

ENGAGE

A woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a bright orange strapless gown, stands on a dark, rocky outcrop. She is reaching her hands out towards a bald eagle that is flying towards her. The eagle has a white head and neck and brown feathers. The background is a vibrant blue with wispy clouds and glowing, ethereal light patterns. The word 'ENGAGE' is written in a large, metallic, stylized font at the top of the image.

Viola Grace

Natalia has developed an allergy to the very technology that enabled her to be a Relay. Forced to resign from a job that would cost her her life, she is sent to Solray, a low tech planet whose inhabitants have the ability to heal her completely. A single woman on Solray isn't single for long, and when the Storm Set eagle shifters show an interest in her, Natalia knows the uncomfortable feeling of being prey. Thobin, Rosh and Apdel are linked mind to mind, talent to talent. A woman who brings out the predatory and protective instinct in all three is a woman worth pursuing, and they are not above using her new familiarity to work their way into her thoughts and dreams.

The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Engage

Copyright © 2010 Viola Grace

ISBN: 978-1-55487-664-8

Cover art by Martine Jardin

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by eXtasy Books

Look for us online at:

www.eXtasybooks.com

ENGAGE
A TERRAN TIMES NOVELLA

BY

VIOLA GRACE

CHAPTER ONE

Natalia winced as she got the notice. A series of requests for her genetic material, with her attached, had recently been filed with the Alliance. It seemed her plans to join the Sector Guard had just been nipped in the bud.

"Are you ready to have our little talk, Relay Nithin?" Her physician smiled down at her. His glowing eyes burned in the artificial light of the space station. Doctor Eklon was the finest of the Wyoran physicians attending the tanked relays. He had supervised her decanting a week ago and she had been waiting for this visit ever since.

Her daily download of information into her brain was still continuing and she knew that it shouldn't be, based on the little matter of her being unplugged.

"What's wrong, Doc?" It was a formality. Tal knew what was wrong with her.

"You have developed an allergy to your technology and we can't remove it all."

She smiled slowly, the heat, pain and swelling

of her face and limbs had tipped her off weeks ago. "You don't say. How long do I have?"

"We have made arrangements for you in a few hours."

She swallowed heavily. "I only have a few hours to live?" Her breath stuck in her chest. Tal's mind whirled with a thousand things she could have done in her life.

The doctor's eyes widened in shock. "No! You will live a long and healthy life as long as we get you away from technology. You're system is becoming irritated just being around the electrical impulses of our society. You won't be able to work in space anymore, but accommodations have been arranged for you on a low-tech world."

"Why low tech, why not zero tech?" Her mind jumped immediately to the specificity of his words.

"Your cousin has requested that you be posted somewhere she can visit."

"You have already spoken to Aster?"

"Yes, we have. Apparently, you did not let her know you were in distress." His displeasure was palpable. Family connections were a big deal on Wyora.

"She is in a new relationship. I didn't want to distract her while she settles in with them." Tal felt decidedly vulnerable. The truth was she didn't want Aster stealing a ship to come and visit when

Tal didn't know exactly what her problem was or if there was a solution.

"I see. Well, she will be with the pilots who are taking you and dropping you on Solray. There is a shielded shuttle on the way that will carry you in a launch pod to your new home."

Despite the irritation that it caused her senses, she checked on Solray while keeping up the conversation. There was not a large entry on the inhabitants of that world aside from a short mention of them being an Avari colony.

"They agreed to take me?"

"Once we remove as much tech from you as we can, yes. That was their only stipulation after they assessed your file. It is amazing, really. They have not offered to take any other personnel in the past, no matter how hard we begged." The doctor patted her arm gently. "You should be honoured."

"Oh. I feel honoured. Please don't touch me." She didn't have enough strength to move herself away.

"I am sorry. I forget how delicate your body is."

She snorted. She knew the rest of the comment. *You look so sturdy.* She was indeed of a large frame but that had not hampered her ability to live in a wired tank for years.

Aster, I hear you are on your way.

We are. Why didn't you tell me? The irritation was palpable through their biological connection. Their

mothers were sisters and two women could not be more different than the cousins. How their minds had gotten stuck to each other was a mystery that only geneticists could figure out.

I didn't know what was wrong or what it would mean. I needed to stay on duty with you while you were undercover.

Oh no. It's my fault.

No! I knew something was happening and I didn't tell anyone. My fault, not yours. Never yours. How are your husbands?

Irritated but flying to get you, we should be there in the next hour or so. This ship rocks!

Why are they irritated?

They can't keep the ship unless we take assignments in the Sector Guard. They want to stay home for a season.

Then stay home with them. I want you and them happy.

I can come and visit you once a year. The irritation in her thoughts was back.

That will be enough. I can't stand tech right now and have no idea how long it will last. This sensitivity may be permanent.

There was a pause through their link. Will you be all right?

The doctor thinks so, but I had better get back to him, he is glaring at me.

The giggle through her thoughts made her smile. "My cousin is on her way."

"Excellent. The null pod is standing by. As soon as you say your goodbyes, you will be sedated for the journey."

"But...I will be in the shuttle. Why can't I stay awake?"

"The pain will grow until it drives you insane and the medicines no longer help."

She shifted in her bed. "Well, when you put it that way, I could use a nap."

He chuckled and raised his hand as if to pat her again, then made a fist and placed it in his pocket.

"Doc, are you sure that they will be able to handle my rehab?"

"They are aware of it and have assured us that you will be back on your feet within a lunar cycle. We will reclaim you and find other accommodations if you are not." Dr. Eklon smiled encouragingly.

"Wonderful. I look forward to it or not. I can't decide." Tal sighed and took a quick look around the only world she had known for the last week.

Sterile counters, a minimal amount of monitors and her dedicated support staff. They had been feeding her via tube and slowly weaning her onto semi-solids since she had come out of the tank. Her physiotherapist was standing by, a worried frown on her face.

"I will see you before you leave. You are not getting sealed into that pod without my

supervision.”

“Fair enough. See you later, Doc.” She used all of her concentration to wave farewell.

Doctor Eklon gave her a long, solemn look, nodded and turned to leave her personal area.

Sovril smiled and hustled forward, her six eyes blinking quickly as she assessed Natalia in a manner that only her species could. “You should not have strained yourself.”

“I waved goodbye.”

“And you and I know that it is too much for you right now. Come on, let me get those legs moving.”

The next hour was spent groaning in pain as her inflamed joints were moved to stretch them for eventual use. Sovril did all the work.

Natalia was sweating, pale and exhausted when the living hurricane that was Aster burst through the door, stopping short at the foot of her bed.

“Hey, you.” Tal smiled weakly at her cousin’s look of horror.

The two Kalorda behind her cousin looked shocked.

“All right. Don’t be surprised. I was a relay for quite a long time. Years longer than the average. If not for my allergy, I would still be in the tank processing data.”

“You...don’t look all right.” Aster reached out a

hand and pulled it back.

Tal used the adrenaline from pain to lift her hand to her cousin's. "Aster. I am fine. Nothing I can't recover from. They got almost all of the tech out of me and only the bits surrounded by scar tissue are locked in. I will be fine."

Aster sat beside her on the bed and took her hand. Her light mocha skin made Tal's hand look chalky in comparison. *Why didn't you tell me?*

"Out loud, please. I don't want to be rude." She smiled at the men who were fidgeting at the foot of her bed. "Vhol, Rassiv, it is nice to put faces to the names."

They bowed low. "It is an honour to meet our wife's cousin. We will speak with the physician about your transport and let you two have a moment together."

Tal waited until they had left the room. "Whew. Nice to see them in person with clothes on. You tend to broadcast during intimate moments. That's a lot of broadcasting."

Aster had the grace to blush. "Sorry about that, but the longer we are together, the tighter our bonds. I am amazed you are not picking up on Rassiv's yet."

"Who says I am not? I am a lady and I have little to no interest in *your* ass."

They giggled together, Aster's grip on her hand warm and secure.

"What happened, Tal?"

"An allergic reaction that no one noticed, not even me until it had spread through my system and started to degrade my tissues. The doctor is confident that I can be fully rehabilitated now that the implants are mostly gone."

"Why can't they get them all?" Aster's free hand stroked hair away from her forehead. Natalia smiled through the flare of pain the small contact caused.

"They are in my emotional centres. If they take them out, I may not be able to communicate with you or to form an emotional attachment. It's a price I am willing to pay to have them in my head."

"How much pain are you in?"

"Enough."

"Will you make it to Solray all right?"

"The Doc is putting me in a transport pod. Probably with gel. I will be asleep until we arrive."

Aster nodded, "We have clearance for annual visits since you won't be able to come to me."

As if summoned by their conversation, the doors opened and the Kalordans pushed a gel pod into the long-term medical area. Doctor Eklon was right behind them.

"Relay Nithin. It is my duty to sedate you for transport. These agents of the Sector Guard are assuming responsibility for your safe delivery to

Engage

Solray. Once you are in the pod, you are all theirs."

Natalia smiled. The painkiller he gave her with a hypo numbed the sear of the sedative he injected next. *Will you stay near me, Aster?*

Of course, Tal. I have to say that your frail appearance had a shocking result on my husbands. They were going to kidnap you for a Kalordan until they saw you.

Oh darn. Better luck with your next cousin. Oh, wait. I am the only one out here. Her mind slowed as the drugs took hold. She felt the pressure of Vhol's arms as he lifted her and passed her to Rassiv who settled her in the pod.

Good night, Tal.

Talk to you soon, Aster. Her cousin's mind touched hers and the warmth that she felt with that contact wrapped Natalia as she fell into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Heat, humidity, scents and sounds she couldn't identify assailed her when Natalia opened her eyes. "Are we there yet?"

A low laugh on her left made her slowly turn her head. A woman with beautiful golden skin smiled at her. "Thank you for joining us, Relay Natalia Nithin. Welcome to Solray."

"Thank you. Where is Aster?"

"Your cousin was not allowed to stay. The cats with her were a disruptive influence and we had no idea how long it would take you to wake." The woman moved slowly around the small room, collecting items that she brought to Natalia's side. "I am Rey lan. You can call me Rey."

"You can call me Tal. How am I doing?"

"You are still very weak, but in the last few days, we have made tremendous strides in calming the infection that plagues you. The pain should be fading."

Natalia lifted one hand slowly and held the other. No flaring pain, just a dull ache. "It is. I

couldn't even stand a casual touch before I was shipped here."

"Obviously. I am chief medic of the Solray colony and your recovery is proceeding at a predictable pace." Rey smiled and checked Tal's eyes, throat and listened to her heart. A few small marks of tech were in place, but most were items that Tal remembered from Earth.

"What are the clothes like here?" Rey was wearing a sleeveless leather wrap top and an ankle-length wrap skirt.

"We dress for comfort and durability. There are a lot of storms here and we need clothes that can stand up to just about anything. Lots of leather, other skins. We use woven fabrics for festival clothing. Boots and sandals are custom made. You have already been measured and have a pair of each."

"That's creepy."

"He doesn't have a foot fetish, you were perfectly safe." Rey winked and slid an arm behind her back. "Now, if I had you measured for a personal rod, then you would have grounds for complaint."

Tal couldn't help but ask, "Personal rod?"

"For pleasure. Your body has not had release in quite some time. I understand that your job required immersion in a tank and you had no options for relief, but it is really something you

should try as soon as you are able."

Tal blinked and laughed weakly. She was being prescribed masturbation. "You are serious?"

"Oh, very. It will speed your healing and improve your mental equilibrium. On Solray, we take sexual freedoms seriously. That includes the right to insist on pleasure from partners or ourselves. You should start as soon as the ache in your muscles eases."

The screaming of a raptor outside a window to her right drew her attention. It was perched on the thick limb of a tree and looking at her with unblinking golden eyes. When she cast her mind out to it, as if it was Aster, she saw herself, pale and astonished, long black hair tangled around her. She reeled her mind back and blinked. "Is there anything unusual about that bird?"

"A little brother. Many here have them as companions. You are chosen by them, you do not choose."

"Is he yours?"

Rey laughed. "In all my years, I have never been chosen. He came when you landed and has been with you ever since."

Tal took a good look at Rey and blinked. The woman was gold and brown all over. Her eyes were similar to those of the bird, her hair a few shades darker than her skin. "Why do you look like the bird?"

"The Solray people are a branch of the Avari. We used our technology to alter our DNA and there are shifters among us. Not all have the ability to shift. Those that do are called the elder brothers. You won't miss them. A raptor the size of a man."

Rey had crossed the room and it was then that Tal realized she was sitting up on her own.

Slowly, Tal draped her legs off the edge of the bed, dangling them until she could wiggle her toes. She still hurt, but she wanted to stand. It had been years. "Can I stand up?"

"Give me a moment and I will help you." Rey finished what she had been doing and extended her arms to Tal, gesturing for her to grip. "I will not touch you unless you need it. Come on."

Feeling like an uncoordinated toddler, Tal pushed up and off the bed, balancing on feet that suddenly pounded like drums were under the floorboards. She took a few steps and looked up at Rey. "I did it!"

"You did." Rey watched her closely as she shuffled around the room. It was comforting to know that she would be caught if she fell.

The cry of the bird outside the window drew her gaze to it again. The bird felt protective pride. Why it was so possessive of her, she didn't know, but it was proud of her.

"Back to bed, Tal. Excellent for a first day." Rey

extended her hand, but stopped short of touching her.

Tal shuffled back to bed with her legs shaking from the strain. She sat up and looked down at her legs in amazement. "Oh lord, I am naked."

The bird's cry mingled with Rey's laugh and Tal started to giggle with happiness and hope.

* * * *

"It's time to get out of here and engage in something more than conversation with your physician, Tal." Rey had sandals and an armload of clothing for her.

Tal made a face and removed her house wrap, replacing it with the top and skirt combo that Rey favoured. Sandals felt weird, but the pain in her tissues had subsided until it was barely noticeable.

"One of the elder brothers crafted this cane for you. It seems to be the right height, though how he knew is a mystery."

Tal looked out the window at Pakor. Her bird. He had told her his name over a long, rainy afternoon when he had requested asylum from the storm. She smiled at the memory of his flight with huge birds that very day and she knew that they were the elder brothers that Rey so often referred to. He shared the images in his mind and his name with her that day and she opened the window to

him now whenever he called.

He was eager to see her out of the small house. He wanted her outside among her kind. The images of her walking through the marketplace were unmistakable. There was an eagerness to his thoughts that was disturbing, but she accepted that she would have to leave her haven sometime.

"I am ready."

"Oh, I doubt that. Your month of confinement has peaked interest. Only three of the Solray have even laid eyes on you. The men are especially curious."

"Okay, I am staying in after that comment."

"Come on. Don't be silly. We are going to get you a pleasure rod today. The vendors are eager to see you."

"Vendors, as in more than one?"

"Three. Most women keep a collection to use depending on mood." Rey didn't let her draw back but pushed the cane into her hand and shoved her out the door.

Natalia stumbled but recovered and took a few steps into the bright light of Solray. Rey escorted her down the winding path and when they stepped from the woods and onto the path leading to the market, heads started to turn.

"Do I look all right? People are staring." The cane helped on the uneven footing and she cast her gaze down as they walked into the market.

"You look fine. They are just curious. As they get used to you, they will stop staring. Besides, the looks are friendly and some are admiring."

Natalia blushed furiously and peeked at a few people belonging to bodies that had feet facing hers. The women looked friendly for the most part, the men amused and some of the men had a strange intensity to their gazes. Those gazes intensified her blush to a pounding heat in her face.

"Tal, stop blushing. It is only increasing their interest."

The mortification that ran through her calmed her face. "Thanks for that. Do all the men where the short and long skirts as well?"

Rey chuckled. "Of course. It helps them if they shift. You can't be bound by cloth and laces. This way."

The cheerful medic led the way through the crowd, leaving Tal to make her way through the bodies. She tried not to flinch as she brushed a few arms with her own. Tiny sparks of emotion jumped from the Solray's to her, some friendly, some more than friendly.

Natalia shivered in distress as she made a sudden burst to follow Rey. When she reached an open area, she stopped. Heads turned to stare at her and Tal bit her lip as she tried to see a path through the people. A familiar cry got her

attention and in reflex, she extended her arm.

The solid weight of the raptor brought a murmur of surprise to the watchers. When she crooned to Pakor and stroked his feathers, stunned silence fell. With the solid weight of the bird on one arm and the cane in the other, Tal made her way through the crowd and she hid the smile that lit her heart as they parted for her.

Rey was waiting by a display of carved phalluses. "So, he came to you in public. Very well done. I knew that the crowd would force some kind of action."

"I hate you sometimes."

"I know, but it is for your own good. Now, what size do you prefer?"

In front of them was a variety of sizes, shapes and thicknesses that left Natalia's mind blank with shock. "What?"

Rey looked at her with a knowing grin and then jerked her head toward the man on the other side of the display.

The artisan was a man with thickly veined arms and surprisingly elegant fingers. "Nesh, what would you recommend for my friend here?"

He looked Tal over and she leaned on her cane to keep from squirming. "How long has it been?"

Natalia snickered. "I thought that was Rey's question."

He looked at her for a moment and then barked

a laugh.

Rey scowled. "Pick one, Tal."

"It has been over five years. I think a dowel would do at this point. Frankly, I don't even know if it is still there." Natalia frowned.

The shock that flowed over Nesh's face was comical.

She hastily informed him, "I was in a sensory-deprivation tank."

He still looked shocked but gave her more of an assessing glance. "Let the bird choose."

Tal smiled and turned to her passenger. Pakor fluffed his feathers and cocked his head at the offerings.

Rey got into the spirit of things and held her hand over the display, moving from left to right. When she got over a certain model, Pakor screeched. She went past it and slowly back again, the screech came at the same time. "This one."

The polished blue stone drew Tal's gaze. She launched Pakor into the air, smiling when he took a perch on the stall post. She reached out, looked to Nesh for confirmation and picked it up. She almost dropped it. The stone came alive in her hand, heating against her flesh, the veins almost pulsing. "Wow. Nesh, you do excellent work."

It came to her suddenly that she was standing on an alien world holding a carved cock looking at a man who seemed more interested in her than a

vendor should.

"Thank you, Natalia. Your little brother has an excellent eye." Nesh nodded at the carving she held in her hand. "It is some of my best work."

Rey smiled and elbowed Tal aside. "That means that negotiations have begun."

Nesh raised his hand, "Not at all. I give it as a gift to the lovely alien in our midst. I hope that you use it and think of me fondly."

The images that that conjured in Tal's mind brought the blush back full force. "Thank you?"

His grin made his deep amber eyes glow in a way that made Natalia distinctly uncomfortable. She realized at that moment that she was clutching a blue erection staring at the man who made it and he was sporting a tent under the wrap skirt he was wearing.

"You are welcome."

She squeaked and stumbled off down the lane until she was out of his field of vision. A number of men looked at her speculatively, one brow raised and she groaned as she remembered the object in her hand. Rey came to her rescue with a square of cloth that concealed the detail of her purchase but left its shape fairly obvious.

Laughing, Rey led the way to a small café. She gestured for Tal to sit while she placed an order.

Tal thumped her prize onto the table and hooked the cane over the back of the chair. Three

men were watching her intently and she simply closed her eyes and prayed for a crevasse to open under her. Pakor perched on the chair back next to her and opened his wings to draw attention. Claw marks on the back of the chairs told Tal that this was a common occurrence.

Rey slid into a chair across the table and sat grinning at her. "That was a little funny, you have to admit."

"Me sprinting down the street with a rod in my hand? Yes, I would have to agree."

"Ah, the cool distance is back. Well, I am glad we touched your emotional core at long last." Rey sat back as the server brought them their order.

A selection of meats, fruits, sandwiches and teas were in front of her and Tal tucked in. She still felt the gazes on her from the other table but tried to enjoy herself.

"Why are they staring?"

Rey didn't even look up, merely spread some soft cheese on bread. "They are assessing you for mate potential."

Natalia almost choked on her fruit. "They don't even know me." She held out a strip of meat to Pakor and he took it delicately.

"Doesn't matter. The moment the little brother over there picked you, you were firmly within their purview." Rey's twinkling golden gaze dismissed her discomfort.

"That's...I..."

"Don't worry about it. The Solray allowed you to come here with the express purpose of having you join our genetic pool as soon as you are well. You are not well yet, so it is not a matter for concern."

Natalia's mouth opened in shock and Pakor screamed with his wings raised and extended. She was suddenly the focus of every eye in the café.

CHAPTER THREE

The three elder brothers came over and stood next to the table. “Reylan, do introduce us to the little sister.” The wraps that they wore were barely decent, covering them to mid-thigh and nothing more. Chests were bare and the shaggy blonde hair in a variety of shades hung to their shoulders.

Rey smiled, “Thobin, Rosh, Apdel, this is Natalia Nithin, relay of the Alliance, Terran Volunteer.”

The men nodded as their names were listed.

Rey continued, “Tal, these are three of the fifty elder brothers that guard our settlement from local predators. None of them have a mate and all of them are looking.”

Natalia fought her blush and nodded at each of them. “This is Pakor. He has apparently decided to become my companion.”

The raptor greeted others of his kind with enthusiasm. With a rush of wings, he landed on Thobin’s outstretched arm and the two shared a

moment.

"He will get fat if you keep feeding him like that." Apdel smiled, his dark gold eyes twinkling.

Rosh gave his companions a look and left suddenly.

"I don't know how much he eats. He tells me that he wants what I am eating and I give it to him." She shrugged, a pang of jealousy flaring through her as Thobin stroked the feathers of her bird. Tal was unsure of which side of the touch she wanted to be on.

Thobin's words were slow, as if he rarely used them, the deep rumble of his tone made Tal lean forward to hear him. "He can hunt for all his own food. When he sends you hunger, place the image of a mouse in his mind. He will go out and hunt one."

"Ah. Thank you, I will."

A tapping on her elbow brought her upright. Rosh stood there with a tangle of leather in his hands. "For the little brother. His claws are marking you."

Bemused, Tal let him extend her arm and he fitted a shoulder-to-wrist guard of thick padded leather that tied tightly around her flesh. It stiffened her arm, but she could flex it if she tried. "Thank you."

Rosh blushed beneath the golden bronze of his skin. "Reylan should have fitted you with one."

Rey sipped at her tea, "Rosh is my birth brother. He loves to criticize me."

Tal was busy playing with the guard. As she raised her arm, Pakor flew to her and walked up her arm to settle on her shoulder. She reached up and caressed his feathers, enjoying the happy warmth that the bird shared with her. He liked the perch.

Thobin and the others were watching her with an intensity that made her feel like a small rabbit in a field. If she made a sudden move, they would be on her.

Rey's smile was hidden in her teacup. "Would you care to join us? We just stopped at Nesh's shop."

The men shook their heads, a light of speculation entering their gazes. Apdel asked, "How bad was the bartering?"

Natalia's face flushed bright red, she could feel it.

Reylan laughed. "None. He gave it to her."

Their gazes went to the wrapping on the table. A silent communication was passed between them and they nodded. "We wish you good day, Natalia. We hope to see you in the market again."

They left the café and Tal felt her chest heave as she drew the first deep breath in minutes. "Wow. I know you said the shifters had power, but wow."

Reylan filled their cups and nodded. "A flight

rarely travels together on the ground, but their presence is enhanced by their joined minds. Rosh in particular wanted to meet you."

"He is really your brother?"

She laughed, "Yes, our parents have five children. Three girls, two boys. My sisters are mated, as is my twin, Rollin. Rosh and I are the last holdouts."

Tal smiled, "I have two sisters back on Terra and more cousins than I can count. No brothers though and you have met my cousin, Aster. We are the only blood relations accepted into the Terran Volunteers."

"You can't go back home?"

"Never. We were altered and given inoculations during basic training to bring out our talents. Apparently, we no longer pass for human." The wry twist to Natalia's lips faded slightly as she looked at the scars where her ports and wires had been. No longer human. It was a sobering thought.

"Enough serious thought, eat. You need to replenish your strength. You will need it to handle your new acquisition." Rey smirked and brought the subject back to sex with that one sentence.

Tal pressed her lips together but loaded up her plate with a series of treats. When Pakor send her hunger, she tried putting the image of a mouse in his mind and he immediately leapt from her

shoulder into the air. "Huh. It worked."

"I can't believe that Thobin spoke to you. He rarely talks and almost never in full sentences."

"Is he the one you would recommend?"

"Oh, Tal. Why just choose one? It isn't unusual for women to keep her options open here. With the men outnumbering the women three to one, it looks like you have your first suitors."

She eyed Rey with a squint of suspicion. "Was that the true plot behind getting me out of the house?"

"Mostly. Too much time alone isn't good for a healthy woman and you are almost healthy, my dear. Nesh's toy will help, but you need to engage your other senses. Life alone is no existence."

Pakor was back, sitting on the empty chair and eating his own lunch. His curved beak shredded the remains of the tiny animal that was his meal.

"I don't see why it is necessary for me to have a sexual companion."

"It isn't necessary, but it does make life a little more fun."

"Do you..."

Rey laughed, the sound turned male heads in the café. "Of course. I haven't attended the festival yet, so my companions know that it is not a life-mate arrangement."

Natalia finished her plate and licked her fingers, blushing at the attention that the small

gesture generated. "Are we the only women out today?"

"No, but with your status as a new woman on Solray, they are eager to meet you. Most will make a bid for your attention, but if any cross the line, let me know or scream the house down. We don't tolerate that sort of thing here."

"Good to know. Do all of the men here look like they bench press shuttlecraft?"

The sparkle in Rey's eyes was unmistakable. "It is the way our ancestors designed us. The men need to be massive to change shape and have enough mass to make the transfer, the women needed to be intelligent and feminine. None of the women here are just for looking at, any and all of them could specialize in bio mechanics from the time they were teenagers."

"Interesting thing for girls to be interested in."

"It is part of our history. You can't tell where you are going if you don't know where you have been." Rey raised her teacup as if she was quoting some profound lecture.

"Sound comment. I wish that more races took that to heart." Natalia thought of all of the war correspondence she had processed in her time as a relay, her memory of it was a peculiarity of the Terrans. Most of the subjects involved races who found a behaviour in another race offensive when it was a prevalent part of their own past. You

always despise what you hate in yourself.

"We still need you fitted for regular clothing of your own as well as some festival gear. Next week brings the mating festival and you will want to look your best."

Tal scowled at Rey, "What about you?"

"I will pick a mate next year. This year, I am too busy actually doing my job." Rey winked and stood. "Come on and bring your bird. There are more elegant guards for festivals and daily wear. I have no doubt that Rosh just grabbed the first one that would fit a young boy."

Tal got to her feet, put her cane in her hand, tucked her new toy under one arm and lifted her hand to let Pakor climb to her shoulder again. He was heavy and she was tired, but the closeness she felt with the predator warmed her.

"Okay, let's go have someone measure me. I have no idea what to pick, so I am depending on you, Rey."

Her golden friend smiled, her white teeth impressively sharp. "Trust me."

"Oh lord."

Late that night, Tal shuddered in release and as her personal enjoyment faded, she came to the conclusion that the thing that had pressed her over the edge into release was imagining the three shifters with golden eyes in the room with her.

After all the flack she had given Aster about her two men, her cousin was never going to let her live this down.

CHAPTER FOUR

“**D**own the path, to the left, follow the stand of trees until you get to the lake.” Rey was letting her swim on her own and Tal muttered the instructions as she walked down the path in question.

Natalia had to admit that she wanted to be immersed in liquid again. Even icy water would do. Missing the feeling of weightlessness that the tank had given her was an ache in her soul. She missed it fiercely, but until today, Rey lan had pronounced her unfit for swimming.

Today, Tal had managed the blow test that Rey wanted and her lung capacity would be able to allow her a modest amount of time beneath the water.

It was near dawn and the sun had just started to warm the forest. Pakor had looked at her in horror when she asked him if he wanted to join her, but he had grudgingly climbed onto her shoulder, because Rey insisted that she needed someone watching over her.

If this was the regular swimming lake, it was a wonder that anyone even used it. Tal had been walking for over half an hour and was giving up hope when she came out of a stand of trees to see a gleaming mirror of a lake surrounded by cliffs of white marble.

The shore called to her and she placed the groggy Pakor on a gnarled branch. Her hands moved swiftly, so she couldn't change her mind. The water looked cold and it would sap her courage if she hesitated.

She folded her clothes and put them on a tall rock to keep them dry and then backed up a few steps. With a mental war cry, she darted forward until her feet were pedaling air and landed in the traditional cannonball format as the liquid cold wrapped around her from every angle.

"Wahoo!" Her cry as she broke the surface echoed eerily on the stone. Pakor echoed her as well and his voice joined her own.

Tal treaded water as voices of dozens of birds joined their cries, keeping the sound waving against the stone walls of the two-mile lake.

When the noise finally subsided, she relaxed, took a deep breath and let herself sink to the pebbled bottom of the clear lake, seven feet beneath her.

The silence wrapped around her, comforted her in a way she hadn't known she craved. Above her,

raptors were waking and taking flight. Pakor was buzzing the air above her meditation spot and three large birds were nearby, circling lazily.

When her lungs demanded air, she surfaced, treading water until she could go back down. The shadows of the large birds didn't get any smaller when she came to the surface, but she was so pleased with her submersion, she didn't think about them.

The water was filled with fish of different species. Some had come to examine her, but most kept out of reach. It was on her third time under the waves that her tranquil environment was disrupted when one of the birds went fishing with enormous talons.

Tal tried to yell, "Shit!" and head for the shallows, but a silver trout-like fish darted past her and was caught by claws that were thicker than her arm. Those birds weren't large, they were huge!

She didn't know if she was up for rising from the depths with raptors catching their lunches, but she had no choice. Her lungs had no air left. She shot to the surface and hoped like hell that she didn't resemble any of the local fish.

Gasping and coughing, she looked around quickly and noticed something that didn't thrill her. One of the enormous eagles had her clothing in one talon, two others were gutting fish on the

rocks. Pakor was sharing one of the fish, making tiny chirps of happiness.

Natalia waded until her breasts were covered, a little wary of approaching the twelve-foot birds. When the one clutching her clothing leapt off the rock, he blurred brightly for a moment before Thobin stood there as naked as she was. The erection he sported was hard enough for Pakor to perch on if the smaller bird had chosen it as a target.

His voice rumbled across the water and against the marble walls surrounding the lake. "Your lips are turning blue, Natalia. Come out of the water."

"I am not wearing anything."

"Neither am I and I hate to tell you, but the water isn't concealing anything. In fact, it is magnifying your attributes in a fascinating manner." He held out his hand and beckoned her to join him.

She stepped across the smooth stones lining the lake and with a blush that heated her skin, Tal left the water behind. The early light was no doubt highlighting every inch of her scarred skin, but the look in Thobin's eyes was telling her that they were not nearly as visible as she thought.

* * * *

She's wonderful. Rosh's thoughts came through to

Thobin loud and clear.

Apdel let out a scream of confirmation. *Who knew she would have breasts like that? Her body is so slender it can barely support them.*

Shut up and finish prepping the fish. I will start a fire. Thobin took Natalia's hand as she emerged from the waters like a sprite of legend. Her black hair streamed down around her, making her skin seem a glowing ivory in comparison. The gaze that met his was the stormy grey-blue of storm clouds and it sent a pulse of blood through his cock. She wanted him and it confused her. He had to fight a grin.

The draw of the elder brothers was such that once they targeted a female, she had little chance of escape. Their inner beast saw a target and pursued it with single-minded intensity.

Remembering to speak was hard, but since he had no connection with her yet, he could not simply place his thoughts in hers. "Come, Natalia. I will start a fire."

Her hand was cold in his and he fought the urge to pull her close to warm her. Too much too soon. Instead, he seated her on a rock and collected wood from the ground nearby. Piling it together, he used his talent to bring lightning to his hand and started the flames.

"Did you just..." Her voice was light, high and he wondered if it would sound tremulous and

breathy when he touched her.

He smiled, "I just started a fire. A small skill, but one I happen to possess."

"Can I have my clothes back?"

"Not until you are dry. If you are cold, come here and I will keep you warm." He didn't believe that she would take him up on the challenge, but her stormy eyes narrowed and she climbed off the rock, hitting his side with a thud.

He staggered back, wincing at the cool temperature of her flesh while marvelling at the softness of her skin. Her breasts pressed into his side and he looked down into her face, hoping that his surprise didn't show.

* * * *

Boy, was he surprised. Tal shivered and pressed herself into his body heat, not caring that they were both stark naked.

The fire was starting to throw heat but not nearly enough. When Thobin put his arms around her, she groaned and wrestled closer to him, ignoring the hot bar of his erection against her stomach. The two large birds shrieked a protest, but Thobin didn't let her go.

She looked down and kept her focus on the fire, tears pricked her eyes as she relaxed into the embrace that she had been craving. Tal had been

alone too long.

"Release her, Thobin." The voice behind her belonged to Rosh.

"She is holding me, Rosh. Go wash the blood off and then make some breakfast."

Apdel appeared on the far side of the fire. He grinned and winked at Tal, completely at ease with his nudity and the blood on his feet. With economical motions, he collected more wood for the fire and selected branches, weaving them into a grid while she watched. Pakor screeched, selecting his own twigs to add to the cause.

"Why did he pick me?"

"Your little brother?"

"Yes."

"He saw something in your soul that called to him. The same way you call to us and we to you."

Natalia absorbed his comment. The slow stroking of her back by his strong and gentle hands soothed her when she would have shoved away. She had always found herself to be too large, too tall, too wide when compared with other women, but here she was small and feminine. It was a precious moment and a strange enjoyment filled her.

"Let her go, Thobin. You are far better a cook than either of us. I will keep Natalia warm while you prepare breakfast." Apdel appeared at their side and offered his arm to her.

She didn't want to leave Thobin, but reluctantly moved away when he loosened his grip. Tal wasn't going to start a fight over body heat. She took Apdel's arm and Thobin released her. Cool air rushed between them and if her nipples hadn't already been hard from the contact with his chest, they would have tightened at the cold.

"Good morning, Natalia. Would you do me the honour of sharing my warmth?" Apdel's features were pleasing, his hawk-like nose an echo of his other self.

"Since you have asked so kindly, I will."

Instead of standing, he took a seat on one of the rocks and pulled her up and onto his lap. She sat across his thighs, his left arm protecting her from the wind that was delighting with her hair. They sat in silence, his hands still and simply warming her as they watched Rosh and Thobin make breakfast.

Suddenly, it occurred to her, "If I wasn't here, you simply would have eaten the fish in your other forms, wouldn't you."

"Yes. But Rosh's meddling sister sent you here to our lake, knowing that we would feed you as well as escort you home."

"I can't believe Rey...never mind." She stifled her irritation. "I can believe it."

Rosh looked up and grinned. "She is a devious one. If only Althwin was able to convince her to

join in the great dance, she would be out of my hair."

"The great dance? She mentioned a festival, she never mentioned dancing."

Apdel lifted her chin. "You are unaware of the dancing?"

"I don't dance. Never have. I am afraid of stumbling over my own feet and onto my partners' feet."

Rosh looked appalled. "You must learn."

Thobin scowled and nodded. The men looked blank for a moment and then all nodded as one. "We will teach you after breakfast."

Tal's mind blanked. "Teach me?"

They smiled as one and spoke in a chorus, "To dance."

"Oh lord."

The fish cooked quickly and they sat and ate. After fifteen minutes or so, Tal was able to ignore the nudity and concentrate on the conversation. Dancing, it seemed was the group pastime on Solray.

"Festival is the greatest dance of the year. Women who are looking to catch a mate take a seat at a private table. Men who would take her to wife come to her table and try to win her favour. If they succeed, they join the great dance, if not, the men are free to pursue other means." Rosh was

explaining their traditions with relish, seated next to her, selecting pieces of fish for her and offering them to her one at a time.

She leaned against a log and used her hair as a cloak, the wind having warmed enough to dry it completely. "What means?"

"I don't think we will tell you that. We might need the element of surprise." Apdel stilled Rosh before he could speak. Thobin smiled with a strange light in his eyes.

Pakor landed next to her and rubbed his head to hers. The image of her came to his mind, wind whipped and running through an open meadow, naked as she was right now. It was an aerial view and she was looking up and over her shoulder.

She blinked and was once again in her body, looking at a trio of men who were watching her intently. "Seriously? You would hunt me down like a mouse or one of the fish?"

Rosh blushed first, then surprisingly, Thobin and finally Apdel.

"If you don't want me to know it, don't think it on the link that you share with Pakor. He thinks me being hunted is funny." The last few weeks had acquainted her with her little brother's sense of humour.

"Your little brother has a big mouth," Apdel grumbled.

Natalia kept a straight face for a count of six

before she howled in amusement. Pakor screeched his confirmation. The emotional release was a complete surprise, but as it rocked through her, she felt cleansed.

"Well, this has been fun, but I think I will put my clothes back on now and return to the village."

"You may dress, but you are not leaving here until you have learned the basic steps of three dances." Thobin was serious. He called Pakor over with a gesture and with excited flapping, her raptor soared into the cliff face.

"What is he doing?"

"You will be more at ease if we are clothed, so we will dress as well." Thobin held out her clothes and she took them with an inclination of her head.

Getting dressed was unnecessary weather-wise, but she welcomed the comforting wrap of the leather against her skin. Apdel brought her boots to her, but instead of letting her put them on, he sat her down on a fallen log and lifted her left foot, placing it on his thigh. His eyes twinkled when he glanced up at her, running his hands up her calf while he smoothed the boot into place. When he slipped his hand halfway up her inner thigh, she gasped, but he removed it before she could yell at him.

Rosh was watching him carefully, a black look on his face as he tied on the wrap that Pakor dropped.

Apdel tightened the lacings on her boot until he was satisfied with the fit, then he moved on to her other foot. He didn't tease her this time, merely fitted the boot to her and tightened it into place.

The moment he stood, a wrap struck him in the face. Rosh was still glaring, but Thobin took the moment of their distraction to lead Natalia to the tiny clearing on one side of the bank.

"Now. The first dance you must learn is the Quarter Promenade." He stepped toward her and then stepped back. "Now you as well."

She stepped toward him, collided, stepped on his feet and jerked free of his hold. "I told you, I can't do this."

Thobin looked at her steadily and stepped forward, taking her by the shoulders and pulling her up to meet his kiss.

Oh lord.

CHAPTER FIVE

The maelstrom of sensation that came with his kiss shook Natalia to her toes. She reached up to grip his hair and slid her fingers through the silky strands as he cupped the back of her skull. Tal felt a tremor in her mind and when his tongue traced her lips enticing them to part, she moaned and opened her thoughts to him.

It wasn't like sharing thoughts with Aster, more like sharing them with Pakor. Images flitted through his mind of her body against rich brown silks, a multitude of hands touching her and images of his storm set with them.

Overwhelmed, she released him and pushed back. "Whoa."

Hands supported her and kept her ass from hitting the ground. "Easy, Natalia." Rosh held her tightly and lifted her to her feet. His mind held images of a similar sort. She saw herself on her hands and knees, looking back at him with a wicked expression in her gaze. Her ass never looked that curvy or enticing in a mirror, Rosh

must be an ass man.

"Oh boy." She pushed away from him and when she focussed on Apdel, he was taking her against a wall, her nipples red and lush, breasts swollen.

"Natalia, are you all right?" Thobin reached for her, but she stepped back.

"Give me a minute. You are all in my head and I have to compartmentalize this." She knelt on the ground and drew a deep breath.

"Pakor, give me a hand here." She raised her arm and he flew to her, striking heavily. A flare of pain reached her mind, but she ignored it, using her little brother's mind to help her sort the emotions of the elder brothers.

Thobin knelt near her. "Are you...can you read our thoughts?"

"I wish. All I am getting is a bunch of sexually explicit fantasies. Pakor is helping me sort them out." She gritted her teeth.

They looked at each other for a moment before bursting into laughter. "You could have just asked us to calm down and close our minds."

The images faded until it was simply one image, of her kneeling in the clearing. She felt foolish. "I didn't think of that."

"We are not ravening beasts. You are not our prey. You are the object of our desires."

"Why are you a storm set? What does that

mean?" She rubbed at her forehead as more images flickered in her mind. She couldn't sort their meaning.

Apdel smiled, "On Solray, nature was not content to have the Avari designers have their way. Shifters are drawn into sets, each set having a certain talent for manipulation of nature. Other sets command fire, we command the storms. Our talents are useful near the settlement as we mitigate the wild storms that Solray gives."

"Thobin is lightning." It made a certain sense.

Thobin smiled, "Rosh is thunder, Apdel wind. He could have dried you and warmed you at any time."

Tal remembered her shivering and scowled at the wind manipulator in question. "Bastard."

He was unrepentant. "I liked the way your nipples stood at alert too much to bid them goodbye so soon."

"Shall we try a few steps?" Rosh held his hand out to her and Pakor left her to take up a watching post.

"It is up to you. Your sister is a wonderful healer, I am sure she can fix you if things go awry." Tal stood and took his outstretched hand.

A sudden image of dancing struck her—the steps she needed to take and the turns and passes that would be necessary. When Rosh stepped forward, she stepped forward and to one side,

when he turned her, she moved with him. Smoothly, the steps took her over and when Apdel took Rosh's place for a different dance, she went with the images that she saw and soon was passing, turning, walking and stepping with him.

Thobin's turn was a slower dance, a sway from side to side with steps and twists at a measured pace. This time she didn't step on him, strike his feet or damage him in any way.

"Well done, Natalia. You are one step closer to becoming a full citizen of Solray." Thobin's voice washed over her as they danced.

"Dancing is a requirement?" Tal smiled, being held against him was having a dizzying effect on her senses.

"Of course. With tech being restricted due to the massive electrical storms, dancing is one of the easiest to obtain entertainments. Music is also prized, but I can't carry a tune."

The other two laughed.

"Do I have the basics?" She stepped with him and let her abdomen drag across his erection confined beneath his wrap.

His intake of breath was answer enough. He backed away. "Enough for today, but the next time we dance, we will take it a little further."

She laughed, "We started naked, how much further could we get?"

The flash of images was enough to force a blush

through her cheeks and down her chest. Thobin's version of dancing did not involve her on her feet but had her thighs around him with her ankles locked behind his back.

"Oh. Right. Gotcha." She drew back from him and found her arm wrap. With a few tugs of the leather, she had it in place and called Pakor to her. "I had better be getting back to the settlement."

"We will take you. Stand straight and hold still." Thobin blurred and shifted, the giant bird that he became looking at her with its golden eyes.

By the time she untangled the image of her body held in the claws of one of the birds, it was too late. Rosh the eagle was swooping down and caught her up with his claws around her waist. It was a horrid way to travel, but it was fast. The leather stopped his claws from cutting her skin and after the *oh shit, he is going to drop me* passed, she understood the practicality of the clothing.

The world looked different upside down at high speed. The wind whipped her hair into a tangled banner that streamed out behind them, but Pakor thought this was the way she should always travel. Her little brother was swooping and diving amongst the larger elder brothers with glee. He was part of their set now, the harbinger of the storm set. It would get him whatever mate he chose and he was loving it.

Rosh flew low, right over the village market.

Tal caught cries of surprise and laughter as they flew past. The entire storm set shared their satisfaction at exposing her selection to those below.

Sending a question mark into their minds confused them, but she couldn't express that she had made no choice. She sent them a picture of Nesh and the eagles screamed in fury.

They sent her a picture of Nesh's skin in tatters and Tal winced. She sent them instead a picture of her new sex toy. They returned an image of three different toys.

It was enough to make her laugh out loud if Rosh hadn't started a descent, tightening his grip until she could barely breathe.

He carefully lowered her to the ground and the moment she was free, she rolled frantically so that she could stand. The storm set extended their wings and rose into the sky, circling her home with a wild flare of noise, light and wind.

It was a display that none in the area would mistake.

She screamed to the sky, "Why don't you just pee on it? It would be faster!" before stomping inside.

Rey was standing near the table, working on some documents and laughed like a maniac at Tal's appearance.

"They took you flying, I can tell. Around here,

we braid our hair before we let them take us up." She was smiling, a pleased smug smile.

"Yeah, yeah. I wasn't planning on it. Where is the brush?" She looked into the mirror near the table and winced.

Reylan was still smirking but handed her the brush from her bedroom.

Muttering to herself about idiot men with birdbrains, she set about untangling her hair.

"You knew that it was their home when you sent me there." It wasn't a question.

"Of course I knew. You needed to see where they lived." Rey was focussed on her reports.

"They live there all year round?"

"Yes."

"But then how would we, I mean, I, I mean they..."

"The men come to the woman's house. They build a new extension onto her house as part of a fair exchange of services. Why do you think that your house is backed onto the forest? Plenty of room for expansion."

"So, this is my house?"

"Of course."

"Then why are you always here?"

Rey looked up and smirked. "Hiding from the elders and patients. If there is anything urgent, I will know, but sometimes I just need to be somewhere away from those folk. You are my

beard."

Tal looked at her in surprise and laughed. "You are hiding from a man."

"I am not."

"You are. I saw his face, just for an instant. Not Nesh, but someone who looks almost like him. His brother maybe?"

Rey blinked. "You saw into my mind?"

"Yeah. I could do that before I left Terra, link to someone's mind for just an instant. The Alliance worked on that talent and I became a Relay candidate. Linking minds across vast distances was easy with some technological boosting, but like the link to my cousin, organic links are easy to form."

"But you couldn't do it before."

"I linked with the storm set this morning. It seemed to snap something loose. It isn't like it used to be, but some of my original talent is returning."

She worked about half of the snarls out of her hair before there was a knock at the door. Looking to Rey, who shrugged, Tal got to her feet and answered the door. "Yes? Oh, hello, Nesh."

"Natalia. I have gifts for you. Presented by suitors who have to go and deflect an incoming storm." Nesh smiled, a genuine and wistful smile. "They thought of you and made their selections." He extended a basket, waited until she took it,

bowed with a wink and turned to leave.

Bemused, Tal closed the door and turned to look at Rey. "Does Nesh just make..."

"Yes."

Tal put the basket down on the table and opened the first of the packages inside. "Oh my."

They thought of you and made their selections.

Three different cocks in a selection of sizes and shapes emerged from the basket. Tal had no doubt in her mind that she would find that each matched one of the storm set exactly.

Rey was laughing her ass off at the corner of the table.

"Quiet you. Don't you have to go torment Althwin?"

Her healer was shocked. "How did you hear that name?"

"Rosh is a chatterbox. So, who is he?"

"He's a mechanic. He works assembling windmills and water wheels. All gears and sprockets. Sometimes I think he doesn't want me, other times he pursues me with a heat that makes me dizzy." Rey's frustration was in her tone and blazing in her eyes.

"Have you ever gone to festival with the intent of joining the great dance?"

"No. I am afraid that he wouldn't meet me."

Wow. She was afraid of rejection. It made the indomitable Rey lan a little more human...Avari...

whatever.

“If I can find out if he will, will you stop hiding in my house?”

Rey considered. “Maybe. Bake one batch of cookies and I will let you know.”

CHAPTER SIX

“Hello. Where can I find Althwin?” The sounds of metal on metal and heated steel drew her in. She raised her voice to be heard and ended up shouting into the sudden silence that occurred.

Men holding a variety of tools, wearing tunics of leather with trousers and boots, protected by aprons turned to watch her. Several of them used hammers or tongs to point to a man manning a crucible in the rear of the workshop.

Tal had waited out the storm and then gone in search of the missing Althwin immediately. Letting grass grow was not in her personality.

He was huge, larger even than Thobin, a very good match for the statuesque Reylan. “Are you Althwin?”

The man stopped monitoring the colour of the molten steel and turned to her. “I am. And you are?”

“Tal, a friend of Reylan’s. May we speak?”

“Speak.”

"Privately?"

"Very well. Yorik, watch that steel. The last batch cracked in winter. We need stronger product." He left the crucible and scrubbed his face under a standing shower. Wet and moderately unconcerned, he gestured for her to lead him out of the shop.

She walked with him to the café and took a seat. Voices whispered around them as he waited for her to talk. The owner brought over a pot of iced tea and a plate of cookies, lingering to hear what they would have to talk about, but Tal glared him into returning to his post.

"I have a question to ask, Althwin, and I will fumble it a little, so bear with me."

"Fair enough. Speak."

"If Reyln attends the festival with the intent of finding a husband, will you attend with the intention of taking her as a wife?"

He blinked his dark brown eyes in surprise. Where Reyln was gold, he was all bronze. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. She is too proud to risk rejection."

"After she rejected me, it's no wonder."

"She did what?" Heads turned at her shriek, but Tal couldn't throttle it down.

"Two years ago, we agreed to meet at the festival. She never showed up. She claimed later that she had to attend a birthing woman, but the

babe wasn't born until the middle of the night. There was plenty of time."

Tal sat with her mouth open before she started laughing. "And you won't try again?"

"We couple occasionally, but I won't risk it."

She called upon her knowledge of metal working, which was not extensive, but she could get her point across. "What happens when you leave the forge unattended?"

"Usually nothing, but the apprentices know it is worth discipline to do it. We need to watch it, just in case there is a crack, a flare, hot spots, even a sudden gust of wind can ruin hours of work."

"So, you would never wander off for a few hours and just hope everything was fine."

"Of course not."

"Then why would you expect Rey to do the same? A child can be born in hours or very rarely, days. Rey could no more abandon the process in her patient and leave things to chance than you could. Didn't you discuss this?"

"No, I told her my feelings and she stormed out."

Natalia was having a hard time keeping a straight face. "If I swear that she will be at the festival and that you have a chance to formalize your mating, will you be there?"

He folded his enormous hands around a cup and sipped slowly. "Who are you to be giving

such a promise?"

"I am her friend."

"She has other friends. None would dare to speak for her."

"I am a Relay."

"It means nothing here. We have no data transfers."

Tal was frowning. "I am the chosen of the storm set and the honoured companion of a little brother."

That made a difference. "A little brother, really?"

"Really." She extended her arm and showed him the scratches around her wrist and forearm. She occasionally forgot her wrap, but Pakor's claws reminded her the instant that he landed. She had seen a few of the birds on arms and the chosen of the little brothers always wore the scars of their companions.

"You swear that she will be there?"

Her voice was grim and she knew it. "If I have to send the storm set to fetch her, she will be."

No way was Tal going to face the festival alone.

* * * *

The toys were still on the table when she returned. Still lined up by size. Grumbling to herself, she latched her doors for a change and took the toys

into her bedroom. Time to try her men on for size.

It only took remembering the images of her in their embraces to start a wet heat between her thighs. She removed her skirt and shirt and closed her eyes to select a toy at random. Tal set the pleasure rod next to her and lay back, stroking her breasts with the tips of her fingers until her nipples tightened and her breasts ached. A twist of her nipple set off an answering pulse in her clit and an ache inside her.

Tal felt a touch on her mind and Apdel's face was hovering over hers. His hands guided her own and caressed her breasts. Her body shook at the feel of his spectral hands over her own. She wished for the ability to hear his thoughts, but he only smiled and trailed phantom kisses down her neck.

She lost herself in a series of sensations brought about by his mouth and her own hands until the pleasure toy rubbed against her for entrance. Tal was wet enough by now that it slid inside easily, her mind's picture of Apdel over her clear as day. He smiled, a strained smile as he slid in and out, finding a rhythm that pleased them both and then thrusting until her mind shattered into glittering shards.

Tal came to herself with the toy lying between her thighs and a coating of sweat cooling on her body. "Oh boy."

She took a quick shower, washed the toy and remade the bed. Wincing at the discomfort left by her unaccustomed nocturnal activities, she curled under the covers and tried to sleep. The other two toys called to her, but she was not going to answer that night.

Natalia quickly learned that just because she didn't play with the toys, didn't mean her dreams were safe. Thobin and Rosh were inventive enough to leave her blushing when she woke the next day.

If they had no part in her dreams, she was one sick puppy. Why else would she have been pressed between them, filled as they thrust into her to the hilt?

How did Aster manage?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sunset was approaching and with it, the first day of the festival.

"Are you sure that this is what I should wear? I feel like a traffic cone." The orange gown was actually quite pretty, but the association persisted. Her hair was braided in a coronet just to keep it out of the way in case someone took to the skies again.

"If I have to wear this, you have to wear that." Rey was over for the dress up before the festival and the brilliant blue that wrapped her in a column was stunning against the gold of her skin.

Reylan's hair was in an intricate set of braids that left the mass of hair loose but kept all strays encased.

"So, what is the rule for today, Rey?"

"Let the other healers handle it."

"Excellent. And what am I supposed to do?"

"Don't run. Don't flinch. Don't try to escape, because they will find you." Reylan gave out the litany in measured tones.

"Don't run. Don't run." Tal chanted it to herself as she slipped on a pair of sandals that went on with straps and laces. After the last few nights of heated dreams, she didn't know if running was even a possibility. She had tried all the toys, one by one, each bringing her another lover and after that, the other two joined to create heated dreaming.

The storm season was starting and the storm set was needed to keep the settlement safe. They did not venture into the town during the days, but they came to her mind at night.

During her time as a Relay, she had intercepted and passed on thousands of romantic communications but never felt anything stir inside her. Now, sex was on her mind constantly, sex and something more. A type of companionship that had never crossed her mind. Something that went beyond a moment and into something deeper.

Rey's voice broke the pace of Tal's thoughts, "Come on you feeble creature. It is time."

"You are my doctor, can't I just call in sick?"

Rey grabbed her hand and hauled her out the door. "No. If I can't call in busy, then you can't call in sick. These are your rules, you made them up."

They walked down the path to the settlement together, the occasional flash of colour in the distance giving away the women who were on their way to the tables reserved for women who

were in search of a mate.

They were given a front seat to the festival events and no one was telling Tal what those events were. She had asked at the café, Althwin's workshop, even Nesh wouldn't tell her, but all of the men looked very amused at her questions. It wasn't something they would tell off-worlders. If she saw it, they said, she would understand.

As the trickle of women joined them, Tal began to understand. In front of them was an open field ringed with a wooden platform. On the platform was a series of tables and each had an embossed card with a woman's name. Natalia tried to go in search of her table, but Rey held her back.

"Hold on, Tal. They have to tag us first." Her lips twitched in amusement as they waited for the young man with the clipboard to approach them. He had a series of cuffs and ribbons and each woman was marked with a set of bands.

"Tag us? Like wildlife?"

Rey smirked. "Something like that. This was your idea."

"I beg to differ. Who was it that sent me to Storm Lake last week?"

They kept bickering to still their nerves until the young man came up to them. He smiled when he saw Reylan. "Finally. I thought Althwin would have to end his days depressed and alone. Now he can be nagged to death."

"Shut up, Vinar. Just tag me and get it over with."

"Doran also wants to speak with you, Reylan. You will be wearing his colours as well."

Reylan's shock was unmistakable. "I have hardly spoken to him."

"Well, he is eager for a family and you have a certain reputation for not being clingy." He snapped the cuffs on her and each was woven with strands of ribbons that flowed to the ground. Two colours of ribbon twined on the cuffs. Metallic silver and navy blue were knotted together in a mix that was quite attractive.

"He has no chance with me and we know it." Reylan pressed her hands together and Tal noted the fists.

"Well, maybe he wants to settle a score with Althwin. You know that I can't speak to motive."

Another young man came forward and took Reylan by the arm. "This way, Reylan. You are near the north end of the yard."

Her friend was lead away leaving Natalia standing facing the young man with the clipboard.

"Hello, Relay Natalia Nithin. These are your cuffs." He extended a set from a pouch at his side. A cascading rainbow of ribbons flowed from the cuffs and she winced at the colours.

"Could you explain this to me?" She held her hands back when he reached for them.

His smile was amused. "No one would explain it?"

"Nope. And I have asked everyone I have run into."

He laughed. "Just a moment. I will get someone to fill in for me."

At his nod, another young man took up the position and accepted the pouch that held the ribboned cuffs.

"This way, Relay." He cupped her elbow and led her down the row of tables to a position across from Rey's.

"Call me Tal or Natalia."

"Natalia then. I am Vinar." He sat her at the table and held out the cuff. "Each ribbon on this cuff belongs to a man who wishes to be considered for your mate."

Before she knew it, the first cuff was snapped onto her wrist. The second followed in a blur of motion. He winked at her and continued.

"Today is the first day of our annual festival, which is the last group event before the storm season. The men who are making a bid for your affections will compete in front of you for your attention. As you lose your enthusiasm for a candidate, his ribbon will darken and fall away from your cuffs. At the end of the day, only the men whom you will accept will be represented."

"Am I stuck with them?"

He laughed. "No, but you will be expected to allow them into your bed to determine suitability."

She opened and closed her mouth several times. "That's—"

"Why no one would tell you what was happening. Outsiders have a problem with our rituals, but now that you are here, you are being held to the same restrictions as a Solray woman."

"Which means no running."

"Which means no running. Several of the men who are interested in you would no doubt enjoy the chase, but it is really better for you if you don't try to escape."

"What about the dancing?"

"That is part of the courtship. A candidate can ask you for a dance. You must at least try."

"Who are you precisely?"

"Nesh is one of my brothers and Althwin is another. I will probably start looking for a wife in the next five to twenty years, but there is no hurry."

"So, metal work and pleasure toys in your family. Interesting pedigree."

His grin was wicked. "We are very good with our hands. Care to find out?"

"I already have more than I can handle. Can I call on my little brother?"

He blinked and laughed, "I forgot that you had

one. By all means. Would you like another chair or a shoulder rest for him?"

"Either, please. When does this all start?"

Vinar looked around him, his deep brown eyes calm and assessing. "Five minutes or so. All the women who will attend are here, now it is just getting the men together."

He took one of her hands, brushed the ribbons from her wrist and gave her a courtly kiss. "I will return with a rest for your little brother."

He was as good as his word. A lovely sewn leather shoulder harness was presented to her and as soon as she had it in place, she summoned Pakor. The harness didn't really match her dress but screw it. She wasn't doing this alone.

With her little brother settled on her shoulder, she felt less vulnerable. The tables arcing around the open area were filled with women, twenty in total. Vinar stayed near her table and it was unnerving for him to be behind her as if blocking her retreat.

A gong rang in the distance and a wave of men entered the oval in the centre, lining up in front of their female of choice. Few women had only one suitor in front of them, but the line up in front of Tal made her queasy.

Pakor screeched and it helped Natalia focus. She looked over the crowd and immediately dismissed men that she had not spoken to. Six of

the ribbons on her wrists blackened and turned to ash. The men that obviously belonged to the ribbons nodded and left the oval.

“Wow. That really works.”

Pakor chortled, fluffing up his feathers and ready to help her choose her mate. Or mates.

Nesh, the storm set and one of the workers at the café were left. Her crowd had gone from eleven to five in that one mood swing.

Vinar stepped forward, “Who would speak with Natalia first?”

The man from the café stepped up. He sat across from her and held out his hand. She placed her fingers inside the warmth of his and looked into his gold-brown eyes. Pakor screeched and the ribbon of bronze faded to ash. Nothing. She felt nothing for this man.

He looked down, his mouth tightened when he saw the loss of his colours. He stood and left the table.

Nesh stepped up next. “I am guessing that you have enjoyed my craft. You have colour in your cheeks once again.”

“I have and my cheeks are once again coloured with your frank discussion. I am afraid that I am not used to the ways of Solray as yet.”

“Should you choose me as your mate, I would craft anything you wished, anytime you wished it.”

The image of Nesh whittling, carving and sculpting a never-ending procession of toys for her was partially amusing, partially depressing. Who needed toys when they had a flesh-and-blood man in their bed?

"I would not ask that of you. Your craftsmanship is wonderful and each creation unique. I am afraid that I cannot imagine a life with you."

His eyes clouded. "You do not find me attractive?"

"I do. But as you know, there is much more to a life partnership than attraction. I want someone to speak to, to link with for lack of a better term." She shrugged and as she watched him wrestle with her comments, the blue ribbon on her wrist died.

He looked from her wrist to her face and the flicker of hope died in his eyes. "I would have made a good husband."

"I need a partner more than I need a husband. A blush should not be the only attraction that you have for a woman."

"It was more than that, but I accept your decision. Please visit my shop whenever you have need." He bowed formally and left her with only three suitors staring at her.

Natalia nervously looked to either side. The other women had done as she had, a few had more than one suitor left.

"Vinar, should it have gone that quickly?"

"You have yet to interview your last three suitors." His voice was amused.

Rosh stepped forward and lifted the chair out of the way. With Pakor giving full authorization, he lifted her to sit on the table while Thobin and Apdel surrounded her.

"What will I get from a joining to you?" She felt bold and timid at the same time. She had not seen them in the flesh since that day at the lake.

In the distance, music started.

"You get a very large addition to your house." Apdel was smiling as if her capitulation was a foregone conclusion.

"You get the best hunters in the settlement." Rosh puffed his chest out and preened under her gaze.

"You get any one of us or all of us in your bed at your slightest whim." Thobin's voice rumbled over her and she shivered.

Apdel continued, "You get to dance."

Rosh. "You get to laugh."

"You get to love." Thobin smiled and drew his fingers down her cheek, his smile widening when she turned to nuzzle his hand. "For a very long time."

Shaking herself out of the sensual stupor she was falling into, she straightened. "What will you get from me?"

Apdel. "We will get a companion."

Thobin. "We will get a lover."

"We will get cookies. Ow. I mean, we will have the chance of children." Rosh rubbed his arm from where Apdel struck him.

On her wrists, three ribbons stayed in an array of greys. Apparently, she had made up her mind.

Pakor screeched his triumph. He was going to get so much tail for being little brother to the storms.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Thobin smiled and extended his hand. "Will you dance, Natalia?"

"Can I?" She looked over at Vinar and he nodded.

"If he tries to stop us, he will be in for a bit of a problem." Thobin held her hand and led her to the open grass area, swaying her against him in a slow beat.

Tal relaxed against him, letting him lead her where he would.

He bent low and murmured into her ear. "It seems your dreams have taught you about moving to the beat."

"If you know about them, they were not dreams." They parted, spun and reconnected gracefully.

"We were in our other forms. It was all we could manage at the time." He held her against him with a palm on her back, his erection obvious under the wrap he was wearing.

She rubbed against him slowly, with her gaze

meeting his own. "Can you manage more now?" Her mind reeled at her actions, but it seemed natural to play with him here, where she was assured of safety.

"It is my turn, I believe." Apdel swung her away by one arm, moving her gracefully in the more formal beat of the new song. "Are you enjoying the first day of the festival?"

"It has its pleasures. This dress is rather glaring. Is there a reason for the bright colours that the women are wearing?"

"Some couples enjoy a bit of a hunt later in the evening. The women run and the men chase." He moved with a lazy elegance that she recognised from her dreams.

"And are you a man who likes a hunt?" The steps were easy. She followed his dance almost lazily.

"It has its moments. I am a very large enthusiast for the sure thing."

They paced with one hand touching, their bodies opposite stepping in a slow circle. Just the touch of his calloused palm on hers made her shiver and she remembered his hands on her body in the dream plane.

Hands gripped her waist and twirled her through the air. She laughed at the sensory memory that flooded her of Rosh whirling her and turned into his arms for a lively step through the

lush grass. Dancing in a long skirt was a bit of a challenge, but she simply lifted the gown up with one hand and turned and stepped to the beat.

Natalia was laughing and gasping for air by the time the song ended. Other couples were now on the green, dancing, laughing and engaging in quite a lot of necking.

It suddenly struck her. It was an out-of-control prom.

Images of horny teenagers ran through her mind and Rosh jerked as if struck. His eyes heated and suddenly she was surrounded by predators.

Thobin lifted her, taking her mouth in a kiss that was more possession and less passion. She was just starting to respond when Apdel swung her away from Thobin and bent her back over his arm, nibbling kisses up her neck and across her jaw line. Her blood stirred at the touch on her neck, an erogenous zone from which she could not hide.

She sighed, a soft moan that sent her tumbling into Rosh's arms. His kiss was sweet but full of promise, taking her higher than she was prepared for. He cupped her ass and pulled her into him and she finally understood the reason for the gown. It provided more protection than a wrap skirt could. She would have to acquiesce to anyone trying to get under it. She also could not get satisfaction by grinding against her chosen's

thigh.

What the hell are you doing, Tal?

Aster's interference couldn't have had worse timing. The storms stared at her in surprise.

I think I am getting married. Not sure though. Will talk to you tomorrow.

Oh, my god...there are three of them. I am not letting you live this down.

"Who was that?" Apdel scowled.

"My cousin, Aster. She is married to the Kalordans who delivered me here."

Thobin was looking thoughtful, "You are linked?"

"Since we were children. We were the only related Volunteers to leave Terra. Our talents were well matched." She smiled at the semicircle of faces. "What happens now?"

"We can remain here, dancing the night away, or we can adjourn to our home or yours. It is your choice." Apdel smiled. "It is a fine night for flying."

They must have read her agreement in her body language, because Apdel held her in his arms as Thobin shifted shape. He took to the skies, circling lower until he was near enough. Apdel lifted her and she felt a blast of wind propel her into the sky.

Thobin's claws came around her torso gently and he soared off to Storm Lake. Screams of

raptors followed them, Natalia gave in to her urge to relax and simply felt the wind on her face and blowing up her skirt. It was quite the arousing draft.

The stone cliffs of the lake were echo chambers for the cries of triumph that her storms were screaming.

She was deposited on the stone ledge on the cliff face and swiftly rolled toward the cavernous opening. On her feet, she only had a moment before Apdel was kissing her fervently, pressing her up against the crystal walls of the hall.

There was the sound of tearing fabric and he was lifting her to suckle and nip first one breast, then the other. He pinned her to the wall with his thigh, lifting her with the flex of his knee. One hand kneaded at the breast not occupied with his mouth, the other worked its way under her skirts and between them to stroke her clit in time with his suction.

Her scream as she came echoed in the crystal halls and she shuddered as he stroked every spasm from her flesh.

"Apdel!" Thobin's voice crackled with barely suppressed rage.

Her lover slowly lowered her feet to the floor, stepping away from her. She looked into his eyes and saw the barely banked lust and passion. His lips were swollen from his attentions and gleamed

wetly in the flickering light.

She took a few steps toward Thobin and noticed the direction his gaze was taking. Her dress was torn down the centre, her breasts naked and swollen in the torchlight.

He didn't speak, merely lifted her off her feet and carried her through more halls until he reached a large chamber. His bed was a circular pallet, similar to the one Natalia had at her house, only much, much larger.

She would have given a flippant comment, but the serious nature of Thobin's face hushed her. He set her on her feet and removed her dress by the simple expedience of tearing it off her. He knelt at her feet and untied her sandals, slipping her feet free. She was as naked as he was, but his urgency was not enough to make him hurry.

He trailed soft kisses across her jaw, nibbling until he reached her lips. He laved her lower lips slowly with his tongue and when she gasped. He shifted intensity and held her head in his hands as he took her mouth, thrusting eagerly.

He trailed his mouth down her body, kissing, sucking, nipping as he went until he was between her thighs. He slid two fingers into her, parting her and spreading her slick moisture along her cleft while he licked at her clit.

She mewled and squirmed under him, each lick, nip with his teeth and strong suction drove

her higher and higher until she saw sparks and a harsh cry came from her throat. As her channel pulsed, he reared up and thrust his cock into her, taking her with a steady plunge of his hips. He rocked into her, pinning her hands above her head as the thrust and drag of his cock inside her sent her scaling the heights to pleasure again.

Just as she would have gone over, he stopped and rolled so that he was beneath her. She sat up and started rocking, but he held her still.

Lips caressed the nape of her neck and worked down her spine, worshipping each inch of her back. Hands stroked her, reached between Tal and Thobin to caress her breasts and then returned to hold tightly to her waist before trailing over the curve of her buttocks.

“Rosh...” She tried to turn around, but Thobin shifted inside her and she gasped. This was a scenario she had never dared to initiate in their dreams. Apdel knelt near her head and she started to shake.

“Easy, love.” Rosh rubbed her spine again, soothing her before delving between her ass cheeks with slick fingers. He rubbed in circles until she arched against him, into the pressure of his digits.

Beneath and inside her, Thobin reached between them and rubbed her clit as Rosh pushed the broad head of his cock into her ass. She bucked

and impaled herself with a gasp. Apdel moved so that his cock was within reasonable distance to her mouth and as the other two started to move, she took him into her as well.

Pleasure, pain, more pleasure ran together and as her body sought release with them all inside her, their minds linked, forged, became one.

She felt her own heat gloving them, squeezing them tightly, the palpitations of her flesh drawing their releases near.

In a moment that locked them together, release ran through Natalia, Thobin, Rosh and Apdel in a roar. Bodies bucked, cocks jerked and spewed, her channel rippled and she swallowed in an endless round of pleasure that bound them.

Natalia sank onto Thobin with a groan, feeling Rosh slip from her. She was just settling in for a light nap when a roar came into her mind.

What the fuck was that?

She looked to the men who lay around her. *Exactly.*

One by one, her lovers started laughing until that laughter spun across the stars.

A storm was coming. She could feel it in her new senses. Her mind had opened to the planet Solray in a number of ways. Pakor was indeed getting all the tail he could handle. He had been on two different mating flights in the last two days alone.

Her bird was a slut.

How am I going to get down?

Thobin ruffled his feathers in the morning light.
I will perch on the edge of the cliff and you will place your arms around my neck. I will glide to the ground.

That will work?

It should. We simply cannot lift off with your weight. Gliding should not be a problem.

Flatterer.

Rosh and Apdel were circling already. Their quartet had spent a long night together bathing, learning each other and finally sleeping.

Day two of the festival was for families and family was now exactly what they were. Natalia's mind was bound so tightly to theirs that she was finding it hard to not jump off the cliff expecting to shift form and fly.

Don't you dare, Alia. His tone was forbidding and she had to fight her smile. The new nickname had come about in the middle of the night. They had refused to call her Tal and Natalia was a bit of a mouthful. Alia it was. She could live with it.

The remnants of her orange gown were what she was wearing. Rosh had rigged some ties and done a quick tailoring job so that she would not return to her home naked.

Her shoes were back in place and the time was now. She took three steps and wrapped her arms around Thobin's feathered neck. Apdel was

circling as her ride prepared to launch. If Thobin needed extra lift, Apdel could provide it and Rosh would steer them to safety.

The moment that Thobin let himself drop off the edge of the cliff, wings extended, she stifled a scream and then gasped as they started to rise.

Apdel, are you doing this? Thobin was just as confused as she was.

I am not. It is our mate. She is negating her weight. Apdel's bird-gaze was intense.

How? Rosh soared below them and then over as he enjoyed the morning breezes.

She answered. *Not a fucking clue, but can you take me straight to our house? I need a new outfit. This one is sooo yesterday.*

The birds screamed their laughter and they took her home. A bundle sat on her front step and she opened it curiously after dismounting from her mate. It was clothing in dark greys for all of them. A note was attached.

They were more interested in getting clothes off you than on you, but these should do fine for day two of the festival. I am sorry that my brother has such horrid taste in colours.

Reylan

"Rosh, your sister didn't let a little thing like getting mated herself interfere with meddling. These clothes are for us." She led the way inside

and put the bundle down on the table. Her thighs ached and her butt was sore. Thankfully, Rosh only took her that way the first time. The rest of the night had been spent in the non-penetration varieties of coupling.

She was stuck with some very inventive men.

She removed the orange dress and looked down at her arm. The port marks had faded somewhat and her skin had taken on a golden glow.

She racked her brain for what she knew of the Avari back on their home world and only came up with one thing. Nanites. The tiny machines that were originally designed but now organically grown were one of the sole exports of the ancient race.

Have I been infected with nanites?

Rosh was surprised. *Of course. We all spilled inside you and what is in our bloodstream is now in yours.*

So that glow last night...

Your body being mapped by the nanites. We all had to come at the same time or the programming would have defended itself against the others, making conception impossible.

That made a horrifying kind of sense. If the nanites with one set of DNA took up residence, it would defend her against the others. She didn't know what kind of tea party they all had when they ran into each other, but maybe Reyland could

explain it.

She wrapped herself in the grey leather, pulling on a pair of black boots that seemed to match her outfit.

Dressed, she went in search of her men.

They were outside taking some kind of measurements. Of course. The addition she had been promised.

"So, will you build it with your own six hands?"

Apdel grinned. "Of course. But our fathers and brothers will join in as well. It will go surprisingly quickly with a group of twenty."

She whistled. "I had no idea you were from such large families."

Thobin grinned, "We didn't want to scare you off."

"Sending me three fake cocks was not designed to scare me off? You have a funny idea of what will frighten a girl."

They looked at each other, sought her mind for the shock of the present and burst out laughing.

"Now. The main bedchamber shall go over here and the babies' rooms are over here." Apdel started to draw a floor plan into the back yard while Rosh used stones as corner markers.

Babies?

Babies. As many as you are willing to carry. The moment you decide yes, the nanites will start the

ovulation process and from there on, nature will take its course. Thobin's voice translated, even on the psychic plane.

The wind changed pitch, the scent of the storm stronger now. *Boys, it's time for you to go to work. Deflect the storm and I will be here when you get back.*

Grey leather flew an instant before they did. Images of them taking her in different positions and places around the settlement that she had not yet been to rang through her mind.

She collected their clothing and went inside. It was time to wait for her storms.

CHAPTER NINE

Two months later...

“I can’t believe it is finished already. I thought for certain that when Rosh was called away to help with Reylan’s house, we would be drastically behind.” Natalia turned and smiled at the new wood in the master bedroom.

Apdel scowled, “With you refusing to sleep with us unless we were all together, it was an easy decision to finish the master bedroom first. After that, three babies’ rooms were easy enough.”

“I did not hold you hostage. We could still fly to the lake.”

“And you would be unhappy. We knew that.”

“No one knew that I would be able to shift. Heck, if I hadn’t gotten thrown into the lake, I might not have done it.”

Her transformation had caught them all by surprise. Instead of an eagle, she had turned into a swan. A huge golden swan. It satisfied her urge for water and she found it lots of fun. The honk

she could manage got the guys out of bed in a hysterical hurry.

"I don't find it that funny."

"You don't see your faces when you scramble around looking for the attacking horde. It brings light to my day." She smiled beatifically and shared the joy that spilled through her.

Apdel groaned and leaned over to give her a kiss. She lifted her hand to his cheek and held him to her for a moment. Thobin was speaking with one of the council elders and they were waiting for her visitors.

Aster was on her way, her two men eager to set her mind at ease.

They were on final approach and with a glance upward, Natalia noticed that Rosh was as well on his final approach.

They had made it through storm season. Long nights alone with the dreamscape and the pleasure rods, the families that she was now part of eager to help her acclimate to her new roll as a woman of Solray.

Reylan offered her a job as her assistant, helping her with the emotional aspect of the healing. Avari did not need much healing, but those that did required a bit of counselling. Trauma had quite the effect on the otherwise stoic people. Natalia's empathy expanded with her mating. She could sense the emotions of others,

even though her telepathy was restricted to her husbands and her cousin.

Rosh landed next to her and shifted. She slapped a rolled-up hip wrap against his thigh. "My cousin will have plenty of things to adapt to without you waving your member around, Rosh."

Natalia winced as she thought of her appearance. Her skin was now the same gold as the other Solray women. Her eyes had gold flecks and streaks of dark gold wove through her hair.

The ship was landing, Natalia stood with her husbands, waiting for the opening of the door. When Aster finally left the confines of the ship, the women each let out an ear-piercing shriek and ran together for a hug.

The men behind her cousin smelled of hunting cat and the bird within Natalia let out a hiss.

"Tal, what the hell was that?"

"Aster, I have had a very eventful few months."

They walked together, talked and left the men to trail uncomfortably after them. "You are going to introduce me eventually, right?"

She giggled. "Of course, Aster. I just like keeping them off balance."

The walk to Natalia's home was mercifully short. They talked about the festival, the storm season and shapeshifters. Eagle shifters were a new one for Aster. "I still don't know how they can fly."

Natalia ignored that. "What would you say if I told you I had gone completely native?"

"How do you mean?"

She led her bemused cousin to the back garden and removed her clothing before changing into her other form.

Aster touched her neck, ruffled her feathers and when she would have yanked on her wings, Natalia reared up and clouted her with them. She shifted back to human and put her clothes back on. "You were going to yank on my wings. Seriously?"

"I thought I was dreaming. Tal, you are a freaking bird woman!"

Natalia put her hands on her hips and scowled at her cousin. "And you like pussy. We each have our personal attractions."

They glared at each other for a few seconds until Aster couldn't keep a straight face anymore. "Pussy. Very funny. I will have to tell the lads about that one."

Natalia explained about the nanites, the changes and the psychic connection.

"Hey, my guys are not complaining about the psychic sex. They are happy and exhausted by the overspill." Aster smirked.

A light blush crept across Natalia's cheeks. "Sorry about that. They like sneak attacks and I don't have time to put up a shield."

"I was in the same situation, if you will recall. I blasted you quite heavily at the time. I have to ask you, Tal. Are you really happy?"

"Aster, I have met men who just want me to be happy and who are willing to drive me to the edge of sanity to achieve it. I have a job, friends and the possibility of a family. I have a life for the first time in decades. Yes, cousin. I am happy."

Aster grinned. "Good. You are so stoic, I can never tell."

Thobin came out of the shadows and Aster jumped. "Our Alia has become the perfect Solray woman. A delightful addition to her being the perfect woman to begin with."

Rosh appeared next to her and lifted her hand to his lips. "Our Alia is a dedicated empath with the ability to make others relax just by her presence."

Apdel whispered in Natalia's ear. "Our Alia is more than we could have wished for and far more than we deserve."

Aster's eyes were wide as Natalia's men circled her. When Pakor screeched and landed on Natalia's shoulder, she blinked as a pleased smile ran across her face and through their link.

"Natalia, I think you are home."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Avari are a fun and festive race. *Avari Nyx* is their first appearance. They are one of the ancient races of the Alliance and have retreated to lower-tech planets in a ricochet of culture. They kept the nanites though, let's not go crazy.

Aster was the main heroine in *Entrap*. In it, we met Natalia through the link that the cousins shared. Tal had to put up with rampaging hormones through the link and was in a tank and couldn't do a darned thing about it.

Hopefully, *Engage* has made up for her frustration.

Thanks for reading.

Your loyal author,

Viola Grace

Viola@violagrace.com

<http://www.violagrace.com>

<http://www.devinedestinies.com>

<http://www.zeninamasters.com>

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.