

Viola Grace

The Hashka Chronicles 4



CAPTIVE OF
THE STARS

Nasha Fano has lived her adult life as the host of Ithena, red star of the northern sky. Refusing to believe that her deceased father sold her to Lord Kalowell, she fights for her freedom and the survival of her people. Caught on the wrong side of the wall between her people and the invaders, Nasha is made a captive by the Lord who wanted the avatar of Ithena, but he has no idea that she is the very woman he seeks. Learning about him, his people, and the course of events that brought them together is humbling, but the star inside her will not come out to confront the other avatar or the star he holds. Frustrated, Nasha gives in to the last thing she wanted and embraces the power of his touch in hopes it will rouse the star within.

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Captive of the Stars
Hashka Chronicles Four

By

Viola Grace

Dedication

To the readers who supported me and let me get to story 100. Thank you for your kindness and support over the last few years and I hope we have many more together.

Chapter One

Nasha trembled with a sick eagerness. Either she would live free or die brutally. The moment was rapidly approaching when it would be decided. She clutched her long and short blade, waiting for the attack on her family's holdings.

“Hold the line. No one will think less of you for leaving now, but if you break the line, I can and will gut you myself. If we are defeated, I will do what I was born to do.”

The house guards looked at each other and then back at her. They all nodded their solidarity. They would stay.

She was the last member of her family, but she stood by the marking on her foot. It was the mark of the Fano house and she would defend it with pride. Her other foot was marked with the icon of Ithena and the service to the goddess of honour and virtue was the primary focus of her life.

Nasha watched the line of men approaching, some on foot and some with war beasts. The warriors of Kalowell

were forging inexorably forward.

Her father had been unable to tell her why the men had come from Kalowell to ravage their lands, but they were here now and her father had passed away before it boiled over into war.

She mentally applauded the men who stayed with her. They all had families and friends that they could be hiding with, but they chose to stay and hold the gateway to the villages beyond the Fano gap. It may be that no one would escape the Kalowell, Nasha Fano had to try and buy them that opportunity. It was her duty. It was her destiny.

The fight was short, bloody and when it was over, Nasha could only do what she was born for. She sealed the Fano gap with her mind. She crawled through the bodies, her short blade beside her, tunic shredded and bare feet caked with blood and muck. Her hand struck the stone, nails torn and bloody, skin abraded. Blood coursed down her forehead and coated her vision as she pulled the energy out of her body and poured it into the stones.

She vaguely heard a shout as the grinding of rock on rock became her whole world. *Please, Ithena, please, just let them be safe.*

They will live, Nasha. As will you. Now, you have done your duty, go and rest. Do not fear what will come, it is your destiny.

As her mind blanked, she smiled. It was her destiny and now she could rest.

When a hard arm gripped her around the waist, she shouted and struck out. Her blind thrashing caught flesh and she heard cursing. She saw a large blurred object before her head exploded in pain. Apparently, it was time to rest.

* * * *

Damn, he had struck her too hard. The woman in his arms was barely breathing. Blood covered her from head to toe. Thorn Kalowell scowled down at the slight figure and pity warred with fury. He was supposed to have claimed his mate on this land and instead, he found betrayal and a dead keep that was to have housed his betrothed.

“I have a live one. Send for the healer!” He carried her over the dead and dying. Her clothing was nothing but rags. He could only guess that she had been one of the peasants of the Fano.

A healer came running and his eyes widened at the woman in Thorn's arms. "This way, my lord."

A tent was quickly erected a safe distance from the final battlefield. None of the Fano warriors had survived. They had been men too young to be in guardsmen's uniforms. Their defence of their people was charming, but it was a futile effort.

The goddess always chose a woman of Fano for her avatar and he would not rest until he found his chosen mate. Thorn's star had moved him to this moment, Eshkar wanted to have what Ithena promised him, a child of the stars.

Centuries ago, they agreed that when they both had the perfect avatars, they would join them to breed a Hashka with its own power beyond the stars. A power to lead its people and protect them from the marauding population who were not worshipers.

Eshkar was completely fixated on this being the right time and the right place. Lord Fano had dangled his daughter in front of Thorn for a price. Thorn had paid the bride price gladly, but when he came to claim the woman, Lord Fano had passed on. No one knew the woman that he was speaking of and he had fought long and hard to get as far as he had.

This bloody battle was not supposed to have happened. He was supposed to be spending the first week with his bride. Thorn cursed and laid the woman on the small cot. “Do what you can for her.”

“Yes, sir. Do you know why she is unconscious?”

He grunted and scrubbed his hand over his face, spreading her blood on his skin. “I struck her when she attacked me. She crumpled in my arms.”

The healer muttered, “That would do it.”

“Is there any major damage?”

“I can’t tell. She is covered in blood, my lord.”

“Then wash it off.”

The healer called a page over and sent for water. “Her hands are abraded, my lord. There is also a gash within her hairline.”

Lord Thorn scowled and strode to the tent opening. He watched his men trying to find survivors, but there was a curious lack of civilian casualties on the field. “Where are the villagers? The people of the keep? The servants?”

General Alsco came up next to him. “What do you mean?”

“The first time we came to the keep, there was a village of hundreds, over fifty servants in the keep.

Where are they?”

Also looked confused. His dark blue brow furrowed.
“We didn’t see any large groups of that kind.”

“I know. Where are they?”

A scout came running up. He knelt at Thorn’s feet.
“My lord. The Fano gap is gone.”

“What?”

“The gap. The division between the public lands and private. The tiny pass into the Marshkar valley. It’s gone.”

A tingle of hope ran through Thorn. “Show me.”

The scout swallowed and nodded.

They moved across the field of death and the wall of rock greeted them at the end of their destination.

Eshkar surfaced. *Ithena was here recently. She touched this stone and closed the gap.*

Are you sure?

Do you think I do not know the feel of my destined mate? It is Ithena. Her avatar lives, you only have to find her.

It is not as easy as you think. She has hidden this long, do you think she will run to my arms after I slaughtered her people?

She made the choice to hide and her people sacrificed

themselves to keep her safe. It is touching, but she needs to understand that you have the contract signed and sealed.

I seriously doubt that it will make it easier for her. She is a lady after all.

And as a lady, she will do what is best for her people. Question the peasant woman that you found. She will know something. At least you can get a description of your mate.

Thorn sighed as Eshkar receded. It was always uncomfortable to have the star speaking directly in his mind. He supposed he had never given into the star completely. He wondered if Ithena's host was doing the same. It would certainly explain why Eshkar could not locate the presence of the other star.

Grimly optimistic, he made his way back to the command tent. The woman with the healer might be his best chance at finding the avatar. He was not going to let her out of his sight.

Chapter Two

Nasha smelled the healing herbs before she opened her eyes. A healer was at her side the moment that she shifted on the hard bed. “Where am I?”

“You are in a tent on the edge of the Fano lands. We are headed back to the Kalowell holdings.” The healer adjusted the bandages on her hands and touched her forehead. He had the paler skin of the northlands.

She held up her gauze-wrapped hands. “What is wrong with my hands?”

“You gouged them with something during the battle. If your jaw is sore, you were knocked out while trying to attack one of our people.”

She touched her face with her wrapped hand and felt the soreness he mentioned.

“Let me help you sit up.” The healer put an arm around her and sat her up without waiting for her agreement.

“Thank you. Why am I here?”

“Our lord did not want you to die on the field. He carried you to this tent and then moved you to a wagon when we started our ride.”

Nasha blinked. “Your lord saved me?”

“Yes. Lord Kalowell. One of the mightiest warriors on the continent. He came to Fano to claim his bride and found that the deceased lord had not told her of the arrangement. He was met with a sword instead of open arms. It was not an honourable situation.”

Nasha grimaced. “He came and demanded the lady of the manner attend him. It was offensive.”

“He has the agreement signed by Lord Fano before his death. She had no right to refuse him.”

Nasha sighed. There was no arguing with their outlook. They believed he was in the right and that was that. In her lands, the moment that a man died, all uncompleted agreements died with him.

“Why am I being hauled along? Why didn’t you just leave me in the village?”

A huge man brushed the door to the tent aside, the healer stiffened. The newcomer removed his helmet and looked her over. His voice boomed over her and she blinked at the effect that it had on her system.

No, no, no, no, no, no. Not now. She cursed as he continued to speak.

“He is taking you along because I want you with us. When you have recovered, I have some questions to ask you about your lady. What is your name?”

“Haella.” She swallowed and begged Ithena to push the burgeoning heat away. There was no answer from the consciousness of the star.

“Well, Haella. Once you are well, I will expect you to earn your keep. You will have a position in my keep and a safe place to sleep. No one will molest you while you are within my care.”

She swallowed again, “You are Lord Kalowell?”

He nodded. “I am. I regret the loss of life, but Eshkar will not be denied. I will find Ithena’s avatar and she will fulfill her promise to my star, but it will go better if you assist me in finding your lady.”

A casual glance at her feet showed that they were covered by the blanket. “I have no information to give you.”

He nodded. “I will be ready when you are. Please get into the wagon. We are preparing to continue our journey.”

She pressed her lips together and looked at her

damaged hands. He must have taken it as a bow of submission because he left without another word.

With the healer's help, she wrapped the blanket around herself and walked stiffly to the wagon. A pallet was ready for her. "May I sit up? Wagons are rarely comfortable to ride in flat out."

The healer nodded. "Just don't grip anything with your hands. Your skin is healing well, but a few more days are needed before you can use them properly."

Nasha sat carefully and watched the tent she had just been in get folded and packed away with astonishing efficiency. Within ten minutes of her being told to get on the wagon, they were underway and the knoclars were walking with all six feet landing with light thuds in turn.

The war beasts were massive and Nasha felt a sick sadness that she had sent her men to face this well-prepared force. There were over a hundred warriors in this pack and each looked battle hardened beyond anything that the Fano peacekeepers had faced. They hadn't had a chance.

As the rocking of the wagon got to her, Nasha became aware that a call of nature was in order.

"I need to stop," she whispered to the healer.

"We just got started. We haven't even been on the

road for an hour.”

“I didn’t have a chance to attend to my functions. Please. I have been shamed enough by the nudity.” She gestured to the blanket that was all she wore.

The healer blushed a deep purple, not an attractive colour under his pale blue skin. He spoke to the wagon driver who turned to look at Nasha.

She tried to look uncomfortable and embarrassed. It must have worked, because he pulled to the side to let the other wagons pass and she was assisted to the ground.

“Do you need help?”

“I think I can manage.”

“You have five minutes.”

She nodded and made a rushed exit to the shrubs. When she was hidden from sight, she dropped the blanket and attended to the actual need before making a run for it. She unwrapped the bandages and dropped them into a pile while she made a beeline for the caverns that she knew like the back of her hand.

She had never sprinted naked through the forest before, but it was strangely freeing. Her sky blue skin was a fairly good camouflage, but the dark blonde swath of hair was a giveaway. Nasha ran as fast as she could to reach safety, her ears listening for any sign of pursuit.

* * * *

Thorn rode back to the wagon and asked the healer. "Where is Haella?"

"She had to attend a call of nature. I was just about to go and see if she needed assistance."

A deep suspicion filled Thorn. "How long ago?"

"Just over five minutes, my lord." The healer cringed.

"Stay here, I will be right back." He circled the border of the woods and when he found an opening, he urged his mount into a run. Eshkar surfaced and pinpointed the Hashka life sign ahead of him. She was running and she was his best chance to find Ithena's avatar. He was going to keep her in custody whether she willed it or not.

* * * *

The thud of a war beast behind her spurred her to increase her speed. She was less than a hundred meters from the entrance to the caverns. Once inside, he would never find her.

All she had to do was to keep running until she reached safety. It was almost within her grasp. Only a few

more steps and she would be in comforting darkness.

The beat of the beast's feet picked up tempo and an arm caught her from behind. The trees and the uncaring sunlight caught her scream.

Trapped against a male torso, she faced the indignity of being naked on the front of a war beast with arms around her ribs and belly.

“You shouldn't have run, Haella. Now you will have to be watched and that isn't something I had planned for.”

Lord Kalowell's voice coursed over her nerves and settled in her belly. Life had gone from purgatory to hell.

Chapter Three

Humiliated was the mildest term for what Nasha felt. Enraged was more accurate. Lord Kalowell kept her on his lap during the entire trip back to his keep, only letting her leave for breaks and when she attended to the needs of nature but while within earshot.

Her heat had simmered to an absent hum in her bloodstream, easy enough for her to ignore. Ithena was not answering her calls for help and that alone made her suspicious. The star was hiding from something and Nasha was fairly sure that the something it was hiding from had a firm grip on her waist.

For the first time in her life, she mentally thanked her mother for setting a trend for long hair. Lord Kalowell was so furious with her that he had forbidden her clothing to keep her urge to stray minimized and all she was wearing was her own long locks. They were her only covering and even with the matted blood and dirt from

the battle, it was better than letting the general leer at her every time he rode by.

He still leered, but there was less to see.

It was almost a relief to see the keep looming out of the mist.

“That is my home. I would have offered you freedom, but I cannot trust you not to run.” He sighed into her hair.

“I cannot promise not to seek my freedom.”

“I understand that and so you will be restrained in the most humane way I can think of.”

With that threat hanging over her, he kicked his beast into a run. The scouts had already passed news of the battle and the loss of the bride, so when they made it into the courtyard, there was none of the standard wedding decoration to be found.

He sighed and handed her to his page who was assisting him with her dismounting. He removed himself from his beast, gave it an affectionate pat and turned to haul her into his arms. “Come along, Haella. First a bath, then clothing and then your restraints.”

He was true to his word. Women who were obviously part of the household scrubbed her until she was clean. They didn’t speak to her, but they were careful of her wounds.

Part of her giggled as they scrubbed her feet but didn't check for marks. No one that she knew of had clan markers on the bottom of their foot. Ithena had placed her mark there to hide it and it was a very successful place. Her father had her family mark placed on the opposite foot for balance when she came of age. She hadn't been able to walk for a week.

The household tunic that they provided her with was a serviceable weave. It wrapped around her and fastened at the hip and ribs. The rest remained open, allowing the skirt to part as she knelt or bent. "It's a good design."

One of the women blinked in surprise that she had spoken. "Of course. Lord Kalowell would never have workers in anything that wasn't practical."

A brush was quickly dragged through her hair and it was braided down her back and tied for her. "There. All done."

The women left the room and Nasha was alone, but not for long. Lord Kalowell came in with a smith and a length of chain.

He looked surprised at her appearance, but moved his massive frame toward her with determination. He really was quite an impressive specimen. The bronze tone to his blue skin gave him a look of wild health and vigour.

Nasha breathed deep and squelched the hormonal surge at his appearance.

“This is our smith, Norvil. He is going to create relatively light bonds for you. Right now.”

“Hello, Norvil.”

The older man blushed to the roots of his hair. “Hello, miss. Please put your right foot on this stool so I can verify the cuff size.”

She carefully placed her foot as he requested and slid the dress up to mid-calf.

“Thank you. You have a very dainty ankle.”

“Thank you. It is part of a matched set.”

He grinned and Lord Kalowell scowled. “Enough. Get to it.”

With the humour sucked out of the room, Nasha submitted to being cuffed and chained so that her legs were never more than two and a half feet apart.

Her wrists were given the same treatment, but with a three-foot span.

“Since you are not in the mood to speak about your lady and your hands are still healing, you will serve at all meals. When you are not serving, you will be with a guard and be allowed access to selected rooms in the keep. If you attempt to escape again, you will be shackled

to the wall until I get the answers I seek.”

“I understand, Lord Kalowell. When is my service to begin?”

“Immediately. All staff has been alerted to your situation. You are not to try to sway them to your cause. Norvil, you may go.”

The smith left the room after throwing her a wink. She grinned back.

“You can engage in courtship after I have what I want.” He scowled and moved close to her until she was looking up at him.

“I will not betray the heir of Fano.” She swallowed and met his blue and amber gaze.

“Then you had better report for duty. A guard is waiting to take you to the hall. The work will not be hard, but you will have to dodge eager hands when the men have been drinking.”

She grew nervous and was afraid she showed it in her gaze. “I thought you said no one would molest me.”

“They know better, but it doesn’t mean that they won’t try. All men try when they see a prime target right in front of them.”

She swallowed and nodded. “Then I am on my own. Thank you for the warning.”

She backed away from him and bowed. Her servants gave the same bow to her, so she hoped that he would accept it.

He did. "You have been in service before."

"Not this kind, but I have witnessed a few formal services. I believe I will be fine, my lord."

"Good. Go."

Her third round with wine the room was getting a little rowdy. The fabric of her gown also gave her another bit of protection. It didn't tear easily when it was grabbed from behind.

Her rounds in the hall had her bringing wine to the highest four tables. A few of the other servers had been irate until they caught a full view of her chains. At that point, she became an object of either pity or ridicule. Whatever their motivation was, she was left alone to refill the goblets of the warriors and their women.

The general was seated at the high table and he was drinking steadily. She had refilled his cup three times and he was emptying it again. Nasha moved in behind him and asked, "More wine?"

"From you? Yes, my dear." He held up his cup and she poured it two-thirds full as protocol required.

She took a few steps away when she was brought up short. The general's foot was on her ankle chain. "Yes, General?"

He drew his finger down her arm and she stifled the rising nausea. "Why don't you meet me in my quarters this evening? I will ask Lord Thorn to go easy on you. Perhaps remove the restraints."

"I am afraid not, General. I have duties to carry out. Please excuse me."

Lord Kalowell raised his cup and she nodded, moving the moment that the general's foot lifted from the chains.

The silver chain tinkled as she walked, each step bringing her closer to her tormentor. She positioned herself on his left and asked, "More wine?"

He pushed his chair back and gave her a long look. "Yes. But first, have a seat."

Lord Kalowell reached up and tugged her into his lap without another word.

He leaned forward and whispered into her ear. "Kiss me."

"What?" Her heart was tripping in her chest.

"Kiss me. They won't touch you if they think you are mine, so kiss me."

She leaned up and pressed her lips to his, tasting the

meal, the wine and the flavour that was Lord Kalowell himself. She reached up and cupped her free hand behind his neck, holding him to her as she breathed deeply of the scent she had enjoyed on the ride in. A hand on her breast shocked her, but she continued the kiss until he slowly drew back.

Gold was swirling heavily in his eyes and his voice was husky. "That should do it, now on with your work."

She sat up and turned, pouring his wine with both hands to keep the jug steady. It was the last of the wine so she returned to the pantry for more while grappling with her out-of-control response to Lord Kalowell.

Nasha was in the earliest stages of her heat. She didn't know what was going to happen when her scent glands started working and every suitable male within her radiating zone noticed. It was bad enough that she wanted the man who had turned her home into abandoned rubble, but to be forced into something because her body had a craving was unacceptable.

For the ninetieth time since she had been born, she cursed the tampering of the stars that had not only coloured the Hashka race blue but also made their males and females draw to sex for procreation and entertainment. True mates recognized each other in two

ways. The females were drawn to the males by scent and sound. The males were drawn to the females by scent alone. It made for a very unfair courtship. The women could be turned into jelly by a casual conversation if he was the male meant for her.

The stars had made sure that their new race would breed, flourish and seed the stars and they had. There was no way to avoid the obvious and Nasha knew the truth.

She was screwed.

Chapter Four

The public kiss had worked. None of the others tried anything for the next week, though the general still tracked her like a predator after something small and fluffy.

Nasha took her meals with the other servants but ate her food in a specific order. Each meal ended with her creating a mash of berries and herbs that left the other women watching in confusion.

She felt nostalgic. The women of Fano would have known what she was up to. The combination of herbs and berries would act on her body like a low-grade fever. Her heat wouldn't start if she was not physically fit and just knowing that the mild poisoning was working on her body made walking around in chains much easier.

None of the women befriended her, but neither did they try to sabotage her. She was content with the status quo. Nasha woke up, bathed and served breakfast to Lord

Kalowell and his cohorts.

Because of her chains, an adaptation had been added to her dress. The shoulders laced up so that she could remove the gown to bathe and sleep.

It was easier now to answer to Haella. A week of it and she didn't hesitate to turn around when she heard the name.

The servants were eating in the kitchen after morning service and Maida smiled. "The scouts are returning today."

Nasha asked, "What scouts?"

"The ones that were left behind to see if anyone tried to return to Fano."

Dorith smiled. "Maida has been dating one of the scouts. She has been eager for his return."

Nasha cleared her throat. "Why were they looking for survivors?"

"To see if anyone had seen your lady, Haella. What did you think?" Maida laughed.

"I..." She hadn't thought he would send men in search of the villagers. The wall should have kept the scouts at bay.

Dorith nodded. "Well, they also cleaned out the keep of all portraits and anything that would lead to finding out

the identity of the avatar of Ithena.”

Maida tilted her head, “Why does he need that particular woman? There are dozens of girls here who would do.”

Dorith sipped at her broth. “It isn’t his lordship, it is the star that wants her and you know what will happen if he doesn’t get her.”

Nasha was listening with a sense of understanding as the truth clicked into place. During her years with Ithena inside her, she had experienced a number of occasions when she had been forced into situations that she would not have chosen for herself. A frisson of pity ran through her for Lord Kalowell.

She swallowed the last of her morning meal, “What will happen if the star does not get the other avatar?”

“A year of bad harvests at the best, a cessation of children at the worst.” Dorith stood and started to clear the table.

“My hands have healed, may I engage in kitchen duties?” Nasha needed to think and nothing helped her think like smashing a loaf of bread into submission or washing dishes.

Maida looked at her in surprise. “Why would you want to? You only have to attend meals and serve. Why

would you want to do more?”

Nasha thought quickly before she said, “Because I have no home and want to make a place for myself here.”

Dorith laughed. “Just let General Alsco under your skirts and you can have whatever you wish. We have all seen him watching you.”

Maida chuckled as well.

“I have no interest in the general or any man here.” It was a lie, but she wasn’t about to tell them that. Her daily dose of herbs was keeping it plausible.

“His lordship watches you as well, but there is a different look to him. Like a man in pain.” Dorith scraped their plates into the rubbish bin and slid the dishes into the steaming sink.

Pain? She hadn’t made eye contact with him since the kiss. She turned to Dorith, “Do you think I can take up more duties?”

The housekeeper shook her head. “No. His lordship wants you only to serve and that is all you will do until he says otherwise.”

The noise of a crowd emanated through the keep from the courtyard.

Maida laughed and darted to the window, looking up at the milling beast feet and wagon wheels. “They are

back! That was quick.”

Dorith grinned. “They probably didn’t have to stop to recover straying women on the way.”

Nasha blushed.

Her guard of the day, Tonio, came to her. “You are needed to help the Fano women bathe and dress.”

She nodded and fought a grin as Dorith yelled out, “You got your wish. New duties.”

Nasha walked with Tonio to the guest quarters where she had had her first bath. Pages and kitchen lads were rushing past with buckets of hot water drawn from the hot spring in the lowest level of the keep.

“How many women did they bring back?”

“I don’t know, Haella. Lord Kalowell just asked me to bring you.” He escorted her to the door and then opened it to let her inside. It closed with a grim finality behind her and she looked over a series of welcomed faces.

“Welcome to Kalowell. You may not remember me, I am Haella.” She smiled at the women who looked at her with relief.

Tish grinned. “Ah yes, the madwoman of the village. You seem to have done well for yourself.”

“I have survived. My duties are light and Lord Kalowell is kind. It makes me regret what brought us all

to this moment. Now, ladies, please enter the large bath and I will help you with your hair and scrub your backs.”

Her women looked scandalized, but out of the five that were looking at her, not one would betray her. They all shucked out of their clothing and slid into the pool.

“How did you come to be here?” Nasha scrubbed each of their backs in turn, her hands rapidly getting wrinkled as she worked her way around the tub.

The women blushed as she helped them, but she didn’t make a fuss, so neither did they.

Vavi sighed. “We came back looking for you...Haella. There was no trace and the scouts were just waiting for us to emerge from the caverns.”

“That was my fault. I led Lord Kalowell to the gateway. I wasn’t expecting him to catch on so quickly. Hence, my jewellery.”

She poured fragrant soap onto her hand and tapped Tish on the shoulder. Tish ducked down and emerged with her hair wet so Nasha could go to town. The lather built quickly and another light tap got Tish to rinse.

Nasha worked her way down the line to Vavi, Lass, Orial and Mithwai. When all of her ladies in waiting were squeaky clean, she returned to the door and asked for clothing for the women.

Tonio nodded and reached to the shelf behind him for a collection of brightly coloured clothing. Nasha sighed in relief. Her companions were not to be consigned to duty in a kitchen or menial service.

She took the clothing with the matching slippers and ducked back into the bathing room. As each emerged from the bath, she wrapped them in a towel and led them to a chair. When all of the women were seated, she went down the line brushing the hair of each of her ladies in turn.

Each colour went with the woman that it best suited and when they were dressed, she backed away to return to Tonio. "They are dressed and ready. What is my next assignment?"

He looked confused. "Don't you wish to remain with them?"

"They are attired as ladies, I am a servant. It is not appropriate." She waved her hands at her damp gown.

"Wait a moment. Lord Kalowell will be along shortly. He is expecting to find you with them."

"Then I shall wait."

She returned to the women who were gathered in a knot and speaking in hushed tones. "Lord Kalowell will be here shortly. He is actively searching for the avatar of

Ithena and believes you will know something about it.”

Her companions took seats in the outer room and waited. Nasha gave them all cups of wine and stood by with an empty goblet, waiting for her captor to make himself known.

Nothing that she said or did betrayed her station or the nervous tension that was shimmying in her belly.

She was so calm that when the door opened again, her arms jerked in shock and she almost dropped the goblet.

Chapter Five

Her portrait was staring at her. Not her face, but her back and feet. It was an image of her in meditation facing the rising sun, the icon of Ithena.

The men entering the room were bringing portrait after portrait into the room, holding them so that they faced the women in the room.

Each one was a picture of the avatar of Ithena, but none showed her face. Nasha was pleased. There was one portrait in existence with her face on it, but it had been painted when she was a child.

Something else got her attention. All of her companions were in at least one portrait, clearly recognizable. A ball of lead started to form in Nasha's stomach.

"Ladies. Thank you for accepting my hospitality." Lord Kalowell bowed to the ladies in the room and Nasha did her best to fade into the background.

Tish straightened. "We were not invited, we were taken. Hospitality was never offered."

Nasha winced. She had no idea what his lordship would make of the Fano woman's direct attack.

"I stand corrected. Thank you for not running from your captors as Haella did. I would hate to have to chain you as well."

"Thank you for your restraint." She curtsied and the other women followed suit.

Nasha watched and at his imperceptible nod, she went to serve him a goblet of wine. Her chains clashed and tinkled as she crossed the room and as soon as she finished serving, she tried to bow her way back, but his hand lashed out to grab her wrist. "Stay here, Haella. I think you will be interested in the conversation."

Turning, she set her carafe down on a short table and stood next to his lordship while her ladies looked at her with worried expressions.

"Now, ladies, the scouts who found you also found these portraits. Who is the woman in the portraits with you?"

Her ladies didn't say a word. Poor Mithwai looked as if she wanted to cry.

Lord Kalowell's hand tightened on her wrist and he

started to twist it behind her back. The chain dug into her waist as the metal refused to give and she kept her face impassive.

“You know, Haella, I am amazed at your stoic acceptance of pain when it would stop with one word from those ladies.” He moved her arm up her back and tears stung her eyes.

Vavi broke. “It is the avatar of Ithena.”

He relaxed his grip on Nasha’s arm and she breathed deeply. He didn’t release her and that let her know that the pain would continue if the questioning stalled.

“Where is she? Is she on the other side of the gap?”

Nasha bit her lip as her arm was raised again when silence ensued.

Tish answered. “She is not. She didn’t make it through the gap. She closed it to keep your troops from razing our people. We came out to look for her.”

Nasha was able to breathe once again.

“Where did she go?”

Orial spoke, “We don’t know. If we knew where she had gone, we would have been with her before now.”

A quick glance at his lordship showed a frustrated expression on his face. “Where would she go?”

Tish nodded. “We don’t know, my lord. The battle

started and she was with the men. When we were all safe, the gap was sealed and she was not seen again. We were afraid she was dead.”

He closed his eyes before opening them again. “What are those marks?”

He pointed to the portrait where Nasha was depicted kneeling in a backless, gauzy gown with her marks exposed.

A slow flick of Nasha’s eyes and Mithwai offered in her timid tones, “Her avatar mark and the mark of the house of Fano.”

Shock rippled through him. “On the bottom of a foot?”

“Yes, my lord. Ithena marked her with the one and her father with the other.” Oriol curtsied as she spoke.

“One more question, ladies. Why did your lady refuse me when I arrived?”

Nasha deliberately didn’t look at him. She felt the pained confusion in his tone.

Tish looked at him with pity. “You should have courted her. With her father dead, the agreement you had with him was dissolved by our customs. The law was designed for this kind of thing, so that men could not make arrangements under duress. She might have greeted

you more favourably if she had known what the hell was going on.”

He jerked his head and nodded. His body vibrated with tension. “Before I go, ladies, show me the soles of your feet.”

Her ladies knelt facing the wall and removed their slippers. Each sole was perfectly smooth and unblemished.

He sighed and his shoulders drooped in disappointment. “What is her name?”

Tish was the easiest to sway by the sight of masculine vulnerability. “Nasha Elorha Fano. Chosen of Ithena.”

A cunning grin spread over his features and he looked down at Nasha. “Lady Nasha, I am pleased to offer you the hospitality of my home.”

With her mouth tight, she inclined her head. “What was the final clue?”

“You never wear shoes. Even in the portraits, you don’t wear shoes. Out of all the bodies on the battlefield, you were the only one found without footwear.”

“And I ran through the forest...”

“Naked and without shoes. You knew where you were going, which is how we knew how to capture your ladies when they arrived. They would go where you were

supposed to be.”

She would have clapped, but her arm was still in his grip. “Well deduced. Can you take the chains off now?”

“No. I believe that you will be wearing them for some time to come. You will not leave this keep until you are my mate in every way. Eshkar is most insistent.”

“Good for him, Ithena is not interested.” The faint presence of the star was far back in her mind.

He scowled down at her. “It does not matter. She promised him a child centuries ago and you will remain here until you deliver.”

“That will be a while as I have not yet had my first heat. Who knows when I will get pregnant if that little tidbit of chemistry does not occur?”

Frustration passed his face and he let out a sharp whistle. Tonio came in with a folded pile of fabric.

“Here you are, my lord. The alterations have been made.” Her guard bowed and extended his hands with their burden.

Kalowell jerked his head for her to pick up the gown.

She reached out and thanked Tonio for his service as the fabric crackled over her hands.

Tonio looked up in surprise and then his gaze focussed on his lord’s hand on her arm.

Tish came forward and bowed as she took the gown. “If you will excuse me, my lord, we will attend our lady.”

“You have five minutes. I will remain here.” He took a seat on one of the low couches and smiled grimly.

Her ladies surrounded her and shooed her into the bathing room. The moment that the door closed, she was hugged from all sides.

Tish was weeping openly, as was Mithwai. Orial and Vavi were made of sterner stuff. Lass didn’t even acknowledge that anything was amiss.

Vavi opened Nasha’s work dress and unlaced the shoulders. It slid from her body in a swish of fabric. The new gown was a similar design with a fuller skirt and more ornate clasps as well as open sleeves. The colour was two shades darker than her own skin.

Tish started on her hair the moment that the gown was on. “My lady, how have you avoided your heat?”

“A berry cocktail. You know the one. The ingredients are plentiful, so they have been my evening dessert.”

The low laugh that her ladies shared made her smile. She had missed them.

“We will make sure that you are served the mix every evening if we can.”

Orial smiled. “I will head to the kitchens myself if I

have to.”

“Like you used to when my father insisted that I needed to fast for the star to accept me?” Nasha grinned as Vavi got her shoulder pieces laced into place.

“Exactly, but with less chance of ending up banished. Your father was pissed.”

Having the elderly Norcron Fano described as pissed brought a wistful emotion to Nasha’s breast. “I miss him.”

“We do, too, lady. We also have been missing Ithena.” Oriol gave her a look of query.

“As have I. She closed the gap and that was the last time she has been truly present. One look at Eshkar’s avatar and she was in for the duration.”

The stoic Lass gave her a serious look. “That isn’t good.”

“She is pouting. There is no getting around it.” Nasha stood straight as the brush slid through her hair.

“That is unfortunate.” Lass’s quiet words said it all. It took a lot to get her to speak, but when she did, it was always right to the heart of the matter.

Tish tapped her shoulder as the final clasp was in place on the gown. She was now dressed in a very fetching blue gown with gold embroidery with her hair in

a honey-coloured cloud around her. She noted that she hadn't been given shoes, but since she always went about unshod, it was not a matter for concern.

One of the bonuses of Ithena's presence was Nasha's lack of sensitivity to heat and cold. She could walk around in the dead of winter and nothing would happen to her body.

"Am I presentable?"

Tish grinned, "You are stunning as always, lady."

"Wonderful. I am sure that his lordship will be impressed." Nasha grinned as she exited the bathing chamber, her women trailing behind her.

Kalowell stood up at her approach with a surprised expression on his face. "My lady, you look stunning."

She paused and put her hands on her hips, glaring at him with all of the indignation of a well-brought-up lady. "My chains clash with my gown."

Chapter Six

He didn't comment but offered his hand to her. Sighing in agreement, she placed her left hand on his right and they exited the guest room together.

"Mid-meal is about to be served. I believe that you will be a little better fed than when you were a servant."

She inclined her head. "There was nothing wrong with my meals. The food was plain but plentiful."

"I am glad to hear it. It is the pride of my lands that we can and do feed all of our people."

She sighed. "It may take longer for service at lunch today. They will be missing a server."

He looked down at her in surprise and then laughed sharply. "I am sure they will manage."

A few familiar faces stopped and stared in surprise at the procession, but Lord Kalowell merely nodded to his people and led his prize to the dining hall.

"They are staring."

“Most won’t even recognize you. You are quite transformed.” He sounded grudgingly impressed.

“My ladies are masters of the speedy transformation.”

The doors to the dining hall were opened and they walked in. Nasha was relieved to see that only half of the warriors were in attendance.

Kalowell led her to her seat on his right-hand side. He waited until she was in place before taking his own seat. Her ladies filled all of the chairs to her right and a stunned General Alsco stood as they all took a seat.

“Lord Thorn, who is the enchantress that sits beside you? Have you given up on finding the avatar?”

With a silent snort, Nasha realized that he couldn’t see her chains for recognition purposes.

“This is the avatar of Ithena. Lady Nasha Fano. Her enchanting charms are to be mine alone. Keep that in mind.” His warning in his tone was unmistakable.

With their lord in place, the servers appeared and laid out the meal. Pages ran around the room providing plates and cutlery for all of those seated beginning at the high table.

For the first time since that first night, Nasha looked about her with complete freedom. The warriors of the keep were staring at her and she cast her gaze over them

slowly, unafraid. Ithena may be hiding, but anyone who tried to lay hands on her would draw back a broken stump.

Now that she didn't have to pretend to be a peasant, her body was hers to defend again.

"What has made you so happy?" Tish asked in a low whisper.

"Just thinking about my classes with Denar."

"Oh." Tish turned and spread the comment until all of Nasha's ladies were laughing.

A tap on her left arm got her attention.

"What are they laughing about?"

"A memory I shared with them. Being myself and not a servant makes a difference in how I react to having my ass grabbed."

Understanding lit his eyes. "No one will touch you, Nasha."

She looked down at his hand on her arm.

"Except me. Whether you like it or not, your star promised you to me the moment she took you over. I will show you the avatar pact after lunch."

A quiver deep inside her mind gave her a roiling sense of unease. Ithena was upset and it wasn't out of concern. There was shame in her thoughts.

Maida placed bread in front of them and flicked her gaze up to Nasha's.

Nasha winked and the woman quickly scuttled away to the kitchens. Nothing was faster than the speed of gossip.

"I look forward to seeing it. And the contract you had with my father. If they both check out, we will discuss possibilities."

He nodded and turned his head to hide his grin.

She sighed. It was nice of him to pretend that she had a choice. She was his to do with as he willed and she knew it. The chains were merely an outward reminder that he didn't trust her.

She waited until the table was set before she started fidgeting. No one was allowed to eat until the highest-ranking male started eating.

A quick look at her dining companion made her blush. He was looking straight at her. "Rise with me."

She nodded and stood when he did.

"I have the honour to introduce to you, Nasha Fano, avatar of Ithena. She is to be my bride and no insult to her will be tolerated. Am I understood?"

The men leapt to their feet and saluted, uttering a guttural grunt that Nasha took as assent. She was

surprised when Kalowell took her in his arms and stunned when he kissed her.

Her body responded quickly, but when she tried to raise her arms to caress his neck, the chain snagged between them.

She let her hands fall to her sides and let him control the kiss. His lips parted hers and slid his tongue between them for a quick flick that sent a shockwave through her system. A sharp contraction in her channel made her gasp and she leaned back. With the subduing substances in her system, a reaction this strong shouldn't be possible.

When Kalowell withdrew, the swirling gold gleam was wider than it had been the first time she met him. With a jolt, she realized that his eyes turned gold where hers turned red. Eshkar had been in that kiss and he had let his power ripple through her.

His lordship helped seat her again and the triumphant gleam in his eyes set her teeth on edge. "Cheater."

"Pardon?" He arched a brow and looked at her with eyes that were a lot less gold than they had been seconds earlier. He took a piece of bread and the room started reaching for their own food as the hungry men loaded their plates.

"Eshkar, you are a nasty cheater who has no business

rummaging around in my hormonal system.” Addressing the star directly wasn’t normally done, but she was an avatar, she had the right.

Kalowell’s eyes glowed completely gold. “You were running a fever. I simply purged your system, Avatar Nasha.”

She couldn’t say anything to that. To do so would be to admit that she was subduing her heat. It was something that most respectable women didn’t do.

Nasha reached for a piece of bread, but before she could do more than shred the loaf, he had started to place bits of meat and stewed vegetables on her plate. It was standard for a man with a female guest, but it was still odd to Nasha. No one had cut her meat for her since her mother died when she was a child.

She used a folded piece of bread to pick up the food and fed herself with delicate precision. Her ladies were cutting their own meat but eating in the same dainty manner. To Nasha’s amusement, her ladies were getting more than a normal share of masculine attention.

“Oh dear, I believe you won’t have a problem finding matches if you wish for them.” Her words to Tish were low and her friend chuckled.

“I have noticed. I am fairly sure that it is our eating

display that is garnering the attention, so I will wait and see before I begin to scope out candidates.” Tish was laughing. “Have you seen the way that they are eating? It isn’t as if the food is trying to escape, there is no reason to stab it.”

Nasha snickered and returned to her growing collection of meats. “Oh, Kalowell, you can stop now. I won’t be able to finish this as it is.”

He blinked. “Why don’t you use my name? Kalowell is my title.”

She blushed. “I don’t know your name.”

“So, your father never mentioned me?” He looked a little hurt, but she wasn’t falling for that again.

“No. He probably guessed I wouldn’t be pleased by him selling me to you.” She looked down at her plate and tried to swallow past the lump in her throat.

He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back of it, then turned it over and kissed her palm. “My name is Thorn and I expect you to use it.”

The shivers started in her palm and spread throughout her body. The gold gleam in his eyes was amused as well as smug as her body reacted to the light flick of his tongue on her skin.

Nasha knew her doom when she saw it, but she was

done running. If she could get Ithena out, she would find out what the hell was going on. It was times like this that she regretted giving her body over to a star with a superhuman ability to hide.

Chapter Seven

Lunch was a strange combination of eternity and a fleeting blur of food and sensations. Nasha held Thorn's hand again as they left the dining hall and walked toward a section of the keep that she had not been allowed in as a servant. Her ladies trailed behind her, a colourful collection of trusted companions. Nasha was feeling better already.

"All documents are kept in the library and it is kept in a climate-controlled environment."

His words made her smile. When their ancestors settled on Xaros, they had brought with them knowledge of the stars. Most large keeps and abbeys had libraries and they usually were the one environmentally controlled room. It was a bit of tech that they still traded for with their space-faring neighbours.

Her father had never seen the need for that kind of security. In his mind, books were for reading and

enjoying, not for putting in prison.

Thorn stopped and released her hand as he opened the door with an impressive flexing of his biceps. He was wearing a sleeveless shirt in the same tone as hers, tight black pants and boots to match. His physique strained the seams on his shirt when he flexed and the stitching still held. It was impressive that a seamstress could put that kind of care into a shirt.

She was so busy watching the light gleam on his skin that she didn't notice he was facing her until he cleared his throat. "What? Oh. Lead the way."

He was grinning again. "This way, my lady."

The possessive pronoun was not lost on her. She followed him into the library but waved for her ladies to wait in the foyer. If Ithena was outed here, Nasha didn't want anyone in the line of fire.

"Here is the original document. It is very old, so I would prefer to leave it in its reading case."

She nodded and approached the agreement. It was succinct and to the point. When Eshkar and Ithena had compatible avatars of similar ages, they would join to produce a child of incredible power who would be able to lead the people of Xaros without feudal division.

Both the stars and their avatars, as witnesses, signed

it. The signature of Ithena was one that was familiar to Nasha. She knew it from personal experience.

“That is her agreement. She signed this document centuries before I was born and sealed my fate.” It was no wonder that Ithena was hiding. Everyone was pissed at her.

“Mine as well. Eshkar is very linear when it comes to fulfilling this agreement. I have not gotten laid in a few years.” He chortled at her look of surprise.

“What?”

“You heard me. The moment that I became an avatar, my sex life was dead. Eshkar looked for traces of Ithena in all of the settlements before finding the rumours of the Fano women. It was only the spurts of energy that your star gave out that enabled him to track her.”

Nasha frowned, digging into her psyche for traces of the star. She was still in hiding.

“And the document from my father?”

“Ah. That is over here.” He showed her another document in a similar formal display case to the first.

“Why the place of honour?”

“I wanted it where I could see it after you had your housekeeper reject me. She didn’t need to be so insulting, I am afraid I did not react well.”

She sighed. “You and me both. I convinced myself that my father would never do something so underhanded, not admitting to myself that he might have been trying to move my life forward as his came to an end.”

He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “How did he die?”

She laughed and tears slipped from her eyes. “He was busy with his leman and died with a smile on his face. I pensioned her off with a nice house in the country and took over the running of the keep the day that we buried him.”

He didn’t say a word, merely left her alone to read the document that bore her father’s shaky scrawl and personal seal. The seal was buried with him so the veracity of the document was not in question.

The truth was laid out in ink and parchment. Her father had indeed given her to Lord Kalowell without telling her. The only thing he had gotten in exchange was the promise that his people would be treated well and absorbed into the Kalowell keep.

“That’s...not what I was told.”

“I am aware of that. General Alsko has done his penance for telling your people you were bought and paid

for.”

Nasha ran her fingers through her hair before the chain brought her up short. “So, how do we proceed? My star is not coming out of hiding any time soon.”

He smiled. “Are you up for trying to convince her to come out and fulfill her promise?”

Nasha bit her lip. “What would that entail?”

He was in front of her in an instant, lifting her so that her face was on a level with his own. “I think we should just improvise.”

She blinked as he brought his face closer and his eyes spiralled into gold pools rimmed with blue. The kiss was scorching and she wove her fingers through his hair, pulling him tightly to her as she hung from his hands.

When his tongue flicked into her mouth, she mimicked him, eliciting a groan. He shook under her touch the same way she burned at his and when he lowered her slowly down his frame, she groaned at the press of muscles and the bar of heat beneath his trousers.

“I don’t think this is the right place for this.” He was breathing heavily and he pressed his forehead against hers

She was burning from her core outward. “Where is better?”

It was all he needed. With a grin, he lifted her into his arms and strode out of the library, the door automatically swinging shut behind them.

Her ladies looked at her in surprise and she merely winked and waved at them as her captor hauled her off.

She was legally his, destined to be his. How could she fight it when she didn't want to fight it?

A guard outside the door opened his bedchamber. It was closed the moment that they passed the threshold.

"I think my ladies are going to be confused." She bounced as he placed her on the bed.

"I don't care." He unravelled her shoulder straps and unsnapped the clasps that held her gown in place.

"This is going to get a little awkward with these chains in place." She held up the silver strand and to her surprise, he nodded.

"You are correct. Just a moment." He lifted her from the open wrap of her gown and settled her against the headboard. Before she knew what he was up to, a silk strap appeared from beneath the bed and was wrapped around one wrist. He did the same to the other wrist and she was frowning.

"I thought the chains were sufficient."

He grinned and reached into his shirt, pulling out a

chain with a small key on it. He removed the chain and then unclasped the small locks on the cuffs.

Her wrists were free of the leather for the first time in a week and she enjoyed the feel of the air on them. Her legs were simply unlocked with the cuffs removed. No additional stricture was added.

Her mouth went dry as she watched him peel off his shirt and sit to remove his boots. She stopped breathing entirely when his hands went to the waistband of his trousers.

Chapter Eight

As the fabric parted to expose his ridged abdomen, Nasha stopped thinking. Her mind went blank as his cock sprang free of the fabric and her mouth watered as a clear, pearly drop formed on the thick and flared head.

“Let’s see if we can’t bring Ithena out into the open.” He knelt on the bed and parted her thighs.

She knew that her cream would be wetting her folds by now. The cool waft of air on her sensitive flesh chilled her.

Instead of positioning himself between her thighs, he lay on his stomach and lifted one ankle to his lips. The skin where the leather had been was extremely sensitive. His tongue traced intricate patterns on her flesh.

To her surprise, her hips started to shift and curls of heat spiralled from that light contact.

He switched to the other leg and it jerked as he treated it to the same loving touch. She wanted to caress the thick

waves of his hair, but her restrained arms kept her from it. She snarled in frustration at the confinement, but as she arched at the soft laving of his tongue, she felt a flicker of awareness deep within.

Ithena was coming out slowly, but she was rising from the dark recess of Nasha's mind.

Thorn was making his way up her leg, her inner thigh twitched and she saw him inhale deeply.

She blushed. Her heat had restarted, but it was in early days yet. She would not reach full pheromone intensity for days.

He used his mouth to trail up her body, skipping over the weeping folds that were begging for him. He lapped at her belly, flicking his tongue into her navel.

She yelped and shivered.

She felt her breasts tighten and swell slightly as he approached, her nipples hard beads of flesh aching for that devilish mouth of his.

His tongue under her breast working toward the peak of one then the other had her arching for firmer contact. A high whine was coming from her throat and when he lapped and then gnawed at her neck, her whole body jerked in a spasm of desperation.

Another soft bite elicited the same response and she

was vibrating with tension when he sat back on his knees to view all of her. The approval was given as his cock bucked with eagerness.

With Eshkar riding him, Thorn positioned himself between her thighs and pressed the blunt head of his erection into her. He leaned forward and held himself over her, their only point of connection the light pressure between her thighs.

He formed a bridge of flesh and muscle over her, leaning in to capture her panting mouth in a kiss that was more sweet than savage. The sensation of pressure in her channel was new to her. She spread her legs as wide as she could in invitation.

The light kiss turned into a more deliberate advance as he leaned back and rocked forward slowly. The deeper he got, the tighter the spiral of tension was wound within her. He was moving faster now and the kiss was getting wilder, his tongue flicking at hers and his teeth coming into play.

The sensations she was getting from two different ends of her body were sending conflicting signals. Her mouth and neck wanted the slow caresses, but her channel wanted everything he could give her.

As soon as he was fully seated and engaging in a full

thrust from almost withdrawing until he was buried in her to the hilt.

“Harder. I want it harder.” Her whisper caused a jolt of power to run between them. She kept up the litany of, “Harder,” while he withdrew and then thrust forward with a vengeance.

He started a flurry of pounding strokes that caressed every inch of her within. She loved the stretched feeling and never wanted it to stop.

His hips rocked back and forth in a rolling tide of sensation. Her body received each movement greedily until her orgasm began to tiptoe in, bringing Ithena with it.

Each time he slammed against her, Ithena came closer and Nasha bit her lip to hold back her release until the goddess would be visible in her eyes.

Sweat coated them and she wrapped her thighs around his back, opening to him completely. She closed her eyes and focused on the sensations, ignoring Thorn when he whispered, “Open your eyes.”

She refused and his response was a bite to the side of her neck. Her lids flew open and she stared into Eshkar’s eyes with Ithena prominent in hers. Nasha’s orgasm ripped through her and she twisted against her restraints

as her body arched and her inner palpitations caressed and stroked at Thorn.

He grunted and thrust into her one final time before he shook in reaction to his own release. His golden eyes closed and he rested on his elbows, still inside her.

Ithena came to the surface. *"I know I should have come out earlier, but everything went wrong."*

Eshkar looked back at her. *"I have you now, my love. Together we shall create a child who can harmonize Xaros. It is not a thing that I undertake lightly. It is something we need to do."*

"I have never been a mother before."

"Your avatar will do most of the work, I promise. And mine will be an excellent father. It is how I know that the time is right. He is the right man, so the right woman had to be out there somewhere." Eshkar was soothing his mate and their bodies were still joined.

Nasha was watching Thorn's face from the back of her own mind.

Eshkar started to slide free of her before rocking back inside.

The energy that surged through Ithena came from Eshkar. He was giving of himself to bond them together.

Ithena, let him try. I would not mind a family and this

is as good a place to start as ever.

The star touched Nasha's consciousness gently. *You are not mad at me?*

I am not pleased, but I will get used to it, as will you. Change is good. Change brings people together and leads them into an unknown future side by side.

I am sorry. Those lives were lost and it was all for my own pride.

Then honour them by creating a better life for those of our lands who survive. Open the gap and let them come to Kalowell.

Ithena moved Nasha's body with Eshkar's thrusts. The moment that he reached between them to caress her clit, she gasped and the burst of power left her body to streak across the land and move the rock that barricaded her people.

Thorn's body was slumped on Nasha's, a heavy weight that made it awkward to breathe but comforting nonetheless.

Sweat coated them and she whimpered in frustration at her immobility.

Without looking up, he reached for her wrist and unravelled one knot and then the other. For the first time in a week, she was able to stretch her arms fully to either

side and while her shoulders were sore, it felt good.

“She has agreed to what Eshkar wishes. If it is possible, we will produce a child that carries them both within him.” Nasha ran her fingers through his damp hair.

He groaned and pressed a kiss to her shoulder before raising his head. “Or her. It could very well be a her.”

She smiled. “A woman ruling Xaros? That would be a change indeed.”

He lifted from her and slid out of her in one move, curling onto his side and pulling her against him.

Thorn’s arm around her kept her anchored, but she was lost in the pleasant hum of her body and the weightless feeling of having the chains removed.

Sleepy but sated, she murmured, “Ithena opened the gap. The Fano people are free to come and go as they wish.”

He pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “Then I will let the scouts know to pass your status to your people. Did you know that your eyes turn red when she is within?”

Nasha chuckled. “Yes. It is why there is no portrait of my face. She enjoys being featured in the paintings, so my normal eye colour isn’t visible. Well, that and the painters lost their nerve to paint with her staring at them. The gaze of a star seems to see through to your soul.”

“It does, but Eshkar has looked into your eyes and found a courage that he admired as well as the roots of a passion that I could appreciate.”

She sighed and snuggled back into his embrace. Nasha just wanted to forget how they had come to be here and enjoy the moment, but that wasn't going to happen.

Chapter Nine

A quick bath was in order. The musky scent of male was all over her and it was distracting as hell.

“You have plumbing in your bathroom?” The guestroom only had a drain to dispose of the bathwater.

“Yes. One of the few perks of position.” He set the temperature with a few deft twists and then boosted her under the spray.

She spluttered until he joined her and began soaping her from neck to ankles with slow strokes of his hands. His body was her keenest point of interest as she watched the play of muscles under his skin. Thorn’s avatar mark was over his heart, a blooming star with radiating lines.

When he stood, she pressed her fingers to it and then followed it up with a short kiss. Her lips tingled from the brief contact with his skin. It was a crackle of energy from Eshkar that went from his skin to her mouth.

She took the soap from him and returned the favour,

running her hands over his skin from the dark blue of his shoulders to the slightly lighter skin of his buttocks and thighs. Each portion of his back had a different texture and all were pleasing to her hands.

When he turned to face her, again his interest had risen, so it was the last thing she soaped and slicked for rinsing.

“So, my lord. What were you missing this afternoon when we were together?”

“Just some reports on harvests and scouting reports from around your keep.” He stretched under the spray and she moved aside to let him enjoy the direct cascade of water.

She reached for and wrapped herself in a towel and took another to dry her hair.

Thorn finished his shower and wrapped a towel around his hips while he towelled his hair dry.

Nasha was lost in thought and worked on her hair while Thorn left the room and returned with something gleaming in his hand. Before she could so more than look curiously at it, a bracelet of pale gold was on her left wrist and her right received the same treatment a moment later. “What are you doing?”

“You are not yet my wife and I do not want you to try

to make an escape now that your ladies have re-joined you.”

Part of her was disappointed that he was not trusting her to remain of her own will, but there was no reason to believe it. She looked down at the light golden chain and sighed. “Well, at least I have more field of motion in this.”

The links were patterned and quite attractive.

“I am sorry, but it is necessary for both our peoples.”

She sighed. “Fine. Where will I sleep tonight?”

He blinked. “Here, with me.”

She shook her head. “As you have pointed out, I am not your wife. As a lady, it would be inappropriate for me to spend a night with a man I am not wed to.”

A dark look of anger crossed his features. “That is not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant. Now, either help me into my gown or let my ladies in. I have difficulty in doing up my dresses with my hands chained.”

Scowling, he stomped to the outer door and jerked it open. With a sharp motion of his head, her five ladies-in-waiting came through the anteroom and into the bedchamber where she was waiting for them.

“Another dressing? How many times a day will you

do this?" Vavi pulled the dress up and into place, wrapping and tucking it around her.

"Don't worry. I am not staying here for the night."

Tish paused with the hairbrush in her hand, "You are not?"

"No. It isn't appropriate if you think about it." Nasha tried to ignore the view of Thorn getting dressed in the background. Her ladies had no such qualms.

Casually, during the process of fluffing the straight sleeves or tidying her hem, they turned one by one to watch him dress. She couldn't blame them. He was quite the specimen.

Lass worked on one of her clasps and winked at her. Nasha stifled a laugh. When they were both dressed and respectable again, Thorn walked over to stand in front of her.

"My lady. You have full range of the keep and gardens, but I will expect you next to me at dinner. We will discuss your accommodations at that time." His tone was grim, but the hard kiss he pressed to her lips confirmed that his passions were still raging beneath the surface.

He released her and without a backward glance, he left his chambers.

The moment he was out of earshot, the ladies burst into giggles.

“Oh, wow, my lady. He is truly impressive.” Lass said it and the rest of them started to howl as the words of truth sank in.

“Eshkar chose him. The star has very good taste.” Nasha tried to be prim and failed miserably.

Tish tsked over the chains. “Still in chains, lady? At least they are prettier.”

“Yes, and I have more of a range of movement now. Progress is always welcome. So, shall we see our new home? I have only seen the kitchens and dining hall so far.” Nasha smirked.

“I think a tour would be welcome. Where is that charming guard you had this morning?” Mithwai blushed a deep violet when Nasha arched a brow.

“I think we might be able to find Tonio if we tried.” She went to the door and opened it. On the other side was the guard in question, his hand raised to knock.

“Speak of the devil. Hello, Tonio. We are in need of a tour.”

He bowed, “Yes, my lady. Lord Thorn mentioned it. May I have the pleasure of meeting your ladies?”

She laughed, “Of course. This is Tish, Vavi, Lass,

Orial, and the lovely, charming and interested, Mithwai.”

Mithwai’s blush went up a notch and she scowled at Nasha with all of the irritation that she expected from her ladies. If she couldn’t tease her companions, whom could she tease?

Tonio looked Mithwai over and bowed low to her while he said, “Pleased to make your acquaintances, ladies.”

Her ladies curtsied and replied in kind. Mithwai was still blushing up a storm.

Tonio held the door and they filed into the hallway to begin their tour.

He showed them the publicly accessible library, the dining hall, the indoor gardens and when they got to the kitchens, Nasha took over.

“This is Dorith. She is the one who organized our charming lunch. Maida is a server par excellence and the others are in the back attending to the dishes from the mid-meal.”

Dorith didn’t know what to do with herself. “My lady. Pardon any offence I may have given.”

Nasha smiled. “No offence was given, but I do warn you that I may take to visiting the kitchen in the dark hours. I occasionally need to think and making a batch of

bread is very soothing.”

“Of course, my lady. Whatever you wish. Lord Kalowell has ordered you to have full run of the keep and so you shall.”

She curtsied again and Nasha turned to smile at Maida. The poor woman was trembling with fear. “Don’t worry, Maida. I will never hold a conversation amongst equals against you. We are all women, are we not?”

Relief and a peculiar respect filled Maida’s eyes. “Indeed, mistress. Thank you.”

Nasha’s ladies introduced themselves to Dorith, each taking her hand in turn. The housekeeper looked amazed that the elegant women greeted her as an equal, but it was the Fano way.

Tonio asked her quietly while Orial was discussing recipes with Dorith, “Why do you treat her as an equal. You are a lady, she is a commoner.”

“Because the only reason I am a lady is that my father had sex with my mother, a poor reason for thinking I am above her in station, isn’t it?”

He nodded as the idea ran through him.

“Why do some of you call him Lord Kalowell and others Lord Thorn?”

“It depends on when we entered his service. I grew up

in the keep when his father was Lord Kalowell. Lord Thorn was in charge of the guard and defence, so most of the military still call him Lord Thorn while the newer and domestic staff call him Lord Kalowell.”

When her ladies were finished swarming around Dorith, they nodded and she turned to Tonio. “Lord Thorn mentioned gardens?”

He grinned and nodded. “This way, ladies. Kalowell has some of the most beautiful gardens on the entire continent.”

She inclined her head for him to lead the way. “We will be the judge of that.”

Chapter Ten

Nasha had to admit that she was stunned at the beauty of the gardens around her. The flowers were lush and well-tended, fruits were sweet and the open grasses were a thick, soft carpet under her feet.

Her ladies were climbing trees and picking berries, laughing and chattering as they would have at home. It seemed the Fano women were adapting quickly.

Nasha was sitting on a bench and enjoying the afternoon sun on her face when a shadow fell across her face. “General Alscó, how charming to see you again.”

He sat next to her, so close that she could feel the radiating heat from his thighs. “Lady Nasha, I hear that you have already spread your legs for Thorn.”

Ithena began to rise in her, the hostility radiating off Alscó was rousing her protective instincts.

“We attempted to raise my star to the surface.” She made a tiny gesture to keep her ladies back.

Tish looked worried and that was a bad thing. She had more sensitivity than any of the others combined and that meant Alsco was broadcasting unpleasant emotions.

Tonio looked conflicted and he suddenly darted back into the keep.

Nasha felt a flutter of disappointment that he abandoned her so easily.

“And were you successful?” He was trailing his fingers on her thigh and leaning toward her.

“Time will tell. I did give it my all though.” Her skin was crawling at his touch.

“Would your so-called star rise with a more skilful lover, do you think?” The trail of his fingers turned into a more solid grip and he moved dangerously close to the juncture of her thighs.

A familiar voice struck out with a deep anger. “I think you should remove your hand and yourself from the keep, Alsco.”

Thorn was emanating pure fury and a strange aura. Golden light was pulsing from him and a quick glance told her that Eshkar was in complete control.

Ithena rose to match her mate, her temperature rising until the general yelped in pain. With his hand removed from her, she went to stand beside her mate, looking at

the male who was turning powder blue under her gaze.

“Nasha invited me to her bed. I swear it, my lord!”

A low growl came from Thorn’s throat. “*You lie. It was your hand on her, not hers on you that I saw when you were offering her your services, hashka. My mate’s avatar did not invite or entice you in anyway.*”

“I promise, my lord. She started to seduce me on the journey to the keep.”

Eshkar laughed. “*She was naked, covered with blood and pinned against me. There was no ounce of seduction in her. She merely wanted escape. You will remove yourself from Kalowell lands immediately. I do not wish to kill you for defying my direct order to leave this woman alone.*”

Ithena placed her hand on Eshkar’s arm. He calmed by inches. A half-dozen guards came and escorted AlSCO out of the garden.

Eshkar looked down at her, stroking her hair away from her face. “*He was my avatar’s oldest companion. They grew up together, but even he was not surprised when Tonio came for help.*”

“*She was contemplating strangling him with the chain Thorn placed on her.*”

He grinned. “*Was she? She is a feisty thing, isn’t*

she?”

“Once, I saw her rally her men to fight off forest bandits when she was twelve, I knew she was the avatar for me.” She curled her arm in his and they began to walk through the garden. “This is a very lovely garden.”

“It is his pride and a source of serenity. He won’t admit it to her, but he gardens every chance he gets.”

“She goes into the kitchen and bakes. Oh, she didn’t like me saying that.” Ithena laughed at the irate cursing of Nasha in her mind. “She is the most independent of my avatars, ever.”

“He is strong and calm of mind. A great warrior and a better statesman. He was dying on the battlefield when I took him and with the healing I provided, he agreed to become my avatar. He was not too keen on the idea either. I have to admit his words to me are hardly deferential right now.”

They passed Nasha’s ladies-in-waiting who bowed low at the obvious presence of their star. The ladies kept a good distance from them, allowing them their privacy. How thoughtful.

Ithena smiled. “You should have heard Nasha cursing me out when I would not rise for you.”

“You allow her to speak that way to you?”

“I sort of enjoy it. It lets me know that whatever she says it is from the heart. I never have to guess what she is thinking about.”

A sober look from golden eyes into her red orbs ceased the momentary frivolity in her. *“Thorn wishes to know how much she really hates the chains.”*

“She thinks they are rather pretty, but would rather have a choice.”

Eshkar nodded. *“Interesting. He wants her people to see her in chains. He believes it will make it easier for them to accept the loss of life involved in the defence of Fano.”*

“It is probable. She has quieted on the matter now.”

He cleared his throat. *“When do you think she will let him back into her bed?”*

She laughed again. *“She tricked him. She cannot share his bed, but there is no regulation against him sharing hers. Oh, she didn’t like me sharing that information either.”*

Chuckling contentedly, she turned with him to return to the keep. Nasha was in a slow simmer of irritation but not generally furious. After years of living in her body, Ithena knew the difference.

“When will her people arrive?”

“By the end of the week. Thorn has sent off wagons and scouts to bring them here, but if she would sign a note to her people that allows them to come to us without worrying, it would be a good thing.”

“She will do it. Take her to paper and pen and she will draft it immediately. Do you have housing arranged?”

“He does. He created a separate village two years ago when he began negotiations with Lord Fano. Their fields are ready for the growing season and supplies have been set aside for them to last them through the first two years.”

“She is crying.”

“Why?”

“It is what she wanted for her people. She wants them to live good, productive lives. Each member of her keep is known to her and as precious as true family. I had to blank most of her mind during the battle. She could not stand to see her men cut down.”

“Ah, Thorn understands. It also explains why she fought when he caught you.”

Ithena laughed again. *“No, that was all her. I ducked out of sight the moment you were within fifty yards.”*

“Feisty indeed.”

“I think she will be a good mother. You simply need to

tell your avatar that there are other places than his bedchamber for sex. Wow, she really didn't like that one." Ithena was so busy laughing at her that she let her control slip away.

"Eshkar, if you so much as hint to Thorn of what she just said, I will...I don't know what."

Thorn's blue gaze focussed on her face. "Too late. I heard everything. She calms him quite well."

"She does. So you are going to pretend you didn't hear anything?"

His smile was pure masculine smugness. "For now, I will let you know when I change my mind."

With a sigh, she left him and returned to her ladies. With Tonio hovering nearby, they made their way back into the keep and Nasha asked for a pen and paper. She had a declaration to write.

Chapter Eleven

After she penned and signed six copies of her declaration to let her people know that they had a new place to live and provisions and lodgings were waiting for them, she completed the tour.

The warriors practicing in the courtyard was a favourite of her ladies, so Nasha left them watching the men engage in mock battles, their bronzed blue bodies gleaming in the sun.

Nasha returned to the dark halls of the keep and tried to yelp in surprise as a hand covered her mouth and pulled her into an alcove.

The scent of the hand over her mouth started a surge of lust as she realized that it was Thorn holding her. His dark whisper in her ear sent shivers through her. “I have changed my mind.”

He released her mouth and cupped her breasts through her gown, pinching her nipples through the cloth as his

lips kissed and nibbled at her neck. He released her breast to raise her skirt to her hips as he bent her forward to cling to a small chair in the curtained alcove.

His hand left her body and she heard his own clothing rustling as he freed himself. The first blunt probe of his cock against her made her flinch, but he backed off, slid two fingers into her and spread the moisture that was flowing from her and then he returned to try again.

This time, the flared head rubbed in her moisture first and then slid into her by inches. For balance, she spread her feet and lowered her hands to the seat of the chair, opening herself to him as best she could.

He thrust slowly until he was firmly seated and then started to pull her back onto him with a heavy beat. The harsh slap of their bodies made a noise that had heat flaring in her skin from head to toe. The perverse thrill of having an active hallway outside the alcove and the idea that they could be discovered at any moment sent her spiralling toward a release that she ruthlessly muffled by biting her lip.

His groan was executed through clenched teeth and his body shook as jets of semen emptied into her channel. She whimpered softly as he pulled out of her and smoothed her skirt back into place. He adjusted his own

clothing after that and she was still leaning forward on the chair, her muscles locked as strong aftershocks pulsed inside her.

Thorn helped her rise and turned her to face him, rubbing her back as he leaned forward for a leisurely kiss. "I look forward to our next encounter, dinner is in an hour."

He left her in the alcove with a wink and a caress on her buttocks.

Nasha's heat was starting to bloom. There was no doubt. Every time Thorn was near, her body readied for sex. It would have been embarrassing if it wasn't so much fun.

She returned to the balcony and watched the fighting with her mind a hundred miles away. When her body was ready and if Thorn was willing, children were a possibility. She smiled softly as she imagined a boy with her eyes and Thorn's stubborn chin and a daughter with the glowing blue of her father's gaze.

"What are you thinking, Nasha?" Vavi broke into her little fantasy world.

"Would you believe...nothing?"

Vavi snorted. "No. You smell like you are back in Lord Thorn's bedroom and you have this strange smile on

your lips.”

“Just thinking about settling down and having a family. I was thinking that I would like a boy with my eyes and a girl with his.”

The other ladies smiled gently and Lass stated, “That is a good thought.”

They all turned back to watch the battle with eyes that were looking inward and imagining lives of domestic bliss.

Life rarely remained blissful, but it was a really good thought.

“How were the men’s skills today?” Thorn’s voice was casual as he placed a helping of vegetables on her plate.

“They seemed to be in fine form when we got there, but it degenerated a bit by the time we left.” She didn’t have to reach for anything, he served her each portion as the food was brought out.

“It may have had something to do with their audience. We have a distinctly skewed population here.”

She laughed. “I hadn’t noticed. Two to one?”

“Something like that. Kalowell has always put a premium on their warriors and with Eshkar’s help, the

numbers shifted. Now, we are stable and have little to no worries of attack and the men are feeling the lack.”

Nasha looked toward her ladies who were exchanging gazes with some of the battered and bruised men who had fought and flexed for their entertainment. “Well, I think we have an answer for five of them, ten if the men share.”

He choked on his wine and gave her a look. “Kalowell men don’t share.”

“Good to know. You have set my mind at ease.” She started in on her food.

Thorn gave her a dark look and set to his own meal.

It took her quite a while to finish the enormous pile of food that he had piled on her plate and she was groaning when the last mouthful was done.

Thorn nodded to her and lifted her to her feet at his side. The room fell silent. “One week from today, Lady Nasha of Fano and I will be joined in marriage. Her people will begin arriving in a few days and everyone is to extend every courtesy so that they will be at home.”

The men stood and saluted again, the grunt and shout rang to the rafters.

“In other news, Captain Haros, present yourself.”

From the ranks of the troops, a man stood and walked to stand before the head table.

Other captains seated on the other end of the table scowled.

“Captain, for your service to the keep and the loyalty of your men, I promote you to the rank of general. A space left open by the departure of Alsco.”

Haros flushed and cast a glance toward the head table. Orial blushed at his direct gaze. “Thank you, Lord Thorn. I will do my best to prove worthy of the honour.” He bowed sharply and with one more glance at Orial, he faced his lordship.

“As general, you will be responsible for greeting the new arrivals. Perhaps one of their own would ease the tensions of the first meetings. Lady Orial, would you discuss the needs of your people with the general on the morrow?”

Nasha fought her smile. He had noticed it as well. Good for him.

“Of course, Lord Kalowell. I will confer with my lady and relay her wishes for when our people arrive.” Lady Orial stood and curtsied.

Haros moved toward Orial and extended his hand over the table. When she extended hers, he kissed the back of her hand. “I will seek you after breakfast, Lady Orial.”

Nasha stifled a giggle as Oriol snatched her hand back when laughter broke out in the room. "You could take lessons from him, Thorn."

"I will work on my techniques." He chortled and led her from the table.

As their departure dismissed the others, several men came to her ladies and made introductions, but a watchful Tonio stood by, keeping all comers from Mithwai with dark looks that meant business.

Her soul lighter than it had been in weeks, Nasha paced along with her companion to her new chambers. She gasped at the lovely and feminine rooms as she opened one door after another.

The bedroom was done in a beautiful silvery grey. "These rooms are lovely. Thank you."

"They were my mother's. Your ladies will be in rooms to either side."

"Wonderful. I wonder how long it will be until they are coupled up themselves." Idly she unlaced the shoulders of her gown before starting on the clasps.

"What are you doing?" He was watching her with rapt attention

"Getting ready for bed. Tomorrow will be a busy day." She undid the clasps from the bottom up and when

the last clasp released, the silky embroidery slid to the floor.

She held her chain away from her body and smiled brightly as she turned her back to move toward the bed. “Goodnight.”

Her striptease had its desired effect. He lifted her off her feet and came down on top of her with the bed breaking her fall.

He pinned her arms over her head and started a slow series of kisses that began at her hairline and worked down her face. She was leaning up to return his kiss, but he moved away, trailing kisses down her neck.

She arched under his attentions, sliding one leg up on the outside of his, her paler skin gleaming against the dark of his trousers. He gripped her buttock and rolled with her toward the headboard. She blinked up at him, bemused until she heard the tinkle of a chain and a click.

He had fastened her to the headboard.

With her in place, he levered off her and stripped in a flurry of clothing and flesh. Seconds later, he slid over her and into her in one slow move that shocked her.

The simple act of confinement had set her body aflame.

He began with a slow rocking thrust, which he

stopped to suckle and bite at her breasts. He surged into her again and hard friction sent her into a shivering orgasm that he rode through. When she stilled, he started moving again, shifting his hips and slamming into her with an intensity that brought cries from her throat with every thrust. Her second climb to orgasm was slower, but he had the determination to bring her to the edge and her scream was muffled by his shout as her body twisted and gripped him unmercifully.

He fell to one side and unclipped her chain before pulling her against him.

She snuggled into his embrace and breathed deeply of their scent.

“They let us have this one to ourselves.” Her amazement was unmistakable.

“They will wait until we are wed. Eshkar told me as much. They don’t want our child born out of legality.”

She sighed. “Things would be simpler if we weren’t us.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead as she started to drift. “If we weren’t us, we would never have met, so I will take whatever Eshkar brings from this point on without complaint. In you, I have the one thing I never thought to wish for.”

She smiled sleepily against his neck. “Haros can now take lessons from you.”

His chuckle soothed her into a dream-filled sleep where children with blue and lavender eyes played endless rounds of hide and seek and the stars were content.

Author's Note

Welcome to my one hundredth solo story. That's right 100! Yes, there have been co-writes, yes, there have been teeny stories for the anthologies of Extasy books, but for books that depended solely on me, this was number 100.

Whee!

An odyssey that started on February 14th, 2006 with Wardstone has now spanned over five universes and nine series has now reached a point that I never thought I would achieve.

Not all of the books may be gold, but they are out and someone has enjoyed them somewhere.

Thank you for picking up *Captive of the Stars*. It marks the fourth book of the Hashka Chronicles, a series I enjoy writing simply for the fact that I don't have to cross the books or make room for a sequel.

Viola Grace

viola@violagrace.com

<http://www.violagrace.com>

<http://www.devinedestinies.com>

<http://www.extasybooks.com>

<http://behindtheebbooks.blogspot.com/>

About the Author

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

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