

Viola Grace

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue cape and a blue mask that covers her eyes and nose, stands in the center. She is holding the mask with her right hand. The background is a deep blue night sky with white stars, a bright lightning bolt, and a faint silhouette of a castle or city skyline.

The Hashka Chronicles 2

EMISSARY TO THE STARS

Siri has worked her way through the temple of Ilshara until the goddess tapped her as the Emissary. With her life now revolving around worshipers and organizing the temple she has no time for herself and with the great festival coming up, she needs some me time. She asks the goddess for some time off and is shocked to her toes when it is granted. Life on Allacor is calm, serene and has a slow rhythm that Siri enjoys as she spends her days in baggy clothing that are completely different from her Emissary clothing. While the goddess lets Siri's biology come back to its rhythm, Mirkan, the next clan leader of the Sorro clan is there to seduce her into an attachment to his world. Time passes swiftly and when the representatives from her home world find her she is caught and her disguise stripped bare. When the goddess inside comes out to put her foot down, she surprises her Emissary with a plan for this new world. A plan that includes Siri.

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**EMISSARY TO THE
STARS
HASHKA CHRONICLES TWO**

BY

VIOLA GRACE

CHAPTER ONE

High Priestess Siralinalia Mzwini arched and sighed as the man who had his head between her thighs drove her higher and higher toward the peak of satisfaction.

His tongue lapped at her while his hands pulled tightly at her hips. The moment she screamed her release, he took one last lick of her juices and knelt back. "Dearest Ilshara, please allow me to engage my abilities to the utmost and give me joy in my union with Oris."

Siri sat up and looked down at the man in front of her, the goddess's presence glowing out through her eyes. "Your request is granted. Take this for your wedding night."

A glow shot from her eyes and Siri blinked as the goddess left her. Of course, Ilshara rarely completely left her favourite priestess. Siri could feel the star's consciousness in a tiny corner of her mind, rolling in the pleasure she had just been given in exchange for the request.

Part of Siri was grateful that the man was just

asking for this kind of a boon. Ilshara wouldn't think twice about giving a man more potency for a wedding night. With the bit of power she had given him, the star would be able to hitchhike and participate in the nuptials in the most intimate of ways.

Siri sat up and straightened the light drifts of silk that covered her around the temple. Her hair was up in its formal locks and the gems she wore as designation of her status gleamed in the afternoon light. She got up and paced her chambers once the dazed and erect worshipper left the room.

Looking out over the town that Ilshara had blessed and supported for centuries, Siralinalia wished for something else. It was blasphemy to want to leave the service of the star goddess, but she couldn't help it. She wanted to get up in the morning and put her hair in a loose tail and wear clothing that didn't make her shiver at the slightest breeze.

I understand, daughter.

Oops. She had thought that Ilshara was otherwise occupied with her afterglow. *I am sorry, Dearest Star.*

Do not worry, daughter. Your life is short, as short as the pleasure you give me to experience. I will give you a gift.

Dearest Star, I am not worthy of a gift. I am content

with my position.

Do not lie to me, Siri. I know the unrest of your heart. You have a friend that you speak to on a distant world?

I do, Dearest Star.

Go and visit with her and return before the great festival. I will allow you this time to be a woman and not my most beloved priestess.

I think I would rather just be me, Dearest Star.

Then give that a try. Now go. Your duties are done for the day.

She didn't thank Ilshara. She was already gone. Siri smiled grimly as she imagined the poor acolyte who was about to be given the star's presence. The sudden blaze of Ilshara would take the woman by storm. Siri was all too familiar with the feeling.

Her quarters were guarded, so that only those who had paid the exorbitant fee to the temple were given the privilege of consulting their goddess directly. As the high priestess, her duties ran from attending the VIPs to running the festivals. The great festival of Ilshara was already in place. She would have three months of freedom before she had to be back. The exertions of the festival would cost her dearly. The forty-eight hours of endless worship would exhaust her, just like they had last year.

Her jewels and chains tinkled as she walked through the temple halls. Many of the men she passed had worshipped between her thighs in the

manner Ilshara preferred and they bowed respectfully as they passed.

She gestured to the high priest as she passed his chambers. He followed her at once, leaving the new acolyte in her splayed position.

Siri internally shook her head. Every year, twenty young women entered the service of the goddess. Ten would remain on as priestesses after the first year, five more would move up the hierarchy after that if the goddess found them pleasing. The most responsive became avatars to the goddess and the rest were available to the population as brides with hefty dowries.

"Yes, High Priestess. What do you wish?" The high priest was about three ranks below her.

"Dearest Star has given me time off until the great festival, but it is not to be common knowledge. I will be going to the mountains to prepare myself until then." She sat behind her desk, her jewels clashing against the cushions while she brought her com unit online.

"You are leaving the temple?"

"For our centre in the hills, yes. I am to be undisturbed until the day before the event."

"You are going alone? No attendants, no cooks or groomers?" He seemed startled, but then Marscwin had always been twitchy.

"All alone. The great festival last year almost killed me." She shrugged. It had been her second

year as high priestess and the line to receive the goddess's blessings had been enormous. The ten minutes between sessions for recovery had been needed as her body was forced to peak over and over by eager worshipers. Ilshara kept her body from getting sore, but her mind knew what the goddess was keeping her from. Her mind knew that nobody should be exposed to this, but their Dearest Star had loved it. The blessings she gave to their people in the form of the most favourable weather had been proof of it.

The blue of her skin gleamed in the reflection on the monitor of her com unit. The groomers polished and primped her every day, the only part of her job she really enjoyed anymore.

"I informed you as a courtesy. Priestess Coraleen will take my place during primary duties. I will be leaving after the noon meal, so please bring all immediate orders for supplies to me for authorization before then."

Her nod of dismissal sent the priest stumbling out the door.

"Well, that is done. Now to find a place to go." She keyed in her friend's code and waited for a response while going through her regular correspondence.

"Hello?" Tahsha looked sleepy, but she grinned when she recognised her friend. "Siri! What are you doing?"

"I just wanted to know, when you invited me to visit, was that a genuine invitation or were you simply being polite?" She kept herself from biting her nails. This was the moment when she found out if she could actually escape her life, even for a few months.

"It was a genuine invitation. Why?"

"I have some time off coming and you are the best friend I have. If you can get clan permission, I would love to come for a visit."

Tahsha smiled, "Hold the connection for a minute. The clan leader is already awake. I will just check with him and then come right back. Hold on."

Tahsha left the screen and Siri could see her dart out an open door.

Siri smiled at her friend's enthusiasm. When Tahsha came running back to the com unit and sat down with a breathless smile, Siri started to hope.

"He says you can come and stay as long as you like provided that you teach me to play that instrument properly." Tahsha smiled and started bouncing in her chair. "When will you come?"

"In five days. Can you meet me at the spaceport?"

"Of course. Keep me apprised of your progress and I will be there. My clan reps might be, too, but that won't be too much of a problem."

"Excellent. I will just tie up a few loose ends

here and then I will be on my way. See you soon, Tahsha, and thank you. There is no one I would rather spend my time off with."

"See you when you get here, Siri." Tahsha smiled and disconnected the com.

Sitting back in her chair, Siri felt the overwhelming sense of hope well up in her. She called and had her private shuttle fuelled and ready for her use. They didn't ask questions, simply said, "Yes, Emissary," and left it at that.

Her clothing was a matter of rank, so it had to be changed. A press of a button brought her private secretary running. "Yes, Emissary?"

"I need the clothing I arrived in, from storage." She drummed a jewelled finger on her desk, waiting for the inevitable questions.

"Your clothing? Your robes or gowns?"

"No, my farm-wear. The clothing I was wearing when I arrived at the temple for the first time. They are in storage, I believe."

"Yes, Emissary. I will bring them immediately." Tirn bobbed her head and left the room.

Siri sighed. One set of clothes was not going to cut it. She stood and paced, her gauzy silks fluttering around her, the panels of translucent blue a shade lighter than her skin opened to expose a lot of thigh as she paced.

That was it. Her family. Her mother would be able to bring her something. They had been paid

handsomely when she had been elevated to emissary eight years after she arrived at the temple.

Back to the com. She entered her parents' number and when her mother answered, she smiled. "Hello, Mama. How are you today?"

"Well, Emissary."

That was disappointing. "I will never be your little Siri again, will I?"

A flicker of regret swam in Parturnalia's eyes. "What may I do for you, Emissary?"

"I need you to fetch clothing for a woman the same size as your little Siri used to be and deliver it to the temple for me." She smiled. "Dearest Star is giving me a vacation and I am not going to be an emissary where I am going."

Shock rippled through her mother's eyes. "She is letting you go?"

"For a few months. I will have to be back for the great festival, but until then, I can just be myself for a time."

"I have missed little Siri. Make sure she has fun. I will deliver the parcel within the hour." Tears pricked her eyes. "Thank you for calling, Emissary. I have missed my daughter so."

Tears tried to form in Siri's golden eyes, but she fought them back and nodded her elaborate headdress. "She has missed you more than she can say. Thank you, Mama."

“Blessings of the Goddess to you.”

“And to you and your family, dear lady. Goodbye.” Siri cut off the communication and sat back in her chair.

Tirn returned, flustered but triumphant. “I found them. They were behind glass in the foyer, since you are the most beloved of Ilshara, but I got them.”

“Excellent.” Well, there went the element of surprise for her regular worshipers. She had forgotten that little tidbit. “I hate to put you out, but return them and find me a formal and a travelling cloak fit for my station.”

“Yes, Emissary.” Tirn didn’t even question why, simply bowed and backed away, the plain clothing in her hands.

Siri stopped herself from lunging for those clothes, they represented a happier time, but goddess willing, she would soon be able to live a life she could enjoy, even if it was for a few weeks.

It would be a life and not just an existence even if it was only for a little while before the goddess called her back.

CHAPTER TWO

“Allacor shuttle base, this is the Morning Star requesting permission to land.”

“Morning Star, your berth is reserved and waiting. Welcome to Allacor, please lock on the beacon.”

She had never thought she would be grateful for one of the most devoted worshipers being a warship commander. He had taken her on a few short hops around the planet to please Ilshara. The goddess had rewarded him and his prowess had grown exponentially.

Siri had officiated at his wedding to one of the newer priestesses only that spring and he had looked at her with grateful appreciation in his gaze.

It had amazed her when she started that none of the males worshipping associated the act with sex. When she had questioned her elders, she had been told that it had something to do with the goddess not allowing her priestesses to go into heat. Since

there was no possibility of bonding or offspring, the men considered it a service exchanged for blessings from their sex-crazed goddess.

She shook her head as she recalled sneaking out of the temple by virtue of the front door, down to a sedan chair, which took her to the shuttle hangar. No one looked at a priestess twice.

Now, as she sat in a comfortable set of loose trousers and a baggy tunic with a belt low on her hips, she felt much more like the old Siri again. Even the low boots on her feet felt good if somewhat funny. She had only been allowed delicate slippers if anything at all.

Today, she had giggled when she piled her hair up in a sloppy mess on her head, pinning it randomly and haphazardly into place. The groomers would have freaked.

Eventually during her vacation, she wanted to try a braid.

Her mother had pulled out all the stops, collecting enough of her old farm clothes to dress her for two weeks with no duplications. Right down to the underwear, another item that felt strange against Siri's skin.

"Tahsha. I am on final approach, so I hope someone will be there to pick me up." She left a message on the handheld that her friend was supposed to be carrying.

The beacon led her down to the spaceport, only

a short hop from the nearest city if she was forced to make her own way.

She landed and locked down the shuttle, made sure that all of her vestments and tiara were tucked away safely in her duffel and then she slung the bag over her shoulder and stepped into the air of Allacor.

"Madam, if you will come with me for standard medicals?" A young man offered her his arm and she took it with the grace she had been taught in the temple.

Nemial had the same protocols. All newcomers were to have bacterial samples as well as blood samples surrendered when they arrived. This was a Hashka world, so they were only checking for general health.

With her bag over one arm, she followed the young man into the medical offices attached to the spaceport. The physician was efficient and respectful, drawing and swabbing the samples with little pausing to admire her markings. Ilshara enjoyed marking her high priestesses and even if she retired, Siri knew that the marks would be with her forever. Fortunately, they all occurred beneath her neckline so it wasn't something that would gather attention from the people of Allacor.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Lady."

"It is far less invasive than my morning duties, doctor." She resettled her tunic and tied it around

her hips.

"I believe your party is waiting in the main area." The young man smiled and gestured to the large door that would lead her out.

A few steps into the main room and the squeal that she heard preceded Tahsha's impact by a second. "Siri! You made it."

"I did. Did you doubt it?" She returned the hug and noticed two large men watching them with indulgent smiles.

"Not for an instant. Come on, I need to introduce you." Tahsha's face was shining, her sky blue skin glowing with an inner golden highlight. She was still living with her family, her first heat a few months away.

Hefting her bag so it was secure, she followed Tahsha to the two men.

"Siri, this is my father, Clan Leader Vonkan, and my brother and leader-apparent, Mirkan."

Siri nodded her head to each. "Thank you for allowing me to visit. I have been looking forward to this for some time."

"You are very welcome. Tahsha has been speaking of you for years." Vonkan smiled and took her hand. "We were beginning to think you were a figment of her imagination."

Mirkan simply looked down at her with navy blue eyes that assessed her from head to toe. He nodded as if coming to a conclusion and looked to

his father. "We should be going if we want to cross the pass before sundown."

"Of course." Vonkan took his daughter's arm and left Mirkan to take Siri's.

She looked up at him and she politely declined his arm as they made their way out of the spaceport. The tiny bit of triumph that she felt walking without holding a man's arm made her chest swell a little. The small movement caught Mirkan's attention, so she slumped back into a loose and sloppy pose.

Inside her mind she heard laughter that was not her own, Ilshara was enjoying the vacation was well.

The transport comfortably fit them all with room for another three if necessary. Mirkan put her bag in the cargo hatch and she buckled herself into the front passenger seat. It had been left open and Tahsha's pointing had her settling into it.

"You will have a better view from the front seat. There are some amazing vistas on the way home." Mirkan started up the transport. It lifted off the ground a few feet before skidding forward and taking up a smooth pace.

Allacor was an eclectic combination of green and browns. Fields were full of grain and the seed heads were hanging heavily. "I am sorry. I seem to have come at harvest time."

Vonkan's voice was cheerful. "Nonsense, we

won't begin the harvest for another week. You will be a welcome help if you are willing."

"It has been some time since I worked in farming, but if your harvests are anything like ours, I would be glad to lend a hand."

Her clan's farming efforts had always left her hands covered with calluses, but it would be nice to work with her hands instead of on her back for a change. This vacation was looking even better up close than it had in her planning stages.

"Siri, look there. The rainbow caverns." Tahsha got her attention and Siri followed her jabbing finger.

Arc after arc of rainbows cavorted in the late afternoon sun over a river of deep crystal blue that put Siri in mind of her formal cloak tucked deep in her bag. "Beautiful."

"One of many lovely views I hope to be able to show you." Tahsha smiled and her voice indicated that she had crafted the panorama just for her friend.

Mirkan smiled indulgently at the silliness of his sister and Siri looked back out the window at the passing vistas.

The drive took them the better part of an hour and she was feeling distinctly guilty by the time they pulled up at the clan house. "I am feeling horrible that you had to drive so far just to collect me."

"It is nothing. We so rarely get visitors that everyone is excited to see you. It will be nice for some of the younglings to see a woman from another world." Vonkan released his harness and left the vehicle first.

Mirkan left and came around to offer his hand to her, assisting her from the vehicle. Siri hopped ungracefully to the ground and smiled to herself as he didn't bother ogling her. Since Ilshara had stopped her heat, she had also stopped her aging. Despite being eight years older than Tahsha, she looked the same age.

"Come on, Siri. Let's get you settled and then I can show you the clan property." Tahsha hauled her along by the hand the moment Mirkan handed over the duffel.

"It was nice meeting you, Mirkan, Vonkan." She nodded formally and when Mirkan's eyes widened she turned quickly to follow Tahsha.

Damn, too much of the grace that had been trained into her. She would have to watch that.

Siri nodded at a few of the clan members as they passed. They smiled at her in return, taking Tahsha's impulses into their grins.

"You are in the room next to mine." Tahsha was almost dancing with enthusiasm.

The room was small by the standards of the temple, but it was twice the size of the room Siri had grown up in. "This is wonderful. Thank you."

"I can help you unpack and then I can introduce you to my mother."

She moved the duffel out of Tahsha's reach. "I don't need help unpacking. I can do it later."

"Fine. Do you need to call and tell anyone that you have arrived safely?"

"No. I sent a signal when I landed." The lie made her wince, but the last thing she wanted was to send a signal back home to tell them where she was.

"Good. Then you are all mine." The childish glee was refreshing. By Tahsha's age, Siri had been serving in the temple for two years. Her glee was long gone by then.

She tucked the duffel in the wardrobe and closed the door. Checking her appearance in the ensuite bathroom, she chuckled at her dishevelled presence. The groomers would have a fit. She even had a smudge on her cheek, dark grey against the blue of her cheekbone.

Siri dampened a towel and scrubbed at her face. She wanted to be comfortable, not grubby.

She emerged from the bathroom with her face and hair slightly tidier. "You said you wanted to introduce me to your mother?"

"Yes. Are all your clothes this..." She gestured at the baggy clothing.

"I am on vacation."

"Oh. Just, usually you are in full makeup and

are wearing prettier things.”

“I have a job in...public relations.” She shrugged. “I miss being able to wear comfortable clothing, so I am taking this opportunity to be a bit scruffy.”

“Excellent. Will you be able to dress up if there is, say, a clan event?”

“If you can find a dress for me to wear. I didn’t pack anything for that kind of occasion.” That much was true. No clan event would include her transparent emissary garb.

“I am sure we can find something.” Tahsha took on a calculating gleam.

“Then I will happily wear it. Now, what’s first?” She rubbed her hands together and they began their tour of the clan house.

The women’s quarters had a gene barrier to keep eager men from stalking the women who had gone into heat. It made it easier to control the formalities of mating when men could not simply run off with amenable females.

Echohar was Tahsha’s mother. The woman greeted her warmly and introduced her to a number of aunts, cousins and nieces. It reminded Siri so much of home that tears came to her eyes before she could stop herself. To hide her emotional outburst, she joined in preparations for the evening meal.

Men and women ate together at the meal,

everyone sitting down at the long table to consume in company.

Vonkan asked, "So, Siri, what do you do back on Nemial, was it?"

"Yes, sir. I work in public service. My family had a holding similar to this though."

One of Tahsha's uncles laughed. "I don't suppose you can drive a reaper."

The group at the table laughed and Siri bit her lip. "I can. Used to be able to anyway. It has been a while."

The laughter stopped. "Are you serious?"

"Of course. Why, do you need a driver? Despite what Vonkan said, the harvest is about to start, isn't it?"

Vonkan nodded. "You cut your arrival very fine. Tomorrow we might not have been able to go and get you. The goddess blessed us this last week. Perfect conditions."

Siri almost choked. "Goddess? Which star do you worship?"

"Ilshara. The Bright One."

"Well, hell." Siri was now the focus of complete attention, but she didn't care. Her Dearest Star had well and truly trapped her. Was there nowhere she could go where her goddess could not touch her emissary?

CHAPTER THREE

“Do you not care for Ilshara?” The room was silent as Vonkan asked her point blank.

Siri decided on a version of the truth. “No, I am just surprised that her light falls even here. I work at the temple of Ilshara back on Nemial in an administrative capacity. I am one of her most devoted children.”

And I know it. I apologize for the surprise, but I would not risk you travelling beyond my reach. I want you safe. Siri kept her eyes downward while the goddess spoke to her for fear that the light would shine out of her eyes. Ilshara was sloppy when she wanted to be.

“Ah. So this was to be time away from the touch of the goddess. She reaches where she wishes.” Vonkan grinned.

“That is the truth. So, do you need someone to drive the reaper?” She blinked pleasantly.

The uncles looked to their clan leader and he nodded. “Dawn tomorrow, we will see how you

handle it."

Siri smiled at Tahsha's dismay. "Don't worry. I have a few weeks and the faster the harvest is in, the better off everyone is."

Tahsha recovered. "You are absolutely correct. If the harvest is in, we can have the celebration dance."

"Oh, I don't dance." Siri's comment got more stares than her mention of the goddess.

Mirkan looked at her speculatively. He had to be about ten years her senior, but his body was still all lithe elegance. "Do you not know how?"

"It was not a skill that I was born with." That was true. Her dance masters had despaired until she had grasped the basic moonlight dances that were required for her position.

"Have you actually tried?" He was pursuing it intently.

"Yes. A few times." It had been back before she had joined the temple, but she had tried. A few bruised feet and her partners had politely begged off. It was embarrassing.

She looked into his mesmerizing blue eyes and saw a flicker of something she couldn't put her finger on. No worshiper had ever looked at her with that emotion in his gaze.

Siri quickly changed the subject. "What model is the reaper?"

The men spoke of farming and the anticipated

yield. The women spoke of the preparations they would have to make for the harvesters and everything had a pleasant domestic- and farm-centred hum to it.

Everything except for Mirkan's gaze. He watched her no matter what the topic and Tahsha was darting looks between them.

When the meal concluded and she mentioned needing rest for an early start, she could feel that gaze following her.

Tahsha gave her a sisterly hug and promised to wake her early enough to fix her hair. She would need a braid and one of the topics of conversation had been her lack of braiding skills.

Finally alone, she leaned back against her door and dove into her duffel, removing her tiara, cloak and clothing to hide at the back of the wardrobe in one of the drawers. Her farm clothes held the scent of the wood her mother had stored them in and that memory brought tears to her eyes.

Drawing a deep and shaking breath, she selected her clothing for the next day, laying it out as her mother had taught her. Her breast band and underwear were worn but still serviceable with the socks, loose trousers and tunic that would be covered by a vest while she drove the reaper. If it was an older model, it might shake her breast band loose. That meant a vest for coverage so she would not draw the eyes of the men handling the forks for

collection.

Siri smiled and looked around her as she tucked herself into bed. This was a good place, even if Ilshara had tricked her into coming here.

She would enjoy every second of every day away from home.

The knock on her door found her awake, dressed and waiting. "Come in, Tahsha."

"You didn't lock your door?"

"No need. There is nothing here to steal." She smiled and held out some of her long honey-coloured hair. "Help."

Bleary eyed, Tahsha sat behind her and started to braid her hair. After a few minutes, she stopped to start again. "Your hair is too thick. You need more than one braid."

By the time she was finished, three braids were coiled around her head in a thick coronet. "Thank you."

"You are welcome, Siri, but I am teaching you how to do that. It is too damned early." Tahsha stumbled out of Siri's room and back to her own.

Smiling, Siri tucked her pants into calf-high boots and crept quietly through the house. Mirkan stopped her in the hall and beckoned her to follow. Silent, they walked through the house, around back and into the farmyard.

The reaper was waiting for her and it was

fortunately a model she had driven before. "This will be entertaining."

"That is what my uncles think. I, however, believe that you can do anything you set your mind to. Now, here are the keys, there is the first field. Try and make a pass as close to the fencing as you can, then spin it and come back."

An army of men was standing by with forks and shovels, carts attached to pulling beasts at the ready. They were waiting for her.

She nodded, took the keys and gracefully swung up and into the reaper. The harvest wouldn't wait and the sun was already drying the dew on the seed heads. It was time to reap what they had sown.

The machine roared to life underneath her. She adjusted the seating with a few smooth moves and strapped herself in. It was time to earn her original title of farm girl.

The reaper rolled forward at a steady pace. She lined it up with the start of the field and continued the approach until she was less than twenty metres from the grains. A flick of the switch and the cutting heads engaged and she lowered them with another lever into cutting position. When the first seeds fell under the reaper's blades, she thought she heard a cheer coming from the men behind her. She didn't care. It took all her concentration to slice down the grain without touching the fencing

running along her left side.

The turning was tricky, but with her blades up, she made the pirouette to caress the edge of the previous cut. This line was easy until she came abreast of the men and animals picking up the seed heads and carting them away in a steady relay.

She slowed imperceptibly as she passed them, but it was too close for her comfort and she breathed easier when she passed them and started a third run down the grain.

When she returned on her forth pass, Mirkan was waiting for her. He flagged her down and she moved the reaper to solid ground, raised the blades and cut the engine.

Siri removed the ear protectors that were in the reaper and exited the machine. Her legs were weak from the vibration, but the rest of her was pleasantly awake.

"Well, you can drive it. Can you continue to drive it until the harvest is done?"

"For your clan? Certainly."

"What if another clan needs your services? Would you help them?"

That made her blink. "I suppose so if it was the wish of your clan leader. I fall under his protection and duty while I am here. If he wishes it, I will do it."

Mirkan smiled and that smile reached inside her and set parts of her alight. "I will keep that it mind.

Now, come down for breakfast. We have made a clear start. The rest will take all of today and part of tomorrow."

"Can someone refuel the reaper while we eat?" She started to walk toward the house and he followed her when she drew even with him.

"It will be done before you start again."

"Good. I had forgotten how much I enjoyed that kind of work."

They sat down at table and the women served the men who had already been out working and Siri. Vonkan was on her left and he grabbed her hand, turning it in his palm. "You are not used to physical labour."

She didn't fight his grip. "No, but I know what it is. I will do what has to be done." Her skin was raw from the vibration of the rough leather against her hands.

"Injury was not my intention."

"I am not suited to forking the harvest, so if I can earn my room and board while I am here, I would like to. Plus, it is a wonderful memory for me to drive the reaper."

He shook his head and looked at her as if trying to figure her out. "You are not a regular female, are you?"

She laughed and pulled her hand back. "No, I have not been normal for a very long time. Now, breakfast?"

The chatter turned into a discussion of the plan of attack. With Siri able to drive the reaper, they would be able to complete the harvest in a few days. That would leave them able to assist other clans in the area.

"Would you be willing to drive for them as well?" Vonkan's earnest question dropped into silence as everyone turned to watch her for her answer.

"I would, provided that your clan benefit."

He grinned. "I will make sure we do. The Sorro clan will hold the first celebration of the end of their harvest and you will enjoy the position of guest of honour."

She nodded and fidgeted a little. "Clan Leader, will you be able to keep up with the reaper?"

He frowned. "Good point. You and my daughter are free in the afternoons. Visit the towns and villages nearby. You are here on your vacation after all."

Mirkan was finished eating and he was watching her again. She finished quickly and excused herself to get to work.

Tahsha stood in the doorway with a bowl of ice water. "Mom said this would help you."

Siri nodded and plunged her hands into the ice water. The skin turned from angry purple back to her normal blue. "Thank you."

"You are shaking."

"It is really cold but will help to toughen the skin. Can I have another one of those when I get back?"

"Of course. We are working on the kitchen garden, so just come get me when you are done for the day."

"See you later, Tahsha." Siri hugged her with her wet hands extended.

When they parted and Siri was once again in the sunlight, she felt better. Part of a community for the first time in a decade. She swung into the reaper with reflexes that were obviously still part of her and settled into the seat.

"Just like riding a horse." She smiled, checked her tanks and revved up the engine. She positioned the reaper at the start of a row as squarely as she could, then started the blades and lowered them into cutting position.

With the sure engaging of the wheels, the reaper rolled forward and destroyed all crops in its path. She had one moment of heart-stopping excitement when a nude couple was flushed out of the grains by the approaching reaper. Siri slowed the motion of the blades and wheels until they had reached safety and then got the whole mechanism underway. She burst out laughing as clothing was chewed in the blades of the reaper, throwing colourful cloth to the winds.

It was a hazard of the farmlands. Many young

couples got their start rolling around in the dubious cover of grain. Until the woman went into heat, such trysts were considered merely part of growing into adulthood.

Siri came around again and found herself on the last swath of the grain patch. There were other seedpods in the distance, but she had no idea which ones belonged to the Sorro clan.

It looked like she was done for the day unless someone came out to redirect her.

Her hands burned as the final swath was cut, but she raised and stopped the blades then turned back toward the clan house. The reaper lumbered through a cleared section and she was soon passing men working with the carts in the field.

She almost hit the brakes when she spotted Mirkan, working without a shirt, throwing the seed heads into the cart. Her mouth went dry and her thighs got wet as his muscles gleamed and bunched in the bright light. She focussed on where she was going, but as soon as she parked the reaper in the yard and turned off the engine, Siri found herself stepping onto the high deck and looking toward the men working in the field.

With her knees buckling with lust, she walked to the clan house and went in search of Tahsha.

It was time to ice her hands and see some of the sights. It was also time to get as far away from Mirkan as possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

“**T**his is Rolbin village. We do most of our trading here. You can get just about anything.” Tahsha was enjoying her role as tour guide. It got her out of canning some of the vegetables.

Their beasts were placid and paced steadily through the village streets. Siri had to smile. The last time she had spread her thighs this wide there had been a worshiper between them.

“There is a temple to Ilshara in the town we will go to tomorrow. If we are lucky, some women will be there to be chosen.”

Siri was both curious and panicked at the thought. *This is why you are here, Beloved Emissary.*

The voice of Ilshara was quiet, but since she used her pet name for Siri, she knew that her goddess was serious. Something was amiss in the temple and Ilshara wanted Siri to see it.

A few people called greetings to Tahsha but spared curious glances for her.

When they dismounted outside a small dress shop, Siri noticed that several of the local men were looking at them with more than polite attention. "Tahsha, how close are you to your first heat?"

"A few months, why?"

"Some of the men were looking at you as if you were edible." She followed into the dimmer expanse of the shop and smiled at a few of the gowns.

"Aeran! We need some assistance." Tahsha's voice carried to the back of the shop and a male came out.

The man was huge. He looked like he worked with brick not fabric. "What is it, Tahsha? Can't get Vonkan to authorize that dress you ordered?"

Tahsha turned a becoming lavender. "No. I am here because Father authorized a gown for my friend who is visiting. She needs it for the weekend party."

Aeran looked at Siri. "I apologize, miss. I was so intent on my sister that I didn't look past her looming form."

That was unfair. Siri was only a half inch shorter than her friend. "You are her brother?"

"I am the third sibling, still older but not the clan leader apparent. Therefore, I have followed my passion with the help of my mate and opened this dress shop."

Tahsha put her hand on Siri's arm. "He really is the best."

Aeran was looking her up and down, his resemblance to Mirkan apparent in his stance. "Something backless I think."

"No. Something that covers me from top to toe. I don't want to make an entrance, I want to blend in."

He looked like he wanted to object, but his gaze collided with her own and he jerked his head. "I think I have just the thing."

Siri hissed internally, *Ilshara, what did you do?*

Only gave him some understanding. He thinks you are scarred.

Fighting the urge to close her eyes and wake up in her own bed, she followed Tahsha to the fitting room while Aeran rifled through his inventory. He returned with a gown in pale gold, one in silver and a midnight blue. All were modest cuts, some had sleeves, some didn't.

"There is a changing curtain behind you. Take one and come out so we can assess it." Aeran smiled gently and held them out.

Biting her lip, she chose the silver first. It would look good on her but not as good as the other two and she wanted to stretch this moment out. Back on Nemial, all of her clothing was selected for her depending on her duties.

Making sure that neither were peeping in on

her, she unbelted her tunic and removed it, then the breast band. She slipped the gown over her head and settled it into place. With a grin, she tucked her breasts into the form-fitting cups of the gown and then she shucked out of her boots and trousers

Barefoot, she pattered into the fitting room. Aeran and Tahsha were staring. "Is it horrible on me?" Insecure, her hand went to the neckline where the flirty cleavage was doing its thing.

"You look...amazing, Siri. Why don't you wear gowns all the time?" Tahsha was stunned.

"I have a uniform I have to wear." She shrugged. It was true as far as it went.

"What about your off days?"

"I had to pull a lot of strings to get this time off. It isn't really feasible for me to own clothing I can't wear."

Aeran shoved the other gowns toward her. "Try these."

She tried on the gold and Aeran proclaimed it to be hers. "Let me try the midnight. It might help me blend into the walls so no one will try and dance with me."

The midnight fit her like a glove, did not show her cleavage and had flowing sleeves that were slashed to show a hint of skin. The skirt was also slit on the left leg to mid-thigh. This was the one.

"This one." She came out of the changing area,

twirling happily and stopped short when Mirkan was with her two companions. "Oh. Excuse me." She darted back to the divider and started to take the gown off.

Aeran's voice came to her. "If you take that gown off, Siri, I will put you over my knee. Mirkan was just inviting me to the clan dinner on the weekend. He will escort you two home."

She peeked around the corner and sighed in relief when the source of her trouble wasn't present.

"He's waiting outside. He doesn't want to upset you." Aeran's voice was wry and she noticed the smile playing around his lips as he got a box of pins.

"Up on the podium. Now hold still, I don't want to puncture you." He moved around her, pinning deftly. The bodice was designed to fit like a second skin and he made sure it did. He was so fast with the pinning that she was afraid to breathe.

When he was done, Tahsha was sitting with her eyes sparkling with excitement. "You look beautiful, Siri. No wonder Mirkan is—" A dark look from Aeran shut his sister up.

"I will have to go home, Tahsha, don't forget that." She sighed and turned to walk to the changing area.

"I will help you so you don't prick yourself." Aeran was right behind her and she fell mute. If he

was going to see the marks the Dearest Star had left on her, he would see them now.

His hands lifted the gown carefully, loosening it as he raised it up to expose her calves, knees, thighs and hips. The moment it cleared her torso he whisked it away and she was left laughing at herself. His only interest was the gown.

She slithered back into her breast band, tunic and trousers, stomping into her boots and wrapping her sash loosely around her hips. It was nice to be able to wear something she had picked out, even if it was her second change of clothing for the day. Working on a reaper was hot work. She had needed a shower before lunch and their little jaunt.

The coronet of braids was holding wonderfully well. Only a few loose tendrils had worked free.

"Mirkan needs us to return home. He's waiting."

"What's wrong, did I park the reaper on someone?" She laughed lightly.

"No. The other clan leader needs to speak with you before they will let you loose on their crops. That's what he said." Tahsha defended her intelligence with a stiff chin.

"Where is Aeran? I want to pay for my gown." She looked around, but the man was nowhere to be seen.

"The clan is picking up the tab, Siri. Don't worry

about it.”

“I have money, Tahsha.” That she actually drew a salary with her work was one of the funniest portions of her position.

“It doesn’t matter. You are saving us one man’s worth of work per day. That is way more than a gown over the course of a week.” Mirkan’s voice sent a shiver through her.

The effect that he was having on her was beyond her recognition for personal feelings. Sure, she had seen acolytes and priestesses fall in love with worshipers who eventually became their mates, but she had never felt this all-consuming warmth and energy when confronted by a male.

“It is my gift to you for the generosity you have offered with your hospitality. To accept more would be simple greed.”

“Regardless. It is time to return to the clan house to meet the other clan heads who want your services.”

Her lips twitched.

“What? Did I say something amusing?”

She shook her head. “No. No. On Nemial that would mean something else.”

Siri lead the way to the exterior of the shop and patted the beast she had been riding. They were called mofs and they suited their name. Squat, wide but sturdy and eager to please, the mofs worked tirelessly and were everywhere in the

countryside.

He looked at her with patient blue eyes the same colour as the hand that stroked him. She took the reins and swung up into the saddle. Tahsha and Mirkan were whispering frantically, so she and her beast went for a slow walk toward the clan house.

She was only a few metres away when a young man pulled his beast in next to hers. "I hear you are from off-world."

"Yes." She knew where he was going with his questions. Men his age had only one thing on their minds.

"Where would such a lovely lady as you be from?"

"Nemial." She circled her beast back toward the dress shop where her companions were mounting up.

"Now, don't ignore me, it isn't friendly." She would have been able to ignore him if he hadn't grabbed her arm.

She wrenched her hand back, made a fist and punched him in the throat. He fell off his beast, gagging and fighting for air.

Mirkan looked furious and Tahsha looked scared. "I apologize for the violence, but he laid hands on me and I did not care for it. I will accept whatever punishment is designed for such an occasion."

Her head was bowed and when Mirkan lifted her chin, she fought the wobble of uncertainty.

"There will be no punishment. He should never have grabbed you. He will be dealt with for defying laws of hospitality."

"But I am not his guest." She joined them and they started off at a slow walk.

"No, but you are the guest of my clan and he knows it. Rohn will have to answer for his insult at a later time." Mirkan clicked to his beast and they cantered forward as a unit.

Tahsha kept looking at Siri in concern while they made their way until finally she sighed and told her younger companion, "I am fine."

"I am so sorry. I never thought that someone here would try something like that."

"It is fine. I have experienced much worse in my time." She grinned and nodded to a few of the locals that they passed. "I was taught to defend myself as a child. It was a common past time for the children in my area."

"What was?"

"Hand-to-hand combat. We spent plenty of time kicking and hitting each other to pass the time and win supremacy in our clan events." She shrugged. "Ilshara wasn't a fan of it, but it did give her worshipers that were in fit condition, so she didn't complain."

Tahsha didn't say another word as they

continued the ride home.

Skimmers and an assortment of riding animals were gathered in the yard of the Sorro clan house.

A large conglomeration of men was standing in the open space and they all looked over as the trio came in.

Mirkan helped her dismount and murmured, "No matter what is said, you are of value to our clan and your work this week will be remembered by all of us."

"Understood and appreciated." She smiled up at him and a darker flush ran under his skin.

With Mirkan on one side and Tahsha on the other, they approached the clan leaders with heads high.

Siri stopped in front of Vonkan and gave him a short and formal bow. "You wished to see me, sir?"

Vonkan put an arm around her shoulders as if she was a daughter and not a guest. "If it would not inconvenience you, would you consider running the reaper for full days for a week?"

She cocked her head as if considering. "It will make for a slow start to my finally meeting Tahsha for the first time. We have barely had a moment to speak."

Vonkan nodded. "I understand it is too much."

One of the clan leaders snorted. "I told you she

would not be willing to help."

She looked him right in the eye. "No one asked me for help, they asked me for a favour. There is a vast difference. Are you asking for help?"

Two of the leaders nodded with grins. One said, "We would be happy to have you assist in our harvest, lady. From what Vonkan has told us, no one can handle a reaper with your skill and it will assist us in getting our crops in. Will you help us?"

She grinned and inclined her head. "Flattery, I do love it. Yes. Yes, I will." she looked around, "Anyone else?"

Two more raised their hands while the grumpy one crossed his arms in irritation.

"Vonkan, will you arrange a schedule for me? I will, of course, devote my mornings to Sorro until they are all reaped."

"I will work it out, thank you, Siri." Vonkan squeezed her shoulders and nodded to Tahsha. "I believe that there is a meal being prepared inside. Take our guest in and make sure that when she is here, she is enjoying herself."

"Yes, Father." Tahsha curtseyed and took Siri by the arm while Mirkan stayed to speak with the clan leaders. He was speaking quietly to Vonkan and before the ladies had made it to the house, voices were raised in anger.

All of the assembled males were rounding on the grumpy clan leader and he stuttered in

defiance.

“Oh dear. I am guessing that the unpleasant one is related to the man in the village.”

“His uncle.”

“Why am I not surprised. Well, Tahsha...you heard your clan leader. Feed me.” Laughing, the women proceeded to the kitchen where Tahsha was put to work and Siri got to put her feet up.

CHAPTER FIVE

Playing the lute in front of Clan Sorro was difficult. It wasn't because of her lack of practice. It was because her hands were so stiff from the reaper controls that she could barely move her fingers.

As the notes died, applause greeted her. Vonkan smiled, his arm around his wife while the younger women and men did the dishes.

Mirkan was watching from the doorway, his enjoyment of the music in his eyes, but a strange tension in his body.

Vonkan asked, "Do you sing as well?"

"Oh, goddess no. I would never subject anyone to that." She smiled and started to pick out another tune.

"As much fun as this has been, you have an early morning ahead of you and I would consider it a personal favour if you would get an appropriate amount of rest." Echohar smiled gently at her. Everything about her was gentle, soft

and feminine. Next to her, Siri felt like a gawky adolescent.

"I will see most of you in the morning then." She put the enamel-decorated lute down on its stand and bowed to the assembled. Having a guest seemed to be a draw, there were not only clan members but also neighbours there for dinner after the first day of harvest.

Tahsha had explained that all the farms helped each other to complete each harvest. Sorro had gotten a jump on things that morning and therefore, the clans that they would be helping would help them first.

Vonkan mentioned that she would complete the Sorro clan property before the reaper would be moved on to the next farm. Siri would only have to work half or three-quarters of a day and then she would be returned to the Sorro clan holdings.

If there were enough time left, she and Tahsha would be able to continue some of their local explorations.

She released her braids from the coronet, leaving them intact for the next day. Lying back, she was treated to an all too familiar voice in her mind.

*I wanted you to go to the temple, Beloved Emissary.
I will go by the end of the week, Dearest Star.*

The star took on a sly tone, You like the male.

Yes, Dearest Star, but what I like or do not like does

not matter. I am in your service and when I return to Nemial, if you wish, I will remain in your service.

You know that is my fondest wish, but I also feel something within you that hasn't been there before, a longing you have not expressed in my presence.

He is...attractive and has a way of looking at me that makes me feel pretty no matter what I am wearing.

His clan does not care for your more masculine qualities, Beloved Emissary.

I know, but I am here not to be the emissary, just the woman I used to be.

Dearling, you will never be the woman you used to be, but you may be the extraordinary creature I chose all those years ago.

It was a cheerful thought and the last one that went through Siri's mind as she snuggled down to sleep.

* * * *

Mirkan looked out his window and tried not to think about the off-worlder a few rooms away. Her eyes as she had played the lute were soft and burnished gold, a hard contrast to her face when she had stopped Rohn from touching her. The clothing she wore concealed a well-muscled body he was sure. No fainting flower could have hauled herself into the seat of the reaper that easily.

If he hadn't been worried about repercussions, he would have dismounted to pound the young

idiot into the ground.

His father did not approve of his interested in Siri, but he couldn't help it. He wanted her and nothing that his mind told him was having an effect on that desire.

As he watched the expansive green out the window, he noticed a flicker of light. His attention focused and the shape of a woman coalesced in light. Her clothing, if he could even call it that, was a series of thin, silky drapes that did nothing to hide her curves.

His erection didn't surprise him. The feeling of recognition did. In his deepest dreams from the previous night, Siri had looked just like this. The heavy pounding in his groin took on an unavoidable beat when the woman with the spill of tousled hair started to dance in the light of the moon.

His grip on the windowsill exchanged itself for a grip on his cock and as the woman writhed and twisted for his eyes alone, he stroked himself until his eyes lost their focus and he stifled a shout, spewing his seed in a jet. When he opened his eyes again, the woman was gone and he had a mess to clean up.

* * * *

Siri sat up, shaking. Oh, lord, Ilshara was body

walking again. This was not going to make for an easy meeting of gazes during breakfast. Apparently, Mirkan stood in windows naked in the middle of the night. Interesting habit.

And why did she pick that outfit?

Slamming back into the bedding, she returned to a fitful sleep.

Awake in the dark, she got dressed and prepared for her day. Her hair was a little fluffy, but the braids were holding. Her faded grey shirt and matching trousers made her look like an anaemic ghost, so that was perfect for the day.

The kitchen was silent, so she moved as quietly as she could and made a pot of tea. A light bit of bread and meat leftover from dinner and she sat at the counter in the dark, waiting for dawn.

Mirkan appeared so suddenly, she thought he was an apparition until he spoke. "You couldn't sleep either?"

"Um, no. Strange dreams. Being in a new place, I suppose." She shrugged. "Tea? I just made some."

He nodded and fetched a mug from the cupboard of the huge kitchen, sitting across from her. "I had the same problem. Mine was in the form of a woman dancing in the moonlight. What was yours?" He sipped the tea, staring at her with his moonlight blue eyes.

"Oh, just a figure I couldn't identify and being haunted by a goddess. The standard upsetting dreams." She closed her hands on her cup of tea and was about to lift it when he placed his hands over hers.

"Were you in the moonlight?"

"No. That wasn't me." She smiled and shook her head. Siri was going to continue when Mirkan leaned over the counter and caught her mouth with his. His hand came up to cup the back of her head, holding her for a possessive kiss that sent her senses roaring to life. She was shaking uncontrollably when he backed away from her, his lips shining wetly in the pale light.

His smile sent a shudder through her, in a good way. "So, there is a woman under the baggy clothing. I had wondered." His hand caressed her cheek and as her hypnotized gaze was broken by a sound down the hall, he withdrew his hand to casually resume his position across from her.

Vonkan looked charmingly dishevelled, his dark hair sticking out at right angles in a few places. "Siri, you are up early."

"The moment that the grain is dry, I will start. Just tell me where you want me to go and mark the fields so I can find out where I am going." She tried to keep her voice calm, but it was a little high even to her ears.

The clan leader looked at her curiously. "The

morning is warm. You can start on the eastern field if you like."

"Thank you. I had better be getting on with it." She slugged down the hot tea, grabbed the bread and cheese and bolted out the door.

In the dim light of the growing dawn, she stumbled lightly before she got into the reaper. When her hands gripped the steering wheel, she stared down in surprise. Someone had wrapped the wheel in the softest leather, lashing it tightly to the rough synthetic of the wheel. The shifters were snugged in leather as well, so her hands would have cushioning for the next trip.

The reaper was fully fuelled, so she started it up and drove it toward the rising sun, finding the eastern field with relative ease. As she started her first pass, she thought about the kiss. Despite her extensive exposure to men, few had ever kissed her, let alone elicited a response. She had wanted to climb over the table and straight onto Mirkan, tearing his clothing away to expose his hard-muscled flesh.

Shaking her head, she turned to look over her shoulder and winced when she noticed that she had failed to drop her blades. She heated up and dropped the blades, then turned in a tight about face and returned over the already cut grain until she reached her point of realization, cropping the bent stalks neatly and turning to make a second

pass, this time her mind was on her work.

She kept her mind on her work the whole morning, cutting a minimum of three swaths in front of the men. There were many more men than there had been the day before and they worked three times as fast.

The eastern field had been cut by breakfast, but she only stopped to refuel and grab a quick plate of eggs before returning and going over the western field. Tahsha was looking a little frazzled under her mother's watchful gaze, but with all the extra men on hand, feeding them was imperative. That meant that Tahsha was being exposed to many more men than she was prepared for and some of them seemed fascinated by her.

Siri kept her mind on the drive and before she knew it, Vonkan was flagging her down. She pulled the blades up and stopped the machine so he could join her. "Siri, after this field, the Sorro clan is done. Refuel and Mirkan will direct you to the Nevell holding for their harvest. They have a fuel tank on their premises, so Mirkan will bring you home at the end of the day, you will leave the reaper there."

She nodded. "Yes, Vonkan. Is there anything else?"

"No. See you at lunch." He patted her on the shoulder and as soon as he cleared the reaper, she started the blades again. The last two swaths were

finished quickly, the field tapering to a weird wedge against the tree line that challenged her steering but nothing else. She shut down the blades and pulled them out of the way, then passed the workers and parked next to the tank.

Her hands felt good enough to pump her own fuel for the reaper and when the tank was topped up, she moved it toward the road, out of the way of the wagons and men.

There was a sink set up outside to allow workers to wash up and she scrubbed her still-chafed but not damaged hands.

She washed her face as well, grimacing as she got the front of her shirt wet.

A man who had a rather fearsome presence came up behind her. "Don't worry about that, lady. The heat will soon dry it."

She smiled up at him. "Yes, it is rather warm, isn't it?" She took a few steps away and let him at the sink. He washed his hands and sluiced water over his face and chest. Like most of the workers, he was working shirtless.

"You are from one of the other clans."

"Yes, Benik of the Nevell clan, at your service. We are not as pretty as the Sorro, but we make up for it in stamina." He flexed his muscles and light gleamed off his taut blue skin. He also had an endearing grin that was only slightly shadowed by his hawk-like nose.

Mirkan came upon them smiling at each other. "Benik! Your father needs you on the field. You can flirt on your own time."

Benik flushed and bowed to Siri. "I will claim the honour of a dance at the harvest festival."

She swallowed. "I don't dance."

He winked. "I will show you."

He sauntered away, past the seething Mirkan whose entire body spoke of his displeasure.

"Mirkan, what's wrong?"

He looked as if he wanted to speak but finally turned and stalked off without saying a word.

Siri headed into the house and despite their protests, helped the women set up for the noon meal. Echohar watched her for a while, but when she showed her domestic dexterity, the clan leader's wife left her on her own.

Siri was confused. How could Mirkan be so intent on her one moment and furious at her for speaking to another man, the next?

She shelled peas with a vengeance until Echohar forcibly sat her at the table to await the men coming in for lunch. The benches filled rapidly and as the meal began, more than a few curious gazes came her way from men who had not seen her before.

Siri ate silently, taking in her sudden disappointment with Mirkan's attitude. She had only been speaking to Benik not flirting. When the

meal was done and the men got to their feet, she joined them, heading to the reaper.

Mirkan jumped into the cab and settled next to her.

"Where am I going?"

"Down the lane to the left. I will tell you where to turn."

The reaper rumbled to life. She checked her gauges and started in the direction that he gave to her.

After ten minutes, the silence had to be broken.

"Why are you angry?"

He tensed. "I am not angry. I was jealous."

"Why?"

"You laughed with him. You were smiling at him."

"So, I cannot laugh with anyone?"

"No...I...I don't know." He scrubbed his hands through his hair. "This is very confusing for me."

She chuckled and increased their speed. "You have no idea. On my world, a man who cannot stand to see his woman even speak to another man is called an idiot. Or a jackass, take your pick. You have to choose your battles and your women with care."

"You are referring to yourself as my woman?"

His grin was devilish.

"No...I...I don't know." She shook her head. Her own blush heated her skin.

"The lane on the left."

She slowed the reaper and noticed the clan holding in the distance. "Is that it?"

"Yes, that is the Nevell clan. Take to their eastern field first."

"They are expecting us, right? I don't want to start mowing down crops and letting them lie."

He chuckled. "They are right behind us if you care to check. I will be joining the gathering crews as soon as they arrive."

"Do you dry the seed heads as soon as they are cut?"

"No, they have dried on the stalk. We thresh them and the stalks become viable for making fibre for clothing. There is a processing centre in town that will do that for us or simply buy the stalks."

He gave her directions to the first field and then, as she paused, he hopped out to join the others who were arriving on their tail.

Siri fired it up and started her job.

By the end of the day, she had taken down all three of the fields that were on the Nevell property. Men were rushing everywhere when she drove the reaper to the tank and filled the harvester.

Since all of the men were preoccupied, she dug around in the equipment shed and found some oil. With a determination and an idea of keeping out of the way, she did the light maintenance on the reaper and topped up all of its fluids. Tomorrow it

would be ready to run with no trouble.

A sweaty Mirkan wrapped his arm around her waist after she had locked up the reaper. "Ready to go?"

She closed her eyes for a moment of bliss as his sweaty body pressed against hers from shoulder to hip. Her own hips shifted back against him as he kept his arms around her, "You have no idea. But we should get back to the Sorro holding."

He was grinning in triumph and when she saw the men who were watching, she felt like smiling and punching him at the same time.

Whatever their earlier episode had been, it seemed to be forgotten as he led her to a two-person hover bike. He took the controls and she had no choice but to wrap her arms around him for the ride back to Sorro lands.

The men they passed called greetings but waved her on for the day.

Tomorrow, it would all start again.

CHAPTER SIX

The week flew by. Only one altercation marred it. A man cornered Tahsha as she came to bring Siri some food for one of her lunches. He pressed himself to her and at her cry for help, Siri was the first one to reach him and the snap as she broke his wrist by pulling and twisting caused several men to wince in pain.

"I am done. No more, Vonkan. They took advantage of your hospitality and your offer for the reaper. Now, they are on their own."

The clan leader had been the second person to meet his daughter in distress. Tahsha was currently sobbing into Siri's shoulder.

"Accepted. You have done more than enough. I will have Mirkan take you both home."

Mirkan scowled at the man who was on the ground being tended by his clan members. "It is peculiar that the males seem to attack when you are in the vicinity, Siri."

"It must have something to do with your

population or my previous job." She scowled and escorted Tahsha into the light skimmer.

They didn't say anything else until Tahsha was in her mother's care and Siri was washing up outside with Mirkan.

"How did you know how to do that? What do you do on Nemial, exactly?"

"None of your business. Exactly." She took a long drink of water while he scrubbed up.

He quickly pinned her against the wall and asked in a low and husky voice, "Now, how would you get away from me?"

She was irritated and she acted on impulse. Her knee shot up and he went down. "Sorry, but you did ask."

He looked up at her and anger vied with amusement in his gaze. "Help me up."

She hauled him to his feet and they made their way into the house, his slight limp almost imperceptible.

Echohar was helping her daughter get herself under control. "Tahsha tells me you are done on the fields."

"Yes. Today was the last straw."

"Would you care to come with Tahsha and me to Ilshara's temple to give thanks?"

In her current mood, Siri would indeed. "Just let me change and rework my hair. I will be ready in twenty minutes."

When she returned to the kitchen in twenty minutes, Echohar looked surprised. "You are actually ready."

"Of course. I may not have access to groomers here, but I can and do know how to take a shower." She smiled and shook her head.

"What is a groomer?" Tahsha piped up from behind her.

Siri closed her eyes before she answered. "Oh. Just staff at the temple that help with some of the formal wear."

She had to get a grip on her emotions. She was slipping in her references. Siri sat in the backseat of the vehicle and watched the fields fall away to small houses and eventually a town. The town was neat and centred around the large temple to Ilshara.

Are you happy, Dearest Star? I am here near your temple.

I am delighted. Go and request sustenance, I want you to see what happens.

Ilshara phrased it as a challenge and as they left the vehicle and approached the temple, Siri started looking with a critical eye at those who served the Dearest Star.

"This is the temple to Ilshara. It catches her light more directly than any other temple on Allacor." Echohar was speaking with a certain amount of pride.

"You enjoy having the temple this close to you?"

"Of course. It brings us better harvests than any other temples on the planet." Tahsha's mother was looking at her like she was slightly dim.

"I see." She kept her lips still. Obviously, the older woman was enjoying the benefits of having the goddess so close.

A line of nervous young women stirred at the base of the steps to the temple.

Tahsha whispered, "Those are candidates for the acolyte positions. There have only been three selected in the last five years."

The shock that rippled through Siri wasn't feigned. The star couldn't keep a presence here without the pleasure that drove her powers.

I have been using the powers you have channelled to me on Nemial.

For how long?

Since the priests appointed this self-indulgent cow to the position of High Priestess. There she is.

Beginning to understand what Ilshara wanted, Siri kept her focus on the woman coming down in flowing and glittering robes in pale silver.

The woman in the elegant robes of the high priestess stepped out of the cool interior of the temple. She stepped down to the third step above the women and cast an assessing gaze over them.

"None of these women are suitable for service."

To Siri's shock, the woman turned and strode back to the cool interior of the temple.

Siri found her feet moving toward the disappointed women and she stopped them before they scattered. Ilshara's power glowed through her for a moment while she spoke. "Return here in two weeks and you will be welcomed into the service of the goddess. If you have faith, you will be here. If not, I wish you well."

The women stared at her in shock and she blinked rapidly to clear the glow of the star's possession before returning to her companions.

"What did you say to them?" Echohar's voice was full of challenge.

Siri sighed. "I told them that the goddess had blessed them with this harvest and to have patience and faith." Keeping her full identity was becoming harder and she guessed that Ilshara didn't really care about that.

"How would you know?"

"Ilshara is my Dearest Star. The light that wakes me in the morning at home. You cannot be that close to the stars and not learn a little about them."

Echohar grumbled but led them up the steps to the worshiper's entrance. They recorded their names in the book and when the scribe took it from her, she lit up and scurried off. The bowing and kneeling were second nature to Siri and it elevated her in the eyes of her friend's mother. They burned

incense and lit lights to the goddess as thanks for the harvest.

"One of you is from Nemial." The high priestess interrupted their prayers. Very bad manners.

Siri didn't sit upright, merely kept up the ritual thanks that had been drummed into her by the priesthood. "That is me and you are interrupting my prayers."

She ignored the gasp from her companions and kept bowing and stretching until the litany was complete. She sat up on her heels and looked up into the astonished eyes of the high priestess and the priests at her side. "Siri of Nemial. Servant of Ilshara."

"Valei of Allacor, Dearest Emissary of Ilshara."

Siri laughed and the woman scowled. "Why are you laughing?"

"Why are you wearing the garb of a priestess if you are Dearest Emissary? I have seen the clothing of the Dearest Emissary and it looks nothing like your robes. Also, where is the mark of Ilshara? Your clothing should be cut to show it."

The woman stuttered and flushed. "You are very rude."

"And you are no emissary. High priestess, yes, but you have never known the touch of the goddess."

Echohar was shaking with nerves, but Siri merely looked at the men on either side of the

priestess and nodded as she understood what she saw.

"And I suppose you have?"

"Of course. Ladies, shall we leave? Ilshara has heard all that transpired here." She led her companions out of the temple and back to the vehicle.

She leaned against it. "Whew, I knew it was going to be hard but not that hard."

"How dare you speak that way to the emissary of the goddess?" Echohar was vibrating with fury.

Ilshara stepped into Siri's body and looked directly at the hostess. "She is not my emissary, nor have I been here since she took power. Siri is here running an investigation for me and she has been doing a wonderful job. Allow her privacy to do what she must."

Echohar shook at what she saw in Siri's eyes, but as the goddess faded into the background, Siri was happy that Tahsha was on the other side of the vehicle and had not seen what happened.

"You are..."

"A servant of our Dearest Star. No more, no less." She nodded and jumped into the backseat once again.

The older woman was still stunned by her confrontation with her deity, but she took the controls and steered them back to the properties of Clan Sorro.

The cracks in her disguise were showing and nothing more than when Vonkan glared at her over leaving the reaper and Echohar told him to shut up.

The woman would never have defended her before that afternoon.

She played the lute again that evening and it was confirmed that she would not suffer for the broken wrist she had caused.

During the night, she dreamed of dancing in the starlight again and Mirkan was vibrating with energy the next morning. Ilshara was going to have a lot to answer for.

That day, her vacation truly began. The dress was delivered for the dance the following evening. With the largest push of the harvest completed, there were only a few major tasks left to do and none of them was time sensitive.

They were outside in the sunlight having a lute lesson when Siri had to blurt out her concern. "I have a problem, Tahsha."

"What is it?"

"I still don't know how to dance."

"As soon as Mirkan is back and cleaned up, I will ask him to teach you."

Her mouth went dry as she turned her head slightly to watch Mirkan working near the baler on one side of the barn. Nothing kept a man in shape like farm work and he looked like he worked every

single day.

"I don't know if that is a good idea." Her body was used to climax several times per day and she had now gone over two weeks with nothing. Her nerves were so on edge, she could barely stand the thought of Mirkan holding her close.

"Nonsense. He's a great dancer. All of the women are lining up for a chance at him." Pride lit her face.

"And the males are lining up for you. I have seen it in their eyes."

"Well, nothing is happening until I go into heat and listen to them. I will know by their voice."

Siri laughed. "Yes, you will. The stars have decreed it so. Personally, I think it was to stop the women from running when the first men came at them with rutting in their eyes."

Tahsha laughed and they kept the lesson going until her hands were cramped, but she had managed to pick out a lullaby.

At dinner, Tahsha dropped the bomb. "Mirkan, Siri needs to learn how to dance before tomorrow. Can you teach her?"

Mirkan's gaze collided and tangled with her own. "I can and I will. Right after dinner."

Vonkan seemed perturbed, but he nodded and the others grumbled about missing a concert.

Siri was more nervous than the day she stood at the base of the steps and looked up into the eyes of

Emissary Nashil.

She pressed her sweaty palms against her thighs and when Mirkan led her out into the garden for privacy, her mouth was dry and knees were weak.

“Don’t we need music for this?”

“No. The key to dancing isn’t the music, it is moving with your partner.”

He took her in his arms and held her with a few inches between them. She could feel the heat coming off his skin and when he stepped back, she stumbled into him, hard.

“Let’s try that again. I will move you backward and you move with me.” He stepped forward and she stumbled and almost fell.

“Siri, you need to relax.” He cupped the back of her skull and kissed her, sending tingles of heat through her and she felt like she was floating on a cloud. “And now, you are dancing.”

They were moving in a slow spiral through the garden, her thighs were taking cues from his and they were dancing in a soft and sultry mist of moonlight.

“Is it this easy?”

He chuckled, “Only with me. Any other male and you will be all left feet.”

She laughed. “Thanks for that. What if they kiss me like that?”

“Then I will invite them to meet my fist.” His grin turned feral.

"They might meet mine."

He laughed, exposing the column of his neck as he shared his amusement with the stars. "You are certainly not slow to act when you have the motivation."

"It is unladylike, I am aware. I just enjoyed the opportunity to stand up for myself or Tahsha, as the case happened to be. At home, I would not have been able to act on my own behalf. It's forbidden to those in service to the goddess to injure another."

They were moving lazily through the grass, their bodies in synch with each step.

"That seems rather harsh."

"We are in service to the goddess, our bodies are hers to protect or not."

"I thought you were in administration."

"I am, but all servants to the goddess under her roof must abide by the rules."

"That is unfair to the women. What if the men act up? Here, at harvest time, the males always get more aggressive."

"The women are instructed to not go out alone and the temple is open for worship round the clock. The goddess keeps things from getting too wild."

He swayed closer to her, his hand on her back pressing her tightly to him. "How do the men worship on Nemial?"

"They give the priestesses or acolytes pleasure and are given blessings of the goddess in return."

"How...precisely?" He was leaning in and his lips pressed against her jaw line, trailing down to her neck.

"Um. A priest greets the man, leads him to the priestesses and one sees what he needs and takes him for privacy. She parts her clothing and he settles between her thighs, licking and stroking her until her orgasm breaks over her. If the goddess is pleased, the man will gain knowledge of what he should do. If he is a war leader, she may give him extra strength."

"So, if you are a servant of the goddess, you can take my worship and send it to her." His grip shifted and he lifted her off her feet, heading for a private part of the garden.

She yelped in surprise when he put her down on a high bench in the gazebo. He watched her expression as he untied her sash and removed her boots. With some sharp tugs, her trousers slid free of her and were placed to one side.

His hands slid up her calves, lifting her knees until her thighs draped over his shoulders. She was sitting on a stone bench in the open air with Mirkan between her thighs, his breath warming her lips until moisture started to slip from her in desperate invitation. His fingers continued to caress her inner thighs, getting closer and closer to

her aching core until she was panting with tension.

The initial touch of his tongue made her arch into his mouth, moaning as the firm, slick touch tasted her juices and dragged up to her clit. He took up a combination of flicking and stroking that rocketed her to the edge of release as he slid two fingers into her while drawing slow, wet circles with his tongue on her flesh.

She hovered there for an eternity, too close to release to push him away or draw him closer. His teeth gently scraped her clit and she pressed her fingers over her lips to stop her scream from reaching the house.

Her body arched, her heels braced against his shoulders as wave after wave of pleasure broke over her. Siri's hand stifled her cry, but she felt Ilshara surge to the fore.

No, please, no, Dearest Star.

He deserves his boon. That was enough to draw me here for a year.

Then give it to him silently, do not speak through me. Not yet, please.

As you wish, Beloved Emissary.

The goddess receded, rolling in the energy of pleasure and afterglow.

Siri opened her eyes to meet the heady midnight stare of Mirkan.

He surged up her body and kissed her, sharing the flavour of her pleasure with her. "Do you think

she heard me?"

"I am sure of it. I am glad I stifled my cries, or she could have heard me back on Nemial." She smiled and leaned up for another kiss.

Her legs were cooling, but she twined one around his thighs as she pulled him to her.

He broke the kiss and sighed, "I had better deliver you back to the house before the clan leader comes and demands your return."

She sighed and reached for her trousers, slipping them on and wincing at the impact of cold dampness onto hot, wet flesh. She stomped into her shoes and tied her sash. "Do I look boring and respectable?"

"From the moment I saw you, boring was not what was in my mind." He smiled and gave her a kiss. "You look fine and congratulations, you have learned to dance."

She balled up a fist and punched him, his arm hard under her knuckles.

A strange lightness in her heart, she returned to the house and her bed. Feverish dreams haunted her night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dawn the next morning brought a bit of a surprise. Siri was helping a reluctant Echohar with the dishes when a noise from the front door and a command from Vonkan got them all walking out.

The entire household, including Siri, were flushed out of the house to greet some incoming guests. Siri was proud of her shapeless garb today, the baggy tunic, flowing trousers and fat boots made her look like a mountain of shapeless flesh. Her hair was tightly wound in her coronet and covered her skull, pulling tightly at her temples.

Siri got a horrible feeling when she saw the transport pulling up. "Who is that?"

Tahsha smiled. "Some dignitary from an outer planet and his entourage. You look upset. What's wrong?"

Siri felt her newfound freedoms and outspokenness die a horrible death as her clan leader, war leader and high priest emerged from

the transport accompanied by minor flunkies.

Mirkan and his father greeted the visitors. The clan leader looked at her in disapproval after the formalities of the greeting were engaged. Mirkan had an amused twist to his lips as he watched the dismay on her face.

"Siralinalia. What are you doing in such repulsive clothing?" Clan Leader Artric scowled at her.

"I was enjoying a vacation, sir." She hated the diffident tone that she took up as she looked at her toes.

"The Emissary of Ilshara does not get a *vacation*. You know this. Do you have appropriate clothing?" His voice was harsh.

The war leader was looking at her with anger.

"I do."

"Then go and dress yourself appropriately. I expect a full explanation in fifteen minutes." Artric scowled. "Go."

Cowed, she sprinted past the astonished men of Tahsha's family.

In her room, she pulled off her boots, tears running down her face. She was about to stop being her own person and it hurt.

When her disguise was peeled away, she jumped when there was a knock at the door.

"It's me. Tahsha. Can I come in?"

Siri wrapped herself in a throw from the chair

and opened the door. She was unsurprised to see one of the war leader's men outside. "Come in."

Her friend watched her dig through the luggage that she travelled with and gasped as Siri pulled out a handful of silks.

"That fabric is beautiful. Is it a scarf?" Tahsha came forward and examined the glittering, rich fabric.

"No. That is the garb of an emissary. Do you mind if I change here, or should I go in the other room?"

"Do you need help?"

"With the breast wrap if you wouldn't mind. It attaches to the skirt." She took the wide panels of silk from her friend, arranged the links of the chain and fastened them at one hip. It was decent enough if she didn't move fast or there was no stiff breeze.

The next part was trickier. It was made slightly more efficient by the braided hair, but it still took her several tries to balance the ends of the fabric, wrap it around the back of her neck and cross it over her breasts. She held the crossed fabric behind her and directed Tahsha. "There are small hooks on the wrap, slide them through the loops in the chain."

"Siri, are you aware that you have a huge tattoo down the middle of your spine?"

She chuckled. "Marked by the goddess herself

when I became an emissary. I have been in service to her for ten years."

"Why was your clan leader so upset about your clothing?"

"It is forbidden for me to cover my tattoo. I did it anyway and will now be punished for it." She shrugged and started to unravel her braids.

Another quick search into her bags brought out a circlet covered with hooks. As she freed her hair, she hooked locks into the circlet until it formed a flowing halo around her head. Siri gathered the hair flowing down her back and draped her over one shoulder.

"Wow. You are stunning." Tahsha was shocked.

"I have my moments. Just a cold cloth and some eyeliner and I will be ready." Siri fished her makeup out of the bottom of her pack and walked into the bathroom.

Staring at herself in the mirror, she acknowledged the reflection of the emissary. The goddess appeared in her eyes and gave her a slight smile, as if telling her that everything was fine.

When the goddess left her, the makeup was in place and she looked ready for a temple event. Wonderful. As if she wanted Mirkan to see her in such a vulnerable state.

Her hair framed her face and the deft eyeliner made her eyes look enormous. Pouting but knowing that the clan leader would only wait so

long, she turned and left the relative safety of the bathroom.

Tahsha gaped. "If I had known that your body looked like this, we may never have become friends. I would have been jealous."

Siri smiled. "That was the reason for the disguise. It allowed you to focus on my personality and not my face."

"Mirkan is going to flip."

That stilled Siri's amusement. Her mind flashed images of Mirkan above her, his erection moving inside her, his hands on her flesh and his mouth worshipping her. Too bad it was only a dream. She would have liked to enjoy the warmth of his touch fully in the waking world.

"It's time to face my punishment."

"They won't hurt you, will they?"

"I caused harm to three of your men. Reparations will be required." Siri nodded to the guard outside her door, he followed her as she paced through the halls barefoot. She arrived on the balcony, took a deep breath and lifted her chin as she gracefully descended the stairs.

Tahsha walked beside her, her presence a support Siri desperately needed as she heard Mirkan's father discussing her.

"She is sturdy enough, but our clan prefers women who are more...feminine than Siri."

Her blush could have heated the house as the

room's conversation ground to a halt when she entered.

The high priest's gaze warmed with approval, as did the clan leader's. The war leader's eyes glowed with something else and she hid the shudder that ran through her.

"Emissary. I see you have forgotten your jewellery. It is a good thing that I retrieved it before we left. Linnar, please adorn her appropriately."

The clan leader was punishing her. Linnar, the war leader, licked his lips and took a single chain from the pile. He lifted her left arm and draped it around her wrist, trailing his fingers down the soft underside of her arm.

He repeated the action on the right arm, then attached her belly chain. Siri caught Mirkan's gaze and she wanted to crawl into a hole.

* * * *

His father had just finished speaking to Siri's unsuitability and mannish behaviour when a vision in crystal silks appeared in the doorway. She was barefoot and walked with a slow sway that displayed a complete control of her body, a body that was displayed by fabric that promised to become transparent if you stared long enough.

This was not the mouthy firecracker that had been his sister's companion. This was the lover

that had haunted his dreams. Her breasts were high, firm and swayed as she walked. Her belly, exposed as it was, was flat with a navel that made his mouth water. The chain that held her skirt accented her hips and the flare of thigh and calf were enough for him to check the men beside him for raging hard-ons. Mirkan smiled, they were all guilty.

When her clan leader demanded that she wear her jewellery of office, he had no idea that watching the war leader place them on her would fill him with arousal and rage at the same time. This woman was his. The submission that she showed in the face of authority proved it. She was not an untamed hellion. He just hadn't known how to tame her.

When Linnar knelt before her and moved her skirt to expose one leg, Mirkan's hands made fists. Her obvious distress at being touched by the war leader was tearing at Mirkan's heart.

Her other leg was chained and then left the final adornment, a thick collar edged in gold and studded with gemstones.

The instant that the collar clicked shut, her shoulders sank and her head bowed in defeat. Her clan leader's gesture had her kneeling beside his chair in a graceful and decorous manner.

Mirkan wanted her kneeling before him, at his side and in his bed. No other had the right to hold

her or expose her publicly.

He held his frustration in an effort to see what the conversation would bring, but he was going to get authorization for a breeding contract before the day was out.

* * * *

"Clan Leader Vonkan, you indicated to me that our little Siri has caused some injuries. Would you care to outline the nature of the damage?"

Siri looked up. Vonkan's eyes were staring at her in shock. "One damaged windpipe, a twisted wrist and a set of bruised testicles. Nothing else of note."

Siri blushed.

"What were the circumstances of the injuries?"

"From what I was told, one of the men got grabby during a chance encounter and the other tried to importune my daughter after. She defended herself and my child."

"What about the third, the one she kneed in the nuts?" Artric smiled. "What were the circumstances there?"

Mirkan flushed but answered the elder's question. "I was asking her questions about her family and life on her world. She refused to answer and so struck out. It was just bad luck that one of her knees made contact."

Artric considered that. "She should have answered you fully and completely as is required by her station. Have you recovered?"

"I have. It took two days, but I am fine now."

"Then you shall have two days if your father is willing to host us for that time."

Siri's blood pressure dropped. Mirkan's face said that he didn't understand.

"She is yours to use for two days and then we will leave. The war leader is eager to press his suit for her as his contracted partner. They will be a good fit. He certainly enjoys the worshipping aspect of it." The low laugh merely confused his audience.

"I don't understand what you mean by worship." Tahsha swallowed heavily, afraid of the gazes the men were pinning her with.

Siri begged her with her eyes to avoid the question or to nullify it, but she was curious.

Artric was in the mood to be informative. "The emissary's job is to be the conduit for the goddess. Our goddess prefers her worship in physical form, so the emissary is chained to a raised platform with her thighs spread and men use their mouths and tongues to please the goddess. Linnar is a particularly ardent worshipper."

"They worship the same goddess, Artric. That is why I am here." Her soft words fell in the room.

"What? I don't understand." Artric looked

down at the top of her head and lifted her chin so she was facing him.

With his green eyes staring into hers, she felt Ilshara surge forward. "The goddess wanted me here, so here I am. The temple here is a sham and a new emissary needs to be appointed here to take matters in hand."

"How dare you speak to your clan leader in such a manner?" Linnar stepped toward her, but she kept her gaze on Artric's.

"I dare because Ilshara controls the harvests and Allacor needs more help from her. That can't be done if her priestess is self-serving and her priests incompetent." The goddess was gleaming in her gaze and Artric nodded.

When Linnar tried to protest, Artric lifted his hand. "Quiet, Linnar. Our Dearest Star is speaking."

"For honour's sake, I will carry out the two days of compensation to Mirkan, but within that time, if he does not mind, we will travel to the temple so I may speak with the high priestess about matters of concern." She turned her head and Linnar stumbled back as her unearthly gaze slammed into him.

Mirkan stepped forward. "Compensation is not necessary."

She smiled and got to her feet. "I believe it is. You have offered much support to my emissary

and I wish to make sure you know how well appreciated it has been."

As she swayed toward him, he watched her hips closely.

Linnar tried to stop her, "Brightest Star, I am sure that this man has no interest in Siralinalia."

"We will discuss it in two days if Clan Leader Vonkan will offer you hospitality." Ilshara was still driving Siri's body as she sidled up to Mirkan, offering her jewelled hand to him.

He took her hand in his own and bowed to his father.

"I believe we can find room for you while Siri pays her debt to Mirkan for the injury." He fought a smile.

Linnar scowled. "Taxos will guard the door so that she does not try and slip from custody again."

Mirkan drew her closer to him and smiled. "Don't worry. If she tries to escape, I will throw my body in the way."

Siri stifled a laugh as he led her off and her chains jingled lightly as she walked. Up the stairs and down the hall to the bachelor's quarters, she walked with him, her hips rocking gently as her bare feet pattered beside him.

"Emissary?"

"Just Siri now, she has receded." She smiled as he opened his door and waved her inside.

He closed the door behind them. "Is she always

with you?"

Siri looked around and saw the window where Ilshara had taken her form and danced for him. "You watched her out that window."

He was behind her, touching her spine. "I did. My mind couldn't reconcile what I was seeing with knowing it was you somehow."

Her nipples peaked under her thin wrap. The marks of the goddess were her largest erogenous zone since the day that she had been elevated to emissary.

"Do you have any more questions for me?" Her tone was husky and she knew it.

"I will think of some, I am sure. For now, how do you get this gown off?"

Laughing, she reached for the chains and he stopped her. "Leave the chains on."

Her skin grew hot as she worked to unknot, untie or unlatch the gown. "It's loose now."

He sat back on his bed and stared at her. "Remove it."

She bit her lower lip as she slid the top of the emissary garb free and kept her gaze lowered as she unlinked the skirt and laid it to the side. Naked, except for her chains of office, she stood in front of him.

"Kneel."

She knelt in front of him, head down.

"Look up."

He was watching her with more than lust in his gaze. A bright flicker sparked in his gaze, something inhuman flaring to life.

"I have waited a very long time, Ilshara, for you to come and put your house in order."

The Brightest Star jerked back, *Karim*?

"Karim? Why have you put my emissary in this position?" Ilshara was speaking through her.

"Because my emissary wants her. He has imagined her at his feet, relaxed and subservient instead of fighting. If it combines my emissary with yours, so much the better."

"What is a war god doing visiting a farming community?"

"Waiting for you. For a goddess of fertility, you have avoided a courtship with alarming skill." Karim stroked Siri's flesh with hands that controlled and cajoled at the same time.

"Let them have their moment first, Karim. We will play our moment out later. We have the time."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Just like that, Siri was free of control and Mirkan was slumped over. She lunged up, “Are you all right?”

“Yes, he has never come fully into me before.” Mirkan shook his head and lunged forward, kissing Siri savagely.

She winced as she tasted blood but returned the kiss until he spun her to her back, pinning her arms above her head. Soft clicks locked her hands in position.

She held herself still as he stripped to the skin, the deep pulsing blue of his cock holding her attention tightly. With feverish intensity, he parted her thighs and pressed into her with his tongue. She shivered as her body came to life as if he flipped a switch. Her clit ached and when he flicked at it with his tongue, she moaned. His shoulders were under her thighs and his hands kneaded at her breasts keeping just on the pleasurable side of pain.

Her chains clashed and shivered as her thighs jerked. Siri gasped and uttered cries of pleasure and surprise in turn. Her voice took on a pitch that climbed higher and higher and the moment she would have gone over, he ceased his attentions, moving up her body with a low snarl in his throat.

Mirkan lodged the head of his cock in her entrance and pressed into her, inch by inch.

It had been so long since a man had been inside her that he felt as if he would split her in two. A high whimper of distress was smothered as he brought his mouth down to hers while shoving in as far as he could.

“Easy, Siri. It will get better soon.” He kissed her again and remained immobile inside her.

She breathed deep and relaxed as Mirkan trailed kisses over her face and neck. As she relaxed, she felt him pulse inside her, a slow, steady throb that drove her to shift her hips. When she moved, he moved and soon, they were thrusting and retreating in tandem, working against each other in a frenzy of power and passion.

She could feel Ilshara in the back of her mind, delighting in the pleasure. A glow in the midnight of his eyes showed her Karim was still with him as well.

Harder and faster, their bodies surged in the bright light of the morning, the sunlight caressing them with heat. As the frenzy reached its peak, Siri

screamed and was unable to cover her mouth with her chained hands.

Mirkan pushed into her with a flurry of thrusts that ended on a triumphant shout, echoing against the walls of his chamber.

He slumped against her, resting his head next to hers. They fought for their breath and eventually their bodies relaxed.

Siri didn't know what to say, so she merely inhaled the scents of their joining, creating a memory she would carry with her to the end of her days as emissary.

Her tiara dug into her skull and she tried to shift it. She couldn't reach. "Mirkan?"

He raised his head, a satisfied expression on his face. "Yes, Siri?"

"Could you unlatch my hands? I need to move my headpiece."

He sighed and lifted off her. When he slid free, she noted that though his cock was shining, it was still erect.

His tone was low and vibrated through her very soul. "Up on your knees, Siri."

She fought herself up on to her knees and when he turned her, her arms crossed under her breasts and he made sure to plump the flesh up to use her own body as support. "Hold onto the headboard, pet."

Her mark was completely exposed to him and

holding the headboard dropped her forward into a kneeling supplication with her ass in the air.

"Now, that is a lovely view."

All she could see was the tumble of her hair, but the strong caress down her spine made her jump in surprise. Her mark sent her senses reeling as he trailed, stroked and swirled his fingers across it. Each type of touch was a different sensation, but all had the same effect, differing pulses of sensation through her womb, breasts and even the tips of her fingers.

She started to pant, a high keening cry that seemed endless as her body was aroused with no hope of relief.

"You sing very nicely. I nearly grabbed your hand last night, but thought you would be uncomfortable if I did."

His deep chuckle ran through her very soul and part of her froze in terror. There was only one reason to react this strongly to a male and Ilshara had made it an impossibility.

Not impossible, Beloved Emissary, merely delayed.

Siri cursed and then gave in to the pleasure that his voice gave her. Each nerve sang and her body ached for him. "Mirkan, please."

His voice in her ear was nearly her undoing. "Please what, Siri?"

"Please come into me, be inside me now."

He inhaled deeply and a shudder went through

his limbs. He aligned with her channel and went in easily.

She felt completely surrounded by him. He was over her, his arms around her, hands next to hers on the headboard as his hips pumped his cock into her, over and over. The angle stroked new nerve endings inside her and she found her body climbing higher than she imagined it could. No worshiper at the temple had ever driven her to these heights.

When he gripped her breast and flicked her nipple with his thumbnail, it was the final sensation her body could not withstand. She bucked back into his arms and her voice broke with wordless cries.

Set free by her release, his hips slammed against her buttocks, working at her until his cock swelled inside her. He held her close as he shouted and jerked within her, the internal warmth gave her both a thrill and a touch of unease.

If she was right and she was in heat, he may be able to impregnate her. His family was respectful enough when she was the emissary, but Vonkan was not her biggest fan.

She sighed and drooped against the headboard, her body bearing most of Mirkan's weight. She heard his inhalation and knew what he would say.

"You are in heat."

"Apparently. Ilshara said she could delay it but

apparently she let it resume."

He nuzzled her spine while unsnapping the links to the chain on her wrists. "Good. It might drive the men mad at the party this evening, but it will be worth it to have you in my arms on the dance floor."

"You can't mean that we are still going to the harvest party?" Released from the chains, she slid onto the bedding, weak as an infant.

"Of course I can. The Sorro clan deserves it and I will be the next clan leader when my father steps aside. I must be there and you will not be alone with that Linnar anytime soon." He curled up behind her and caressed her slowly.

"He is an ardent worshiper."

"He wouldn't worship nearly so often if you were not the emissary."

She chuckled. "I don't know why, there are many other women who are much more suitable for him at the temple. His fixation is confusing."

"You are a competent and capable woman."

"Yes. Do you think that Aeran will be upset that I cannot wear his gown to the festivities?"

"Why not?"

"It's against protocol for me to hide the mark on my spine. The gown was picked because it did. I will have to go in my emissary garb."

"I do not have an objection to it, but would you prefer the other gown?"

"I would. It is lovely." She smiled and looked down. "The same colour as your eyes."

His sigh and the enormous hug he gave her said it all.

They lay together for quite some time before he rolled her to her back and caressed her between her thighs. Without a word, he left the bed, went into his en suite bath and returned with two washcloths, one warm and one cold. He cleaned her with the warm one and soothed her swollen flesh with the cool one.

When he was done, he parted her thighs and summoned the goddess again.

She sighed and threaded her fingers through his hair, drawing him up for her kiss when she had keened the walls down.

A sharp knock on the door turned both of their heads. Echohar's voice came to them through the wood. "Dinner in half an hour. You are expected."

"Expected, not requested. Interesting."

Mirkan laughed, "It is fascinating how you go from being meek and submissive to being calculating and in command."

She shrugged. "Ilshara said it was one of my best traits. I could be the emissary and the administrator. Who could accept worship and attend festivals."

"You run a temple. How many?"

"One hundred twenty priestesses, eighty

priests, twelve administrators and twenty acolytes."

He looked impressed.

"Not that different from running a farm. Worshipers are the clients, the pleasure is the crops and the priestesses the seedlings. The acolytes are fertile earth." She smiled. "I actually was raised in a farming clan."

"I could tell by the way you danced with the reaper. Did the wraps work?"

She laughed. "I thought it might have been you. Yes, the wraps worked. And I think we should get a shower before I show you how soft my hands currently are."

Her hand trailed down the muscles of his chest and circled lightly around his rapidly reviving erection.

"Yeah. Shower. I want to hear you scream against the tile."

He grabbed her and flipped her over his shoulder, making her squeak in shock when he slapped her ass.

The shower was an exercise in control. She placed her hands on the tile while he stroked into her again, his hands ran feverishly over her body, over her breasts, across her spine and up and down her thighs as she braced them both for the movement of his hips.

The short, hard jerks of his flesh into hers rasped

already-swollen tissues and she bucked against him when he pressed her clit with his hand, circling rapidly until her scream echoed in the shower.

She slumped, limp and spent and he sluiced them both off, drying her first, then himself. He hadn't come, but he didn't seem to be in the same sort of frenzy he had been earlier.

He tucked the towel around his waist and carried her back into the bedroom.

Sleepily, she whispered, "You don't have to carry me."

"But I want to. You feel very nice in my arms." He put her down next to the folded silks and asked her. "How does this go on?"

"I can do it."

"No, I want to know so I can also take it off again."

Laughing, she showed him how to wrap the top, link it to the chain and attach the skirt to the same. When the second knock came at the door, she was dressed and he was in boots and trousers. His shirt went on and was tucked in by the time he reached the door.

Linnar's guard was waiting and bowed as she approached. "Emissary."

She inclined her head and took Mirkan's arm when he came up next to her. Together, they made their entrance and swept into the foyer right into

the face of High Priestess Valei.

"High Priestess, so nice to see you again."

The woman went from arrogant to pale in an instant.

To rub in her point, Siri dropped Mirkan's hand and turned slowly so that the other woman could see the mark of Ilshara down her spine.

When she turned and stepped toward the high priestess, the priests stepped back. "You have not greeted me properly to your planet."

Valei dropped to her knees and kissed the hem of Siri's skirt.

She tutted in disapproval and jerked her skirt back. "The priests taught you nothing. No manners, no decorum and no generosity of spirit. No wonder Ilshara has not been here in five years." Scowling she added, "You are also far too young to be in your position."

Valei's eyes flashed with anger at the comment about her age. "I appear to be older than you."

"That is appearance. The Dearest Emissary of Ilshara is granted privileges. One of them includes a cessation of aging."

The clan leaders and members of the Sorro clan were standing nearby and watching. Vonkan's eyebrows rose. "How old are you?"

Echohar slammed him in the stomach and he doubled over. "Never ask a woman her age."

The hostess straightened and nodded to the

high priestess. "Would you join us for lunch?"

"I..."

Siri put her foot down and nodded to Echohar. "The priestess and her entourage would be happy to accept such a generous offer."

Valei looked uncomfortable. The priests even more so.

"When you accept hospitality, you create a passive charge which Ilshara can use to survive." The lecturing tone was soft, but Valei jerked in surprise.

"The goddess needs us? For what? I thought we were merely figureheads." The whisper carried into the dining room where everyone was assembled.

Mirkan helped Siri to her seat. She folded the gown under her with the ease of long practice.

Tahsha was staring. "I still can't believe that we became friends."

"Neither can I. We have known each other for years. When can you remember me looking younger?" Siri winked.

Tahsha frowned. "I can't. You always look the same except for your hair."

As the meal began, a few of the men were elbowed by their dining partners for staring at the emissary of their goddess. "Stop staring and eat, Mocorik, you will need the energy to tell those tall tales you are so fond of."

As the room at large laughed, several people seemed relieved that Siri was under all that glamour and glitter.

Conversation lightened and even Valei joined in a few of the chats.

Siri turned to Echohar. "Is there a way to get a message and a dress to Aeran for alterations for this evening?"

"Of course, Emissary."

"Echohar, you despised me for your son as Siri and now as the emissary I am bound to the temple at Nemial. What has changed?"

Echohar blushed a becoming lavender. "I learned why you were doing what you were doing. It did make a difference."

"I can accept that. The dress is the midnight gown that your son altered for me. I need it backless to show the marking. It's that or go to the dance in this and trust me, you do not want me twirling around in this."

The matriarch was having a hard time keeping a straight face and inside, something in Siri loosened. She could balance being Beloved Emissary and Siri if she worked at it.

She winked at Mirkan and he gave her a look that curled her toes. "Oh, you definitely want me wearing more clothing than this."

CHAPTER NINE

The harvest celebration was under way with musicians from other clans, guests and a feast that was being served by other clans. It seemed that Sorro could have the first celebration, because they had completed the majority of their harvest.

Food was consumed, toasts were made and Siri was acknowledged as a pivotal point in the harvest. She stood, nodded and sat back in Mirkan's lap where she was happily enjoying the festivities.

Harvests were considered too lowbrow for an emissary back on Nemial and she had missed them after she had grown up with the annual event.

"This is wonderful." She wriggled against his lap, confident that his erection had at least an hour until it recovered from her apology for kneeling him in the groin. She had knelt, suckled and licked with as much devotion as he had and Karim had gleamed in his eyes more than once as she took him to the edge of ecstasy and back again.

Her torture had been an exercise in will, hers and his. He had lost, flipping her to her back and sliding into her moist sheath. And she had won in every way.

Now, she was tender from their repeated couplings, proof that the goddess was not interfering.

"I am enjoying it as well." His arm wrapped around her hips and pressed her against him.

She laughed and wriggled in place. "Linnar is even enjoying himself. That woman is all over him. Oh dear, it's the high priestess. Well, she will enjoy herself, he is very determined."

Mirkan scowled and brought her head to his for a hard kiss. "Hush on the subject of other men."

"It is my job, you know."

He sighed. "I know, but for tonight, pretend it isn't."

Strains of music started up and soon a drumbeat joined them. Couples rushed to the dance floor.

The women of the clan were wearing gowns that flattered and were in an array of amazing colours. The clan leader's family wore long gowns and the rest of the clan varied in their dress.

"Not this dance, Siri. The first slow one." He kissed her again and smiled at her frown. "You don't have to worry. No one will criticize you for it. You can even step on my toes. I am sure it will only cost you another day in my bed for the

injury.”

She slapped his arm and laughed. It was a day for laughter now that the fear of discovery was gone.

When the cadence of the music changed, he stood and simply carried her to the dance floor amid friendly laughter. He plunked her on her feet and wrapped his arms around her, moving her smoothly around the dance floor.

She was amazed at her ability to simply hold on and move as he moved, that the dance was over before she realized it had begun.

Mirkan looked at the musicians and at a signal, they started another slow ballad. This time, she was aware of his body against hers as they slid around the floor in a soft pattern. When the music ended, he bent her back and then raised her for a kiss.

A small round of applause broke out and they returned to their seat.

Benik stopped by their table and asked her to dance, much to Mirkan’s astonishment. “She is with me, why would you want to dance with her?”

“How many chances will I get to dance with the Emissary of Ilshara?”

“Good point. Feel free, Siri.” Mirkan relaxed his grip and she hopped free.

“Benik, I have never successfully danced with anyone other than Mirkan.”

"I understand. We will take it slow."

The music was anything but slow. She enjoyed the whirl and twirl of the steps and when it was over, she pressed a kiss to his cheek and stepped back to her spot on Mirkan's lap.

As the night spun on, she danced with several men, all of whom kept a respectful distance. Mirkan even twirled a lady or two around the dance floor with her permission.

The fun of the evening finally had her yawning, so Mirkan scooped her up and flipped her over his shoulder to leave the event.

They were too exhausted to do more than fall together in a tangled heap in his bed. During the night, she crept over him like ivy and clung with all her strength. If she only had one day, she was going to spend every moment with him.

It wasn't every day she fell in love.

* * * *

The books for the temple were in shambles. Only one of the priests knew what he was doing and he had been kept under upper authority for years.

Beloved, would you like to stay here and bring this temple back to life?

No.

Why? You have enjoyed your time here.

I could not be that close to him and not be with him,

Dearest Star.

Ah, what if I suspended your duties to accept worship? Would you stay with your male then?

If I could be with him? Of course. That is...if he wants me.

Oh, he wants you with the same fire that Karim wants me. It would be a boon to me to have an emissary I am familiar with to work on this world.

How do we get them to start a reorganization?

Simple. We take their high priestess to Nemial for remedial training. She has a good heart, but the priests have pandered to her ego.

An exchange program. Is this what you had planned all along?

More or less. You were not happy, Beloved. This will make you happy.

The subject of their discussion was in conversation with the auditing priest.

She sighed to get their attention.

"Siri, what is it?"

"There is just so much work to do here. Ilshara has offered to suspend some of my duties indefinitely so that I can get underway with increasing her worship."

Mirkan's eyes started to glow. He wasn't alone in there and for the first time, she sensed how unsettling it was to be the focus of that un-Hashka gaze. "What duties?"

"Accepting worship from petitioners. She will allow me to stay here to get her house in order and

train a new generation of priestesses who will go and retrain the houses in the outer reaches of Allacor."

Do I have to stay at the temple?

I don't see why as long as you are accessible.

"I don't even have to stay at the temple, though some kind of compromise as to my location may have to be reached."

"You can stay with me? Will you?" He was in front of her in a rush. He gripped her elbows and lifted her to her feet.

"I can and I will. Do you need to get permission from Vonkan?" She stood on her toes and asked her question against his lips.

"No, he gave in when your rank was exposed."

"Valei will be returning with the others to Nemial for training in being a priestess. The priests here will be fired for the most part. Returned to their clans for dereliction of duties."

"You can operate with so few priests?"

"With this many priestesses? Easy. The building is in good shape, the food supplies and local tithes are in good condition, the big problem lay in the higher priests using the dowry money to line their pockets." She gave him a quick kiss.

"Dowry money?"

"Each woman who enters the service of Ilshara is supposed to have a dowry provided to her clan. When she leaves service, if she does, she is given

another dowry to compensate for her public service. They have not been doing that."

He sat in her chair and pulled her into his lap. "I have to ask, what makes a woman a good candidate?"

Ilshara took her over, "I seek women who are generous of spirit, open hearted and, most of all, who have the potential to enjoy pleasure. If they cannot give themselves up to it, it does not make for a good priestess. I am able to share this energy with others because I can channel it. Only two other goddesses have this ability to focus, though a few of the mated stars do it as a side effect of their coupling avatars."

Mirkan's occupant glowed from within, "I thought as much, so if war and fertility tangle, what will happen?"

Ilshara smiled through her emissary. "I can't wait to find out."

The priestesses of Allacor were friendly. Some predated Valei and had the generous nature that was needed to rebuild the temple. They accepted her readily and with a certain amount of awe.

Aeran gladly took on the job of properly clothing not only her, but also the priestesses. Their robes were sorely neglected.

One week after her clan leader, war leader, priest and the ex-high priestess were gone, she

held the first selection of acolytes.

Based on the desperate need, she decided to select ten women every quarter. Too many acolytes at one time would bankrupt a temple. They required instruction, tutoring, elocution and movement classes. Sexual tutoring would come later in their instruction. It was the last step and offered to women before they became full priestesses. Until that moment, a woman could easily leave the temple of her own accord.

Ilshara had agreed to do the selection and that meant holding it at night so that the glowing eyes were more visible. With the crowd gathered below, Siri took a breath and prepared to have the star take over.

Mirkan kissed her quickly before patting her on the butt and sending her out to do her job. He had purchased a piece of unfarmed land between the Sorro clan and the town. It made for a ten-minute commute for her, a half hour for him.

The variety of clans was evident in the shades of skin that glowed in the light. Every shade of blue was displayed, each with a differing shade of hair.

"Welcome, ladies. This is the first quarterly selection of acolytes for the temple and if you are not selected this round, please come back for the next, next quarter." Siri let Ilshara take over and the star floated down the steps and into the crowd of gathered girls.

She examined faces and touched minds. A few girls jumped at the touch but looked at her with awe as she passed. When she had seen all the girls, she went to her chosen and touched them on the shoulder with a murmured instruction to climb the steps.

They stopped halfway up and turned to wave at their families.

When the last one had been touched and made her way up with the others, a row of ten women stood and turned to wave at her family, Siri was put back in control. "Those of you who have not been chosen were told why. The ones who have been asked to return next time have also been informed. The cycle of fertility of this land depends on this temple and too long it has been neglected."

"Families who have sent a daughter into service tonight, you will receive your dowry when you next return to the temple, after your child has been recorded into the books."

Several of the disappointed women looked down to their bellies and Siri had to sigh. Getting pregnant and running to the temple was not a solution.

"Thank you for coming and here is to a wonderful growing season spurred on by Ilshara's generosity."

Applause followed the girls into the temple and priestesses waited there with acolyte clothing and

storage bags for the new recruits. The girls were checked in, names and clans of origin duly written down and they were taken to their rooms.

Their training would start in the morning.

Siri hugged the girls as they went to their rooms for the first time. One by one, she embraced them as she would her own daughter. Damn, she felt old.

Arms wrapped around her. Mirkan murmured into her ear. "How old are you anyway?"

"Still four years younger than you, so don't get any ideas. My chambers tonight?" She chuckled and let him swing her into his arms.

He clipped her wrist chains to the chains in the posts that he had installed. She gasped and shivered as he stripped her with slow deliberation. Karim took him over and Ilshara's gasps took the place of Siri's as the stars used their bodies to dance.

The combination of their energies flowed out and over the landscape as he thrust into her body and mind. When she screamed her satisfaction, wrapping her legs around his waist, he shouted his own release and poured into her.

When the god and goddess finished their reunion, Mirkan unclipped Siri and curled around her. Dawn was hours away and they were still exhausted.

"Do you think you are?"

"It is possible. I have asked her and she won't say a word." She curled her hand over his low on her belly. "I guess time will have to tell."

"Time will have to if the stars won't. But how do we know if it is our child or that of the stars?"

Siri chuckled and snuggled into his embrace. "If I give birth to it, it is ours. I don't care if its whole body glows, it will be mine and yours and no one can speak against it. Where is Karim anyway?"

"You know the sun that warms you in the morning? That's him."

She started to laugh. "We never had a chance."

"No, and that is the way I like it. No chance, no hope and no way you are getting away from me. Everything I could ever have wished for." He pressed soft kisses along her neckline and he fell asleep.

Siri looked out at the starscape that was visible through the skylight. Ilshara gleamed and twinkled. "Everything I could have wished for and never thought to ask for. Thank you, Dearest Star."

The purring satisfaction was still in the star's tone. *You are welcome, Beloved Emissary. Very welcome indeed.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading *Emissary to the Stars*. It seemed to me that if a star were sentient, it would have the mentality of the Greek gods, coming down to play with mortals.

As for the means of worship, a woman has the most power at the moment of release, the tension flows out and relaxation flows in. Someone has to be able to harness that kind of power.

Join the Hashka in the next instalment, *Wrath of the Stars* (continuation to *Sacrifice to the Stars*) in which a twisted holy book gets straightened out and a psychic in heat has to depend on a stranger to save her from certain death.

Thanks for reading,

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there. She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis. In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush. Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.