



Viola Grace
IMPERFECT

Illora has been through a lot and is looking forward to a solitary retirement. All she needs to do is to get past the selection process in the Lorahan seraglio for three more days and she is home free.

The Prefect of Lorahan wants Illora and her successful efforts to dodge the selection process has turned him ashen with fury and parts of him blue. He concocts a plan to trap her with her own honesty and the race is on to make her his before the Alliance comes to retrieve her. He must fight his urge to be forthright and deliberately manipulate her into the position as his wife.

Let's hope they both survive the process.

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Imperfect
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ISBN: 978-1-55487-585-6
Cover art by Martine Jardin

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Published by eXtasy Books
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IMPERFECT
A TERRAN TIMES NOVELLA

BY

VIOLA GRACE

CHAPTER ONE

“Three more days, Nikolay. Three more days and I am out of here.” Illora Danyon moved one of her checker pieces into a jumping position.

The shadowy guard across from her looked up in surprise. “What? No one leaves the confines of the seraglio.”

Her grin was evil as he completed his turn and she took his piece. “My contract for him to select me as a mate is almost over. He had six months and didn’t even summon me once. Time is up.”

“That isn’t possible.”

“It is more than possible. If I don’t get tapped as a mate, the Alliance will send a retrieval team and I will be able to enjoy my retirement. A nice small house on a beach somewhere will suit me fine.” She waited for him to play his next move. After all this time, she barely felt the weight of the jewels that she was forced to wear as a member of the harem, even the headpiece that had to weigh over two pounds and tinkled when she shook her head.

It had been a relief when she arrived to find a

care package from the Terran Representative waiting for her. The lingerie was nice, but the games that were included, rocked.

Packs of cards, dominoes, dutch blitz, rook, checkers and chess games had greeted her on her arrival at Lorahan. It was her third and final attempt at a mating bond and frankly, she wasn't too worried if the Prefect Morgyan did not choose her for his wife.

Each day, she arose, was dressed, shaved, perfumed and adorned with silks and jewels, left to wait in gilded boredom for the Prefect's drone to fly into her room and flash the signal that she was summoned into the royal presence. So far, no drone.

After the first week, the boredom had gotten the best of her, so she asked her private guard if they would like to learn children's games from her home world. A few had taken her up on it and soon, she had a regular roster for checkers, go fish, dominoes and the occasional chess game.

Nikolay was a checkers fan. He took drawings and had a set made for her that he presented her as a gift. The pieces and board were precious stones instead of wood and cardboard, her original set was tucked safely away in her quarters.

As soon as he had taken one of her pieces, she jumped three of his pieces in a massive surge of

enthusiasm, setting aside her winnings while she waited for her man to be kinged.

Nikolay was not impressed. He grudgingly placed another piece on top of her victorious icon and took his turn.

A few more minutes and a short triumph for her later, she clapped her hands as Nikolay got to his feet. "Who is on duty after you?"

"Kai Miron."

Illora stifled a groan. Her least-favourite guard and he had to be in charge of the whole seraglio. She swiftly packed up her checkerboard and prepared to hide back in the main common rooms inhabited by the other women. "I think I hear a nap calling me."

Nikolay laughed and ran a hand through his smoky hair. His skin was a charming shade of mahogany and his eyes danced with golden glints in a midnight blue orb. There were no whites in his eyes—it was all a deep blue. Soothing really, like looking into a starry night sky.

He was the perfect example of the men of Lorahan, blended genetic histories that culminated in a single joined moment. They had all been held or fought in a variety of underground arenas and were refused re-entry to their home worlds.

Some planets claimed that the men had been altered by the arena medical staff, some that their blended heritages did not allow for full

citizenship, but very few were honest enough to say that they believed the newly released men to be dangerous.

Illora didn't look back over her shoulder as she made her escape. Kai Miron was one of those dangerous men. He had midnight black skin, snow white hair and blazing red eyes that saw through any and all attempts she made at conversation. When he was around, she never had to guess at what he was looking at—he was staring at her. It was not a comfortable kind of stare.

Many of the guards she had seen were the same shade as Nikolay or else the deep charcoal grey of the Ikath. None had the blackness of space in their skin that Kai Miron had. He was something different, something that frightened the life out of her.

It wasn't that he was cruel or gave off a *sicko* vibe, she was simply very unsure of herself when he was around. Her dress felt tighter over her breasts, the earrings swung more heavily against her neck, she felt small and vulnerable. She never felt small and vulnerable.

The other women looked up as she scurried inside, jewels swinging. The graceful and elegant Benar greeted her. "Is there something wrong? Usually you are out playing games until you are forced in here for dinner."

A lovely woman in green, Ulani, smiled. "I am guessing that Kai Miron is coming on shift. It's the only time you grace us with your presence."

"Yes, fine. Right. I am hiding. Any news, new books, anything?" Illora took a seat on the lavishly embroidered cushions dotting the group of women.

"Eruhar is married now and living in the countryside with the male she was given to." Ulani was always good for gossip. It was her most endearing trait.

"So, the Prefect just gave her away?" That was not a fate that awaited her. She had to be taken as bride or not at all. Representative Tyrell had made quite the bargain on her behalf.

"I am assuming that he tried her out first. Perhaps she failed to please him."

"It still sucks."

"Perhaps she didn't."

The lewd giggling that ran through the seraglio lightened the aura of the room for that one moment. The next instant, a servant was scurrying in to the ladies' quarters and stopping at Illora's side.

"Yes, Ben?"

"You are summoned to the common space, milady."

She closed her eyes as the women cackled. Resigned, she stood and returned her

checkerboard set to her private room, sealing the door with a palm lock.

She followed the mint-coloured man with all the dignity she could muster. It was only the presence of a jug and two goblets that surprised her as she approached Kai Miron. His gaze was on her breasts, hips, waist and neck in a restless pattern.

Kai Miron had his hair braided today, weaving down his back in a snowy column, the dark, high-necked livery of the palace almost matching his skin tone. Only the gold braid denoted where he ended and the uniform began.

Remembering what she could of her etiquette training, she curtsayed gracefully. "You sent for me, Kai Miron?"

"You are a hard woman to understand, Illora Danyon. Please have a seat. I wish to have a conversation."

Ben held a chair out for her, so she took the hint and sank onto the seat with all the self-control she could muster. Her blue-green, gem-encrusted earrings made a tinkling noise as she turned her head slightly to face his blood red gaze.

"I am quite easy to understand, you merely have to listen to my endless nattering." For the first time, she noted the pointy ears that were protruding from his slicked back hair. That one discovery relaxed her from head to toe. No elf

could be nasty. They were in fairy tales for pities sake.

He poured the liquid into both goblets and handed her one while he took the other. Falling back on her manners, she sipped, then sipped again. Whatever she was drinking was lovely. Sweet, tart and rich all at the same time.

"Nikolay tells me that you only have three days left in the seraglio and then you are free by contract. How could that possibly be?" He was relaxed, leaning back in his chair and keeping the full force of his gaze off her. Behind him were the standard two guards, there to insure that nothing more than the juice in the pitcher pass between them.

She was going to avoid it, but she heard herself saying, "My Rep formed an ironclad contract. Either I am taken as bride by the Prefect in six standard months from the day I arrive, or I am free to go my own way and a retrieval team will land on Lorahan to come get me."

What did I just say? Blinking, she looked around to see if she had gone insane. Honesty couldn't hurt her at this point, but it was a little awkward when the other women had no way out.

"Interesting. How have you not been chosen?"

The grin that crossed her features was hidden by the gulp of juice she took. "The machine never chooses me."

He sighed. "You know as well as I do that the Prefect is behind the hovering bot that makes the selections. He has been trying to select you for some time, but the machine will not register you. Why is that?"

She giggled and wanted to kick herself. Her logical mind was screaming at her to shut up, but her attention-seeking outer ego wanted to explain. "That was easy. I cheated."

Kai Miron was leaning forward with interest, "How?"

"I was coming off a recuperative leave when I was sent here, when the scans were done. I started working out furiously every moment alone and changed my muscle mass. The computer couldn't register me as a match because it doesn't have my muscles on file. I weigh more with a different metabolic rate. As far as the seeker is concerned, I don't exist."

To see the darkly dangerous man sitting there with his mouth open was funny enough, but to her giggling mind, it was hilarious. She fell off her chair with mirth and before Ben could help her up, Kai Miron was at her side and lifting her back onto her seat.

Shock stilled her mirth. The guards were not allowed to touch them, it was worth their lives. That the two on hall duty had not complained or raised an alarm sent a chilling realization through

Illora.

She looked up into the eyes that were registering their concern with her tumble. "You are Prefect Morgyan."

The smile that he gave her exposed sharp white teeth. "And you, Illora Danyon, are overdue for an updated scan."

CHAPTER TWO

With Ben at her side, Illora went through the intake scans for a second time. He held all of her jewels and clothing while another servant set up the equipment. Her body was scanned from head to toe. Defeated, she stepped off the scan plate and allowed the servants to dress her.

Morose and exposed, she ignored the cheerful greetings from the game-playing guardsmen that they passed and merely shuffled back to the women's quarters.

Without a word, she took up a seat on the cushions, waiting for what happened next. She was no sooner seated than the chime rang for the ladies to line up and appear presentable. Illora sat where she was. No sense making it easy on him.

Precisely five minutes of primping and preening later and the small hole in the wall opened to disgorge the flying sensor that made the Prefect's selection for him. If the ball hovered in front of you for more than a minute, you were to

prepare yourself for the royal attentions that evening.

Illora leaned back and covered her face with another pillow. This was humiliating. At least the other women seemed to want to leave the seraglio for new lives. She wanted to leave this world for her dream life.

A series of gasps told her what she was not looking at. The drone was near her. A light hum was over her head and when a barrage of electronic chirps sounded, she flipped off the pillow. "All right, all right. I heard you."

Removing a pillow to be face to face with a drone was nothing compared to the man standing behind it. The only man allowed to be in the seraglio, the Prefect.

She wanted to crawl back on the pillows as he stalked her, but she stopped short when he leaned down with what seemed to be a grin and offered her his hand. Bemused, she placed her hand in his and let him pull her to her feet.

"Because I feel you could escape if you wanted to, I decided to take custody of you now. Come with me." He began to walk out of the seraglio, ignoring the shocked gazes of the women who were vying for his attentions. Illora moved quickly to keep from tripping over her own skirts and soon was out of the women's quarters and into a whole new world.

The place was full of men. Her nose twitched at the amount of musk flying around in the air. She was *escorted* through the halls, catching more than her fair share of attention, but too busy keeping her footing to do more than look away when curious gazes found hers.

The Prefect didn't even look back at her, just led her past endless arrays of scary-looking guards until he reached what had to be his private quarters.

He pulled her inside and locked the door behind him with a palm scan. She wasn't going anywhere.

"Illora, you have dodged me for quite some time. It was rather ingenious of you, but when Nikolay told me of your impending release, I was forced to act. I am sorry for drugging you, but you put me in an awkward position."

Now that he had her caged, he wandered around his room, pouring glasses of water and bringing her one.

Calmly, she poured the liquid on his feet.

To his credit, he didn't shout or jump away, merely put his glass down on a table and got her another drink. This one she took and flicked into his face.

His jaw flexed threateningly and his eyes glowed a bright garnet. Kai Miron took her empty glass, placed it on the low table and handed her

his. When she took this glass, he moved quickly. One hand cupped her jaw, forcing it open and the other held her hand in place and poured the water down her throat.

Choking and spluttering, it was swallow or drown. As soon as the glass was empty, he let her go.

"Are you going to ask me more questions?" Illora backed away as far as the walls of the room would allow.

He scowled. Even damp, he was striking. "No, the truth serum I gave you needs to be flushed out or there will be side effects. You didn't seem particularly receptive to anything I was going to say."

She opened and closed her mouth several times. "You are right. I am not receptive."

Nodding, he lowered himself into a large leather chair. "I suspected as much. Have a seat, the secondary effects of the first drug will begin to manifest shortly."

A cold spill of fear ran down her spine. "What effects?"

"Inhibition removers. I have been able to feel your attraction to me, but also your restraint. The restraint will soon be gone and we can see how deep the attraction goes."

The double entendre of his words made her flinch. It went all the way to her core.

Despite the caution that ripped through her every time she saw him, the feminine awareness that was tripping beside it was undeniable. This was very bad.

There were several couches in a conversational arrangement several feet away from the set of masculine chairs where he was sitting, so she scooted onto a couch as far from him as she could manage. "That is cheating."

"What choice did you leave me? You cheated the selection scanner. I couldn't find a way to choose you and I have been trying for two months."

Two months. Three months ago, he had joined her selection of gaming guards, demanding the most challenging game she had. Kai Miron loved chess and not just because he invariably won. Part of him liked sparring with her. It was a tiny battle of attack and retreat and until this moment, she hadn't even realized what she had been playing at.

"Oh."

"Yes, *oh*. To keep you here, I have to take you as my bride and that involves us confirming emotional compatibility before an audience and sexual compatibility in private." His lips twitched and he shifted.

With some surprise, she noticed his erection for the first time. It was straining at the confines of his midnight trousers and it brought home her

situation.

"You could simply let me be taken back to the Alliance, sterilized and set free on some quiet world."

At the mention of sterilization, his brows snapped together. "No. You will be happy here or you can take it out of my hide."

She blinked at the order. A small laugh broke from her throat. "Are you serious?"

"I am. The women who are sent here are treasured. The more I worked at learning about you, the more I was convinced that you were finally the right female for me."

"How many women have you gone through?" She knew of at least two dozen who had been selected since she arrived.

"In the last three months, all selected women have gone directly to some of the other males who are waiting their turn for a female of their own." Kai Miron, Prefect of Lorahan, drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair.

"Seriously? Why not petition the Alliance for brides?" She was feeling decidedly relaxed.

"They are sending us willing women as they find them. Only the imperfect are considered."

That got her attention. She had heard that term over and over in the medical centres that had examined her after her little adventure in the Dailan arena.

It had been a sting, an elaborate trap to find a leak in the medical bay who was selling information on exotics to a black market slave ring. Her genetics were tailor made for such an assignment, so she had left her day job as a chemical analyst and gone in for a full medical on Ror station. The slavers had grabbed her within five hours. Two days later, she was in the arena assessment area, fighting for her life.

Illora had a peculiar talent that had never even manifested on Terra. The Alliance officers selecting Volunteers found her genetic heritage worthy of removal from earth, her body a strange melange of at least five different Alliance species. It was news to her. All of her relatives looked refreshingly normal if you overlooked the slightly pointed ears. It was barely noticeable, unless you were looking. Kai Miron was looking now.

"You have Admarn blood."

"So they tell me. I wouldn't know." She shrugged and moved her skirts absently. A restless energy was taking her over.

"You are also an exotic with a psychic talent."

"They tell me that, too. They tell me a lot of things." She was getting irritated with the constant comments. It was enough of a problem being a freak out in space without him mentioning all the details.

"You were at the Dailan arena?"

"Yes!" Her self-control was eroding at an exponential pace.

"One of our newest arrivals was there. He saw you fight and knows all about your talent."

She was almost screaming, "Good for him."

"He said you fought with a wild ferocity that set his blood ablaze. I must tell you, when I first met you, I had a hard time believing it."

The snarl that she gave him was her answer.

In a sudden move that startled her, he pushed up and out of the chair and was hovering over her. "I almost found it impossible to believe that such passion lurked within you." His ruby eyes were glowing with an unholy glee and he took her mouth in a savage kiss that created a result that set her blood on fire. Not in a good way.

His shout of surprise as she pushed up with her hands and mind, throwing him fifteen feet straight back, echoed in the chamber as he landed on his back.

Her fury didn't stop there. She used her mind to pick him up and throw him into a wall, once, twice and again. Finally, panting for air, she heard his pained groan.

"Oh, shit." Lifting her skirts, she ran over to the dark heap that was the Prefect. Kneeling at his side, she reached out and turned him over. His midnight hand closed over her wrist and pulled her across and over him. He wove his fingers

through her hair and kissed her again, this time using his strength to calm her. Her mind cleared completely and she moaned in regret over what she had done, his mouth taking in her remorse.

When he lifted her head, his smile was delighted. "I am thinking it is a good thing I am self-healing. You will not be easily tamed."

CHAPTER THREE

She leaned as far back as he would let her go, her pelvis cradling his erection. "I am sorry, but there is a reason for my self-control. Removing my inhibitions almost cost you your life."

He snorted, a sound that made her grin, "I have faced telekinetics before. At least you weren't armed."

"Which arena were you at?"

"The Arena Station. The mobile arena. When the Alliance came to retrieve us, my planet would not take me back. They claimed that I was *tainted* by the medical procedures administered by the medical staff at the station. There were nine hundred of us left after the station was disbanded, so we petitioned the Alliance with the help of a Negotiator and here we are. It wasn't habitable when we landed, but Lorahan is now a green and lush planet."

Having this conversation while lying on top of him was surreal. "How long were you in the

arena?"

His face went carefully blank, "Six years. My healing talent kept me alive, but I almost went mad. By the time the Alliance got to us, I was more animal than man, as were many of the fighters. The Negotiator got them to agree to brides, but only after habitation could be proven. We started working like men possessed."

Fascinated, she kept her gaze on his lips as he spoke. The contact between their bodies was starting a moist heat between her thighs, but she ignored it in favour of listening to his history.

"It took us five years, but we managed to get our planet self-supporting with residences for the women we hoped would join us."

"When did you become Prefect?"

"Year two. There were fights over materials breaking out, riots about priority lists for women. It was mayhem."

"How did you get elected?"

"We were fighters—I fought for it and I won."

Impressive. She couldn't help but admire his determination. "You contacted the Negotiator after the houses were built?"

"In the fourth year. I gave an outline of the progress and infrastructure designs, Negotiator Tyrell agreed to assist in obtaining females of compatible species and instructed me to set up a lottery based on physiologies. I did and slowly,

they started to arrive."

Whoa. "Negotiator Tyrell? Amy Tyrell?"

"I don't know the Negotiator's first name, didn't even know that she was a woman until recently."

"She's our Terran Representative. And empress of the Haldis Imperium. Wow. She really got around."

He looked surprised. "The rep that sent you?"

"Yes."

"Then I must send her a thank you note. The last few months have been the bright spot in my last decade." He stroked her hair.

"How did the seraglio come about?"

"It was the safest way to introduce the women to the men that were chosen for them. We watch carefully, make notes and match the males to the females. The first shuttle was almost destroyed because we had failed to safeguard the ladies. That is why we created the segregation. Once a woman has a match, she has full run of the planet."

Nice. Lorahan was not the confined backwater she had been imagining. "Some of the women do enjoy being cloistered though."

"They are matched with men who have a similar upbringing and outlook. In some cases, the women are from a situation where multiple partners are an option, but most of the males here

prefer their own female. We had to share in the arenas, but now that we are here, most want to settle down and live as normally as they can."

"Are all the men subject to psych evaluations?"

"Of course. It occurs before their names are entered into the lottery." He held her chestnut locks up to the light and ran strands through his fingers. "Your hair is many colours. I couldn't see it before."

"Yes. Gold, red, light and dark brown. It's all in there." She fought the urge to swat his hand away. But before she could act on it, he was kissing her again.

This time, she was already a little aroused and relaxed from her position on him, so she opened her mouth for his tongue and let him inside.

The tingling of nerves along her skin surprised her, as did the moan as she tried to get closer to him. The scent of him was intoxicating and she was becoming quite lightheaded.

Her hands were pinned between them, making her huff in frustration that she couldn't caress him as she wished. Kai Miron had one hand in her hair and the other stroking her spine. The light fabric of the gown was no barrier to his touch. *Hooray.*

When he let her lift her head, she had one more question, "What do I call you? Kai Miron? Prefect?"

"Miron. The other two are titles." With a fluid

surge of muscles, he got them both to their feet and carried her summarily across the room.

"Are we in a hurry?"

He grimaced. "Sort of. One, I have wanted you so long I ache with it and two, if I do not consummate this relationship within the solar day, another will be free to claim you."

She winced. "How long do we have?"

"An hour." He looked to the window where the sun was indeed turning the sky a light orange. Sunset was coming.

"Fine." She reached behind her and unbuckled one of her necklaces, tossing it to the side of the bed.

"Leave the jewellery on. I will remove your gown."

Kinky, but when his hands went to the metal and stone belt she wore around her hips, heat followed the lightest touch. The belt slithered to the floor, followed by the graceful whisper of the gown and slip. She was now nude with the exception of seven pounds of body-heated metal and gems.

His clothing hit the floor faster than hers had and with a groan, he knelt in front of her, caressing her skin and tasting the textures of her neck, breast and nipples. The rough calluses of his hands gave her insight into something he hadn't mentioned—he still worked with a sword.

He cupped her bottom, caressed her thighs from the outside before trailing his fingers up toward her channel.

When he gripped her ankle, she was startled out of the lust-induced stupor that was taking her over. He lifted his knee and placed her foot on top of it.

Good lord. She was now wide open with a trail of moisture leaking down her thigh. Miron's finger's explored her folds in enough detail to make her clutch at his shoulders and squirm. When he plunged two fingers into her and started a slow, deep rhythm, her knees buckled.

Miron chuckled and lifted her to lie back on the covers with her thighs wide and knees angled over the edge of the bed. He resumed his digital contact and the noises that she began to make surprised even her as she flew over the edge of pleasure, quaking in his arms.

He moved her again, flipping her to her belly and raising her to her knees before she had even caught her breath. The hot prod of his cock against her opening caused her hips to shimmy back to take him inside. He worked into her slowly as the sun swathed them in orange and red light.

It wasn't comfortable, but her body flooded her channel with moisture to accommodate him. After a few minutes of slowly lunging and retreating, he was finally seated to the hilt inside her, his hips

flat against her buttocks.

Illora braced herself as he started to move with serious intent. She had had her release and it was now his turn. He pulled back and rocked into her, hard, thudding against her. The slap of flesh against flesh took on a frenzied tempo until the incessant stroking against her g-spot from within caused another shivering orgasm to build. Her breath was whooshing through her lungs, her body tensed in preparation and the moment that he groaned and pressed hard into her, she almost shrieked in despair.

Miron's weight came down on her spine and bore her into the covers, she quickly reached between herself and the bedding, lodging her arm so her fingers were close enough reach her clit. A few circles on her clit and her borderline orgasm came over her in a rush. Miron groaned as she clutched around his cock with her velvet heat, a sharp answering thrust from his hips made her return the favour.

The sunlight turned red and bathed them both as they caught their breath. The wiseass within her rose and she squashed it. It was time to bask in afterglow.

Plenty of time to introduce Miron to the sharp side of her tongue later. *Won't he be surprised?*

CHAPTER FOUR

A sharp smack on her ass brought her upright quickly in a fighting mood. Well, she tried to get upright, she had to roll Miron off her first. He laughed as their bodies separated, closing his eyes as if to savour the sensation.

“I need to do something. Wait here.” He used his hand to stroke slowly down her body until his fingers were sliding through the copious moisture that they had produced.

Illora bit her lip as he swirled his fingers inside her for a moment before withdrawing them. Satisfied with what he saw on his digits, he left the bed and slid over to the office space in the chamber, placing the sex sample on a scanning plate before he licked his fingers clean. That absentminded, unselfconscious action sent a stampeding anticipation through her body.

Damn it, we just had sex, I don't want any more. Her body flexed and preened as Miron finished with the scanner and turned back to her.

"What did you just do?"

"Registered consummation. Tomorrow, you will face the last impediment, but I am sure that you can manage it without difficulties."

"What is that impediment?"

"I don't want to ruin the surprise. Tomorrow will come soon enough." He returned to the bed and folded back the sheets. "Rest now. You have used your talent today and the after-effects will be hitting you soon."

The sight of all that glorious skin that seemed to absorb and retain light made her wistful, but she helped him tuck them in. Once under the covers, he pulled her tightly to him and tucked her head on his shoulder.

"No."

He raised his head. "No?"

"I am not going to sleep with all of this weight in my hair and around my neck." She sat up and tackled the hand flowers that were on each wrist and middle finger, Miron assisted by removing her necklaces, earrings and the elaborate headpiece that she had been wearing.

She felt lighter the moment it was all on a bedside table. With bare hands, she shoved him back into the sleeping position and snuggled against his chest. "Better."

She knew he was smiling, but didn't verbally respond. She put her own smile on her face and

snuggled down for a light nap. She was a little tuckered out after all.

Miron woke her in the dark of night with heated caresses designed to play on her most sensitive places. He had been paying attention as her body went from warm sleepiness to writhing heat in what seemed like seconds.

He was behind her, lifting one thigh so that it was high against her chest as his cock slid home once again. He rocked her slowly and thoroughly to pleasure twice before he gave up his seed again. After his shuddering stopped, he held her tightly, kissing her neck and ear. It was a sweet gesture, but she was so tired, she dropped back into the abyss in seconds.

A slap to her rump brought her out of a sound sleep with a yelp. "What?"

"We are required to attend the council hall in five minutes. Get dressed." He left her sitting there bemused until his words sank into her mind. *Five minutes?*

She dove into the slip and untangled her gown, using a mirror to fix her hair as best she could. The jewelled belt was back in place and she was ready to go.

"Put on your jewels." Miron was wearing the implacable face that had made her so wary of him.

Grumbling, she reset her headpiece, necklaces and, finally, the hand flowers. Exhausted, heavy and hungry, she faced her tormentor. "Good enough?"

"Do you need the lav?"

"Aw hells." She ran to the bathing chamber and quickly attended nature while her stomach growled. She washed and dried her hands, rejoining him in the main room.

"Good, let's go." He gripped her hand in his own, escorting her through the halls.

Grins broke out as she passed several males and despite her hurried dressing, the scent of their coupling still reached her nostrils. She could feel the heat scorch her cheeks when she realized that most of the races here were scent sensitive.

A full hall of men and women waited for them. The women were dressed in an array of styles, including trousers. Things were looking up.

Miron led her to the front of the room, a dais was in place as was one large chair. He turned, sat in the chair and gestured for her to sit at his feet. Casually, he introduced her. "Please make welcome my bride, Illora Danyon of Terra."

"I don't understand." This was bizarre. He couldn't really expect her to sit next to him like a pet, could he?

The crowd murmured and stared. He gestured again. "Sit, Illora."

Fury began to simmer in her. "No."

The crowd stilled when he raised an eyebrow, "No? I am your lord and master, Prefect of Lorahan. You will do as I say."

She could feel her lower lip extending in rebellion. "No. I am not your pet. I am an equal."

Miron was out of the chair and had his hand in her hair, pulling her head back in seconds. "Kneel. Take your place."

The stinging pain of his grip only whet her fury. She was hungry, sticky, embarrassed and furious. Without her willing it, she broke his grip and shoved him back, using her uncontrolled talent.

The crowd gasped and stepped back as Miron snarled and lunged forward again. This time, when she moved her hands, he flew across the room.

She remained where she was, breathing heavily, waiting for him to get up. She did not have to wait long. His hair fell loosely around him in a white cape as he reached out for and was given a sword. *Shit.*

As quickly as she could, she identified two likely candidates for weaponry at the sides of one of the wedded guardsman. A rapid gesture and Nikolay was handing her a medium sword and a long dagger. She took possession an instant before Miron reached her.

The clash of metal against metal sent a reverberating shudder through her, but her mind and body knew what to do. Fight.

As a pair, they circled. The crowd backed away but didn't leave as the new couple tried to kill each other.

Illora didn't know if he could see the outrage in her dark brown eyes, but she could read the cold determination in his blood red gaze.

When she had started the fight two-handed, a cry of approval had rung out, but now she was simply fighting for her life. Stings from the cuts that he inflicted on her kept her talent running high, but she deliberately chose not to launch him out the window.

This was going to be as fair a fight as she could make it, even if he started it. They collided, separated, circled and met over and over until her arms were numb from the impact. When he knocked the sword from her right hand, she did what she could, ripped the headpiece off her head and flung it into his startled face. The earrings went next, the hooks snagging near his eyes.

Then it was the necklaces in between parries, the cuts inflicted by the gems healing within seconds, but distracting him enough for her to get a small breather. The hand flowers weren't coming off with one hand, so she used her left fist to block while she flipped the dagger to the right

hand.

She was tiring fast, there was no help for it. Illora raised her fist and blasted him with her mind, sending him up and over the crowd. When he stood, she did it again. Again. Again. Dizziness assailed her and she walked up to the throne. Sitting was easier, but she still only had a few shots left in her before the world went black.

A hand under her chin brought her back to the world. Miron was in front of her, his snow white hair streaked with his own blood. The sight made her smirk, just a little.

"Will you kneel?" The room was silent, waiting for her answer.

"Why would I kneel, I am sitting perfectly comfortably." She really wished she could take that back, but the applause that broke out in the room combined with hoots and hollers from male and female voices distracted her.

Miron leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "I am sorry for the subterfuge, love, but we needed a strong leader for the females in case a domestic issue ever arises. With an increasing female population, they need someone to bring their concerns to. The Prefect's bride must be able to shoulder those social issues and have the strength to stand up to any and all of the males involved. In front of those assembled, you have proven your skill."

"So, this morning. The jewellery..."

"Was because I know you don't like it. I know your temper is shorter when you don't eat, so I let you sleep until the last moment. Our relationship is new, so my scent on you would make you nervous."

Her eyes widened as she listened to his listing of things that would piss her off. "You paid attention."

He smiled and dabbed at a small cut on her cheek. "I really did, but if you hadn't played games to dodge me, we could have proved our relationship via example."

She blinked and a tiny smile crept onto her face. "So, this is all my fault?"

He beamed. "I knew you would see it my way."

CHAPTER FIVE

Together, they laughed. She was covered with nicks, cuts, slices and blood. He was covered with her blood and his own, his shirt and trousers sliced into ribbons and together, they laughed.

When they finished their fit of giggles, he asked, "Can you stand?"

"I think I might need some help. I lost my shoes." She wiggled her toes against his legs and let him lift her.

The crowd applauded as he carried her from the room. She smiled at Nikolay as he retrieved his weaponry, waving at the woman who had to be his wife. She was practically glued to his side and gave Illora a less-than-friendly look.

"I am guessing that only the married men are allowed as guards?" They cleared the council room doors and moved through the cool and sparsely inhabited hallways.

"Yes. The unattached men have tried to abduct women in the past and it hasn't ended well. The

women became shy around their proper matches and it caused their selected men a great deal of stress. It was all we could do to keep them from killing the abductors."

"So you caught them all?"

There was a smile in his voice. "Before they even left the town hall. The jewels that you were wearing have trackers in them. The second that they leave the seraglio, an alarm is sounded."

"I am guessing that it isn't common knowledge?"

"No. Only myself and the tech staff know about it and they are all Zisson. They really don't care where you are or who you go with."

She thought fondly of Ben, the Zisson servant of the seraglio. He was one of a corps of small beings that bred via penetration, spike-related penetration. Once in their lives, the males would impregnate a female and she would release one egg and have one child every five years for the rest of her life. He had already had his moment and sex had not even entered his mind since. Apparently, it was rather painful to lose one's spike in a female.

"Ben was nice."

"Ben?"

"One of the servants in the seraglio. He and I sort of became friends. I think. With them, you can't be too sure." She wiggled her toes idly.

"If he spoke to you, he was a friend. They don't bother talking to those they don't like." Miron used his shoulder to push into a room with the chemical tang of a doctor's office. "Rict. I have a patient for you."

An Azon blended with something else looked up with a start from his screens. "Really? You didn't kill her?"

That irritated her. "No, he didn't kill me, but I might take a run at you if I find something sharp." She glared at him from the confines of Miron's arms.

"Uh. Put her down on the exam table. I'll get some creams." The medic rushed to a cupboard and started pulling down supplies.

Miron was grinning down at her as he helped her remove the last of her jewellery.

She heaved a sigh of relief when the hand flowers fell to the table. "I feel so much lighter now."

"Remove her clothing, please." Rict was pulling an instrument tray up next to the table and his comment made her scowl at him again.

"I can take off my own damned clothes."

"Let me do it, Illora. Blood is making it stick in some unusual places." Miron helped her sit up and simply tore the fabric down the centre.

At her startled gasp, he smiled, "It was ruined anyway. While Rict works, I will go fetch you

something more suitable."

He tugged, tore and removed her jewelled belt until she was completely naked. Looking down at her body, she could see the damage. It was all superficial, but red stripes covered her arms, legs, breasts, belly and there was one that burned a lot on her neck.

"Be quick. This guy seems like a weenie." She watched the medic as he applied protective gear and lenses. The sterilization light emanated from above her and below at the same time. Her wounds were now sterile so Rict set to work.

He removed any residual blood from each and every cut before applying a cream and holding the wound together. The moment he pulled his hands away, only a thin line remained from the original slice.

Miron had taken it easy on her as well. His restraint was shown in the shallow slices. She hadn't blasted him out of the council hall and he didn't take her head off. It was a pretty fair trade.

She watched Rict as he moved competently and calmly through her wounds. "How long have you been here?"

If she had been a talking dog, he couldn't have been more surprised. He jumped, then turned to look at her. "Six months. The station I was at was raided and it was suggested that I live on Lorahan after that."

She had seen it before, in those who were not cut out to fight in the arenas but who were used as training tools. He was in a strange sort of beta shock. His life was nothing without alphas around him and without people to keep an eye on him, he would simply waste to nothing emotionally and physically. It was PTSD.

"You were in the arena for a while. Over four years if I don't miss my guess."

"How could you know that?" He blinked at her as if finally bringing her into focus. He actually *saw* her for the first time.

"I have seen haunted eyes before, Rict. One doesn't forget them."

"Where?"

"Dailan. I was there for...too long." She shuddered at the memory and to her surprise, Rict held her hand.

"A day is too long in those places. You were an exotic?"

"Yes, and imperfect, but I still only know two of the races in my bloodline. Is there a test you could do to find the other ones?" He had resumed his ministrations, but he was facing her now.

"I can do a complete genetic workup. That should do the trick. You are partially Admaryn. That I know without fail." A tiny smile played at the corner of his mouth.

"How do you know?"

"Kai Miron. He looks at you as if you were perfect. The ideal woman. The blood in him calls to yours as well, I think."

She didn't have anything to say to that, so she asked him about his home here on Lorahan and asked if he was in the lottery yet for a female of his own.

Miron came back to find almost all of her cuts sealed and she and Rict chatting amiably about checkers and the Zisson.

He cleared his throat as he entered the room. "I see that the weenie factor is no longer an issue."

"We just had to set some common ground. After that, it was smooth sailing." She waited for Rict to seal the final slice down her left arm and let him help her sit up.

"You certainly have an exceptional female here, Kai Miron. You will be blessed all the days of your life if you treat her right. If not, there will be men waiting to take your place." Rict's statement was a warning and everyone in the room knew it.

"So, what you are saying is no more swordfights in the council hall. No problem." Miron inclined his head in acknowledgement and handed Illora a pile of folded fabric with boots on top.

It was a uniform similar to his but included inside the bundle were some of her hoarded Terran undergarments in hot pink. She slipped the

bra on with a sigh of relief. Her breasts were not huge, but they did better with support. The panties just felt right as she squirmed into them by lifting her hips to the ceiling.

The men carried on a quiet conversation that she couldn't hear, but she didn't care. For the first time in six months, she pulled on a tunic and yanked on some trousers. Socks and boots completed the look.

Miron had changed his clothing, but she matched him from top to toe. The only difference was that her tunic had a low square neckline and his had a mandarin collar and fastened at the shoulder.

She stood and held onto the exam table until she stabilised.

Rict was at her side in an instant. "Still dizzy?"

"Just hungry, I think. Miron, can we have food?" She sounded whiney even to her own ears.

His curse was lurid and colourful. "I forgot you had not eaten. We will go to the market and get you something."

As they turned to leave, she stopped, "Thank you, Rict, for everything. It was so nice to be able to speak to someone who wasn't coated in silk and lace."

His chuckle followed them out of the room as they exited the tiny clinic and made their way arm in arm back the way they had come.

The concealment of clothing gave her her standard cocky confidence as they walked the halls. Several couples stopped them to introduce themselves to her. Illora found out one peculiar thing, she had a new designation.

Prime Illora was how the majority of women greeted her. Kai Miron remained the Prefect.

Once the clot of introductions cleared, she asked Miron, "Prime?"

"We didn't have a title for wife of the Prefect, so the women chose the name. To them, after your display this morning, you are their Prime."

Her blush didn't clear until they were out in an open space. The agora effect was incredible and for the first time, she realized that this was a planet almost entirely populated by men. Hundreds of different combinations of the Alliance races milled around, shopping, chatting, playing games in the open spaces that resembled lawn bowling.

She breathed deeply of the fresh air and smiled at the scent of roasted meat. "Meat on a stick?"

He looked down at her in surprise. "How did you know? There are also vegetables on a stick if you wish."

"Where there is a large group of men, there is meat on a stick. It is an immutable law of the universe."

CHAPTER SIX

She was almost giddy. There was air that wasn't enclosed and perfumed. It was wonderful. Illora had to fight the urge to twirl around with her arms out in the open space.

She could have followed her nose to the food, but Miron led her to the line of food vendors and loaded her up with a stick of anything that she chose. There were chairs nearby and while he paid with a thumbprint, she took a seat and started gnawing her way to satisfaction.

Miron took a few of the selections and pulled chunks of food free with his sharp white teeth. He seemed surprised at her ferocity, but wisely kept his fingers free of the selections that she was guarding. "Is it good?"

"It is my first meal in twenty-four hours. It is wonderful." Whether he could understand her muffled speech around the roasted tuber, she couldn't care less. The food was hot, tasty and *oh, look. Fish on a stick.*

He had obviously eaten at some point and wisely wandered off to get her something to drink. A few males were eyeing her curiously, but her uniform must have been clueing them in as to her identity.

A huge cup of shaved ice covered in juice was placed in front of her. Her feeding frenzy had slowed by that point, so she remembered her manners. "Thank you, Miron. And thank you for the food."

"You are most welcome. We will place you on my accounts for now and set up your own for the future. The single males rarely cook for themselves and we pay for all meals via thumbprint or retinal scan."

"Oh. So the married men have houses with kitchens?"

"All except me. There was a voted dispensation for my choice when you popped up as available."

"So, you picked me, or someone else made the choice."

"Both. I chose you, but because of the conflict of interest, a vote had to be held amongst the unmated males to allow me to have you."

"You don't quite have me yet. Well, you had me last night, but that was then, this is now." She finished most of her selections and in the tradition of women around the galaxies, she gestured for her mate to finish her food.

Licking her fingers brought the image of him doing the same thing after using the registry scanner. A surge of heat ran through her, tightening her nipples and engorging her breasts. She reached for the iced drink frantically, needing to cool her body quickly.

The belch was one of her most embarrassing moments, stopping nearby males in their tracks. Everything froze for an endless moment before the laughter started. She buried her face in her hands for a moment while even Miron joined in. Unable to avoid the attention, she stood and bowed to those assembled.

"Thank you. There will be a repeat performance later today." She raised her hands and smiled as the cheers resounded.

"Very nicely handled, my dear. I am lucky that I got you when I did. With decorum like that, you could have most of the men here." Her dark-skinned elf was leaning his head on his fist and grinning. He was looking relaxed and cheerful, two things that she would never have guessed he could be.

"Well, as the new Prime, I have a certain amount of dignity to maintain." She held her index finger and her thumb less than an inch apart. "That much."

"Excellent attitude with the men."

"I will be more circumspect with the women,

but this is my first day out of the seraglio in six months, cut me some slack." She stuck her tongue out at Miron and he took it as an invitation to lean over the table and plant a kiss on her lips that had her leaning up to keep contact.

When they pulled apart, he licked his lips. "Tastes like chicken."

She was so surprised that her mouth opened for an instant before she burst into gales of laughter. "Got a Terran phrase book, did you?"

"A file, but yes."

She snickered and had another careful sip of juice. This time no thunder. *Hooray.*

The nice hum of the afternoon activity was relaxing, too relaxing. She was falling asleep.

"Would you like to go back to our rooms and take a nap? Or do you want to go for a ride to see some of the local homes?"

"The nap is tempting, but can we go for a ride?" She wanted to get out, wanted to see more than this town square.

"Sure. Let's just tidy up and we can be on our way." He swept the sticks into a pile and deposited them in a receptacle for them. "They will be taken to be used to start cooking fires in the homes that have low tech."

She followed him to the water fountain and washed and dried her hands on the towels provided and beamed up at him. "Let's go."

"The stables are this way."

Stables? Uh oh. When he said ride...he really meant ride. The beasts were six feet high at the shoulder and mounting was done by a set of steps built into the lower edge of the saddle and pulled up once you were mounted.

It was like riding a goat crossed with a cow on steroids. The animal was placid enough, but steering was accomplished with vocal cues that were not easy to learn.

Miron looked like he belonged on the beast and she was sure that her mount was wondering why he had to carry the dud.

The villages were small and grouped by base society. Some were low tech, some were high tech and some, like the town, were tech on demand. A vote had to be passed to introduce new equipment into the town and it had to pass by a sixty-percent margin.

These were the little tidbits that he shared with her as they rode slowly through the area surrounding the town. He was a good tour guide, she had to give him that, even if he did stop to chat now and then with people ploughing the fields. He introduced her every time and soon she was getting off the beast with him and meeting the locals.

It was getting harder and harder for Illora to remount her beast that Miron started to lift her up

into the saddle. They finished their little *ride* in four hours with Illora feeling decidedly exhausted and hot from the sun exposure by the time they meandered back into the stables.

She wasn't burned, just a little warm and in need of some water. Her uniform did a remarkable job of keeping her body temperature even. "Can we get something to drink?"

"Damn it, there was water on the back of your saddle." He sighed and detached a water bottle from his own saddle.

"Oh. I thought the sloshing was Jeeves."

"Jeeves?"

"The riding animal. He needed a name."

"It's a she."

"She needed a name." She took the water skin and sipped carefully, wincing at the smell. Water and leather didn't make for a good taste sensation.

He was smiling again.

"Can I keep this?" She gestured with the water skin.

The stable master looked at her, bemused. "Why would you want that? There is plenty of water in the town hall."

"So that I can keep my supply with me until I figure out where to find it. I am tired of being thirsty and hungry without knowing where I can find food and I have only been out for the equivalent of a day." She was cranky, she was

tired and she was still sticky, something that she had only realized when she straddled Jeeves.

"I want a nap, then dinner, then an uninterrupted night's sleep." She stamped her foot and swayed as spots flared behind her eyes.

"I think that is exactly what you need. Let's go." Miron tried to pull the water skin from her, but she hung on tenaciously. He gave up and started a slow pace back to the town hall and from there to their quarters.

Illora must have looked worse than she thought, people who had greeted her earlier in the day now gave her a wide berth. Her control was frayed and she thought she may have literally been pushing them away, but was too tired to tell.

At regular increments during their walk, she drank more and more water, soothing the burn in her throat and the itch in her eyes. By the time they reached their quarters, her water bag was almost empty and she was sloshing when she walked.

"Go lie down."

"No. I want a shower or bath or whatever. I feel itchy." What she felt like was a cranky four-year-old and she didn't think it sounded good.

She scooted past him and into the lav, stripping off as she went. Pulling down the pants without removing the boots was a tactical error but one that could easily be solved. Finally wearing

nothing but skin, she stepped into the shower, yelping as the spray came on when she passed the sensor. It was a nice, warm shower and with a little effort, she moved the controls up to hot.

Soap and shampoo dispensers were conveniently located on the far side of the shower from the spray, so she used the opportunity to scrub herself from head to toe. By the time she finished, she was exhausted and fantasizing about the large bed with pristine white sheets. Of course, if no one changed the bedding, the sheets would be less than pristine, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Illora stumbled out of the shower and was wrapped in a towel by two strong unclothed arms. "Hello, Miron, are you napping, too?"

"Yes, I am napping." Brusquely, he rubbed her dry, leaving no drops of moisture on her skin before he lifted her and carried her to the bed.

The sheets were a powder blue today, someone had done some cleaning and she snuggled into the bed with sinful abandon. Lying still had never felt this good.

He slid into bed behind her and curled around her as she lay on her side. His cock was hard against her back, but she was so tired, she didn't care. Surrounded by warmth and comfort, she drifted off to sleep.

She was haunted by dreams in which she chased a sandwich and never caught it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The smell of food brought her out of her coma the way that an alarm clock never could.

“Wake up, Prime. Your dinner is here and then you can rest again.”

It was Ben. She looked at the mint green Zisson and smiled at the tray he held.

“Hey, Ben, they let you out of the women’s quarters?” She sat up and scooted the sheets under her armpits. Ben didn’t care, but she was never one to wave her breasts around.

“The Prefect has requested that I become your personal valet. Making sure you are fed and such. He isn’t very good at that thing and frequently has to attend to matters of debate.”

He handed her the tray of food that she was used to getting in the seraglio and she sighed happily. The salad, starch and small meat portion were carefully measured for her dietary requirements, just perfect. There was even a pitcher of water next to the bed.

"Ben, did you bring that?"

"Yes, Prime. You have not hydrated properly today."

"I know. Do you mind being made a valet?"

"No, it vastly improves on working with some of those flighty women. Ulani is set for her match soon, I don't know if it is a good idea to release her into the wild." Ben's flat, slightly scaled face was impassive, but Illora giggled. She and Ben had shared a deadpan sense of humour at times and only the twinkling in his eyes gave it away.

He bustled around the room, fixing, tidying and unpacking her personal items. There were nesting tables along one wall and he placed her board games on them. Her underwear went into a drawer and a pile of uniforms was unfolded and hung neatly in the wardrobe. Boots were lined in the bottom of the wardrobe and she was set.

It was nice to have Ben with her.

The food on her plate was disappearing in a steady manner, the glass of water that she poured reminded her of that other fact, she had consumed three litres of water and not peed. With one eye on Ben, she tried to slide out of her sheets and make a run for it, but he appeared at her side with a robe.

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

She answered the bellowing scream of nature before she exploded and sighed in relief. She

almost felt normal, or as normal as she got.

A quick scrubbing of her teeth and she was back in bed, the robe folded neatly and laid across the footboard. She gulped down the glass of water, waited for her stomach to settle and piled some pillows behind her back so she could chat with Ben.

"Is there a data pad or anything I could read?"

"The Prefect left some information on prospective couples as well as some minor domestic issues for you to address tomorrow. I think the couple information would be more conducive to a good night's sleep."

"Spoilsport. All right, I will wait until tomorrow for the heavy stuff. Give me the matchmaking stuff." She held out her hand and a data pad was smacked into it. She began to scroll through the prospects and winced at some of the stats for the men's mental health. To be captured and forced to maim and kill would do a number on anyone's sanity.

These men were not anyone, they were now her people and she wanted the best for them.

"Ben, is there a writing implement and some paper or something? I want to make some notes."

She could have made notes on the data pad, but she preferred to write her conclusions down and then look back and forth at the original data.

Ulani was high maintenance. She would benefit

from the low-tech village, but it would be a hardship for her mate if she decided to slack. High tech would make her too sedentary. She needed to be kept out of trouble. That left the select tech. It would restrict her options, but give her mate the upper hand. For example, she would still have to cook, but it would be on an oven-style heater, not a fire.

Checking Ulani's upbringing, she noted that the select tech matched the life she had grown up in. In fact, Ulani's planet was a slightly more advanced version of Terra. She had been consigned to Lorahan because she caused a riot about being imperfect. The government had wanted her gone before she could convince more people to get genetic testing. They offered her the chance to leave and she went.

With Ulani's requirements in mind, she started to look through the men who were at the top of the lottery list and who were physically compatible. A few of the males on Lorahan had acid blood and Illora didn't even want to wonder about their semen.

An hour later, she was yawning, but she had a short list. She circled the first pick and marked the others in the order of suitability. Each male had a home that was ready for a woman's touch and was waiting patiently, knowing that Kai Miron would pursue each and every female that the

Alliance was willing to send their way.

Her fingers were smudged, but she put the data pad and parchment aside, the charcoal pencil on top of them. Time for more rest.

There was time to play living dolls in the morning.

Miron curled around her in the night, waking her. She turned to face him and gave him a sweet kiss, stroking the side of his face in the dark. Silently, she pushed him onto his back and straddled him, continuing the kiss.

In the dark, she could bring his hands to her breasts and not blush, but instead of moaning, she kept to the silence, it made it more fun somehow. She could only feel and not see his fingers as they stroked, caressed and teased her breasts. The kiss that she had him locked in grew more passionate until he broke it and began to work at her neck.

The soft trailing heat of his lips on her neck caused the warmth in her womb to become a warm rush. One of his hands left her breast and reached between her thighs to spread the liquid that would allow him access.

Two fingers slid easily inside, her arousal higher than she had ever felt it. She pushed back until the molten rod of his erection butted against her opening and slid inside. Illora abandoned the intoxicating feel of Miron's mouth on her neck,

licking and sucking, for the increase of heat inside her.

Rocking back onto him bit by bit, she braced her hands on his rock-hard abdomen until she was on him as far as she could go with her knees braced on the bed. Using his belly as a balance point, she spread her knees out as far as they would go, pressing her pubic bone against his. Now, time to swivel her hips.

She grinned in triumph and twisted, circled and ground herself on him until he grabbed her hips and started a fast hard beat of lift and drop. The slapping of their bodies and the harsh sound of their breathing was the only noise in the room.

The raw slide of flesh into flesh was creating enough friction to heat her body inside and out. When her orgasm approached, she tried to slow him, but he was having none of it, his hands tightened their grip and he threw her nerves into spasm as they tried to still the overload of sensation. She ruthlessly clamped her teeth into her lower lip and breathed through the waves of contractions that her body was treating his cock to.

His orgasm broke the silence with a harsh growl and she winced as he pulled her onto him harshly in time to his body's release. She would have bruises in the morning, but feeling him shake and the warm shot inside her was worth them.

Miron rolled her to the side and kissed her

softly, stroking her hair. "I thought you said you were going to sleep today."

"I did. It's tomorrow already."

His warm chuckle and the feel of him inside her carried her into dreams of warmth, security and sex. Lots of sex.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Yahi, are you sure that he meant to take the last of the cookies? He may have just seen them on the plate and thought there were more in the cupboard.” It was her ninth interview with a concerned woman in the first full day of being Prime.

A long table had been set up for her on one side of the room and chairs on either side provided a sort of desk for her to meet with the women. A series of data pads dotted the surface of the table, as did her handwritten notes.

Yahi and Elro had been mated for one year and he had a tendency to consume the last of any sweets that she baked, even if she asked him not to. She was at the end of her rope.

“I am sure. He falls on them like a man possessed.” Yahi’s pink skin was flushed fuschia with agitation.

“A moment please.” Illora grabbed up one of the seven data pads that had been provided and

swiftly ran through Elro's file. "Aha."

The young woman perked up and leaned forward. "You have found something? Is something wrong?"

"Not precisely. I wish for you to try an experiment." A quick look around confirmed that the male in question was not within earshot. His pale lavender skin marked him clearly and he was deeply in conversation with another man on the far side of the council hall.

"Anything. I love him. I want nothing more than to live happily with him, but there is no sign of him going into rut and I can't ovulate without it." Her words came out in a hissing rush, the desperation in her eyes apparent.

"You want children with him?"

"More than I can say. He is quiet, generous and wants the best for me. I am content here and wish to continue to evolve as his wife. That requires children."

"Excellent. Well, after reviewing his medicals and genetic traits I have a suspicion that he has taken after one of his ancestors. The Pilwi are harvest breeders. He is going after the sweets so that he can trigger his rut. The more you bake, the faster his body will get the idea that it is safe to breed the next generation. You are a reactive breeder. When he starts putting out mating signals, your body will follow."

Tears started in her eyes. "Is it that simple?"

"It might be. Try it for a few weeks and see what happens. There should be a result within a month. If he goes into rut, it was the sweets all along. If not, make him work off the extra pounds."

The startled laugh that Yahi let out made Elro turn to look at her with a surprised smile of his own.

"He hasn't seen you smile recently, has he?"

Yahi snivelled and smiled. "There hasn't been a lot to smile about. He has watched me fill with despair and irritability. He has been worried."

"Try this and if nothing happens, speak to me again and we will get Rict to give you a full workup with myself there as ladies' maid. Now go bake some cookies."

The hug that Yahi delivered was enthusiastic and filled with a desperate energy followed by her mad dash into Elro's arms. They whispered frantically to each other before leaving the council hall.

The women seated calmly in the chairs in front of her greeted her with grins when she sat back down, turned to Ben and chirped, "Next."

* * * *

Across the room, Miron watched the women line up to pour their hearts out to his new mate. This had been too long in coming, but the choice of his bride could not have been better.

She had pounced on him in the dawn hours, but instead of any sexual matters, she had whipped out pieces of parchment and gone over the matches that were up for consideration.

Ulani would be a handful, but Illora's assessment of the men suitable was so accurate that he was left smiling at her foolishly. He could feel that same smile teasing his lips as he watched her speak earnestly to woman after woman. No matter how minor the question, she gave them her full attention.

The feminine laughter emanating from that corner had all the men smiling foolishly as they basked in the glow of that happiness.

A tapping at his elbow got his attention, it was the Zisson, Ben. "The Prime would like to know if she could get two private offices to hear the women's issues. It might make them a little more forthcoming with details."

"I will make arrangements. Does she have everything that she needs?"

"She is still a little tired, but for the most part recovered from her excesses of yesterday. The women seem receptive to her advice. She needs you to accompany her to a few homes in the next

weeks."

"I will make the arrangements. I am sure that she will give me a list with the details."

"I am certain you are correct." A flicker of amusement appeared in the small man's eyes and Miron finally understood why Ben and Illora got along. The Zisson found her amusing and amused her in return. They were friends of a sort.

Ben returned to Illora's side and waited for her to request something or finish her tea. As she whispered to him, he also got beverages for the ladies waiting in the gallery and sent one of the waiting husbands for some light food.

It seemed his lady had everything in hand.

* * * *

He was watching her. Illora looked up from her conversation about the best way to tell one's husband that his belching was not attractive and blew Miron a kiss. The surprise in his glowing red eyes made her giggle, the woman that she was speaking to turned to see what she was looking at and sighed. "I remember when Glaori and I were like that. It seems a decade away."

"How long has it been, Laveela?"

"A year and a half."

"I will have a roundabout word with Glaori. Is the belching the only problem?"

"It is. He is a perfect husband otherwise. Thank you."

"Wonderful. I will be right back." Sighing to herself, she had to admit that eighteen months of belching was a little much.

Standing near Miron's chair, she waited until he was finished talking. "Miron, may I have a word with you?"

"Of course, Illora." He stood and nodded to the man he had been speaking to.

"Are you well? Is the line up of women too much?" He looked over at the women who were still trickling in and taking a seat to wait their turn.

"They have not had someone to share their stresses with and it builds up. Most of the women do not have a woman nearby from their home world or with a similar upbringing. They are lonely."

He nodded. The married men had begun to suspect as much. "What can I do?"

"First off, can you find out from Glaori if belching is cultural or personal? If it's personal, is it dietary, can it be mitigated by a change in food?"

He barked a laugh. "Belching? Seriously?"

"For eighteen months. I think she is thinking about a cork." She tried to keep a serious face, she really did, but was afraid that she cracked.

"I will speak to him. Send Ben to me in ten minutes." Miron left a sweet kiss on her lips and she returned to the desk where Laveela was waiting anxiously.

"Miron is going to raise the topic so that Glaori isn't embarrassed." She smiled confidently until an excited shout came from the Prefect's desk. "Oh, for the love of Pete. Arm wrestling?"

Laveela giggled. "It is Glaori's favourite pastime when he has finished his chores and the farming for the day. The men get together and continue some of the games they learned in the arena."

"What do the women do?"

"We tend our homes and our men. There is nothing else available to us. Perhaps after you settle in, you could assist in a change there as well." Laveela had a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

"Let's tackle the gas leak first." She smiled.

Another shout rang from the table and the men were clapping Miron on the back while he rubbed his wrist. Glaori was looking a little embarrassed, but nodded in acknowledgement of his loss. At least that is what it appeared to be. There was a glimmer of resignation in his eyes that had nothing to do with that contest.

"Is your husband a contact communicator," she asked the mocha brown woman.

"No, but yours is. The Prefect rarely uses his

talent, but it is a powerful one." Laveela smiled and stood as her mate arrived. "Are we leaving?"

"Yes. We have some things to discuss on the way to the market. Good morning, Prime." His resigned look was back and it suddenly struck Illora as to his difficulty. It was Laveela's cooking.

Stifling a giggle was hard, but she extended her hand to him and had her arm grasped in the manner of equals in the arena. "Good morning, Glaori. Laveela and I have been discussing ideas for the ladies. I was thinking of cooking classes for the different species types. What do you think?"

The relief in his face was almost funny, "I think that you are as intelligent as the Prefect stated. I look forward to your lessons. I am sure many will benefit from them."

"Thank you, I hope they will. Now, I just need a place to conduct them."

"I am sure the Prefect will see to it, he is excellent at that type of coordination." The admiration in Glaori's face was unmistakable.

They all inclined their heads and the couple left the room.

Illora took a gulp of tea before nodding to Ben to call the next woman who wished to speak to her.

The morning turned into afternoon and Illora's perkiness was forced by the end of the day. Miron seemed calm and relaxed as he went over land

petitions and requests for supplies. The great warehouses had been shown to her the day before, but their contents were carefully monitored so that no one got more than the other. The supplies were handed out by work done in the town and each day's work was carefully logged so that when a request came in, supplies for an entire house were available.

Currency was not used, it was all recorded thumbprints and iris scans. It had been the first thing that Miron had done that morning—put her thumb and iris on his accounts until she generated enough to purchase her own goods when she wished.

Each of the women shared their husband's accounts and could shop on his accumulated credit when she wished. From something that Miron had said, she was the only female earning credit on the planet.

That was unacceptable in her eyes. Many of the women had marketable skills in logistics, design and handcraft, not to mention child rearing and housekeeping. Their skills were being wasted and there was nothing like a bored population of women to cause trouble.

Only nine children had been born since the women started arriving and that was a worrying trend. The rate of miscarriages was almost non-existent, so that meant that there was an

environmental factor that had to be addressed. She had made a note of it.

If she were to be in charge of the women of Lorahan, then those women would flourish.

CHAPTER NINE

There was a surge of relief when Ben told the women that she had to stop for the day. She couldn't tell them, they were all too hopeful. A Zisson speaking to them was such a novelty they filed out with promises to return the next day.

Alone with her copious notes, she pulled them together and bound them with a ribbon that one of the ladies had offered for that purpose when Illora had dropped a pile on the floor.

"Why do you insist on paper when there are data pads available?" Miron whispered the question in her ear and she jumped in surprise.

"Don't sneak up on me. You might end up in the wall." She turned to give him a quick kiss on the nose. "I like paper. Writing manually helps me organize my thoughts. Writing in carbon means that I can smudge the page into unreadability when I wish to. And this way, I can compare some of the nuances of the day's information at a later time."

She was about to pick up the scattered data pads on her desk when Ben said, "I will get them and deliver them to your rooms, Prime. Go have dinner with your mate."

Miron grinned. "That sounds like a not-so-subtle order. I believe we should go." He extended his arm in a courtly manner and she stood to take it.

He asked her about her day and she shared some of the more distressing details. Tales of one woman with several miscarriages and other women who desperately wanted children. "It isn't for want of trying, so I am thinking there is an environmental factor. One of the locally grown fruits or vegetables perhaps."

"There have been children." He sounded unsure.

She shook her head. "To only those who have reactive mating. Stress ovulators. The women who are triggered by their men in rut."

"I don't suppose that you are one of those."

"No, I am not. I am a seasonal ovulator. If this is environmental, I will know in a few weeks."

"I read something about your race, you ovulate..."

"Every twenty-eight days." She sighed at his twinkling eyes. "Don't look so keen. If I go the way of the other women, it will be a Herculean effort for a useless cause."

"I am willing to take on the task. But you are right. We need to find the cause of the infertility, or this entire enterprise will be for naught." They were out of the town hall, and in the main square.

Row upon row of banquet tables were set, married and unmarried folk were seated at them. When they appeared on the green, the assembled fell silent. In that unnerving silence, Miron led her up to the head table and turned to face her.

He was about to speak when she leapt up and kissed him with everything in her. Illora hung from his neck until applause burst out and she leaned back from his mouth, grinning.

Miron lifted her hand, kissed it and presented her to the assembled throng. "My mate, Illora, Prime of Lorahan."

Ravon, a man whose wife, Alsie, needed more foreplay than he was providing, saluted them both. "The Prefect and Prime."

The words were echoed by the assembled and as Illora watched, bemused, the crowd raised their glasses in salute.

Miron helped her to her seat and at that silent signal, servers brought the meal out in large dishes. The servers were young men, a little skittish and Illora had far too good an idea of what they were used for in the arenas.

There were dozens of same-sex couples in the throng, feeding each other as playfully as the

female-male couplings. Miron tried it and she bit him, followed by an angelic grin.

"Don't get between me and food, dear. We had a long relationship before you ever came along." She patted his cheek and kissed the digit she had bitten.

"Point taken."

Smug in her triumph, she ate, drank and talked with those who came to speak to her. It was an excellent night and at the end of it, she had samples of all the food sent to medical, as there was no other lab on the planet...yet.

Rict had been bemused when Illora arrived the next day—the leftovers from the evening meal were all over his examining table.

"Hiya, Rict. We have a problem and it is up to you and me to solve it."

"Morning, Prime. What is all this food?"

"We need to take samples and find out what could be delaying ovulation in the women of Lorahan."

"But there have been children." He watched her as she scooted over to the computer and brought up the birth records.

"All of the women who have had children are reactive to their mates' hormone level. None of the seasonal women have had children."

Rict looked over the records with a dawning

shock. "So..."

"There has to be an environmental factor."

"How did you learn all this?"

"I talked to the women. None have had a cycle since they landed on the surface."

The medic was looking excited. She had to ask, "What did you do before the arena?"

"Biochemistry. This is right up my area of expertise. Will you help me?"

"I will. Can you set aside the hours from dawn to midmorning to work with me?"

"Why that time?"

"I need to speak to the women and get some community activities going that they can participate in." She grinned to herself, across the galaxy, she was working to reinvent the Women's Institute.

"I see. Isn't this more important?" Rict looked as if he couldn't see her dilemma.

"If we keep them occupied, we buy time before they start to talk to each other and panic. They haven't been talking, have been insular and it has bred a sort of depression in them. They need the company of other women as a support system."

"I still don't understand."

"It's an oestrogen thing."

"Fair enough. When do I start?"

"Why don't I start prepping the samples and you can run the tests? I will keep a steady stream

of samples running through here on a daily basis. We are looking at something that will have a biological effect. Something that affects chemical balances, specifically mating hormones."

Rict started to rub his hands together. "Thank you. This project will be just the thing I need to concentrate on. To keep me busy, I mean."

She understood all too well. "Let's get to work then. The ladies are already lining up in the council hall."

Under the medic's watchful eye, she selected, cut, droppered and shredded samples of the evening's feast. Each sample was marked, logged and set for analysis.

Rict began to work on the samples before she finished and was happily running his machines when she left.

The tests were in good hands.

The council hall was indeed filling up and while Ben was standing by with a ream of paper and data pads, she wanted more privacy than the hall could afford. "Ben, ladies, we are heading to the green. We are going to have a frank and open discussion with a question and answer period. Private consultations will now be scheduled and I will discuss private matters one at a time."

The ladies looked a little embarrassed, but most of them followed her to the green. Thirty women sat with her on the green and had a conversation

about why they were there and what they hoped to get out of their lives and their mates.

She asked them about their skills, if they wanted to have more in their lives than husband and home. More than half raised their hands.

She started to discuss cottage industries, earning credit and the attitudes of their spouses. If their husband didn't want to be married to a businesswoman, there was always something else they could do, including teaching others domestic skills.

Illora made a note to get Miron to include teaching others to cook, clean and mend as payable skills. Testing would have to be arranged, but that is what baking contests were for.

The women perked up and started to ask more questions and offer suggestions to each other. Illora smiled, it was a start.

* * * *

Rict had been slaving for weeks on the project she had set him and finally his tests were conclusive. He called her and Miron to his new lab and faced them both. "It's the wine."

"What?" She had just had a few glasses the night before, leading her to giggle her way through Miron undressing her until he used his tongue on her wet heat. All the giggles faded

away at that point.

"The wine. There is an enzyme caused by the wild yeast we have been using for fermentation."

Miron leaned forward and stared at Rict. "How did you determine this?"

"Once I had narrowed down the possibilities, I fed the suspect compounds to the beasts that were due to go into heat. The one animal that didn't was the one fed the wine compounds. She simply paused. As soon as the wine was discontinued, she was fine within days."

"Fine, as in...in heat." Illora just needed that clarification.

"Indeed. She is currently with calf as we speak." Rict was enthusiastic.

"Well, that is good and horrid at the same time. What about the women who don't drink wine? There are some of them."

"The dried grapes are used in a number of publicly produced foods as a flavour enhancer. The yeast is on the surface and therefore any by-product of the grape has this effect."

Miron sighed and Illora exhaled. "One mystery solved, now how do we get the grapes out of circulation?"

"A notice will be issued. The offending fruit will be destroyed."

A thought occurred to Illora, "Wait on that. Rict, you said this seems to have no obvious side

effects?"

"The beast seemed fine, but it requires more study. Why?"

Miron was looking at her curiously.

"I think Lorahan might have its first export. Oral contraceptive with no side effects. There are several planets that practicing population control that might want to purchase this product. Well, that and many women suffer ill health if constantly in childbed. It used to be the most common method of death in women on my world."

The horror on Miron's face was for her health, "Oh, geez, Miron. I come from a family with three children and my mother had four brothers and sisters. It just needs more common sense. Aside from that issue, you don't want a population explosion. Slow and steady growth is far more easy to plan for."

"You do have a point, but this involves more regulation of our populace. I don't want a woman denied or forced to imbibe this and some of the men may become insistent."

Rict was standing and watching their byplay.

"May I continue my experiments?" He was eager and more animated than Illora had ever seen him.

"You may. Investigate the possibilities of this substance while I announce the problem to the

population. Wine will be restricted for the meantime. How is the beer?"

"The beer is safe, Prefect."

Illora made a face. She hated beer, but if the price of drinking water and juice was her chance at Miron's child, she was willing to risk it.

"Shall we make the announcement?"

She smiled. "By all means." They thanked Rict and walked together down the halls, still talking. "Can you imagine, in one year we could be up to our ears in babies."

He stopped in the hall and looked into her eyes, a wild look in his own.

She laughed and caressed the points of his ears. "They won't all come on the same day, silly. There is plenty of time for laying in supplies. I am thinking that it is time for a knitting class and as one of the Terrans is on Admar and a spinner, I think she may be able to help us."

She felt the touch of her mind, the way she did when he was stressed or urgent. "Will they help? We will need so much, a nursery, larger medical centre, diapers..."

"They will help."

"Why?"

"Because we ask it." Her grin started his and soon they were standing in the centre of a bustling hallway with thoughts of a new crop of citizens waiting to be born.

It was a really good thought.

* * * *

The babies did not arrive all at once, but it was common for two or three to make themselves known on the same day. Proud fathers were everywhere, as were women who looked to be on the verge of exploding.

Illora's own pregnancy had only entered the beginning of the second trimester. She and Miron agreed that there was too much to do for the newly burgeoning families to start their own immediately. Now that the Women's Pavilion was almost complete, the lessons were underway and her new friends had solved the petty problems with their husbands, she was able to start her own family.

For her birthday, at Miron's request, Rict had presented her not simply with a list of races, but a genealogy chart for each contributor to her genes. Admar, Dhema, Jela, Azon and Nyal all appeared in her bloodline and made her one of the most complex creatures on Lorahan.

As Prefect and Prime, they were representing different needs in the population and they did fight, but they never went to bed angry. In fact, they often ended up in a chair or on the floor, fully reconciled.

Illora smiled as the child shifted inside her, reminding her of her presence. They were having a little girl.

Miron was asleep beside her and she wanted to keep it that way. He had been helping to expand the nursery to help some of the little crossbreeds get a better start on life. Not all of the early matches were completely compatible. That had changed.

Between Miron, herself and Rict, they had worked matching the personalities with the medical possibilities to the best possible result. There were no longer any women in the seraglio, but there was a new batch on the way, all mixed breeds and all volunteers. Prime Illora had pulled out all the stops and called in every favour she had ever been owed to find those women and with this group, there would only be two hundred eligible men seeking matches. Each day, she received more letters from women who wished to become pioneers of Lorahan and if they were good candidates, she sent them to one of the Terrans that she was corresponding with for an interview at her expense.

Miron's hand stroked her belly as he rolled over. "How is she this morning?"

She loved the rough feel of his hand on the tight drum of her belly. "Good, frisky."

Miron rolled her under him and slowly worked

inside her. She closed her eyes, relishing the tightness and her body's smooth acceptance of him. "Like her father."

He chuckled, keeping his dark, sleepy gaze on her as he thrust slowly with the rhythm of the rising tide. Since her pregnancy, he only took her fast and hard when she asked for it, but this morning, she was more than willing to let him set the pace. A slow and leisurely pace.

When she came, it was with a gasp and a shiver, her body clutching at his. He followed in his own time, keeping the slow measured pace that they both enjoyed.

With a groan, he shifted to the side and pulled her so that her head rested on his shoulder. "Have I mentioned how happy I was that you were the one?"

"Once or twice. Have I mentioned that I still need to pay you back for the truth serum?" She smiled and pinched his nipple.

"You can't still hold a grudge...can you?"

She sighed and looked into his face, "How well do you know me, Miron?"

He winced. "How about if I beg your forgiveness?"

"You would have to be very sincere..." She laughed as he began to kiss and lick his way down her body, stopping to savour the spots that made her shiver.

In the next hours, he proved one thing to her over and over, he was very sincere and she was a lucky woman. Beloved and proudly imperfect.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Imperfect was an interesting story to write. It started as something different and mutated along the way. I love my Terrans, their wild and mouthy ways and Illora Danyon is no exception.

Miron was tougher. He started off as a snooty royal and transformed into an elected voice of the people. The men people.

The women had no voice and before I knew it, Illora jumped in.

The Women's Institute is referenced and is a British institution. Women can learn any number of domestic skills, attend lectures and get involved with their communities. This is what Lorahan needed and what has started to take place.

Thanks for reading!

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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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