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FERTILE
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LYNDI LAMONT

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

“I need you to touch my clit.”

He cupped her pussy, wet and swollen with need.

“Oh, goddess, that feels good.”

“This will feel even better.” He lowered his head and licked her pussy from back to front, pressing his tongue against her clit. Contractions rocked her body and she panted in need. He continued to stroke and lap the sensitive area until she came in shuddering gasps.

He held her until the tremors passed. “So responsive. The minute I saw you, I knew your body was made for loving”

“So is my heart,” she whispered. At the moment she was filled with tenderness for the man who held her. It was both her strength and her weakness, her need to love and be loved.

She felt his hard rod pressing next to her thigh. Pushing him onto his back, she lay on one side and ran one hand from his broad shoulders, down his muscular chest to his flat belly. When her fingers grazed the head of his cock, she felt a shiver run through him. She caressed the length, then cupped one of his balls.

When she removed her hand, he uttered an incoherent protest. She leaned over and kissed his mouth, while caressing his flat nipples.

“You do know how to tease a man, don’t you?”

“I can do more.”

“Not now.”

In one swift motion, he rolled her onto her back, parted her legs and knelt between them. She was ready for him and he eased inside her until he was completely sheathed in her body. She moved her hips to the rhythm of his thrusts as the sensations built again...

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ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

BY

LYNDI LAMONT

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ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

This book is a work of fiction.

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*Old as the sands of time, potent as life itself,
an ancient relic reaches out from the past
to tempt adventurous hearts with promises of
carnal delights...and an unexpected gift...*

CHAPTER 1

Fala looked around the happy crowd gathered for the wedding. She was still surprised Arpana Toryl had actually married Captain Rulik of the Ziganese military. A dynastic marriage. What would that be like? The concept was foreign to the Mhajavi mind, but it had been the only way to cement an alliance with the traditional king of Zigan.

She glanced past the swirling dancers and saw her ex-lover Shayan standing against the back wall. It had been difficult to let him go, but she'd known their affair wouldn't last. She still had feelings for him, though. His handsome face wore a brooding look as he watched Rulik twirl Arpana around the floor. This had to be so difficult for Shayan. He'd fallen hard

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

for Rulik and now had to watch him wed another. Not just another, but Arpana, for whom Shayan served as protector.

As she made her way around the room Fala recognized the man beside her former lover—Jahesh, the most famous archeologist on Mhajav. He was tall, with broad shoulders, dark brown hair and eyes. Though not as handsome as Shayan, he was still attractive in a rugged, masculine way. She'd only met him a few times, but he was rumored to be brilliant. She'd soon have a chance to find out, since she'd joined a joint Mhajavi-Ziganese archeological expedition headed by Jahesh and his Ziganese counterpart.

“What are you two doing, supporting the wall?”

Shayan smiled at her. “I’m not here as a guest.”

“No, I suppose not,” Fala replied. “Arpana’s protector rarely gets a rest.”

“Is she as demanding as I’ve heard?” Jahesh asked.

“Yes,” Shayan and Fala replied in unison, then laughed.

“You’re getting a break,” Shayan pointed out.

“Yes.” She turned to Jahesh. “I’m really looking forward to the expedition.”

His eyes lit up. “It should be fascinating. This has been my dream. The chance to excavate an ancient site on an alien planet. I never thought this day would come.”

Fala smiled. His boyish enthusiasm for his job was endearing. “I’ve never participated in an excavation before. I’m really just going so I can document the event for posterity.”

Suddenly Shayan pushed himself away from the wall. “It

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

looks like Arpana and Rulik are leaving.”

She put a hand on his arm. “Will you be all right?”

He covered her hand with his and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “I’ll be fine. Arpana has asked me to join her and Rulik tonight.”

Fala raised her brows. “A threesome on her wedding night? That’s our Arpana.”

“Yes, and she has made it clear Rulik and I can be together, as long as we’re discreet.”

“I’m glad for you,” Fala said, giving him a hug. “Be happy.”

“You, too.” He turned slightly to include Jahesh in the conversation. “I can’t wait to hear about your adventures in Algott. Take care of Fala for me, will you?”

“Of course,” Jahesh said. “Have a safe trip home.”

After Shayan left, she turned to Jahesh. “You don’t have to worry about me. Shayan tends to be overprotective.”

Jahesh smiled at her, but his eyes were serious. “I told him I would, and I meant it. May I ask one question, though?”

“Of course.”

“Are you still in love with him?”

She stared at him in surprise. “You don’t mince words, do you?”

He flushed slightly. “Sorry. I’m not good at small talk.”

Fala smiled. “After all the diplomatic maneuvering, it’s refreshing to find someone who speaks his mind. No, I’m not in love with Shayan, though I am fond of him. We’re good friends now.”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

"He is my friend, too."

"How do you know him?" Fala asked.

"We were both in the resistance."

"Of course, I should've realized that." After the dictator Havir was deposed, Jahesh was revealed as the man who broke the military code, allowing the rebels to win a decisive victory. "Forgive me. I'd forgotten you were a hero of the resistance."

He shook his head. "I'm no hero. Shayan, and many others like him, risked their lives. All I did was sit in a safe house deciphering code."

"But your success led to the final victory. Surely that should be celebrated."

He shrugged. "I did what I was trained to do."

She knew there was more to it than he let on. Many people had tried to break the code, but only he had succeeded. His modesty made him even more appealing. If there was one trait she abhorred, it was arrogance. "No one forced you to work with the resistance," she pointed out. "You had a price on your head."

He grinned at that. "Yes, and a pretty hefty one it was. Fortunately, most of our people are not greedy."

"True." She checked the time. "Oh, goodness, we leave the city in an hour. I need to change for the flight to Algott. I'll see you later, I guess."

"Perhaps we can sit together during the flight."

She smiled at him. "I'd like that."

As she left the ballroom, she wondered what kind of lover

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

Jahesh would be. Perhaps she'd get a chance to find out when they arrived in Algott. She pictured his large hands with the long, slender fingers running over her body and heat rushed through her. Yes, that was something she'd have to investigate.

* * *

When Jahesh boarded the chartered aircraft for the flight to Algott, he looked around until he found Fala sitting next to a window at the back of the aircraft. The aisle seat was unoccupied so he headed for it. She'd caught his eye the first time she'd come to a meeting of the archeological team. Though not a beauty like the fabled Arpana Toryl, Fala had a natural warmth that drew people to her, and he was not immune to it.

She was friendly, obviously comfortable with people and the messy emotions being around them involved. How she and Shayan put up with Arpana Toryl's dramatics baffled him. He'd have strangled the woman long ago. No, he and Fala couldn't be more different, but that didn't stop him from wanting her. His attraction to her was illogical. Well, not entirely illogical. She had the figure of a goddess, all soft curves and womanly flesh. That, plus the genuine interest and sincerity he saw in her lovely green eyes, were hard to resist.

He stopped beside her. "May I join you?"

She looked at him and smiled. "Please do."

He sat and stretched his legs out as far as possible in the cramped space.

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

"You'd think the Ziganese could send us off in better style," Fala whispered.

"Apparently there isn't much travel to Algott, so we're lucky to have found this craft, small and slow though it may be."

She frowned. "I wonder why not."

"Since the continent is geologically unstable, it's considered unsuitable for large populations. Nor is it a prized tourist destination for the same reason. How much do you know about the region?"

"I know the basics," she said. "There was a large population several thousand years ago, but the largest city was wiped out by a series of massive earthquakes. The society fell into decline and had reverted to small warring tribes when the Ziganese arrived two centuries ago."

"Very good. You have done your homework."

She laughed. "Not really. I ran into a native of Algott on the *Borivoy*."

"The what?"

"That's the name of Commander Rulik's ship. One of his officers, Lieutenant Behrin, was born in Algott. He was happy to tell me about his homeland."

Was this lieutenant another of her lovers? Jahesh decided he'd better not ask her.

Just then, a tall, fair Ziganese came out of the cockpit and stood in front of the passengers. "May I have your attention?" he said in slightly accented Mhajavi.

When the passengers quieted, he introduced himself as

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

their pilot, Erok, then sauntered down the aisles, greeting each passenger, flirting with the women, flattering the men.

Jahesh managed to nod civilly when Erok reached their row, but tensed when he leaned over him to shake Fala's hand, holding it longer than necessary to be polite.

Returning to the front of the craft, Erok addressed the group. "Estimated flying time is approximately twelve hours, so we should arrive in Algott shortly after noon, local time. Does anyone have any questions?"

When no one did, the pilot advised them to buckle themselves into their seats and returned to the cockpit.

"Oh, my, isn't he glorious?" whispered Ishala, the Mhajavi woman sitting across the aisle.

Jahesh ground his teeth. He knew the type—smooth and glib, with a surface charm that attracted women. He'd seen enough of that in his life. Women always fell for the charmers who used them, then discarded them, while the nicer men were ignored.

"Why do I get the feeling you don't like our pilot?" Fala asked.

"Because I don't."

She smiled. "You do speak your mind, don't you?"

He turned toward her. "I've seen his type before. He's phony, the kind of man who uses people for his own purposes. I'd steer clear of him if I were you."

"I'll keep that in mind," was all she said.

Jahesh settled back in his seat, fearing he'd just made a fool of himself. But Erok's attention to Fala had stirred

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

uncomfortable feelings. He couldn't be jealous, could he? He'd only met the woman. And from what he'd seen so far, there was no indication she was anything like Gambhina. Fala seemed honest and genuine, not shallow. And he wanted her as he'd wanted no other woman in a very long time. He'd be damned if he'd let a phony charmer like Erok beat him to her.

The takeoff was fast and smooth, so at least the man was competent at what he did.

When the craft leveled off, Jahesh loosened his safety restraints and tried to relax. He hated intra-planetary travel. It seemed such a waste of time. Hours cooped up in a small space with nothing to do except talk to other people. At least on a space ship he could move around and spend time in the lab.

Fala touched his arm. "Perhaps this is a good time for me to interview some of the expedition members. Would you like to be the first?"

"Good idea. Much better done here than on-site."

"Oh, I'll be documenting the entire dig," she assured him. "For now I just want to get the background and goals of each participant."

She pulled out her recording device, turned it on and aimed it toward herself. "This is Fala, assistant historian to Arpana Torgyl. These files will comprise part of the official record of the first joint Mhajavi-Ziganese archeological expedition on the continent of Algott."

Turning the device, she pointed it in his direction. "Professor Jahesh is the head of the Mhajavi team. Please tell

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

us about this expedition. How did it come about?"

Jahesh spent the next hour explaining in detail how the expedition had been formed and what they hoped to accomplish on site. He stopped when a service bot came down the aisle handing out drinks and a light snack.

After everyone had eaten, the lights were dimmed.

Jahesh turned to Fala. "Will you be able to sleep?"

"I doubt it," she replied in a soft voice. "Perhaps later, if I get tired enough. I have trouble sleeping while sitting up."

"Me, too. Why don't you tell me about yourself. How did you end up as assistant to Arpana Toryl?"

Fala smiled. "Do we seem like an odd pair?"

"Not odd, just different. I imagine you complement each other perfectly. Arpana is outspoken and opinionated, whereas you're kind and diplomatic. She uses people; you take care of them. Only someone with a great deal of patience could do your job."

Fala stared at him with a surprised expression. When she spoke, it was obvious she'd chosen her words carefully. "Don't be too hard on Arpana. I know she seems volatile, and she does tend to speak and act first, then think later. But she doesn't mean to be unkind, and her devotion to Mhajav can't be questioned."

It was so like Fala to defend her difficult employer. He took her hand in his and squeezed it gently. "You are a very nice person, I think."

"Thank you. I hope so. Arpana and I understand each other well. I was chosen to assist her for two reasons. One is my

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

interest in history.”

“And the other?”

“I’m on the waiting list to host a symbiont.”

“I see. In that case, I’m surprised you were allowed to come on this expedition. What if something happens to Arpana and you aren’t with her?”

“Shayan is also on the list. That’s why he is her protector.”

“Really? I had no idea.” Of course, Shayan would hardly advertise the fact he was one of the few Mhajavi men with a vestigial uterus. Jahesh was glad his people were no longer hermaphroditic, as they had been centuries ago. Relations between the sexes were complicated enough as it was. “How do you feel about hosting a symbiont, Fala?”

She turned to him, a troubled expression on her face. “I hope it will be many years before I have to do so.”

“Because you care about Arpana.”

“Yes, and because I still hope to have a family one day.” Her free hand drifted to her abdomen. “I have a lot of love to give, and children need love.”

His heart kicked into hyper-drive and his cock stiffened at the thought of Fala carrying his child. Slow down, he told himself, then ignored his own advice. He let go of her hand and put his arm around her shoulders. “I’d be happy to help you with that,” he whispered, surprised at his own boldness. When she didn’t pull away, he lowered his face toward hers.

“I think I’d like that.”

Her words set his heart pounding and his hopes soaring.

He touched his lips to hers, lightly at first, then with more

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

pressure. When he ran his tongue along the seam of her lips, she opened her mouth.

“Yes,” he whispered against her lips, his breath mingling with hers. With the tip of his tongue, he traced the outline of her lips before delving inside to stroke and lick the inside of her mouth, her tongue. When she returned his kiss with abandon, he let his hand roam over her body, her shoulders and arms, her thighs and stomach. He cupped her breast, enjoying the feel of the generous flesh, and brushed his thumb over the peak. Her nipple hardened to his touch.

Breathing harder, he pulled his mouth from hers. Her pupils were dilated, with just a rim of green showing.

“I wish we were anywhere but on this craft,” she said.

He glanced around, noting that most of the other passengers were dozing. “Meet me in the lav,” he suggested.

She licked her lips, swollen now from his kisses. “Won’t it be a little cramped?”

He grinned. “Yes, but that’s the fun of it.”

She smiled back. “All right.”

Jahesh undid his restraints, stood and slipped quietly into the lav in the back of the aircraft, leaving the door unlatched. It was predictably small, but he judged there was enough room for two adults, if they stayed in close congress.

A minute later, the door opened and Fala squeezed inside. “This is what I call close quarters.”

He pulled her into his arms. “I thought getting close was the whole point.”

“So it is,” she said, with a laugh.

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

She unfastened his shirt, pushed it off his shoulders and ran her hands over his chest, grazing his nipples with her fingertips. His cock stiffened further, but he held back, letting her take the lead. Reaching lower, she undid his pants and pushed them down over his hips. She clasped his cock in one hand, while the other gently cupped his balls.

“Fala,” he panted.

“Do you like that?” She ran her hand up and down his length.

“Yes. But if you want my cock inside you, I think you’d better get undressed.”

She laughed softly and let go to unfasten her clothes.

He ran his gaze over her body, all smooth brown skin and soft curves. “You’re magnificent.”

“Thank you. You’re not bad yourself.”

Her admiring gaze did wonders for his ego. He was no ladies’ man, but that didn’t seem to matter.

He pulled her to him, hands on her buttocks, until they were body to body, skin to skin, her large breasts and his hard cock pressed between them. She wrapped her arms around him and held up her head for his kiss. Long, slow, wet kisses that left them both panting.

He caressed her ass, tracing the sensitive skin between her butt cheeks, then delved between her legs. She spread her legs to welcome him. Her slit was wet with her juices, her clit swollen and distended. When he touched it, she gasped, and he felt a shudder pass through her.

When he probed her channel with one finger, he found it

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

hot and ready. He bent his knees, leaned against the wall and pulled her toward him, one hand on her hip, the other on her thigh. “Lift one leg,” he urged.

She rose on tiptoe and lifted one leg to wrap around his thigh as he entered her. He thrust inside, hands on her hips to guide her pelvic movements.

“You feel so good. Hot and tight and welcoming.”

She murmured something incoherent before grabbing his head and pulling it toward hers. She kissed him, sucking on his lower lip, as she ground her pelvis into his.

His heart pounded, his breathing rasped, and pressure built, until he could wait no longer. As he made one last thrust, she tightened her internal muscles around his cock, and he came, the pulsations spreading through his body.

When he squeezed a hand between their bodies to touch her clit, he felt the contractions rock her body, too.

Drained of tension, he slumped against the wall as she leaned into him, head resting on his chest. “Wow.”

She nodded, her hair tickling his chest. “Wow is the word.”

He cupped her chin, tilted her head and stared into her green eyes. “I think this is going to be an interesting expedition.”

She smiled. “To say the least.”

* * *

Fala awoke to find her head nestled on Jahesh’s shoulder. She breathed in his masculine scent and remembered having

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

sex with him in the lav. Who'd have thought the cerebral professor could be so passionate, so abandoned? This was indeed going to be an interesting expedition.

Careful not to wake him, she pulled away to stretch and rotate her stiff neck. She much preferred space travel, as the ships were set up for a greater degree of comfort. She opened the window shade and peered out. The craft had descended to an altitude where she could see the ocean below. Off to the side she saw a hazy green land mass that had to be their destination.

"Are we nearly there?" Jahesh asked suddenly. He leaned toward her, one hand on her shoulder.

"Yes, I believe so."

He brushed her hair back and nuzzled her neck, sending shivers through her.

"That feels good," she murmured.

"Wait until I get you alone," he whispered in her ear. "Again."

Her breath caught in her throat. "I'm looking forward to it."

The pilot's announcement interrupted them. "Algott is visible through the windows on the right-hand side of the craft. We'll be arriving at our destination shortly."

Fala stared out the window as Algott grew closer, then they were flying over the land. She saw a hilly terrain with green valleys interspersed between rocky hillsides. In the distance stood taller mountains, including one peak with smoke wafting from the top. She recognized it as the volcano

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

Rehor. Behrin said the name meant Watchman, an apt description for the tallest mountain on the continent.

When they arrived at their destination Fala understood why they'd come in such a small craft. The only possible landing site was the top of a hill that had been leveled off. She pointed it out to Jahesh. "Is that where we're going to land?"

"Guess so. I hope the pilot knows what he's doing."

"So do I."

"Don't worry," Ishala said. "Erok told us this craft is equipped with hover technology."

"That's good to know," Jahesh said.

Fala realized the engine sound had changed and they seemed to have stopped in mid-air, then they began to drift downward. When the craft was firmly on the ground and the engines turned off, she let out a sigh. "Glad that's over."

Jahesh grinned and unbuckled his restraints. "Me, too. Now the fun starts."

She laughed at the boyish look on his face. She liked it when his mask slipped. He seemed so stoic most of the time, but she was beginning to suspect he had a passionate nature under his cool exterior. And she had a feeling she was soon going to find out if her suspicions were true.

Fala stepped off the aircraft into blessed warmth. Unlike Lodur, where the summit had taken place, the climate of Algott was hot and humid, much like her home area of Mhjav. She closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun. "It feels marvelous to be warm again."

A chorus of agreement rose from the other Mhjav.

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

The Ziganese archeologist waiting to greet them introduced himself as Viekun, speaking in heavily accented Mhajavi. "Welcome. My entire team is excited about working with you. We have transport waiting to take you to the site."

"There is no need to speak Mhajavi," Jahesh said in Ziganese. "We are all fluent in your language."

Viekun thanked him. "This will make things much easier."

As he led the way toward a waiting vehicle, he explained the camp routine. "Because of the heat, we get up early and try to get as much done as possible before it gets too hot. At mid-day we break for a cold meal, then a quiet afternoon in camp. Time to rest or study any artifacts we may have found. In the late afternoon, we resume work for a few hours."

Fala exchanged a long look with Jahesh. "Not exactly the routine you're used to, I imagine."

"No," he said, his eyes twinkling. "But I wouldn't mind lazing away an afternoon in the company of a beautiful woman."

"Is that a promise?"

He leaned closer and whispered in her ear, "It's a prediction. You're going to be mine again, and soon."

Her heart hammered in her chest as desire shot directly to her clit. Oh, yes, she'd gladly be his, and the sooner the better.

A short time later they arrived at the camp set up for them. She was pleased to learn she'd been assigned to a small, one-person tent. Having to share could be awkward, especially if she wanted to be alone with Jahesh. She undressed, then packed away her warm boots and shawl. She changed into a

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

traditional gown of green flowered cotton, wrapping it around her body and fastening it over one breast.

Fala left her tent, her recorder hanging from a strap over her shoulder, to look for Jahesh. She spotted him talking to Viekun and decided not to interrupt.

Her gaze drifted to Erok, who was apparently staying with the expedition. He caught her eye and moved toward her. He'd have his pick of the Mhajavi women here, but not her. If she was to have any chance to conceive a child, her partner had to be Mhajavi. She wasn't taking any chances with incompatible DNA.

He motioned toward a bench set under a shady tree and joined her there. "Welcome to Algott," he said. "Fala, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right. Where is everyone?"

"Resting. Work won't resume for a few more hours."

"The heat doesn't bother you?"

"I was raised here."

"Is that why you are staying with us?"

"No. Professor Viekun wants the aircraft available to bring in supplies or fly out any valuable artifacts we may find. There are too many black marketers in this area."

"Really?"

He shrugged. "The locals are poor. Black market antiquities are the only growth industry in the area."

"What else do the local people do to make a living?"

"Farming mostly. There has been some talk of turning Algott into a tourist destination, but every time it gets serious,

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

there's another earthquake. The locals say Maradon doesn't like the idea."

She frowned at him. "Maradon? I believe that's the name of the ancient goddess who was worshipped here."

"That's the one."

"But I thought goddess worship had been replaced years ago by the Ziganese gods."

"It was, but the Algottans simply added Maradon to the pantheon as an earth goddess."

"How very clever of them."

His face darkened. "The conquered always find ways to adapt."

"That was over two hundred years ago. Surely the Algottans don't still consider themselves a conquered people."

He sighed. "Sorry, old wounds. Not conquered so much, but there's still a lot of prejudice in Zigan against us. Algottan jokes are common, always portraying us as stupid or backward. Worse than that is the lack of quality education in this area. It seems we'll always be second-class citizens."

She frowned. "That would never be allowed on Mhajav."

"You seem to have a much more enlightened culture."

"Have you been to my world? I noticed on the plane you speak our language very well."

"A few times. I've done some trading there and I was very impressed by your society."

"Things are much better since we got rid of the dictator Havir."

"So I understand." He stiffened suddenly. "I don't think

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

your friend likes me.”

She looked around and saw Jahesh glowering in their direction. He turned abruptly and strode off. Could he possibly be jealous?

She turned back to Erok. “Don’t mind Jahesh. It takes him a while to get to know people.”

“Are the two of you close?”

Very, she thought. “We just met recently, but I hope to spend time with him.”

Erok grinned. “And what about me?”

“I hope we can be friends, too.”

“Just not as close?”

She spoke kindly, but firmly. “I think there are several women here who would like to get very close to you. I just don’t happen to be one of them. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

She headed in the direction Jahesh had taken and found him at the site of the Temple of Maradon. He, too, had changed into cooler clothing, lightweight pants and shirt. He wore sandals on his incredibly long feet. She smiled. Long feet weren’t necessarily an indicator of the size of a man’s cock, but in this case, it was so.

She walked toward the temple. Bright sunlight glittered on the white stone pillars ringing a round stone floor, all that was left of the temple building. The area around it had once been a garden, but at this point it was difficult to know which plants had been cultivated in ancient times and which ones were natural weeds

“May I join you?”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

He turned and smiled. "I see you managed to tear yourself away from our 'glorious' pilot."

She laughed, glad to see he wasn't angry at her. "I know you don't like him, but he's a local and could be a good source of information."

"Such as?"

"For instance, did you know the locals refused to give up their goddess Maradon after the conquest? I don't remember reading that in the books we were given."

His eyebrows shot up. "No, indeed. That means the locals may know more about the old ways than we'd expected. Is that something you can follow up on?"

"Yes, I'd be happy to. I always find folklore fascinating."

"Anything else?"

She touched one of the stone pillars, noting that it was pitted from wind and rain. "Apparently the Algottans have not been as easily assimilated into Ziganese society as we were led to believe. Erok has some obvious resentments. I wondered why so many of Ludosh's supporters were Algottans."

"How do you know that?"

"Lieutenant Behrin mentioned it."

Jahesh studied her thoughtfully. "Do you always attract men so easily?"

Fala laughed. "You seem to have me mixed up with Arpana. Besides, I suspect Behrin has a preference for other men."

"I don't suppose Erok shares his preference."

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

“I doubt it.”

Jahesh grimaced. “Too bad.”

She stepped closer and ran a hand down his face. “I have no interest in him.”

He caught her hand and kissed the palm. “What about me?”

“Oh, I’m very interested in you.”

He pulled her closer, one arm around her waist. When he let go of her hand, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and lifted her head for his kiss. His lips were firm and warm against her own. She parted her lips to allow his questing tongue access to her mouth and desire spiraled within. She loved the feel of his lean, hard-muscled body pressing against her curves. His erection pressed against her stomach, hard and ready. He was a healthy, virile man, one who would sire strong children. If only she could get pregnant.

She pushed away her sorrow and sent up a silent plea to the goddess. *Maradon, if you exist, help me to conceive. I so long to know the blessings of motherhood.*

Jahesh cupped her hips, pulling her tighter against him, and all other thoughts fled her mind as she gave herself up to the need coursing through her body.

He untied her gown, unwound the material, and pushed it down to her ankles, then went to work on the buttons of her blouse. He slid it off her shoulders and examined her naked body. “Beautiful, like an ancient goddess.”

“Is that your only interest in me, sir? That I fulfill your archeological fantasies?”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

A laugh rumbled from his chest. “No, but can’t I enjoy worshipping a body fit for a goddess?”

She smiled at him. “You’ll get no objections from me.”

He reached out and cupped her breasts, running his thumbs over the nipples until they hardened. “Magnificent.”

His frank appreciation of her ample charms was quickly winning her heart. “Let me see you,” she whispered.

While he unbuttoned his shirt, she went to work on his pants, untying the drawstring and pushing them down. His cock jutted up proudly and she took it in her hands. “So smooth and yet so hard.”

He groaned and stopped her hands. “I’d like to keep it that way a little longer.”

She let go of his rod and traced a sensual path over the smooth, firm muscles of his chest, then down his arms. The skin of his chest was a lighter shade of bronze than his tanned forearms. His waist was narrow, his stomach flat and his legs long and leanly muscled. “You could pose for a statue yourself.”

He pulled her close for another kiss. The feel of skin touching skin seemed divine. In this spot, surrounded by the ruins of an ancient temple, bathed in warm sunlight and humid air, the act of love seemed so right, so perfect.

By the time he broke the kiss, both were panting for breath.

“I need you, Jahesh.”

Gently he pulled her to the warm ground, cushioned by thick grass. She lay on her back with him above her,

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

supporting himself on his knees and forearms. He leaned forward to kiss her, then trailed his lips and tongue down her body. When his mouth closed over one of her nipples and tugged, she gasped and squirmed beneath him. Need shot to her pussy, centering in her throbbing clit.

He moved lower, skimming his fingers lightly over the skin of her groin and inner thighs. She parted her legs, giving him better access. Her distended clit was demanding attention, and she tried to grab his hand.

“Easy, *priya*. What do you need?”

“I need you to touch my clit.”

He cupped her pussy, wet and swollen with need.

“Oh, goddess, that feels good.”

“This will feel even better.” He lowered his head and licked her pussy from back to front, pressing his tongue against her clit. Contractions rocked her body and she panted in need. He continued to stroke and lap the sensitive area until she came in shuddering gasps.

He held her until the tremors passed. “So responsive. The minute I saw you, I knew your body was made for loving”

“So is my heart,” she whispered. At the moment she was filled with tenderness for the man who held her. It was both her strength and her weakness, her need to love and be loved.

She felt his hard rod pressing next to her thigh. Pushing him onto his back, she lay on one side and ran one hand from his broad shoulders, down his muscular chest to his flat belly. When her fingers grazed the head of his cock, she felt a shiver run through him. She caressed the length, then cupped one of

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

his balls.

When she removed her hand, he uttered an incoherent protest. She leaned over and kissed his mouth, while caressing his flat nipples.

“You do know how to tease a man, don’t you?”

“I can do more.”

“Not now.”

In one swift motion, he rolled her onto her back, parted her legs and knelt between them. She was ready for him and he eased inside her until he was completely sheathed in her body. She moved her hips to the rhythm of his thrusts as the sensations built again.

When she hit the peak, an explosion of emotion carried her to new heights. She felt as one with the universe, surrounded by love and acceptance and beauty. Tears of joy sprang to her eyes as she panted out his name. He thrust again, then shouted incoherently as his seed spurted into her waiting body.

When his contractions ceased, he flopped on his back next to her, their bodies touching. She lay beside him for what seemed like a long time, savoring the joy of their loving.

Finally she let out a long sigh. “I’ve never experienced anything like that.”

He turned on his side, one arm propped on his elbow. “I haven’t either. I think we’re good together.”

In a flash, joy disappeared and her sorrow resurfaced. She turned to face him. “Jahesh, there’s something you should know. I’ve been trying for a long time to conceive a child, but the doctors think it will never happen.”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

“I don’t care about that.”

She sat up and wrapped her arms around herself. “I care,” she said softly. “I want a child more than almost anything.”

He sat up, too, a muscle bunching in his jaw. “Is that the only reason you made love with me? Did you somehow think I could get you pregnant?”

“No, of course not,” she protested. “I would never do that. I made love with you because I wanted you.”

His face relaxed and he dropped a kiss on her mouth. “I didn’t mean to be unsympathetic. But if the scientists have said there’s little chance of you conceiving, maybe it’s best for you to let go of that hope. Science is seldom wrong.”

She stared at him as disappointment welled inside her. How could he be so cold? She jumped up, grabbed her clothes and started to dress.

He stood and reached for her, but she backed out of his grasp.

“I said the wrong thing again, didn’t I?” he asked ruefully.

She nodded, unable to speak past the lump in her throat.

“I’m sorry.”

She swallowed and forced herself to meet his gaze. “It’s all right. I shouldn’t have expected you to understand.”

He pulled on his pants and fastened them. “Why? Because I’m a man? Or because I’m a scientist?”

“Both, I suppose. It’s the female hormones, I think. Women and men are very different.”

He put on his shirt. “Are you too angry to walk back to camp with me?”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

She ran a hand down his cheek. "I'm not really angry, but I would like to be alone for a while."

He caught her hand and kissed her fingers, then let go. "Will I see you later?"

"Yes, of course."

She watched as he walked toward camp, his long strides eating up the distance. She wasn't sure why she'd reacted the way she had. What a strange experience. She'd gone from a cosmic high to the depths of despair in the space of a few seconds. What was wrong with her?

* * *

Fala wandered through the garden, soaking up the sunlight. A nap might have been wise, but having sex with Jahesh had left her feeling energized rather than relaxed. She stopped to examine a bush covered with red berries. There were a lot of bushes, and she suddenly realized they were planted in a circular fashion around the temple. "These must have been here a long time," she muttered to herself.

"Yes, they have."

She started and spun around. An old woman stood in the shade of a tree watching her. She appeared to be in her seventies, with long, steel gray hair tied in a long braid and brown eyes. "You startled me. How long have you been there?"

"Long enough."

Fala's face grew warm. "Did you see us? I hope you weren't offended."

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

The woman smiled, her face crinkling in a maze of lines. "It has been a long time since anyone has made love here. It pleased me to see you in such ecstasy, though I sense you carry a deep sorrow inside."

Fala stiffened. "How could you possibly know that?"

"With age comes wisdom, child, and I am ancient."

"You do not look that old," Fala said. "You must be an Algottan. Most of the Ziganese I've met have blue or gray eyes."

"I have been here a long time," the old woman agreed. "But you have just arrived. Where do you come from?"

"Forgive my manners. My name is Fala. I'm from the planet Mhajav."

"Yes, I have heard about our visitors from space. You have come a long way to fulfill your destiny."

Her words startled Fala. Could she be right? "I don't understand what you mean. What is my destiny?" She laughed, a bit hollowly. "I have no idea what it is."

"You will," the old woman replied cryptically.

"What do you know about these berries?" Fala asked, eager to change the subject. "Are they edible?"

"Yes, indeed. They are delicious and healthy, and they will make you happy."

Fala plucked one off the bush and tried it. The taste was tartly sweet, and almost certainly healthy, though she doubted it would make her happy. "Very good. What are they called?"

"They are *juji* berries, blessed by the goddess. In the old days, my people celebrated the appearance of the first berries

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

with a week-long festival.”

“You must know a lot about the old days. I would love to learn more.”

The woman beamed at her. “It will be my pleasure to teach you.”

“You haven’t told me your name.”

“I am called Maradon.”

“After the goddess. Many Algottan women take that name.”

“My people long for the old days, before the conquerors came with their male gods.”

“Not all Ziganese gods are male,” Fala pointed out. “There are numerous female gods as well.”

“But they have no power. They are subservient to the male gods, just as the women of Zigan are subservient to the men.”

It was true, and it was one thing about this planet that made Fala uneasy. That and the rigid social structure. It had caused a major problem during the diplomatic summit that finally led to an alliance between the two worlds. “Things are very different where I come from. In many ways, better. At least I think so.”

“I look forward to hearing about your world. But first, let me show you mine. Come, there is a place you must see.”

Maradon turned and walked into the forest. Fala hurried to catch up to her, surprised at how spry the older woman was, especially given the heat and humidity. After a few minutes, she heard the sound of running water.

“Is there a river nearby?”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

“You will see.”

Maradon stopped at the edge of a clearing, and Fala saw the source of the noise. A waterfall plunged over a cliff into a large pool of water. “Oh, how lovely.”

“It is a sacred place,” Maradon whispered. “The goddess dwells here.”

Fala made no response. What could she say to such a superstition that would not offend the other woman?

Maradon began moving again, around the pool until they came to a nearly hidden path that led along the base of the cliff and under the waterfall. They stood for a few minutes staring through the veil of water as it tumbled over the cliff. Droplets splashed onto Fala, cooling her after the walk through the jungle.

A touch on her arm drew her attention to Maradon. “This way.”

The old woman turned and disappeared. Then Fala noticed an opening in the cliff face. Following slowly, she found it led to a small cavern. An opening overhead let in enough sunlight for her to study the interior.

“This is where my people once worshipped.”

Fala looked around and saw markings on the wall. Ancient pictograms. She drew in a sharp breath. “This is amazing. Have the archeologists documented this?”

The old woman smiled. “They have not yet discovered it. This is my secret place, open only to those whom the goddess favors.”

Fala frowned. What on earth was she talking about? She

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

held up her recorder. “I would like to make images of this. I have a device that can record the pictures for posterity.”

The old woman seemed to consider her request, then nodded. “You may do so. But do not tell anyone else about this place.”

Fala spread her hands. “How can I not? It is a major archeological find.”

The woman shrugged. “What will be, will be.”

Fala was frankly a little tired of the woman’s cryptic comments, but said nothing, just turned on the device and recorded each picture and symbol on the walls. As she finished up at the far end of the chamber, a glint of color caught her eye. Kneeling down, she found a small metal statue. “What is this?”

Moving to better light, she examined the artifact she’d found, a female figure with huge breasts and a distended stomach. Obviously a fertility statue. The color that caught her eye came from small pieces of gemstone used for the goddess’s eyes. It was slightly tarnished, but otherwise in good condition. Excitement coursed through her. “Is this supposed to be Maradon?”

“Yes. In her role as mother to her people.”

Fala examined the artifact from all sides. “It’s amazing. The craftsmanship is outstanding. I didn’t know the Algottans had developed metallurgy.”

“Many, many years ago. Long before the conquerors arrived.”

Fala frowned. There had been nothing in the books she’d

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

studied to indicate the ancient Algottans had had such an advanced culture. And why was this the only artifact here? Could it be a forgery?

“May I take this? The lead archeologist should see it.”

“You may keep it for a while,” Maradon agreed.

Fala impulsively took the woman’s hand in hers and squeezed it. “Thank you for showing me your secret place.”

The woman squeezed her hand in return. “You are a good woman, one who deserves to have what she wants. This statue will help you.”

Fala laughed. “If nothing else, it should impress Jahesh. He’s the archeologist. I’m just a historian here to document the dig. Who’d have guessed I’d be the one to make a major find?”

The old woman smiled serenely. “My people say the ways of the goddess are mysterious. Good fortune should not be questioned, just accepted.”

Fala smiled back at her. “A wise saying. I should leave now. Will I see you later?”

“I will be here when you need me.”

Fala laughed and shook her head before leaving the cave. She couldn’t wait to show her findings to Jahesh.

* * *

Fala stared at Jahesh, Erok and Viekun in dismay. “What do you mean, it’s a fake?” She’d rushed back to camp to show the men her find, only to be met by disbelief.

Viekun handed the statue back to her. “The Algottans

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

never developed metallurgy. This is bronze, so it must be modern. Probably designed for gullible collectors.”

“I told you we had a thriving black market,” Erok reminded her. “How much did you pay the old woman for it?”

“Nothing. I told you, I found it in a cave she showed me, near a waterfall.”

Viekun frowned. “We explored the area, but found no caves.”

“The entrance was well-hidden behind the waterfall,” she explained.

“May I see the statue?” Jahesh asked.

Fala handed it to him. “The workmanship is quite good, I think.”

He and Erok examined it carefully.

“This may not be authentic, but it has some value,” Erok said. “The eyes are xandrite.”

“Xandrite?”

“A gemstone found locally, but one that is in great demand in the cities. You’ll notice the stones change colors depending on the light.”

She glanced at the relic. In the bright light shining through the flap of Viekun’s tent, the goddess’s eyes appeared to be a pale blue-green. “Yes, I see. When I found it in the cave, they appeared more purple, almost red.”

“If you like, I could try to find a buyer for this,” Erok said casually.

“Oh, no,” she said. “I’d like to keep it. I like the idea of having my very own fertility goddess. That is, if Viekun has

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

no objections.”

“None at all, though I am interested in this cave you mentioned.”

“Oh!” Fala reached into her bag and pulled out her recorder. She’d forgotten about the cave paintings. “Wait until you see this. The walls of the cave were painted with drawings and symbols.” She turned on the recorder and backed it up, then moved into the shadows so they could get a better look at the images.

Jahesh set the statue on a table, then the other men gathered around her to view the images.

“Amazing. What a wonderful find,” Jahesh said, his hand resting on her shoulder. His gaze radiated approval and something else. Desire, perhaps? Was he staking a claim in front of the other men?

“Better than the statue?”

“Much better,” he assured her.

Even Viekun seemed impressed. “Will you show us this cave?”

“Yes, of course,” Fala agreed.

Just then the earth shook, nearly knocking them off their feet. The movement only lasted a few seconds, but it left her shaken. “Was that an earthquake?”

“Yes, tremors are frequent in the area, though that one was larger than most,” Viekun said.

“How do you become used to them?” she asked.

He shrugged. “After a while, you barely notice.”

She exchanged a look with Jahesh, who smiled at her

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

reassuringly. “This area has always been geologically unstable.”

He moved between her and Erok and casually slipped an arm around her shoulders as they walked back toward the temple. She ducked her head to hide her smile. Oh, yes, he was definitely staking his claim to her. Not that she minded. She’d enjoyed making love with him earlier, and would gladly do so again.

“Viekun was telling me they believe there was another large city in this area at one time, but it was destroyed by a large earthquake,” Jahesh continued. “Algottan legend says most of the inhabitants were killed.”

“What a tragedy. It sounds as if there might have been a more advanced culture here at one time. Could they have had metallurgical technology?”

“We believe not,” Viekun answered shortly.

Jahesh gave her a sympathetic smile. It appeared the Ziganese leader was pretty set in his ways. Perhaps viewing the cave would help.

“I hope we run into Maradon,” Fala said. “She seems to know a lot about the ancients.”

“Yes, I’d very much like to meet her, too,” Viekun said. “The last thing we need is to have the site overrun by locals.”

Fala bit her lip. She hadn’t realized he might ban Maradon from the area. It didn’t seem right, since her people were here first.

“I’m sure the old woman means no harm,” Erok said. “The locals have always been interested in artifacts.”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

“Perhaps not,” Viekun replied, “but surely you know how easily an amateur can contaminate a site.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Fala said. “I hope I haven’t contaminated the site by removing the statue.”

“Since it isn’t authentic that shouldn’t matter,” Viekun said dismissively.

She hugged the artifact closer to her. Poor goddess, once so revered, now so devalued.

When they arrived at the waterfall, Jahesh exclaimed over its beauty.

“It is lovely,” Fala agreed as she led them around the edge of the pool and under the waterfall. It was a tight fit with four of them. But when she looked for the opening to the cave, the place where she thought it had been was blocked by rocks.

“Oh, no, some of the rocks must have been dislodged in the quake. The opening should be here, but it isn’t.”

Viekun and Erok exchanged a glance, and Fala’s temper flared. “You don’t believe me. Do you think I faked those wall paintings to get attention?”

“No one is saying that,” Jahesh soothed. He examined the rocks. “I think we could move these and perhaps find the entrance.”

The ground shook again, with a warning rumble.

“We’d best get out of here now,” Viekun warned. “More rocks could be dislodged.”

Before leaving the clearing, Fala paused at the edge to study the waterfall. How curious. She’d been able to get in an hour ago, and now it was blocked. Almost as if the goddess

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

were guarding her secret place from the invaders.

She laughed and shook off the fanciful thought. When she opened her bag and peeked at the statue, one eye seemed to be winking at her. “Come, my goddess. I’ll take good care of you.”

* * *

Late that evening, Fala sat in her tent studying the images she’d recorded in the cave. She’d transferred the files to her portable computer and made a copy for Viekun’s records. No one on either team seemed to have any idea what the symbols stood for, though some of the pictures were obvious. They clearly depicted a ceremony where the ancients made offerings of food to the goddess. Perhaps the *juji* berry festival Maradon had spoken of.

As she worked, she munched on a few of the berries she’d picked earlier. She’d offered them to all at dinner, but no one else seemed to like them as well as she did. Despite the afternoon’s disappointment, she felt happy and content. Maybe Maradon was right and they were happy berries.

Though why she should trust the old woman was another question. She’d apparently been wrong about the authenticity of the artifact and her claim the ancients possessed a high enough level of technology to produce it. It was all a puzzle, but an intriguing one. Fala was beginning to see why Jahesh loved archeology so much.

“May I come in?”

She looked up to see Erok peering in through the open tent

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

flap. "Yes, of course."

He had to duck his head to enter.

"I'd offer you a seat, but..."

He lowered himself to the air mattress that ran along the other side of the tent and reclined on one side, looking entirely too comfortable. He really was a beautiful man, tall and lean with tanned skin setting off his blond hair and devilry dancing in those blue eyes. She could understand why so many of the women watched him like a raptor eyed her prey. He could have his pick of nearly every woman in camp. So why was he here?

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

"I just wondered if you were all right. I know you were disappointed earlier."

"Yes, I was, but I'll get over it. Just being here is so amazing. I've really enjoyed seeing the area. It's so different from Lodur."

"Very. I grew up in Algott so I'm used to the warmer weather. You must feel right at home."

She smiled. "At least as far as the weather is concerned."

"I see you've put the statue in a place of honor."

She glanced at the relic, which now sat on a crate beside her mattress. "I thought it was the least I could do." In the dim light, the statue's eyes glowed purple as they had in the cave.

"Are you sure you want to just leave her here? As I said, the eyes alone are worth something. I could take it to the local bank for safekeeping when I go into town for supplies tomorrow."

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

“No, thanks. I doubt anyone around here would try to take her.”

He reached out to touch her leg, running his fingers lightly from ankle to knee. “You know, I’ve never made love to a Mhajavi woman.”

She moved her leg out of his reach. “I’m sure any number of women would be happy to accommodate you. Ishala seems to be quite interested in you.”

He studied her face. “But you aren’t ?”

“I think you’re a very attractive man, but I’ve made my choice.”

His lip curled. “The professor? I doubt he’d know what to do with a woman.”

“Then you’d be wrong. He is Mhajavi, after all. I have my reasons for preferring men from my home world,” she said firmly. “And, no, I won’t discuss them with you.”

He grinned his devilish smile. “So I should mind my own business.”

“Please. I mean no offense, but...”

He casually rose to his full height. “Fair enough. But you don’t know what you’re missing.” He leaned down and kissed her lips. When she gave him no encouragement, he straightened.

“Good night, Erok,” she said.

Anger flashed briefly in his expression, then he smiled and bowed. “Good night, Fala.”

After he left, she sat fuming at the arrogance of the man. Of course, the way he looked, he was probably used to women

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

falling over themselves to be with him. Maybe that explained his interest in her. She was a challenge to him.

Under different circumstances, she might have made love with him, but not at the risk of jeopardizing her relationship with Jahesh. Unlike Arpana, she was a one-man woman. She'd yet to find that one special man, but she suspected Jahesh might be the one. She'd never experienced such ecstasy as she had in his arms earlier that day. Perhaps this was the love that had eluded her for so long.

* * *

Jahesh stood in the shadows and watched Erok kiss Fala before leaving her tent. He clenched his fist, wishing he could drive it into the pretty boy's face. Why was he pursuing Fala? Jahesh thought he'd made his interest in her clear this afternoon on the way to the waterfall. Apparently Erok hadn't gotten the message. At least Fala didn't seem to be encouraging the man.

Jahesh strode across the open area of camp, heading for her tent. It was time to stake his claim publicly.

She smiled when she saw him coming and stood to greet him. "Good evening, Jahesh."

"Fala." He said no more, just took her in his arms and kissed her thoroughly at the entrance of her tent. Where everyone could see.

When the kiss ended, she looked at him with raised brows. "What was that all about?"

"Just making a point."

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

She smiled. "You saw Erok."

He ground his teeth together. "Yes."

She reached up to cup his head and look into his eyes. "You have nothing to worry about. I have no interest in Erok, and I've tried to make that clear to him."

"Well, I intend to make things even clearer." He kissed her again, his tongue delving deep into her mouth. His hands cupped her buttocks, pushing her stomach against the hard evidence of his desire for her.

"Jahesh," she panted between kisses, "we'd better close the tent flaps."

He let go of her long enough to do so, then began removing her clothing.

"Shall we turn off the light? You can see silhouettes through the tent fabric."

"I don't care who knows you're mine," he whispered before nipping her earlobe.

"Are you always so territorial?"

He stopped to think about her question, then smiled slowly. "No, not usually. You bring out something primal in me."

"Maybe it's not me, but this site. I've sensed a primal energy here ever since we arrived."

He brushed her hair off her forehead and stared into her eyes. "I don't think it would've mattered where or when we met. I think it's you who stirs these feelings in me."

* * *

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

Fala's heart raced at the thought of having such power over this self-contained man. "I'll take that as a compliment."

When they were both naked, he pulled her down onto the mattress and began kissing and caressing her breasts. Her nipples hardened under his tongue and the light grazing of his teeth.

She grasped his hand and guided it between her legs. Her *yoni* was wet with her juices and her clit swollen with desire. "I need some attention down here."

He laughed and lay beside her, one arm draped over her stomach, his hand resting on her *yoni*. Using one finger, he traced her lower lips, stimulating the sensitive nerves. Moving his hand away from her needy core, he brushed his fingers over the skin of her thighs and pubis.

"More," she panted.

"Patience, love," he whispered. "We have all night."

It was true, but she doubted she could wait much longer. Her breath caught when his finger stroked her wet slit, then circled her swollen clit. "Yes," she gasped. Her breath quickened even more when he grazed the sensitive nub with his fingernail, then squeezed it between two fingers. Sensations spread outward, filling her with pleasure. Oh, he knew what he was doing, this wonderful man.

When he probed her entrance with his fingertips, she spread her legs to give him better access. He slipped two fingers inside and gently rubbed the inside wall. Her muscles contracted, clamping around his fingers. Her heart was racing, her breathing rapid, and the need to climax almost

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

overwhelmed her. She pressed into his hand, straining for release.

“Easy,” he crooned in her ear as he slipped his fingers from her to graze her slit again.

A shudder gripped her body, then she came in wave after wave of body-wracking pleasure.

When her contractions eased, he turned on his side, threw one leg over hers, and put his arms around her.

She looked at him and smiled. “That was amazing.”

He brushed her lips with his. “Glad I could be of service.”

One hand behind his head, she pulled him closer for a long, deep kiss, pouring all her emotions into it. Lips met, parted, and melded again. Tongues danced in the age-old way, mimicking the act of love.

Jahesh rolled onto his back, pulling her with him. She straddled his legs, his cock caught between their bodies. “I want you inside me.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he joked.

She took his hardened rod in her hand, caressing its length. A drop of fluid appeared at the tip, and she knew he was ready. She guided his cock into her entrance and slowly lowered her body until he filled her. She looked down at him and saw naked emotion on his face. A need only she could satisfy.

She eased up, then back down, setting a slow, easy rhythm. As he grew more aroused, he thrust upward and she increased her rhythm. He was breathing hard now. He grabbed her hips, and thrust upward, then came with a low moan. She felt his

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

contractions, then his seed was spurting into her, filling her.

A flash of light caught her eye, and she looked at the statue. The goddess's eyes glowed red in the dim light and she seemed to nod in approval.

Fala shook her head. She must be hallucinating.

She glanced at the artifact again. Its eyes shone purple, as they usually did in dim light. Had they really been red earlier? She supposed it was possible, as the color of the xandrite stones changed with the light. That's all it could have been. A trick of the light. And the very notion that the goddess had nodded her head...

Fala smiled. This place, with its connection to the ancients, was making her fanciful. She'd best kept her little fantasy to herself, or Jahesh would think she was losing her mind.

As she drifted off to sleep, she made a mental note to thank Erok for stirring Jahesh's jealousy. This evening he'd been even more ardent than he was this afternoon.

CHAPTER 2

Fala awoke to the sounds of birds singing in the trees outside camp. She smiled and stretched, then turned to see she was alone on her air mattress. For the last three weeks, Jahesh had shared her bed, but he usually awoke early and tiptoed out of the tent so she could get more sleep. It was thoughtful, though she never objected when he reached for her instead.

She got up and dressed in her usual work clothing of cotton top and skirt. Her stomach gurgled queasily. It had been bothering her for a while now, but this morning was worse than usual. Obviously, something she'd eaten since arriving in Algott was bothering her, perhaps the *juji* berries.

She stepped out of her tent, caught a whiff of breakfast

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

meat being grilled, and ran for the latrine. Leaning over it, she emptied what little was left in her stomach.

When she heard someone approach, she looked up to find Erok standing by her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "Yes, but my stomach is upset."

He offered a hand to help her up. "I'm going in to town today for supplies. Is there anything I can bring you?"

She stood, her hand still in his. "No, not that I can think of."

"You should see the camp medic."

"I already have. He gave me something to settle my stomach, but it didn't help. Perhaps I should see a doctor."

He squeezed her hand. "I hope it's nothing serious. You could come with me today. I know a good clinic."

She thought for a moment. "I'm not sure how much a Ziganese doctor will be able to help me, but it may be worth a try."

"Good, it's settled then. Oh, you might want to bring the statue with you."

"Why?" She was beginning to wonder if he had some kind of obsession with the goddess. He seemed to want to talk about the artifact every time she saw him.

"I think you should put it some place safer. A bank, perhaps."

Somehow the thought of being parted from the relic upset her. "I'm sure it will be perfectly safe here. I'll ask Jahesh to take care of it for me."

Erok let go of her hand. "As you wish. I'm leaving in an

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

hour.”

“I’ll be ready,” Fala promised.

She returned to her tent to pick up the statue and her recording device. Carrying them with her, she found Jahesh in his tent, studying his notes. “Good morning.”

He rose and greeted her with a kiss. “Good morning. How are you feeling?”

Her hand went to her stomach. “It was worse this morning. Erok offered to let me fly into Algott City with him so I can see a doctor. He leaves in an hour.”

Jahesh frowned. “Do you want me to come with you?”

She smoothed a hand over his forehead. “There’s no need. It’s not a long flight, and I’m sure the problem is minor. Probably something I’ve eaten.”

“The *juji* berries?”

“Perhaps.”

“Why don’t you take some with you, have them tested? We have no idea what’s in them.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll go pick some now. Will you watch the goddess while I’m gone?”

He took the statue from her and placed it on his portable desk. “She’ll have a place of honor until your return.”

She handed him the recorder. “You should probably take this, too, since I won’t be around to record whatever you find today.”

He slung it over his shoulder and picked up his notes. “I’ll give it to Ishala and let her play archivist today.”

Jahesh walked with her to the edge of camp. “Are you sure

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

you don't want me to go with you?"

She smiled at him tenderly. "I'll be fine. Besides, I know you're needed here."

He shrugged. "They can manage without me for a day."

"But what about the big discovery? The entrance to the underground chamber?"

"Yes, but it could wait a day, if necessary."

"I hate to hold up the entire crew. This could be an exciting discovery."

"Viekun said if we make a major find, he'll have no trouble getting financing to extend the dig. If that happens, I think I'd like to stay and see it to the end."

Fala stared at him in surprise. She'd thought they would be returning home to Mhajav in the next few weeks. "I didn't realize it was so important. I'm sorry I'll have to miss it."

He tipped her face up with one finger and kissed her. "It's more important to find out why you don't feel well. Just watch out for that horny pilot."

She laughed. "I don't think he's so needy any more. Rumor has it he's warmed the bed of nearly every female in camp."

Jahesh shook his head. "He's quite an operator."

"So he is," she agreed.

"Let me know what the doctor says." After one last kiss, Jahesh left for the site, his long strides eating up the distant.

She watched, admiring his long legs and tight buttocks, until he turned a corner of the path and disappeared from her sight. Turning, she headed down a different path toward the

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

Temple of Maradon, where the *juji* berries were concentrated.

* * *

Fala sat in the exam room, waiting for the results of her tests. The doctor had given her a thorough physical examination and taken blood and urine samples. Then he'd disappeared, after telling her she could dress. He'd been efficient, but rather taciturn, and she hadn't even had a chance to ask him about the *juji* berries. She picked up the bag of berries so she wouldn't forget again.

The door opened and he breezed in. "I think we've found out what's troubling you."

She was surprised to see a broad smile on his face. "What is it, doctor?"

He was practically beaming. "Congratulations, young woman. You're pregnant."

She stared at him, stunned by his words. "P-pregnant?"

His smile faded. "Yes, indeed. Is that a problem?"

"No," she assured him. "Just a very big surprise." A slow smile spread across her face. "The doctors on my home world assured me I would never conceive. This is a miracle for me."

The doctor frowned. "I don't know much about Mhajavi physiology, but I consulted a colleague in Lodur, who referred me to one of your countrymen. He confirmed my diagnosis."

She continued to smile like a fool. "I can't believe this happened. I've wanted a baby for so long now. It must be the artifact."

"What are you talking about?"

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

She leaned forward. "I found a fertility statue near the site."

He laughed. "I can assure you the statue had nothing to do with this."

"I suppose you're right. I'm just so happy. I thought the nausea came from something I'd eaten." She held up the bag of berries. "I've been gorging on these berries."

"Ah, *juji* berries. That explains a lot, though I had no idea they'd have the same effect on a Mhajavi."

"What are you talking about?"

"Local women have eaten them for centuries when they wanted to conceive. There's something in the berries, but our scientists haven't been able to figure out exactly how it works. Apparently the berries cause nausea once the woman conceives, so I'd recommend you stop eating them."

"I see. Thank you so much, doctor."

She left the office in a daze. Pregnant. She touched her abdomen and wondered how Jahesh would react to the news.

* * *

Fala spent most of the flight deep in thought. When Erok asked her what the doctor said, she replied only that the *juji* berries were indeed the cause of her nausea. She wasn't ready to trust him with her news, not before she'd had a chance to tell Jahesh.

She hoped he'd be happy about her condition. He had offered to help her conceive, but they'd never talked about their future after this dig. Would he still want to be part of her

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

life and help raise their child once they'd returned to Mhajang?

And what of her position with Arpana? A child would be a major complication, especially since Arpana traveled a lot in her position as chief historian. That plus the fact Fala would, at least for a time, be unable to take the symbiont if something happened to Arpana made the future uncertain. She had to inform Arpana as soon as possible.

When the aircraft landed, Jahesh was waiting for her, a worried expression on his face. He rushed forward to greet her. "How are you? What did the doctor say?"

She wrapped her arms around his neck and stroked the back of his neck. "I'll be fine. It was the berries," she said. "I'll tell you all about it later. I don't feel like talking right now."

She dropped a kiss on his lips, lingering a few seconds, while she continued to stroke his neck and play with the hair at the back of his neck.

He deepened the kiss, pulling her close so she could feel his arousal.

"Am I interrupting?"

She pulled back and turned to see Erok at the door of the craft, a sardonic look on his face.

Jahesh surprised her by striding forward and offering his hand to the other man. "Erok, thanks for taking Fala to see the doctor. We appreciate it."

Erok raised his brows in surprise, but shook Jahesh's hand. "My pleasure, doc. I'm just glad she's going to be fine."

"Me, too," Jahesh said as he put his arm around her

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

shoulders. "Come on. I'll walk you back to camp."

"That was nice of you," she said as they headed down the path. She was glad he was no longer jealous of her friendship with Erok. She'd given Jahesh no reason to be jealous, and he seemed to be mellowing out. Of course, regular sex tended to have that effect.

"How did the work go today?"

"Pretty well. We've uncovered a flight of stone steps leading downward, but we're still not sure how deep underground we'll have to dig. It's slow work, but we need to be careful. There could be some useful artifacts in with the debris."

"Of course." Fala pulled at her blouse, which was sticking to her. "It's unusually humid today."

"Yes, it is," he agreed. "Why don't we go take a swim in the pool by the waterfall? That should cool us off."

"What a marvelous idea. Let me grab a change of clothes and some towels."

When they arrived in camp, Fala went to her tent and set the bag of *juji* berries where the statue usually sat. She'd have to remember to get it from Jahesh later. She grabbed a carry bag and stuffed a towel and her green gown in it.

"Are you ready?"

She turned and saw Jahesh standing at the entrance to her tent, a bag slung over his shoulder.

"Yes, let's go."

* * *

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

When they arrived in the clearing, Jahesh stripped off his clothes and dove into the pool. He surfaced, shivering at the shock of the cold water. He shook his head, letting droplets fly in all directions.

He swam to one side of the pool, found a natural ledge on the rocky side and sat. “Come on in, Fala. It’s cold, but refreshing.”

“In a moment.”

He watched as she neatly folded his clothes and laid out their towels. Her nesting instincts were strong, like a lot of women. He’d lived like a rover for so long, he could barely remember what it had been like to have a real home. Not that his family spent much time in their house. His father was an archeologist, too, so he went where the work was as well. His mother had always been good at making a home wherever she went, and he suspected Fala would do the same.

She unbuttoned her blouse and removed it, revealing her large breasts. His cock hardened at the sight. It took very little these days. Just the thought of her nude body with its generous curves was enough to make him hard and aching.

She took her time undressing, folding the clothing as she went. She seemed unconscious of the erotic picture she presented, and he watched in silence, enjoying her natural sensuality.

She looked up, saw him watching her and smiled. She walked toward the pool, her breasts bouncing, her hips swaying, and his cock hardened further. He could barely wait to plunge it into her hot, tight pussy.

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

“Now, Fala,” he called.

She laughed as she reached the edge of the pool, dipped a toe into the water and pulled it back out. “It’s freezing.”

“You get used to it. Dive in...that’s the best way.”

“If you say so.” She jumped in feet first, sank under the water, then emerged, sputtering. “Why did I listen to you?”

“Then come over here and let me warm you.”

When she swam over to him, he pulled her onto his lap, trapping his cock between his belly and her thigh. He held her close, rubbing her arms until she stopped shivering. It was warmer here, with heat reflecting off the rocks.

He lowered his head and kissed her, trying to show her how much he wanted her, needed her. He sucked on her lower lip, then invaded her mouth with his tongue.

He slid his hand down to one full breast, cupping it in his hand. Did it seem heavier than usual? He used his fingers to tease her nipple, already erect from the cold. She gasped into his mouth when he grazed the hard nub with his thumbnail.

“Did that hurt?”

“A little. My breasts have been more sensitive than usual this week.”

He caressed the nipple with the lightest touch. “I’ll be gentle.”

“No need. However you touch me feels good.”

“I want to do more than touch,” he growled. “I want to stare into your eyes while I fuck you all afternoon.”

“I want that, too, but not here. I want the sunlight warming my body.”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

“Then let’s do it.”

He helped her climb out of the pool, then led her to the towels she’d spread on the ground.

Kneeling, he pulled her down beside him. He brushed the wet hair from her face, kissed the water droplets from her cheeks, nose, chin and lips, then ran his hands over her shoulders and down her arms. The hot sun was already doing its work, drying the droplets and warming her skin. He urged her to lie back and continued his exploration of her body, kissing, licking and fondling his way from her jaw and neck to her breasts. Her large brown nipples were beaded, but whether from desire or the chill of the water, he didn’t know.

“Is this better?”

“Much,” she said breathlessly. “I love it when you kiss my breasts.”

He smiled before settling his mouth over one nipple to kiss, lave and suckle it, while his hand teased its mate. As her breathing quickened, he knew desire had replaced any chill left over. She gripped his shoulders, her fingernails digging into his flesh.

He took his time worshipping her breasts, all the while willing his hard, demanding cock to be patient. When he could stand it no more, he lifted his head. “I need to be in you, Fala.”

“I want that, too.”

He kissed a trail down her soft belly to the smooth skin of her pubis. Her clit was red and distended, her pussy wet and inviting. He inserted a finger in her hot channel, then a second one, and circled her clit with his thumb. Her hips bucked.

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

“Now, Jahesh.”

He entered her slowly, but she wrapped her legs around him and pulled him closer. “Impatient, are you?”

“A little.”

Still smiling, he quickened the pace, pumping his cock into her as her internal muscles gripped him. His heart pounded as he thrust in and out of her hot, tight pussy. He shifted, changing the angle of penetration, and elicited a gasp of pleasure from her. “Come for me, *priya*.”

“Yes, yes,” she panted.

When he reached between them and squeezed her clit, she bucked and cried out. He felt the tremors contract in her body. Thrusting harder now, he climaxed in an explosion of sensation, starting in his cock, then spreading through his body.

When he’d emptied his seed into her, he collapsed next to her, drained and wet from perspiration. Damn, he’d need to take another dip in the pool now.

Fala turned on her side and smiled at him. “That was fantastic.”

He smoothed a strand of hair from her face. “It usually is, between us.”

Laying down, she draped an arm over his chest, and nestled her head on his shoulder. “What if the chamber turns out to be more than a hole in the ground? It might be another chamber like the one I saw in the cave, with artifacts and paintings on the wall.”

“That would bring in some major funding to extend the

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

dig.”

“And you’ll stay here then?”

He pulled her closer. “When and if that happens, we’ll make the decision together.” He hoped she’d want to stay. If not, he’d have to decide what was more important. Fala or his career.

He glanced at the woman in his arms and thought he knew the answer to that.

* * *

Fala rested on the towel, her head pillowed on Jahesh’s shoulder, the sun warming her naked skin. The only sounds were his rhythmic breathing, the steady splash of water tumbling over the rocks, the gentle soughing of the breeze and the occasional bird call from the nearby forest. She took a deep breath, drinking in the fresh scent of the earth mingled with the musky odor of sex.

She hadn’t been so content in a long time, perhaps never. Coming here had turned out to be the best thing she could have done. Not only had she met a wonderful man, but she was carrying the child she’d longed for all her life. But how long could this last? The time was soon coming when she’d have to make a decision. She let out a sigh.

Jahesh stirred. “Everything all right?”

“Fine,” she said, sitting up. “It’s getting late.”

“And I have work to finish back at the camp. Paper work.”

She smiled at him. “I know how much you like that. Do you want me to help?”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

He leaned over to drop a quick kiss on her mouth. “No need. Stay here and relax. You haven’t been well lately.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, touching her abdomen. Better than fine.

She watched as he stood, then pulled on his clothing. “See you later.”

“Of course.”

After he left, Fala donned her gown and sandals. She left the towels to dry and wandered toward the waterfall, wishing she could find Maradon. The rustle of leaves had her spinning around, and there stood the old woman. “Maradon. I’ve been looking for you.”

“So I have heard.”

Fala rushed to her side. “Oh, Maradon, I have the best news. I’m pregnant.”

The old woman’s smile was serene. “Then you have much to thank the goddess for.”

“I think it was the berries you showed me,” Fala said. “The doctor said women have used them for ages as a fertility drug.”

Maradon smiled. “The goddess works in many ways, child.”

“I suppose. I wanted to tell you, but I haven’t seen you for ages.”

“I am always nearby, child, but you must guard the statue well.”

Fala smiled back at her. “I keep it in my tent. I’m sure it’s safe there.”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

Maradon's smile faded. "Do not be so sure. It must never leave Algott."

"Oh, no, I was hoping to take it home to Mhajav with me."

Maradon gripped her arm, her bony fingers digging into Fala's flesh. "No, you must not. The statue must remain here. It belongs to the women of Algott. Dire consequences will fall on the person who takes it away from here."

Her words confused Fala, but she gave in gracefully. "Very well, if you insist. The archeologist, Viekun, said I could keep it, since it wasn't authentic."

Maradon let go of her arm with a sneer. "The Ziganese think they are so smart, but they know less than they realize. It is authentic, and it must not be moved."

"Don't worry. I will find someone to take care of it when it's time for me to leave."

Maradon's face crinkled into a smile. "Thank you, child. You are a good woman. Your child will be very lucky to have you as a mother. Just as your man is lucky to have found you."

Fala's smile faded. "I can't say Jahesh is my man."

"Of course he is, whether he knows it or not. Men can be dense at times. It is up to you to convince him he will be miserable without you."

Fala laughed. "I'll do my best." She impulsively hugged the old woman. "I'm so glad I saw you again."

"Go to your man now," Maradon advised. "You may not see me again, but know the goddess watches over all."

Fala was touched by the old woman's blessing. "Thank you."

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

She returned to fold the towels, and when she looked around, the old woman was gone. What a strange creature she was.

Fala hated the idea of giving up her relic, but she'd promised Maradon. The question was who to give it to when she left. Erok seemed to have more than a casual interest in it, but she wasn't sure she trusted him not to sell it on the black market. Perhaps Jahesh would have a suggestion.

* * *

After supper, Fala wandered into Jahesh's tent and found him bent over his desk, writing in his journal. The statue still sat on one end of his desk. The goddess's eyes gleamed bright blue in the light from his lantern, and one of them seemed to wink. She smiled. There went her mind playing tricks on her again.

"Are you still working?"

He looked up. "Oh, Fala, I didn't hear you come in. I'm writing part of the proposal for more funding to explore the underground chamber. Viekun seems to think we can get an extension for another two or three months."

"And you would stay?"

"Yes, just a little longer. Would that be so awful?"

"No, of course not." She moved behind him, bent to wrap her arms around him and pressed an open-mouthed kiss on his neck.

He moved his head to the side to give her better access, so she traced the whorls of his ear with her tongue, and sucked on

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

his lobe.

“Don’t you want to take a break?”

“Good idea.” He set down his pen, pushed his camp chair back from the table, and pulled her into his lap.

She ran a hand over his face, tracing the faint lines in his forehead and around his eyes, evidence of a life spent outdoors. Her hand moved lower to caress his stubbled jaw, and her thumb grazed lightly over his lips. She kissed the side of his mouth, then nibbled on his lower lip, before slipping her tongue inside his mouth.

He deepened the kiss, one hand holding her head, the other caressing her lower back.

She shifted in his lap, causing him to groan.

“What are you doing, woman?”

She laughed and slid off his lap to kneel between his legs and unfasten his pants. His cock responded to her touch, growing longer and harder. “You’ve been working too hard. I think you need a distraction.”

When she glanced at him, she saw a muscle twitch in his jaw.

“Don’t start anything you can’t finish.”

“Oh, I intend to finish,” she promised.

Lowering her head, she took her time kissing and nibbling on his shaft, gently pressing her teeth against the hard length. A long, slow lick up the underside of his cock to the head had him squirming in his seat. Wrapping her hand around the base of his shaft, she pressed her tongue against the tip. As she squeezed with her fingers, she closed her mouth over the head.

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

When she pulled back, he growled, “Stop teasing.”

She laughed and stroked him with both hands, tracing the blue veins in his rod. A quick stroke of his length made his hips buck. She gripped the base of his shaft and again licked the length of it.

“Do you want to climb on top?” he asked in a hoarse voice. “I’m not sure this stool will hold both of us.”

“No, I want to taste you.”

When a drop of fluid appeared at the slit, she licked it, savoring the salty taste of this man she loved. She closed her mouth over his cock and sucked, pulling as much of him into her mouth as possible. When he thrust in response, she pulled back and gently squeezed his glans with her mouth.

“Are you enjoying this?”

“Yes,” he panted. “Don’t stop.”

She reached up to stroke his face with one hand. “All in good time, *priya*.”

He thrust his hips, urging her back to the business at hand.

“So impatient,” she murmured, before licking his shaft again.

“Now, Fala,” he demanded.

She closed her mouth around the tip of his cock again and sucked on it rhythmically, using her hands to stimulate the base. She continued to alternately suck and stroke his penis, increasing the pace and stimulation until he came with a groan of pleasure.

He pulled her back into his lap for a kiss. “When you set out to distract, you don’t mess around, do you?”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

She smiled at him. "I just wanted to give you pleasure."

"And you did."

"It's late," she whispered. "Shall I join you here tonight?"

He caught her hand and kissed the palm, his whiskers abrading her skin. "Damn, there's nothing I'd like better, but I'm not quite finished here, and Viekun needs this report by first thing tomorrow. It's lousy timing, but..."

She sighed and rested her forehead against his. "It's all right. I understand."

"How about I join you in your tent a little later?"

"Don't be too long."

He touched her lower lip. "What is this, a pout? You've been around Arpana too long."

Fala laughed and climbed off his lap. Arpana had been known to pout a time or two. "All right, I'll be patient. Just don't keep me waiting too long."

Returning to her tent, she undressed and lay on her mattress, with a sheet pulled up to her waist. The nights in Algott were warm and balmy, much like her home world. She wondered how much longer her team would stay. It would take years to properly excavate this site. Would Jahesh want to stay? Assuming the Ziganese agreed to that. Though she'd enjoyed the stay, she was beginning to miss home. Besides, she'd soon have a child to think about.

Her hand drifted to her abdomen. She smiled in the dark, savoring her joy. She'd have to tell Jahesh soon, should have told him right away, but she was afraid of how he'd react. What if he didn't want her anymore, didn't want to be part of

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

their child's life?

She could raise the baby on her own, but hoped that wouldn't be necessary. Not when she could share a life with the man she loved, too.

The realization was no surprise. She'd been falling in love with him since the day they met. She just hoped he reciprocated his feelings.

She was almost asleep when he crept into the tent. After pulling off his clothes, he doused the lantern and crawled in beside her.

"You're still awake."

She yawned. "Just barely."

"Let me make love to you. All you have to do is lie there."

"Sounds good to me."

He started by kissing her mouth, then running his tongue over her lips, slipping it between to brush the inside. Lazily, she touched her tongue to his, then sucked on his upper lip, while he did the same to her lower lip. She could stay here all night like this, kissing and touching.

He ran his hands and mouth over her body, sending a frisson of heat along her sensitive skin. Her neck, shoulders and breasts all received his studious attention. As he moved lower, her *yoni* responded to his caresses, growing wet with her juices as her clit throbbed. She was filled with a sweet languor, like melting butter.

When he ran his hands up her inner thighs to her *yoni*, shivers passed through her, and intensified as he pressed his tongue to her slit and ran it up and down. Using his fingers, he

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

tested her channel to see if she was ready for him.

“Turn over,” he urged.

She turned onto her stomach and he placed a pillow under her pelvis, then lay on top of her, his weight on his elbows. Gently he eased his cock into her. His first thrusts were gentle, stimulating her nerves. As he increased the pace, his cock penetrated deeper, triggering little tsunamis of pleasure. The tension built throughout her body, her heart pounding and her breathing fast and shallow.

She thrust her pelvis up higher, trying to take more of him, imprint this night, this memory on her soul. “Jahesh,” she panted.

“What, *priya*?”

She heard him breathing hard, just as she was, felt the slickness of his skin where it touched her back.

“Nothing, I just need...”

“Need what?”

“I need you.”

“I need you, too,” he whispered, his breath hot on her ear.

Her pelvis was throbbing, the pressure building to the breaking point. He made one deep thrust, and she went soaring over the brink. Spasms spread outward from her *yonis* as she panted her release, her toes curling into the mattress.

Jahesh continued to thrust until her contractions ceased, then shouted out as his seed spurted into her.

Afterwards, they lay spoon fashion, his arm around her waist, her hand resting on his. As she waited for sleep to come, she knew she had to tell him about the baby. She sent

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

up a prayer to the goddess that he wouldn't leave her.

* * *

Fala awoke to find herself alone. Jahesh must have left quietly without waking her. She smiled, remembering how they'd made love several times during the night. No wonder she'd slept so soundly.

She dressed and went outside, surprised to see the camp was deserted. When she checked the time, she realized how late she'd slept. Someone should have awakened her.

Deciding to skip breakfast, she went looking for her recording device, then remembered she'd left it with Jahesh. She went to his tent, but it was nowhere to be found. He must have taken it to the site. She was turning to leave when she realized something else was missing.

She spun around to stare at his desk. Where was the statue? Surely he hadn't taken that to the site, too.

A sinking feeling settled in her stomach. The statue had been here last night. Someone must have taken it. But who?

She spun and hurried to the site. The other archeologists were gathered there. Only one person was missing. Erok.

Erok, who'd shown an unusual interest in the artifact all along. He must have stolen it during the night while she was with Jahesh.

She moved among the group, asking if anyone knew where Erok was, but no one had seen him all morning. She rushed back to camp to check his tent, only to find his personal things gone.

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

Filled with panic, she rushed back to the site and found Jahesh. By now, she was covered in sweat and short of breath from running.

“What’s wrong, Fala?”

“The statue,” she blurted out between pants. “It’s been stolen. I think Erok took it.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw. “I’ll find the bastard. He’s probably at the landing site.”

“Be careful.”

She watched him go, berating herself for being so stupid. But how could she have known he’d steal it? Jahesh had been right all along to not trust the man.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she muttered to herself as she left the dig. She had to find Maradon, tell her what happened.

But though Fala searched the area around the temple and the clearing by the waterfall, and every place in between, there was no sight of the old woman. Returning to the dig, she asked everyone she could find if they’d seen the woman. To her surprise, no one else even knew who she was talking about. Had she been the only person Maradon talked to?

Jahesh returned then, his upper body covered with a light sheen of sweat and a grim expression on his face. “The shuttlecraft is gone. He must’ve been after the statue all along.”

“I wonder what will happen to him. I hope he doesn’t leave Algott.”

“I’ll have Viekun notify the authorities. With any luck, they’ll find him before he gets too far.”

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

"I hope so. Maradon said there would be dire consequences to anyone who took the artifact away from here."

"Why would you care what happened to him?"

"I don't, not really. I am disappointed in him, though."

Jahesh frowned. "I told you he was no good."

She blinked back tears. "Yes, you did, but I was too stupid to see it."

He pulled her into his arms. "Not stupid, trusting. You always want to believe people are good. That's one of the reasons I love you."

She looked up. "You love me?"

His lips met hers in a tender, lingering kiss. "I do."

"Oh, Jahesh, I love you, too."

"I'm sorry about your relic. I know it meant a lot to you."

"It's all right. The statue has done its work."

"What are you talking about?"

She smiled at him. "I'm pregnant."

A huge grin spread across his face as he grabbed her and spun her around. "That's wonderful."

She laughed and clung to his shoulders. "I'm glad you think so. I wasn't sure how you'd feel about being a father."

He set her on her feet and kissed her again. "Shall we get married here, or wait until we're back on Mhjav?"

She stopped to think a moment. "I wonder if we can find a local priestess. I'd love to have a traditional Algottan wedding."

"A ceremony blessed by the goddess?"

ALLIANCE: FERTILE GROUND

Fala touched her abdomen. “I think we’ve already been blessed by the goddess.”

LYNDI LAMONT

Lyndi Lamont is the racy alter ego of author Linda McLaughlin, who writes historical and Regency Romance. Since becoming Lyndi Lamont, she has discovered that writing erotic romance is a license to be naughty, and at her age, those opportunities don't come along very often!

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