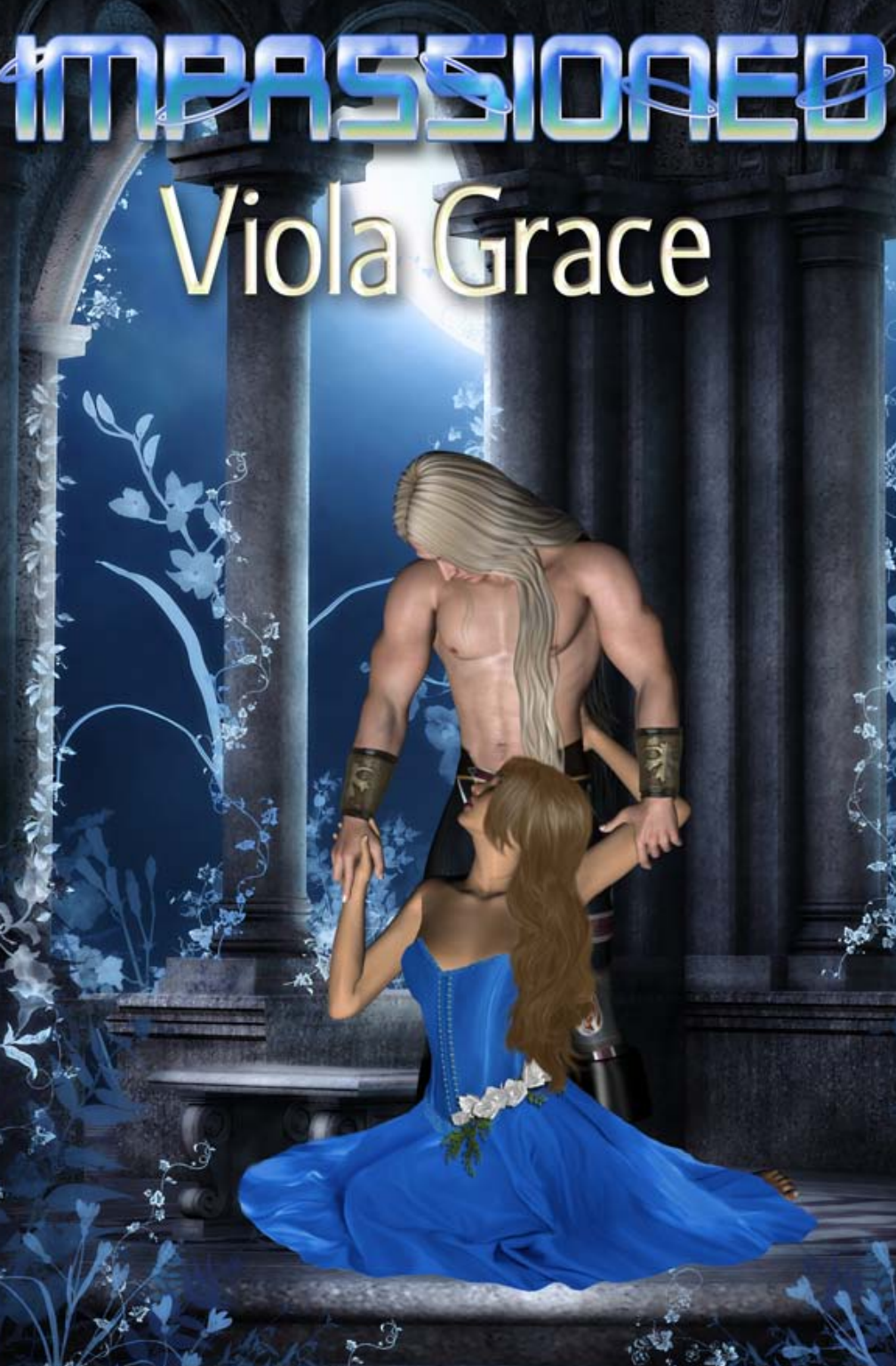


IMPASSIONATO

Viola Grace



Megan has been summoned to Essengar station in orbit above a planet she is not allowed to set foot on. No alien has the right to walk on that world. She meets her ex-partner in the psi-tracker corps and immediately is overrun with emotion. Einar stirs lust, longing, and when he tells her that he took their child out of stasis to be born in a surrogate, she feels fury.

Punishing him in the most direct way possible, she drains her immediate anger and they can begin the negotiations for Megan's presence...in his bed...as his wife.

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Impassioned
Copyright © 2010 Viola Grace
ISBN: 978-1-55487-599-3
Cover art by Martine Jardin

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Published by eXtasy Books
Look for us online at:
www.eXtasybooks.com

IMPASSIONED
A TERRAN TIMES NOVELLA

BY

VIOLA GRACE

CHAPTER ONE

Megan Bander drummed her fingers on the armrest of the seat of the private shuttle. The world below teased her with azure oceans and green and gold swathes of farms. It was a horrible taunt to her gravity-starved senses, knowing that she was not allowed to land on the surface.

“Ma’am. We are docking. Please lock in for landing.” The Essengar servant was diffident, but didn’t look too impressed with her. The disdain in his ice blue eyes was unmistakable.

Meg didn’t care. Her beloved space Viking had called her to come for a visit. They had been psi trackers together for two years before he was called home. They had been lovers for only a day when he left her. She tried not to hold that against him.

The reason for this summons was a little muddled. He either wanted her help or just wanted to reminisce over old times. Whichever one it was, she had been assigned to attend Essengar Station and this shuttle had been sent by

the Essengar High Command to pick her up.

The ship rocked and she buckled her harness as it shifted in the forced gravity and shielding of the station.

Megan took in the turrets trained on them as they glided the last few feet into the docking area. Someone was taking security seriously. "Why all the extra security?"

She wasn't really expecting an answer, but the servant responded. "The War Master is visiting the station. There have been several attacks on his life recently and with no heir, he is in constant danger."

"Oh." So she was meeting with Einar and the War Master was on the station. Not horrible, she just needed to avoid the knots of security when they were on the station. She was only going to be there for a few days she hoped.

"Docking is complete. You may release your harness. An escort is waiting for you at the foot of the steps." The servant stood solemnly and took her bag from her when she tried to retrieve it from storage. "Your bag will be delivered to your quarters."

"How do you know where I will be?" She quirked her eyebrow. She knew the answer, she just wanted to hear him say it.

"The War Master has arranged your quarters adjoining his own. Go now, he does not like to be

kept waiting.”

Einar had been upgraded to War Master. It wasn't unexpected—he had always been driven, but to rule the smaller fiefdoms of an entire planet was reaching a little high.

Straightening her shoulders, she exited the ship and at the base of the steps was the escort that had been sent to get her. Twelve armed guards snapped to attention when she appeared. “Psi Tracker Megan Bander, welcome to Essengar Station. Please, come this way.”

They were wearing deep blue tunics and deep brown leather trousers and boots. Megan felt the corner of her mouth kick up when she remembered her ex-partner's penchant for leather pants. Apparently, it was a cultural thing.

She walked into the centre of the group and opened her senses wide as they started to make their way into the station.

The men around her were curious, respected the War Master and were completely baffled as to why he wanted this stranger instead of the Essengar women who were lined up to warm his bed.

Whoa. His bed? Megan wasn't sure what she thought about that. Sure, he was hot, but that wasn't everything. He had left her without a second thought five years ago. *What could have happened to change his mind?*

Her escort drew a lot of attention. The population of the station was trying to determine the reason for her escort and a few were wishing her ill because of her very presence in their sovereign space.

Her blood started to hum in her veins when she thought about Einar, but she squelched it until she could see him in person. She was conflicted.

When the honour guard stopped outside the doors, she realized that the sparsely occupied hall they were passing through was where her ex-partner was living.

They passed those doors and went to the next set, "Ma'am. Your quarters. Wait until we determine they are clear and then you may rest and freshen up after your journey."

His gaze took in her loose ship suit, the standard uniform that she preferred. "Should I wear another colour?"

"There will be a formal dinner. You may wish to dress more appropriately." He stood beside her while they waited for the guardsmen to finish their inspection of her rooms.

"I can be appropriate if the situation calls for it. Oh, look. My luggage." A nervous attendant brought up her bag to her from the ship. "I will be able to find something in here for dinner. Don't worry."

The guard looked dubiously at the pack,

imagining that no proper clothing could come from so small a duffel. "We will call on you before the dinner. Have a nice rest."

Entering the chambers with her clothing clutched in her arms, she would have gasped if it wouldn't have gotten the attention of her guards. Her favourite colours, ice blue and pale gold were covering every surface in the suite, from the dressing table, the bedding to the drapes around the window that overlooked the central green house.

It was heaven. She never wanted to leave. Putting her pack on the bench at the foot of the bed, she backed up and with a happy cry, launched herself into the huge bed, then rolled back and forth, wallowing in the scent of crisp, clean linens.

A slow, methodical clapping came from a corner of her room and she twisted in place to glare at the intruder.

"Welcome to Essengar station, Megan. I have missed you."

She snorted and faced her demon on her knees. "I just bet you have. You have had a rough time of it. I always made things so easy for you."

He stood slowly, letting her take in his magnificence, for he was truly a sight to behold. On earth, he would have been a model, an actor or a man who had women that let him use them as

paving stones.

Her self-control held until he opened his arms and she gave in to the urge to run forward and wrap herself around him. The hug warmed parts of her soul that she thought were long frozen. She missed him, body and soul. The only satisfaction that she got was that he was holding her just as tightly.

She let go before he did and leaned back in his embrace. "I made it easy for you again, didn't I?"

"Nothing has ever been easy with you, Megan." He rested his forehead against hers and simply breathed her in.

His eyes were closed, hiding the glorious blue with the slitted pupils, but his blond hair slid around them both, giving them a small bit of privacy that was only them.

She broke the intimacy deliberately. "So, I hear you are High Commander. That must be fun. How is your wife?"

He slowly opened his eyes.

Her blood ran cold at what she saw there.

"She died in childbirth, but your daughter survived."

CHAPTER TWO

“My daughter? I left her in secure stasis in the Alliance Medical Centre. I check on her every week, what do you mean she was born?” Megan was struggling against him, fighting to get free.

After he had left her, the fruits of their union had manifested in the form of a tiny daughter growing inside her. The Alliance had refused her leave to have the baby, so she had her carefully removed, stored and placed into stasis with the assurance that she could reclaim her as soon as she was out of her contract.

“Our daughter. I was alerted to her existence when she was registered in stasis. The Essengar are protective of their genes. Tests had to be run to make sure that she would be a strong representative of our species. As her father, I had to authorize them.”

Tears pricked Megan’s eyes for a moment. “What is her name?”

“Amelie. Just as you wished.” He was acting in a most reasonable manner.

Meg brought her knee up hard and fast, standing over him as he buckled to the floor. “As I wished? I wanted to bear her, to hold her in my arms. How old is she?”

He gasped for air as he slowly sat up. “She’s four.”

“Son of a bitch. You just couldn’t wait. You get married and knock her up with *my* baby.” She was furious, pacing back and forth like an animal in a cage. “Where is she?”

“On Essengar.”

She stopped and closed her eyes, clenching her fists as tears started down her face. “So, I can’t see her.”

He sighed and rose back to his full height. “There is a way, but it will be discussed over dinner. Now, splash some water on your face and get your emotions under control. I will be in my rooms, waiting for you when you are ready.”

He was back to being Einar, her ex-partner, the man who knew her better than any other in the Alliance. He was speaking sense and if it was the means by which she would see her daughter, she would do it.

She turned her back to him and walked into the lav, splashing water on her face as suggested. Her baby was four years old and she had never even

seen her. Amelie...named after her grandmother. Meg wondered what the little one looked like, her or Einar or some weird combination of both.

She stretched, working the kinks out of her shoulders and neck. She opened her senses and found Einar had indeed left her room, but he was staying close to the connecting door. Dinner. She had to dress for a formal dinner. Time to work some magic with her backpack.

The loose and baggy jumpsuit fell to the floor and she stuck her hand into the pack to withdraw her rolled silk gowns by feel alone. A set of sandals came out for her evening's attire as well.

With a practiced flick of her wrist, she unrolled the layers of the gown, putting them on one at a time, securing the two off-the-shoulder layers with a thick sash that bound her from under her breasts to the curve of her hips.

Megan pinned her hair into a fall of honey brown hair that piled on her head, left her neck bare and tumbled down one shoulder. The mirror told her that she was stunning, but the shock in her eyes kept her mind on Einar and his possession of their daughter.

Before she left, she tidied up the large room, folding her uniform and setting her boots against the edge of the bed. Unable to delay any longer, she knocked on the connecting door.

Einar had changed as well, his deep blue shirt

matched his eyes and the black of his pants matched his boots. The appreciation in his eyes almost made her forget the betrayal.

"You look amazing, Megan. That gown is...wonderful." He came close to her and walked around to enjoy the view.

"Thank you, Einar. Or should I address you as War Master?"

"Always Einar for you, Megan. Please, be seated."

There was a small table set for two.

"I thought there was to be a formal dinner?" She let him help her to her seat.

"I am in formal wear, you are in formal wear...ergo formal dinner."

His grin made her smile a little in response. This was the whimsical man that she had come to think of as a friend.

A servant peeled himself from the wall and served them wine and water. A cart covered with dishes and a pristine cloth supplied the food that he served to them. When the plate of bread was placed in front of her, she hesitated.

To break bread with the Essengar meant that you did not mean them any harm and you were willing to engage in peaceful negotiation. She thought about it for a moment that had Einar shifting in his chair. "What the hell, I have already kneed you in the nuts." She broke a chunk of

bread off and her dining partner breathed a sigh of relief.

The guards heard her comments and looked at each other with alarmed eyes.

“Calm down, he still has his equipment, it is just a little bruised.”

Einar waved them off when they started moving forward. “It was less than I deserved and Megan would not actually damage me beyond recovery.”

She sighed and took a sip of water. “Even while furious, no. I can’t. It seems you always incite me to passions, lust, affection and anger. Take your pick.”

He tore off a piece of bread, “I pick lust.”

She snorted, “You always did.” They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes.

“I have a proposal for you.” Einar was keeping his gaze on his food.

“Is that why you sent for me?”

“Yes.”

“What is it? Your proposal, I mean.”

“I wish you to join me on Essengar...”

“Only citizens are allowed on the surface.”

“As my wife.”

Megan coughed as some meat tried to go down the wrong way.

Einar simply looked at her, his blue gaze bright with concern.

As she got her wheeze back under control, she croaked, "What?"

"I wish you to join me on Essengar as my wife. I have received permissions and dispensations from both our governments, all that is necessary is your consent." He nibbled at a piece of fruit.

She watched his pointed white teeth as they worked at it. "You are serious?"

"Yes."

"Why? I have no doubt that there is a line of women trying to get into your bed. Our night together wasn't that memorable, I am sure."

He smiled and it softened his angular features, "You have not seen our daughter yet. If there is a chance to get another little one like her, I would wed a tortoise."

He was a proud father. There was no denying it. As much as she resented her loss of the early days, she was glad that he wanted his daughter enough to flout convention.

"Was your wife..." She couldn't finish that sentence.

"Magna was a good woman, a good Essengar. She wed me out of duty, not love. When I told her of my child, she volunteered to carry her to term. Her death was regrettable, but Amelie's biology was different enough to cause Magna's body to attack itself, a side effect she was not aware of until late in the third trimester."

“And if she had not died?”

“Our contract would have expired. She was infertile and my people demand an heir.”

“A baby would be War Master?”

“No, but he would take my place as Lord Ilgor. Right now, there is no one in that place.” He raised his hand and the attendants left the room.

As soon as they were alone, he stood up and took her hand to raise her to her feet.

“Megan, I have wanted you since the moment we left the Citadel as partners. Our one night together has been burned in my memory for the last five years. Amelie is a blessing that I could never have expected and all I desire now is for us to be a family at last.”

In front of her astonished eyes, he knelt and took her left hand in his.

“Will you have me?”

Megan fought for an argument, a reason that this was ridiculous, but all she came up with was, “Yes.”

In an instant, Einar surged to his feet and lifted her in the air.

She clung to his shoulders as he spun her around before pulling her close for a kiss.

The taste of him was familiar and sent her blood pounding through her veins. He opened his mouth and she traced the sharp outline of his teeth with her tongue before lapping delicately at

his lower lip. He groaned into her mouth and she laughed.

She felt the slide of her body against the hard planes of his chest and shook with urgency. She was wet, her body slick with just that small touch. If she was honest, she had started to cream the moment that she first saw him. "Now."

"Now?" He seemed surprised by her willingness to get to it.

She reached between them and stroked his hard length. "Now. Or we could wait until after the wedding..."

She laughed, she was on her back with the silk sliding up her thighs to gather at her waist while he freed his cock from its leather confinement. Megan concentrated on the blunt feel of him pressing into her, groaning as he forged in until friction stopped him, withdrawing and sliding in until he was up to the hilt.

"Oh, that feels good." She sighed and smiled into his blazing blue eyes. She knew her own green orbs were sparkling.

"I have to agree. Nineteen hells, it has been so long." He rested his forehead on hers and started a slow thrust and retreat.

She leaned up and kissed him, nipping and licking at him as they both quickened with urgency.

Clothed from the waist up, they moaned and

slid against each other until Megan climaxed with a gasp as she dug her nails into his shoulders. Free to pound into her, Einar thrust over and over until he groaned as his own release ripped through him.

He dropped forward again, resting his forehead against hers. Their chests were heaving and they calmed in a synchronized manner, their minds touching and melding as they relaxed.

Megan was happily tucked out. She smiled as she ran her hands through Einar's hair.

He grinned. "That is a yes?"

She whispered in his ear. "That is a yes. Now, can you slide out of me so we can take care of the assassin under the food cart?"

His warm, cuddly mood was suddenly gone. Einar withdrew from her, reached to his hip and the blade that he had not been carrying an instant before, materialized. His cock was still hard and shining, but he didn't notice his open trousers as he rammed the sword through the base of the cart.

The scream made Megan wince as she sat up and pulled her skirts down so that the guards wouldn't get a show when they came in. The assassin rolled out from under the cart, bleeding from a gash to the shoulder.

"Einar. Tuck yourself in."

Muttering to himself about bossy women, his cock was back in hiding a second before the

guards came in.

“War Master, we heard a scream.” The guards froze at the sight of the bleeding man on the ground.

“Who was in charge of checking the food cart?”

“I was, War Master.”

Einar backhanded the guard, “Next time look under the tablecloth. If my lady had not sensed the man, he would have killed us while we slept.”

The guard who had been struck looked at Megan with confusion. “She sensed...”

“My lady is a psi tracker, like I was. She is capable of not only defending herself but those around her. Take this man for questioning.” He nodded for them to remove the bleeder. “And patch up the wound, we don’t want him dead. Not yet.”

“Do you need your personal guard this evening, War Master?”

“No, but keep guards outside both rooms. I don’t wish to be disturbed...again.” Einar waved them out and the blood trail left by the assassin marked the dragline.

The men saluted as the door slid shut.

Einar turned to her and the gleam in his eyes was all too familiar.

“Einar, calm down. You know what bloodlust does to you.” Megan backed away from him, crawling backward on the bed. “Nice sword by

the way, War Master.”

He cornered her on the bed, blocking her escape. “It comes with the job. Now, how do I get you out of that dress?”

CHAPTER THREE

Megan helped him release the sash that kept her dress in place and the resulting spin as he lifted her off the bed to whirl her free made her dizzy.

“Are you in a hurry or something?” It was a stalling tactic. She knew very well the effect of blood on his senses. With this particular Essengar, bloodlust was quite literal.

He didn’t dignify her question with an answer. He merely slid one shoulder of her gown down and attacked her breast with ferocity.

She hissed in pain as he used his teeth a little too freely, sighing in relief as he took her hint.

The laving of his tongue combined with the sharp prickle of his teeth had her shifting her thighs together. The residue from their coupling still had her slick and the heat he was generating was going to drive her nuts.

His hand on her shoulder was the only warning she got to her other breast being bared, her tracker

mark on her shoulder glittering in the bright light of the room. She tried to roll over and cover it, but he was having none of it.

"It's lovely, an addition to your stunning beauty that completes you." He laid reverent kisses on the blue dagger and smiled against her skin. "I seem to recall you complimenting my mark at one time."

"That was a long time ago." She giggled. His marking was on his left buttock, the Essengar insisted that his mark never be visible while he was performing his duties, some of which required him to be shirtless.

"I value your opinion. Please examine it again and give me the opinion of a woman who has seen worlds and wonders." He stripped out of his shirt, kicked his boots off and then slowly began to peel his leather trousers down to expose the expanse of muscled flesh ornamented by the same dagger that Megan wore. He kept his thigh flexed and looked at her expectantly, as if she would be able to ignore his erection.

"It is still a lovely mark." She trailed her fingers across it and walked them over to caress the column of flesh that pulsed at her touch. "A charming compliment to this wondrous appendage."

He closed his eyes and leaned back as she stroked him slowly, working her hand up and

down the smooth, soft skin. Megan smiled, she remembered that look, thought of it fondly when she stroked her clit to orgasm.

That was a thought too good to ignore. With one hand on his cock, she shifted so that she could stroke her clit in time with her other hand. His eyes were still closed, so she kept her breath even as she raced him to orgasm.

“You little sneak. You do that when I have my eyes closed?” His voice conveyed his astonishment.

“You weren’t opening them and I was getting bored.” She moved her hand and fingers faster, her body tightening in response and the sight of his balls drawing up against him let her know he was close as well.

His hands suddenly confined her wrists as he stretched her arms over her head. He held her arms anchored with one hand while he stripped her gown off her with the other. Einar lay down on her, the feel of skin on skin making both of them moan. He worked his cock against her slick opening, pushing and pulling back to work him into her. The moment he was seated, he released her hands.

She dug her fingers into the muscular channel of his back, holding him tightly as he moved inside her. Each pounding thrust drove her higher and she mewled with every impact. His speed

increased and she heard a low snarling in his throat. Wincing at what was about to come, she tilted her neck to the side as he bit into her shoulder while she screamed in response. Her body was torn between pleasure and pain, so full of both that it sent a rush of contractions to her cunt, clasp and milking at Einar's cock until he groaned through his grip on her shoulder.

She held him tightly, digging her nails into his back, earning another groan from him. It was one of their peculiarities – they both liked a little pain with their pleasure. Not a lot, just enough to spark the peak of pleasure.

Einar released her shoulder, pushing up to look down at her. "How have I lived without you?"

She smiled and caressed his face. She pressed her thumb onto the point of one of his canines until it pierced her skin. Sucking her own blood, she grinned at the look in his eyes. "Einar, you are so easy. You lived without me because you were summoned home for a wedding and then you were too dumb to call for me."

"I have been trying to get you here for four years. The moment that Magna died, I began the proceedings to get you to Essengar. Politics is a bitch." He leaned down to lick the wounds he had caused.

He had tried to bring me to him for years? She was going to have to confirm that.

"If you want to confirm it, call your Terran representative. She has been haggling on your behalf all this time."

He had always been able to tell what she was thinking. "What was she negotiating for?"

"The right for you and your children to leave Essengar when or if you wished to."

"What was the result?"

"If you and the children wish to leave, you can leave. I just have to be dead at the time." He rolled to one side and hauled her up against him.

"You know how to tempt a woman." She processed what he had just said, "Children? You are assuming that I can have another."

"You can. I have kept an eye on your medical results." His breath was hot in her ear. "You have quite a bit of muscle now, I like it."

"Well, after you left, I was deemed unsuitable for a partner, so I had to take a ton of courses at the Citadel for self-defence." She closed her eyes and let herself focus on the trailing of his fingers on her abdomen.

"Good. You will need them. The acceptance for an alien as a bride for the War Master is a little thin on the ground. When we leave the shuttle, we will have to ride for my home, fighting off attackers as we go."

She opened her eyes a slit and turned to glare at him. "You Essengar are seriously messed up."

He laughed. "That we are, but once we get inside my home, you are safe for life. You are given the acceptance of the people."

She sighed. "You can't make it easy on me, can you? What kind of weaponry are we facing?"

"Traditional. Swords, daggers, normal stuff."

"Will I be armed?"

"If you wish to be. It may be a good idea." He tucked her head under his chin and kept caressing her belly and breasts softly.

"Is Amelie going to be safe?"

"She has a guard and a nanny, she will be fine. They know to keep her out of the way when we come riding in."

Megan sighed again. "You know how I hate riding."

"You did a pretty good job on me." His tone was more than suggestive.

"We weren't at a full gallop, it was a slow trot. And it was in a private shuttle. No witnesses, so I am ignoring that innuendo."

"I can call for a witness if you wish. It's a little more adventurous than I remember you being, but I am willing to adapt." He grunted as she turned to punch him. "Yes, you have been gaining strength."

Meg laughed, her mirth continued until it shifted into tears. Sobbing, she let him hold her as the storm of emotion washed over her. She was

here, in his arms and they had a daughter.

After the violence of her outburst subsided, Einar kissed her tears from her eyes and cheeks. "It is too much too quickly, but the sooner that we get on the surface and into my home, the more time you will have to adapt before the wedding month is held."

That stopped her sniffing. "An Essengar wedding? For a month? With your enemies?"

"Once we touch the doorway of our home, the enemies will cease to exist. Or at least they will not be able to strike us whenever they wish. We may have some time as targets, but it is worth it to have you with me at long last."

"You didn't answer about the wedding."

"Yes. A big wedding for weeks of celebration."

She shuddered as images of endless ticked-off bridesmaids in ugly dresses ran through her mind, "Can't we just elope?"

CHAPTER FOUR

The steed that Megan was staring down was almost a horse. Horses didn't have large horns and wickedly sharp hooves though. "Look, I don't like you and you don't like me, but we have to work together to get through this and then we need never mention it again."

The beast shook his head and she nodded as well, stepping up and hoisting herself into the saddle.

Einar sat nearby on his mount, shaking his head. "Do you have to talk to everything?"

"Yeah. Just be lucky I don't name him."

Einar clenched his eyes shut for a moment. "Amelie did. His name is Buttercup."

The beast's ears twitched at the mention of his name and Megan grinned. Perhaps nature over nurture was not so farfetched after all.

The honour guard was standing near the shuttle steps. "Lengar, I need a sword." Megan moved Buttercup toward the man who had failed

to check for assassins. Having him unarmed was probably a good thing.

Reluctantly, Lengar slid his sword from its sheath. He extended it hilt forward.

She gripped it and swung it a few times to check the balance. "Thank you." Her tone was sweet and singsong to her own ears.

Einar moved his mount next to her. "Are you ready?"

She held up her finger and expanded her psi field. When she could sense the anger in a few of the men hiding in the field beyond, she nodded. "Yup. Let's go."

Einar would have extended his own field, but she had better distance senses, she kept a quiet communication in pictures between them as they rode. Her thighs flexed as Buttercup pounded across the plain.

When the attackers saw her bearing down on them with a sword in her hand, they flinched and a few ran. They were not expecting the alien bride to be a warrior. She could see it in their auras.

Buttercup was a great steed, as long as she could hang on. He lashed out with his hooves, used his horns with amazing accuracy and kept up a speed that made her head spin.

Einar's home was a little more than the simple house he had been depicting. The War Master's home was a large castle in the centre of an open

area. As it loomed in her view, she took note of the men hiding behind the gates with swords. *Crap.*

In the courtyard, the majority of the protesters were waiting for them and in a practiced manoeuvre, Megan and Einar stood back to back. "Just like old times, Megan."

"Old times I would rather not relive."

Men came at them and Einar struck them down with the War Master's blade. Many of their attackers saw their united front and lay down their arms, leaving the battle before they got in.

Megan was tiring, but she was happy with the way the battle was going until she heard a high voice yell, "Papa!"

She turned to look at the small girl who was being pushed out the door by a woman in a long gown. The little girl had white blonde hair and bright green eyes, her face was scrunched up with concern and she was unaware of the man coming up behind her with a sword raised.

"No." It was a whisper of denial followed by a noise that stopped the battle around her. Her scream rent the air as she sent the spike of her talent through the air and into the attacker who was trying to kill her little girl.

It was hard to see a man's head explode, but Megan watched as her little one made it safely through the field of battle, following the line of Megan's mind. Meg rushed forward to pick up the

little one. "Come along, peanut. It isn't safe here. Hold onto my back."

The small arms wrapped around her neck while the little legs went around her waist. Megan fought her way back to Einar, enjoying the relief in his eyes.

She was so distracted that one of the attackers was able to land a shot in her left arm. Hissing, Megan asked, "Peanut, can you climb onto your Papa's back?"

Einar backed up so his daughter could get a grip. "What are you doing, Megan?"

"Ending this. When I say down, get down."

This was tricky, but she dropped her sword and started to swing a gleaming chain that she could see only in her mind. With light flicks, she struck the men in her immediate vicinity, knocking them cold. Now that she had some breathing room, she stretched her hands apart, extending the chain of power until she had a length that would cover the courtyard. "Get down!"

Swinging the invisible chain over her head, she made three circuits until every man in the courtyard was on his back, groaning.

Meg dissipated the power and turned to her partner. "It's over, let's go. I need to hurt someone." She scooped up the sword she had discarded and took point, her left arm throbbing with every step.

"Papa, is that my mama?" Amelie was swung around into Einar's arms and Megan fought the lump in her throat.

"It is, Ammy. She is very cranky right now, so just let her have a little bit of time." He still had his sword out and was watching for any of the bodies on the ground that were going to rise.

"She's bleeding. I think she is after Nanny Gala."

"Why would she be after your nanny?" Einar kept his voice light, but they were crossing the threshold and Meg was in pursuit of the woman who pushed her daughter into a battle.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry." The woman was on her knees as Meg approached with burning fury in her. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and extended her hand. The moment that the woman touched her skin, she was shocked unconscious with a blast that Meg controlled at the last second.

Amelie was in her father's arms when Meg turned around, swaying from her psi exertion. Einar put her on her feet and moved forward to catch Meg before she hit the floor. "Yes, Ammy, this is your mama."

Eyes the exact colour of her own were watching her from on top of her chest.

"Papa. She's awake."

"I know, Ammy. Let her sit up." He leaned forward and helped Meg sit up without using her left arm. "Meg, you were stabbed and have seven stitches, but you are still as sturdy as you ever were."

"Sturdy doesn't make me feel that attractive, Einar." She winced as she settled herself against the pillows he propped up for her.

"You know that I find you beautiful, even with your hair messed up and your arm all puffy." His kiss on her lips made Amelie giggle.

Megan looked at her daughter. She was kneeling on Meg's right side and smiling with intense excitement. "Hello, Amelie." She held out her hand and the little girl slammed into her, cuddling intently.

"You are my mama. I can tell."

Tears pricked Megan's eyes as she held onto her daughter. "How can you tell?"

"Your mind is funny like Papa's and he is happy that you are here. Your eyes are funny."

Meg choked a little, "Yes, they are, but they are the only ones I have, peanut."

"They are pretty, like mine but not like mine."

Amelie looked up at her through her lashes and Meg had to admit, the green eyes with slit pupils were striking. *She will have men at her feet everywhere she goes when she is grown.* "Yours are much prettier, peanut."

Einar looked at her, "Why do you call her peanut?"

"It was the size she was when she was taken from me." Meg held out her right hand and slowly widened her fingers to show the size that the baby had been. "You were that big the last time I saw you."

Amelie brought her head close to the fingers and mimicked the distance with her own hand. "I was tiny. I don't remember being that small."

"You are the child, you don't have to. It is the responsibility of your parents to know every detail of your life."

She nodded as if it made complete sense to her. "Will I get brothers and sisters?"

Einar grinned and stood, lifting his daughter from the bed and taking her to the door where a woman with kind eyes waited for her. "Take her to her tutor."

Amelie waved at her as the door closed and Meg waved back. "Whew. She has quite the little personality."

"She was born that way." Einar tucked her in and checked on her wound. "It seems to be healing cleanly, but putting you into that nightgown was not my idea."

"I know. You would like us to be living in a temperate climate and frolicking naked in the sun, as long as Amelie was not around." She smiled

and puffed out the sleeves. "I quite like it, nice, lacy and concealing. The high neck is a little much though."

"I agree. I much prefer the look of the marks I left on you, but the medical staff would not be deterred. All the men you struck down are awake, by the way."

"Are they walking funny?"

"How did you know?"

"Because I struck them in the junk, well, mentally anyway." She smiled and tried to clap her hands, but her left arm wasn't cooperating. "What about the men we struck down the old fashioned way?"

"Some are dead, some are recovering, all are waiting to pledge their fealty." He lifted and shifted her so that she was now leaning against him and not the pillows.

"Really? Fealty. That sounds nice." She yawned. "Why would they do that?"

"Because they were bested in battle. Trial by combat is still a tradition around here." His fingers worked the tangles from her hair. "How did you make Alfric's head explode?"

She yawned again. "Psi spike. I told you I had to go for extra classes at the Citadel. When you left, I was unbalanced and needed an emergency weapon. Watching him bearing down on the little peanut was enough to trigger it."

"I would applaud your maternal instinct, but I don't want to jostle you. She likes you very much, by the way."

"How does she know about me?"

"I have been telling her stories since the day she was born. Capturing the Sithoran commander and dragging him to his wedding, running through the wilds of Michga in search of the informant who was dodging testifying. These were her bedtime stories."

That sounded nice. *Why did that sound nice?*

"They sedated me, didn't they?"

"Oh, yes."

"That's nice."

CHAPTER FIVE

“**T**he blue one will be pretty on you, Mama.” Amelie was being girly and helping with the selection of fabrics for Megan’s new wardrobe as the War Master’s wife.

“And it will match your Papa’s eyes.” She had figured out the impetus behind many of Ammy’s decisions. “How much did he pay you, peanut?”

“I get to ride Buttercup!”

Meg smiled as the little girl clapped her hands and wiggled in place. “A worthy bribe, Buttercup is very pretty.”

“Papa likes blue.”

“Yes, peanut, he does.”

The seamstress requested that she extend her arms and with a little stiffness, Megan complied. It was harder than it usually was, but the stitches only tugged slightly as she held her arms out to her sides. Measurements were taken and then it was time for Meg to put on a light dress over her outfit and for Einar to come into the room.

“This is highly irregular, madam.” The seamstress was flustered as one of the guards was sent for the War Master.

“Why? He knows Essengar fashion and I really don’t. Plus, he is going to be the one looking at it.”

“But these are your bridal gowns. He shouldn’t see them.”

“He won’t see them until the wedding day, but he can see the pictures of them, just not on my body.”

The older woman gave in and was ready when Einar swept into the room. “War Master, I have been told that you will be picking the gowns.”

“My intended is a horrible shopper. She would attend the events in a ship suit if I would let her.”

The shock on the face of the seamstress was not faked. It seemed she could not conceive of a world where women did not care what they wore.

As a family, they sat on the couch and let the woman bring in books of dress designs. They all had an opinion, even Ammy ensconced between them.

As they looked through all of the designs, Megan occasionally caught Amelie out of the corner of her eye, looking from Einar to her and wiggling happily. It was nice that she felt comfortable and even better that in her little mind they were already a family.

Megan was still getting used to being a mom. It

was a hard change for her. She was used to only having to look after herself, but now, there was this little person around her heels at all times that she had to look out for. She felt fiercely protective, but was it enough?

“I am not wearing that.”

“Why not? It would be cute.”

“Do you have sheep that need herding? That would make me look like a shepherdess.”

A light chirp between them asked, “What’s a sheep?”

“It is a fluffy animal that grows a fibre for clothing. It is herded through fields and pastures until it is time to shave it, usually by women who wear clothing like that.” Megan pointed at the picture of the woman in what she considered a French shepherdess dress.

“Can I have a sheep?”

“No. I am pretty sure that Buttercup would eat it.”

She was completely serious when she said it, so the small, “Oohhh,” made her crack a smile.

Einar was stifling a laugh while he flipped through the designs. He spoke quietly and ordered a series of clothing that Megan didn’t see. The blush on the cheeks of the seamstress gave an indication to the design of those selections, but Einar didn’t let her see them. Her intuition told her that *he* would like the selections very much.

She might be a little iffy on them.

"Is Amelie going to be wearing something special?"

"Of course. A gown to match yours for every day of the festivities."

"And your shirts will match?"

He just grinned, looking down at their daughter. She had slithered to the floor and was wearing a few yards of fabric on her head, delighted giggling was coming from under the fabric pile.

"That's just...wonderful. We will all match. That will be great." Megan wasn't a huge fan of cutesy clothing, but it was her wedding after all. She was going to have to embrace wearing an uncomfortable set of gowns.

"So, that is half a dozen gowns for the honeymoon and a dozen for daily wear. When were you planning your nuptials?" The seamstress was making frantic notes.

"Next week." At the woman's stricken expression, he filled in, "Start with the first formal gowns and have another seamstress make three day gowns. Work on the rest as you can, deliver them as they are finished."

Einar stood and hauled Megan with him. He uncovered their daughter and lifted her high on his chest. Together, they exited the sitting room, leaving the seamstress shouting orders to her

assistants.

“A week? You move fast.”

“I want a baby brother and Papa says you have to be married for him to show up.” Amelie was playing with some embroidery on Einar’s tunic.

Megan would have stopped in place if Einar hadn’t put his arm around her to haul her along. They passed a guard stationed in the hall outside Einar’s study and she nodded to him, he didn’t move. She barely even noticed the guard in the house, but she could feel them when she extended her senses.

They were heading to the large courtyard in the centre of the house, the green and open space dotted with trees and framed on one side by a rose garden.

As soon as they were in the garden, Einar let Amelie go. She immediately ran full tilt to the end of the enormous yard and turned to return.

“It is fast, but I want us to formally be a family in case anything happens to me. This is a slightly violent place if you hadn’t noticed.”

“I noticed. Fighting my way to your house kind of tipped me off.”

He held her close, “I am sorry that your introduction to my world had to be so vicious. If it makes you feel better, the men who survived have a new name for you.”

She leaned back in his embrace. “And that

name would be..."

"Brain Breaker. It was that or Ball Crusher."

A heated blush pinked her cheeks. "I see. Is there anyway to get those names erased?"

"We are a people who love to immortalize our leaders in song and poem. The only option you have is to do something that tops your previous public display."

"Fuck."

He considered, tilting his head in thought. "That would do it."

Amelie came barrelling up to them, wanting to be included in the hug. It was a welcome distraction from the thought of Megan bearing a nickname like Ball Crusher.

She wondered what the wedding invitations would say.

"War Master, there is a message for your lady from her Consulate." Einar's secretary strode up to them. Rolfeir was also one of Einar's oldest friends.

Megan recognized him from communications years earlier. "Rolfeir. Nice to see you with a shirt on." Meg extended her hand and was not surprised when Rolfeir gripped it in a warrior greeting, forearm to forearm.

"Brain Breaker, nice to see you in one piece. The com screens are this way. May I escort you?"

"Einar, Amelie, I will find you after I have

finished with the message. I haven't gotten a communication from a Terran in a while." She kissed each on the cheek and waited until Einar nodded it was safe. "See you soon."

She took the arm that Rolfeir extended to her and walked with him through the halls. "How has he been, Rolf?"

"He has missed you. He did not wish to disrespect Magda and tried to be a good husband. She tried to be a good wife and when she learned of his child being in stasis, she asked to bring her to term." There was a hitch in Rolf's voice.

"I can never thank her memory enough. Amelie is a beautiful, young girl and would not be here today if not for Magna's sacrifice."

"Einar was grateful as well. When she passed, there was no reason for him to wed immediately, he had a child and he was not yet War Master." Rolf pressed his hand to a wooden panel and a door slid aside, exposing a little of the technology that was allowed to the Essengar.

He briefed her on using the equipment and left her alone.

"This is Megan Bander of the Alliance Protectorate of Terra."

A face flickered and came into focus, a lovely woman with intricately braided blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes. "Hiya, Megan. I am Kyra Dannick vi Ranith, Terran consulate to Azon. I

was wondering how you have been?"

"I am adapting."

"Essengar is a little harsh, very strict on the xenophobia angle. Have you met your daughter?"

Megan sighed. "How many people know?"

"Amy and myself and of course, the techs that handled your little deposit and his withdrawal, but they are sworn to secrecy. They couldn't even tell you and *that* was driving them nuts."

"I can imagine, but they kept the secret over four years."

"I know and all I can tell you is that having one of the little beasts around is worth every second, even if they drive you nuts at some point. So, I am going to be attending your wedding in a week and was wondering what you wanted as a gift."

"I don't think I need anything, aside from one of those phase swords that the War Master has. That thing rocks."

Kyra grinned. "I can probably manage that. We are attending as your familial representation. Do you mind if I bring some of my children? We have received clearance for my husband and two of my children, but I am not sure if you want little screamers running around."

"I think it would be nice for Amelie to meet some kids of Terran extraction. Do you have boys, girls?"

"I have four, but the youngest two will still be

left at home with my in-laws. Alsa is six and Reegar is four."

"Wow. Four. They are all healthy?"

Kyra seemed to catch on, "Yes. They are. The Azon have excellent medical centres, but I am happy to say that we haven't needed them. The Essengar are a compatible species as well. They interbred with our race over a thousand years ago with no side effects for the children."

That was news to Megan, "They did?"

"Sure, Norse gods and giants. They frolicked with the local ladies quite a bit before scooting up the rainbow bridge."

"Ah. I knew I had read about that somewhere. Was that all you were calling for?"

"Pretty much, just wanted to make sure that you had everything you needed and were prepared for the wedding day. There will be storytellers around, telling the tales of your husband's upbringing and his triumphs."

"Like an Essengar *This is Your Life*?"

"Pretty much, but set to music. They have also been doing research on you. Just a heads up." Kyra's blue eyes were sparkling with mischief.

"It is one day. I am sure I can deal with it."

The unholy laughter of the other Terran stuck with her as she cut off the call. "I can deal with it. There is nothing they can sing about that will hurt my feelings."

The door slid open. “Megan, are you talking to yourself?” Rolfeir was standing in the open doorway.

“Yes. Where are Einar and Amelie?”

“Amelie is with her new nanny and Einar is greeting his mother and sister. They are waiting to meet you.”

“Oh. Goody. In-laws.”

CHAPTER SIX

Rolfeir escorted her through the halls filling, Megan in on the women she was about to meet. “Halga is a good woman, she took care of Amelie while Einar was moving through the ranks from Clan Leader to War Leader and finally to War Master. Then she was able to come and live with her father again.”

“And her daughter?”

“Amelie’s Aunt Morda. A lovely woman.” The warmth in his tone was unmistakable.

“Are you married, Rolfeir?”

“No, lady. Why?” The suspicion in his voice made her smile.

“Is Morda married? Do you like her?” Megan was taking a little bit of delight in this, probably too much.

“She is my best friend’s sister. I am second to the War Master. There is no time for a wife and children.”

“And yet, your War Master is making that time.

Think about it." She didn't have time to say any more, they were approaching three blonde heads gathered in conversation.

Einar sensed her approach. She could tell by the way he turned his body before his head. His smile was welcoming and relieved. "Megan, thank you for joining us. This is my mother, Halga, and my sister, Morda."

Megan extended her hand palm up to Halga, "Pleased to meet you, Halga. I thank you for raising my daughter in my absence."

Halga looked her over and covered Megan's hand with her own. "Call me mother, daughter, for daughter you will be."

Megan accepted and returned the hug that her soon-to-be mother-in-law was giving her. She straightened and turned to Morda, extending her hand sideways. "I am glad to meet you, Morda."

Morda dispensed with the handshake and went straight for the hug. "Welcome, sister. It has been too long a wait for your coming."

Tears started in Megan's eyes again. "I thank you for your welcome, sister."

"Enough. Do you want to visit with your granddaughter, Mother? She is with her new nanny." Einar was trying to distract the weepy women – it was obvious.

"New nanny? What about Gala?"

"She has been let go." Megan's voice was firm.

“Amelie was so happy with her.” Halga looked as if she doubted her new daughter’s authority.

Megan simply shrugged and kept her mouth shut. If she spoke out on the subject, she might lose her cool.

Einar wrapped his arm around her waist and did the same with hers. “It was justified. Don’t ask Ammy about it though, I don’t want to upset her.”

Halga looked as if she was catching on to the fact that there was something more going on here than she assumed. “Let’s go see my granddaughter. I have brought her a new dolly.”

Megan smiled and as a group, they walked to the nursery. Ammy was excited to see her aunt and grandmother, so she and Einar took the opportunity to sneak away from them.

Meg stifled a squeal when he lifted her and carried her swiftly to a linen closet. He pulled up her skirts and freed his cock in seconds, lifting her onto a shelf so that he could press against her effectively.

He leaned down and kissed her while he kept his fingers busy finding her clit and sliding inside her in a quick flurry of thrusts. Meg wrapped her thighs around him and locked her ankles behind his back. As soon as her moisture started to flow, he pushed into her and her world dissolved into sensation and the fire that he lit in her blood.

He rammed into her furiously and her body

responded. It had only been days, but it had been too long. Her left arm throbbed, but even that flash of pain only drove the sensations in her body higher. Einar returned his fingers to her clit and the resulting scream was swallowed by his ravenous kiss. Their talents collided and separated as he pounded into her until his balls tightened and his cock jetted inside her.

He leaned on her, forehead to forehead, as they both fought to catch their breath. Their afterglow a mere rest until the day that they could wake up next to each other. This was stolen time, the only time they would have with his family now in the house.

“Do you think peanut minds?”

Einar blinked, “Minds what?”

“Being used as a distraction for your mother and sister. Well done, by the way.” She kissed a trail from the corner of his eye, down his jaw and then up to his lips.

“She doesn’t know.”

“She does. I could feel her mind *seeing* us in the closet. I only hope she didn’t get curious enough to come looking.”

A knock at the door made him groan. “Papa, why are you and Mama in the closet?”

There was adult laughter beside the little voice, so Ammy wasn’t alone.

Meg winced as he withdrew from her. Her

skirts fell straight to her ankles, but she could feel the swelling of her lips and the wildness of her hair. Her stitches had parted a little as well, a stream of blood was marking the bandage.

“Am I presentable?” She looked to Einar, but he was occupied tucking his cock back into his trousers. “Serves you right for wearing all that leather.”

Meg went to the door, her senses told her that Ammy and three adults were still outside. “Papa will be with you in a minute, peanut. He is having problems with his...belt.”

“Okay.”

Einar gave Meg a sarcastic look. “Thanks for that.” He was finally tucked and presentable.

She held out her arms. “How do I look?”

“Not nearly as satisfied as I had hoped.” He snaked an arm around her waist and removed a towel from her head with his other hand.

She laughed and opened the door, stepping into the hall.

“What were you doing?” Ammy was insistent.

Halga was smothering a laugh while her daughter hid her face in her hands.

“Your papa was just showing me the linen closet. I don’t know the house very well yet.”

“Oh. Why did you take so long to come out?” She was suspicious.

“We were counting the sheets and towels. You

know how it is bad if you stop in a mid-count. You get all confused.”

That satisfied her and Megan heaved an internal sigh. Einar pinched her ass and she almost struck him. Almost. Her peanut had her arms up and outstretched for her to be lifted. “Okay, peanut. Up you get. I can’t hold you too long though, I have to see the doctor to get my arm checked.”

“Is it sore?”

“It is. Your papa was just going to show me where to go.” Megan smiled sweetly and Einar started to blush.

Rolfeir stepped between them. “I will show you, lady. The War Master is needed in the council hall.”

“We will come with you.” Halga and Morda accompanied them as Rolfeir took Megan on a tour of the palace.

She sighed in relief when they arrived at the doctor’s office. “Okay, peanut. You are on your own feet now.”

“I don’t want to. I want to be close to you.” The big green eyes filled with tears.

“That is wonderful and I want to be close to you, too, peanut, but I need to have my arm checked so that it will be healed when I marry your papa.” She relented a little. “You can hold my hand.”

The compromise seemed to work. Amelie latched on and kept her little hand on her mama's the whole time.

The doctor pronounced that her wound was healing well and he reset a single stitch. "Since you are here, lady, I was wondering if I could give you a quick physical."

"Oh. I wasn't expecting, I mean that Einar and I got together earlier and..." She tried to explain to the doctor and finally his eyes had the glint of understanding.

"Oh. I see. I can take that into consideration. Just put your feet here and here and I will take some tissue samples." It was the fastest internal exam she had ever had, but the most difficult part was to keep Amelie from peeking around her knees to see what the doctor was looking at.

"Enough, peanut. Stay still and trust that the doctor will be nice to me and that you will eventually grow into this kind of an exam. No sense rushing things."

"When will you tell me about this?"

"When you have breasts." Her statement caused a ripple of amusement behind the privacy curtain hiding her in-laws.

"When will that be?"

"I will tell you when they arrive. I swear." Megan calmed her little one as she took in the look in the doctor's eyes. "Halga, can you come and

take peanut's hand? I need to speak to the doctor for a moment."

The doctor nodded and took a small sheaf of papers in his hand to a small office. "Lady, you are pregnant."

She fought the urge to slide down along the wall. "How much?"

"Less than three days. We are experts at early detection."

"Boy or girl?"

"A boy. Is that good or bad?"

"It doesn't matter. I just had to have an answer for little miss *why* when she asks me."

"The War Master will be pleased."

"And he will hear it from my lips alone. You are not to mention it to him. If you heard anything about my arrival, you know that I will not deal lightly with you."

The doctor flinched, but he nodded his agreement.

Megan beamed at him. "I am glad we understand each other. Thank you for your services. Oh, when can the stitches come out?"

"In a week, just before your nuptials."

"Excellent. See you then." With a spring in her step, she walked out of the private office and rejoined the women of her ever-expanding family.

"We can go."

"What was that about?" Halga asked her as

they walked out.

“Just a reminder that I need to watch my stitches. Nothing serious.” Meg’s mind was dancing with enthusiasm, but she couldn’t show it. This was a honeymoon present that she wanted to deliver personally.

Her mother-in-law looked at her suspiciously, but kept any comments on the matter to herself. “Einar wanted me to fill you in on the details of an Essengar wedding. There are a few things you need to know as well as need to prepare for.”

“Like what?”

“The exchange of bride price, the race to the hall, the insult contest, the traditional bedding...a whole bunch of small rituals. The next morning, he will give you a morning gift and then the final exchange of dowry will be made. These are details you need to be aware of.”

Rolfeir was walking with Morda ahead of them and it made Megan smile. “Can we get some lunch and discuss it? Perhaps ask Rolfeir to join us?”

Halga looked ahead at her daughter and the warrior who was focussed on her every word. “I think that would be an excellent idea.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Megan was wrong. She had never been more wrong in her life. The secret outfits that Einar selected were not skimpy lingerie, but a feminine version of warrior wear. Loose trousers that appeared to be a skirt, a knee-length split tunic over a long tunic and a beautiful blue sash to hold it all tightly to her body.

She grinned and turned, looking at the outfit in the mirror. "Isn't it lovely?"

Halga looked like she was fighting comments and when Rolfeir brought in a sword for Megan to wear, she threw up her hands in surrender.

"The War Master gives this to his bride with these words, *Just in case.*" Rolfeir was fighting his grin, but he bowed formally and helped Megan settle the sword at her hip.

"I am greeting the Azon-Terran consulate today, so the sword is welcome."

Halga was looking at her with a sort of horror. "Aliens? You are bringing aliens to us?"

“Just for my wedding. Kyra Dannick vi Ranith is one of my people. She is one of our Champions and a warrior of the arenas.” She smiled a little and put it into terms that Halga would understand. “She is my family and needs to be here for the wedding.”

“Oh. Then it is unusual but acceptable.” It seemed Halga was willing to accept some of her new daughter’s habits and beliefs, but she needed a little bit of back-up logic.

A small tugging at her trouser made Megan look down.

“You look nice, Mama.”

“You look very nice as well. We match.” Einar’s little joke, all of Meg’s clothing came with a matching set for peanut.

It was one day until the wedding and the wardrobe that had been empty when she got to her private rooms, at Halga’s insistence, was now full of ornate gowns, shoes and slippers.

Today’s outfit came with boots for her and little shoes for Amelie.

It was relatively easy for her to fit in with the Essengar, she loved the combination of technology and simplicity that was enforced. It kept the other planets from seeing Essengar as a trading post and let them live simple lives occasionally interspersed by raiding and conflict.

The hardest part of their culture was their

violent streak. It had kept them from full admittance to the Alliance, but allowed them an independence that they would not have traded for anything.

Einar's talent had sent him off world. The Essengar had made an agreement with the Citadel to train any of their population that exhibited psi talents. Raw talents tended to go very wrong and it was to the benefit of the entire planet to have them trained and under control.

Einar had been betrothed to Magna, but thought that her family would opt out of the marriage when his talent was exposed. Megan winced as the memory of the day that he found out that that was not the case. They had slept together as a farewell, never expecting to meet again. Well, Megan hadn't expected it. Einar claimed it was his plan all along.

"What are you thinking about, Megan?" Morda was pouring tea for her with one eye on Rolfeir.

"Einar being a sneaky bugger."

Halga burst out with a startled laugh while Rolfeir chuckled.

"About what in particular, daughter?"

"He claims that he never intended our night together five years ago to be our last. Apparently, he was right." She quietly admonished Ammy to sit up in her own chair, like a lady.

"Well, when he told me that he wanted an off-

worlder woman, I was not impressed. The moment when he told me that you were Amelie's mother, I changed my mind a little and upon meeting you, I can understand his fascination, Brain Breaker."

The room at large chuckled while she closed her eyes for a moment. That name was picking up speed around the castle. Even the kitchen staff used it when they addressed her.

"I am never going to live that down." She blew into her cup of tea and had a sip.

"Not unless there is a better name to replace it. It is the Essengar way." Rolfeir smiled.

A knock at the door got Rolfeir to his feet. He spoke for a moment with the messenger and then returned. "Brain Breaker, there is a shuttle coming in requesting your presence. Mounts have been prepared to deliver them from the landing site, Buttercup is saddled."

"Then I had better be on my way. Where is Einar?"

"Negotiating peace between two warring clans. They are waiting to see how his marriage goes before agreeing to exchange members of their clans in the same type of union."

"Will I have an escort or am I on my own here?"

"Your choice." There was a challenge there. She had not ridden out since her dramatic entrance.

"Fine. Keep Amelie here, I will be back soon."

Tears formed in the bright green eyes. "I want to ride Buttercup!"

"No. You can ride him later when we escort them back to their shuttle. For now, I want you safe. You remember what happened when the men were trying to stop your papa and me?"

"You got hurt." Her lower lip was sticking out.

"I did. Now, I am bringing friends and they have a little girl and a little boy you can play with." She kissed her peanut on the forehead and nodded to Rolfeir. "Keep an eye on her, she's wily."

Walking through the halls, she smiled and spoke to the few guards and clan members who greeted her. Buttercup was saddled and waiting for her in the courtyard, two other beasts saddled and tied to Buttercup.

She could see the shuttle in the distance, slowly lowering to the surface. Megan mounted Buttercup and took the reins in hand. Time to go collect her family.

Her senses were wide open, there was no one lying in wait. It was a clear ride to the landing site and she had a moment to enjoy the sunlight and the whistle of the wind. Her nose twitched as she identified the scent of flowers blooming, the muskier scent of grains and the occasional flare of a farmyard.

In that moment, Essengar took root around her. She understood their want to keep this place separate from some of the rampant tech and trading of the Alliance. It was so peaceful and beautiful. She would also defend it with everything in her.

Shaking her head with the sudden revelation, she tied Buttercup and the other two animals securely to a tree, then walked to the shuttle and knocked on the outer hull.

Megan waved at the camera that swivelled to focus on her. It surveyed the area and retreated into the hull, sealing seamlessly.

The door opened and a stairway descended, Tiergar coming out of the door first, viewing the area before calling his family out. Kyra shoved past him and ran to Megan, hugging her tightly. "Hello, Megan. I am so happy to see you alive and well."

That was different from their original discussion. "Why the sudden concern?"

"We saw the footage of your arrival." Tiergar was looking at the riding beasts with some resignation.

"I guess that was kind of hair-raising. It's fine though. The stitches come out tomorrow." Two little people exited the shuttle with squeals of excitement.

"Megan, this is Alsa and Reegar. Kids, this is

your Auntie Megan." Kyra smiled as her children made their formal bows.

"I am pleased you meet you." She bowed in return while taking in their Azon features. Alsa had her mother's blue eyes, but they were catlike and set above her high cheekbones. Reegar looked just like his father, his nose flat and hair black with red highlights.

"We will ride back to your home?"

"Yes. I thought it would be safer if the children each rode with one of you." Megan started walking back to the beasts.

Tiergar stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Can Alsa ride with you? Kyra isn't exactly stable on riding animals."

Meg looked to Kyra and she was nodding decisively. "Oh, sure."

"Come on, Alsa. My daughter Amelie named him. His name is Buttercup." Megan helped the little girl seat herself on the saddle and swung up behind her. She waited until Tiergar had helped Kyra get settled and was on his own beast with Reegar and then she untied their mounts from Buttercup.

Kyra was looking nervous, she gathered up the loose leather and held the reins tightly.

"Relax, Kyra. It is a straight ride and if there is any trouble, the beasts are trained for protection."

"Excellent." She still sat stiffly in her saddle, but

as they started to move, she relaxed a little.

Megan waited until they were clear of the woods before clicking Buttercup into a trot. A muffled curse from Kyra had her and Alsa circling around, grabbing the Champion's reins and simply controlling her beast from the front.

The moment that they were inside the courtyard again, Kyra was off the beast and waiting for her children. Tiergar dismounted and lifted Reegar down, then wandered over to catch Alsa. The stable hands were smirking over Kyra's discomfort, but when Megan glared at them, they studiously led the animals away the moment she touched the ground.

"Einar is in a peace negotiation, but would you like to have something to drink in the gardens?" Being a hostess was a little new to her, but she did the best she could.

"That sounds wonderful. Please, lead the way."

"Aelfric, would you please ask Rolfeir to bring Amelie to the gardens?"

He grinned, his dark eyes sparkling, "Yes, Brain Breaker." He wandered down the hall.

Megan sighed. "I hate that name."

"Brain Breaker? What did you do?" Kyra was whispering in her ear as they walked through the stone halls. The children and Tiergar were bringing up the rear.

"You saw the arrival. I used a mind spike."

“They cut that portion out of the vid. You used a last-resort weapon in hand-to-hand combat?”

She gritted her teeth. “He was going to kill Amelie. Her nanny pushed her into the battle to make her collateral damage and the warrior was waiting for it. I couldn’t get to her any other way.”

“That I can understand. Sorry.”

No further words were spoken until they were seated in the gardens, looking at the blooming flowers. The children immediately found some of Amelie’s toys and were playing ball on the grass.

“So, Kyra, after you found Admar, what else have you been looking for?”

“A way to sneak birth control past Tiergar.” She gave her husband a dark look and he merely grinned in response.

“Pregnant again?”

“How did you guess?”

Megan smiled. The Terran’s sarcasm was welcome. The women of Essengar were a little more direct in their sense of humour.

“Congratulations.” She wanted to share her own situation with the other woman, but couldn’t. She was trapped in the veil of secrecy that she had drawn over herself.

A squeal of excitement arrived two seconds before Amelie did. She ran up to the small Azon and introduced herself. In a few seconds, she was kicking around the ball with them, laughing and

enjoying the freedom of the trousers she was wearing.

Tiergar smiled. "She is just like you."

"She is very like her father. She has his eyes and hair."

"But your talent and aggression. It is a very interesting combination."

"She seems to accept me, but I am never sure if one day she will rebel." Meg put it out on the table. It was her private concern, but only her own people would understand.

Kyra leaned forward. "You are not her stepmother. You are her genetic mother. Not her birth mother, but her genes come from you. By the way, whose idea was it to dress you both alike?"

Megan wiped the tears from her eyes. "It is Einar's way of making sure that people know who she belongs to."

"And he dresses to match you, doesn't he?"

Meg leaned back. "He is standing right behind me, isn't he?" A kiss on top of her forehead confirmed her suspicion.

"Hello, dear heart. I see your guests have arrived."

"They have indeed." She made the introductions, "This is Kyra Dannick vi Ranith, Champion of Terra and Terran Consulate of Azon. Her husband, Tiergar vi Ranith, Councillor of Azon. Their daughter, Alsa, and son, Reegar, are

playing with Amelie.”

Einar shook their hands and pulled up a chair.

The ease with which he spoke with Kyra and Tiergar reminded Megan of their early days as partners. He always had charm on his side, cajoling his conversational partner into giving up more than they had intended.

With the shrieking of the kids in the background and the low hum of conversation around her, another little bit of home was settled into place. When Halga, Morda and Rolfeir joined them, it solidified even more.

When a sleepy Amelie was tired of playing and crawled up into her lap, it was the nail in her coffin. Megan reached out and took Einar’s hand. She was home.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Megan woke on the day of her wedding before any of her ladies could enter her room. She feigned sleeping so that they would have the fun of waking her.

Morda giggled the instant before she jumped on the spot that Megan should have been in. Megan's roll brought her across the bed and she was sitting up. "Sorry, I couldn't stay still that long."

"Come on, speedy. We have to get you bathed and then ready for your wedding." Morda took charge of her. "You also need to have your stitches removed."

She put a robe on over her nightgown and followed her sister-in-law out and into the festivities of her wedding.

Kyra, Halga, Amelie and Alsa were waiting for her in the outer room, as was the doctor. Her stitches came out under the fascinated gazes of the little girls and then it was a whirlwind of activity

that made her head spin.

She was washed, dried, her hair brushed into a flat cloak, a lovely gown of ice blue with off-the-shoulder sleeves, crossed silver ropes and enough embroidery to stiffen the sides, cuffs and hem.

Silver slippers were on her feet and she looked down at her toes in bemusement. Amelie was twirling in her own gown, setting Megan into a little bit of envy. Ah, to be young and able to twirl as the spirit moved her.

Kyra smiled and nodded to Alsa. "Now, for the bride gift of the family. It isn't tradition, but I think you need something that is yours alone."

The little girl pulled a long box from under one of the couches in the sitting room.

"For the defence of you and yours."

The small chirping voice made Megan smile. She opened the box and found a phase blade.

Kyra was looking at it longingly. "It has a stun setting and will be keyed to your hand when you pick it up."

Megan felt the light prickle as she removed the blade from the box. The blade hummed in the air until she set it to the right side of her hip and released her grip. It folded out of phase and when she drew it, it came back into view. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

She kissed Kyra and Alsa and when Amelie looked upset at the other girl getting attention, she

covered her daughter's face with kisses.

"Now, we have the headpiece. It is the first wedding of your family out here, so we are supplying that as well." A coronet of spikes radiated from the headpiece as Kyra settled it on her head.

Tiergar knocked on the door. "Are you ladies ready? Einar is going a little stir crazy."

Nodding, Megan took up the steel sword that she had been given for this moment, Einar's ring on the hilt. She walked with the sword point down in front of her and out of the house, through the courtyard and into the meadow beyond. Riding beasts were arranged on one side of the crowd that was gathered, making the run to the hall a little unfair.

With Amelie skipping in front of her, Kyra and Elsa behind her, Megan stepped to the altar that had been erected for this occasion.

Einar met her in the centre, their little peanut stood between them. The words of the official blurred in Meg's mind as she looked into Einar's eyes. They exchanged rings, swords and a very public kiss and then were parted once again.

With a wink and a grin, Einar ran for his beast and his half of the bridal party was soon thundering back to the hall.

Laughing, the bride's party made their way back on foot, only to have the entry to the home

barred by Einar and an unsheathed blade. Unperturbed, Megan walked up to him and stood facing him. He blocked her entrance with the sword, but then leaned down to carry her into his home. Amelie and Alsa skipped inside together and followed them into the house as Einar carried her over the threshold.

With that confirmation of Einar's standing as head of the house, the party began.

Food, wine, insults and the occasional arm-wrestling match marked day one of the wedding festivities.

Kyra winked at the new couple, "I will take care of Amelie this evening. She and Alsa want to have a sleepover and give Reegar a haircut, so I will be on my toes."

Einar's eyes glowed at that, but there was another part of the wedding tradition to be adhered to.

As the moon rose, her in-laws grabbed her and hauled her to Einar's room. She was stripped and tucked into his bed to await his arrival. She didn't have to wait long. The sheets hadn't even settled over her when Einar and his groomsmen entered and stripped him.

She wasn't shy about watching the muscles and planes of his chest being exposed, Meg did meet his gaze as his boots and trousers were removed. Grinning, he allowed himself to be tucked in to

bed next to her and with the witnesses watching, he covered her with his body, the sheets still between them.

A shout went up as the official *witnessing* was complete and the assembled throng left the room.

"I thank you, wife, for coming to me when I called."

"I thank you, husband, for calling to me when you could." Meg kissed him lightly, sucking on his lower lip before laving it with her tongue.

He cursed and rolled to his back, pulling the sheet to the floor.

Meg straddled him carefully, setting him against her and pressing down lightly.

"You are already wet for me."

She chuckled. "Since you carried me over the threshold." Closing her eyes, she bit her lip as she sank slowly onto him.

She rocked her hips as she raised and lowered her body against him in a methodical wave. When he was finally inside her all the way, she opened her eyes, seeing his burning gaze.

"Lean down."

He leaned up and met her halfway, engaging her in a kiss that made her channel clench around him. He stroked her breasts, belly and clenched his fingers on her hips, raising and lowering her on his turgid cock.

She wove her fingers into his hair, moving his

mouth to her breasts as she rocked on him and this endless moment of privacy and unlimited joining stretched forever.

Forever was shorter than she had thought as she started to gasp and her body tightened in preparation for shattering. She held her breath as each slick stroke inside her drove her higher and higher on the edge of sensation. Meg was almost over the edge when Einar switched positions.

“No cheating, bugger!”

She punched him in the arm and had to struggle as he pinned both her arms above her head, his hips working steadily against her. With her arms over her head, her breasts were arched up against his chest and in a move that surprised her, he licked and sucked at her breasts as he kept thrusting into her.

Her release approached again and this time, he was with her as she screamed and shook in response to her body contracting around him. His snarl and bite heralded his release as he grunted while jetting his semen into her.

When he released his bite, he lapped at the wounds he left. “My wife.”

She sighed and pulled him until he rested on her breast, “My husband.”

After a few minutes, Megan looked around at the wreck they had made of the bed, “My god.”

Twice in the night, Einar had woken her with soft kisses and urgent hands. She only woke him once.

Waking in his arms was enough to bring tears to Megan's eyes. The dream of five years realized in that one moment.

"Morning, wife."

"Morning, husband."

"I have one gift left to give you." Einar stood in glorious nudity and walked to the dresser on the far side of the room. A ring covered with keys was in his hand. "The keys to my home. No room is closed to you."

She smiled at the morning gift. "I have something for you as well."

He looked around. There was nothing in the room that wasn't there the day before.

She grinned. "Come here."

He walked over and sat next to her.

Megan lifted his hand and placed it on her belly. "Amelie's brother is on the way."

Delight and surprise were on his face. "How long have you known?"

"A week."

He gave her a wry look, "You managed to keep a secret that long? I am impressed."

"So was I. If not for all of the preparations and you being busy brokering stuff in the council halls, I might have blurted it out."

He smiled and grabbed her, cuddling her against him. The cuddling led to lust and soon, she was straddling him as he sat, rocking on him until they both shook in release.

“A little boy. Amelie will be so pleased.”

“Oh, sure she will, until my lap gets too big to cuddle her on. Then she will be a little less than impressed.”

Einar carried her into the shower and washed her from head to toe. She sat aside as he took his shower and then they returned to the bedchamber where the bed was now neat and tidy and a gown was spread over the foot of the bed.

What a surprise, it was blue. Megan pulled the gown on and created two small braids to confine her hair. She was no longer allowed to have her hair loose, so she was adhering to the law, in spirit if nothing else.

“We have one more exchange of formalities. The bride price for your dowry.” He was wearing a matching deep blue shirt and black leather pants.

“And that will involve...”

“It has been worked out.” Hand in hand, they returned to the hall, said their good mornings to those who had partied all night and made their way to the council chambers.

Kyra, Tiergar, the in-laws and the children were all there waiting for them. Amelie ran up and

hugged Megan's legs, then Einar's.

The council room was one of those rare rooms with technology, a large-screen communicator was online, Empress of Haldis, Amy Tyrell, was on the screen.

"Welcome, Megan, Einar. We are here for the final exchange of bride price and dowry." The ex-Negotiator sat calmly with a slight smile on the edges of her lips.

"Hello, Representative Tyrell." Megan lifted Amelie to her hip and waited.

"Representative, I have offered to increase our search for the psi-talented Essengar. My Amelie has already shown signs and she will need training when it is time. I have gotten the War Leaders to agree to allow a Citadel school on Essengar Station. To my wife, I give the proceeds of three properties to her coffers."

"Excellent. For the dowry, her *family* pledges the unlimited use of Citadel-trained healers for ten years, support for Essengar sovereignty and tech to be used for educational applications and communications."

The Citadel healers got an excited murmur from Halga and Morda.

"Do all parties consider this acceptable?" Tiergar asked.

"We do." Einar was eager and Megan took his hand.

“Wonderful. I now record this marriage as ratified and congratulations on the daughter, Megan, she is lovely.” Amy Tyrell waved as the screen went dark.

* * * *

Kyra laughed and hugged Tiergar as she watched Megan and Einar kiss to seal their wedding. It was very different from the informal mating that she and Tiergar had had. Well, until his mother had gotten involved.

She wondered idly if Megan had told Einar about her next baby. Tiergar had scented the pregnancy the moment that he met the Terran. It was annoying that he knew before she did, but she had to admit that it had come in handy at times.

The little family that had now been cemented was grinning like fools. “So, Einar. What is next?”

She and Tiergar would be gone in another two days, time to move things along.

“The sagas and songs start.”

Megan pulled a face that made Kyra laugh. She howled when the woman said, “Oh, good lord.”

CHAPTER NINE

The songs started late in the afternoon and ran into the evening.

Megan learned about Einar's whole life story, from his birth to his first battle, his disgraceful talent and his return as a proud warrior.

Three songs about his life had been sung when Kyra held her hand up. "What about the bride?"

The bards looked from one to the other. One of the bards smiled. "Do you have the song?"

Kyra held up a halo. "Here is her life. Do her justice."

Megan hadn't realized that there was a Vision Bard in the mix until she saw the small implants on either side of his temples. While the Essengar didn't like tech for battle, they didn't mind it for entertainment. The bard would wear the halo and download the images to project them into 3D.

The bard placed the halo on his head and his eyes moved rapidly.

Einar was looking at Megan curiously and it

came to her then, despite their partnership, she hadn't told him much about her world, or even her life before the Citadel.

He was going to learn it now.

The bard wove songs of pain, of loss, images of the earth growing smaller and smaller, the knowledge that she could never return to her home had tears in the eyes of some of the drunk revellers.

The pain of the Alliance training, learning to use her mind without going insane, getting a partner in Einar.

Her love for Einar was recorded in detail, their exploits and their fighting prowess as a team until they were parted by his obligation.

Megan was leaning against Einar as the bard sang about her. It was a sombre mood that washed over the crowd.

They retired to their rooms and made love slowly and without jokes on Megan's part that evening. The memory of her loss was far too close.

The next day, the bard eagerly donned the halo Kyra gave him, but this time Megan smiled. It was the history of the Essengar on Terra.

Shock ran through those assembled as tales of warriors great and maddened by psi talents rampaging through Terran history were laid out

before them. The data was from the Alliance archives and it was an amazing display.

The great removal of the ships from Midgaard was recorded and two generations later is where the saga ended.

“You are from Midgaard?” Einar looked both surprised and pleased.

“Yeah. I didn’t think it was an issue with Essengar being closed to aliens and all.”

Kyra stood. “Records of Essengar compared with the DNA of the Volunteers of Terra show five percent of us are descended from your race.”

That caused a stir that even Einar’s shouting could not calm.

Megan turned to him, “Let them shout it out. It will be good for them to get it out of their systems.”

Kyra came to the bridal table and handed Megan two halos. “This one is Einar’s life here, this one is your life after he left. It should make for some food for thought on the matter of your being alien.”

Megan was surprised. “You are leaving?”

“We will return. Family can always visit. It’s an Essengar tradition, right?”

Einar grinned. “Right.” He looked over Tiergar’s shoulder and gave Rolfeir a look.

Rolfeir stood and nodded.

Megan and Einar saw their guests to the

courtyard where an honour guard was set to deliver them to the shuttle. Separating the two little girls was a Herculean effort, but when Amelie was sniffing in Einar's arms, Alsa in Tiergar's, Kyra and Megan were able to hug farewell.

Reegar was rolling his eyes at the girls making a fuss and was happy to sit with Rolfeir as they rode out of the courtyard and across the field.

"I will miss having a friend around here." She sighed as they went back inside.

"Morda likes you and who knows, if Rolfeir gets his head out of his ass, she may be living here soon."

That elicited a giggle. "How long have you waited for him to ask?"

He groaned as they re-entered the hall. "Years." Ammy had cried herself out and was snuffling lightly on his shoulder. The nanny came and took her with a soft smile when they entered the house.

The hall was still wrapped in debate of the actions of their ancestors, so Megan scooped up the halos and left the hall with a swing to her hips. Einar was behind her in seconds.

Laughing and racing down the hall to their rooms, they enjoyed the discovery of flesh and sensation just as much as they had that first night so long ago.

“I wonder if they will still be upset today...whoa.” Ready for the hall to have the regular number of visitors, she was surprised that it was standing room only.

The Vision Bard, Ulfric, came to her. “Lady, the word has gone out that you have Essengar blood in your people and the Clan Leaders who resisted your arrival have come to pay tribute and enjoy your hospitality.”

Einar was chuckling silently.

“Do you wish for the Essengar chronicle?”

“They wish it, lady. The others will be viewed and sung of tomorrow.” Ulfric took the halo and handed it to a surly man who swept back his hair before placing the device into position.

The new bard had a deeper voice than Ulfric, but he brought a life to the battle scenes that held everyone enraptured.

Megan watched, cuddled against Einar, and listened to the sagas sung to match the images that were being displayed. There would be plenty of time for Einar to learn about her turn to savagery and her dance on the edge of madness, just as there would be time for her to learn how he had earned the title of War Master.

She just wished that she could get rid of her less-than-graceful title, Brain Breaker, but she had to admit, she was glad that Ball Crusher had not been adopted. It had connotations she was not

entirely in favour of.

Megan held her breath as Einar slid his hand beneath her skirt while the sagas continued. She made another wish in that moment that their passion would never fade. She had already had one wish come true, so maybe, just maybe, her luck would hold.

Megan the Lucky had a nice ring to it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for joining me for the fifth book of the Imp series. Impassioned was fun and halfway through the first chapter, I realised that I had space Vikings on my hands.

Megan had to be a tracker, because in the land of those who swing swords, she needed a way to defend herself and her own.

Bringing in my first ever Champion was a work of nostalgia, but Kyra has a no-nonsense approach to life that I have always enjoyed and Tiergar is both a hot alpha and a man with patience. They met at the *Arena Station* and have been together ever since.

Thanks again,

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.

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