

CHASM

A woman with dark hair and red lipstick, wearing a white strapless corset-style dress, stands barefoot in a dark, rocky, and cavernous landscape. Two black crows are perched on the rocks; one is on the left, looking towards the woman, and the other is on the right, facing away from her. The background is a deep red and pinkish glow. The title 'CHASM' is at the top in a stylized, colorful font.

Viola
Grace

Razi has been digging into the past of the Alliance for years, but now that she has found the Oefric origin world, she has a problem. The world is disintegrating at an alarming rate so if they are going to find the origin of this species, they have to work quickly. Ailan and Eckhar are her assigned assistants and despite their being unfamiliar with dig sites, they have one other trait that irritates her, they claim that she is their own. A fall and interference from a determined AI change her attitudes toward her new mates in a way she cannot deny.

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Chasm
A Terran Times Novella

By

Viola Grace

Chapter One

Razi Nelson fought to keep her excitement under control. The ancient ruins were crumbling, but they were recognizable.

She was on the Oefric origin world and if she didn't hurry, it would be lost forever. She started her recorders, flicking them on around the huge expanse. When passing the doorway, she looked over at the two shuttles huddled side by side. Her companions hadn't woken with the false dawn like she had, so she had the endless morning to keep her company.

Back on earth, she had loved history. Being an archaeologist in the Alliance was something that she had never dreamed of back home, but after she volunteered, her life changed.

She had a talent for the old and ancient, her mind fairly hummed when she got close to a new discovery.

Finding the hidden files in the depths of an ancient

ship's navigation log had caused a stir in the Oefric community. While she was allowed to go on the first exploratory mission to the world depicted in the files, she had to bring two Oefric scientists with her.

Ailan Dar and Eckhar Minkoss were not her idea of scientists. No nerd back on earth had ever sent her heart pounding in her chest, nor had they ever looked like they could have played football. These two were the standard Oefric height, well over six feet tall, and while they were of different families, both had inky black hair.

Razi smiled and bustled about, her recorders scanning and catching every inch of the remains of the great hall. Dawn would come soon enough and with it, her new companions would rise, stretch and she would start drooling. She had heard from other Terrans that the right Oefric at close range was irresistible and she was beginning to suspect that they knew what they were talking about.

With her machines scanning away, she returned to her shuttle for the matter of a late breakfast. She assembled her meal, put it on a tray and took a seat on her makeshift porch. The steps to her shuttle made a comfortable chair and she watched the morning caress the mountains of the dead world. Haskar would have been a lovely world if it

had still been living and thriving, but now, shifts in gravity were pulling it apart and creating a new surface by destroying the old.

This world had been reshaping itself for a thousand years and its transformation was the reason that the Oefric had left. The origin of their species was a past fogged in time. This was the last opportunity to see the dim remains of a fantastic evolution.

She looked over at the other shuttle, so sleek and elegant compared to the serviceable lines of her own, and smiled. The origin of their civilization was all around them and they were sleeping through it.

Razi was done and watching her scanning bots work their way through the site by the time their shuttle opened and they wandered out with breakfast in their hands. They had trousers on this morning that was a nice yet depressing change.

“Morning, Ailan, Eckhar. The scanners are doing their work and the bots are taking measurements.” She brushed crumbs off her suit as they admired the sunrise.

Ailan finally took in the bots that were quietly chortling and moving around the site. “How long have you been up, Razi?”

“A few hours. I just couldn’t sleep, so I got to work.”

Razi smiled at him.

“You should have woken us.” Eckhar held his beverage in one hand while scrubbing his face with the other.

She chuckled. “Why should you lose sleep just because I am an insomniac?”

“The ruins won’t last long. We need to examine every inch of it before the planet takes it back.” Ailan leaned against her ship and sipped at his tea.

“That is why I started the exam bots and the recorders.” She lifted her data pad and tried to ignore the naked torso within arm’s reach.

The Oefric bred for intelligence and skill as well as beauty, but their stunning looks tended to be the overwhelmingly noticeable trait. By Terran standards, they were too good looking for any human woman’s hormones. She had no idea what Terran men thought of Oefric women, but the few females she had seen were definite stunners.

Eckhar nodded. “We will get to work then. May I add that you are looking lovely this morning?” His bright green eyes twinkled with mischief.

Ailan cleared his throat. “I concur. Your hair gleams in the light of dawn.”

Razi smiled, fighting a laugh. “You are both prettier than I am and you are aware of it. Just let me put this dish away and we can start decoding the remains of the signage.”

She stood and returned to the interior of her shuttle, setting the dish cycle to clean. The data was already streaming into her devices and her early start was paying off.

Basic training in the Alliance had given her the basics of interspecies mating habits, but even with the reproductive clause in her contract, she had never expected to be on the receiving end of a courtship. It had never occurred to her that the Alliance would enforce the requirement that Terrans find matches in the handful of compatible species.

The Oefric that were here with her were prospects, chosen from over a hundred candidates, several of whom were of the Oefric species. They were just the best matches out of the bunch.

Eckhar was a historian, Ailan an anthropologist, both of which were complementary to her Alliance training as an archaeologist. It was a good match on paper, but she still wasn't keen on the idea of taking two men as spouses.

The day before yesterday they had met for the first time when they landed. Yesterday had been a planning and settling-in day, she was staying in her shuttle, they in theirs. Today would be their first day working together.

Razi smiled and when all was set and put away, she returned to her companions.

“Okay, shall we get what we came for and preserve what we can?”

“You might be able to get what you came for...” Eckhar started, but Ailan covered his mouth with one hand.

Ailan grinned. “Yes, let’s get to work.”

Eyeing them suspiciously, Razi grabbed her equipment and entered the ruins, starting near the great crevice that was threatening the structure.

She was into her notes for two hours before she looked around for them. Ailan was within earshot. “How did your people realize that their world was going to shift?”

“Our animal forms are very sensitive to alterations in electromagnetic currents. When they had enough information, it was decided that evacuating was the best option.” He came closer as he spoke.

“I see. I am guessing that there aren’t many records

from back then.”

He chuckled and sat next to her. “Not really. In a thousand years, most records turn into myth. We are as eager for this information as you are. We have no idea what really happened or how we came to our new home world.”

She chuckled. “That must suck.”

His grin was engaging and she spent a little too long on watching the chiselled plane of his jaw and the clear cut of his lips. He winked as he caught her looking.

“Sorry. I can’t help it. I haven’t been this close to one of your species before.”

“Ask anything that comes into your thoughts.” Ailan gave her a wicked grin.

She laughed and asked the question just as Eckhar came running toward them. “Fine. Are you allergic to wearing shirts or is it just your audience?”

Ailan barked a laugh and was going to answer when the ground shifted under her and a harsh rumbling took over her senses.

She stood and turned to run, but before she took three steps, the floor under her feet gave way and she was falling. Hoarse shouts from the surface followed her while she flipped end over end and collided with the

walls.

Chapter Two

The air was stale and dusty, her arm was throbbing as well as one of her legs and she wanted to be back in her shuttle and under the covers. Her head was pounding with her pulse and the coppery smell of her own blood was starting to take over everything.

She heard the shrieking of birds and two large black ravens swirled over her head before landing at her side. The birds were huge, but the men they transformed into were blessedly familiar.

“Stay still, Razi.” Ailan was on her left and examining her limbs.

“Will do.” The words came out on a groan as his hands found the break in her arm.

Eckhar grinned down at her with a worried tension around his lips. “You are going to kick yourself when you

wake up, Razi.”

She gritted her teeth and a high-pitched whine broke free. “Why?”

“You have found the design centre.”

Her focus gained immediate clarity that distracted her from Ailan’s hands on her leg straightening the limb. “The what?”

“Oefric are a designed race. We know it, but have never been able to find our originating lab. Guess where we are right now?”

Eckhar was doing an excellent job of distracting her. She tried to move her head and Ailan barked, “Stay still. Doctor’s orders.”

She stilled. “I thought you were an anthropologist.”

Both of them chuckled. “A necessary fiction. Our government did not think you would respond well to a doctor and an enforcer courting you.”

She smiled, but the throbbing in her head became deafening. When he pulled her leg straight, blackness rushed toward her and swallowed her whole.

A peculiar trilling accompanied her return to the world. When she tried moving her fingers with a slow and careful attention, the sound stopped.

“So, you have rejoined us. Ailan will be happy. He nearly tore his hair out trying to get this old medical equipment running, but he did and here you are.” Eckhar lifted the hand with the wiggling fingers and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

She stared at the forearm where she was sure bone had pierced flesh. “There is repair equipment here?”

Ailan entered the small bright room. “Yes. Antiques, but they still work if you splice components together with regular communicators and curse a lot.”

“The cursing is an integral component I am sure.” Razi shifted her legs. While the previously broken leg ached, it felt almost normal compared to the remembered agony. “How fixed am I?”

“A few weeks of light walking and you will be able to drop into chasms again. You are lucky to have survived.” Ailan was checking her palms and the surprisingly intact boots. “How is it that your shoes survived?”

She chuckled and struggled to sit up. They quickly reached to help her get into an upright posture. “Masuo. I have a friend stationed on Morganti and it just grows wild there.”

“You have a friend in the Sector Guard?”

“I have friends everywhere. It is one of the bonuses to

a travelling lifestyle. I have been on over twenty worlds, many of which had a representative from my own species posted there. We get around.”

She chuckled and sent a signal to the Masuo. The living boots stretched upward and formed a rigid cast around her calves, up to the knees. Her bones were not going anywhere.

“Too bad they didn’t do that on the way down.” Eckhar was watching her legs as the living pods settled into place.

“They did, or there would have been far more damage. I clawed at the walls and dug in with my feet to slow myself. It worked. I should have been dead.”

Razi wiggled her feet off the edge of the bed she was sitting on and with their help once again, she lifted herself to a standing position. “Where are we exactly?”

Ailan supported her as she took a few steps. “We appear to be in the underground labs where our shapeshifting abilities were opened wide.”

She looked at the interior of the chamber. “It was in this pristine condition this whole time?”

“No, you were out for over three days. We did a little housekeeping.”

Eckhar smirked. “We started up the maintenance bots

and they did the housekeeping. Ailan fussed over you while I molested the mainframe.”

Eagerness swamped her. “You got it all?”

“As much as I could. Parts of the memory are still being repaired.”

Razi shifted toward the door and picked up speed with every step. Her leg was sore, but her mind was sparking with eagerness to explore.

Small bots hummed along the floor, vacuuming and whirring as they went. Razi stepped aside and let a few pass, then followed them to a huge chamber filled with medical slabs and computer banks. Tanks lined one wall, each as pristine as the day they were decommissioned.

Before giving in to her urge to explore, she asked. “Is the area stable?”

Eckhar nodded. “For now. The planet is still active, but the area we are in should be fine for a few more days.”

The waves of energy that had caused the tectonic shift would be back.

“Where is the power coming from?” She was examining every console in her path.

“Geothermal. The earthquake raised the water table back to the point where the equipment could activate.”

As she stared at the tech in front of her, a series of

lights began to flash. They went from black to crimson and faded to a bright white. “What are these?”

Eckhar leaned over her shoulder and examined the panel. “They appear to be indicators of the processor function.”

Razi chuckled. “I don’t think I am going to push those buttons just yet, or not until I have my equipment back. Did any of it survive the fall?”

The look on his face told her all she needed to know. “That bad, huh?”

“It was worse than you could imagine. If Ailan had not gotten the tank working, you would have been dead the day you fell.”

She paled, her normally chalky skin going a little grey. “You had to use a tank? If there wasn’t a base sample for comparison, what did you use?”

Ailan was leaning against the doorframe, looking a little sheepish. “We had to use our own DNA for the primer. All of the systems here had been purged.”

Razi absorbed that information. She looked around and took a seat near one of the terminals. “I see. I guess there wasn’t time for another way.”

Ailan looked at her. “You were dying and hauling you out of here was out of the question. By the care and

maintenance agreement I signed with the Alliance, it was well within the scope of my decision as your physician.”

“Ah. Now about that. If you are a physician, what are you, Eckhar? And why did you deceive me?”

Eckhar bowed and winked, his dark hair blocking the golden hue of his eyes. “I am a master of military service. I have been an enforcer for the colony for the last twenty years.”

Ailan answered the other question. “The elders said you would be more receptive if we appeared to share your occupation...so we lied.”

Chapter Three

A wave of weakness struck her and she leaned heavily on the console. Her hand flipped a switch, a tiny little switch, and the room's systems roared to life.

Eckhar was at her side and staring at her hand. "Razi, what was that switch?"

She jerked her hand back quickly. "I only know conversational Oefric. What do you think it says?"

Ailan shoved her aside and stared at the console. "Oh dear, this isn't going to be good."

"What? What did I do?" She was catching their worry.

An answer wasn't coming from them. Around the room, bots whirred to life and approached them. A burst of gas emanated from the vents in the ceiling and everything went dark.

Floating in a tank wasn't a new experience for her, but the general ache in her body was. A voice came to her through the speakers in the fluid and rippled into her. She was wearing a breather, but the rest of her was naked.

"Welcome, human." The voice was feminine but monotone.

"Um. Hello." Her words were hollow to her own ears, but they were recognizable.

The voice casually mentioned. "I have subdued your companions."

"Who are you?"

"Nala. The mind of this facility."

Razi looked up to the opening of the tank and gauged her odds of making it out.

"Do not attempt to escape. Your reworking is almost complete."

A trill of dread ran down Razi's spine. "My what?"

"This facility creates shifters. Your companions are already full-blooded with mastery of their bodies. You require additional adjustment."

"I am not Oefric, I am Terran. There is no reason for adjustment." Reasoning was her only recourse as her body tensed with panic.

“It is a requirement before any personnel leave this facility. You are not an employee or management.”

She considered her options. “Where are my companions?”

“They are restrained in the outer quarters. They were quite insistent that you not be altered, but that would go against my protocols.”

“I see. What alterations have you engaged in?”

“You have been enhanced with Oefric genes. Your body will soon be able to shift shape and accommodate your mates as well.”

Her body shook with shock. “Please define the alterations.”

“Physically, you will be able to mate with both of your males at the same time. It is a wish in their minds that my scanners determined to be a primary concern. With the alterations, you need never choose between them.” Nala’s monotone took on a smugness that irritated the hell out of Razi.

Shock ran through her as she floated in the liquid. The mask kept her from looking down so she quickly ran her hands down her torso, relieved when she only found two breasts. With a sense of dread, she continued her exploration to her clit, further to her slit and with a blank

mind, she found her second slit beyond it. Her rectum had been relocated an inch northward.

Thrashing around in the tank, screaming invectives into the mask was not productive, but it exhausted her until she could do nothing but pant into the mask.

“Your blood pressure is too high. I will sedate you until the procedure is complete.”

“No, no...” Razi felt her consciousness give way and she floated into blackness.

“Razi. Razi, wake up.” Ailan was holding her and her body was still shining with the liquid from the tank.

A ripple of sensation ran through her skin. It wasn't arousal, a strange energy was inside her and trying to crawl out of her skin.

“Let me at that damned AI. I want to see if it can feel pain.”

Eckhar snorted in relief. “Thank goodness. We thought she killed your personality.”

Razi sat up, Ailan's arm behind her. “What the hell did she do to me?”

Her skin rippled again and she flinched as the visible creeping moved down her arm to her fingertips. “What the hell is that?”

Ailan whispered in her ear. “Calm down. The change will come on you if you don’t calm down and this is not the place for it.”

She hissed, “What change?”

“From her lecture, she treated you to an Oefric reset. Your genes are being rewritten to make you into a shapeshifter.”

“Fuck.”

Ailan and Eckhar looked at each other and grinned.

Ailan admitted, “I haven’t heard you curse before.”

“I save it for special occasions.” She looked around and grimaced. “Where are we?”

“Nala had the bots dump you in here. We are in a holding cell.”

The walls were blank. Half a dozen bunks were around the exterior of the room. There was a small dispenser on one wall and a tiny lav enclosure.

“Why did she dump me in here if she was done with her tampering?”

The hated voice came through a minute speaker at the top of the wall. “You will not be released from this facility until you are proven to be a working shifter. At that point, you will be allowed to leave. Not before.”

Razi tried to reason with the computer. “You don’t

understand. This facility is going to be destroyed. The tectonic waves are getting closer.”

“I am aware of the degradation of the local strata. It does not mean that a defective Oefric will be allowed to leave. You were brought here to be changed and you shall not leave until you are complete.”

Frustrated, she yelled, “How long will that take?”

“That is up to you. You cannot leave until you take another form so your mates had better work to help you. The moment you shift, you are free.”

Razi was gearing up to yell, but Eckhar clamped a hand over her mouth. “Calm down, Razi. You are experiencing Oefric history in person. Consider it an experience most archaeologists would kill for.”

She snorted and glared up at him with narrowed eyes until he freed her. “That would be an anthropologist. I would be content to simply observe.”

Her skin rippled again and she gasped.

Eckhar sighed. “Calm down. Your first change will be run by adrenaline if you are not careful. That is not a good way to start.”

Muttering to herself, she left the men and went to one of the cots. A few short yanks later and she was wearing a sheet, toga fashion. “That is better. I am in favour of

public nudity as long as it doesn't involve me."

They seemed surprised but gestured for her to take a seat on the floor of the cell.

Ailan asked. "Do you want to shift quickly?"

"I have no idea, what are my options?"

Eckhar sat on her right, Ailan on her left in a strange triangle.

"You can do a slow shift, controlled and complete, but you might stall out halfway through. That would leave your transformation incomplete and uncomfortable."

Eckhar continued, "Or you can focus on an image in your mind, get your adrenaline high and shift quickly."

Razi weighed her options. "Like ripping off a bandage."

Ailan nodded. "Something like that."

She bit her lip and noted the tightening of Eckhar's jaw.

"How exactly will I get the necessary adrenaline going?" She grunted as her skin rippled again.

"Fear, pain, anger or arousal. The choice is yours."

She blinked. "Any one of those?"

Her companions nodded.

Ailan spoke in a low and calming tone. "It is your first

transformation, you can choose. At home, family would guide your first change. Here, we will stand in for the elders of your clan.”

“I would vote for fear, but neither of you scare me. Anger is not a constructive emotion and I don’t want to remember my first shift like that. Pain isn’t really my thing.” She hesitated before finishing her thought. “I suppose that just leaves hormones as my route to shifting.”

Eckhar held up a hand. “Not that we don’t appreciate it, but we don’t want you shifting or fighting for control whenever we are together. Are you sure that this is the method you want for your first shift?”

She ran her fingers through the damp tangle of her hair. “I don’t know. What are you thinking?”

“We have ways to trigger all of those emotions in this space. You need only give your authorization.” Ailan leaned forward, a peculiar light in his eyes.

“Will you stop if I say no?”

“You will need another word. Something that you would not say in reflex.” Eckhar was stripping off his shirt while Ailan removed his boots.

“Why are you removing your clothing? You can shift with it on, can’t you?” She was getting nervous and the

tremor in her skin became more visible.

“We can, but the arousal factor is easier if we are able to engage in skin-to-skin contact.”

Ailan stripped off his shirt and Razi’s mouth watered.

“Razi, I want you to concentrate on an animal that you think of frequently. Fur or feathers, claws or paws. Every detail you can think of should be there.”

Eckhar removed his trousers and stood straight, his eyes glowing and gaze fixed firmly on her. She couldn’t help but notice the enticing curve of his erection, including the drop of glistening fluid on the broad head.

Her heart began to beat heavily, moisture emanated from her core and an aroused lassitude came over her.

When Ailan completed disrobing, she bit her lip. She couldn’t quite believe what she was seeing. They were both facing her, both aroused and her body was starting to shake with instincts that did not belong to her species.

They did nothing, simply stood there with precum beginning to drip from their cocks. At an unseen signal, they moved and the faces that she was used to shifted into feral animals with open jaws and flashing eyes.

Razi screamed and flung her hands up, hiding her face from their attack, but they brought her to the ground and held her there while their jaws tore at the wrap she was

wearing. Teeth flashed, fabric tore and two pairs of clawed hands held her while the shifters eyed their meal.

Her skin was pulsing rapidly now—fear, arousal and confusion driving her body into a welter of conflicting signals.

Teeth fixed on her limbs at random intervals, not piercing, but pressing hard enough to bring a prickle of pain to her. Her eyes watered and then widened in surprise when tongues replaced the teeth.

Ailan had taken on a feline head, Eckhar a wolf's. The rough versus smooth tongue ran over her breasts, down her ribs and between her thighs with a random frenzy of tasting and caressing.

Razi winced when Ailan moved between her thighs, lapping with his barbed tongue. Her body didn't care what the stimulator looked like, as long as it got what it needed. The arousal spiralled to dizzying heights as his tongue scraped her clit, delved into her channel and then dug deep.

When he removed his tongue from her channel, she thought he was done, but as he dug into her second channel, she found extra sensations that the moronic AI had installed in her. Nerves that had not been wired for this purpose woke under the methodical scrape of the

feline appendage.

He lapped obsessively at her, a deep purr coming from his chest.

Eckhar held her neck between his teeth in warning before his attentions turned to her breasts and shoulders.

She was trembling under the dual onslaught, the difference in sensation enough to make her dizzy. Just when she thought she would shatter in orgasm, they both retreated.

A roar of frustration followed amazement. She lunged up, intent on straddling one of them to find satisfaction. They were waiting for her move.

The moment she was up off her back, they flipped her to her belly and drew her up on her knees. Her skin was vibrating violently and the moment that Ailan moved behind her to bite the nape of her neck while caressing between her thighs with his claws, she shifted.

The world was brighter, smells stronger. Her own arousal was heavy in the air, but so was the scent of male. Their musk made her shake her head and twitch her whiskers. She was panting, but her body felt wonderful, as if every cell she had had sneezed at the same time.

When her acute vision took in her mates, a low growl

came from her throat.

They thought they had the right to tease her and it was not the case. She could and would teach them that they could not arouse her and then leave her to shift into a bobcat.

Eckhar shifted completely into a wolf, Ailan a lion and they stalked her, low snarls in their throats.

She lunged and swiped her claws along Ailan's rear flank.

Eckhar got his claw on the front shoulder.

She hunched low and lashed her tail, waiting for the response.

Razi, can you hear me?

She blinked and tilted her head in surprise. *Ailan, yes, I can.*

You need to shift back now.

She shook her head, loving the feel of her fur shifting with her motions. *Why? I like this form.*

It is dangerous to let the instincts take hold. For the first few shifts, you need to make them short and complete.

This is complete. She stretched in a slow showing of her wonderful new shape.

Now it is time to make it short. Come back to us.

Her cat form snorted. *Spoilsport.*

Eckhar rumbled in her mind, his wolf form nuzzling her side. *If you shift back to human form, we will be released from this place and can return to the surface.*

She scowled, her furry face wrinkling. *Well, if we can get out to where I can run free...How do I change back?*

Just relax and concentrate on your human form. Thinking of your hands does the best job.

With that advice, Razi walked in slow circles until she took up a sphinx-like pose. She stared down at her paws and concentrated. Fingers...thinking of fingers.

Her hands shifted back to flesh with no fur. She looked at the pale expanse of her nail beds and the long middle fingers on each hand. Her body was suddenly cold where the metal floor pressed against her.

“Well, I am back. That was fun.” Her voice was hoarse to her own ears and with a little concentration, she was back to normal. A light clearing of her throat tested pitch and when it sounded right, she nodded.

Ailan and Eckhar joined her on two legs. They quickly dressed and she couldn’t help but watch all that muscled flesh disappear with a certain amount of disappointment.

Eckhar nodded. “Nala should let us out of here now.”

The voice came through the loudspeaker. “You have met the transformation criteria. You are free to go. Be a proud member of the Oefric species, serve your masters well.”

Eckhar wrapped a hand around Razi’s mouth as she opened it to screech at the computer. She was no male’s slave.

The door to their cell opened and they left. Her Oefric companions lifted her off her feet to haul her out of the find of the century.

Chapter Four

Her boots were the only piece of clothing that was in one piece when they got to the outer chamber where the bots had come upon them. The remainder of her garments had been shredded.

Razi glared at the men while she put her feet in the boots and relaxed as they wrapped their way up past her knees. Thigh-high boots were not in her normal fashion sense, but extraordinary times called for bizarre measures.

Ailan brought a medical sheet to her and she wrapped it around herself while muttering.

Her companions kept quiet and Razi knew why. Nala may be an AI, but many computers had come up with logical paths to explain unusual decisions. It was time to get back to safety as quickly as possible.

The chasm that had swallowed her and started this whole mess loomed above them. “How am I going to get up that?”

Ailan stepped in front of her and turned his back. “Climb on. We agreed to take turns bringing you to the surface. I will carry you for the first leg and when I tire, you will climb to Eckhar’s back. Together, we will all get to safety.”

Razi leaned back and murmured to Eckhar, “Do you still have the recordings?”

At his nod, she smiled, “Then let’s go.” She hopped onto Ailan’s back and held tight as he shifted his hands into elongated claws and started pulling her to the surface.

Eckhar was in a similar shape, long bodied, long claws and feet that resembled hands quite closely. They moved up the rough walls of the chasm rapidly, but daylight was a tiny slit far above for a very long time.

Razi’s arms ached and her legs were cramping, so she could only imagine what Ailan was feeling with her wrapped around him.

When he stopped and made a coughing noise, Eckhar was at their side in an instant. The transfer had sounded acceptable when they were on the ground, but stuck to a

rough wall with a drop that almost killed her once, it was an effort of will to let Ailan go and transfer her grip to Eckhar.

They were moving more slowly now but still a steady climb. While the fall had seemed to be almost instant, the re-emergence to the surface took hours.

The edge of the crevice was so welcomed that they all simply lay flat on the ground next to it while their muscles twitched and trembled. Amusing quips were beyond Razi for the first time in her life. She was exhausted and all she had done was to hang on for dear life.

The sun was taunting her, flirting with her lids and warming her hands. Razi groaned, every muscled in her body screaming. With superhuman effort, she sat up and perused her surroundings.

She was still in the chamber with the rift in the floor and Ailan and Eckhar were asleep on either side of her. Blood covered their hands and feet, while cuts and bruises decorated the rest of them.

Razi staggered to her feet, walked slowly to her shuttle and pulled on a ship suit. She snagged her medical kit and returned to her companions. Triage meant that the

long gash on Eckhar's back be tended first. He woke while she was puttering but lay still until she finished sealing the wound.

Ailan was next, the bruises on his biceps and open fingertips on his left hand getting her attention while he blinked at her, pain in his gaze.

She went back and forth treating the more serious injuries, until minor scratches were all that were left. When they were both sitting up and as patched as she could get them, she got some supplies from her shuttle and brought a tray of food and water to them.

"Is anyone going to mention what happened down there?"

Their exhaustion was still obvious, but before they could answer, the ground shook again. En masse, they ran for the shuttles and waited out the earthquake.

Razi's panic ceased when she realized that, wounded as they were, the Oefric were bracketing her on either side with arms around her waist. She wasn't going to fall again.

"I think we need to evacuate this world. We have learned that it was indeed the home of the Oefric species. With the data I was able to grab, we should be able to figure out why the facility was abandoned." Eckhar

leaned back and let Razi get back to her own balance.

“They had to deal with Nala, that’s why.” Her grumble made her companions smile.

The men shared a look over her head. “We need to get you somewhere safe. You need far more medical exams than I have equipment for.”

“Fine, we can send a signal and have an Alliance warship pick us up.”

Ailan disagreed. “I believe that your condition would be best examined by an Oefric medical team. It is definitely a more suitable facility.”

She scowled. “This is an Alliance mission. I will report to them before anything else.”

“Fine. We will leave the surface and dock out of orbit. The planet is becoming far more unstable than we anticipated.” Eckhar seemed to have taken charge and the planet rumbled under their feet in agreement.

Razi could smell the newly tumbled rock, felt the electric discharge in the air. The new senses her body was exercising were distracting. She wanted to get back into pristine and cleaned space where there were no moments of impending death at the hands of the planet you were standing on.

“Fine. We will discuss this off planet. Send that

message to the Alliance first thing, or you are going to hear about it.” She was about to stomp into her shuttle when Eckhar grabbed her arm and pulled her in for a kiss.

Her lips parted and she tasted him for a moment.

Ailan spun her away and overrode Eckhar with his own mouth.

She was breathing hard and fighting to stay on her feet when he let her go. Leaning up against her shuttle, she glared at them both. “Seriously?”

They raised their eyebrows in surprise at her irritation.

Eckhar straightened and asked the question that both of them were thinking, “I beg your pardon?”

“I am about to pilot a ship off a planet in gravitational flux and you just overloaded all of my senses. Jerks.” Snorting, she minced into her shuttle and did a quick inventory. Aside from the destroyed instruments, everything was in place.

Her systems check showed everything was green and she lifted off the surface of Nala’s damned planet before the shuttle could change its mind.

The controls felt a little odd, but she attributed it to the gravitational variance. She was able to lift from the surface and exit the atmosphere with only a few smooth

moves. Once out of the grasp of the planet's gravity, she waited for her companions.

The Oefric ship had a lot less difficulty than she had in separating from the planet. They locked onto her signal and came straight for her without hesitation.

"Razi, we have sent the signal and are preparing to dock. Don't move." Eckhar's voice came clearly through her system speakers.

"Fine. But be gentle. You haven't even bought me dinner yet." She set the systems to passive access and waited.

The Oefric shuttle glided into position, silence ringing through the air in her ship until the moment they made contact. The ships clunked together, the magnetic seals intimately connecting as the grapples fixed to her shuttle.

Razi smiled as she got a travel bag together, tucking it under her bunk.

A polite knock at the door got her attention. The seals were green and she opened her shuttle to her visitor.

Make that visitors. She stood aside to allow them in.

"Your shuttle is very...functional." Ailan was peering into cupboards while Eckhar went straight for the console.

"You can say it. My apartment is ugly. I am used to

the idea already. It has been my home for months at a time at different digs. It is hideous, but it gets me where I need to go.” Razi shrugged.

Eckhar finished what he was working on and turned to them with a bundle of wires in his hand. “I have her.”

“What did you do to my ship?”

“Nala jumped your systems via your communications terminal. She downloaded herself into your steering systems.” He waved the circuits and connectors in the air. “She trapped herself in a closed loop and when you went passive, she was stuck.”

Razi was amazed. “How did you know?”

Eckhar grinned. “You are not that clumsy a pilot. Your trajectory was off, your steering sluggish...and when we contacted you, she tried to jump our systems.”

“That would do it.” Razi examined the object in Eckhar’s hand. “Hold on a moment. Did you just rip out my steering?”

“Our shuttle is locked to yours. We can and will do the piloting for you.” Eckhar put the bundle in a small case.

Ailan found her bag and put it on her bunk. “She may have affected your life support, so we should be going now. Come along, Razi. There is a warship on the way to

pick us up.”

“Good. I can hardly wait to debrief on this one.” She stretched and grabbed her notepads. “Let’s go. I have some questions to ask.”

Ailan bowed with a formal wave to his hand. “We will answer anything that we can. The first change is a time of adjustment for everyone. Normally we are at home and have our families around us. You don’t have that luxury, so we are at your disposal. Now move your ass, it’s getting cold in here.”

Glaring at him, she lifted her chin and moved through the hatch. Her shuttle was behind her and her future followed on her heels.

Chapter Five

When the warship arrived, she didn't have the answers that she wanted. They had shared a meal and all climbed into one of the large bunks to sleep in a tangled heap.

Razi had squirmed around to get comfortable until Ailan pinned her shoulders with one arm and Eckhar draped his legs over hers. Surrounded by warmth and the steady beat of their hearts, she slept.

When her back got cold, she woke. Eckhar was at the controls and they were approaching a huge ship. Ailan had her cuddled against him and she really didn't want to move.

Eckhar turned and spoke to her. "They are prepping medical teams. We all need a good going over and Ailan isn't in any condition to do it."

She looked at the man who had her in his arms and

noticed the pallor of his skin. There was a fever in his flesh and she couldn't see the cause.

“What is wrong with him?”

“The bots worked us over while we were trying to get to you. I am fairly certain that they did some internal damage to Ailan, but he insisted on carrying you out of that crevice.”

She stroked the dark hair away from Ailan's forehead as the twined shuttles parked in a brightly lit hangar. The emergency hatch was blown from the exterior and a swarm of medics charged in.

“Please let him go, miss. We need to care for him.” The kindly faced man had the scent of a feline with feathers.

Razi nodded her head and reluctantly released Ailan into their custody. She sat up and a kindly older female was sitting nearby.

Eckhar joined his own batch of medics and that left Razi with the stranger.

“Hello, Razi Nelson. I hear that you have just had your first shift.” The woman's face was concerned as was her posture. Everything about her was calm and nurturing.

“Yes. It was...” A blinding welter of impressions and

memories jammed into her mind in one shot. “Memorable.”

“What form did you take?”

“One from my planet. A bobcat. Large feline with fluffy tufts of fur.”

“How did it feel?”

“Comfortable. Natural. I really wanted to run.” The words came out in a rush and she felt that it was a confession of sorts.

The woman smiled in relief. “That is natural. I am Matron Hailial. I act as a counsellor on the ship and am glad that you had a relatively easy change.”

The welter of fangs, fear, arousal and the strange energy that she had felt played back in her thoughts. “That is not how I would categorize it.”

“Trust me, the amount of tangled first shifts would astonish you. Most of our folk have been trained since childhood to prepare for it, but they still panic at the moment of the shift.” Hailial smiled. “Please, Razi, come with me to medical and we will find out how a transformation from Terran to Oefric happens.”

Razi got to her feet and put her hand in that of the counsellor. “I can tell you how it happens, you accidentally turn on an ancient AI and she carries out her

protocols on any non-Oefric life form.”

“I still can’t believe that you found the original factory that created our race.” Hailial tugged her out of the ship and into the shuttle bay.

The men on duty lifted their heads as she passed. A light scenting of her that she found unnerving. “Why do they do that?”

“Do what?”

“Scent females when they pass. I noticed my companions doing the same the first time we met.”

Hailial chuckled. “Masculine nature. They are genetically programmed to pass on their bloodlines. Any likely candidate merits further study.”

Razi snorted. “How flattering.”

“You get used to it. At least they fight their more base nature and do their scenting from a distance.”

The interior of the ship was not like standard Alliance vessels and it suddenly struck Razi that everyone she had seen was an Oefric. “This isn’t an Alliance ship, is it?”

Hailial smiled. “We are affiliated, but your males judged that we could do a better job acclimating you to your new situation than an Alliance crew that would study you before helping you adapt.”

“You don’t plan to study me?”

“Of course we do. We just will do it as you learn and adapt. You are the first first-generation Oefric that most of us have ever heard of. This is a valuable opportunity for us to learn how our people came to be the society we have today.”

They were moving at a steady pace, but it was still unnerving for Razi to have men turn their heads before she came into visual range. The air channels on the ship had to be sending the pheromones ahead of them.

Medical was bustling with personnel. Each of her men had a swarm of physicians and assistants around them. Ailan was receiving surgery while Eckhar was being hooked up for supplements.

A separate room was set aside for Razi. She lay on the scanning bed and waited.

A female physician came through the doors with a smile on her face. “Please remove your Masuo. They will interfere with the scan.”

Razi sat up and pulled her boots off, allowing the Masuo to turn into a boot-shaped slumping mass.

“Thank you, now please lay back, miss.”

Shrugging at Hailial, Razi lay back and relaxed as the bands of light cascaded over her. It took a few minutes and the physician made amazed noises a few times, but

when it was finished, the doctor was at her side with a full-on grin.

“Your body is amazing. I have your pre-assignment scans and you are a completely new woman. An Oefric woman. Are you aware that the program altered your sexual organs?”

Razi sat up with a grimace. “Yes. She mentioned it.”

“That configuration has not been seen in my people for generations.”

“Wonderful. Now I feel like even more of a freak.”

The doctor put a hand on her shoulder and gave her a serious look. “You are not a freak. You are an Oefric woman who was raised on Terra. There is nothing odd in that. Many of your folk have been redesigned to suit mates of different species.”

“I know, but this is different. I am not a Terran who got tweaked to make breeding possible. I was changed into something that could change shape! That is not a normal human activity. Ever.” She let a few fat tears fall. Her frustration at the change finally came out and Hailial was there to put an arm around her.

Razi snivelled. “You were waiting for this.”

“I was. I know that the Terrans are an admirable race, but no one is that well-adjusted. Let it out. You have a

right to mourn the loss of what you once were.”

With the permission out in the open, her companions in medical care and her frustrations at her new status as something completely different, she wailed like an infant.

The doctor and counsellor waited until she was done and then they hauled her out into the main chamber to face her doom.

Chapter Six

Eckhar was sitting up, but Ailan was still unconscious.

A peculiar trembling hit Razi and she heard a tearing sound as she ended up on all fours, her feline body a welcome refuge from the emotional storm she was feeling.

She jumped up on Ailan's bed and carefully lowered her body against his, purring and rubbing her face against his jaw line.

The physicians moved toward her, but Hailial and the female doctor stopped them.

She felt fingers in her fur, stroking and rubbing at the muscles of her chin and neck.

"Hey, Razi. Nice shift. Next time, take your clothing off first." Ailan's tired voice came to her pricked ears.

She let out a low purr and he chuckled.

When two strong arms pulled her off her mate, she yowled and clawed the air. It was horrifying to be awkward and helpless, all four feet flailing in the air.

Eckhar was making calming noises. "Shift back, Razi, bring your body back to normal."

She yowled again and flailed, making angry noises.

"Come back to yourself, Razi. Ailan is going to be fine. I am fine and you are fine. Be yourself again."

She huffed and stared at her paws. They shifted quickly to fingers and hands and she was left in Eckhar's embrace wearing the shredded remains of her clothing.

"How come you can shift in clothes?"

"Our clothing is designed for it, pet. I promise to get you a set of clothing that will shift when you do as soon as we get back home."

A medical assistant came forward with a shift and Eckhar helped her out of her shredded ship suit and into the tunic. Ailan was grinning at her from his bed and she asked him, "How are you feeling?"

"Waking up with you over me was just the tonic I needed. They managed to correct my internal bleeding and now it is just a matter of time before I can enjoy the feel of you against me again."

Eckhar put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I am

glad you are better. You had me worried.”

“You and me both, old friend.”

One of the doctor’s cleared his throat. “Ailan needs to rest and the captain is waiting to debrief you. The discovery of our origin world is an exciting time in Oefric history.”

Razi grumbled. “I have had quite enough of the excitement of the discovery. I could happily go back to not knowing how your folk came into being.”

The entire room quieted and Hailial took her by the hand. “She has her reasons, folks. Doctor Xishgar will explain.”

Razi was hauled out by the counsellor. Eckhar followed and Ailan was held back by the physicians.

Hailial whispered. “The Oefric are very sensitive about their origins, Razi.”

Eckhar grumbled. “I used to be. Since meeting the AI that shaped us, I am a little more inclined to believe that there are some myths and legends that should remain just that.”

They walked down the hall until they ended up in the captain’s boardroom. He was sitting and working on a data pad, his face focused and intense. When Hailial cleared her throat he looked up and smiled.

To Razi's surprise there was a wealth of affection in his expression. Hailial walked to his side and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Hello, darling. Is everything well?"

He stood and gave his mate a kiss. "The Alliance is demanding that we hand over Ms. Nelson."

"Have you informed them of her condition?"

"Yes, but they want to see it for themselves. Ms. Nelson, I am Captain Althoush. Welcome to the Necorinna."

Razi inclined her head. "Pleased to meet you. Call me Razi."

"Razi then. You have met my mate, Hailial?"

"Obviously. This is one of my companions. Eckhar Minkoss." She finished the introductions and took a seat at the table. There was a case in the centre of the table and Razi just knew that Nala was in there, circling in the circuitry.

Eckhar sat next to her and she would have been lying if she didn't admit that it felt right.

"Good afternoon, Captain. I served with your nephew, Wasser. He's a good fighter and a better enforcer."

Captain Althoush looked pleased and took a seat across from them, his wife at his side. "Thank you. He

does his parents proud.”

“He does indeed. Where would you like us to start?” Eckhar poured water and placed the glass in front of Razi. He poured for himself second, his large hands dwarfing the glass.

Although turned on the recorder and inclined his head to Razi. “Ms. Nelson, please begin when you found the information that led you to the origin world.”

Razi took a sip of water and began.

“The unsorted stockpiles at the Alliance Archive are a treasure trove of information that no one has had time to look at. Those of us in the realm of ancient Alliance studies go diving in frequently to find what we can.”

“A document bundle caught my attention on one of my many trips to the archive. The ribbons that bound it together bore seals that were reminiscent of Oefric symbols. I removed them in one of the study labs and started to go through the information that was in the notebooks and data packs.”

“The notebook was written by a man named Daklin Orbic. He was a third generation Oefric who wanted to record his family’s history and early struggles.”

“He outlined the original creation of your race for war, and when the wars ended, the need for females

became apparent. Because the designers had created a new race built on existing abducted citizens, they could not simply kill your ancestors.”

The captain interrupted her. The other two simply stared in amazement as their history was exposed.

“Abducted citizens? This is the first I have heard of this.”

“The notes explained that his grandfathers had been stolen from their homes because of their existence as Class Zeros.” Razi saw their confusion and filled in the blanks.

“A Class Zero is a person who is born with completely malleable DNA. Some small alterations to their physiology and you can create any kind of creature you wish. They are the ultimate in building blocks for a new race, but they only occur in a one in ten thousand births in the average species.”

She took a slug of water. “May I continue?”

Hailial leaned forward. “In a moment. What do you mean, grandfathers?”

“I am not the only female to be altered by Nala for multiple partners.” She felt Eckhar jerk next to her.

“To concentrate the population and create a maintainable genetic line, the first gen Oefric were

designed for two males minimum to every female. The males' genetics would combine to create a stronger multi shifter, a solid line that could breed true across time."

"Why is it no longer necessary?" Eckhar murmured in her ear.

"The first generation were folk torn from their homes and transformed while in adulthood or late adolescence. They fought for their creators and when they returned to their bases, the creators faced the decision, create breeding females or let their new pets scatter through the universe creating havoc wherever they went."

"Instead of abandoning their project, they kidnapped and created females with genes programmed to intensify the strength of the shape shifter traits."

"Class Zeros?" Hailial was making frantic notes.

"Yes." She drained her glass and put it down on the table with a solid click. "Just like me."

Chapter Seven

Eckhar took her hand and held it while she fought for emotional control.

“The notebook detailed the selection process for the males and females and how his grandfathers respected each other while each was devoted to his grandmother.”

“Does he name her?”

“Iharica Jarel. Her mates were Nico Vosnar and Orvan Kel. She had five children, one of whom was his mother, Narra Orbic. His father was named Hackru.”

Hailial crowed with triumph. “I found them. Their line still continues to this day.”

Razi smiled. “Good. His words were the means by which we ended up here today.”

She continued. “So, after I went through the documents and translated all of the old Oefric, I sent a

mission proposal to the Alliance and the Oefric governments. That is how Ailan and Eckhar came to be involved.”

Eckhar chipped in. “The Oefric councils have found that the Terran women make excellent mates. They are useful members of several colonies and make their mates very happy.”

Razi snorted. “All women love being described as useful. Anyhow...I got the mission funding and authorization I needed and I sent the information to the Oefric council. They had Ailan and Eckhar waiting for me on the jump ship. After that it was three jumps and a quick flight to the surface while we watched the world around us shudder and collapse. The clock was ticking and we had to get what information we could.”

“The first day was simple recon and the next morning we went inside the largest structure. The information was so old it was hard for me to read it, but the recorders fed all the information to my shuttle and you should be able to access the files from here.”

“While examining some of the glyphs and structures a chasm opened in the floor and I fell in. I woke two days later and Ailan had done repairs on me. We were inside the original Oefric design centre.”

Although gasped.

“I accidentally turned on the AI, and it restrained the men and dumped me in a tank. Since I was the only non-Oefric there, Nala decided to remedy the situation by giving my body the original programming given to your ancestors.”

Eckhar took over. “With Razi in the tank the computer tried to test the genetic lines it had created. Nala sent her bots to torture us and while we took damage it was not long before she produced Razi in a pre-shift state.”

“She was going to shift immediately and time was of the essence.”

Hailial looked at her with compassion. Razi felt a little embarrassed.

“We walked her through the shift and as soon as she complete the move, Nala let us leave, burrowing her consciousness into Razi’s computer. As soon as we docked, I ripped out the nav system and here is the creator of our species.” He tapped the box on the centre of the table and sat back.

Razi was exhausted all over again. “Is there somewhere for me to rest? I am suffering a little bit of culture shock at the moment.”

Captain Although straightened. “Of course. Hailial will take you to the VIP suite. Your men can stay with you or you can have them assigned to other quarters.”

She thought about it. She really wanted them close, but not in her bed. Not yet. “Can I think about it?”

Hailial grinned. “Yes. Your room is a suite though, so they can take on the outer room and you can have the bedroom.”

Eckhar lifted her hand to his lips. “As long as we are near and other men aren’t, I am good.”

She snorted. “As if I would have any interest in additional Oefric men.”

His grin blinded her and she closed her eyes for a moment before she turned back to Hailial. “Where is this mythical room?”

Laughing, the captain’s wife stood up and led Razi out of the boardroom and down the hall. The room was keyed to her thumbprint and she entered the room with a sense of relief. The front room had couches and a vid screen as well as a food dispenser.

“I will have some clothing brought for you, but if you are engaging in shift practice you might want to simply wear a robe with a pressure seal. I have some on hand that I will have brought to you in a few hours. For now, I think

some alone time would do you a world of good.”

Razi’s expression must have said it all. With a quick hug, Hailial left her alone to wander the suite or take a nap. All choices were hers.

Fur tickled her nose and she rolled over to escape it. More fur waited on the other side. Sighing, she opened her eyes to find the feline translation of Ailan’s features staring at her.

“That isn’t creepy at all, but I am glad that you are feeling better.” She scratched behind his ears, completely at ease with his body and her own nudity. The rumbling purr made her smile and she backed against Eckhar in his favoured form, the wolf against her spine.

Chortling she rolled to her back and used each hand to pet her males until their eyes were closed happily. She sighed and flopped back, extricating her arms from under them while manoeuvring to sit up.

“So, what are you two up to today?”

They shifted into their normal forms and seeing it close up was fascinating.

Ailan smiled and gave her a soft kiss on her neck. “Shifting practice for you.”

Eckhar nibbled his way across her breast and she

sighed and arched into his mouth. They petted, stroked and warmed her flesh in turn, her body responding to them like a finely tuned instrument.

Her body readied for penetration rapidly making their abandoning of their ministrations a cruel taunt to her system.

“Come along, Razi. Shifting practice.” Eckhar laughed at the evil look that she shot him but he merely rolled away from her and reached back to haul her to her feet.

Ailan followed into the outer room where a folded pile of fabric called her.

“Hailial had these delivered. The dress on top is a simple wrap.” Ailan lifted it and held it out. “It has panels on the side to stretch with your shift. If you forget to remove it, you might be trapped in your clothing, but you won’t be naked.”

She nodded and put the dress on. It had a magnetic seal that would open easily if she forgot to remove it. “How long does it take to get used to being nude in public?”

They shared a look. “It depends on who is in the vicinity. I am sure that your nudity in public will never be comfortable for us.”

She laughed. “Honest at least. Where will I be doing my shifting?”

“There is a gym and exercise facility. It has a track where you can run.” He said the last on a singsong.

“Tease. Let’s go.” She couldn’t help it, she wanted to run.

They left the suite together and walked the halls with Ailan on one side and Eckhar on the other. No other male was allowed near her without receiving a scowl and a snarl from her companions.

Inside the exercise area she took a deep breath, got a confirming nod from her companions and removed her dress. It took a lot of effort to shift with every male in the room staring, but she managed to get into her bobcat form and immediately took off running.

The tail took some getting used to, but even here she wasn’t alone. Ailan was a huge lion on her right, while the enormous black wolf that was Eckhar protected her rear flank from the prying eyes of other males.

A few hardy souls tried to join them on the track but they were quickly shoved to one side as she ran laps until her blood was singing.

Razi finished her run and collapsed next to her gown. She shifted back to her normal shape and struggled into

the wrap dress before she could dwell on public nudity.

With her body covered she sat on a nearby bench and caught her breath. Ailan and Eckhar weren't panting like she was, but they had a bright sparkle to their eyes from the exercise.

She got to her feet and they escorted her from the room. "The tail thing takes some getting used to."

A lighter mood came over them as a group and she had to admit that the joint run had cemented something in her. These were her mates and if she didn't get them to herself soon, she was going to engage in drastic measures.

Chapter Eight

The days took on a strange routine. Each morning she was run through her paces in the exercise room in a number of shapes. She had mastered a bear, wolf, bunny, and most peculiarly, an eagle. Learning to fly was the hardest part of the entire exercise and she crashed into the walls more than once.

Each afternoon was spent in the com room, talking to researchers and Alliance bureaucrats about the Oefric site.

The evenings were spent having dinner with the officers of the ship and her nights were spent in a welter of lust and torture.

Every evening, she woke to her men caressing, teasing and stopping just short of bringing her to orgasm. She went to sleep frustrated and spent the following day

irritated.

At another officer's dinner she was finishing dessert when Eckhar and Ailan stood up, calling everyone's attention.

Eckhar spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen, I, Eckhar Minkoss..."

"And I, Ailan Dar would like to make..."

"Our formal declaration that we are engaged in deliberate courtship of Razi Nelson. Led by instinct and emotional attachment, we are here to declare intent to mate."

"We have found Razi to be a worthy female with emotional stability and a strong talent that will be an asset to our community as well as personal lives."

Captain Although stood and inclined his head. "Your proposal is logged and recorded. When do you wish to formalize the union?"

Ailan grinned. "As quickly as possible."

Eckhar smirked, "We have waited long enough."

Razi was astonished. "Don't I get a say in this?"

The captain grinned, "You already have. The exercise room is thick with your pheromones when you leave. Your body has already agreed."

She blinked. "Well, damn."

The captain bowed slowly. "I will take on the representation of her family."

"Like hell." A woman with all the hallmarks of a Terran female came forward with a hulking Oefric male behind her. He had the same look in his eyes the Razi had come to associate with Eckhar. The look of a professional peace officer.

"As much as the Terran Volunteers appreciate your offer, Captain, I am her family." The human woman stood proudly at the side of her very serious-looking male.

Captain Although nodded. "Please identify yourself."

The brunette with pale green eyes smiled and curtsied. "I am Gwen Steryio Mathijen, matchmaker of Raxos. This is my husband, Alpha Etien Mathijen of the Raxos Oefric outpost. You passed through our space and I perked up at the sound of a fellow Terran in the area."

The male sighed and extended his hand in greeting to the captain. "Please pardon my mate, but she is strong minded and feels it is her job to make sure that every passing Terran has a true match."

The captain smiled and shook the other male's hand while Gwen rolled her eyes.

Razi stifled a smirk of her own. "I am very pleased to

meet you, Gwen. Has your time on Raxos been entertaining?”

Gwen came forward and gave her a hug. Razi scented the other female and found the peculiar crackle that she was beginning to associate with psychic talents in the odour that was Gwen. “You are a psychic matchmaker?”

“I am. You can tell that through smell?”

Razi blushed but smiled as the other woman pulled her away from the cluster of men in the room. “Yes.”

“Huh. Well, I used to be an enforcer, but when I was given a secondary assessment, it was found that my skills could be effectively used to match women and men with their ideal mates.” Gwen looped her arm with Razi’s and walked down the hall toward the garden.

“How do you know your way around so well? I can find the garden by the smell, but you...”

“I have been on many of these ships. They are all laid out the same. Also, even with my normal human senses, I can smell the damper air of the arboretum.”

Razi was finally able to ask the questions she had bottled up. “Can you tell me what it is like to be married to an Oefric?”

Gwen rubbed the back of her neck. “It depends. When I am with Etien, it is wonderful, but when he is pulled to

mediate colony matters, I miss him. The Oefric emote a lot, but you never have to wonder what your mate is thinking. If you can't figure it out, they tell you. Subterfuge is not a very strong trait in their lines."

"As a matchmaker, did you have a chance to see how Ailan, Eckhar and I resonate?"

"I did and the selection process was very accurate. You have complementary harmonies but do not move completely in unison. You will have your ups and downs and different interests, but you will always return to each other." She was businesslike but not unkind when she said it.

"Excellent. I thought that might be the case, but with two of them...How am I going to deal with two of them?"

Gwen barked a laugh. "Multiples are not uncommon among the Oefric. With your redesign, it is no wonder that you ended up with the set being your match. With just one of them, you would be incomplete. I don't know how else to describe it. Is having sex with both of them a problem?"

Razi's body leapt to immediate attention, her frustration evident. "No, in fact, that would make things easier, but they keep holding back and I am going out of my mind."

The flowers were in bloom and their scent reminded Razi of the previous evening's tease. One flower and a delicate stroke along her body while Ailan held her hands to the bed had been enough to make her bite her lip until it bled. Sharing kisses that allowed them to taste her blood had caused her heart to start tripping in her chest, but at the end of the evening, they had taken their rest in the outer room, leaving her alone and frustrated as hell.

Gwen's chuckle grated along her nerves.

"It isn't funny."

"It is actually. They are trying to make your wedding night special. The anticipation also has the added effect of advertising your constant arousal to all of the men in the area, making their constant attendance mandatory. They tease you to madness and then have to defend you from the lust of other men. It is a little counterintuitive, but it is the Oefric way."

"It's fucked up."

"Succinctly put. But, with me here, we can have your wedding tomorrow if you like. Etien and I will kick your mates out of your quarters and tomorrow, you will have them all to yourself."

"Done. I don't have a dress."

"I brought one. Several in fact. Didn't know what you

would like.”

They finished their turn around the garden and approaching the doorway when three males blocked their path.

Etien came forward. “Is it settled?”

Gwen nodded. “It is. We are moving into her quarters and you gentlemen will enjoy crew accommodations for the night.”

Razi knew that Gwen had saved her bacon when her fiancés perked up. “You don’t mind?”

Ailan grinned. “Of course not. It means that you agreed to the ceremony and tomorrow night we will be together.”

“And nights alone will be a thing of the past for all three of us.” Eckhar was smiling.

Etien straightened and scowled at the other men. “As the Alpha of the family, I am telling you to bid your future bride good night and we will see you at ship’s dawn. I will make the arrangements with the captain.”

Eckhar didn’t waste time. He lunged forward and caught Razi in an embrace that had her head swimming as the contact points between their bodies flared with heat. His kiss started with a quick lick to her lower lip and then his tongue flicked out to taste her.

She sighed and wrapped her arms around his neck, going up on her toes to press her breasts firmly against him.

“My turn.” Ailan pried them apart, but instead of trying to wipe the memory of Eckhar from her lips, he went for her vulnerable neck.

As his lips and breath heated her skin, teeth were scraping to cause her to sigh and tilt her head. He sucked, licked, nipped and caressed her neck until she was twisting against him, her clit throbbing and channels slick with moisture.

Her heat roared to her sense of smell and when Etien cleared his throat, her suitor stepped back, a heated expression in his eyes but satisfaction written on his face.

Etien stepped between her and her men.

Gwen pulled her away from the heady scent of her aroused mates and out the door.

“It’s hard to walk away from them, isn’t it?” Gwen’s voice was low.

“It is like tearing part of me away. Funny, but that is how it feels.”

“You will see them tomorrow and in the light of the ship’s dawn, you will be with them completely for the first time.”

“It still seems hard to believe.”

Gwen sighed. “We were born on a planet that thought of creatures like this as myths and legends. Getting naked with one is a dream that we never thought possible. Stop gloating, Etien.”

A masculine laugh sounded from behind them.

“Don’t let him fool you. He took a position with the colony just so he could court me.” Gwen’s smug tone was unmistakeable.

“And yet you are happy together. What was your wedding like?”

“It was wonderful, but I could have done without being stalked by butterflies...never mind.” She shook her head and Razi opened the door to her quarters.

With gowns to try on and wedding rituals to learn, their bonding continued into the night.

Terran girls always loved sleepovers.

Chapter Nine

“As much as the Terran Volunteers appreciate your offer, Captain, I am her family.” The human woman stood proudly at the side of a very serious-looking male.

Captain Although nodded. “Please identify yourself.”

The brunette with pale green eyes smiled and curtseyed. “I am Gwen Steryio Mathijen, matchmaker of Raxos. This is my husband, Alpha Etien Mathijen of the Raxos Oefric outpost. You passed through our space and I perked up at the sound of a fellow Terran in the area.”

The male sighed and extended his hand in greeting to the captain. “Please pardon my mate, but she is strong minded and feels it is her job to make sure that every passing Terran has a true match.”

The captain smiled and shook the other male’s hand while Gwen rolled her eyes.

Razi stifled a smirk of her own. “I am very pleased to meet you, Gwen. Has your time on Raxos been entertaining?”

Gwen came forward and gave her a hug. Razi scented the other female and found the peculiar crackle that she was beginning to associate with psychic talents in the

odour that was Gwen. “You are a psychic matchmaker?”

“I am. You can tell that through smell?”

Razi blushed but smiled as the other woman pulled her away from the cluster of men in the room. “Yes.”

“Huh. Well, I used to be an enforcer, but when I was given a secondary assessment, it was found that my skills could be effectively used to match women and men with their ideal mates.” Gwen looped her arm with Razi’s and walked down the hall toward the garden.

“How do you know your way around so well? I can find the garden by the smell, but you...”

“I have been on many of these ships. They are all laid out the same. Also, even with my normal human senses, I can smell the damper air of the arboretum.”

Razi was finally able to ask the questions she had bottled up. “Can you tell me what it is like to be married to an Oefric?”

Gwen rubbed the back of her neck. “It depends. When I am with Etien, it is wonderful, but when he is pulled to mediate colony matters, I miss him. The Oefric emote a lot, but you never have to wonder what your mate is thinking. If you can’t figure it out, they tell you. Subterfuge is not a very strong trait in their lines.”

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Chapter Ten

The tight fit of the gown made Razi very aware of her curves. The flow of her black hair down her back, until it brushed her buttocks, brought the gaze of the witnesses to her assets.

Gwen was walking at her side, wearing a gown that was far more subdued than the glittering, almost translucent, confection that wrapped and supported Razi's breasts, holding tightly to her ribs and hips before flowing into glossy waves to the ground.

Ailan and Eckhar were waiting for her at the front of the hall and the ship was rotating to allow the bright light of the stars in for an artificial dawn.

With a bouquet of flowers and gems woven in her hair, she felt like a princess for the first time in her life.

The captain's voice was a buzzing in her ears. All she

could think of was that Ailan and Eckhar would be hers as soon as this ceremony was over.

“Razi, Razi!” He waved his hand in front of her eyes and Gwen laughed.

“Yes?”

“Do you take these men to be yours?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Gwen Steryio Mathijen, do you give Razi to the Oefric, her offspring and genetic line to be ours alone?”

“I do not. We will, however, share the credit with the Oefric. Terrans are Terrans until our lines die out.”

Captain Althoush blinked in shock, as did many of the observers.

“She can be their companion, wife, lover and mate. She can devote her life to the Oefric people, but she was born of a different world and that world is just getting started.”

“Ailan and Eckhar, do you accept the amendment?”

Together they spoke, “We do.”

“Then meditate and blend your minds. Become one in every sense and enjoy each other.”

Ailan and Eckhar helped her kneel and kept hold of her hands.

A warmth crept through her mind and she recognized

its flavour. It was them—her mates—and she could hardly wait to get them alone.

Two hours of meditation let her read their emotions and when the food was served, she could tell which items her men liked and which they did not care for.

The captain organized a series of games for the men and even Etien participated in the shifting competitions. His win caused his wife to congratulate him most publicly and Razi had had enough.

She sent her lust and frustration to her men and they immediately stood. She took their hands and hauled them out of the gathering room and back to her chamber.

Not a word was spoken as they disrobed each other, eager hands pulled at fabric and then it was blissful skin on skin on skin.

Ailan nibbled at her neck and caressed her spine and hips, delving his fingers between her buttocks and between her thighs into her rear channel. She went up on her toes as he thrust into her.

In front of her, Eckhar went to his knees as he licked and sucked at her breasts until she was quivering with desperation.

“Inside, now. Please.”

Eckhar quickly moved to lie on his back while she eagerly crawled over him.

Ailan positioned himself against the second entrance created by Nala.

As she eased onto Eckhar's rigid member, Ailan eased inside until she was completely filled. Ailan rocked against her, moving her on Eckhar and in seconds, she screamed as her body clamped on both hard cocks within her.

Sweat beaded Eckhar's brow as he fought for control and as soon as Razi was back with focus, he nodded to Ailan. He began to move again, but this time, it went on and on until she once again was hovering on the edge of release.

In a prearranged signal, Ailan thrust deep and bit one shoulder while Eckhar bit the other. The scream Razi let loose carried a wave of power with it and their minds went from connected to wide open. Their roars followed her emanation into the bedroom.

I can't believe it. I can hear everything you are thinking. It was bizarre, but she didn't mind it.

Ailan nuzzled her neck, his body sated for the time being. *I did not expect it so soon.*

Nor did I. I hadn't realized what a female felt until

now.

You mean the orgasm? That was a good one, but there are all kinds of releases. Grinning, she rocked on them and they winced as the heads of their cocks shrieked with sensitivity.

Okay, no moving afterward. Got it.

Ailan moved to the side, pulling out of her and then tugging her to lie against him. It felt nice and went into the feeling of being perfect the moment that Eckhar cuddled against her.

The sex was nice, but they were her mates and that was going far, far beyond the physical.

The physical is nice too, though. Ailan's voice was amused and he started to kiss his way down her shoulder.

I would agree—the physical is very nice. Eckhar's fingers sought and found her clit, rubbing in slow circles until her mind was humming with arousal.

Ailan was trailing his fingers lightly over her spine, using all of the sensitive spots he had found during their nocturnal tease attacks. With a small nip on her buttocks, her body overloaded and she twisted in place.

Instead of her vocal orgasm, this one took her breath. Eckhar's fingers kept the spasms going until she almost blacked out.

When she managed to regain her breath, she had been turned and Ailan's kiss was arousing her all over again. His cock was hot against her belly, pressing against her insistently.

She wrapped her fingers around his rod, feeling Eckhar's silent groan as he shared the experience. It warmed her, knowing that what one felt, the other shared. They knew what each touch and caress was doing to her and she could feel the tightness, the pleasure that a light friction on the shaft was creating.

Razi straightened Ailan's cock, shifting her hips until he was nudging her entrance.

Eckhar echoed her movements and positioned himself inside her.

They shoved in together and she gasped and whimpered at the sudden fullness.

That feels bizarre. Do you always feel like that? Eckhar was leaning against her shoulder and his eyes were closed as he absorbed her sensations.

She could feel her own body wrapped around their cocks—hot, wet, tight and with a peculiar rhythmic massage. That last feeling was aftershocks of her previous orgasms, but they didn't care, it felt fantastic.

They rocked, revelled in and twisted against each

other until satisfaction and then exhaustion claimed them.

In the night, they woke and bathed, returning to the bed for a round of experimentation that lasted into the small hours of the new day.

They would soon land on the home world of the Oefric and there they would have to start a new home, new life and possibly new jobs.

Razi grinned happily as they slept in a pile. A honeymoon in space had never been more appreciated.

Chapter Eleven

Two years later

The museum of Oefric was a wonderful structure. Its very solid nature brought a sense of the history that it contained.

Razi stretched and walked slowly through the dim reception hall. She was not moving swiftly lately and her pride in sneaking away from her mates was a little squelched with the guilt it brought on.

“Curator, how are you feeling?” Sahshi had a concerned expression on her face.

She mentally cursed at her assistant’s interception. “I am fine, Sahshi, I just want to check on the new exhibit.”

“Ailan said you were not to attend work until your baby arrived.” The scowl on her young face spoke

volumes.

“Don’t squeal. It is taking all my energy to project that I am home and napping.”

Sahshi sighed. “You shouldn’t be exerting yourself. It isn’t good for the baby.”

“The baby is fine. My curiosity is doing strange things to my mind and I just have to finish those translations.” Razi kept waddling forward, her baby rather quiet for an active little beastie.

Sahshi didn’t say another word, simply took her arm and helped to balance her unwieldy bulk down the hall and to the research lab.

They passed several museum employees who waved at her while eyeing her belly with a nervous gaze. Smirking, she kept waddling through the halls until she reached her private lab containing the notebooks and data packs that had brought her here.

They were being prepared for an exhibit of Oefric origin and Razi had some more information to glean from the books. She hadn’t been alone with them again until last month and by then, her condition forced her to rest more than she was able to work.

She wanted to get one answer and that answer was hidden somewhere in the documents, she was sure of it.

Sahshi helped ensconce her in her chair and wheeled her over to the materials. “What do you want to look at, Razi?”

“That notebook over there. The one with the green cover.”

The ache in her back was annoying, but it wasn’t going to stop her from doing what she loved. She was after the name of the species that created the Oefric and she wasn’t going to have her baby until she knew.

With her hands gloved and the instruments sterilized, she opened the book and used her talent to decipher the ancient language.

It had come as a bit of a shock to learn that few, if any, Oefric could read the old texts, but that was why Razi was in space. A human with a talent for ancient and dead languages had a place in the human Volunteers whether she was up for it or not.

The ancient Oefric’s books gave a wealth of knowledge about the first settlers but no mention by name of the race that started the whole thing. Razi wanted to know who had the bad taste to create a new race as war machines.

She sat at her station, rubbing her back as the pain grew more intense and she went through the history of the

settlement as well as the constant search for females. Despite the breeding adjustments, they had suffered from a skewed gender divide. Far more males than females were born and with the biological adjustment removed after the next generation, multiple matings became less common.

Razi's belly contracted and she paused. Labour. Huh. Not until she found that answer.

Another hour passed as she pored over the documents and finally she saw a sentence.

And now our creators are dying out. They have been banished from their own world and must leave it for another people. Their wars and tampering are at an end. Admar will die.

Her shout of triumph was lost in a shriek of surprise as her water broke. There was no hiding that from Ailan and Eckhar. Their fury and worry rippled into her mind as Eckhar came to get her and Ailan prepped at the medical centre for her arrival.

Neither of them was very happy with her, but she didn't care. The mystery of the creators was solved.

"Sahshi, can you wheel me to the front door? Eckhar

is on his way. Oh, and apologize to housekeeping for me.” Razi carefully closed the notebook and put it in its preservation case.

She stripped off her gloves and tried not to get dizzy as her assistant hauled her to the front doors.

Razi breathed slowly through the contractions but was very happy to see her scowling mate as he charged up the steps.

“You were supposed to be in bed.”

“I know. Bed is boring when you two are at work.” She batted her lashes at him and his scowl cracked into a grin.

“Flirting your way out of this won’t work.”

“Yes, it will.” She grinned and lifted her arms to him, the interspecies sign for *up*.

He lifted her tightly against his chest and walked to his skimmer. She was securely buckled in and they were on their way to the medical centre.

The pain wrapped around her in a band from the centre of her spine across the front of her distended abdomen. She tried to keep her pain from Eckhar, but his hands tightened on the controls with every contraction.

When they reached the medical centre, she almost cried. Ailan’s irritated features were just as welcome as

her other mate's when he lifted her from the skimmer and carried her inside.

"You were supposed to be at home, Razi."

"And you were supposed to have more of a sense of humour." She grunted with pain as the efforts of her baby took on a new intensity.

She caught her breath. "Babies need a 'good coming into the world' story and I have a doozy for this little one."

He paused while settling her on a medical bed.

Eckhar put pillows behind her back and his furrowed brow let her know he was listening intently without prying into her thoughts.

It had taken them months to separate their minds after their first joining, but her men's jobs demanded that they be able to pay attention to their surroundings at all times.

Eckhar had taken on a post as the head of the city enforcers. He was on call day and night to answer any queries or situations that were required.

Ailan was head of paediatrics at the city's largest medical centre. He had returned to school to specialize the moment that they landed.

Eckhar's position with the enforcers and Razi's with the museum guaranteed them good income as well as a

lovely house in one of the larger suburbs.

“You found it?”

“I did. Ooof.” She clutched her belly and waved at Ailan’s assistant while he checked on her.

“Almost there.”

“Are you going to be able to do this? I won’t be able to keep blocking for long.”

Eckhar and Ailan winced in unison.

“Carry Micral will be here in a moment and she will take over from there. I sent for her when you said you were on your way.”

Razi nodded and kept breathing in quick pants when the pain escalated and by the time the doctor arrived, both of her mates were hunched over and breathing with her.

Razi watched Carry stop and look at the scene with unbridled amusement. “I wish I had my vid recorder. This is precious.”

Ailan gave her a scowl, but he had to gasp again as Razi stopped blocking her pain from her mates. They put it in. They were going to feel it when it came out.

“I believe that it is on its way, Carry.” Razi blew her hair away from her eyes and tried to look composed.

“I really hope so. If not, you need to cut down on the fibre, Razi.” Chuckling at her own wit, Carry checked

and whistled.

“Hold on for just a moment while I get you ready, Razi. Your baby is almost here.”

Razi ignored the maintenance that was going on below. She was concentrating on not pushing. *Don't push, don't push, don't push.*

The child was *theirs*. The design job that Nala had done on her was up to ancient standards. The genetic scans indicated that it was a blend of all three of their little grouping. This child and his or her descendants would breed pure Oefric.

Don't push, don't push, don't push.

“Okay, Razi. When I tell you to push, I want you to push.”

Razi stowed the sarcasm and pushed. She concentrated on shifting her body from the waist down and she pushed again.

After all the pain, the baby slid into Carry's hands without a fight. “Stop pushing. Just breathe now and put yourself back the way you were. The view is just disturbing.”

Laughing and crying at the same time, Razi waited for a sound. There was a sucking noise and then a gurgling wail and their little one was making a lot of fuss.

Carry lifted the infant and laid the baby on Razi's chest. "Congratulations. My son has a date to his first school dance."

A huge baby girl was on her chest. Wide amber eyes were staring up at her and Razi looked to Ailan and Eckhar who were at her side, staring down in amazement.

"She's beautiful and huge. How much does she weigh?" Razi had been assured that she wasn't carrying twins, but her size had made even her doubt that she wasn't.

"Fourteen pounds. It's a good thing you can shift. She would have ripped you apart." Carry was delivering the afterbirth and when she had tidied up, she left the family to admire their new addition.

"A girl. I never thought it would be a girl." Eckhar held out his finger and the bright-eyed baby gripped it tightly.

Ailan bit his lip and Razi smiled. "What do we name her?"

Ailan answered, "Barial Razi. She should wear your name."

Razi smiled and leaned back on the cushions while Ailan helped Barial to her breast. This little girl was going to be loved and when she was grown, the local men

who wanted to court her would have to be very, very brave.

For a woman whose life was investigating the past, Razi had a sudden interest in seeing the future. Looking at her family, she knew the future was going to be so brilliant, it would blind all who looked at it and in that moment, she decided to begin her own record of where she came from.

Hundreds of years down the road, this moment might give hope to a species or a person who thought that the past held all that the worlds had to offer.

The future was a bright and living thing and Barial was living proof.

Epilogue

“The exhibit is wonderful, Razi.”

“Thank you, Gwen. Thanks for coming to visit.”

“Thank you for the invitation. There, is that enough politeness?”

Laughing, Razi smiled down at her daughter. “It is.”

“How is the AI handling being part of an exhibit?”

“Nala is doing rather well. Her base programming is still intact, but she can’t go anywhere. The security here is rather tight and Eckhar has a truth seer go over everyone in the facility before they are hired.”

“She seems to enjoy holding court.”

“Surrounded by male and female Oefric, she has no reason to create more. The population records here calmed her down rather effectively.”

A crowd was swarming around the station where

Nala's housing was under guard. Folks asked the AI questions and she answered them all. She contained all of the records of the original Oefric and those who offered a genetic sample could find out the name and origin of their ultimate ancestor.

It had brought the entire city in in the last week and they had had to schedule appointments after that.

"Barial is lovely and so big." Gwen's admiration was evident.

"Do me a favour?"

"Sure."

"Mention that to Ailan and Eckhar. They want me to have another baby right away. They are addicted to the idea of spawning a dynasty." Laughing, she rocked Barial and stroked her downy cheek.

"Why should I mention it?"

"Because they were there when she was born and I couldn't block the pain. Just a little reminder of her size will make them a little less eager for an immediate rerun."

Gwen laughed. "Will do. Don't you want more?"

"Of course, but I want a year between them. She deserves my undivided attention for a while." Razi made a face at her daughter, loving the way her nose crinkled when she smiled.

They talked and enjoyed the Oefric who lined up for genetic identification.

When Razi spotted Etien in line, she started laughing and Gwen groaned. “I can’t believe he is doing that.”

“Don’t be surprised. As much as they hate what she did, Ailan and Eckhar were the first testers with Nala. Learning where you came from is important.”

Gwen put her arm around Razi and grinned, “And knowing your future when you see it is essential.”

Watching Ailan and Eckhar walk Etien through the process made Razi smile. She hadn’t recognized her future when it first appeared, but now, she couldn’t see anything else.

Author's Note

Hello, back to the Oefric...again. I just love multi-shifters. Razi and her men were a little bit of fun. They were normal men with normal jobs and when push came to shove, they ran to the rescue.

Gwen and Etien were first seen in *Enforce* and they haven't had a moment's rest since.

Thank you for joining my Terrans,

Viola Grace

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About the Author

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

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