



# MATING URGE

By

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## Chapter One

Proximity warning claxons shattered the silence in the space shuttle. Navigation Officer Selandra responded by quickly tapping pads on the Nav console with both hands.

"Sir, a ship just appeared in sensor range," she reported over her shoulder, her tone sharp with urgency.

"Identification?" From the co-pilot's seat to her right, Denali scanned his instruments and the viewscreen. Ships were rare on this frontier of space. Had the activity of the Panesh ship dropping off their passengers attracted unwanted attention to the shuttle? His muscles tensed as his fingers touched controls on the panel in front of him.

"Too far away yet." She spoke crisply while performing her Nav duties.

"Let me know as soon as you identify it."

Two minutes later, Selandra hissed at him, "Malchovists! They're closing fast!"

Shock rocketed through him, and he stiffened. Anger and hatred followed quickly, spurting fire into his veins. Malchovists were the Felisians' mortal enemies and the foes of every other species in Unified Sentient Planets, or USP. They were indiscriminant killers who raided unprotected colonies, as they'd done to the Felisians' own colony, Felis II, in its infancy.

"Wake Beratim!" he ordered Selandra, while he disengaged the piloting from the computer. He was a communications officer, not a pilot. He knew how to operate the shuttle, but in a fight or flight situation, he knew to delegate to the person with the most skill. Selandra sprinted toward the back of the shuttle, her long bronze mane flying out behind her.

Normally Felisians would fight Malchovists fiercely, but their shuttle was no match for a spaceship in maneuverability, speed or weaponry. Besides, they had their Bonwee passenger on board ....

His mind froze in horror for a second, skittering to a stop at the thought of petite Mala Avonee, captured by the Malchovists. Because of the Bonwee species' capacity for languages, two other Bonwees had been captured in the past and both had been horribly abused. The Malchovists would systematically torture, rape and starve her until they got whatever compliance or information they wanted out of her. The rest of those on board the shuttle would die, but she would be mistreated until she wished for death. No! Denali wouldn't let that happen; he would rather kill her himself than allow her to suffer at their hands.

At the sound of bare feet slapping a staccato on the decking, Denali glanced around. The shuttle pilot, Beratim, a young man of nineteen, dashed from the sleeping berths, still in his black military issue pajamas. He'd cut the top of his mane short, but let the rest hang to his shoulder blades.

Denali moved over to the Com station. As his two officers strapped on their harnesses, he turned back to the passenger section where Mala sat with her large Grimari bodyguard, Tarana.

"Belt in. We've got company. Malchovists!" He had no time to think in Basic, the language of USP, so Mala would have to translate to Tarana. He knew Mala understood the

peril when he saw her face pale. He put on his harness and his earpiece and spoke into the Com, trying to remain calm, even as his heart raced. Their space ship was six minutes away for messages, even longer than that for anything more. He squelched that thought.

"This is BQN2 shuttle. We have Malchovists in this sector. We're being pursued and are beginning evasive maneuvers. Do you copy BQN-3210?"

This wasn't supposed to happen. Their voyage was a routine passenger transport, a favor for USP. Pick up Mala and Tarana from the Panesh and deliver them to the planet Felis II to await the next transport to the USP interior two weeks hence. "An uneventful trip" was how Captain SoAhnor had described Denali's first command assignment. It might turn into a ride through an exploding nova instead.

While he waited for what now seemed an interminable lag time, he turned toward Beratim and Selandra. He was in charge of this mission, so he'd do the best he could. "Any success at evading them, Beratim?"

"No sir, but I'm trying." The young man's voice quavered slightly.

"Status, Selandra?" Denali asked.

"They're almost within firing range--for both of us."

"Fire only if you can hit something. Look for a planet or moon to hide behind."

"Yes, sir."

A minute later the first hit rocked the shuttle and threw him forward against his harness. The lights flickered. A second, smaller jostling indicated Selandra had returned fire with the laser weaponry on board.

"Status reports?" Denali barked.

"They hit one of our engines!" Beratim exclaimed, his voice going high with anxiety. "I've lost some maneuverability and a lot of speed."

"They're trying to disable us," Selandra cried.

"We fight to the death if we can't get away. Agreed?" Denali demanded.

"Agreed!" Selandra snarled. She was almost his age, old enough for the attacks on the Felis II colony to have been told to her as an impressionable child.

"Agreed," Beratim said, less vehemently. He didn't have the proximity to the past that Denali and Selandra had, but he was Felisian, and the Malchovists were his enemy.

Denali turned to Mala and Tarana. Tarana's black eyes were alert and she had a laser weapon in her big hands already. Mala was very pale, making her green eyes appear huge in her face. He took a deep breath and schooled himself to speak in Basic to Tarana as he addressed her directly. He wasn't fluent enough to speak it naturally under stress, and she didn't speak the Felisian language like Mala did.

"The Malchovists want to disable the shuttle so they can board. We will try to get away. We will fight if we have to, but if they board and we lose the fight, you must kill Mala. If something happens to you, I will kill her. Do you understand?" It was imperative that Tarana understand. Mala could not risk capture.

"I understand. I will not let Mala be taken!" Tarana's face was fierce, skin dark and taut with menace. Her species were the fiercest warriors in USP.

"Tara," Mala protested, but Tarana began speaking rapidly in what Denali had come to recognize was the Grimari language, all gutturals and harshness.

He turned back to the Com as the return message came in from their ship. "Shuttle, this is BQN-3210. We're coming! What's your position shuttle?" First Com's voice held more than a note of anxiety.

"Selandra, where are we now?" Denali asked.

As Selandra began to yell coordinates, another blast hit the Nav side of the ship. The Nav station exploded in a shower of sparks that threw her backward to the floor. Denali stared in horror at the bloody mess that had been his friend and knew that she was dead. He looked up to find Beratim gaping at Selandra's body. Tears rolled down the young man's cheeks.

"Veer away, Beratim!" Denali snapped at the pilot out of his shock.

"Yes, sir." Beratim turned back to his controls.

Denali spoke rapidly into the Com. "This is BQN2 shuttle. We're hit! One engine is disabled. Nav is destroyed. Selandra is dead. Last known position was 24.352 by 16.481. We've now veered off course. We'll hide if we can; otherwise we'll turn and fight. The Bonwee will not be captured. Hurry!"

Denali slipped off his earpiece and harness and moved to the co-pilot's seat. "How are you doing, Beratim?"

He tried to project a calm he didn't feel. His heart slammed against his chest with the knowledge that the final minutes of his life were ticking away too fast. He hadn't even had a chance to tell Mala the startling thoughts he'd had about her since she'd boarded--thoughts of an impossible interspecies relationship, even a mate bond. How could he have found his permanent mate--someone not even Felisian--only to lose her? They hadn't had a chance at all. He fought off blind panic.

Beratim talked too rapidly with a voice gone high with panic. "It's hard to maneuver and it's slow moving."

"Can you turn enough to make a direct hit when we fire?"

"I think so. Sir, I wanted to live a little longer than this!" It was a wail from the heart that Denali echoed.

"So did I. So let's do what we can to take these blasted Malchovists with us."

"Yes, sir!"

The shuttle turned ponderously and the Malchovists' ship came into view to fill the viewscreen. "You know the weak spots, Beratim?"

"Yes, sir. I learned them in pilot's training."

"I'll hold the shuttle steady and you fire, all right?"

"Yes, sir." Beratim fired, but nothing happened.

Denali frowned over the instruments. Were they damaged? "Did you miss?"

"No, sir. I don't know what happened. I'll try again."

Beratim fired again and suddenly the Malchovist ship exploded like a sun going nova. Denali threw his arm over his eyes to lessen the brightness of the explosion, while with the other hand he tried desperately to turn the shuttle away from the direction of the blast. Beratim helped with the struggle, but the shuttle was showered with debris, from small particles to massive chunks of hull. The thumps on the hull rattled Denali's brain with percussive shock waves. The shuttle was rocked over and over and pushed along increasingly fast and out of control in the wake of the explosion.

There was a massive thump, then they lost power and the emergency lights came on. Oxygen masks dropped and Denali and Beratim donned theirs. Denali glanced back to see Mala and Tarana had donned their masks as well.

"Shuttle, do you read? Shuttle, this is BQN-3210 responding to your distress call. What's your status?" There was panic in First Com's voice as he called the shuttle. Denali

could feel a corresponding panic that increased as internal gravity in the shuttle was lost. His stomach roiled.

"I have to go to Com," he told Beratim. "Can you handle piloting for a few minutes?"

"Yes sir. Nothing to do right now, but go where we're being pushed."

Denali unharnessed and floated out of his seat, swimming in the zero gravity towards the Com station. He finally grabbed the back of the Com seat and brought his body close to the communicator. He took a quick breath from the oxygen mask over the Com.

"BQN-3210, life support is lost. Gravity is lost ..." he gasped with his oxygen mask off.

At that moment a huge thump started the shuttle rolling violently and he was thrown headfirst into the Com station. His face exploded with pain. He pushed back from the controls and brought his free hand up to find blood running freely from his nose. Scarlet drops floated in the air around him.

"Sir! Denali, are you all right?"

"I think my nose is broken, but I'm all right." The rolling motion made him feel ill with his face hurting this way. He covered his face with the oxygen mask while he tried to work the Com, but it no longer functioned. "Blast! The Com's dead."

He pushed away from the Com station and tried to keep Beratim in focus as he floated to the co-pilot's seat. The tumbling of the shuttle was severely disorienting. Beratim caught his arm when he got closer and reeled him in. Denali climbed into the co-pilot's seat and put on his oxygen mask and seat belt.

"See if you can fire thrusters to stop this tumbling," Denali suggested.

"Yes, sir." Beratim fired the thrusters on the side against the direction of the tumble. At first there was no difference, but gradually the tumbling slowed and finally stopped, to Denali's intense relief. But as the shuttle became stationary two more huge hits of debris veered it in yet another trajectory.

"Planet!" Beratim yelled excitedly.

"Did you get enough data from Nav to know if it's oxygen atmosphere or not?"

"It's on your station, sir."

Denali scanned the data. "This data is twenty-five years old!" Since the discovery of Felis II! "No habitable planets in this solar system. There is oxygen on the fourth planet, but no large bodies of water. Too small to be of interest for colonization, apparently. Which planet is this?"

"Third, sir. I'll try to maneuver to the fourth planet."

"There's no data on this planet due to the density of the upper atmosphere. It was thought to be a gas planet."

Another thump against the hull veered the shuttle closer to the third planet.

"We're caught in the planet's gravitational pull!" Beratim cried.

Denali fired thrusters while Beratim fought with piloting the ship, but the planet had the shuttle firmly in its grasp and began reeling it in. Several smaller thumps on the hull gave them an uneven vector coming into the outermost atmosphere of the planet.

"We're going down!" Beratim cried.

Denali turned quickly to the two female passengers and in a combination of Basic and Felisian told them, "We're going down. This planet has caught us and we can't pull free. Prepare for a crash because we can't maneuver."

He stared at Mala, feeling anguish over what would never be. Her face was stark

with fear, the skin taut over her cheekbones. Her eyes were huge dark green orbs in the white oval face. Then he turned back to his duty. He couldn't think of her now and still be able to function.

The shuttle's exterior hull grew hotter and hotter as it careened through the upper atmosphere, causing the interior to heat up quickly. As Denali wiped sweat from his forehead, he knew the shuttle had sustained a lot of damage to the hull for it to get this hot. There was a lurch as the shuttle finally hit the lower atmosphere and then a feeling of the bottom falling out as the shuttle began to plummet to the surface unhindered.

"Beratim, get the nose up!"

"I'm trying!"

Denali continued firing the thrusters, but there was no slowing the nine metric ton shuttle in its descent. Then he fired the aft thrusters and the shuttle lurched forward. "Nose up! Look for trees or water or sand to soften the crash."

"I can't see anything down there. This atmosphere is too dense."

The thick clouds cleared suddenly. The planet looked dirt brown. Their altitude dropped quickly, but they had no power to break their speed. Denali anxiously scanned the horizon for something that offered a chance for them to survive.

"Over there." Denali pointed to a patch of dark green he assumed was forest miles away. "Hit the trees."

The shuttle was traveling four hundred kilometers an hour and reached the green area quickly. As they approached, the green resolved itself into trees. Beratim let the nose of the shuttle fall and in moments the shuttle clipped the trees in half as easily as a laser would. The flight was rough but basically unhindered, although their speed was reduced.

They flew over rocky terrain and then the shuttle hit a second forest at a much lower altitude. The trees broke much more of the shuttle's speed as they were mown down until, unexpectedly, the forest ended in a rocky prominence on the left side. The rocks scraped the Nav side of the shuttle with the tortured screech of metal.

Denali heard a female scream, but the left side of the shuttle suddenly sprang free of the rocks and the momentum flipped the shuttle over twice until it finally slammed upright full force into another rocky hill.

## Chapter Two

Denali awoke to a throbbing pain in his head that amplified the beat of his heart. His skull squeezed his brain like a vise. He'd never had a headache this bad. Even his bed felt hard. When he tried to push upright, pain stabbed his chest and bright lights flashed behind his closed eyelids. His whole body ached like he'd been in a fight. The surface under his hands was cold metal. Then he remembered the shuttle going down. He'd survived! He opened his eyes and saw the deck of the shuttle. What was he doing on the floor? He'd been in the co-pilot's seat during the crash.

Slowly he pushed to a sitting position. The pain in his chest made it hard to breathe. He gingerly probed his chest and winced at several tender places. He had at least two cracked or broken ribs. He ran his hands over the rest of his body but found no other broken bones, just a lot of bruised places. There was a lump on the right side of his head above his ear.

"Beratim," he called, his voice rough. Then more loudly, "Beratim!" But there was no answer.

"Mala." Again there was no answer. "Tarana."

The Grimari didn't answer either. Since he sat by the Com station, he dragged himself to his feet using the Com chair. Then he stood swaying, lightheaded and gasping with pain. When his head cleared, he began to walk toward the co-pilot's chair. Every movement was agony, and he moved dizzily slow.

At the co-pilot's chair, he found the reason he'd been on the floor. He hadn't put on his safety harness, only his seat belt--and the belt had broken. He held the shredded pieces in his hands, but couldn't make sense of how it had happened. He remembered the shuttle flipping over, but nothing after that. He must have been thrown from the seat and hit his head. From this vantage point he could see the other side of the co-pilot's chair and he caught his breath. The control panel was driven into the chair on that side. If he'd been sitting there he would have been crushed! He panted through his dismay.

He could also see Beratim and knew the young man was dead. His neck was twisted at an odd angle and the controls impaled his chest. Poor Beratim. All that life force snuffed out at nineteen. His dreams of flying space ships, which he'd confided to Denali, were crushed like his chest. Just to be sure, Denali moved to his side and felt for a pulse, but there was none.

Denali looked at the young man who'd had the wildest ride of his life these past few hours. He'd performed extraordinarily. Death was not a just reward for the service Beratim had performed. The young man's face was frozen in an expression of surprise, as though he couldn't believe a landing piloted by him could end this way. Tears clogged Denali's throat, making it even harder to breathe.

Thinking through the haze of pain and shock was difficult, like slogging through thick mud. But a nagging worry reminded him there were others on board. He looked toward where Mala and Tarana had been sitting. Both were slumped over, so he couldn't see their injuries. For the first time he realized the shuttle was cut open in a huge jagged tear all along



the Nav side of the shuttle, clear back to the sleeping berths. In some places the metal sides of the shuttle were bent inwards several feet, like near the passenger seats!

He staggered painfully toward Mala, not looking up as he moved for fear of what he'd see. Mid-way he ran into Selandra's ruined body and knelt down to check for a pulse. There was none, but he'd wanted to be sure. Here was another life full of promise that had been cut short too soon. She'd been a good friend to him and he would miss her very much. Denali climbed to his feet, wincing again at the pain, and continued toward Mala.

When he stood in front of Mala and Tarana, he looked up and saw finally why they were so quiet. Tarana lay protectively over Mala. The jagged metal on this side of the shuttle protruded into Tarana's body from her skull to her shoulder blades like the teeth of a giant animal. Blood saturated the seats and pooled on the floor. She'd performed the ultimate act of self-sacrifice and had thrown her body over her charge's to protect Mala from being gored to death. She had taken the metal herself, but had she done enough? There was blood in Mala's light brown hair and on her fair temple. Was she dead?

Denali felt for Tarana's pulse. She was dead, as he'd known she would be. Sadness overwhelmed him. Tarana had been faithful to Mala to the very end.

Now came the most painful test of all, to see if Mala lived. If she didn't ... but he didn't, 't, complete that thought. He reached over Tarana's still form to touch Mala's neck. He hesitated a moment as he took as deep a breath as he could, and then he lowered his fingers to her neck. Her pulse was thready--from shock, he realized--but she was still in danger, and that thought kept him from sitting on the floor and crying with relief.

"Mala!" he called her name loudly. "Mala, wake up."

She groaned a little as he unhooked Tarana's belt. As much as he felt it was disrespectful treatment of Tarana's body, he pushed her off Mala and onto the floor. Now he had access to Mala and he unhooked her belt and ran his hands over her slight body, looking for injuries. Her left forearm was broken; it must have been her that he heard scream earlier. No other bones were broken, although she winced a number of times as he checked her. She was probably as bruised as he was.

He caressed his way back up her body, overwhelmed by a hunger to touch her. He molded her surprisingly full breasts, a liberty she would never allow while awake, because this was forbidden for unmarried Bonwees. Possessiveness seared through him, shocking in its primal intensity. He wanted her for his mate. The potential mate bond thrummed in his cells, awakening a Felisian instinct he hadn't believed he'd be lucky enough to share. In order to claim her he needed to join them together intimately in a Felisian mating. He grew erect and hard. But Mala wasn't Felisian.

That thought brought back rational thought. He fought down his desire and reluctantly took his hands off her breasts. He could not take Mala while she was unconscious and bond with her. He blew out his breath and lightly probed her bloody temple. The gash had bled profusely, as many head wounds did, but it didn't seem very deep. There was no other lump or wound, but he knew any head wound could be serious.

"Mala," he crooned. He nuzzled her face in the Felisian way of lovers and would-be lovers, rubbing cheek to cheek on one side against her smooth skin, then over the bridge of the nose, then cheek to cheek on the other side. She fell into the latter category, although she would be so much more than his lover. She would be his permanent mate, the other half of himself.

She smelled gently of flowers. "Mala." He kissed her cheek.

Mala groaned and her eyelids lifted slightly. The green eyes beneath were glazed. "Who are you?" she asked in a breathy voice.

"It's Denali. Does your head hurt, Mala?"

"Yes. Lieutenant Denali. From the shuttle."

She tried to lift her head, but fell back groaning. "Hurts," she moaned.

"I think you have a concussion. I'll go get you pain medicine. I'll be back, all right?"

"Yes." Her voice was slurred.

He rubbed his face against hers again. He didn't want to leave her even for a moment. "You're going to be all right, Mala. You're going to live. I need you to live."

\* \* \* \*

Mala swam in and out of consciousness. Each time she woke she was confused until Denali told her he was with her and rubbed his face against hers. Tarana had warned him not to touch Mala, but he was doing a lot of touching and she liked it.

"I like that," she told him in a slurred, dreamy voice.

"I like it too. Here, drink this." Something cool and tangy was slipped between her lips. When she'd swallowed it, warm lips covered hers for an instant and then they were gone. Denali wouldn't kiss her. She must have imagined it.

"Mala, I need to set your arm. It's going to hurt."

"No!" she moaned. "I don't want to hurt any more."

"It has to be done. Be brave for me." She felt his hands on her arm, then he pulled between her elbow and her wrist and pain stabbed her like a knife. She screamed until the pain opened a wide abyss and she fell into oblivion.

\* \* \* \*

"Who is it?" Mala asked again. She asked it every time she woke and it rubbed on Denali's raw nerves. He needed her and she was unconscious much of the time. He wasn't sure if he had taped his ribs tightly enough. He was still in shock, and he knew it, but he couldn't close his eyes because Mala needed him.

"It's Denali. Mala, can you walk?"

"Denali." She repeated his name each time. "I don't know if I can walk."

"Can you try, Mala? I need to lie down. The berths are in the back of the shuttle. Please, can you walk there?"

"I'll try," she murmured. He helped her to a sitting position, where she groaned with pain.

"Move slowly and don't open your eyes all the way."

She rose very slowly with her good hand pressed against her forehead. He'd taped her broken arm to her body while she was unconscious.

"Head to the back of the shuttle," he directed her somewhat robotic movements.

It took awhile but they both arrived at the sleeping berths. "Get in the middle berth." She climbed in, her movements slow and her face contorted with pain. Gently he pushed her to the back wall, and then he climbed in with her.

"What are you doing?" she squawked, then grabbed her head, grimacing. Her eyes squeezed shut.

"I'm going into shock. I need warmth. But I have to take care of you. Please let me stay so I know you're all right."

Mala's eyes flew open, full of distress. "Don't die! I need you."

"Then help keep me warm. I need you, Mala."

He pulled the berth hatch down until it latched, holding his ribs tightly with the other hand. They were engulfed in the tight darkness together. He covered them with a blanket and slid his arms around her. Mala stiffened at first, but slowly relaxed against him. He rubbed his face against hers.

"What's that for?" she asked, her voice slurred.

"It's a Felisian greeting."

"Tara won't like this. It's not proper. Where is she?"

He sighed. He hated this part. At least he didn't have to ask who Tara was any more. It was her bodyguard's nickname. But when would her short-term memory return?

"She's dead, remember?"

"Dead? How? When?"

"In the shuttle crash. Where you and I got hurt."

"No! Not dead. Not Tara." She began to sob. She always cried at this part and he held her as tightly as his ribs would allow.

"I'll take care of you now. Nothing's going to happen to you. It's all right."

"You can't take care of me. You're a man. You know unmarried Bonwees live chaste lives."

"Yes, I know." Denali also knew she missed the symbiotic bond she'd shared with Tarana. There was nothing he could do about it at the moment. Not until he could form a mate bond with her to replace it. "But I'd like to be your man, Mala."

She tilted her face up to his, her nose brushing his chin. "What do you mean? You're not Grimari. You can't bond with me."

Until now, only Grimari males could bond to Bonwee females. "You believe that because no Felisian has ever tried. I believe it is possible. But I understand you need to get to know me, to see if we're compatible before you allow me to try."

"I don't think it's possible."

Denali had seen the way Mala looked at him since she'd come on board, like she found him fascinating and beautiful. If he had to use his Felisian looks to appeal to her, he would. "I don't think you find me repulsive. Will you give me time to find out if it's possible?"

"No, you're not repulsive. But I'm only going to be here a few weeks." Her voice had grown querulous.

"We'll make the most of them." An empty promise, considering their current physical conditions. He kissed her cheek. "Sleep for awhile. I'm so tired."

"Don't die, Denali!"

"I won't." He wanted to live to be with her. He'd planted the idea in her mind. He needed to live to see it to fruition.

\* \* \* \*

Mala woke without pain in her head for the first time. She was aware of the passage of time and snippets of things happening, but all her memories were dream-like. She opened her eyes to the darkness of what she realized was her sleeping berth, but someone was in the berth with her.

"Tara?"

"It's Denali," said a baritone voice, sounding sleepy.

"What are you doing in my berth?" she demanded. All her Bonwee-bred chasteness came roaring to life.

"Mala, I'm tired. Go back to sleep."

"You can't sleep here." No unmarried Bonwee shared a bed with someone of the opposite sex.

His hands framed her face, his palms smooth and warm against her cheeks. "What's the matter?"

His hands were familiar and she realized that he was body to body with her in a too-intimate pose. That, too, was familiar. His musky scent tickled her nose, also familiar.

"Have I been ill?" she asked.

"You've had a concussion."

"For how long?"

"This is the fourth day since the crash. Is your headache gone?"

"Yes. Have you been sleeping with me every night?"

"And every day. I felt it was better if we stayed together."

If they'd been sleeping most of the past three days, he must have been hurt in the crash. "Have you been ill too?"

"A slight concussion, cracked ribs, shock."

"Are you feeling any better?"

"Yes, but the pain medication makes me sleepy."

"I need to get up. Would you open the berth please?"

"Mala," he put a restraining hand on her arm. "Do you remember what's out there in the shuttle?"

She remembered pieces of sad news and tears. She took a deep breath. "Dead bodies."

"Yes. I got them into body bags but I couldn't move them by myself. Please be careful where you go out there."

"I will."

He opened the berth and the light showed him snuggled tightly with her in the confined space, his long tawny mane in glorious disarray across their shared pillow. As his face turned back to her, his eyes had a chatoyant gleam. Cat eyes. He was part feline, after all. Then they changed from reflective to golden and she was snared in their depths. The darker striations made him look more feline than ever. His golden skin was paler than usual, but he was still a golden beauty, perfect in face and body. She'd never seen anyone so beautiful. She took in a breath, trying to calm her pounding heart, and looked away.

She saw no other way to climb out of the berth than to slide over his body. Moving cautiously onto him, she was startled by the feel of her breasts pressed against his firm chest. Before she could move over him, his arms wrapped around her, holding her tight against him. Her heart pounded frantically.

"Mala."

He nuzzled her face. Automatically she echoed his movements. What had been going on in this berth for the past three days? His gesture felt completely natural and acceptable to her. She slid over him and out of the berth.

"Do you want the berth closed?" Mala asked.

"Yes," he said sleepily.

Mala felt a tendril of fear. How ill had he been? She closed the berth hatch and looked around in the cool air. She stood between the rows of temporary sleeping berths. The rectangular boxes were stacked three high on each side. She crossed to the bathing room to

use the facilities and found the room a mess. Cabinets and drawers were open and supplies scattered over counters and on the floor.

She walked down the corridor to the tiny galley and found that it, too, was a mess. The remains of food packets covered every surface. Could all this mess be from the crash? She located something to eat and drink and cautiously paced forward to the passenger section. There the destruction was overwhelming. The gaping gash that seared past where she now stood reminded her of a horrible pain in her arm and head, and she rubbed the splints on her arm that she knew Denali had put there.

Logic told her the gash was what had killed Tara. Tara's body was there somewhere, but she wasn't ready to see it. There was a bagged form near the pilot's chair and she could see the edge of another one on the floor: the navigator. She shuddered, remembering the bloody mess of the woman's face after the explosion. The front section of the shuttle was completely crushed inward. How had Denali survived the impact?

Cool air was coming from the gash in the hull. Oxygen! It wasn't recycled air like on the shuttle; it contained no chemical odor, but smelled dry and clean. The emergency power was still on because the emergency lights were lit, so the shuttle hatch should open.

She hurried to the hatch in the side of the shuttle and pressed the control, but nothing happened. She tugged on the hatch handles, and then she pushed the control again. This time the mechanism complained but the hatch opened, then stopped halfway, leaving an opening wide enough for a slender woman like her. Denali might not fit through, but they could widen the opening later.

She climbed through the hatch and stepped down onto hard ground. The sun was weak in the sky through the heavy cloud cover and a slight breeze moved the cooler air over her bare hands and face, making her shiver. Was this a colder season on this planet or was it always like this? She moved several feet away from the shuttle then turned to study it. The damage on the outside was terrible. The hull was pitted and gouged deeply from debris hitting the shuttle after the Malchovist ship exploded. Where the hull had been more seriously damaged, there were scorch marks from entry into the planet's atmosphere.

Mala walked to the back of the shuttle where there was a long furrow in the dirt twenty meters wide and several meters deep. It took her a second to realize the shuttle had created the furrow with its landing. She looked up to see a path razed through the trees some distance back. The snapped trunks were stark against the gray overcast sky, mute testimony to recent violence. What a terrible death those trees had experienced. She shuddered. Just like the people inside the shuttle had.

Mala crossed the furrow to see the other side of the shuttle. The long rent that had killed Tarana looked like a large, vicious animal had attacked the shuttle, leaving deep scratches and wounds behind.

She walked to the point where she calculated she would have been sitting inside--and here the tear seemed widest, the metal exploding inward to stab at innocent passengers. Tara! She reached her good hand to the hull and bowed her head. She said a prayer for her best friend's soul to find joy wherever Grimari went after they died. Tara hadn't been a theist, but she wouldn't mind Mala praying for her. Tara had been dead four days already so Mala hoped her prayer wasn't too late.

Mala's chest felt tight and she pressed her hand to her heart. For four days she'd been unbonded, severed from what she'd thought would be a lifelong connection. She was glad she'd been unconscious when the symbiotic bond with Tara was lost; to have felt it uprooted

from her body would have been unbearable. But the place inside her where the Bonwee-Grimari bond had tied her to Tarana was empty now, aching so. She'd wanted that bond, needed it, exalted in having it and in having the warm love that was her best friend Tara. As Mala's bodyguard, Tara had provided security as well as a sense of safety. She'd provided comfort and caring and constant companionship.

They'd had ten years together, not long at all in the scheme of things, but at least they'd had that much time together. Losing a best friend wasn't like losing a husband or child or parent, but it still hurt terribly with a tight fist of grief in her chest and a tightening of her throat. She won't cry, Mala swore, even though she knew she'd cried already. She wouldn't want a sobbing mess. She'd want me to be brave, so I'll be brave.

She walked forward, looking at the terrain immediately surrounding the shuttle. The nose of the shuttle was buried in huge boulders taller than her head, so further exploration had to be to the side or back of the shuttle. She started off to the left side first. It was mostly barren, rocky ground in this direction and it wasn't long before her feet hurt from climbing and scrambling over rocks and boulders in short boots that weren't made for climbing. Her broken arm throbbed as she moved, so she clutched it to her chest.

At least she'd finally gotten warm with the unexpected exertion. After twenty minutes she'd seen no trees or water, only startled one small rodent, saw very few insects and only sparse, dry-looking vegetation. This was definitely not the direction to explore, so she turned back.

Where was the shuttle? Mala's heart pounded in fear. She couldn't see it. She couldn't have gone that far, but climbing over and around boulders had kept her from going in a straight line. She looked for treetops and could just barely see them a little to her right. That meant the shuttle was to the left, so she started that way.

More than thirty minutes and two dead-ends later, she stumbled gratefully into the furrows behind the shuttle. Her breathing was labored from the unfamiliar exertion and she stopped to lean against the hull and catch her breath. There she heard a sound.

It came again. "Mala!" Denali's voice was distressed. Was something wrong?

She scrambled around the side of the shuttle and climbed up through the hatch.

Denali was standing in the front aisle looking wild. He looked panicked until he saw her.

"Mala!" he stumbled to her and reached out his arms to drag her to him and crush her close.

"What's wrong?" she demanded, pushing him far enough away to be able to see his face.

"Where were you? I woke up and you were gone. I called and called for you. I was worried that something had happened to you." He kissed her face urgently and she pushed away from him.

"I was looking over our surroundings. I was careful. You didn't have to worry."

"You're my responsibility. I told you I'd take care of you." His arm slid around her back and he drew her to him to nuzzle her face.

"Stop that!" she protested, pushing hard at his chest. He groaned in pain. "I'm sorry," she exclaimed quickly. "I forgot about your ribs."

Denali hugged his arms to his chest while he breathed loudly. "It will stop hurting shortly," he gasped.

"I'm sorry, but it's not right that you keep touching me. I think you've taken a lot of liberties while we were ill, but it's got to stop now. You know Bonwee are chaste."

"Touching you doesn't threaten your chastity. It feels right to me and you've responded to it the past four days. We need touch, to know we're not alone. You need it badly right now, and I want to give it to you. I want you in my arms, I want to kiss and nuzzle you, and I need to know where you are at night. I need the reassurance of being next to you in the dark."

"You want sex ..."

"I want to mate. With you. From the moment I found you alive after the crash I wanted to join with you to affirm life. I've wanted it every night as I lay with you in my arms. I want it now ... with you."

Mala held her palm up between them. "Stay away from me! I've heard about Felisian morals--rather, their lack of them. I'm not someone who has sex indiscriminately. I'll give my chastity to my spouse after I marry him. I won't have sex with you."

Denali's golden eyes snapped with emotion. "I'm not without self-control, and you discredit me by thinking I am. Even though you and I were attracted to each other from the first moment we met, I haven't acted on that attraction as a Felisian normally would. I tried to respect Bonwee rules of propriety while I took care of you these past days.

"Do you remember talking to me about a mate bond? I don't want to lose the tenuous connection we've built since the crash, a connection built on physical closeness. You feel it too, that tie between us. We only have a few weeks before you leave to find out whether we're compatible enough for a permanent relationship. I don't want to waste that time staring longingly at each other, wondering what it would be like to be together. Do you really want to get on that transport at Felis II and not know what we could have shared?"

Vaguely she remembered such a discussion. "I'd like to know, but I can't be intimate with you. For me that requires commitment."

"Until then, I need the closeness of touch. What will you allow, Mala? Will you allow me to hold hands with you?"

"Denali," she protested.

"Tell me."

That seemed safe enough. "Yes."

"May I put my arm around you and hold you against me?"

She paused to consider this one while his golden eyes watched her closely. To have her body--her breasts, belly and hips--pressed to his seemed so very intimate. But if they were fully dressed it would be less intimate. It wasn't something that other Bonwees would approve of, but Denali was right that she needed touching badly. She and Tarana had been physically close. Now she had not only the inner emptiness of being unbonded, but the outer lack of a friend's touch. Just now Denali's hug had felt comforting until she remembered Bonwee restraint.

"All right."

"Will you nuzzle faces with me?"

She remembered this was a Felisian form of greeting. "Yes."

"May I kiss you?"

"Not on the lips. Only a Bonwee's spouse may do that."

Denali took an audible breath. "What about the sleeping arrangements?"

"I sleep alone from now on," she stated firmly.

"Mala," he protested, "how can I protect you that way?"

"You can sleep in the berth above me, like Tara did."

"Tara left the berth open. It's too cold on this planet to do that."

"We have blankets," she offered in a dry tone.

"You might need comfort in the night."

"I've slept alone for twenty-eight years. I can sleep alone for a few more days until we're rescued."

"All right. Your message is received loud and clear. I don't agree with your decision, but I won't force you to see my view of things."

"Thank you."

"Come talk to me while I have something to eat."

"I'll tell you what I saw while I was outside."

She moved to pass him on the way to the galley, but instead of turning to go with her, he gathered her tightly into his arms and rubbed his face against hers.

"Denali," she protested.

"My friends call me Deni. Will you put your arms around me, too?"

Slowly her arms came up around his back as he continued to nuzzle her. How strange that what was frowned upon by her species should feel so good. His body was solid and warm. She rested against him for a moment until his lips pressed warmly to the side of her face.

"Deni," she protested weakly. "You can't take advantage of me all the time."

"Mm," he murmured. He kissed her on her cheek, then let her go and walked further along the corridor.

Her fingers pressed the spot he'd kissed and then slid to her lips, which were tingling. How strange. He hadn't actually kissed her lips, but they tingled just the same. She looked where he'd gone to find he'd stopped to stare at her, his golden eyes darkened. Was he trying to seduce her? Was this how it was done?

He reached out his hand to her.



## Chapter Three

Mala automatically went to Denali and placed her hand in his. They entered the tiny galley and he released her hand in order to prepare his meal.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"No, I've eaten. We need to straighten the galley; it's a mess from the crash. So is the bathing room."

A slight pink stained his cheeks. "The crash didn't make the messes. I did."

She smiled. "Before the crash you seemed to be a neat person."

"While I had the concussion I was dizzy, and the few times I could get you up, things were rushed. I grabbed what I could and didn't bother about cleaning up afterwards. But the mess will have to wait while we move the others outside and bury them if we can."

Mala gulped, but straightened her shoulders. She knew this duty could no longer be avoided. The others had been dead for four days already. "Tell me what you want done."

"There should be a shovel in the tool compartment."

She followed him out of the galley to the right. There was a compartment next to the hatch, almost waist high.

"Look for the shovel in there while I get the hatch open all the way," Denali directed.

"Sure."

Mala brought out the cartons and boxes stored carefully inside and opened each one. There were tools used for exploring and science, emergencies and repair, survival and construction. When she found the shovel, she looked back at Denali, not for the first time. His muscles flexed under his navy blue uniform as he strained at the hatch, his long tawny mane flowed forward over his shoulders and back again in a bronze hypnotic sway. He grimaced in pain with the strain on his cracked ribs.

She moved to his side. "Let me help with that."

With both of them straining, the hatch opened fully. Denali looked around outside, then back to her. "It's going to be hard and unpleasant. Are you sure you're up to this?"

He thought she was as soft as she looked. He was in for a surprise! "I investigate rights violations for USP. I've seen unpleasant things before."

His tawny eyebrows lifted in surprise. Then he smiled. "That's something I'd like to hear more about some time."

"I'd love to tell you." She smiled, too, and followed him to the front of the shuttle.

\* \* \* \*

While moving Tarana's body, Denali was reminded that the death of Mala's bodyguard meant the job of protecting and caring for Mala became his responsibility. He welcomed the challenge without reservation because they would become mates some day soon.

He glanced at Mala as they rested by the hatch, drawn by her sadness and pain. Tarana's death had freed Mala from her previous ties. She belonged to him now.

"Come here, Mala," he urged. He needed to hold her.

She hesitated a moment and then slid into his arms and he pressed her warm body to

him. She lifted her face to his and he kissed her everywhere but on the lips.

"Kiss me, too," he urged.

Mala tentatively kissed him on the cheek. She grew more confident and placed more kisses on his face. Unable to help himself, he turned his face slightly and her next kiss landed on his lips. The contact was electric and he devoured her lips hungrily. This was what he wanted with this woman. Mala participated fully for long moments until she stiffened, broke the kiss, and turned her face away. He continued to nuzzle the side of her face while she breathed heavily and regained control once more.

"That was wrong," she said in an anguished voice.

"No. Your feelings about your partner's death are strong. You came to me for assurance and to feel alive. You reaffirmed life with me. It wasn't wrong."

"That's not what I was raised to believe," she denied, her voice low.

Denali knew he couldn't challenge her beliefs with words. "Can you continue now?"

Mala looked at him, her face tight with want. Slowly he placed his lips on hers and allowed her to deepen the kiss until it was a sensual suction. He gave her control of the kiss, but it strained all his willpower. Her lips were marvelously shaped. Wide and full, and they covered his completely. She was a wonderful kisser, this tentative virgin, and he never wanted the kiss to end. He would never let her give her kisses to anyone else.

She slowly broke the kiss, but he didn't voice the protest he felt. She was conditioned to go slowly in a relationship, while he already knew he wanted her permanently. He wanted to experience that kiss again and again all his life. He had two weeks to make her feel the same way about him.

\* \* \* \*

Finally Tarana's large Grimari body lay outside the shuttle beside Selandra's. Mala leaned her weight against the side of the shuttle, drawing in great draughts of air. Denali leaned next to her trying to catch his breath. When he could breathe again, he gathered her to him with one arm. He turned her so they stood facing away from the bodies.

Unexpectedly, Mala said, "I'm a theist."

"Does it help?"

"Most of the time. I like the thought of not being alone and of being able to ask for help from a higher power. I don't always get the help I want, but those times I learn lessons instead. Are you a theist, Deni?"

"No. Most Felisians aren't. We draw strength from being bonded to millions of other Felisians. Because we share a collective consciousness, we're never alone after we're bonded to our species. We don't feel loneliness as other species do. That's why we stay together, to feel the connection to the others."

"I wondered why Felisians stayed close to their two planets. Can you feel it now?"

Denali stilled and then his eyes widened. "No, I can't feel it!" For the first time in fourteen years he felt a disturbing disconnection, loneliness, and an eerie emptiness inside. All his empathic life he'd wished not to feel the emotions of others. Now he felt only Mala's loneliness like a haunting echo of his own. Was this how non-empaths felt all the time? He shuddered.

"You're unbonded, like me," Mala said, her tone sympathetic.

He looked sharply at her. "Yes, that's how it feels. Do you feel empty inside like me, Mala?"

"Yes." She looked at him with her deep feeling.

He wrapped his other arm around her. "I'll fill you, Mala. And you'll fill me in return."

"How?" Her voice throbbed with yearning.

He fought a battle with himself over what must be done and what he wanted to do. Despite her yearning, Mala wouldn't allow him to mate with her so he could forge bonds between them. He wouldn't force her, even though it was what they both needed, to be half of someone or something else as they were programmed to be by their DNA.

"We'll talk about it tonight. Let's finish this."

Finally the pilot's body lay beside the others on the ground outside.

"I.D.'s," Denali gasped, though breathing caused fire in his chest.

"What?"

He sucked in a breath. "We need all their documentation, their effects. We need to search them." He mentally kicked himself for not thinking of it earlier.

"I'll do it. My hand is smaller than yours," Mala said in a strangled voice.

"Jewelry, too."

She nodded, dropped to her knees and began the search. Finally there was a small pile of personal effects on the ground and she climbed to her feet again.

Denali felt how disturbed Mala was by what she'd had to do. "Why don't you sit down while I get the shovel?" Mala simply nodded and did as he asked.

The first jab into the dirt sent pain stabbing through his ribs and he dropped the shovel to hug his ribs tightly. For long moments he breathed through the pain until it was bearable. Then he picked up the shovel and made another stab at the ground. It was almost as hard as rock. This jab hurt almost as much as the first one had, and when he opened his eyes, Mala stood close to him with a concerned look on her face.

"We'll have to burn them. Do you have any objections?"

He had no breath, so he simply shook his head.

"Tara would like knowing she had a funeral pyre," she astonished him by saying, then she turned and walked back to the shuttle. She returned with a black box, a canister of accelerant and an igniter. She handed him the accelerant and stooped to put the personal affects in the box. Denali splashed the bodies liberally, and then turned to her.

"Do you want to say any final words or prayer?"

Mala faced the bodies. "Thank you for your service and your sacrifice. You'll be remembered with honor. You've gone to a better place and we're glad for you, but we'll miss you. Be at peace now."

She nodded to him and he lit the funeral pyre. They moved away from the smoke and the heat and Mala slipped her hand into his.

There was honor in this pyre and reverence for the bodies. No cold dark pit for them, but a blaze of glory, entirely fitting. "This was well done," he said, keeping his tone quiet in honor of the dead.

"Yes, very appropriate for them," she agreed.

\* \* \* \*

They watched the fire until it was burning embers and then Denali turned Mala back to the shuttle. "We should eat something to keep our strength up."

"I don't think I can," Mala replied in a small voice.

"Try. We have a lot to do today, and you need energy. Tara would want you to take care of yourself."

Mala scrutinized his face. "You barely knew Tara. How do you know that's what she would want?"

"Because she wanted what was best for you. Just like I do."

He held out his hand to her. After a moment she took it.

As they ate, Denali laid out his plan. "I don't know how soon my ship will find us, so we need to determine how much food, water and power we have left and how long each will last. We should do that today."

They met back in the galley to compare what they'd found.

"The emergency power will last about a week," Denali said, then added, "if we use it sparingly. After we store some water for drinking, there's enough left for several days of short showers."

"We have food and liquid stores for a conservative week," Mala reported.

"So if we're not rescued in a week we'll need to find water and a source of food,"

Denali decided.

"Agreed."

\* \* \* \*

They worked industriously for hours and the shuttle was straightened and sanitized. Then Mala helped Denali close the hatch. He taped plastic over her splinted arm and she slipped into the bathing room to shower. She gasped at her hag-like appearance in the mirror. Her short brown curls were disordered. There was dirt on her face and a black streak across her forehead. Her clothes were dirty and wrinkled. Denali still looked beautiful, but Mala worried about how bad she, herself, looked. She'd never thought about her looks before, but she wanted to be attractive to him.

Their circumstances weren't conducive to romantic thoughts, although she was getting to know Denali. She liked what she'd learned so far, a lot. She liked his kisses, his caresses and his embraces a lot, too. Probably too much. She didn't want to think about leaving him in two weeks. She didn't want there to be a time when she couldn't see him and be with him.

She had a startling thought: what would it be like to marry him? To give her chastity to him? To bear his children? Mala warmed with a blush all over until the thought of his children found fertile ground in her mind. Babies. Lovely, wonderful babies. They'd be beautiful like Denali, of course. He would be a loving father and take good care of their children. She got goose bumps as she thought about what a demanding lover he would be. How immodest for her to think of that. These thoughts were inappropriate for a chaste young Bonwee. And Denali was a sentient being, not an object for her base lust.

She showered in cool water to quiet her lust and quickly washed her hair. She dressed in a soft green tunic set and opened the bathing room door. Denali was there and once again she was caught by his beauty. He smiled at her, making her feel all warm inside, and she smiled shyly at him. He stood close to her and pulled on one of her wet ringlets and it sprang back to her head.

"Your curls are so tight. You look like a young girl. Where's my Mala?"

"I'm in here."

He ran a palm up the side of her face and she leaned into his touch. "Yes, you're in there," he said, his voice gruff. Then he kissed her beside her mouth. Her fingertips touched the spot with wonder. There it was again. His kiss wasn't on her lips, but her lips tingled anyway. His golden eyes sparkled and she wondered why.

"Will you help me get the tape off my ribs before I shower?"

"Just tell me what to do."

He came fully into the bathing room with her and took off his shirt. They were close together in the small room and Mala hungrily studied his lithe musculature. He had a well-defined, sleek body. He had a lean strength and his muscles flexed smoothly beneath his golden skin.

Slowly the scope of her investigation took in more than broad shoulders and flexing muscles. She could now see the Felisian ethnic markings that ran down the side of his neck to his shoulders and down the outside of his arms to stop at the back of his hands. The dark brown spots were quite striking against his golden skin and the pattern made by the irregularly shaped spots was now clear to see. Before she realized it, her hand had reached out to touch the pattern, but she stopped short of contact.

"You can touch me," he offered, his voice husky.

"The pattern is very beautiful. To which ethnic group do you belong, Deni?" She knew there were six distinctive Felisian ethnic groups.

"Mitzli. You can tell by the diamond pattern where the spots cluster. Here, give me your hand."

Tentatively she put her hand in his and he raised it to the first visible diamond on the side of his face near his hairline. She couldn't feel the markings, just warm skin. Then he moved her hand to another diamond on his neck, and then one on the upper part of his chest. By now she caressed him and her hand continued to move from diamond shape to diamond shape across his broad shoulder, down his sculpted bicep, to his forearm and then his hand. There her hand and his performed a dance of caresses.

Denali's hand captured hers again and returned her palm to his chest and the diamond on his clavicle. Then he slid her palm down his side to a diamond there and finally to a diamond showing above the waistband of his navy uniform pants.

Again his hand lifted hers and placed it in the center of his chest where there was a thatch of tawny hair.

"There are no markings here," Mala remarked dreamily.

"No. I want you to know me. I am for you."

He moved her hand slowly down the front of his chest following the thin line of tawny hair until again they reached his pants. But he didn't stop until her hand rested on a large warm bulge and her trance broke. She tried to pull her hand away, but he pressed her hand there.

"I am for you. All of me, including this part. When we mate--"

"No." She looked up, nervous at the thought of sex, only to be snared in his darkened pupils.

"Are you empty, Mala?" His voice was that of a siren.

"Yes." The word was wrenched from her.

He pressed her hand harder to his penis. "I'll fill you when you're ready, then you won't be empty any more. And neither will I."

His voice was soft and enticing and she was unable to break the connection with him because of its emotional undertones.

He released her hand and she snatched it back to her own chest but she continued to stare at him with wide eyes. His fascination was magnetic, because he seemed to be offering more than his words stated. What did he mean that he was for her? Did he mean sex, as the

bulge in his pants indicated, or was he saying something else?

His face moved closer and she automatically raised her lips towards his. He would kiss her right beside her lips. In this she could trust him. His kiss in her dimple was warm and welcome and she wished she could turn just enough for his lips to be on hers. But she was compromised enough today in the area of Bonwee morality.

"When you're ready," he whispered against her skin and she couldn't decide whether to agree or disagree. She'd be ready when she was married, but whether Denali would be her husband was unknown. "Let me fix your ribs," she murmured, her voice thick. She felt relieved when he made distance between them.

"You'll have to pull hard on the tape. Don't worry about whether it hurts, just pull."

For the first time Mala saw the strips of white tape across the middle of his chest and wondered how she could have missed them earlier. There were vivid green and yellow bruises disappearing under the bandages. She placed her hands once again on his chest, but this time there was no passion involved. She searched the bandages for ends.

"Deni, how did you survive the crash when the pilot died?" She pulled on the end of the tape.

"My seat belt broke at some point when the shuttle flipped over. I remember the shuttle rolling, and then I woke up on the floor, but I don't remember anything in between. During that time I hit my head and cracked my ribs. I got a bunch of nice bruises too. Ow!"

"Sorry. I'm sure the hair will grow back there."

"I'm sure it will, and it will itch like fire!"

Mala laughed and continued to pull tape, then a thought struck her and she sobered. "So if your belt hadn't broken, you would have died too and I would have been all alone."

"But that didn't happen and I'm here with you."

"But it could have happened. My belt held. Why didn't yours?"

"I don't know. The shuttle is checked routinely so it was a freak thing that it broke."

"A freak thing," she murmured almost to herself as she pulled off tape. She didn't believe in "freak things." Her theist belief put it in another light. She would have survived alone--maybe--but the loneliness and emptiness would have traumatized her, perhaps permanently. With Denali alive she would be all right.

"I'm glad you lived," she said, her voice husky.

His warm palms framed her face and she turned her face up for his kiss. He surprised her with a kiss on both sides of her mouth, but she sensed his hesitation and knew what he wanted. She turned her lips to his and there was the affirmation he'd spoken of earlier today. She savored his lips, their warmth and their life.

Denali was a wonderful kisser and Mala enjoyed the connection to him for the many minutes it lasted, until her Bonwee propriety once again reared its head. The kiss had moved beyond affirmation and that was why it had to end. Reluctantly she broke away and took a step back from him. She had no idea when she'd become tightly wrapped in his arms. She'd known only the wonder of his kiss.

"Let me finish removing this tape so you can shower." She began pulling tape again. Now there was only one row of tape left and a much darker bruising had appeared. It must be extremely painful to him.

"I think I was meant to live to be with you," he surprised her with his quietly voiced statement. Mala gasped at the echoing of her earlier thought and her wide eyes flew to his.

"You're not a theist," she accused in a whisper.

"Not theism. Fate. Destiny." His voice was soft, but confident.

"I don't believe in those things," she said, and went back to removing the last of the tape. "There, finished. How does it feel?"

"It hurts. I'll actually be glad when you re-tape it. I'll call you when I'm finished with my shower."

Mala scooted out of the room, closing the door behind her. It was much cooler out here in the corridor, but she knew it had nothing to do with the gash in the hull letting in the cold air from outside.

\* \* \* \*

Denali finished his shower and the painful process of washing his mane. He would have to ask Mala to comb it out. Now that it was hopelessly snarled from four days of not being combed and then washing it, he couldn't do the job himself without a lot of stress on his ribs.

But there were more positive things to focus on right now. He'd kissed Mala for the second time today, a mind-blower of a kiss. She'd turned to him for comfort twice today. She'd been affectionate with him. She was very attracted to him; the looks she gave him would set fire to combustibles. She liked being with him. All her actions said they could begin to build a relationship together. And although he wanted to be rescued, this time alone with her would hasten a relationship between them.

He imagined wearing just a white towel while Mala re-taped his ribs, but she wasn't ready for that yet, so he donned clean navy uniform pants and opened the door. She came inside with the medical kit.

"I've never done this before. You'll have to tell me what to do," Mala remarked in all innocence.

Denali lowered his eyes so she wouldn't read the direction of his erotic thoughts. He'd rather show her than tell her. Oh, yeah.

"Deni?" Mala prompted.

Denali helped and the taping was quickly finished. "It took much longer when I taped it myself," he remarked.

"How did you manage the first time?"

"It was something that had to be done. You were unconscious and couldn't help me, so I just did it. Mala, would you comb out my mane? It's hopelessly snarled and with my ribs hurting it'll be difficult to do it myself."

"Sure." He handed her the comb and sat down.

She began combing the ends of his mane, working her way up to his scalp. "What will we do tomorrow?"

"I'd like to explore the planet."

Mala laughed. "How much of it?"

"As far as we can while it's light outside."

"Mm, that much?" Mala's voice had grown huskier and he sensed what she had. It was sensual to have someone of the opposite sex comb his mane. If only she had longer hair he could have combed hers when it was wet.

"Your mane is thicker than it looks. There. All done."

She handed him the comb and he grabbed her hand and pulled her down for a Felisian nuzzle.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll get out something for us to eat while you dress."

\* \* \* \*

Over reconstituted high protein meat and vegetable combos, which Mala found surprisingly spicy and filling, they discussed exploring the forest behind the shuttle. Trees usually meant some sort of water source, which they would need if the rescue took longer than a week. They decided which supplies to take with them and then they tidied up the galley.

Coming out of the galley, Mala stopped short. "Why is it so dark?" They'd had the little galley light on while they ate standing up.

"I don't know. Maybe there's a weather front overhead."

Denali moved past her to the hatch. She helped him get the hatch open and they both looked out. It was completely dark outside, but with no increase in wind. He stuck his hand outside. "No precipitation."

"Our chronos aren't set to this planet so maybe it's later than we think it is," she suggested.

"What time did you wake up this morning?"

"I don't know. I didn't check before I went outside."

"We can't afford to waste what light there is on this planet. I suggest we go to sleep earlier and wake up around 0500 to see if it's light already."

\* \* \* \*

They spent the evening putting together backpacks with emergency essentials in them. At 2100 Mala yawned. "I'm going to my berth."

"I'll shut down the power in the front of the shuttle."

"All right."

Denali double-checked everything before heading to the berths. The temperature had dropped ten degrees already and the gash in the hull let the cold air flow in unhindered. He hadn't noticed the cold before today. At least it would be warm in the berths.

Mala exited the bathing room in her warm, utilitarian pajamas. They were shapeless and unadorned, covering almost every inch of her, but the green matched her eyes. Her cheeks were pink from scrubbing. She was very appealing. He couldn't bear to sleep alone, to be isolated more than he already was. He halted her and she looked at him in question.

"I need you, Mala. I know you want to sleep alone, but I need a connection to someone. I won't be able to sleep when I'm empty inside like this."

"Deni," she protested.

"Just to hold you, nothing more."

She stared at him intently and he could sense her probing for the truth in his words. Finally she found whatever assurance she sought. "All right."

Mala climbed into the bottom berth and he went into the bathing room. He was aroused just thinking of them in bed together, but his desires had to go unfulfilled right now. She wasn't ready. He'd asked for her comfort and she'd agreed to give it. That had to be enough for now.

When he'd completed his nightly rituals he went to the berth Mala was in. She had scooted to the back wall of the berth and she looked fearful with her eyes wide.

"Don't be afraid. You've been sleeping with me for four days now. Tonight won't be any different."

"I'm conscious now, though."



"I won't hurt you."

He turned off the single light and climbed into the berth. In the confined space he touched her immediately, but she still tried to keep herself separate from him. He sighed and gathered her stiff body into his arms.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was squeezed tight.

"Nothing we haven't done all day today. You don't have to be nervous; it's just me." He kissed her face along her hairline, her temple, her cheeks, and her eyelids, saying, "It's just me," over and over. By the time he came to the side of her lips, she was pliant in his arms. He kissed one side, then moved to the other side and placed a kiss there. These were careful, deliberate kisses that just grazed the corner of her mouth on each side. Back and forth between the sides of her mouth he moved until the next pass lightly brushed her lips on the way. The next pass was a little harder brush. The third pass lingered a little. The fourth brush savored a little and brought a protest from her.

"You're taking advantage."

"I know."

By now they were body to body and he had her tightly in his arms, her face turned up to his. "It's so hard for me not to show what I'm feeling. I care about you, Mala."

"I care about you, too. No more, though."

"All right. Good night."

"Night," she said sleepily and her head snuggled against his chest.

He welcomed the small pain in his ribs from her action. The first two days were a jumbled, dizzy memory for him, but the last two days spent snuggled with her in his arms were a clear memory. Tonight he knew more about the woman in his arms. The more he learned about her, the more he wanted her. He needed to slide in under her defenses while she was vulnerable, yet protect her from danger and from himself going too far too fast at the same time. But he had to be firmly entrenched in her affections in less than two weeks. She had to want to stay as much as he wanted her to stay with him.

## Chapter Four

At 0500, the alarm on Denali's wrist chrono beeped and he reached an arm around Mala to shut it off.

"Is it 0500 already?" she murmured near his ear.

"Yes. Stay here and I'll take a look."

"You can't get the hatch open alone," she protested.

"I feel a lot better today."

He opened the berth to find it was just as dark as when they'd gone to sleep. Cold air wafted inside and he shivered. He slipped from the blankets, trying to keep Mala covered, and closed the latch hurriedly to keep the warm air inside. He switched on the single light and quickly grabbed a dark gray blanket from another berth and threw it around his shoulders. He felt warmer instantly. The rubber friction matting was cold against his soles as he padded forward to the hatch in his bare feet. He'd walked this corridor so many times yesterday he didn't need to waste precious power to light the way.

He looked towards the gash in the hull, but it, too, was dark. He turned to the hatch and found the control panel by touch. He needed to work on the controls tonight when it was too dark to be outside the shuttle. The hatch slowly opened partway and he pushed it open enough to stick his head outside. It was just as dark, with no lightening of the sky to indicate dawn. It had been dark for eleven hours now. Was this a winter season like many planets experienced, or was it because the sun had difficulty penetrating the dense cloud cover?

He closed the hatch with a little effort and padded back to the berths. By the single light he set his chrono alarm for 0530. He would watch for dawn by thirty-minute increments. He turned off the light and crawled into the berth with Mala. She had her back to him so he took her in his arms spoon fashion and nuzzled his nose between her chin and shoulder.

"Brrr! You're cold," she exclaimed.

"I know. I'm glad you're here to warm me."

He eliminated the small gap between their bodies and continued to gently kiss and nuzzle her neck and cheek until he was toasty warm again. Warm, nothing. He was on fire.

\* \* \* \*

The alarm at 0530 startled them both and Mala jerked against Denali. She felt his body and arms flexing around her as he shut off the alarm. Then his warm lips searched her neck, then her cheek, and she turned her face for his kiss next to her mouth.

"Mmm," he murmured against the skin of her face and the hum buzzed through her lips and cheek. "I don't want to go out in the cold again."

"I'll warm you again," she offered, liking the feel of his cheek against hers and being wrapped in his arms. Liking it too much, she thought with a spurt of shame. "I'm sorry, that was inappropriate for me to say."

He'd stopped nuzzling. "Not to me."

"To anyone who isn't my husband it is. My behavior has been so immodest, and so wrong."

"Not with me it isn't. You and I plan to get to know one another and explore our feelings for each other. We both want a permanent relationship, so nothing you do with me is wrong as long as we're moving toward that goal."

The words "permanent relationship" gave her hope. But was he thinking about marriage or something else?

He kissed her on the cheek. "I'll be right back."

She heard the berth open and his warmth slid away from her. Then the cover closed again.

Inside her the fight raged between modest behavior and the loving warmth of the man who had just left. She and Denali were alone, it was cold, and they were recovering from injuries. What could be more natural than for them to seek comfort from each other? Sometimes holding him and kissing him did feel natural, but sometimes it didn't. What should she do?

Denali said that what they were doing was all right, but he wasn't her conscience. Each person and each species had its own moral code and her code was part of her being Bonwee. How much could she compromise her own moral code before she lost her identity as a Bonwee? She shuddered. She would never want to be another species.

The berth opened to a single dim light and even that made her blink after the long darkness. Denali sat on the edge of the berth with his face turned towards her, his tawny mane disheveled. He had a dark gray blanket around his shoulders. "The sky is lightening. We should get ready to go."

"All right." Mala scooted to the edge of the berth.

"Keep your blanket on. It's cold out here."

She felt the cold on her face then. As she stood up Denali pulled her close for a quick kiss on the cheek. "Dress in layers so we can take them off as the temperature rises."

"Right."

Mala followed his lead and within thirty minutes they had eaten, finished packing their backpacks and closed the shuttle hatch as it became light enough to see.

"Twelve hours of daylight. That means we can only go six hours one way. We have to be back here before it gets dark," Denali directed.

"Lead the way."

Denali turned towards the back of the shuttle and she followed, and then walked by his side. The day was just as gray and overcast as yesterday, only colder with the sun newly risen. She shivered in her multiple layers of clothing.

"Are you going to be warm enough, Mala?"

"I warmed up yesterday after I walked for a little while. I just hope my boots hold up."

"Try not to step on anything sharp."

Mala laughed "There are rocks everywhere, Deni."

"You know what I mean. You've got a nice laugh. You should do it more often."

"I haven't had a lot to laugh about recently. I don't think I've heard you laugh either."

"I'll try to do that for you today."

Mala peered at him to see if he was serious. "You can't force laughter."

"I can do anything for you."

"Oh." What else could she say to such a statement, and one put so seriously, too? She concentrated on her footing on the rock-strewn ground, avoiding the larger stones. This

direction was cleaner because the shuttle had cleared a path with its landing.

"Mala," Denali's voice cut into her concentration, "you said you're a right's investigator for USP."

"Yes, I am. I investigate complaints of crimes against the rights of USP citizens."

"Is that what you were doing with the Panesh? I can't imagine them violating anyone's rights. They were so eager to join USP."

"Legal rights are so easy to breach, Deni. A person may think they're just exercising their own freedoms when actually they're imposing on the freedoms of others. Each species needs freedom in order to grow and advance. Nothing is more precious and necessary to achieving parity among species than for each person to be free."

Denali's eyes were riveted to her, like she was food and he was starving. They stared at each other for one long moment. She felt a tentative connection with him, but it was like a communication from far away that she couldn't boost to make louder. She looked away, breathing deeply, and the feeling dissolved. What had that been? It had felt something like a bond seeking a home. But Denali wasn't Grimari, wasn't her symbiotic other half like Tara had been. And he was male. Was he ever male! She could not form ties with him.

"Do you like your job?" Denali's voice was husky but she welcomed the distraction.

"Yes. I like to help people. I like being able to eliminate injustice and make strides towards the equality of all species."

"That's quite a complicated answer. I was expecting a simpler one." He smiled at her and her cheeks burned. She couldn't help feeling the enormity of what she did for a living and how she impacted the lives of others.

"I want my life to count. I want to make a difference in the universe. There's nothing wrong with that," she defended.

"No, there's nothing wrong with that. It suits you. Are you lonely in your job?"

"I have ... had Tara," she stumbled over the past tense. "She was a good friend and companion to me."

"You've never married or been engaged to be married?"

"No, I'm only twenty-eight. I hadn't planned to marry for another five or six years. I want to serve USP awhile before I settle down to raise children."

"Are you planning to quit USP in order to have children?"

"No. I just won't travel anymore. I'll ask for a permanent position on a space station or planet, cut back on my duties, and probably take time off from work."

"That's commendable. Children are very important. Felisians treasure their children."

"That's very good to know, Deni." She smiled at him. "What do you do on your ship?"

"I'm Second Com. I've worked at Com for the past four years."

"So how did Second Com get to command a shuttle mission?"

"My captain thought this would be an easy mission for my first command." He shared a sardonic look with her.

They talked of other things and slowly they neared the forest. The forest's destruction became more apparent the closer they came. Splintered wood jabbed jagged spikes into the sky. The limbs were a twisted wooden carnage in a twenty-meter wide wasteland. These severed headless fatalities stood as mute testament to the life and death struggle that some of them had won and some had lost. Sadness swamped Mala as she viewed the destruction of

these living things and at the reminder of the people on the shuttle who'd died. This planet was stark enough without the loss of these splashes of color.

Denali reached over and interlaced his fingers with hers. "Don't be sad. They saved our lives."

"I know. Bonwee are taught self-sacrifice so that's a concept I fully understand. I'm willing to give up my life in service to USP if that's what it takes to hold USP together or to advance the ideals of equality, parity or justice. All Bonwee in USP service feel this way."

"How could someone else's life be more valuable than your own? Why should you die so that someone you don't know or barely know should live?" Denali's voice was incredulous. "How could USP ask it of you?"

"My life means nothing if USP disintegrates, or if conflicts between species can't be resolved and then genocide and mass destruction result. To go on traveling freely while others are chained, to exercise my legal rights while others are enslaved, to have limitless opportunities while others have no hope--these are things I can't do. I can't have the power to change things and not use it.

"Bonwee must serve and we have the tools to serve that most others don't. We can speak other languages effortlessly, we can mediate, we excel at diplomacy ... and we want peace. With every fiber of our beings we want peace, not just for ourselves but for everyone. And if my death is required to gain that peace, I'll gladly give it. Don't think I'll throw my life away, because I won't, but I will lay it down to save others."

Her whole body vibrated with the passion of her beliefs and in the back of her brain she noted that Denali was staring at her again as though transfixed.

Slowly he moved towards her and she flowed into his open arms as he gathered her tightly to him. His warm cheek came to rest against hers and they nuzzled contentedly together. "I'll protect you, Mala," he murmured against her skin.

"You understand, don't you, Deni?" she demanded and pressed tighter to him. His body was warm with life force, and without her willing it, her mouth sought his.

"Yes, I understand," he got out before their lips melded together.

Mala was greedy, savoring the living warmth of his mouth. While he lived there was hope for many things and she transmitted her hope to him through her eagerness. The glide of her lips against his was thrilling and she clutched him tight, until she sensed a different type of urgency in him and reluctantly broke contact.

"Mala," he protested, but his swelling lower body had sent her an unmistakable message that she couldn't ignore.

She nuzzled his cheek in apology and he encouraged a full Felisian nuzzle. "Deni, you know I like you, but I can't do what you want."

"It's too soon for you, I know. I care for you."

He continued to nuzzle her, but she sensed the urgency had diminished. Very reluctantly he released her and almost as reluctantly she stepped away from his warmth. She looked at him and he looked back with darkened pupils and what she was beginning to realize was desire on his face. She held out her hand, he took it and they began walking again.

The area of decapitated trees was too difficult to enter so Denali led them to the right of that point. The trees were huge, towering far above their heads.

"These are very old," Mala said with reverence.

"I think the planet must have been more habitable in the distant past."

"Do you think this planet is dying? The trees seem to be the only living things here."

"I don't know. I wish I'd studied ecology. Then we could make more intelligent guesses about this world."

"You can't know everything."

"A hero should know everything," he said in a strange voice.

Startled, she looked to see if he was serious. "Are you a hero, Deni?" she breathed.

"I'm trying to be. How am I doing?"

"You're doing a good job," she told him and was rewarded by his warm smile.

By 1200 they'd traversed the woods thoroughly looking for water, but all they found was a small pool that Denali decided wasn't large enough to sustain a base camp. The woods extended several miles in each direction and although the ground was easier to walk on than the rocky ground around the shuttle, the uneven tree roots and irregularly spaced trees made walking an adventure. Denali circled back to the pool for lunch. They ate with their boots off, relieving their sore feet.

After a lunch of packaged high-protein meals, Denali tugged Mala's boots on her feet and laced them. He hesitated with his hands on her calves and he seemed to want to say something, but what came out was, "I need to make a sling for your arm."

She sat stiffly while he wrapped the sling around her splinted arm and secured it. It seemed to take a long time and his hands were warmly caressing on her arm, her shoulder and her back. He was very close to her as both of his arms worked their way around her back to the front, close enough for her to breathe in his musky scent. Mala looked into his face to find that the gold of his eyes had receded and the sight of his enlarged pupils speeded up her heart rate. As his head lowered and her face rose to his, one of his hands brushed her left breast and she jerked back as though scalded.

"Don't!" she ordered with affronted virgin modesty.

"It was an accident," he soothed.

"I thought you understood I wasn't an easy kind of woman," she said with disbelief.

"Mala," Denali began, "there's something you need to know."

She heard an odd note in his voice, saw that his face was serious, and felt an intensity that she couldn't define. "What is it?"

"I meant what I said, yesterday and this morning. I am for you, completely, and I want it to be permanent."

She drew breath sharply. Here was the answer to what she'd wondered. "Do you mean marriage?"

"Felisians take permanent mates, but I understand you'd also want marriage. You understand, don't you, that in order to become my mate you'd have to give me your chastity before marriage?"

"Oh." Her hopes plummeted. "I couldn't do that, especially if marriage wasn't a certainty."

"I'm certain you and I would bond as permanent mates, and a permanent mate is legally recognized the same as a spouse. A marriage ceremony could come afterwards."

"Why couldn't marriage come beforehand?" she demanded.

"Because I'm Felisian. We marry for only two reasons--for a limited contract to bear and raise children or to marry a permanent mate. I couldn't marry you first, because if for some reason you didn't bond with me, I couldn't stay with you. I have to have a mate."

"I can't have sex with you first."

"Then we're at an impasse. Perhaps when you know me better you'll feel differently."

"I won't feel differently."

"Then you condemn our relationship to end when we're rescued."

"No, Deni, that can't be. You can't say there's no future just because I won't have premarital sex with you. That's ludicrous."

"I want a mate, Mala, not a wife. Marriage doesn't mean the same thing to me that it does to you--it's just words. People can and do walk away from marriages all the time. Felisians do it regularly. But a permanent mate is someone bonded into the very fiber of your being, an intrinsic part of you that you can't walk away from. Together the two mates make a complete whole. I want that. I want a bonding so deep I don't know where I end and my mate begins. I want a permanent, unbreakable, physical and emotional connection with a woman, not some words that are easily discarded."

Mala could barely breathe after his description of a permanent mate. "A bonding so deep" he described it and it matched what she wanted--a bonding soul deep. His words woke a fierce yearning in her. This clawing emptiness she'd experienced since Tarana died was unbearable. If she could fill that emptiness with what Denali described ... she grasped his arm in desperation.

"What is it?" he demanded, alarm and uncertainty in his voice.

"That's what a permanent mate is? You're sure?"

"I've known several pairs of mates and that's what they describe."

"That's what I want," she whispered hoarsely. "I thought marriage would be something like that, but what you describe is more ... and I want it."

"You can have it as my permanent mate, Mala!" There was excitement in his voice and manner.

"I have to be sure though, Deni. I need time to get to know you better. We need to let our feelings deepen. You said there's no way to be sure a bond would occur. Is there any way to give ourselves a better chance to bond?"

"The pairs I've known said they wanted the bonding badly and they wanted a permanent, monogamous relationship with their mate."

"Did these couples love one another?" she asked carefully, although his answer was very important to her.

"Deeply."

Mala let out a small sigh. She would find love with this man. "Then you and I can work towards that kind of commitment." She took a deep breath for the next part. "And when we're committed we'll try to bond."

"How long?" his voice was full of anticipation.

"I don't know. Perhaps six months."

"That's a long time," his voice sounded strange and he appeared to be considering his words carefully. "You'll stay with me during that time?"

"I'll stay on your ship. I'll have to take a leave of absence from USP while we work things out between us. Will your captain allow me to stay on board?"

"I don't know. We'll ask him when we're rescued." He appeared to want to say something else.

Mala put her hand on his arm to encourage him. "What aren't you telling me?"

His warm palm caressed the side of her face while he stared at her. "What I have to tell you will have to wait until we know each other better. It's too soon to discuss some

things."

"That's fair enough. What's your favorite color, Deni?"

Denali smiled at her and her stomach filled with butterflies. "Green," he answered mischievously. "What's yours?"

"Green," she smiled up at him. "But lately I've found a lot to like about gold."

He swooped suddenly and planted a kiss beside her mouth and her hand rose to touch the tingling spot. "What was that for?"

"Because you're an imp and a seductress all rolled into that prim little body and you deserved to be kissed for that answer."

"I'm neither imp nor seductress!" she denied, flabbergasted by his description of her.

"You're both. You smile all warm and welcoming, both an innocent and beckoning siren, while your eyes are full of mischief. And you're small like an imp."

"I'm average height for a Bonwee. You know what's odd, Deni? Height is the only way you can distinguish Bonwee males from females from the back, because everyone is slender and has short brownish hair. From the front and at a distance racial similarity makes it difficult to tell Bonwees apart in a crowd. I think that's where I began to treat all people equally."

"But not me."

"No, I've never met anyone like you before. I knew you were special from the moment I saw you."

Denali swooped for another kiss.

"Was it the right answer this time too?" she asked in delight.

"Yes, and you know it."

Quickly she diverted his attention. "Deni, how long will you stay in the military?"

"I plan to give six more years' service, and then return to civilian life. By then I'll have given my twenty years."

"How old are you? I thought you were close to my age."

"I'm thirty-two," Denali answered. "I'm four years older than you, a little wiser, more experienced--perfect for you."

By the end of his statement he had her in his arms and she lifted her face for his kiss. "Nuzzle me," he cajoled and she did as he had taught her, liking the feel of her cheek against each of his. Then his hand was under her chin, bringing her face up for the expected kiss. His lips lingered on the side of hers, just grazing the corner of her mouth. The desire to turn that extra inch was overpowering.

Finally he brushed his lips lightly across hers and sipped at the corner of her mouth. When he lifted his head his pupils had darkened and Mala felt a thrill bubble inside her, like effervescence. Her heart raced and she felt out of breath. Denali was a siren, but he was siren.



## Chapter Five

As they walked, they talked about their lives. Mala asked so many questions that Denali found himself dredging up things about his life he'd forgotten. She was like a dry sponge, absorbing the facts and minutiae of his life with avid curiosity. And he couldn't give her enough information, this woman who would become his mate. His mate!

His thoughts stumbled to a halt and circled incredulously around those two words. She'd agreed to work towards commitment and then to try to bond. She would give her chastity to him in less than six months and he would seal her tightly to him. He would fill her body with his child this year and more children in the future. She would be a good mother, loving and caring. He would have Mala all of his life, not just while the children were being raised, as most Felisians did. There was no way he was letting this hot little woman get away. She was what he'd been searching for and couldn't find among the women he knew, among his own species.

It was ironic that this prim virgin had more passion in her convictions and in her kiss than any of the experienced lovers he'd known. It was more ironic that a promiscuous Felisian like him would want complete fidelity and permanent monogamy--and with a Bonwee of all people.

That last thought stopped his internal celebration cold. There was going to be a problem with his sexual practices until he could mate with Mala. She would expect him to be celibate, and rightly so. He couldn't have sex with other women while he was working towards a commitment with her. But he hadn't been celibate since he was eighteen years old and he didn't know if he could do it, especially with the desire he already felt for her. And in three weeks, when mating time came, how would he explain that to her? He couldn't hide it and she would never accept him mating with another woman. He'd have to be sedated this time and know that he would have Mala for his partner for the mating time seven months from now.

"Deni?" He became aware this was not the first time Mala had called his name.

"I'm sorry. I was thinking about something else."

"You looked so fierce. What were you thinking about?"

He decided on part of the truth. "I was just marveling how in six months you'll be my mate."

"That's not a certainty," she cautioned.

"I'm sure enough. What were we talking about before I got distracted?"

\* \* \* \*

The forest ended in an even rockier terrain and the second forest was just discernable on the horizon. "I thought the forests were closer together," Mala mused.

"We were going pretty fast and at that speed they would have seemed closer. We've explored this forest, but haven't found sufficient water or food sources. We'll walk another two hours away from the shuttle, and then we'll go straight back."

Denali started forward and Mala followed him. This man might be her husband in six months! And before that she would allow him to have what only her husband should have.

She was glad he couldn't see her blush at that thought. They should know one another much better in six months and be comfortable together, and then she would know whether it was right to give herself to him. She was ... Mala stumbled over the term for what she had with Denali. Was she engaged to be married? But marriage wasn't yet guaranteed. Still, engagement best described what the two of them had agreed to.

"Deni, are we engaged?"

"What?" He turned to face her and his face was almost comically confused.

"Engaged. To be married," she clarified when she got no response from him.

His brow furrowed in thought, and then cleared. "Felisians don't have engagements."

Now she frowned. "What do Felisians call the time between the agreement to marry and the wedding?"

"A day, two days, a week," Denali explained.

She couldn't control her shock. "What? Why does the wedding happen so quickly?"

"I told you why Felisians marry. To us it's either a contractual arrangement or the publicizing of a permanent bond between mates. The former needs no wedding and the latter is usually a quick ceremony with the Felisian Elder presiding. There are few arrangements and little planning and no reason to wait. I expect you'll want to be married the day after you become my mate, right?"

"Yes, I'd want to be married right away."

"Yet we don't know when you'll become my mate, so how can we plan for an elaborate ceremony?"

"I see your point, but that still doesn't answer the question of whether we're engaged."

"Do you want to be engaged?"

"Well ... I do need something to tell my mother."

"What has your mother got to do with us?" Denali asked, dumfounded.

"My mother will want to know about us, about what we are to each other. What will I tell her?"

"Mala, you're over the legal age of consent. You don't need to tell your mother anything."

"Yes I do," she replied in a small voice feeling inordinately sad. This man didn't understand family ties even though he'd said Felisians treasured their children. Here was a major difference in ideology between their two species and it was an important difference.

"Mala," his palm was warm against the side of her face. "Parents don't care so much about their child's partner--partners are transient ..."

"I won't be transient!" she denied vehemently, pulling away from him.

"No, you won't be, but parents care about grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It's the children who are important."

"On my planet the partner becomes a sort of adopted child, because the partner isn't transient. The partner is important, too."

"I think I see the problem now."

"Do you, Deni? I see a wide gulf between your beliefs and mine." She turned away to try and get herself under control.

Denali's arms slid around her and he pulled her close, but she stood stiffly within his embrace. "It's not an unbridgeable gulf," he spoke softly to her and his tone took some of the starch from her spine so that she leaned against him. "What we need is a mediator to show us where we agree. Can you mediate for us?"

"Yes." She laid her cheek against his shoulder. "I'll be a permanent partner, and so will you."

"Yes."

"I'll tell my mother I've met a man--"

"A warm and caring man," he inserted.

"A very interesting man."

"A man you want to get to know much better because you need to know ... if he's the one."

"Yes. The one," Mala agreed.

"He's different."

"But different doesn't mean bad. There's common ground and the differences will make life interesting. There will need to be compromises, attempts at understanding, patience and tolerance."

"We only made our agreement a little while ago, Mala. We can't falter every time we find a difference between us, because if we do we'll never make it. We knew we were different when we met. What needs to be our foundation is the goal of permanence. When there's a difficulty, we think of the goal. If permanence is truly what we both want, we need to admit it now. I want it."

"So do I," she affirmed.

"Then we focus on that. We can work on the differences if we don't lose our focus. Agreed?"

"Yes. Thank you, Deni."

Denali kissed her cheek, then let go of her. "Come on. Let's finish our search."

\* \* \* \*

They didn't find what they sought, but at the appointed hour Denali turned them back towards the shuttle. The handheld directional device showed them the way and hours later they arrived back at the shuttle. Mala had been quiet the past half-hour and Denali knew it was because she was tired. They had walked for almost twelve hours today, not fast or particularly far, but it was a very long time on their feet.

He got the hatch open and boosted Mala up into the shuttle, then climbed in after her and closed the hatch.

"No rescue party came," she murmured as he began taking off her pack.

"I didn't think they would. Maybe tomorrow," he said in encouragement as he stripped off his own pack. "Do you want a shower before dinner?" He knelt and took off her boots while she held onto his shoulder.

"I don't think I have enough energy. Why aren't you tired, Deni?"

"I am tired, but everybody walks daily on the ship to keep in shape and to maintain good mental health." He took off his own boots.

"That's a good idea." She continued to stand, unmoving.

"Mala, you'll feel better if you shower. Let me tape up your arm."

"I don't want to waste water," she said, her voice querulous.

He sighed. She was too tired to care for herself and he was almost too tired to care for her. But she was his responsibility. He made a quick decision: food then bed. He pulled Mala into the galley and fixed them both a meal with juice to drink. "Eat," he commanded her and she began to eat mechanically, her eyelids growing heavy.

"I'm going to hike to the second forest tomorrow. It's too far to come back here in

one day so I'll take supplies to spend the night and return to the shuttle the day after tomorrow."

"No!" she said sharply, alert now. "You're not leaving me here alone."

"You're in no condition to hike again tomorrow and we need to find food and water. I can reconnoiter while you stay here and wait for rescuers."

"I said !" Her green eyes blazed. "I go where you go. I don't want to wait here and wonder what happened to you if you don't come back. I don't want to be alone."

The impact of her words hit him like a blow and he couldn't catch his breath for a moment. She wanted his company, and more importantly, she didn't want to be separated from him. He understood that her reasons were more complex than the attraction between them and their agreement. Mala was unbonded and feeling lost, and so was he. He hadn't wanted to be separated from her either, and for some of the same reasons.

"Fine, you can come along. We'll prepare in the morning. Go get ready for bed." He shooed her out of the galley and quickly tidied up.

When he climbed in their berth he took her in his arms and fit their bodies tightly together with their legs entwined.

"Mmm," she murmured into his chest.

"This is what it'll be like when we're mated," he murmured to her and sighed contentedly into the top of her soft hair. The words "when you're mine" were tagged onto the sentence in his mind and he fell asleep thinking that she was already his.

\* \* \* \*

The chrono alarm woke Mala from a deep restorative sleep to find a heavy weight on her, more than half covering her. Recent experience identified the weight as Denali. She breathed in his scent. In just two days of consciousness she'd identified a particular scent as his--warm, slightly musky and male. Why she thought his scent was male she didn't know, but it was different than hers, which she identified as female. The scent of him was alluring and she pressed her small nose to his face to inhale more of it.

"Mmm. Mala." His hands moved to frame her face and his lips were warm as he placed kisses around her face.

She became aware that he had moved onto her completely and that they were intimately aligned, with a warm bulge pressing into her. "Deni, don't!" She pushed at him forcefully.

He moved off her reluctantly. "It's going to be a long six months," he muttered. She couldn't help but hear him in the confined space of the berth.

Denali opened the berth and sat on the edge. She swung her feet over the side and sat next to him, sharing her blanket with him. "Are you sure you're up to a long trek today, Mala?"

"If you don't walk too fast and we stop for a few breaks."

"All right, then. We need to shower, eat and pack for two to three days, just in case water is farther than the second forest. We'll need blankets and some waterproof sheeting for outdoor protection at night. I'll tape up your arm so you can shower first."

He stood up and pulled her to her feet, then leaned down to give her a Felisian nuzzle. "Don't start with that, Deni. You said we had a lot to do."

"There's always time for this," he said and kissed her beside her lips.

## Chapter Six

Denali said there should always be time for physical affection between them. That thought stayed with Mala all day and stoked the fire of feeling for him that was growing in her heart. In less than two hours they were on their way, leaving a note behind for potential rescuers. They spent the whole day walking towards the second forest and reached it a half-hour before the sun set.

"Mala, why don't you collect wood for a fire while I make a shelter?"

"Sure." Mala turned and moved away from him.

"Don't go far," he called to her. "Keep the camp in sight if you can. Yell if you get lost."

"Okay."

Mala collected sticks from among the numerous fallen branches. Keeping Denali in sight, she marveled at his lithe body as he stretched to tie the plastic sheeting to tree trunks. She loved the fall of his mane as the strands shifted this way and that. Its many shades of brown and gold were muted in the diminishing light and that was a pity, because his mane was one of his most fascinating features. She dumped her armload of sticks far enough from the shelter to prevent it from catching fire.

"Do you need help with that, Deni?"

"No. We're going to need several more loads if we're to keep a fire going all night. It's going to be cold in the open. We'll need larger pieces of wood, but I know you can't carry those with a broken arm. You're being careful, aren't you, Mala?"

"Yes, Deni. I want the bone to heal properly. I've seen larger pieces of wood, and I'll try to get them all in one place for you. Don't worry. I'll be careful," she said, to head off his concern. His caring was a welcome balm to her wounded soul.

She returned to collecting wood, picking up larger pieces this time. She mulled over the easy camaraderie that she and Denali had shared all day as they walked. The two of them had some things in common, but their differences were also interesting. She loved hearing his baritone voice, so smoothly delicious to her ears, and seeing the way his golden eyes sparkled when he looked at her or when he talked about a favorite topic.

Each time they'd stopped to rest there'd been nuzzling and kissing. Denali was a toucher and very affectionate with her. If she hadn't been Bonwee, she would have thrilled to being the singular focus of his desire. She was still thrilled, but she had to be on her guard all the time to prevent their physical encounters from getting out of control. He didn't hide his desires completely and she felt uneasy at the intensity and scope of his wanting. He seemed to want to press the boundaries of her restraint each time, as though he thought the more he touched her the more she would allow. And she couldn't allow much more, even if it was what her heart and body clamored for. Her morals were an integral part of her integrity, not just words.

Rustling in the underbrush nearby startled her and she froze mid-motion. There was further rustling and then the underbrush parted and a small brown nose and brown beady eyes peered from the leaves. The nose quivered and the beady eyes seemed to peer at her.

She tried to breathe inaudibly so as not to frighten the small animal. Slowly it came out of the brush and she got a better look at it. It was a quadruped mammal, less than a foot long with heavy dark brown fur.

Animals meant there was water somewhere! Mala inadvertently took a step toward the animal, and it turned in an instant and fled back into the undergrowth. She chased it with only one thought in her mind: it might lead her to water.

She caught several glimpses of brown fur moving quickly through the undergrowth and she followed hurriedly, tripping on unseen roots as she ran, until she tripped and fell. The fall knocked the wind out of her and the jolt to her broken arm sent pain ratcheting through her. She rolled to her side and cradled the arm tightly to her chest while she breathed through the pain.

Long minutes later she regained her breath and the pain had become a dull ache. Good, the arm hadn't been re-broken. She sat up and looked around for the animal, but it was gone. Then she realized she couldn't see Denali. She fought down her fear and climbed to her feet. He couldn't be far away because she hadn't chased the animal that long. She started walking in the direction she thought would lead her back to the camp.

After five minutes she conceded that she'd chosen the wrong direction. She turned around and began walking back the way she'd just come. The light was fading and it was getting harder to see, so she had to find Denali quickly. She hurried, as fast as she dared, but still there was no sight of him.

"Deni!" she called loudly and stopped moving to listen. There was no reply, so she shouted, "Deni!"

Muffled sound came from off to her left, so she turned in that direction, calling for Denali until she heard his shout. His voice grew closer and finally a beacon of light appeared and she ran towards it.

"Deni!" She flew into his arms and the force of her flight knocked him down and she, perforce, went with him.

"Mala!"

Denali's lips moved eagerly on her face and suddenly their lips met and the feeling exploded from her. Here was safety, comfort and affection, and she couldn't get enough of him. Her lips hungrily devoured his and his were voracious on hers.

His hands caressed and roamed her body. Then he rolled her under him and began to rhythmically press his lower body into hers.

"Don't!" she broke the kiss long enough to protest.

He brought her lips back to his for a long kiss. Then he demanded, "Where were you?"

"I got lost following an animal. I called, but you were too far away to hear me. I was all alone."

She sought his lips again and they fed off each other, until she felt his hands on her hips. Then she broke the kiss. "Don't, Deni!"

"Let me in, Mala. I won't hurt you. Let me fill you," he cajoled as he placed kisses on her face and pressed his body firmly to hers.

"No. It's not time to try. We're not committed to each other yet."

"I want you. I need you," he begged. "I was so worried when I couldn't find you."

"No, Deni," she said, feeling sad that she had to deny him. "We have to wait."

"Why does that make you sad?" He was alert and listening.

"I want to move faster towards a commitment, but I can't. I've only known you for less than a week and so it wouldn't be right for me. It would be like throwing away everything I believe in for something not quite real."

"It's real."

"I don't know that for sure, and until I do you'll have to honor my wishes. If you want permanence, you'll get it, but not if you push too hard too fast."

"It's hard for me to wait. I'm a physical man."

"I know. But it can't be that way yet. Please be patient with me." She pleaded for his understanding and his tolerance.

"I'll try." He brushed his cheek against hers and she finished the Felisian nuzzle for him. Slowly he climbed off her and pulled her to her feet.

There was almost no light left now, and Denali took her hand and led the way with the hand light. His eyes eerily reflected what illumination there was.

"I saw an animal, Deni! A small mammal. That means there's water someplace nearby doesn't it?" she asked, excitement returning once again.

"Usually that's what it means. We'll search for the water tomorrow. I was really frightened when I couldn't find you."

"I was a little scared myself when I knew I was lost. And when I called and you didn't answer, I panicked a little. I don't want to lose you."

"You won't. I'll make sure of it," Denali said.

She was unnerved by the certainty and possessiveness in his voice, so she changed the subject quickly. "Deni, how do you know which way our camp is?"

"Felisians have an excellent sense of direction. We can also tell time accurately and know what day of the year it is."

"That's amazing. Why is that?"

"It's because of our feline DNA."

"I've wondered about Felisian DNA since I first heard about it. Does it bother you that part of your physiology comes from an animal?"

Denali laughed. "You say that so carefully, like it's an insult to me to tell me I'm part feline. Felisians were bioengineered that way thousands and thousands of years ago. We like being what we are and we wouldn't eliminate the feline part of us if we had the opportunity. Personally, I think it's great."

She'd been snared by Denali's laugh, so free and contagious. Then his excitement and enthusiasm captivated her as he talked about his species. He was so vivacious.

"Deni, do you think Felisians came from Grimari, like the scientists are trying to prove?"

"Your partner was the first Grimari I ever met, so I couldn't really judge. All the records from when Felisians were first bioengineered were lost, so even we don't know for sure. And like I said, we're pretty happy as we are now. We're not looking to rejoin with Grimari if they find out that's where we came from."

"Oh."

"Don't sound so disappointed. Felisians aren't lost or anything. We have two planets and billions of people. We're thriving and we're happy."

They rounded a huge tree and their equipment became visible. "Here's the camp."

The "camp" was waterproof sheeting laid on the ground under all their blankets with another sheet tied above it between two trees. There was only a single space for sleeping,

although logic told her that they would need one another's body heat to keep warm in the open air. But Denali was taking a lot for granted.

There was a pile of wood surrounded by a circle of rocks where their fire would burn. A real wood fire was a novel idea for her, although it seemed wrong to her to burn trees.

"Are you hungry?" he asked her.

"Yes, but I'll fix us something to eat."

"You're tired. It's no trouble for me to get everything ready."

"It's not right that you always have to take care of me. At least let me help you."

"All right, we'll share the work. We want to be equals in our relationship anyway."

\* \* \* \*

They spent the evening around the fire, talking quietly, getting to know more about one other. Denali sat close to Mala, holding her hand. He needed to touch her, needed the reassurance that he hadn't lost her. His heart raced again, knowing that they could have been separated. He stroked her arm, and felt instantly calmer.

Cocooned in the intimate circle of the fire's glow, with the warmth of the flames to chase away the evening chill, Denali breathed in the peacefulness of Mala's presence. She had so many appealing facets: her fiery passion, her innocent sensuality, her caring nature, her vulnerability, and her desire to work side by side with him as his equal.

Her face glowed with animation as she talked using her hands to express herself. Her dimples flashed and faded over and over as she moved her mobile lips. Other men might not find her attractive, but he couldn't look away from her. Other men might not find her sexy or womanly, but he desired her deeply and couldn't wait for them to be mated.

"You're staring at me, Deni."

"It's wonderful to watch you while you're speaking. Your whole face lights up and your eyes shine. I've never seen eyes that color green before."

Mala blushed and ducked her head. "I sometimes get carried away when I talk, and you're such a good listener."

"That's because I like listening to you."

He nuzzled her face and she nuzzled him back. It was such a wonderful feeling to have her cheek against his. They sat with their faces together for long moments, and he savored the closeness with her.

"I care for you," he said as he snuggled against her. This was his woman and he was right where he wanted to be.

The next morning they searched for water. They saw several other small rodent-sized mammals, which encouraged Denali. This forest was huge compared to the one nearer to the shuttle and it took all morning to search part of it.

At lunchtime they discovered a good-sized pool with a constant influx of clean water through a four-foot high waterfall. The pool was nestled up to the trees on two sides with the hillside on the waterfall side, and was open on the fourth side. Relief almost made Denali's knees weak. Here was the first of their basic survival needs.

"Is it large enough?" Mala asked quietly, afraid to hear a negative answer.

"Yes. We can use the falling water for drinking and the pool for bathing. The trees will give us privacy when we bathe."

"I don't think I can bathe in the open," she said, her face flushed scarlet.

"You'll have to if you want to be clean. Let's eat and then we can start looking for a shelter."



Denali covertly watched her as she ate. She was relaxed at last and looked entirely natural sitting on the flat rocks that surrounded the pool. If the sun had been shining, Mala and her green eyes would have fit perfectly into the lush greenery that surrounded the pool. She looked serene in that spot.

He leaned forward and kissed the side of her mouth. She turned questioning eyes to him. "You look lovely sitting there."

She blushed wonderfully. "Bonwees aren't lovely."

"are."

"Thank you." Her eyes flirted innocently with his and his libido and emotions were both awakened by her actions.

He reached his hand out and stroked his fingertips along the side of her face. She pressed into his hand, clearly enjoying his touch. "Your skin is so soft," he murmured.

"May I touch you too?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes," his answer was almost a purr of eagerness.

Her small hand rose to his face and her palm was a little roughened by the past few days' work, but he was thrilled by her touch. She traced his features, her face alight with curiosity. Her other hand rose and her fingers slid into his mane to fondle the strands. He moved closer to allow more of the torturous exploration. Her hand strayed to his neck to stroke his ethnic markings with affection and then rose again to trace his lips.

Mala's eyes were dreamy with budding affection for him. He knew that she was unaware what her innocent explorations were doing to him. He leaned forward to join their lips lightly and she explored his lips just as tentatively. His tongue snaked out to wet the seam of their lips and Mala made a hungry sound and deepened the kiss while her hand tightened in his mane. Her other hand went around the back of his neck and pulled him closer.

For long moments he devoured her lips hungrily until she pulled her mouth free. She turned her head away to rest panting against his shoulder.

Finally she said shakily, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen."

He nuzzled her curls with his nose, holding her tightly to him. "There was nothing wrong in what you did. We care for each other."

"I told you how I feel about kissing on the lips."

"If you were any species other than Bonwee, or if I were Grimari, we'd be mated by now," he argued quietly, wanting not to frighten her with the strength of his convictions.

"No, we wouldn't."

"Yes, we would. You're a virgin so you don't understand the power of desire."

"I understand," she admitted in a very small voice.

He was speechless at her admission, but what she felt she wouldn't act upon. "I won't hurt you, Mala. I want you with honorable intentions. Permanently."

"I believe you," her voice was still small. "That's how I want you."

He crushed her to him. They wanted the same thing, but they were moving toward it at different speeds and from slightly different directions. If Mala were Felisian, it wouldn't be a problem. He stiffened at that traitorous thought.

"What is it?" she asked, a little uncertain.

"We need to search for shelter. I don't want to take advantage of you anymore." Reluctantly he put space between them by standing up.

They began a search pattern circling out from the pond. Denali was quiet while he

brooded. His earlier thought that if only Mala were Felisian things would move faster between them had felt disloyal, almost unfaithful to her. He wanted her as she was, an innocent Bonwee, beguiling and beckoning. He didn't want her to be Felisian. He wanted, not some female who looked like him. Why would he even think such a thought? Why would he besmirch her that way? Did he miss the others of his species that much? He felt empty, yes, but he wouldn't trade Mala for a Felisian.

"What are we looking for?"

"A cave would be best. Something with three sides will work, not too far from the pool but screened from it for privacy and to separate us from animals."

A little while later they found a cluster of huge fallen boulders. There was a good-sized triangular-shaped space between the boulders that was not quite tall enough inside to stand up in. There was plenty of room to spread the blankets for a bed and room to keep all their stores dry. Denali stood up outside the shelter and dusted the dirt off his hands.

"Is it safe for us?" Mala asked. "If boulders fell once they could fall again."

He studied the rocky face of the hillside and the boulders in front of him. "These have been here awhile and the face of the hill is flat now with no overhangs to come down. These boulders are sturdy. It's a better shelter than I thought we'd find, and the pool is just around that corner." He pointed off to his left.

"Deni," Mala began, then turned pleading eyes to him. "I'm not sure about this."

Their conversations over the past few days had cued him to her concerns. He took her in his arms and she clutched him tightly. "The shelter is precautionary--we won't need it if we're rescued. And if there's a delay in being rescued we'll live here together. I'll give you as much privacy as I can, but we'll be together every day and night. There will be intimacy between us. We won't be able to avoid it completely because we'll be dependent on each other for survival. If the situation becomes untenable to you, we'll mate and I'll bind you to me."

Mala shook her head against his chest.

"Yes. The intimacy between us can only grow stronger in this situation. If you need to be bonded in order to continue living with me each day, we won't wait the six months. We'll bond right away, and then we'll marry when we're rescued."

"I need time, Deni."

"I'll try to give it to you, but you need to prepare yourself that you may not get it. I won't dishonor you, Mala. Besides, this discussion will be moot if we're rescued tomorrow."

"But we may not be rescued tomorrow. It's been a week already," she insisted.

"I'm a good man. You know that already, otherwise you wouldn't be talking to me about marriage. You can trust me."

"I know you're a good man. I'm sorry. I'm just not used to being unbonded. I feel so unsure of myself and I feel uneasy about so many things. It's foolish to feel this way."

"It's not foolish. I'm a little unnerved myself. But I'm responsible for you now. I'll take care of you. I'll see to your best interests."

Mala took a deep breath and her chin came up. "All right. What do we do now?"

"It's too late to start back so we'll spend the night here. We'll look for things to eat, have a bath in the pond tonight and start back first thing in the morning."

He watched her face and saw the uneasiness when he mentioned the bath. He sighed. Mala's modesty would be hard to preserve if rescue was delayed.

"Come on," he reached out his hand to her and she took it. They walked to the pool

to study the plant life there for possible food sources.

\* \* \* \*

Their afternoon turned out to be fun. Mala laughed at Denali's jokes and stories as they searched for food. After doing a chemical analysis for toxins, they tasted little pieces of plant life.

Denali tried a small bit of water reed, which he spat out immediately, his face contorted in distaste. He sank to his knees, plunged both hands in the pond and gulped a quantity of water. His long mane pooled around him as he drank. When he rose, the wet mane soaked his shirt. As he swore at the reed, Mala laughed and laughed until he turned sparkling eyes to her.

"Would you like to taste this, Mala?"

"Oh no," she denied, laughing. As he leaped at her with the reed she squealed and ran.

"Come on, try it," he wheedled as they raced around the pool.

"No. I saw your face when you tasted it." She laughed and circled a tree.

"You might like it. Come here, Mala," he cajoled, laughter in his voice.

"Not a chance," she called back as she sprinted for the next tree.

As he tackled her she squealed again and they tumbled to the leaf-covered floor of the forest. They were both laughing madly as he waved the reed under her nose and rubbed it against her lips.

"Come on. Try it. That would be fair." He nibbled her ear.

She brushed his lips away, rolled him to his back and pounced on him. "No. You can't make me."

Denali held the reed over his head and she struggled with him for possession of it before she realized how still he was beneath her and that she was lying fully on top of him. She looked into his face to find his golden eyes had darkened and his cheeks were flushed.

"Mala," he said her name huskily. One of his hands came around the back of her neck and his fingers spread in her curls as he applied pressure to bring her face down to his.

She was mesmerized by the look in his eyes. He found her a desirable woman and he didn't hide it. She continued to watch his eyes as he kissed the side of her mouth on one side and then on the other side. She knew he was testing her, that his real intention was to kiss her lips. She should roll off him now, but she began to kiss him back. She placed kisses on his cheeks and eyes, on the side of his face, his ears, and his neck.

Denali purred with pleasure as her kisses followed his ethnic markings. His skin was so warm and the purring rumbled pleasantly through her lips. She left his neck and returned to kiss him on his face. She hovered for a moment over his lips.

"Go ahead," he encouraged. She found his eyes hot with desire.

She shouldn't. She was thinking about it which made it premeditated if she kissed him now. Most of their kisses had been emotions that had gotten out of control, sort of "accidental" and perhaps could be excused. But if she kissed him now it couldn't be excused.

She stared at his full lips. She knew how good they felt against hers. She wanted to taste them. Slowly she stuck out her tongue and ran it lightly along the seam of his lips, from one side of his mouth to the other. Then she ran her tongue over her own lips. She tasted like him and the bitter reed. She wanted another taste of just him. She leaned forward on his chest and brought her lips right up to his, and then she licked them.

Denali growled in his throat and the rumble went through her. His hand on the back

of her head pulled her the rest of the way to him, and two sets of wet lips sealed together and began to feed. 'Il only kiss him for a minute. But the kiss lasted a lot longer than a minute. She wanted this closeness so badly. Why was it so wrong when they had made a promise to each other already?

Mala jerked away from him as the traitorous thought echoed in her brain. It came so close to crossing the line of losing her integrity. She scrambled off him and backed away. He was a siren and his song was irresistible. She must stay away from him in order to keep her integrity, but how could she stay away when they'd promised to get closer? What a dilemma!

Mala whirled and ran with Denali's shout echoing in her ears.

## Chapter Seven

Mala ran as though ravenous beasts pursued her, although the beasts were inside her. She didn't stop running until she stumbled into a small grassy glade. It was almost a perfect ring where no trees interfered with the view of the gray sky.

She stopped and slowly turned in a circle, while her lungs heaved for breath. There was a strange peace in this glade and suddenly she knew what to do. She dropped to her knees and fell back on her theist beliefs.

"What should I do?" she whispered out loud. "How can I remain true to myself? Show me the way."

She felt like she was being torn in two. There had to be a way.

The grass rustled behind her and then a hand landed gently on her shoulder. She lifted her face to Denali.

"I'm sorry," he said, then sighed. "I'm always saying that to you. It's so hard for me to be sorry that I feel this way about you."

"I face the same dilemma, Deni. You like who I am, yet if I do things with you that destroy my core self, my integrity and my self-worth, will you like who I become? Will I?"

Denali knelt in the grass in front of her. "I don't want you to be anyone other than who you are."

Mala reached out across the gulf--literal and figurative--between them and touched his lips. "We can't kiss on the lips any more, not until we attempt to become mates in six months. There can be no accidental kisses, no brushes of the lips, and none intentionally. Your lips are sweet nectar to me. I love the feel of them on mine. I love to kiss them. I love to kiss you, because I want to love you. Your lips hold a promise in them, Deni, the promise to love me forever. But I can't accept your promise until I'm first your mate and then your wife. Will you honor my wishes in this?"

His eyes narrowed and his brows furrowed. "Will anything else change between us? Will you continue to hold me and sleep with me? Or will I be forbidden those things too?"

"I can do those things and retain my integrity. Nothing else will change between us. From my point of view, I'm engaged to you and I'll be affectionate with you as a fiancé should be."

Denali reached out and stroked her cheek. "I never meant to make you run away from me. Never. The look on your face before you turned to run was terrible to see. I want to love you, too. I want to show you that I care for you and care about you in everything I do. I don't want to dishonor you in any way. I've told you that before."

"Thank you," she said. Her shoulders slumped with relief. Her stomach muscles unknotted.

"What are you doing on your knees?" Denali asked.

"I was exercising my theist beliefs, asking for guidance. This glade seemed like a perfect place to do that. There's a strange peace here."

"Do you need more time here? Do you need to be alone to practice your beliefs?"

"No, I'm finished." She began to rise, but Denali was on his feet before her and

assisted her up.

He guided them towards camp and she took his hand as they walked. She looked into his face. He smiled at her and Mala felt at peace again. She didn't like discord between them.

"We'll start back to the shuttle tomorrow," Denali stated. "It's a day and a half walk, so we'll have to stop and make camp somewhere for the night. We can stay in the shuttle until the water, food and power run out. Then, if we haven't been rescued we'll begin the trip back here. We'll have to bring everything salvageable, so it's going to be a long hard journey. We may even need to make two trips with supplies."

"I don't mind hard work. I'll help in any way I can."

"That's one of the things I like about you, Mala, that you're my equal."

"With a job like mine, how could I be anything else?"

Denali squeezed her hand and soon they were back at their camp.

\* \* \* \*

Two days later Denali and Mala arrived back at the shuttle to find it untouched since they'd left. Denali clenched his fists in frustration. What was taking the ship so long to find them? Relations between him and Mala were strained because he was trying so hard not to kiss her lips. With the two of them, kissing too often got out of hand. He'd already driven her away from him once, and had felt like a brute for doing it. He wouldn't drive her from him again.

He felt a little out of sorts as they climbed into the shuttle after three and a half days away. The shuttle was his connection to his species, but it was an empty connection. He'd missed other Felisians for days now, missed the sensation of other people in the back of his mind. The emptiness inside ached like a wound. It felt unnatural to be unbonded, which made his physical estrangement from Mala all the harder to bear. Restraint with a female also felt unnatural. He needed to be bonded and Mala was bondable. Her species made permanent ties with others, but so did his. He those ties. His instincts clamored to mount her and make her his bonded mate.

"Why don't you shower while I put the supplies away," he said. The words came out a little more harshly than he intended, as unappeased arousal prodded him.

Mala turned to face him. "What's the matter?"

He took a deep breath to smooth his voice. "Nothing. I'm upset that the rescue party hasn't come yet."

"Oh." His answer seemed to appease her.

He helped her out of her pack and her boots. "Call me when you're ready to have your arm taped."

"All right." Mala disappeared into the back of the shuttle and he started putting away supplies. There was a fine layer of dust on everything after only three days away and he brushed the grittiness off the storage cupboard. Is this how thinly he wore civilization, like this layer of dust? Less than two weeks on this planet and already he was feeling feral and wild. Did his feline DNA become feral when separated from other Felisians? He hadn't felt like this when he was eighteen and unbonded. Or was it the hardship of this planet? Or the frustration of his unconsummated relationship with Mala? Maybe it was all of those things that were making him wild. Whatever it was, he couldn't take it out on Mala.

"Deni," she called from the bathing room.

No, not yet! He hadn't calmed sufficiently to see her clad only in a towel. He needed

more self-control in order to be around his future mate in a state of undress where only his restraint kept her virginity intact. He couldn't jeopardize her that way. What was wrong with him?

"Deni, I'm ready!"

So was he. He went to her then and her eyes widened with surprise. He must look fierce--he certainly felt fierce. He took her in his arms and crushed her to him.

"Deni, what's the matter?" Her voice quavered with fear.

"Nothing. Don't move. I just have to hold you. Don't make it worse by moving." He pressed his cheek to hers as his hormones raged and he tried desperately to be the man Mala wanted him to be. She held perfectly still while he fought his unseen battle.

"What is it?" she whispered finally.

"I think it's this place and what it stands for. Don't be afraid, Mala. I have you. You're mine now."

"You're frightening me, Deni."

"I think it was returning to the shuttle. I'm all right now. Give me a nuzzle and I'll tape up your arm."

"But Deni ..." Mala rubbed his cheek and completed the nuzzle with him. "If something's wrong--"

"Nothing's wrong. We'll go to bed early tonight so I can hold you. That's what I need." He released her, the moment of crisis averted. He picked up the plastic sheeting and the tape and began taping her broken arm.

"Is it the kissing?" Mala whispered and he looked into her wide, concerned eyes.

"That's part of it. Don't worry. It's my problem, not yours. You've done nothing wrong."

"I'm hurting you somehow."

"Let's not talk about it any more. There are some things I can't discuss with you until you're my mate."

She stood silently as he finished taping her arm. He'd hinted what the problem was and now Mala's Bonwee propriety had reared up to protect her. What a prim little virgin his future mate was.

"All finished. Call me when you're ready to have the tape removed."

"All right."

He pulled the door shut as he exited the bathing room and went forward to sit at the Com station. Its familiarity allowed him to calm himself as he brushed the dust from the console. They would have to clean the shuttle tomorrow.

His hands were still shaking. He'd come so close to doing an unforgivable violence to Mala, to rutting on her unwilling body like some animal in order to make her his mate. She would probably have refused the mating bond then. No mating bond could be forced on another--it was like a gift freely given and freely accepted. It was like saying to a lover, here is my life to bind with yours. And the lover accepted your life and gave you theirs to bind with yours. In that arrangement there was no room for violence.

He bowed his head as shame washed heavily over him. He was an intelligent, sentient, rational being. Mala was all that was good and right and decent. They were trying to tie their lives together. How could he have become an animal around her? It was unacceptable, unthinkable. He should apologize to her, but if she knew the danger she'd been in ... he couldn't tell her that. He wouldn't frighten and disillusion her that way.

He sat there pulling the veneer of civilization around him. He owed it to Mala and to their future.

"Deni," her voice came faintly to him from down the corridor. She sounded unsure of him now.

He rose and made his way quickly to her. Her anxious face scrutinized him. He took her in his arms and held her tightly. "I'm sorry I frightened you earlier. Please forgive me."

"No forgiveness is needed. You're a caring man; you're allowed to feel things deeply." Her good hand rose to stroke his face with her palm and he leaned into the caress.

"Thank you. Let me get the tape off you so that I can shower next." He pulled on the tape and plastic. "I should warn you, there's dust everywhere in the shuttle so it will be hard to remain clean for long."

"At least I'm clean now. Ah, that's better. I don't like being taped up like that."

"How does your arm feel?"

"It aches, but it's a bearable ache."

"Then it must be healing. That's good." He took hold of Mala's arm, stopping her from leaving. "I am sorry."

"I know you are. It's all right. We've been through a lot lately."

He took a cold shower to be certain his libido was shut down. The shower completed the calming process for him, but it was as though he'd suffered a time of insanity, which Felisians didn't have. He would have to tell the ship's doctor about his experience.

Another, more frightening thought occurred to him as he combed out his long mane. He and Mala had been checking for toxins in the plant life, but they hadn't checked for bacteria or microbes in the water or even in the air. Since they were different species, he might be experiencing a reaction to bacteria or microbes which her physiology could accept without any reaction. He hadn't noticed any behavior in her similar to what he'd experienced. But he couldn't tell her what he'd experienced and ask her if she'd felt it too. She would be horrified and any hope for a relationship together would be destroyed. He would just have to watch her closely for any symptoms like his own.

After lunch they went outside the shuttle to do their work. By now they were accustomed to being out of doors during the day and they preferred the freedom of movement outside. Besides, it would be dark soon enough and they would be enclosed in the shuttle for twelve hours.

They sat a little distance apart so that each of them had space to work. Denali watched Mala work and liked what he saw. She was so lovely with the slight pinkness to her pale cheeks from the cool air and slight breeze. She had a contented look on her face. Her light ash brown curls would have a golden sheen if only the sun would shine on her. He could picture it: Mala with her halo of tight curls and the warm green of her eyes lit up by the sun. She looked up from her work and smiled at him with affection. Her wide dimples flashed and her expression was innocently seductive. She knew she might be mated within six months and she was telegraphing the knowledge that he was the one.

Possessiveness towards her filled him. She was his future mate. But an idea teased him about another way she could be his--as his partner. Grimaris could bond Bonwees as partners, so why couldn't Felisians bond Bonwees? Denali had no logic to back up his reasoning but he was sure that he could bond Mala to him as his partner. He wasn't sure exactly why he wanted it, except that it would tie her to him in a way completely separate from the mating bond, which he was also sure he could do. He didn't want to share her in the



future with a Grimari. She was his alone. If he could bond her to him as a partner before she returned to USP duty, then she wouldn't need a Grimari at all.

But how was the partnership bond accomplished? He'd have to get Mala talking about a subject that was painful for her. He didn't want to hurt her, but he needed answers.

"Mala, how do Bonwees and Grimaris become partners?" When she looked up, her smile dimmed. He quickly tagged on, "Do you choose your own partner?"

"Grimaris and Bonwees go through six months of USP training. Bonwees are usually eighteen. Sometimes Grimaris are older. The older ones usually become mercenaries first and when they're tired of fighting they seek peace with a Bonwee. No one knows why some mercenaries seek a partnership and some don't.

"There's a symbiotic relationship between Grimaris and Bonwees. We're halves of a whole, we complement one another. They're warriors, and we're peacemakers and peacekeepers. But we're safe with them. They protect us."

"You're safe with any Grimari?"

"Yes. Even those that aren't a partner will protect us. They feel the symbiotic relationship even though they aren't bonded as partners. Anyway, USP has made a science of matching Bonwees and Grimaris together. Since it's a permanent professional partnership, there has to be compatibility, like in a marriage. Before the Grimaris and Bonwees graduate from training, USP has usually paired them with partners, although not necessarily from those classes. If there's no appropriate partner available, a Bonwee receives a temporary partner in order to begin working for USP.

"The only times that USP doesn't choose are when a male Grimari partners with a female Bonwee. There's no predicting those partnerships and I heard they happen when the two see each other for the first time. They marry immediately, of course."

"You mean you could have had a male partner and he would be your husband?" he asked. Disquiet churned in him that he could have missed out with Mala, but at the same time he was intrigued at the male partner aspect.

"I didn't meet any males I was attracted to. And then I was partnered and off-limits to the males."

"What does one have to do with the other?"

"Male Grimaris must be both mate and partner to a female Bonwee. The two are connected somehow. I don't know more than that. I didn't meet a male Grimari who attracted me until five years ago. I couldn't become his partner because I had Tara, so I couldn't become his mate either."

"Wait. You said partnered females were off limits. But this male Grimari pursued you?"

"Yes, as a mate. But he couldn't get close to me because of Tara."

"Tara kept a male away from you? Did she threaten him like she did me when she came on board?"

"No, not like that. The partnership bond refused to allow a male who wanted a mate close to me. I didn't know that at the time. I learned that later."

"It acts like a force field of some kind?"

"You could say that. It's because of the symbiotic relationship--only one partner to a Grimari or Bonwee."

Better and better. If he could partner with Mala, she would be off limits to all Grimaris. "So how did you partner with Tara?"

Mala swallowed. Her voice was a little hoarse when she spoke. "USP had paired us. We met for the first time after graduation and the bond just slipped into place immediately when we shook hands. She was mine and I was hers. We were tied loosely together for life."

Her lower lip quivered and he rose and went to her. He sat next to her and took her willing body into his arms and she clutched him tightly.

"She was mine and I'm so empty inside without her."

"I know," he murmured into her hair. She pressed her face into his chest. How he wanted to give her what she needed. "Hold me tighter, Mala."

She wrapped her arms around him and slowly her face came up to his as his lowered to hers. They nuzzled in the Felisian way several times. Denali's lips were close to hers, but he held back, remembering his promise.

She seemed to read his mind. "It would be all right this time, Deni."

"Are exceptions allowed?"

"I need your kiss."

"Will you pull back as you did before, and then run away from me?"

"Not this time. I need a connection with you."

He moved his lips to Mala's and she sighed as he pressed his lips to hers over and over. He scooped her onto his lap and continued to kiss her hungrily. Oh, she had marvelous lips, and the emotions behind the kiss were alluring: her innocent desire, her vulnerability, her trust and her need. She needed so much and he had everything she needed.

He deepened the kiss and tried desperately to give her a partnership bond. He opened his mouth and pressed his tongue against the seam of her lips. They parted a little and he slipped his tongue inside. Mala's tongue darted away from his and she made a sound of surprise. Then it returned to tentatively stroke his. She became braver and their tongues mated eagerly, but still he couldn't forge a bond with her. There was a resonance between them, like a beginning connection, but the desire to deepen the connection was thwarted again and again.

By then he was wild to mate with Mala, and that's when he realized why the male Grimaris must be mates as well as partners to the female Bonwees. Their partnership bond was finalized through the mating process, like a mating bond would be. He would be unable to bond Mala as a partner until she allowed him to mate with her. In the meantime, she was vulnerable to partnership bonds from both sexes of Grimaris and if it was a male Grimari, Denali would lose her completely. She'd agreed to remain on his ship, but should an unpartnered Grimari be sent from USP, Mala would bond with that male. ! He wouldn't allow that to happen.

He broke their kiss suddenly. "Mala, promise me you won't go near any male Grimaris."

"What? Why?" she asked, clearly muddled by the kissing, the abrupt cessation of the kissing and the question itself.

"You're unbonded. If a male Grimari were to approach you now, what are the chances that you'd bond to him?"

"I'd have to be attracted to him. But I'm attracted to you."

"But if you were attracted, would the symbiotic relationship draw you to bond with him?"

"Yes," she answered in an anguished voice.

"Promise me you won't go near any Grimari males until we're mated."

"But if a Grimari male is perfect for me I must allow him to bond."

"I'm perfect for you!" Denali almost shouted. "How could you refuse to mate with me, but if a Grimari were here, you'd mate with him immediately? Why don't Grimaris have to wait six months like I do? I could lose you." Panic almost consumed him.

"Grimaris are natural partners for Bonwee. We're drawn to them and they're drawn to us. With you I have to build a relationship--with a Grimari it would come naturally, like breathing."

"So we could be weeks away from a commitment and you would throw it all away if you found a male Grimari attractive?" he demanded. Anger and fear warred inside him, making his breath come faster.

"Deni, that's not going to happen. I said I'd stay on board your ship."

"USP has access to my ship. We stop at Felis II and shuttle down for recreational time off. Felis II's ambassador is part Bonwee with a male Grimari partner. The partner probably has Grimari friends that visit him. So you could run into male Grimaris on a Felisian planet. Would you have me ask the captain of my ship to refuse a USP boarding or to refuse you permission to leave the ship to keep you away from Grimaris?" He ran his hands through his mane in exasperation, and then pushed her off his lap.

He bounded to his feet and paced in front of her. "I could lose you. I won't let you go. You're mine!" He swirled to face her. "We need to mate." He advanced toward her.

Her eyes grew huge and she leaped away from his hands. "No! We're not mating."

"You won't promise to stay away from Grimaris, so what other way can I ever guarantee I'll have a chance with you?" He stalked her.

"Deni, stop it! I'm not ready to mate." Mala sidestepped him, her expression wary.

He caught her and fierce wrestling ensued between them. He could think of nothing but losing Mala to someone else. He had her pinned against the boulder where he'd been sitting when her terrified voice penetrated the fear in his brain.

"You would hurt me? Do violence to me? And then ask me to love you and be your wife?"

He released her as though a laser had burned him. Bile rose in his throat at what he'd almost done. Self-loathing replaced his previous feelings and he spun away from her. "Go into the shuttle, Mala." His voice was ragged.

He heard her move, but then a small hand touched his arm. "I believe I understand your fear of losing me. I don't want to lose you, either."

"I deserve to lose you. I'm an animal. I've always been civilized. I've been a good, decent man, and a good officer."

He turned his contorted face to her. "I've never found a woman I wanted to be mine until I met you. You're so lovely. You're passionate and have compassion, you care deeply about things. You're what I want and I don't want to lose you. But what I almost did will make you turn away from me."

"I'm not turned away from you, Deni." Mala took a deep breath. "I believe we need a negotiator. You go first."

He reached a palm to her cheek and stroked it. "I ask you to promise me to avoid male Grimaris until I can make you my mate."

"Only unbonded ones, Deni."

"Agreed. What if they work for USP?"

"I've only met one unbonded Grimari who worked for USP. But if there's one I'll only speak to him through communications equipment."

"That will work."

"Deni, I was terrified that you would hurt me and force me against my will."

"I'm sorry. Our situation has made me act completely alien to myself. I'm a good man. To hurt you would be to hurt myself, and that's not what I want. I want you to be with me always and I want to make you happy. I want to give you my children and I want to have a home and a family with you. I want to see you every day and sleep with you every night. I promise, you be happy with me."

Her face had grown luminous with hope. "I want those things, too."

"You'll have them. I spoiled our kiss and it had been so wonderful. I think it was the best kiss we ever shared."

"I felt strange during it. I felt very close to you and I needed to get closer, but I couldn't. I felt like you were reaching out to me and calling to me, but I was blocked from you. It was very frustrating."

Denali's breath trapped in his chest. Mala had felt it, too! A partnership bond with her was not only possible, it was a surety. As soon as they mated, she would become his partner. But he couldn't tell her that. "I felt it too. I kept trying to get closer--I reaching out to you. I'm glad you wanted it too."

"I've never felt like that before." Mala blushed. "Of course, you're the first man I've ever kissed."

"And the last. You're a wonderful kisser. I'm glad all your kisses will be mine."

"Deni," Mala ducked her head in embarrassment and he gathered her into his arms.

"I'm sorry. I truly am. Please forgive me."

"You're forgiven. I understand what drove you. Fear is a powerful motivator."

"Heroes aren't supposed to be afraid."

"Not that again."

They laughed together and their easy camaraderie was restored on the surface. Denali suppressed his anxiety about his loss of control. Twice now he'd been on the verge of taking Mala against her will. Force was a very serious offense for his species, because they offered sex to each other so freely. With so many partners available, no one had reason to force another.

Insanity in the Felisian population was non-existent, but twice today he'd felt he wasn't in control of his sanity. Could the stress of the crash and its aftermath have pushed him where his species didn't go? Or could he be suffering brain damage from hitting his head? With his fingertips, he probed the area on his head that was still tender, although it was no longer painful. He still couldn't remember his belt breaking, falling out of his seat or hitting his head. Now he thought hard as he tried to remember anatomy class and medic training to determine what the section of the brain controlled where he'd been injured. Was that the part of the brain where sanity resided, and was a brain injury causing his strange, volatile behavior?

"Does your head hurt, Deni?"

He snatched his hand back. What should he tell her? She didn't know him well enough to determine if his behavior had altered. And any mention of insanity would frighten her. She was dependent on him for survival, after all. "My head is still tender there. I thought it would have healed by now. How's your head?"

"Mine's still tender, too. I only feel a twinge of pain every now and then, but it doesn't last. Is something else wrong? You seem disturbed about something."

She couldn't help him and the full truth would hurt her. Perhaps part of the truth? "I'm disturbed by my behavior towards you. I was trying to find some logic for it."

"I thought you explained it to me well enough. I'm the first woman you've wanted permanently. Your species doesn't usually marry for life, so maybe it feels odd for you to want a lifetime commitment. And you don't have engagements so you feel strange about having to wait to marry."

"That last part is certainly true. It feels unnatural to wait."

"Are Felisians normally an impulsive species, or is it you?"

"I hadn't thought we were, but compared to Bonwees we certainly are. I've never thought of myself as spontaneous, but that's all I've been since I met you."

"You didn't seem that way when we were in space."

"I was, though. I couldn't take my eyes off you for long. You invaded my thoughts. You're addictive to me."

"Deni." Mala's face turned very pink. "I'm Bonwee. How could I possibly make you feel that way? We're sexless and nondescript, our entire species."

"Not you. Haven't you ever looked at yourself in a mirror?"

"I look like every other Bonwee. We all look just like this." She indicated her face and body with her hands.

"I think you're beautiful," he purred possessively to her, slipping naturally into Felisian sensuality. Her pinkened cheeks, her shining eyes, her smile, her modesty, her purity, her graceful hands, all attracted him. Every bit of her small person was perfect for him. She was lit from within by a life force he wanted to harness with his own. No one with that amount of life force could be anything but beautiful.

"Deni." She rolled his name off her tongue as an endearment.

He turned her into his arms and once again they nuzzled. "You're beautiful. You're perfect. You have cute ears." He spaced out his compliments between kisses and nuzzles. He was very careful to keep away from her lips and in control of his physical and mental self.

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Mala ran her hands up into his mane as they nuzzled. She loved his mane--it was what had first attracted her to him. This man--so beautiful on the outside--thought she was beautiful. She'd thought Denali's female crewmate had been lovely. The pilot had been pleasing to the eye too. If these three were representative of Felisians in general, then all Felisians must be good-looking. How could Denali prefer a plain woman like her to the beauty of his own species?

She laid her cheek against his and wrapped an arm around his neck. She continued to stroke his mane and he purred in her ear. Denali was a volatile man today. She'd felt his emotions seething since they arrived back at the shuttle. His passion and desire for her kept surging to the surface. His blatant desire embarrassed her and caused her nervous trepidation.

He'd been intensely focused on her twice today. She'd felt his possessiveness towards her and was thrilled and anxious about it. How could she hold him off for the next six months when he felt such strong desire? She felt desire for him, but it was a pale thing when compared to his.

"Deni," she purred and nuzzled him some more. She kissed his warm smooth cheek,

and then kissed over to his ear where she bit him gently on the lobe. He growled and she bit him again.

"You're a seductress, sweet Mala." His voice was a sensual growl.

"I was an innocent until I met you." She bit his neck gently and he nipped hers. His teeth were sharper than hers were.

"You're still an innocent, but only for six months. Not one minute longer."

She thrilled to his sensual threat. She turned her face back to his and kissed his cheek close to his mouth.

"Careful, Mala," he warned hoarsely. He kissed her dimple. "Careful."

"You're so beautiful, Deni. You're the most beautiful man I've ever seen. I want to touch you all the time. I think about touching the skin that's under your clothes." Denali growled deep in his throat and kissed her again.

"You have wonderful lips." She traced them. He kissed her fingers and when he looked at her his eyes were hot.

"Is it because you're beautiful that I like you, Deni?" she asked, voicing her uncertainty. She didn't think she was superficial, but she'd only been attracted to two men in her life, Denali and the Grimari male five years ago. They were both good-looking men.

"No, sweet Mala. It's because we were meant to be together. I always thought being beautiful was a hindrance, but I see now it was the only way to attract your attention. You would have walked right by your own mate if I'd been plain."

"What do you mean?" She put a little distance between them to watch his serious golden eyes.

"How many men have you been attracted to?"

"Two."

"And yet you meet men all the time, you work with men every day."

"Not men like you."

"Some of those men are smarter than me--some can speak more languages than I can. Some are doctors who heal people, some are educators who teach people, and some are ambassadors and diplomats. Those men are all better than I am."

"No, those men aren't like you, Deni. You're different. You're wonderful. You're alive and you make me feel alive. You make it hard for me to breathe sometimes when you look at me. Those men don't do that. You make my heart race sometimes--they don't do that either. They don't have manes."

Denali looked startled. "You like my mane?"

"Oh yes." She slid her hand up into it again and combed her fingers through it several times. "I saw your mane and I couldn't look away. Then I saw your eyes and I couldn't breathe. So beautiful. And then you spoke and I had heard your voice before on the Com. I love your voice. But it's your mane I see first and then I know it's you."

"What a pair we are. I think you're beautiful and you think I'm beautiful. Neither of us can look away from the other. Neither of us can stop touching the other. See how true it is that we were meant to be together."

"Deni," Mala asked him shyly, for this was difficult to ask. "How long do you think it will take for us to love each other?"

Denali transfixed her with a dazzling smile. "Ahh, if we were to judge purely by our behavior I would say that we love each other already." Mala's cheeks warmed and she ducked her face into his chest. His arms enfolded her and she snuggled against his warm,

firm body. "I like almost everything about you already, although you're rather strong-willed." The last was said teasingly.

She tried to absorb what he'd said. "Do you want to love me, Deni?"

"Oh yes," he breathed. "With every fiber of my being. Felisians rarely love deeply or for a lifetime. It will be a big step for me and I think love will consume me. But you deserve nothing less than an all-consuming love."

"Oh, Deni," she breathed. No woman could wish for a man to make a bigger commitment than the one Denali intended to make. She felt humbled to hear his words. What had she done to deserve a man like him? "I want to love you like that. I wish it would happen soon."

"I think moments like this build a foundation for love," he said huskily, nuzzling her face again.

"Do they?" she murmured, nuzzling him back. "Then we should love each other already."

Denali laughed and Mala watched his sparkling eyes with joy. His laugh was full and rich. She pulled him down for several quick kisses and they stared into one another's eyes.

"We're not getting anything done today," she reminded him.

"We're stranded on a deserted planet. There are no time schedules to keep here. These next few days can be lazy days if we want. And I think we need what we've been doing, don't you?"

"I love being in your arms, but we can't do this and nothing else all day. I feel guilty."

"All right, you win. We'll do both." His golden eyes were laughing when she threw herself at him and kissed him all over his face.

## Chapter Eight

Four days later Denali turned from checking the water level in the shuttle's tank to face Mala's anxious expression. They'd used the water sparingly, but they'd known it wouldn't last long.

"Tomorrow we have to move to the waterfall."

She nodded, but her eyes were wide with anxiety. He drew her into his arms to hold her tight. "It'll be all right. We'll have shelter, a food source and water there, and I'll take care of you. It will probably only be a week before we're rescued. We can handle a week in the shelter."

"I know. Hold me tighter, Deni."

He squeezed her harder. "We'll pack today and leave first thing tomorrow morning. It's going to be slow going pulling the carts, especially once we get to the forest. It will probably take a full two days to reach the waterfall."

He let her go. "Help me get the carts outside first."

The flat, wheeled carts were part of the exploration equipment on the shuttle, made of sturdy, lightweight polymer. He and Mala lined them up outside the shuttle.

"Where is the list, Mala?"

"In the galley."

She led the way to the galley where the handheld lay on the counter. They scrolled down the list they'd put together and Denali recalled the long, painstaking discussions which had sometimes turned into arguments. In the preceding three days they'd inventoried the shuttle and decided what they would take with them and what they would leave behind. Their food stores would be gone in two days--just enough to get them to the shelter.

Denali scanned the items, even though he already knew what was listed there. They would take with them several bottles of the remaining water, the medical kit, the hand lights, all the blankets, pillows and waterproof sheeting, the weapons, all the survival equipment, the exploration and science equipment, the handheld locator, dishes, their clothing and personal items, towels, soap, Mala's book of poetry and their friends' personal effects.

It was a lot of things to take, but he thought they would need all of it. He would pull the heavier load because Mala's broken arm made it impossible for her to pull a cart two-handed. As it was, he worried about the strain on her. It was only two and a half weeks since the crash and she was still recovering. He didn't want the move to the shelter to set back her recovery or re-injure her in some way. His cracked ribs were healing nicely and he shrugged off any thought of the strain to his own body. They'd waited as long as they could, and now they had no choice. Mala had to be protected and cared for. That goal must be attained, despite any obstacles along the way.

They loaded the carts, starting with the larger and heavier items. All day they worked slowly and steadily, conserving their energy to complete the job. Denali watched Mala for signs of tiredness, but she was well rested from four relatively lazy days around the shuttle. They only stopped several times to kiss and nuzzle because there was so much to do, but he was sure she realized there would be more affection tonight.



She'd been a quiet, hard worker today, but he felt her emotions roiling beneath the surface. How could she be otherwise? Her partner had died and was cremated here. This shuttle was the only sign of civilization on the planet. And she was going away from this civilization to live a survivalist existence with her future mate. She would be strong until they were alone tonight, and then she would turn to him for comfort, reassurance and affection. He cautioned himself to remember her restrictions. Tonight it would be doubly important not to frighten her when they become amorous, because she would be vulnerable.

\* \* \* \*

They finished packing as twilight began and Mala helped Denali cover each cart with plastic sheeting. Her muscles ached and she felt emotionally drained. She'd kept from thinking about her feelings all day by concentrating on the tasks to be completed, but now that darkness was falling she felt her control slipping away. Nerves fluttered in her stomach, making it clench. Tears prickled at the back of her eyes. She'd never had to live a hand-to-mouth existence, never lived completely outdoors, never had to depend so heavily and completely on another living being to provide emotional, physical and psychological support.

She'd been alone with Denali for more than two weeks, yet she felt they would be more alone where they are going. He was her future mate and husband, but he was also an intimate stranger to her. She was still learning how his thoughts worked and what motivated him. In any given situation she could only guess how he would act or react, because she had only two weeks' experience of him.

They were going where there were no doors to close for privacy, not for bathing or dressing or anything else. Her life and everything she did would be open for viewing and she would have to trust Denali's word that he would allow her moments of complete privacy.

A Bonwee never undressed in public--now Mala would both undress and bathe in the outdoors. All day the metaphor of the lack of doors had plagued her. She would be leaving more than the shuttle behind when they started out tomorrow morning. Denali wanted closeness and there was nothing she could do to stop the greater familiarity that was coming. He was right that her being a virgin made her fear intimacy, but she was twenty-eight and a professional woman. She would lift her chin and go bravely with him. After all, he thought it would only be for a week.

They ate their dinner using the last of the perishable food. They'd eat dry food for the next several days. They would pack the remainder of the galley tomorrow morning after breakfast. Mala swallowed hard. There were a lot of final moments to a departure--the last dinner, final breakfast, and final time of sleeping in the berths. Each was a farewell of sorts.

Denali gripped her hand and she realized she must not have hidden her feelings well enough. She looked into his golden eyes, which were full of empathy. She moved closer to him and laid her head against his shoulder. His strong arm came around her back and his long mane flowed around the side and back of her neck, giving her unexpected comfort.

"I won't break down and make you watch hysterics. I won't burden you with that," Mala promised.

"Your feelings run deep. I expect you to be emotional about leaving here."

"I have to be strong, for you and for myself. If I let go of my self-control now, I won't be able to help you move everything to the shelter. I'm your equal, not a hindrance or a useless weight to burden you."

"You won't be a burden if you want to cry."

"Afterwards, Deni. When we're there I'll go to the glade and cry. You'll let me have

time alone there to do that, won't you?"

"If it's what you want. I could come with you and hold you while you cry."

"I'd rather you think well of me."

Denali opened his mouth but she touched her fingers to his lips. "Don't argue about it now. I have something for you."

His bronze eyebrows rose and he smiled. "You do?"

"Yes. Let's clean up and go sit in the passenger seats."

\* \* \* \*

Once they were seated, Mala took a piece of real paper from her pocket. It was much folded and her hands trembled slightly. Somehow Denali knew it was important to her. There was only a single light on in the cabin in order to conserve power, so the setting was intimate. The light made radiance on her curls, gilding the brown with gold. She carefully opened the folded paper and inhaled deeply. Slowly she read the cadenced words in her melodic voice, infusing them with feeling--with hope and fear, with yearning and confusion, and with love and dreams.

The words of the poem transported him into a young woman's search for a soul like hers, for a love to last through the ages and for a man with strong arms to hold her and love her without reserve. The poem was poignant and honest, and he realized that it was Mala's story.

He watched her face as she bared her innermost thoughts to him and between the words the thought resonated that her search had ended. Mala finished and he willed her to lift her face. She had divulged her deepest thoughts and made herself vulnerable to him. Now she must be brave to face him. Slowly her face came up and in the deep pools of her dark green eyes was a lonely woman who wanted to belong to one man, to him. What a gift she was, what a treasure to be valued and held close forever.

"That was beautiful, Mala. It's about you."

"Yes."

"You don't have to search any more. I'm right here, I belong to you, and I'm not going anywhere. If I could rush love I would, for you, because you deserve it. When we love each other at last I'll be the luckiest man in the universe. I'm lucky already, to have met you and earned your attention and regard. I'm lucky you chose me out of all the men in the universe to marry."

Her face glowed. "Oh, Deni, that's beautiful!"

"I have nothing to give you."

"That's not true. You've given me everything."

\* \* \* \*

An hour before sunset two days later they reached the shelter and the waterfall. It had been a very long two days of walking.

"We're here," Denali tried to project enthusiasm into his voice.

Mala's steps were slow, her shoulders bowed. "It looks the same as when we were here last."

"Our temporary home for the next week. Let's unload some of the supplies, then eat and bathe. We'll turn in early again tonight."

They got the essentials unloaded and into the shelter before it became too dark to see what they were doing. They collected wood for a fire, and Denali pulled out the last of their food rations. Tomorrow they would eat plants or roots and try to catch mammals or rodents

for meat.

Mala snuggled close as they ate and he savored her warm body next to his. She'd been brave the past two days, holding in her emotions in order to make the trip in a timely manner. She would have to continue to be brave for her cold outdoor bath tonight. He knew she would be anxious about it, but he couldn't lessen her anxiety.

"You can bathe first while I get the fire ready for the night."

She bit her lip and clenched her hands together, then slowly her chin came up and she went into the shelter to gather her things. He grabbed towels and soap and she looked up anxiously into his face.

"I'm just going to help carry things to the waterfall. I won't stay."

She nodded and walked silently by his side, following the beam of the handlights. They laid their items on the flat rocks surrounding the pool and he pointed Mala's handlight so she could see the pool and the waterfall.

"The water's cold. It might be easier to wash under the waterfall. Afterwards get your hair as dry as possible and then come sit by the fire to get warm. I'll build up the fire while you're bathing. I know you're nervous here, but it's just you and me on this planet."

"My mother will be horrified when I tell her. And my aunt."

"Come here," he cajoled and she stepped into his arms. He nuzzled her curls with his nose. "Be brave a little longer, until you're in my arms again."

"I can do it. It's just that my Bonwee propriety is very strong."

"How well I know that," he said sardonically. He put his hand under her chin and raised her face to kiss her tenderly in her dimple. "Take as long as you need."

He let go of her and walked away without looking back. He built up the fire to a toasty blaze, and then gathered his own night things together. He turned back the blankets so that the fire would warm them, then he sat at the furthest edge of the fire. It wouldn't do to get all warm just before plunging into the cold water. His mane alone would take time to scrub.

It seemed a long time before Mala appeared around the corner of the rocks following her beam of light. She was in her sturdy green pajamas and her curls shone damply as she entered the area of the fire's glow. Her face was pink--whether from cold, scrubbing or embarrassment, or a combination of all three, he didn't know--but she looked very young.

"Sit close to the fire to warm up again. I won't be long. Will you comb my mane when I return?"

"Sure. Deni, I washed my clothes and laid them out to dry." She combed through her curls as she spoke.

"Good idea." He headed for his very cold shower, which he needed after watching Mala run her fingers through her hair in the firelight. It was such a feminine gesture, even without long tresses.

The cold water felt good on his over-heated body, reducing his arousal, but thoughts of lying with Mala in his arms tonight kept the fires stoked. First she would comb his mane, then they would kiss and nuzzle ... he groaned and turned his erect penis into the water to cool it. How could he think her such a siren in her conservative nightwear? And if he found her pajamas arousing, how would he stand it when he finally saw her naked? He dragged his thoughts away from that dangerous precipice--dangerous for both him and Mala. He blanked his mind as he washed his mane until finally he felt calm again. He washed his clothes and laid them next to hers, then dried himself and dressed in his own military black pajamas and

returned to her.

Her curls had dried very dark golden in the firelight. Her cheeks were flushed with warmth and her eyes were drowsily half-closed. His heart clamored at the sight of her like that and he took her face gently between his palms and kissed each dimple.

"You're beautiful in the firelight."

She blushed, making her cheeks pinken further. "Thank you."

He handed her a comb and sat down with his back to her. Her strokes with the comb were steady with a hint of caress in them. Clearly she enjoyed touching his mane as much as she enjoyed looking at it. Mala's small hand smoothed his mane back from his forehead as the comb in her other hand moved through the strands. As the fire's warmth dried his mane, he purred with pleasure.

Eventually he felt just her hands running through the strands, massaging his scalp, and he leaned into her touch. She had marvelously sensitive hands. She was so tactile. He found that surprising because she was so physically reserved.

He turned and gathered her warm body to him for a kiss beside her mouth. "Come to bed," he murmured.

She moved with him to the shelter and they climbed between the fire-warmed blankets. He took her in his arms, holding her pressed close to his body. She slid her hands up into his mane to caress and hold him close to her. He kissed the side of her neck. She nibbled his ear. He kissed her jaw, her cheek, the dimple beside her mouth. He panted, and so did she. The fire of passion flamed to life once again and he pressed his erection to her cleft.

"Deni," Mala reminded him, although her voice was husky.

He blew out a breath across her neck while he thought of cold water. If he was right about their rescue coming in a matter of days, he had less than a week to strengthen their tentative ties. His smile was grim as he pressed his aroused body tightly to hers. This next week would test him greatly, but he looked forward to it.

\* \* \* \*

The next afternoon they stopped to rest by some towering cliffs. Mala watched Denali toss his mane over his shoulder to uncover his shirt pocket. The movement displayed the multitude of shades that made up his tawny mane and her eyes riveted to the cascade of golds and browns. Then her gaze was drawn to the long slender fingers rooting in his pocket--the ethnic pattern on his hand faced her with its beautiful design displayed. Her gaze traveled upward to his face, which was slightly dipped as he searched his pocket. His tawny lashes covered his eyes at the moment. Then he found what he was searching for and his lashes swept upward to reveal curious golden eyes and Mala's breath caught at his beauty. Slowly the curiosity became intense interest.

"You're staring, Mala."

"I can't help it. You're so beautiful. I've never seen anyone like you and I want to touch you and hold you and feel you in my arms."

She felt herself blush by the end of her statement.

Denali growled deep in his throat. "You're seducing me with words."

"I need you, Deni."

He moved to where she sat and gathered her hungrily to him. She lay her cheek against his and put one arm around his back and the other hand slid into his mane.

"Deni," she murmured his name. The loneliness she'd been feeling vanished with the

touch of his warm strong flesh. "Deni," his name was a caress as she rubbed her face against his. He placed warm kisses along the side of her face and she eagerly did the same to him. His arms tightened around her. Their kisses became heated and their hands hungry. Soon they were panting and he wrenched her from him to hold her at arm's length.

"We have to stop," he panted.

"I know. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to start that, but I needed you."

She ducked her head. Shame washed over her.

"It's all right to need me. I need you too."

She lifted her head. "You do?"

"Yes. I'm hungry for you all the time, for the sight of your smile, for your dancing eyes, for the blush on your face, for your cheek against mine. I need to hold you, to feel your hand in mine, to touch your curls, to be with you."

"Oh," she breathed, staring wide-eyed at him. His feelings were exactly like hers.

"But we still have to find dinner."

Mala smiled, feeling impish. "I didn't know it would be so hard to catch food. We've spent most of the day looking and only found lunch."

"I think we're going to spend the majority of each day finding food. Come on, you've spent enough time seducing me. Let's keep moving." He held out his hand and she entwined her fingers with his. As they walked together, she looked up at him.

"I can't wait to love you, Deni."

His eyes were very golden suddenly and he squeezed her hand tightly. "And I'll love you, and then you'll be mine." The last words were a vow of possession and she shivered with excitement and a little trepidation.

\* \* \* \*

They arrived back at the shelter a little while before sunset. They had left their camp duties for the evening because the daylight hours were needed for finding food to eat. Mala had been quiet since they neared the camp and now she spoke up. "I'll gather more wood for the fire. Deni?"

"What?"

"I'm going to stop in the little glade like we discussed."

To cry, she meant. "Do you need me to go with you and hold you?"

"No. I don't want you to see me like that."

"There's nothing shameful about grief."

"Still, I don't want to burden you with my feelings. I won't be long."

"All right."

Mala gathered several armfuls of smaller sticks for the fire while he prepared the small mammals they'd caught for their dinner. When he got them spitted over the fire he noticed she hadn't returned from her latest wood gathering foray. Unable to stay away, he moved the spit further from the flames and walked to the glade.

In the fading light he saw her small figure kneeling in the grass, her shoulders hunched and shaking with her grief. His heart clenched with pain for her and with pride that she could delay the grief at all until the move to the shelter had been completed. His palm dug into the rough bark of the tree he leaned against. His woman needed him. She shouldn't be alone now.

He walked forward quietly until he could place his palm on a small shaking shoulder. Her wrenching sobs grew quieter at his touch. She was his responsibility now, given to him

in sacred trust by the death of her partner, and he accepted the responsibility gladly. He was her future mate, and a mate wouldn't stand idly by while she was in pain.

He slid his hand under her elbow and helped her to her feet, turning her into his arms. "You can cry on me. You're not alone any more. I'm here for you."

Mala nodded into his chest and her shoulders heaved again as she cried into his shirt. The storm soon subsided and he continued to stroke from her crown of curls down to the middle of her back.

"Thank you." Her voice was thick.

"Are you finished? Shall we start back now?"

"I'm done here. It was silly to cry now anyway."

He turned them towards the shelter. "Not silly at all. You left a lot behind at the shuttle, including your old life and your old friend. It's natural that you'd grieve for their loss. But I'm here and I'm your future. Keep that in mind from now on."

Mala looked up, startled, her eyes wide in the fading light. "My future?"

"Yes. I'll be your mate. You'll bear my children, make your home with me, share my grandchildren and grow old with me."

"Yes, you're my future." Her words were a promise, a vow, and he was amazed at the joy he felt. To know he was "the one" for Mala and that she was "the one" for him, when he'd never sought or expected a singular life-long commitment was overwhelming. Other species, like Mala's, knew there would be someone special with whom they would bind their lives. But for Felisians there was no such knowledge. Permanent mates were rare and surprising among his people. Why hadn't he known or sensed that he would be one of the rare ones? Shouldn't he have felt different all along? He shook off his amazement. It was enough for now to bask in the joy of being "the one."

## Chapter Nine

Denali lowered his eyes from scanning the sky. Disappointment was a cold knot in his stomach. There was still no sign of rescue. It had been nine days since they'd moved to the shelter and now it became a race against time. Tomorrow would make it a month that they'd been stranded on this planet, a month alone with Mala.

He should be back on his ship by now, safe with the others of his kind ... the kind who mated. Felisians were careful not to make plans around their mating time and they were never sent off alone or without others of their ethnic around that time. Since the mission was only supposed to have lasted eight days, he wasn't meant to be away from his ship now.

The ship had to come, it to! And it had to come soon. His mating time would begin in three days. For several days he'd desperately longed for others of his species and he thought he'd go mad with the emptiness he felt inside. He needed Felisians. He wasn't meant to be a single being--it wasn't in his genetic makeup to be alone like this. He had Mala, but he had no bond to her and he needed that now like a starving man needed food.

He'd hidden what he felt from her so as not to frighten her. But every day from now until mating time it would be harder to hide his seething emotions and soon he'd be unable to hide the physical signs as well. Tomorrow his feline hormones would begin to rage through his bloodstream, preparing him to procreate, and in three days he'd go into heat. He couldn't be in heat around Mala, so they had to be rescued before then.

He opened the medical kit and went through the contents, just in case.

"Are you hurt, Deni?" Mala asked from behind him. There was a note of anxiety in her voice.

"No, I'm not hurt. I just want to see what's in here, just in case."

"It's been nine days. You said we'd be rescued in a week. Now you're checking the medical kit. Do you know something I don't know?"

For a moment he was horrified, and he couldn't breathe. Did she know about mating time? But then reality set in. She was only asking if he knew anything generally, not about mating time specifically. He calmed himself before answering. "I'm just being cautious, that's all."

"You've been tense lately. I thought maybe you knew more than you're telling me."

He turned and gathered her soft body into his arms. "I'm tense because I want to be rescued. You want that too."

"Why is it taking so long?"

"I don't know. We were unable to report our exact location so they have to begin the search from our last reported location. Then we moved from the position where we encountered the Malchovists to this planet. They have to find where we crashed. They're searching a vast amount of space."

"How much longer?" she asked into his chest, clutching at him.

"I don't know, but soon. Very soon." It was a plea in his mind. "Let me inventory the medical kit, and then we can start out."

She moved away from him to do other things around camp.

In the kit he looked first for sedatives. Felisians could be sedated for mating time, but there had to be enough for the whole time it lasted. There was one vial of sedative and he read the label carefully. There was enough in the vial for only one day, then he would be awake again and still in heat.

For the first time he cursed the length mating time lasted. A man could impregnate a woman on the first day, and this was usually the case, but their feline DNA made mating time last for three days to insure a pregnancy occurred. Unlike other humanoid species, mating time was the only instance Felisian females were fertile. Even though modern Felisians rarely had more than two children on Felis I, or four children on Felis II, their DNA compelled them to mate twice a year to procreate. It was an unavoidable biological compulsion which, for the moment, had to be hidden from Mala.

He found no other medicine in the kit that could be used as a sedative. Then his hand closed around another vial and his breath stopped in his chest. It was a vial of aphrodisiac. Felisians were divided into six ethnics, and the different ethnics had different mating times. So if someone in heat wanted to mate with someone from a different ethnic who wasn't in heat, an aphrodisiac was used.

He quickly read the label; there was enough in the vial for several mating times. He released it as though it was poison, but the thought was already planted in his brain that he could give the drug to Mala. No! She wasn't ready for mating, even if was. She would fight, she would be horrified, and she would never forgive him.

But the thought of joining with her and making them one was almost overpowering. Each night passion flowed between them in their quest for intimacy. Mala's body was ready for mating even though her mind wasn't. The drug would make her want mating. No! He ruthlessly cut off those thoughts. It was his responsibility to protect her, even if it meant protecting her from himself.

He closed the lid of the kit and returned it to the shelter. They would be rescued. They had to be!

All day long he found himself watching Mala and finding her desirable, the curve of her cheek, her flashing smile, the slight thrust of her breasts through the clothes that hid her true fullness, and the curve of her sweet buttocks as she bent over. Four times during the day he grabbed her to him and began a long passionate assault on her with his lips and hands.

In the past few weeks he'd accustomed her to his sensual explorations and she allowed them now as he overwhelmed her with passion. Her fists clenched tightly in his mane as he hungrily aroused her body. He was fiercely erect and fought hard against the driving urge to mate. Over and over he was driven to claim her as his own, but each time he pulled back before committing an act they would both regret.

Each time they lay panting in the aftermath. Denali lay sprawled on her or next to her still holding her. He was unable to let go of her or stop touching her.

"Mala," he pleaded after the third time, for what he wasn't sure.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"You're mine!"

"Not yet, but I will be."

"No, you're mine!" he told her fiercely and fell to kissing her again. Her hands caressed his neck and face and then she gently pushed him away.

"We have to stop this now. We need to find food."

"I know," he panted hard. He'd never wanted a woman like he wanted her. His



whole body throbbed with the lust he felt for her and it wasn't just lust of the body. His heart and mind wanted to be a part of her and wanted her to be a part of him. His desire for her was so much more than hormones.

That night his desire got completely out of hand and Mala again had to restrain him. "We're getting carried away with passion. We've got to stop!"

He pressed his heavily aroused penis to her cleft and rubbed hard. "I want to mate with you. I want to fit myself inside you where I belong. I want to become a part of you. You belong to me as I belong to you."

She stilled completely as he rubbed against her. This was his mate beneath him and he wanted inside her. He wanted their two layers of clothing to disappear so that he was skin to skin with her. He reached his hands to her hips.

"No!" she cried and threw him off her. By the firelight she sparked with anger as she faced him.

"You're mine!" He reached for her.

"No I'm not, and I'm not going to be yours if you don't stop this. Get hold of yourself."

Her words snapped through the haze of primitive possessiveness and lust and he stared at her, horrified by his actions. It wasn't even mating time yet and already he was out of control. An apology wouldn't be enough this time to excuse his actions.

Her face gentled as he continued to stare at her. "What's wrong, Deni? You've been strange all day today."

"I can't explain," he said in frustration.

"Try."

He couldn't tell her. But what could he say that she would accept but which wouldn't frighten her? "I need to claim you as my own. It's a Felisian need."

She furrowed her brow in thought. "That doesn't make sense from what you've told me of Felisians."

"We haven't talked about the actions of permanent mates, which is the basis of my need to claim you."

"But I told you I'd try in five months. I won't change my mind and refuse you then."

"I don't think I'm going to be able to wait five more months." He tried to warn her without being specific.

"I don't think I can try any sooner than four months, and that's indecently fast."

"I ... don't think that will be soon enough."

"Deni!" Her voice was full of exasperation. "I can't give myself to you like it means nothing."

There was no moving her on this subject. "You asked me to explain and I tried. Let's just go to sleep."

"But we haven't resolved anything."

"You and I can't agree on this subject. Lie down so we can sleep."

"Deni--"

"Shhh. I care for you very much."

"I care for you too, Deni."

In the morning his testicles began to swell with sperm in a process which would continue through mating time. A male Felisian would copulate with a female seventy to a hundred times over a three-day period in an attempt to impregnate her and continue the

Felisian line. By the morning after next he would be uncomfortably full and it would be impossible to hide his state from Mala. Already he was semi-erect with the onset of Felisian hormones. Rescue had to come today or tomorrow at the latest. Any other scenario was unacceptable.

"What are you looking for, Deni?"

He lowered his eyes from scanning the treetops to look at her face. "I was searching for a rescue shuttle."

"Wouldn't we hear it first?"

"Yes. I was just hoping."

"Come on, I'm hungry."

He grinned at her. "Yes, Madam Avonee. Let's feed you."

\* \* \* \*

Mala lifted her head from digging up roots and peeked at Denali. Again he was scanning the sky above them through the treetops. What was he really looking for? He was extremely tense and agitated today, even more so than yesterday. He was sometimes very distracted and the expressions that she had caught on his face had been anxiety, sadness, fear and desperation. What did he know that was causing his anxiety?

She could feel the intense passion of yesterday simmering below the surface, but he was keeping a tighter reign on himself today. He'd come up behind her a half dozen times already and gripped her fiercely to him. He always came from behind her--why? Suddenly she realized that it was to hide the expression on his face. What emotion would she see if she turned quickly in his arms?

Denali had been very tactile today, holding her hand or keeping his arm around her all the time, nuzzling faces often, exchanging quick kisses, but not the passionate exchanges of yesterday and last night. Her heart beat faster at the memory of what they'd done together last night. Her behavior with him had been shameful and wanton, but had felt so wonderful. She'd been so aroused by his ministrations last night that had he not halted to ask for more she feared what they might have done. He had certainly wanted to bring their encounter to a culmination.

His passion yesterday reminded her of the day they'd returned to the shuttle two weeks ago. He'd wanted to mate that day, too. Yesterday he'd said that he wanted to 'claim' her--she knew that meant he wanted to mate. His passions were strong, but they seemed to run in cycles of varying strength, or was it his control over his passions that varied in strength?

If they weren't rescued soon she would have to struggle with him every day to protect her chastity. Despite her anger at his persistence and her threats to prevent him from mating with her in five months, she thought Denali was the man she wanted to spend her life with. Giving herself to her mate would be a natural thing to do, especially since marriage to him was becoming more certain every day they spent together.

That night their explorations were again torrid and it took all her efforts to keep Denali from mating with her. She was half undressed, disheveled, panting hard and very aroused by the time she got him halted and he was no better off. She prayed for rescue so that she didn't give herself to him.

\* \* \* \*

Denali was physically uncomfortable the next morning as he gingerly untangled his body from Mala's. They had slept intimately together all night, which did nothing to

alleviate his state of arousal. He was lucky that she hadn't slapped his face last night, even though as a Bonwee she was non-violent. He'd pushed hard at her boundaries and had been mad to mate with her and almost out of control.

The only good thing about what had almost happened last night was that if they weren't rescued today Mala was prepped for his intimate touch. He reared back violently from that thought. She wouldn't accept mating, not this soon. He would have to force her. His throat filled with bile at that thought. He wanted to love her and for her to love him. She would probably never love him if he forced her to mate. Rescue had to come today, it just to!

He roused her from slumber. "Come on, sleepy. I'm hungry."

Her eyes opened and there was a slight wariness in them. Already she'd lost trust in him from his actions last night. If he had to be with her tomorrow it would destroy the rest of her trust. "I'm sorry for last night. Will you forgive me?"

"You know I'm not ready to mate, but you keep trying anyway."

"I said I was sorry." He could give her no more even though she seemed to be waiting for something else. "Let's get started." He gathered his clothes and moved off towards the pool to wash. Mala would just have to function as usual today, without further explanation from him.

A little later they were silently heading out to forage and he took hold of her hand. He looked at her to find her eyebrows raised in question, but he just squeezed her hand and continued walking.

By late afternoon he was desperate. No rescue had arrived and the hours were slipping away. He'd scanned the sky all day long, been completely preoccupied and been a poor companion to Mala. In addition, his abstraction had made her nervous and several times he'd noticed that she scanned the sky with a troubled frown on her face. She didn't understand his constant searching of the sky and he couldn't explain it to her.

After the sun set the rescuers would still be able to hunt for them with sensitive mechanical equipment, but chances were they would wait for daylight to search. If rescue didn't come in the next few hours he would be locked into a course of action which would irreparably change his relationship with Mala. But how could he mate with her and not destroy what they had together?

She'd lost her wariness from this morning, mainly because he'd been too distracted to treat her passionately, as he'd done yesterday. And there was the underlying fear of touching her lest he lose complete control. He didn't want to lose her, but what could he do to prevent it?

If they'd had more time together--another month or two--they would be in love and mating would be a natural progression for them. But they weren't in love yet. They cared for one another, felt affection and passion for one another, and they wanted marriage. But would it be enough to win her back after the first mating?

Taking her virginity against her will would be traumatic--for both of them. There would be physical pain for her and emotional pain for both of them. The aphrodisiac would make her physically crave mating, but he needed to make her crave him as her mate. He didn't doubt she'd be his mate, but he couldn't attempt a mating bond until she'd accept it, and he was sure she'd refuse it in the first few hours. He had to bond her as a partner first, because he didn't think she'd refuse that bond and it would help to draw her closer to him.

Mala was empty--so was he. She was lonely--so was he. She needed him--he needed

her. Once he joined himself to her she'd have what she needed most. Completion. And a melding with her was what he wanted more than anything else. He'd been erect all day. His subconscious was salivating over the chance to mate with her, the opportunity to see her naked, to touch her precious body and become one with her. He wanted that. She was his and he wanted to claim her as his own.

"Deni, no one's up there."

He looked down at her concerned face. "I know." There was a hint of despair in his voice. He started walking, but soon his eyes were drawn to the treetops again.

"They're not coming today."

"They have to come," he growled in desperation.

"Why?"

"They just have to." What a horrible time for him to be Felisian! He loved being Felisian, and had always looked forward to mating time, but not now. Now he cursed this part of himself that might lose him the woman he wanted. How ironic; Mala was attracted to him because he was Felisian, and now his being Felisian might drive her away. She had to take the bad part of his DNA with the good, and what he would do to her would be very bad, criminal in fact. And there was worse to consider.

Mala was a virgin, unprotected against pregnancy. He would be at his most sexually potent for the next three days. He would feel biologically compelled to fill her womb with his child and would spend those three days trying to do just that, so there was a very good chance that he would impregnate her. He felt a possessive surge, a primal need to beget children in her. He'd planned to make her pregnant within the year, but it looked like that timetable might be moved up. He was hot just picturing her swollen with his child.

"Deni, what are you thinking about?"

His eyes swung to hers and for a moment the vision of her ripe with child overlaid the real woman. Tenderness for the mother of his children swelled in him and his palm rose to cup her cheek. "How I wish that love would come." He infused the quiet, fervently spoken words with what he felt for her.

"Me too," she replied. Her eyes were deep green pools of wanting. A man could drown happily in the depth of those eyes. They held a quality and a luster he'd never seen anywhere else. She was the peace of a grassy glade dozing in the sun. She was the complexity of a deep sea, tranquil on the surface but with hidden depths below. She was beauty and wonder and enchantment: one only had to look into her eyes to know it. He looked deeply and was awed and humbled by what he found there.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she whispered.

"I see my future in your eyes. I see a love to warm me, arms to hold me when I'm tired. I see the endless wonder that is you beside me through the years. You're a gift I never dreamed I'd receive."

"Oh Deni, that's beautiful." Mala hugged him to her.

"I was inspired."

He took hold of her hand and they proceeded on their way, good feelings restored between them once again.

An hour after sunset Denali fatalistically accepted his fate. He would claim Mala tomorrow and hope that she forgave him. He needed to prepare her body so that any pain was minimal. He needed to keep her aroused so that she could handle the whole mating. Three days was taxing for first-time Felisians who were physiologically made for it; it would

be much harder on Mala. She would tire and want to sleep, she would get hungry and thirsty, and she would be very tender from the unaccustomed use of her body.

All he could give her in return would be his affection, his mating bond, a partnership bond, his child and his marriage vows. From the moment he took her virginity marriage would be a certainty. Mala deserved nothing less. It should have made him happy that he was gaining a mate, but it didn't. Not when she would be forced into it. He wished with all his being that she had the choice to come to the mating and the marriage willingly, of her own free will. But she didn't have a choice in the former because of who he was, so that eliminated her choice in the latter because of who she was.

He took her hand in his and watched his other hand stroke it. "How's your arm?"

"I haven't felt pain in days."

"Then let's take the splint off."

"Are you sure? You said it would be six weeks and it's only been four."

"I'm sure." He removed all the tape and bindings and watched her move her hand and arm stiffly in all directions.

"It's a little stiff, but it feels like it's healed."

"Good. Wash it well tonight. In fact, take extra time washing all of your body tonight."

"Why?"

"It's important to be clean."

"You're not making sense."

"I'm going to collect more wood for the fire. Will you help me?"

"Sure. But you didn't explain about washing."

"I can't explain. We need to fill the water jugs tonight."

"Why, Deni? What's happening?"

"I want water in camp. Please just do as I ask."

She hesitated, and then gave in. "All right."

He could feel her unasked questions beating at him in waves. Perhaps if he explained to her what he needed and why she would give herself to him willingly. For a moment he was filled with hope, and then his hopes plummeted. Mala wouldn't give herself without love, no matter what his need was. She would give her life for USP, but she wouldn't give her chastity to save him from an unconscionable act. But he owed her the chance to know what was going on, didn't he?

"Mala, would you try to stop me if I intended to commit a crime?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"What if I had no other choice but to commit this crime?"

"You always have a choice."

"What if committing a crime meant the difference between life or death for me?"

"How could committing a crime grant you life?"

"What if I was starving and had to steal food to eat?"

"Why wouldn't you work at a job to earn the money to buy food?"

"Mala!" he gritted in exasperation, "Stop arguing with me." He took several deep breaths and tried another approach. "Do you admit that each species in Unified Sentient Planets has its own unique attributes?"

"Yes."

"Do you agree that we shouldn't suppress these unique attributes?"

"Yes, that's what USP is all about."

"Are there some attributes that USP supports, but with which you personally disagree?"

"Yes, a few."

"But they aren't wrong just because you disagree with them?"

"That's right."

"Some species, like the Panesh, have very special needs, without which they will suffer greatly, do you agree?"

"Yes." Mala's manner was both curious and cautious now.

"Felisians have a need peculiar to them; without it they are known to go insane. Is the fear of insanity a compelling enough justification to commit a crime?"

"You're not talking about other Felisians, you're talking about yourself, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what's peculiar to Felisians." But he knew by the hesitancy in her voice that she'd already guessed.

"Mating time. Mine begins tomorrow."

She audibly sucked in her breath. "And what crime will you commit tomorrow to avoid insanity?"

"I won't be able to accept no for an answer." There, he'd told her and now he had to await her judgment. He held his breath.

"You'd force me?"

"More than likely, if you're anywhere near me. I don't want to, but I have to mate. I'm part feline and nothing will stop me going into heat. I'm rational now, but in twelve hours the feline part of my brain takes over. I'll know only one need, and my every thought and action will be to fill that need. You've noticed my nearly desperate behavior towards you the last few days. I can barely control my need to mate, and it's not even mating time yet. Tomorrow it will be so much worse."

"I'll hate myself for doing it, you'll hate me, and I'll deeply regret it. I'm so sorry this is happening, but I have no control over my DNA. Without your permission it's a criminal act. I beg you--do you think you could accept me?"

"You speak so calmly about something as ugly as rape!"

He flinched. "I'm trying not to frighten you. I'm trying to make you understand what I'll go through tomorrow by presenting you with the facts. I need your help. There's sedative in the medical kit, but only enough to put me to sleep for a day. Then I'll be awake again and still in heat. That extra day might give us time to be rescued."

"What if we're not?" Mala cried. "Then we face this moment again a day from now. And in the meantime I'll be alone, worrying about what will happen when you wake up."

"I'm trying to give you options."

"They're not ones I want!"

"I know, but to save me from hurting you if I mate with you, and insanity if I don't. Will you consent?"

"You say I have no choice."

"You don't really. If you run from me I'll chase you and try to find you. If I can't find you, I'll be insane by the time you return. The Felis II ambassador became catatonic when he was prevented from mating during his imprisonment by the Malchovists. He was part-Bonwee and it was only his second mating time. I'm fully Felisian and have been sexually

mature for more than a decade. I don't know how long the insanity would last; the ambassador's lasted a month. But I'll be unable to care for either you or myself and you'll be all alone."

"That's not arguing your case fairly. You know I don't want to be alone."

He pleaded with her. "Mating isn't a horrible thing, Mala. We've been intimate together and enjoyed it very much. Mating is a deeper intimacy we would enjoy just as much. I want you to be willing."

"I need to think this over. Please excuse me." She brushed past him.

"Where are you going?"

"To the glade."

She walked away following her handlight. He'd felt the small gulf that was created by his revelation and was deeply saddened by it. If she didn't agree, the gulf would become even wider, and possibly unbridgeable. He clenched his hands in frustration and began to gather more wood.

\* \* \* \*

Mala knelt in the glade and called upon her theist beliefs for guidance. She was frightened of Denali for the first time, questioning what she thought she knew about him and questioning herself and her judgment.

Even if she allowed him to mate with her tomorrow she wouldn't be doing it willingly. She would be doing it because she had no other choice. The thought of him forcing her was abhorrent, but the thought of him being catatonic while she was alone for a month or more was untenable.

Why had this terrible trial come to her? How could she be true to her Bonwee beliefs when these were her choices? For a long time she prayed, then she bowed her head low and accepted her fate. She wiped away the tears of a hurt heart and rose to return to Denali.

\* \* \* \*

Mala walked towards him, her shoulders bent as though from a heavy load, and Denali's heart cried out in pain. This was what he had done to his future mate--he'd stolen her joy and her happiness. He knew her answer was yes, but there was no celebration in his victory, not when she felt this way about it. For an instant he thought about choosing insanity instead, but that path would punish her, too.

She stopped in front of him, not too close, and lifted her face to look at him. Her eyes were full of pain and disillusionment. "You've left me no choice. Tomorrow I won't fight you. But it isn't what I want."

"I didn't want it this way either. Not ever. I'm sorry."

"You want me to wash well tonight because you'll mate with me tomorrow." It was a statement, said tonelessly.

"Yes."

"You want water in camp and firewood for the same reason."

"Yes."

"Is there anything else we need?"

"No."

"Do you want to tell me what to expect tomorrow?"

Denali filtered through the information she needed to know and when she needed to know it. "There's an aphrodisiac in the medical kit that I'll give to you in the morning to help you. We'll begin with intimacy as we always do, but then I'll touch you between your legs.

I'll prepare you for me, and then I'll come inside you. There may be pain, but the longer you allow me to touch you between your legs beforehand, the less pain there'll be. Then we'll mate."

Mala had ducked her head and her cheeks were red with embarrassment. "How long will it last?" Her voice was choked.

"I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Why not tonight?"

"Because you're afraid now, afraid of me, afraid of what will happen and afraid of the pain. Just know this: I'll only hurt you once, but I'll give you pleasure too."

"We'll ... mate more than once?"

"Yes. Go have your bath. I won't touch you tonight, I promise."

Mala hesitated and asked quietly, "There won't be intimacy tonight?"

"No. You don't want it and I don't think I have the heart for it."

She nodded and headed for the pool. He continued to gather wood with a heavy heart. How could he bond her as a mate when she felt this way? He was going to try, and keep on trying to bond her until she accepted him, but her hurt was palpable. He'd always been a good man, but he was disillusioned by what he was going to do.

\* \* \* \*

Mala watched Denali return from his bath, wary of him now. He'd said he wouldn't touch her tonight, but thoughts of what would happen tomorrow made her feel skittish. His usual smile and warmth were absent and she missed them, missed the physical closeness they shared, and missed his affection. There was a heaviness surrounding him--a heaviness of the heart, she sensed--and was comforted that he didn't take tomorrow lightly. There were two hearts hurting here in camp and no balm for either of them.

She watched him comb his own mane tonight--even this small joy was denied her because it required touching. She searched his profile for the man she'd hoped to love one day, but his words had made him a familiar stranger. His outer beauty was unchanged; he hadn't become ugly in her eyes. Was it the inner light of him that had dimmed, or had her vision of him tarnished? His face was troubled, like hers. He looked over at her with his eyes clouded, with simmering emotions and a palpable sadness. Her heart clenched in empathy for his pain, which echoed her own.

"Time for bed." His voice was thick with emotion.

She crawled into the warmed blankets and lay stiffly as he lay down beside her and covered them. For the first time he didn't take her into his arms and she felt lonely without him.

"You wanted to be rescued so this wouldn't happen."

"Yes. I wanted it with every fiber of my being. I'm sorry."

"I know."

"I'll marry you afterwards. I'll make things right."

She drew in a sharp breath. "I can't think about that right now."

He sighed and turned over. Despite the small distance between them she could feel his body heat and it helped to warm the chill she felt in her heart.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"So am I."



## Chapter Ten

Denali woke in the early morning, when mating fever was less than an hour away. He was fully erect already and his testicles were painfully swollen, ready to give Mala his child. He was still capable of rational human thought, but the animal haze was close.

It was time for him to begin his seduction of Mala, for he intended her to be a willing participant. He planned to be her mating tutor, like he'd had for his first heat. Felisians were taught the art of mating by someone skilled and mature, someone able to direct their animal passions. That initiation was a tender journey into sensuality, not the heated aggressiveness that usually marked Felisian matings. Mala deserved no less than he'd had his first time.

He left their blankets and her warm body to open the medical kit. By a pencil-thin beam of light, he filled the injector with aphrodisiac, then returned to her. He uncovered her, pressed the injector to the curve of her buttocks and emptied it into her lax body. She stirred, grumbling, and then was still again. He placed the aphrodisiac beside their blankets, and then went to build up the fire. Mala would need the warmth in the beginning. He turned off the handlight and removed only his shirt; she would be afraid if he was completely naked. He slid under the blankets with her and unbuttoned her shirt, undoing all but two of the buttons. The last two would give her a sense of modesty. He began his physical wooing by kissing her cheek.

Mala jerked awake. "Deni?" There was fear in her voice.

"Don't be afraid. You know this part. Kiss me." He nibbled at the corner of her lips and nuzzled her face. As he kissed the soft skin of her cheeks and temples, she became less stiff in his arms. Yet she trembled.

This was his mate. Possession surged through him as he stroked her smooth skin and kissed whatever parts of her he could, until she kissed him back.

"You're so smooth here," he murmured.

He spent a few minutes at her neck and ears, sucking and nipping, licking and kissing. She clutched his back and ran her hands up and down his spine. Her kisses branded him wherever she could reach: his neck, ears, chin, and cheeks.

He moved fully onto her body and between her legs. Mala stiffened. "Not yet. Keep calm," he soothed. He pressed his swollen arousal into her opened legs over and over. He kissed between her breasts and she let out a gasp as he licked between the soft swells. He felt her heart pound madly. He spent a long time kissing the edges of her breasts, loving the swells that were only a prelude to the real treat.

"You're beautiful," he purred.

Denali slid down Mala's body and moved her shirt aside to stroke and kiss the soft skin of her midriff. Another mewl escaped her lips as he sucked the skin. Soon Mala's hands gripped tightly in his mane, holding him in place.

He rolled and pulled her astride him. "Kiss my chest," he begged her. "I want you to touch me."

Her eyes were wide, but the pupils were dilated. She leaned down and placed her lips at the base of his neck. He sucked in his breath and threw back his head. He slid his hands

up her back under her shirt where the skin was silky smooth. She placed kisses in the hollow of his neck and lower. He caressed down the curve of her buttocks and squeezed. She gasped and restlessly wriggled her hips. The drug had finally taken hold of her hormones and awakened her sexuality. Relief uncoiled his tense muscles. Mala would come to him willingly. She would be his.

Rhythmically he pressed his penis to her cleft and pulled her hips down onto him. The mating haze was imminent and he struggled for control not to rip her clothes off and impale her. He caressed her thighs and calves and feet as she knelt astride him. Her legs were lightly muscled, smooth and soft.

Denali rolled them once more and turned her onto her belly. He lifted her shirt and thoroughly kissed her back, caressing her flesh and listening to her groans and soft sighs. His fingertips skimmed along the sides of her hips above her waistband until he could slip his fingers a little under her pants and gently caress side to side. Then he slid his hands under the waistband of her pants and a quick hard pull had them off. She squealed with fright.

"Not yet, Mala."

"Deni." It was a plea for reassurance.

"It's all right."

She squawked with surprise as he licked the back of her knees. He made love to the back of her legs and sensually massaged her feet. She sighed. Her flesh was warm and silky. Then he rolled her over again and kissed and caressed his way up the inside of one thigh. His control teetered on the edge.

"So soft."

The restless movements of her legs made his penis throb with hunger. She was very aroused by the time he reached her thigh, her pupils black in the firelight, but her eyes widened and she bit her lip. The musky scent of her arousal made him almost crazed and he barely held onto his humanity. He moved to the other leg and did the same to the inside of that leg. By the time he got close to the vee of her legs she was writhing under him.

Mala tugged on his mane and brought him up to her lips where they began a torrid exploration of faces and adjacent places. Denali could barely breathe. He pressed his lower body urgently to hers. His hands caressed her lower abdomen and then moved lower to her underwear. He couldn't take much more. This torment had to end soon.

His fingers crept under the fabric and into the curls hidden there. She stiffened, but before she could protest, he pushed her shirt up to bare her breast. His mouth latched onto the nipple, sucking hard. Her protest turned into a deep groan as he drew hard at her nipple. He was ecstatic to have her plump breast in his mouth at last and he fed hungrily on it. She writhed, groaning, and her hands clenched in his mane.

"Deni." His name was a throaty plea for more.

"Mala." He hardly recognized his own voice.

He moved to her other breast to happily suckle there. His free hand fondled the wet breast, tormenting the nipple. As she strained against him his other hand delved between her legs. She gasped and tried to close them, but he pinched one nipple while he gently bit the other to draw her attention back to her breasts.

"Deni!" It was both protest and plea.

His fingers traced her wet folds and stroked to her clitoris. She bucked and writhed, trying to get away from the torment, but he increased his ministrations at her breasts and between her legs until she stiffened, her body arched and she cried out in surprise with her

very first orgasm. He swelled with pride that he was the one to give her this pleasure.

As she lay boneless and gasping beneath him in the aftermath, he stripped her underwear off her pliant body, rolled her over onto her stomach, stripped off his own pants and began to caress her legs and buttocks.

"Deni?" her voice quavered.

"Get up on your hands and knees, Mala," he ordered in a tone he knew she was used to obeying. When she was on all fours, he spread her legs wide and continued his caresses. Her body quivered with nervousness, so he wrapped one of his arms firmly around her waist to hold her in place. The other hand worked slowly down her channel, stoking her heat until he carefully inserted one finger into her vagina.

"Oh!" Mala cried out at the penetration.

A wave of feline heat consumed him. His vision sharpened. The scent of female musk burned his brain. He was wild to mate. "Now we begin," he growled, his voice more cat than man. It was time to claim his mate!

\* \* \* \*

Mala trembled at Denali's growled words. When he pressed his finger deeper into her vagina she cried out in refusal and surprise. But her limbs would not obey her commands to move away from him. She felt such heat and need in her lower body, a gnawing emptiness as he circled the mouth of her vagina with his fingers. She wiggled her hips to bring his touch closer to her need.

Denali obliged by rubbing her clitoris and she gasped at the electric touch between her legs. He rubbed and she wriggled and moaned, while her brain tried to wrest back control from her body. It was so hot between her legs and so empty.

"So empty, Deni," she pleaded to him, although she didn't know for what. is so wrong, a part of her brain protested. But he inserted two fingers into her vagina and rubbed in and out, and her logic flew away in the face of such pleasure.

"Now you're not empty." His voice was husky.

She groaned, straining for something and gasping as he stroked faster. He inserted another finger increasing the penetration. With his next probe of her vagina her body clenched around his fingers and she saw stars. She groaned with pleasure that became a shriek as she felt his much larger penis replace his fingers. She was stretched with his fullness.

Her mind suddenly cleared of the sensual fog and her Bonwee propriety reasserted itself. This wasn't right; he wasn't her husband. She struggled to get away. "No, Deni! I've changed my mind. I don't want to do it."

His hold around her waist tightened. "You promised not to fight me. There's nothing to be afraid of." His voice was a deep feline growl.

"Deni, I can't do this!"

He stilled, his breathing ragged. "It's me, Mala, the man who'll be your mate. We made promises to each other, remember?" His growl was tortured and feral.

Her heart pounded madly. He was a feline now. He had no choice. "I'm not ready."

"There's no more time." He leaned over her and his cheek pressed to hers. "Mala, I care for you. Do you care for me?"

She inhaled the musky scent that was Denali, felt his beloved strong arms around her, felt the flesh as familiar now as her own. She fought back the fear and nuzzled against him, wanting reassurance as he waited to consummate their relationship.

"I care for you. Hold me, Deni. I'm afraid."

His arms tightened almost painfully around her. "I have you."

Mala cried out as Denali's insistent penetration slowly continued. Her body fought it until she felt her maiden barrier tear. She screamed at the pain as Denali drove deep into her body. She felt stretched by his thick penis, while her vagina slowly accommodated him. His hair-covered legs teased the backs of her thighs, his heavy testicles hung low between her legs, and the downy hair of his chest pressed tightly against her back.

As she cried tears of pain and regret, Denali rested his cheek against hers. "I'm sorry, Mala, so sorry. Don't cry."

He wiped the tears from her face and she welcomed his tenderness and the kiss that followed. She knelt there quivering in his hard grip with the echoes of her orgasm still pulsing in her loins, with the pain of losing her virginity still fresh in her mind, feeling Denali's body deep inside hers. There were too many sensations in her lower body.

"There won't be any more pain," he soothed, his voice a strained growl. "The rest is for us."

He kissed her face, interspersing the kisses with growled words. "It's me, it's Deni. I'm yours now. I'm all yours and you're mine. We're one and you're no longer empty. Everything's all right."

His arms held her tight to him. His familiar scent helped calm her.

He growled softly, "Now we ride."

Mala felt his penis withdraw, and then begin to penetrate again. She braced herself for more pain, but there was only the arousing slide of his penis inside her vagina. He slid in and out of her body in the most delicious manner, and soon her instinct was to push backward as he thrust forward.

He placed hungry kisses on her neck and she pressed her back into his chest. She found herself wriggling her hips from side to side to increase her stimulation on his penis. The feel of his body inside hers was wonderful, such a stimulating fullness and exquisite impalement. She moaned with the thrill of this part of the mating.

He thrust faster and harder and she cried out with pleasure. He leaned close and his fingers closed over her nipples and rubbed. Oh, the stimulation! Her breasts sent pleasure streaking to her loins and she pushed hard against him and strained for release. It was too much, but not enough. Suddenly her lower body clenched and she flew to paradise again. She heard his shout and felt his hot seed spurt into her. Fear seared her. She wasn't protected against pregnancy. Why hadn't she thought of that?

"Deni, I don't have a birth control implant!"

"It's all right," he assured her, "I'll take care of you. Let's ride again." And he began to move in her body, to her delight. His movements helped reduce her unrelieved aching need.

She was so absorbed in the pleasure of his thrusting body that she barely noticed him remove her shirt. She concentrated on the feel of him fondling her breasts and stroking between her legs with his agile fingers. The added pleasure helped bring her to orgasm as he slid in and out of her body. He praised her for her participation, his voice warm with affection. This was Denali, and he wasn't hurting her any more. Here was the intimacy he'd promised her.

He no longer restrained her from moving away from him. She knelt in front of him and received his intimate thrusts. She needed him to thrust over and over: the wanting never

seemed to end.

She lost track of time until she grew tired on her hands and knees. "Deni, my arms are tired."

"Let's finish this ride and then you can lie down. All right?"

"Yes, but push harder."

\* \* \* \*

Denali drove deep into Mala's body and she screamed as his seed filled her womb. Then he folded his body over hers and held her tightly. Mating with her was wonderful. She was woman! Their bodies were a perfect fit and it felt natural to be inside her. They'd been mating for four hours. He'd gotten erect over and over, mounting her every few minutes and sometimes not even leaving her body. As he thrust in and out of her she'd been a delight. She was sensually receptive and very easy to stimulate and bring to orgasm. She'd accepted every mating since the first one without protest as he filled her over and over with his seed.

His Felisian intuition tingled again as he rested against her back, reminding him of what he'd realized by their third mating. Mala was pregnant with his child! There was another of his kind in the world. He felt a surge of possessiveness for her and the child. He was going to be a father. But Mala was the mother and she hadn't come willingly to this mating, although she was willing now. How would she feel about being pregnant? Should he tell her now or wait until mating time was over?

He gently pushed her to the bedding and rolled her over on her back. For the first time he really saw Mala's naked front--her pale slender body, her full breasts topped by nipples extended and rosy from his ministrations, the small indentation of her waist, the ash brown thatch covering her mound and her white hips flexed wide. Just the sight of her spread like that was enough to make his penis erect and he thrust inside her. Her pale legs gripped his thrusting golden hips. He watched as his engorged flesh was swallowed into her tight body. He looked up to see Mala staring wide-eyed and he put a little distance between them so that she could see what mating looked like.

"Look at us, Mala. This is mating." He drew almost completely out of her so that she could see his penis, and then drove back into her so that she could feel it. She arched against him.

Then he lowered his body to hers and took her in his arms. As they mated face to face, chest to breasts, he explained everything to her. "Felisian mating time lasts three days and two nights. I'll enter your body and thrust like this up to a hundred times." Mala gasped. "I'll give you more of the aphrodisiac each time you need it, unless you feel you can mate without it. But I'll rarely be out of your body for the next three days. We won't eat or sleep, although you'll want to rest. You can have water whenever you need it. Do you have any questions?"

"Why, Deni?"

"It's a biological compulsion in my species, which can't be physically denied. That's why Felisians are never voluntarily away from their species during this time. Twice a year we experience the compulsion to perpetuate the species. It has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with procreation. I've done my species duty by making you pregnant."

"What? How can you know?"

"The species bond. I know my child is in your womb."

"But I can't have a child, I'm not married."

"You will be," he said possessively. He leaned forward to suckle a nipple, making

her gasp.

"I can't think when you're doing that."

He suckled harder to end the conversation.

Whenever Mala's Bonwee conscience awakened, he gave her more aphrodisiac. She was receptive to everything he did in her body in her efforts to relieve the unbearable lust the drug caused. She complained about having to be given the drug, but she didn't complain about the mating.

He was surprised to find they were very sexually compatible, despite Mala having been a virgin. She wanted to pleasure him as much as he wanted to pleasure her. He taught her most of what he knew about mating and she was a joyful and eager student. By the second day they were comfortable mating together, reminiscent of their previous nights of intimate exploration.

The first day had been for physical ease of a mutual lust, for satisfaction of sexual curiosity about each other, and to reestablish affection, rapport and trust between them. So exquisite was the pleasure of being intimately joined that he felt he would rather die than be separated from her. And he thought Mala felt the same way.

On the second day Mala seemed in harmony with Denali once more and his body thrummed with the potential for bonding. He recognized the resonance between them as a bond seeking a home. He had emptiness only she could fill.

"Are you empty, Mala?"

"Yes," she whimpered.

"Then let me fill you." He mated furiously in her body while she writhed with pleasure. Between gasps for breath his mouth fused to hers and his arms held her tightly to him as he worked a bond into her cells through their intimate connection.

For the first time in his life, Denali's empathic abilities allowed him to feel completely what Mala felt. And locked body to body with her as he was he felt her body being flooded with a feeling like soothing balm on a hot burn, like rain on parched earth. A deep feeling of security, protection and safety poured through his physical connection to her and she welcomed it with relief, as he did. She accepted all of it greedily as he poured his bond into her willing body. Her wounded psyche and her emotional emptiness was vulnerable to a deep connection to another being. He shamelessly filled her emptiness with his bond. He pushed it deep into her body and in turn he felt himself deeply bonded to her. He didn't feel empty any longer.

Slowly the feeling of the bond changed and became affectionate and he felt her welcome that too. It flooded into her body like warm sunshine and he marveled at the feeling of being tied to her. But when the feeling of the bond changed yet again to strong possessiveness and ownership he felt her grow afraid.

"No!" she cried and began to fight this part of the bonding he pushed hard into her. He felt the bond meet her resistance, but it met no resistance in him and filled him completely. "No more."

"You're mine now, Mala," he gasped. "I'm partner and mate to you." He fused their mouths together to seal his claim.

Mala panted as he thrust hard in her body again. "It didn't work, Deni. We're not fully bonded."

"We bonded."

Denali drove them to climax to stop the talking. He sought out her lips and wrapped

her tightly in his arms. Before he met Mala, he'd never thought to take a permanent mate, let alone a Bonwee one. From all that he'd been told, he hadn't thought he could even have a non-Felisian mate, since he was already bonded to the Felisian species. He'd been taught he would always need to mate with a Felisian at mating time. Yet here he was mating with Mala and now bonded to her.

Their bond felt strange. It didn't feel like his Felisian species bond and felt different than he thought a mating bond would feel. He was sure he felt more than a single bond. He knew Mala was his mate, despite her denial. He wasn't sure he'd succeeded in bonding her as a partner as well, but he'd done something more and now she was .

At the end of sixty hours, mating fever left him and he became a rational being once again. Denali brought them to sweet culmination and then collapsed onto Mala's body. It was the best mating time he'd ever had. He just breathed until he caught his breath, then levered himself onto his elbows to look into Mala's tired, flushed face.

"It's over. Thank you for accepting me." He kissed her sweetly on the lips.

\* \* \* \*

"You do this twice a year," she murmured in an amazed tone. Her voice was husky and slurred with fatigue.

"Yes, from the age of eighteen until we die. It's the only time Felisian females are fertile, just like you were."

"You're sure there's a child, Deni?"

"Absolutely positive. A boy, I think."

"A son," she said wistfully, and then she felt ashamed. "A child created outside of marriage. You know I was raised to believe that sex outside of marriage is wrong."

"There's no need to feel ashamed. What we did was the natural biological continuation of the Felisian species. And I bonded you to me as my mate, which is legally the same as a marriage."

"It doesn't feel like a mate bond."

"Is it. And it claims you as mine."

"I'm not sure what it is."

"That's because I think I'm your partner, too. But I your mate. We have things we need to discuss, but we're too tired right now."

"We do need to talk. Let me up so I can get dressed."

"No. I expect my mate to sleep naked with me."

"I can't."

"You willingly accepted a mating bond and the commitment to me it entails."

"It's not a mate bond. I'd know it if it was." Mala rubbed her forehead. "Deni, I'm exhausted. Can't we go to sleep and talk about this tomorrow?"

"All right." She could tell he wanted to argue.

Denali withdrew his semi-erect penis from her body. Her vagina clutched and clung and the separation from him was emotionally painful. She was unable to quell a sound of protest and her hands reached for him. He pulled her up as he rose and back into his arms.

Lying down they'd seemed equal in height, but upright the half-foot difference between them made Denali seem to tower over her. She'd never noticed that before and was uneasy with it. He leaned down to brush his mouth over hers and she clung to his lips for a moment. Then she looked at him in mute appeal.

"I feel the separation, too. I'll fill you again soon."

"Don't talk like that, Deni."

"Come on. Let's wash, then eat and then we'll sleep."

They washed quickly in the cold water. The sun had set and the temperature had dropped. They ate a quick meager dinner of roots, and then Denali ushered them to their bed. She was nervous with him again as she lay stiffly on her side. He positioned his nude body spoon-fashion against her naked back and began to probe between her legs.

"Open your legs so I can fill you where you're empty."

"No, nothing's settled between us," Mala argued.

"Mala, we both need it."

Slowly she opened her legs and he slid his penis into her body. They both groaned with relief and made minute adjustments to the fit of their bodies. Denali covered them and gathered her close to him.

"I'm your mate," he said firmly to her, but she said nothing.



## Chapter Eleven

Mala was having a wonderful dream in which Denali's penis slid slowly in and out of her body in a long, smooth glide. His hands molded her breasts. His chest pressed against her back and his groin against her buttocks as he moved. She moved with him in the ride.

"That's the way, Mala," his voice, blurred from sleep, said close to her ear.

She snapped awake to find he was really mating with her; it wasn't a dream. "What are you doing?"

"Newly mated pairs mate three or four times a day for the first few months to help reinforce and seal the bond between them. We'll be drawn to one another like a gravitational pull until such a time as there is no separation between us."

"Deni--" Mala began to argue, but he reached between her legs and stroked. She groaned, straining, and finally he brought her to orgasm. While she gasped for breath afterwards he continued the long smooth strokes.

"You were made just for me and you were made for mating. I love being inside you like this." He thrust deep. "You're mine, Mala. My mate. And I'm yours. Your mate. For the rest of our lives."

"I told you I'm not sure I'm your mate."

"First we mate." He spent a long time thrusting slowly in and out, until she writhed against him.

"Deni, please!" she begged.

"Do you want orgasm?"

"Yes. Don't tease."

He brought them both to orgasm. She screamed and he shouted his satisfaction. They lay gasping until their breathing returned to normal.

"Get ready," he warned, then eased out of her body. Once again the separation was wrenching and Mala made a sound of protest.

Denali pulled her to her feet, kissed her lips, and then let her go.

"Deni, why does it feel like that when you leave my body? It feels so wrong, so empty. And it feels right when you enter my body. I don't understand."

"The bond's not complete yet. We need mating to reinforce it. The process is strong while we're mating and we're deeply connected. When I leave your body the connection is broken and we want it back again."

"We need to talk, but I need to get dressed first."

Denali put a restraining hand on her arm. "I meant what I said earlier. We'll feel compelled to mate three or four times a day for the next several months. We need that connection, Mala. I don't want to fight you whenever it's time to mate."

"We'll discuss it."

"Only the where and how."

They stared at each other, two strong-willed people caught in a strange circumstance neither was prepared for. He leaned down to give her a loving kiss and the tableau broke. The kiss ended quickly and with tingling lips Mala began to dress. Her body was sore from

the excesses of the past three days; her nipples and between her legs were very tender.

Denali was a virile man if the past three days and this morning were any indication. He'd been an aggressive lover every mating except the first one. Even now she felt the echoes of three days of vigorous thrusting. She'd gone from virgin to experienced lover and expectant mother in too short a time, and all of it without love or marriage. Now Denali planned to exercise husbandly rights several times a day.

She was caught in a maelstrom of emotions; deep affection for Denali warred with uncertainty about whether she was his mate, desire for his body to be buried deep in hers warred with her principles of chastity. They had to talk about things, but what if neither of them had the answers? How could they work things out? And what did Mala really want? Did she want a Felisian husband? She'd thought so, but now she wasn't certain. What would it mean to her, a Bonwee, to belong to a Felisian with a species-based biological compulsion to mate?

And what about the baby? By now she was dressed and she pressed her hands against her belly. She looked up and caught Denali watching her with fierce possessiveness and her lower body clenched at the thought of how the baby got there. Her face heated with embarrassment and shame, and she quickly looked away.

Breakfast was meager fare since they hadn't been out of the shelter to forage for three days. "We'll have to hunt for food today." Denali echoed her thoughts.

"I know, and I'm so hungry."

"Mating time is hard on non-Felisians. I should have had you eat more beforehand, but then I would have had to explain why and I couldn't do that."

"How long did you plan that you'd mate with me?" she asked, growing cold with suspicion. She'd thought the day he confided his problem to her was the first day he knew what was happening.

"Three days. I told you Felisians always know what day of the year it is, and we always know when mating time is, so I knew when it would begin. As the time approached, I looked at our situation closely. I told you I only had two choices: either go insane or mate with you. But I didn't want to force you. You'd granted me the right to mate with you in five months, so you were already agreeable. We'd been physically intimate, so you were physically ready for mating. And you have strong feelings for me. I thought that if you understood, you might give yourself to me.

"You and I are attracted to each other, we care deeply for each other, and in time we would have married naturally. But there wasn't any more time." He shook his head. "I'm sorry it happened the way it did."

Mala felt regret like a cold lump in her stomach. "I wanted to wait until I was sure you'd be my husband."

"I know that. I told you I'll be your husband as soon as you agree."

"We might not be able to marry. Mating time reminded me that Felisians are bonded to their species, that Felisians mate with their own ethnic, and that bonded Felisians never marry non-Felisians. And you're bonded, Deni."

"In my experience what you said has always been true. Yet I mated with you and bonded to you, and you're neither my ethnic nor my species. So we can marry, too."

"But when you're back with Felisians, won't you be drawn to them?"

"No, because I'm your mate. Mates are never attracted to other people."

"Another 'never.' I don't think I can trust Felisian absolutes. Look how many we've

broken so far." Mala took a deep breath. "We shouldn't create any more bonds between us until we're sure. I wouldn't want to be the only one tied tightly. I couldn't be one of many who mated with you. I couldn't!"

"I'm tied permanently to you as your mate. What more assurance do you want?"

"I want love!" she cried before she could stop the words.

"Love takes time and the matings help. I have deep affection for you now. I feel possessive about you. I want to protect you and take care of you. I desire you. I want to be with you always. I believe you're the one for me. Is that enough for now?"

"For now," she admitted.

"We'd better get moving. The morning is passing quickly." They got to their feet and picked up their hunting equipment and a carton to hold any food they would find.

As they walked, Denali continued their conversation. "Our children will be Felisian; we've learned that much about Bonwee-Felisian offspring. My Felisian genes will be switched on and your Bonwee genes will be switched off."

"I read that too. I'd only thought about having children a few times, but I'd hoped they would look something like me," she said. It made her sad knowing that with Denali her genes were recessive, relegated to uselessness by the more dominant Felisian DNA.

"I'd like to have a daughter who looks like you. You're very pretty."

She blushed and responded shyly, "The baby will be beautiful like you, Deni."

He stumbled a little in his surprise. Obviously he hadn't expected the renewal of compliments from her so soon after their argument. They were both quiet for the next several hours as they gathered berries and roots.

Mala was afraid to break the small moment of happiness they'd found, but she thought of something she had to know. "Deni, I'm not Felisian, but the baby is. Should I worry about our blood being different?"

Denali stopped moving and his forehead creased in thought. "I never thought about it. In the two cases of Bonwee-Felisian babies I'm aware of, the mother was either part Felisian or completely Felisian. We'll just have to watch you and see."

"Oh." Now she was more concerned. She didn't want anything to happen to the baby or to her.

"Mala," Denali groaned in an agonized voice and her head snapped up and around to him. His eyes were hot and she experienced a moment of fear as he approached her, striding purposefully. "Get your pants off," he ordered, but she froze.

He reached her and carried her down to the ground where he quickly dragged her pants to her knees and off one leg. Heat swirled in her lower body. He got his penis free of his trousers and shoved between her legs. With a single thrust he entered her all the way. She was still struggling to breathe from hitting the ground with him on top of her. She gasped at his deep penetration. Her body bucked. It was a fast mating during which she never caught up before she felt his hot seed fill her.

"What came over you?" she gasped afterwards.

"I'm sorry. I needed you badly. Are you hurt?"

"A little bruised. Will it always be like that?"

"No, but I've heard these matings are usually short. Did you feel the need at all?"

"A little, but nothing like what you must have felt."

\* \* \* \*

In a few hours they found a cliff with nests and Denali climbed up to look for eggs.

They needed protein in their diet. It took a long time climbing up and was hard work for a man who sat a Com station, but Mala's health couldn't be risked. He found two tan eggs, two and a half inches in length, and triumphantly shouted down to her on the ground. He tucked his prizes carefully into his shirt, and then climbed down. He was exhilarated and turned to Mala to share the triumph. She was wringing her hands and pacing and when she looked at him with pleading, her eyes were all pupils.

"Get undressed. Hurry!" he ordered.

Denali carefully set aside the eggs and tore at his clothes. He looked up to see that she was almost nude and her naked flesh brought him to full erection. As she pulled off her last garment he pushed her hands down on a low flat boulder, spread her legs and thrust into her from behind. Mala groaned loudly and he vowed to make this time good for her. He reached between her legs and rubbed and her groans turned to gasps.

"Harder, Deni. Harder!" she cried as her hips wriggled from side to side, straining for completion.

He drove hard and gritted his teeth with the strain of holding back his climax. Suddenly Mala's body clenched around his and her orgasm triggered his. He groaned loudly. Then he folded his body over hers and they stood there gasping and shaking in the aftermath.

"Don't wait so long next time, Mala. I know you need mating; I do too."

"I didn't want to give in to it, and then you were up the cliff so long. I was so empty, Deni."

"Shh. We're joined now. How about one more ride?" His body had grown erect again.

"Deeper this time, Deni, much deeper."

"Yes, to your very core."

He thrust deep inside her, feeling the connection with her in his cells and wanting it with all his being. She was his mate; he knew it. Why did she keep fighting it? He gave her a long hard ride this time and it was very good for both of them. He was reluctant to leave her body, but they still had much to do today. The wrenching was worse this time as he extricated his body from hers and he felt confused. The matings were supposed to make being bonded easier, not harder.

\* \* \* \*

Late in the afternoon they discovered a large pond with aquatic creatures. They were six to ten inches in length with blue-gray scales. Mala and Denali attempted to catch some of them with their hands while standing in the cold water. Their efforts were so ludicrous that the two of them were laughing hard as they stood ten feet apart in the water. Mala watched Denali's efforts and her eyes perused his body. He'd taken off his shirt before entering the water and his biceps and chest muscles rippled as he moved.

Her eyes followed the line of tawny chest hair as it arched down into his pants to an obvious bulge between his legs. He was aroused again! Her mind provided her with a picture of his naked erect penis and she grew moist between her legs. She needed him in her body; she needed it desperately. What had he done to her with this bond that made her need mating so often? She was Bonwee and not ruled by bodily lusts. Mala fought her physical needs, but it was a losing battle from the start. She needed him.

"Deni," she pleaded.

Denali strode through the water towards her. His eyes were hot and possessive and she knew he felt it too. She removed her shirt as they reached the shore and he led her to a

grassy spot. Their union was fiery and over quickly.

"What have you done to me, Deni?"

"I only bonded you to me. I know people who are bonded and this madness never happened to any of them. I don't know what's causing it. Are you ready?"

"Once more," she pleaded and he helped her to ride long and slow. They watched each other's faces as emotions crossed them, seeing the crests of passion.

"You're my mate, Mala," he reiterated as he caressed her body lovingly.

"I'm connected to you in some way, but I don't know how."

"You're the other half of me."

"Yes, I think I am. I feel so incomplete when you're not a part of me."

"I feel that way too. We need to get back to camp before it gets dark. Finish it, Mala." They climaxed together, building a tighter bond between them.

\* \* \* \*

A tired pair returned to camp as the sun began to set. They'd wandered far and wide foraging and had mated five times already. Denali was erect again and trying to wait until camp was made for the night, but he was losing control. He set his parcels on the ground near the fire pit.

"Mala," he groaned her name and she dropped her items near his.

She turned to him with a look of despair on her face and he backed her into the shelter. They tore off their clothes and fell to the blankets. Mala spread her legs wide and he thrust inside. The mating was fast and furious and over too quickly. As they gasped for breath, he studied her face. The look of despair was still there.

"More?" he asked.

"Yes. Why doesn't the wanting stop?"

"I don't know. Again," he gritted and the second mating was almost as intense and lasted little longer than the first. For a long time they just lay there breathing.

Denali was tired, but he knew they had to eat. Lunch had been a long time ago and the matings were using up a lot of energy. "Ready?"

"No. I'm never ready," Mala admitted, her voice sad.

He disengaged their bodies and had to fight the impulse to return to her. They both rose and dressed, and then they prepared a hot dinner. Each ate with a hearty appetite, but little energy.

"I need a bath," Mala complained as they finished cleaning up.

"I'll join you."

She glared at him. "No mating."

"I'm sure that will come later," he said sardonically. He shared a wordless look with her, and then they walked to the pool.

He studied her carefully as they bathed, looking for changes signifying pregnancy. She'd lost weight since they crashed, as they walked miles every day in search of food. Her former layer of softness was now sculpted muscle. Her belly was still flat; how could she be otherwise when she was only four days pregnant? But he wanted to see her swelled with his child, to feel his son kicking inside her and to hold the baby in his arms. He was surprised at how eager he was for the birth of his son. Nine months was going to be a long time.

When they were clean and dry they returned to the shelter wearing only their towels and he lay down next to her. "Mala, I want to touch where our baby is."

She looked surprised, and then she took his hands and placed them on her lower

belly. He lovingly caressed the place where his child was growing. He shifted and laid his ear against the same spot. , he chided himself again; can't hear the baby yet.

"I'm your father. My name is Denali, and I love you. I'll take good care of you. I can't wait for you to be born," he said to her belly. He looked up at Mala, feeling even sillier, but there was a look of wonder and tenderness on her face.

"I'm your mate, Mala, and father to your baby."

"Lie down, Deni. We need to sleep."

He snuggled next to her. "Open your legs," he commanded, and tonight there was no argument. He slid into her body and they were both asleep quickly.

There was mating again when they woke and then they set out to forage for food. Denali brought the blanket from the bed. After one shocked look at it, Mala made no comment.

The matings happened every two hours and very little else got done. At one point he covered a waist-high boulder with the gray blanket and folded her over the boulder on her stomach and mated intensely with her. For a long time he pounded into her willing body until in frustration at the mating not ending he jerked his body out of hers. She squawked in protest and he experienced such a feeling of being bereft that he thrust back into her and began to mate again. He leaned over her, his chest on her back, and laced their fingers together.

Mala made a growling noise in the back of her throat and suddenly Denali's feline DNA engaged and all he wanted was to mount and cover his mate. He bit her neck in a primitive feline claim on the female of the species. She squealed and he growled as he bit her again. He mated as aggressively with her as he would have mated with a Felisian lover. His growling took on the feline tones of all Felisians and Mala began to growl, too.

His bites worked up the side of her neck, never breaking the skin, then the back of her neck and down her back as far as he could reach while being intimately connected to her. She wriggled and growled and her movements incited him to fervor. He bit a nerve bundle in her neck, and then gave an eerie feline howl whose tones went through the nerves he was biting. She squealed and bucked with orgasm.

As she quivered and gasped in the aftermath, he bit another nerve bundle and issued a high-pitched howl. Mala screamed as her nerves transmitted the pitch to her body. She convulsed in orgasm. This time he joined her in climax.

\* \* \* \*

Denali sought her lips and Mala knew a moment of fear that he intended to bite again. Instead, he fused their lips and she lost herself in her hunger for him. She felt no separate identity as he voraciously fed on her lips. In fact, she found that she'd slid into his skin and mind with him. As an empath she was a part of what he felt. She felt his burning erection as he began to thrust again. His fingers plucked and rubbed her nipples and the pleasure was intense on her breasts.

She strained to intensify his touch and then felt Denali in her skin and mind with her. She recognized another empath and he felt her pleasure and rubbed faster. They climaxed together as they felt their own pleasure and that of their partner. Finally they could bear the joining no longer and slipped back into their own skins. They broke the kiss and lay gasping against the boulder.

Mala was afraid to ask what they just experienced. Was it something Felisian or just something that happened to empaths? "You're an empath," she exclaimed.

"So are you."

"You knew Bonwees were empathths."

"No, no one told me that."

"You were in my mind and my body ...."

"And you were in mine. It was wonderful. Is it something Bonwees do?"

"No. I thought it was something Felisians did, like the biting and the howling."

"No, it wasn't. I thought you were Felisian when I was biting you. You seemed Felisian to me. How strange. You were making Felisian mating sounds."

"You were howling and I wanted to howl, too. But Deni, the biting hurts."

"Biting stimulates the nerves, then the howling sounds travel along the nerve endings. It's quite pleasurable. I wish you'd bite me that way," Denali added wistfully.

"It was pleasurable, but felt strange. You'd really want me to bite you?"

"Yes. It's what Felisians do when they mate with other Felisians."

"You said I felt Felisian to you. How?"

"The growling sounds you were making were Felisian. I had closed my eyes and when I heard them I felt you were my Felisian mate and I wanted to mate as Felisians do. Can we mate that way again?"

"Now?" she gasped.

"Not now. I mean the other times we'll mate."

"Not all the time, Deni. I told you, the biting hurts."

"I'll be more careful. Will you make Felisian sounds every time we mate?"

"I can do that. Deni, we need to get some work done today. You're going to have to let me up."

"I don't want to be separated from you. This mating felt so good."

She looked up at the sky and measured the time of day. "It was marvelous, but we lost an hour."

"So we did. All right, get ready." Slowly he pulled out of her body and both drew in breath. Mala fought long with herself not to beg him to thrust back into her body. He had to be fighting similarly because his hands were fisted. Finally he mastered himself and stepped away from her.

\* \* \* \*

They continued to forage the rest of the day, but Denali was haunted by having been in Mala's mind. There were very few Felisian empathths, and he'd never had another empathth as a lover. But those moments when he and Mala had shared first his mind and then hers had been absolutely perfect and he wanted to relive them each time they mated. He was afraid regular mating without that connection wouldn't be enough for him any more.

The matings continued at two-hour intervals and took on a decidedly Felisian flavor with feline sounds being made by both of them. Mala made a particular growling noise in her throat that stood his body hair on end and drove him to madness. She bit him, but had not yet mastered the depth or position to give pleasure. For his part, Denali learned to be more careful with his bites and Mala began to enjoy them.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning Denali was horrified to find himself in heat again. He began mating with Mala immediately, but his panicked mind couldn't think logically in order to give him an answer as to why mating time had come again. They couldn't handle another three days of mating. What was happening to him? Was there something wrong with him?

Was there some sort of natural aphrodisiac in the food they ate or the water they drank?

"Mala, I'm in heat again!" he growled while he thrust.

"But I thought that only came twice a year," she gasped.

"It's here again. Are you in heat, too?"

"No, why?"

"If you're in heat, then there's something in the food or water."

"We have to eat and drink, Deni."

"I know. Ride me harder!"

Denali's heat lasted six hours. Mala wasn't in heat, which relieved him that the food and water weren't affected. However, he was concerned that something was wrong with him. He brooded the rest of the day, even during mating, which occurred every few hours.

Late in the day while they were lying together after a long mating, Mala demanded to know what was bothering him.

"I think I must be sick or something. No Felisian has ever gone into heat early and then stopped. I feel all right otherwise, but I'm afraid something's wrong with me."

"Nothing is wrong with you, Deni. Nothing can be wrong with you. I couldn't bear to be alone on this planet. You're frightening me."

"I won't leave you, Mala. I just need to know what's happening to me."

"Stop thinking about it. Do something to take your mind off it. Talk to the baby."

So Denali talked to his son and kept his concerns to himself. Mala was pregnant and didn't need to fret about things right now.



## Chapter Twelve

One morning, Mala woke and was violently ill.

"Morning sickness," Denali pronounced proudly, and then tried to nuzzle her.

"Get away from me," she threatened. "I'm dying. Leave me alone."

"You're not dying. You're pregnant and you'll feel better in a little while."

Denali's prediction came true and when the nausea passed she glowed with wonder at this confirmation that her body contained his baby.

"You didn't believe me," he accused.

"Yes I did, but I didn't feel any differently. I guess I wanted physical proof there was a baby."

"It's a boy. My son. We'll have to decide what to name him, but since he's Felisian it should probably be a Felisian name. Felisians don't have surnames, but if you want him to have yours that would be all right with me."

"How do you know it's a boy?"

"I can feel him, can't you? You're an empath. Try focusing on your womb."

Mala placed her hands over her lower belly and concentrated on the baby. At first there was nothing, then a sense of an alien life form and then the knowledge that it was a male being. "It a boy and definitely Felisian," she exclaimed wonderingly.

"I told you it was a boy when I made you pregnant. Do you have any other symptoms, Mala?"

Her face warmed. "My breasts are tender."

"Ah. I'll have to be careful when we mate." Denali became very serious. "Mala, will you marry me now that you know for sure you're pregnant?"

"Deni, there's a question unanswered between us that can't be answered until we're rescued. I want to wait; I don't want to make a mistake."

"And marrying me would be a mistake?"

"If, after we're rescued, you felt compelled to mate with other Felisians, marriage to you would be a terrible mistake."

"I've mated with you every few hours for the past five weeks. How can you think I would want someone else?"

"I'm the only female here. But when we're rescued you'll have your choice of your own species and your own ethnic. We'll see then whether what has been happening between us is just propinquity."

"Do I mean nothing to you?" he demanded. "Do you feel nothing for me each time I'm in your body?"

Mala looked at him and took a deep breath. He deserved to know the truth even if it hurt her in the end. "I love you, Deni."

He looked startled, then very pleased and his chest puffed out with pride. "I love you too, Mala. I'm your mate and you mean everything to me."

His words settled warmly in her heart. Denali was a good man; he'd told her so many times. And his actions, for the most part, had been to protect and care for her, to show her

affection, and to be her other half in every way. She wanted badly to have everything settled between them.

"I want to wait until we're rescued. I need to be sure, Deni."

"Very well," he replied curtly, and she knew he wasn't pleased with her decision.

\* \* \* \*

Over the next week Mala was awakened every morning to morning sickness. At the end of the week she began to feel first trimester tiredness in the afternoons as well. They carried a blanket with them on their forages and now Mala slept for several hours each afternoon while Denali hunted or caught the water creatures in the pond. He never strayed far from her when she was asleep and was vigilant while she was vulnerable. He woke her after two hours and they wandered farther from camp.

\* \* \* \*

Three months later Denali woke in heat again. "No! Not again!" he howled. He used to look forward to mating time, but when it came unexpectedly without preparations it was hard on both partners. He shook Mala awake. "Mala, I'm in heat again!"

"What?" she exclaimed sleepily. "It's not time for you to be in heat."

"But I am," he declared.

He mounted her and thrust inside to begin what turned out to be a ten-hour heat. Mala was tired and out of sorts and only felt compelled to mate every three or four hours, so he had to be the more aggressive and dominant partner.

When they reached six hours he hoped the heat would end like the last one had, but it continued on. They were both hungry and thirsty and they quickly grabbed supplies. Denali only drank water, but Mala had to eat to sustain the pregnancy. Afterwards she became lethargic with early afternoon sleepiness. He rolled her to her back and she fell asleep. Even Denali's heat couldn't fight pregnancy tiredness.

When she awoke several hours later he begged her, "Ride me Mala, please." He was desperate and she did what she could for him. He could normally handle anything, but these unscheduled heats unnerved him.

"What's happening to you, Deni?"

"I don't know, but it's not normal."

\* \* \* \*

At ten hours the heat suddenly left him and he collapsed onto Mala. "It's over," he panted tiredly.

"Good," she replied just as tiredly and her eyes closed. Her breathing evened out and she was asleep that quickly.

He felt terrible that he had had to mate with her in the condition she was in. He staggered to his feet and prepared dinner with what little food they had. They hadn't foraged or hunted today, so the fare was meager. He warmed what they had because he felt Mala needed a hot meal. He washed himself and drank lots of water, and then he woke her so she could eat. Afterwards she curled back up in the bedding. He cleaned up after the meal and climbed in beside her. He, too, was asleep quickly, even at that early hour. Neither of them looked for rescue in the sky that night.

\* \* \* \*

In Mala's fourth month of pregnancy they felt their son move for the first time. They'd named him Jeran, after a favored uncle of Denali's. When he felt the movement, Denali looked at Mala with wonder on his face and her heart lurched with love for him once

again. They'd grown so close in the five months they'd been stranded here. What would happen if rescue never came? She'd begun to think that she should exchange wedding vows with him before their son was born. She was almost halfway through her pregnancy with no sign of rescue, and Mala wanted their son to be born within a marriage.

That day Denali came to her frequently and placed his hands on her rounded belly to feel his son move and to talk to Jeran in his smooth baritone. Mala was very moved by his love for his unborn son and she laced her fingers through his mane as his head bent close to her belly.

Their matings were tender and very loving all day. Denali had said the heated matings every few hours would last only two months, but although their need had diminished, it had not completely waned. They could now go six to eight hours without mating if they chose to, although today he wanted to mate more often and she welcomed his attentions. She knew he wanted to be closer to her and the baby today and he found this closeness in mating. It was one of the happiest days together since the crash.

\* \* \* \*

A week later Denali noticed the Felisian ethnic markings on Mala's abdomen around the sides of her swollen belly and from hip to hip on the underside of her belly. The irregular, elongated spots, dark brown in color, were in his ethnic pattern, which was also the baby's. Denali felt cold fear. Somehow the baby's blood was infiltrating Mala's blood and the Felisian genes were causing the ethnic pattern to show up on her skin.

Felisian gene changes to non-Felisians took six to eight weeks to show up physically. So, unknown to both of them, Mala's body had been becoming more Felisian in the past two months. He wondered if that would explain the Felisian feel to their matings. But was Mala in danger from the mixing of blood? He remembered reading about the only two documented cases of mixing Bonwee and Felisian blood. In the second case the Bonwee's body rejected a small amount of Felisian blood. In both cases the Bonwee required a DNA gene splice and changed physically afterwards. Each of the Bonwees showed Felisian ethnic markings on their skin, but Mala's markings were concentrated around where the baby was in her body. He decided to say nothing unless she asked about the markings.

That day Mala seemed more tired than usual and he hoped it was due to all the climbing they'd done the previous day. The day after that her appetite was off and again she seemed to drag.

"I'm tired," she remarked to him. Her brows knit together in confusion. "I thought that part of the pregnancy was over when I went into my fourth month."

"How do you feel otherwise?" he probed cautiously.

"I don't feel right, but I can't pinpoint what's wrong with me."

"Why don't you rest for awhile today," he suggested, hoping that would help. He assisted her to lie down in the shelter, then went back to check the traps for small mammals to eat. He refused to allow his thoughts to dwell on what might be wrong with Mala and the hunting kept him busy and occupied, although he was lonely without her.

When Mala woke up later there was a sharp exclamation from her, and then she screamed his name. "Deni!"

He scrambled to her side and saw what she was looking at. There was blood on her underwear. Mala's hands grabbed for him. "The baby! Am I losing the baby? Am I having a miscarriage?" Her voice edged into hysteria.

"Lie down!" he ordered, panicked. She lay down, but her eyes were huge with fear

and her hands clawed at him. "Are you in pain, Mala?"

"No. Is that a good sign? Why am I bleeding?" her questions came faster and so did her breathing.

"Calm down and breathe slowly. I'm not a doctor so I don't know. Let's find out where the blood is coming from first." He removed her underwear and an investigation confirmed his worst fear. He fought blind panic. His son was in jeopardy. Jeran couldn't die, he just couldn't! Denali wanted his little boy to be born so badly. He placed his hands on Mala's belly. "Can you feel the baby moving, Mala?"

She was quiet while she tried to feel the baby. "I don't feel anything!" she cried. "Is he dead? Is my baby dead?" And then she burst into huge, gulping sobs. "I want my baby. I want my baby."

Denali put his ear to her belly, trying to hear a heartbeat, but Mala's wailing made it hard to hear. "Mala, be quiet!" he ordered sternly and tried to focus his empathic senses on the baby in her womb. It took a few minutes before he registered anything, but his son was alive and apparently asleep. Jeran's life force was strong. "He's alive!"

"Alive? You're sure?" she gulped through her tears.

"Can you focus your empathy on him, Mala?"

She was quiet for a moment, then burst out, "I can't do it! Deni, Deni help me. I can't sense him." She became hysterical again.

He lay down with her and took her in his arms. "Shh Mala, he's all right. He's asleep, but I felt him. You're overwrought so naturally your own emotions are interfering with your ability to feel anything else. I've got you, love, and the baby's all right." He continued to soothe her and finally she fell asleep, exhausted by her emotions.

He moved down to her belly and whispered to his son. "Hold on, Jeran. Stay where you are. Your father loves you, but he wants you to wait to be born. Your mother loves you. Hold on tight, son."

Denali felt helpless. They had no drugs to prevent a miscarriage. Mala would be devastated if she lost their baby and he would be distraught if Jeran died. He would have to get her pregnant again quickly, but he might have to force her to mate if anything happened to the baby. And what if Mala couldn't carry a Felisian baby to term? That was something he couldn't accept, that she would never bear his children.

The next day there was more blood and Mala was lethargic. Denali made her eat and drink, but her movements were very slow.

On the third day there was still more blood and Mala complained of not feeling well. "Are you in pain?" he asked, but she denied any pain. Her face was pale and wan and she looked ill. He could still sense the baby and the life signs were still strong. It was Mala's life signs that were waning and he was very afraid. He treasured Mala's life more than his own. He couldn't bear to lose her, but he didn't know what was wrong with her or what to do to help her.

On the fourth day Mala continued her slow loss of blood. Denali couldn't get her to eat, although she did drink water. She was asleep most of the day and he was going out of his mind with worry. He'd even considered cutting his baby from her body in order to save her life. Kill one precious life to save another--what an abominable choice to have to make. But he was no surgeon and had no tools to perform such a delicate operation.

He dared not go too far in case she needed him, but they were out of food and low on firewood. He gave her prone form an agonized glance and then he left camp to forage. He

had to provide for her and he was doing no good hovering over her while she slept.

He gathered water and wood first, since they were close at hand, then began the task of hunting for food. It was late afternoon and he was tired, dispirited and desperate when he set foot in the little grassy glade opening in the trees. He'd gone several feet into the clearing when he looked up to the looming sky and suddenly raged at Mala's God.

"Why are you doing this to her? I love her. I need her. She believes in you. Help her. Help us. Take me if you need a sacrifice. Take my life instead. I would rather be dead than face life without her." Denali fell to his knees and sobbed out his helplessness. "Help me, please help me. I want her to live!"

That night he held Mala tightly and willed her to live. "I'm your mate and I love you," he told her unaware form. He tried over and over to slide into her skin and mind with her, but was frustrated in his efforts. It was a long, lonely night, because he was afraid to go to sleep and give up his vigil over her.

In the morning she'd lost more blood and Denali couldn't get her to drink or eat. In her one lucid moment she asked in a slow, slurred voice, "Am I dying?"

"No! Don't say that. You're ill, that's all."

"I don't want to leave you, Deni. I love you." Then her eyes closed.

"I love you, Mala," he cried in an anguished voice. His mate and child were dying before his very eyes. What irony that Mala had survived the shuttle crash to die in pregnancy. He'd just begun to experience paradise only to be thrown out of it. Where was the justice in that? Where was the sense in what was happening now? Was this his punishment for forcing Mala? Now she would be taken from him? And his son, too?

Mala didn't wake again and with fatalism he planned what he would do. When she had breathed her last breath he would lie beside her and slice his neck from ear to ear with a sharp knife. He would die with her and Jeran. He made his peace during his hours alone and sharpened his knife to a razor's edge.

He was so intent on his rhythmic sharpening of the knife that at first the meaning of the droning noise didn't impinge upon his consciousness. Finally some latent sense of self-preservation made him pause and he registered the sound of a shuttle first with disbelief and then with incredulity and hope. He leapt to his feet and scanned the sky in every direction. Help was coming for Mala! Finally he spied the shuttle and waved like a madman. He ran towards it, unthinking that the shuttle could fly faster than he could run. Soon it was overhead and dropping and his brain finally told him to get out of the way.

As soon as the shuttle settled to the ground, he reached the hatch. When the hatch opened, he grabbed the first person out. "She's dying! Come quickly. She needs a doctor."

"Who's dying?"

"Mala. Hurry!" There was a strange buzzing in Denali's brain that made it difficult to think.

The man questioned Denali as they ran. "What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know. I thought it was a miscarriage, but the baby's still inside her. She's bleeding. Mixed blood, mixed genes."

"Mixed genes? What type?" The man's voice was sharp.

They'd arrived at the shelter and Denali knelt down next to Mala and pulled the other person down next to him. She was white, very still and barely breathing. "She needs a doctor. Do you have a doctor?" he asked like a moron.

"I'm a doctor," someone else said from Mala's other side. "What's wrong with her?"

"Mixed blood I think," Denali stated, picking up Mala's hand. "She's dying. Help her," he threatened the one identified as the doctor.

"She's the Bonwee we're expecting. Who's the baby's father?" the doctor asked while injecting Mala with something.

"I am. The baby's my son, Jeran. He's Felisian and he's four months old. His blood is in her." He uncovered Mala's abdomen to show her Felisian ethnic markings. "See, it's in her blood. Mitzli, my ethnic."

He heard indrawn breaths and one of the newcomers said, "We've got to get her to the ship fast. Lieutenant Denali, where are the others?"

Denali lifted his eyes from Mala and recognized First Officer Marwan for the first time. Marwan was in his fifties, tall, slender and straight, the perfect officer. "Dead. In the attack and the crash. Almost me and Mala, too."

"What did you do with their bodies?"

"There's no time for that. Mala's dying."

"Crew will get Madam Avonee to the ship while you tell me what happened to the others."

"No. I'm going with Mala."

"Survivor togetherness," a voice from behind them said.

Two crew placed Mala gently on a stretcher while Marwan tried to get Denali's attention. "Did you bury the others, Lieutenant?"

"Couldn't. Mala had a concussion and a broken arm. I had a concussion and cracked ribs. Ground's too hard. Had to burn them."

"Did you save their personal effects?"

"Yes." Denali felt momentary confusion, then pointed to the back of the shelter. "In there, in a black box."

"Why didn't you stay with the shuttle?"

"We needed water and wood for a fire. Can we go now?"

"Yes," Marwan addressed the others. "You three search for anything salvageable. We'll send down scientists to explore this planet. Stake out a base camp here for now."

Marwan, the doctor, two stretcher-bearers and Denali proceeded to the shuttle and strapped themselves in. Denali sat on one side of Mala's stretcher holding her hand. The doctor sat on the other side taking her vital signs.

Marwan instructed the shuttle pilot, "Get us up to the ship as fast as possible. Call ahead for a float pallet to meet us. Doctor, will you need anything else brought to the hatch?"

The doctor looked at Denali and said, "Plasma. Mitzli."

Denali nodded agreement.

The shuttle blasted off in a heavy G lift. The pilot must be using full thrusters. Denali watched Mala's face for signs of strain, but saw none.

The doctor began rapid-fire questioning as the shuttle continued its ascent. Denali answered distractedly, describing in detail Mala's descent into her current state.

"You know a lot about Madam Avonee."

"I should. I'm her mate."

The doctor looked shocked. "But she's not Felisian!"

Denali shrugged. "That doesn't matter to me."

"It will matter at mating time."

"How do you think Mala got pregnant, doctor? It was mating time."

"We're preparing to dock, doctor," Marwan called out.

"Come with me to the infirmary," the doctor said.

"I intended to."

"Lieutenant Denali, I want a complete debriefing," Marwan ordered.

"You'll have to get it in the infirmary," Denali responded, then added, "Sir."

"So you know who I am now?"

"I'm sorry about earlier, sir. I was distraught. I'd been sitting there waiting for her to die all day and sharpening my knife ...." Here he searched his clothing anxiously. "I've lost my knife!"

"I don't think you need it now, Lieutenant."

"Sir, I need a favor immediately."

"What is it?"

"Promise me that you'll kill me if Mala dies."

"What? Why?"

"I don't want to live if Mala dies. Promise me."

"I can't do that, Lieutenant Denali. What you're feeling now is left over from being alone on that planet with her. You're not alone any more. I don't believe Madam Avonee will die, but if she does you'll have other people on the ship."

"Not like her, not to me."

"You're bonded to us, Lieutenant. You don't have to be afraid of being alone any more."

So that strange buzzing noise in his head was the return of his Felisian species bond. But it paled to what he shared with Mala, to what she meant to him. "You don't understand--"

The pilot called out, "We're docked. Please move to the hatch. Doctor, your team is waiting on the other side."

Everyone moved to the hatch and Marwan opened it. Ship security opened the ship hatch. The doctor climbed out first, and the stretcher was handed out to the float pallet, followed by Denali, Marwan and the others. Plasma was handed to the doctor and he began a transfusion.

"Go!" the doctor shouted once the needle was inserted into Mala's arm. Everyone pulled the float pallet towards the infirmary. On its own the float pallet would move slowly on a cushion of air, but this way it moved much faster.

In the infirmary, the doctor donned surgical garb and sanitized his hands. Denali watched his preparations and turned to watch Mala being transferred to a gurney. "Be careful with her!" he growled possessively.

"Lieutenant Denali, I'm Dr. Lazara and these are my assistants Ensign Boramis and Private Steffay. Everyone, this is Lieutenant Denali and that's Mala Avonee. She's four months pregnant with Lieutenant Denali's son and the baby's blood has mixed with hers. We're going to move very fast now. Do what I tell you to do quickly. Boramis, draw blood and analyze it immediately. I want to know what percentage Madam Avonee's blood is Felisian. Be very certain of your figures."

Boramis drew blood and hurried from the room.

Steffay cut off Mala's clothes. Denali fought down possessive jealousy that the male doctor was looking at his mate's nude body. He growled in his throat in a threatening way,

causing Dr. Lazara to look up sharply.

"Stop that or get out!" the doctor ordered.

Denali bristled, then backed down, feeling embarrassed.

"We'll need to do a pelvic exam," the doctor told his assistant and she spread Mala's legs. Denali moved to the foot of the gurney where a hormone rush hardened his penis. His mate was in the presence of another male and Denali had to show ownership.

Dr. Lazara looked up and Denali was sure he must look as feral as he felt because the doctor shouted, "No, Lieutenant! Steffay, get between Denali and Mala. Boramis, bring a sedative immediately! Lieutenant Denali, you can't mate with Madam Avonee now. Think about her. Think about your son."

Denali growled again quite threateningly. He had hold of Mala's foot and moved forward between her upraised legs. Steffay grabbed him around the waist. "Deni, stop it! Control yourself." Steffay had been his casual lover in the past, but he felt nothing but irritation at her touch now. He wanted his mate. He stepped towards Mala's center.

Denali snarled and tried to brush Steffay off, but she held him away from Mala. He felt a stabbing pain in his buttocks and whirled to find another male with an injector. Before the sedative could take effect, Denali threw his weight at Boramis, tumbling them to the floor. Denali growled as he bared his teeth and sank them into the other male's neck. He had to protect his mate. Boramis howled in pain, but before Denali could do further damage, his sight blurred, then dimmed.



## Chapter Thirteen

"I want to see Mala," Denali demanded. He pulled at the padded wrist restraints as Dr. Lazara entered the infirmary room and approached Denali's bed. Denali curbed his anger with difficulty that he would be treated this way. The doctor had the power to help him.

"In a little while we'll put her in the bed next to yours. She's getting a blood transfusion now. We had to do a DNA gene splice."

Relief sang through Denali. "Mitzli?"

"Of course."

"What percent Felisian will she be?"

"Forty percent. We took bone marrow and stem cells from your hip bones while you were unconscious and gave them to her. We also gave her a liter of your blood. We gave her three liters of blood and plasma from other people because I didn't think you could stand to lose any more blood. You're underweight from your stay on the planet. So is Madam Avonee."

Denali nodded. "We had to forage for food every day; even then, there wasn't a lot to eat. I'm glad you gave her my blood and bone marrow."

"You don't seem surprised at what we did to her."

"I guessed that was your only choice. Besides, she needs to be able to bear the rest of my children."

"We did a DNA test on the baby, which is a boy by the way. He's Felisian and definitely your son."

"I knew that, doctor."

"Have you noticed any behavior changes in Madam Avonee since you discovered the ethnic markings?"

"Mala's been my mate since the second day of mating time four months ago. We mate frequently every day, we have for four months. Sometime in the first week she began to feel Felisian to me. She sounds Felisian when she mates. I can close my eyes when we're mating and not be able to tell that she isn't Felisian. So I wasn't surprised to find Felisian ethnic markings on her."

"Now that you're back with Felisians, won't you feel compelled to mate with your own ethnic at mating time instead of with Madam Avonee?"

"She asks me the same thing, but none of the times I went into heat did I want anyone but her."

The doctor jerked, his eyes widening. "You were only gone five months. You went into heat more than once?"

"Three times. The second one was only three days after the first one ended. The last two times were shorter; one lasted six hours and one lasted ten. I thought maybe there was something in the food or water, but it didn't affect Mala. The last time was a month ago and Mala was Felisian by then. It was unnerving never knowing when I would be in heat and for how long, and it was hard on Mala the last two times because I didn't have any more aphrodisiac. It was hard on me because I couldn't prepare ahead of time. I was tired, hungry

and thirsty.

"I also thought maybe there was something wrong with me, that I was ill or something. But I feel fine."

"We tested your blood before we gave it to Madam Avonee, but we didn't find anything wrong with it."

"That's good. Since we crashed things were just a little strange and I thought it was me."

Dr. Lazara's gaze sharpened. "What was strange?"

"Well, it was really easy to bond Mala to me, but I'd always been told it couldn't happen with a non-Felisian because I was species bonded. But I wasn't bonded to Felisians on the planet. Then we had to mate so often every day afterwards, more than I expected. We still need to mate daily, doctor. I haven't mated for five days and I need her."

"We'll talk about that in a minute. Was that all that was strange?"

"I was wild to mate with her from shortly after we crashed. I thought I was suffering from insanity, the urge was so strong. Yet Felisians don't have mental illnesses."

"Your behavior on the planet and again in the infirmary was erratic and irrational."

"What's your name, doctor? You must have told me, but I don't remember it."

"I'm Dr. Lazara."

"Doctor, on the planet I was watching my mate and my child die. When the shuttle arrived, I was sharpening my knife to kill myself after Mala died. Most people wouldn't behave normally under those circumstances. I don't remember being in the infirmary."

"You growled at me and my assistant and you tried to mate with Madam Avonee. That's when we sedated you."

"I don't remember any of that. Sorry. Would you take off these restraints? I'm not dangerous."

"The geneticist and I talked about it, and we think you should refrain from mating with Madam Avonee until after the baby is born."

Denali stilled. "Could mating hurt Mala or the baby?"

"No ...." Dr. Lazara hedged.

"Then the answer is no."

"Then I fear you'll have to remain in restraints."

"I'll take my complaint to the Captain and to USP. Under USP law you can't deny me access to my mate, and you can't deny me mating under any Felisian law."

"Lieutenant Denali, we had to suture Madam Avonee's uterus closed to stop the bleeding."

Denali considered for a moment, then, "I'll be careful when I mate, but I mate with her. Now free me."

Dr. Lazara released the restraints, but when Denali tried to get up, the doctor pushed him back down. Denali's anger rekindled. "Lie still," the doctor ordered. "You've never had bone marrow removed from your hips before. You're going to lie in that bed today and let your hips heal. Doctor's orders."

Denali subsided. The doctor was right. Even the small attempt to sit up had jabbed pain through both hips.

Dr. Lazara cocked his head. "By the way, how did you get a Bonwee to mate with you, anyway?"

"She reluctantly agreed after I explained mating time to her and what would happen

to me otherwise."

"Reluctantly?"

"As you say, she's Bonwee. Neither of us had a choice, but I didn't force her. I claimed her that day, and she's continued to mate with me since then."

"For a Bonwee to be required to make such a choice ...." Dr. Lazara looked appalled. "If it hadn't been mating time, you'd face rape charges now."

"If it hadn't been mating time, Mala and I probably wouldn't have mated at all. I loved her enough to wait until she was ready."

The doctor insisted, "But she accepted you as her mate?"

"She hasn't accepted me, but I'm her mate. She was vulnerable to a bond and so was I. I was unbonded, remember. Her Grimari partner died in the shuttle crash and Mala had no mate or husband. She was alone and empty and unbonded, and I'd made her pregnant the day before. So I bonded her in every way I could. She was so easy to bond. It slid right into her, just like a species bond would, and then she was mine."

"But she won't recognize you as her mate?"

"No, and she won't marry me until she's sure I won't be drawn to Felisians next mating time."

"Lieutenant Denali, you're aware that her species expects her to be a conservative, proper, chaste young woman. She's now pregnant and unmarried and you intend to remain her unmarried lover. You may have been able to mate openly with her when you lived on the planet, but she'll revert to her former self here."

"It will be hard for her to ignore me when I live with her and sleep with her."

"There's no talking to you about her, is there?"

"No, she's my mate and that should explain everything."

\* \* \* \*

An hour later assistants wheeled Mala's gurney into the room. There was faint color in her cheeks and Denali's heart leapt at seeing her alive and getting well again. The staff transferred her to the bed next to his, handling her like she was fragile. She looked so fair surrounded by golden-skinned Felisians. She wore an unflattering white hospital gown, but she was lovely and precious to him.

Dr. Lazara stayed behind when his assistants left the room.

"She's accepting the transfusions?" Denali demanded, his eyes never leaving Mala's face.

"Yes, she's doing very well. She'll be awake soon." There was a note of warning in the doctor's voice.

Denali faced the doctor. "I'll be gentle with her. You should have put her in bed with me to save me having to walk and climb to get to her."

"I thought obstacles might make you reconsider. She's been through a lot."

"So have I. I need to connect with her and feel for myself that my son is all right."

"The first officer is waiting for my call to say you're awake for debriefing."

"I'll call you when we're finished. Staff won't come into the room, will they?"

"No, I've instructed them to knock for permission to enter while the two of you are here unless it's an emergency."

"Thank you for that. I love her, doctor."

"I believe you do. I'll wait for your call."

After the doctor left, Denali levered himself to a sitting position. Pain stabbed

through his hips with the movement, but he continued doggedly on. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up, cursing the doctor for making movement so painful for him. Only the fact that what had been done to him helped save Mala's life, made the discomfort bearable.

The few steps from his bed to Mala's were slow. He gently pushed her to the far side of the bed, got a hip up on the bed and lay down next to her. Sighing with relief, he took her into his arms. In a few minutes she began to stir. "Mala," he crooned to her, but she wasn't awake enough to respond.

In ten minutes her eyes fluttered open and she looked around confusedly. "We're rescued, Mala." Her eyes flew to his face and he smiled at her. "How do you feel?"

Her hands moved down to her abdomen and her eyes filled with tears. "The baby's all right?"

"Yes. Jeran will wait to be born. I need to feel him." Mala reached for his hand and placed it on her belly. He moved the soft green blanket back and lifted her gown to bare her flesh. Then he laid his hands over his child. In moments he sensed his son asleep in Mala's womb. His eyesight momentarily blurred with tears as relief and joy surged through him.

"Can you feel him, Mala? He's sleeping; he's all tired out."

She put her hand over his and in a minute she exclaimed, "I feel him!" Then she cried. "I thought I was losing him. I want him, Deni, I want my baby."

"I know. Shhh, don't cry. You're both going to be all right now." He lowered his blue drawstring pants to allow his erect penis to spring free.

As he reached for Mala, she hissed, "Deni, no. Not here." Her eyes flew to the door and back to him again. "People might come in."

"No one is coming in, doctor's orders. Are you empty like I am?"

"Yes. But not here, Deni."

"Yes, here. I'm going to fill your emptiness. I need it." He moved closer to her.

"Lift your leg." She did as he asked and he slowly inserted his penis into her body.

"Deni! Mmmm. Oh, ohh, deeper."

"No, love. We have to be gentle these first few times and very gentle when I'm deep inside of you. They sewed your uterus closed to keep Jeran in, so we have to be careful. But there's no danger to you, or Jeran, from mating. The doctor said so."

"You asked the doctor about mating?" Mala gasped, blushing, then gasped again as he was seated in her to the hilt. Then she groaned.

"He knows," he panted. "Mala, may I come into your mind? I watched you dying and I need to feel you alive in every way."

"Yes," she agreed and reached for him. As they kissed, Denali slid over into her mind and under her skin. Together they made the most of the gentle mating, getting pleasure out of smaller and slower movements while they protected Mala's uterus. It was a devastatingly intimate experience for both of them and it lingered on and on.

\* \* \* \*

A demanding voice impinged on Mala's consciousness, and then Denali suddenly broke apart from her, leaving her alone in her mind. She looked up at the golden-eyed man who'd interrupted them. Then, realizing where she was and what they were doing, her cheeks scorched. Denali clutched her close while he growled threateningly. The man's eyes widened.

"Doctor, how dare you come in here after you promised us privacy!" Denali snarled.

The doctor chastised Denali in return. "It's been more than two hours and the first officer wants to meet with you immediately. I knocked and called out, but you didn't answer. Why didn't you respond?"

Denali looked chagrined. "I was in Mala's mind with her and we were linked empathically. I knew nothing but her."

"You have to cease mating and go back to your own bed. There have been questions from the scientists on the planet that we need you both to answer, but especially you, Lieutenant."

"Will you leave us please, doctor?"

"I think I'd better stay, that way I know you'll return to your own bed. I'll turn my back," he offered solicitously and did so.

"Are you ready, love?" Denali asked.

Mala frowned at the doctor's back. His waist-length mane was captured in a gold metal clasp at his neck. "Deni, I can't. Not with him here," she whispered.

"He's the doctor. He's seen you naked inside and out. Get ready."

Mala stifled a cry at the sense of disconnection when he left her body. It was worse since she'd been ill.

Denali kissed her deeply and whispered, "I'm your mate and I love you. I'll fill you again tonight."

"I love you, Deni."

Denali pulled up his pants and swung his feet over the side of the bed. As he mounted his own bed, the doctor turned around. Mala bit her lip to stem the tears over Denali's absence. He was too far away from her now.

The doctor came to her bedside. He appeared to be in his late forties and was of a different ethnic than Denali. His spots clustered almost like a crescent moon. "Madam Avonee, I'm Dr. Lazara. I've been taking care of you. How do you feel?"

"I feel better," she murmured, not looking into his eyes.

"You needn't feel embarrassed around me. I'm Felisian and I understand about mating. I know Lieutenant Denali has been mating with you for four months." Her face heated again. "You're an empath. Will you take my hands and feel that I don't judge you?"

Mala looked into his eyes. There was intelligence and intense curiosity in the golden depths. He held out his hands to her and she took hold. His fingers were warm and slender, with a firm grip. She searched his face, probing his surface emotions for the truth.

"You don't judge me." Mala expressed her surprise. "You're concerned for me on several levels, you're interested in me on several levels, but you don't think badly of me for what I've done."

The doctor smiled warmly. "Felisians are open and honest about sexuality. We practice it openly, we encourage it and mating time is very important to us. We don't consider it shameful between consenting adults who exchange pleasure. Madam Avonee, Denali admits you didn't willingly consent at mating time."

Mala dropped the doctor's hands and glanced at Denali. "No," she admitted, "I didn't."

"But you did consent?"

"Yes."

"Felisians don't tolerate rape. Since you consented, it can't be considered rape. But you can press assault charges against Lieutenant Denali."

Mala gasped.

Denali protested, "Doctor!"

A male voice from the doorway demanded, "What's this about rape and assault?" A high-ranking officer stood in the doorway with another officer.

"Sir, it wasn't rape. It was mating time. We had no choice," Denali assured him.

The man's eyes swung to Mala. "I'm First Officer Marwan. Is this true?"

Mala slowly nodded.

Marwan approached her bed and his tone gentled. "You're safe here, Madam Avonee. You can admit the truth. We don't tolerate rape. The penalty for that is death."

"No!" Mala shrieked and the doctor and Denali protested loudly. "It wasn't rape." She swallowed. "Denali and I discussed it beforehand, and I gave my consent."

"Sir, Mala is my mate," Denali explained.

Marwan's head swung back to Mala, his eyes widening. "Is this true? Are you his mate?"

Mala looked at Denali, then back at Marwan. "We don't know if he is or not. We're bonded, though. And engaged to be married."

The first officer frowned. "Engaged?"

Mala sighed. "Would every Felisian react this way to the word 'engaged'? 'We plan to marry in two months.'"

Marwan stared at Denali again. He opened his mouth, then closed it without speaking. He looked at Mala, then back at Denali. He seemed completely at a loss. He stood straighter. "Lieutenant Denali, I need you to debrief to me about the last five months."

"What do you want to know, sir?" Denali asked.

Denali answered all of the first officer's questions about the encounter with the Malchovists, the shuttle crash and everything he knew about the planet. Marwan sat with a handheld computer containing the scientists' questions from the planet's surface and Denali was able to give answers about geology, topography, botany, meteorology and zoology. The first officer typed in the replies, nodding at some of the answers.

Mala added what she knew about the planet, but mostly she watched the interchange between the two men. Marwan was the first officer she'd met who outranked Denali, but Denali didn't seem cowed by that fact. He remained the same confident man she'd known all these months.

Finally Marwan's questions ended and Denali asked the question that burned in both their minds. "Why did it take the ship so long to find us? I expected you within the first week of the crash. Why did it take five months?"

"We weren't even sure there were survivors," Marwan explained. "When the ship arrived at your last known coordinates, all we found was debris. We couldn't reach anyone via communications. First Com was deeply distressed at his inability to contact the shuttle. We sampled the debris and determined it to be Malchovist manufacture, so we knew their ship had been destroyed.

"Next we had to determine if the shuttle had been destroyed as well. For months we searched and tested debris, but we didn't find any from the shuttle. We concluded that the shuttle had escaped, but we didn't know where. We had to search millions of miles of space.

"When we entered this solar system, we thoroughly scanned each planet. Due to this planet's dense atmosphere, it couldn't be scanned from space. I'm sorry to say, we left this planet until last, believing you would never choose to land here. And then it had to be

scanned by shuttle. It took four days to find the crashed shuttle because the homing beacon died months ago. I'm sure it was just as frustrating for us to search as it was for you to wait for rescue."

"No. You had thousands of other people, food, comfort and warmth. Mala and I had hardship and each other." Denali gave her a look full of love.

The first officer cleared his throat. "Madam Avonee, we had arranged a suite for you, but under the circumstances--"

"I'll need a place to stay--" Mala began.

"No," Denali overrode her loudly. "My mate stays with me. My cabin will be sufficient, sir."

"Deni," Mala protested.

Dr. Lazara interceded. "Sir, I believe the new mates need time to acclimate to ship life."

Marwan rose from his chair. "If you need anything, Madam Avonee, let Captain SoAhnor or me know." He turned to Denali. "Lieutenant, I'm glad that you're on board again."

"Thank you, sir."

Marwan strode from the room, gripping his handheld with the precious data in it.

Dr. Lazara rose from his chair. "Madam Avonee, how do you feel?"

"Tired and weak, but I'm alive. And please, call me Mala."

"You're alive now. But you were dying when you came on board because your baby's blood had mixed with yours, but in too little a quantity for your body to accept. Your body was fighting the Felisian blood and losing. And there was too little Felisian blood to help you get better. We couldn't take the Felisian blood out of you--that would have hurt the baby. So we put more Felisian blood in and we did a DNA gene splice, and now your body accepts the Felisian blood."

Mala drew in a deep breath. She felt cold all over. "How Felisian am I?"

"Forty percent. Your blood was eighteen percent Felisian when you came on board."

"Forty percent. I'm almost half Felisian!" She turned to Denali. "You authorized this?" she demanded.

"No--" he began, but the doctor interrupted.

"We had to sedate Lieutenant Denali. The chief geneticist and I made the decision. Mala, the first liter of blood came from Denali while he was unconscious. And we took bone marrow from his hips and transplanted them into your hips so your body would make its own Felisian blood and accept the transfusions. We felt since you carried Denali's baby that your body would accept transplants from his body."

"'Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone,'" Mala murmured, looking at Denali.

"What?" both he and the doctor asked.

"Was forty percent enough? Or do you intend further modifications to my DNA?" she asked the doctor.

"All indications are that you're doing well. So we don't foresee any additional gene splices."

Mala released her breath. "Good, because I won't approve any."

Dr. Lazara frowned. "But if it's medically necessary to save your life?"

"You're not saving my life if you destroy it through mutation. I came on board a Bonwee. Now I'm nearly half Felisian. I don't want to be Felisian."

"You wouldn't rather be dead than Felisian," Dr. Lazara argued. "It's wonderful to be Felisian."

"How would you feel if your choice was between being Bonwee and dying?" Mala asked.

Neither the doctor nor Denali could control a flinch. Mala felt a pang of sadness that they considered Bonwees to be a less desirable species. "I believe I've proven my point. Doctor, you're removed from my case."

\* \* \* \*

After the staff pushed their beds together, Denali was left alone with Mala at last. He returned to the topic of living quarters. "Mala, you're going to live with me."

"I can't."

"You're being recalcitrant. There's no reason to live apart."

"I'm not. I explained the reasons."

"I thought Bonwees didn't lie."

Mala poked her finger in his chest. "Just because I don't follow your every order doesn't make me recalcitrant. It makes me an independent thinker."

He wrapped his fist around her finger. "Well, you're finished being independent. We cohabit from now on."

"But Bonwees don't--"

Denali shook his finger at her. "Stop right there. You and I have done a lot of things that Bonwees don't do, and you've admitted that all of those things would be acceptable if we were married. Through no fault of my own you refuse to marry me, but I won't be punished for that refusal. You'll be my wife within two months, I'm sure you're already my mate, and for the next two months I'll live with you as your mate and future husband."

"You're very domineering. I've noticed it before," she mused.

"This is how you deal with recalcitrant mates."

"I see. believe in equality."

"We're equal, but in this I stand firm and get my way."

"All right. But I hope they don't know we're mating."

He said nothing in reply. Mala's rounding figure would tell everyone on board the ship what she'd been doing with him. Once again he'd run smack into Bonwee propriety. He sighed with frustration.

\* \* \* \*

Mala awoke from her nap, feeling less lethargic. The sucking enervation had receded. Denali lay in his bed less than two feet from her, still asleep. His lashes made bronze crescents against his cheeks. She reached over and stroked his forearm where it lay upraised by his face. His fingers curled into his palm.

When they'd mated earlier, Denali had continued the binding he worked on every time they were empathically linked. One or two more such matings and that binding would be complete, tying together two empaths. Mala was already strongly bonded to him in an as-yet-unidentified way. He'd suggested that it was a mutated partnership/permanent mate bonding. It wasn't a true partnership bond; she'd had one of those and it didn't feel like this. Wait! she gasped.

Denali's eyes snapped open and he stared at her, the gold darkening in concern. His hand moved, interlacing his fingers with hers. "What's wrong?"

"Deni, what if the reason my bond with you feels strange is because you're my



Felisian partner? I'm used to how a Grimari feels as my partner."

He smiled and stretched his lithe body. She followed the movement, loving the sleek lines of the taut muscles, even in the infirmary pajamas.

"I told you I was your partner. It only makes sense that I would feel different than a Grimari would. I can't be what I'm not." He looked and sounded smug.

Mala leaned towards him. "I don't know what a permanent mate feels like either, but you seem so sure." Denali squeezed her hand. "How can be sure? Who's qualified to judge what we share, and how can we get them here to help us?"

"Wait a minute!" Excitement zinged through her body. "We've found a new, unidentified, possibly habitable planet. USP should have been notified. They'll send representatives. Deni, they can identify what type of bond we share!"

## Chapter Fourteen

An elderly Felisian poked his head around the door of Mala and Denali's infirmary room the next morning. Mala lay her green amorsite comb down on the bed and straightened the front of her soft green tunic. "Yes?"

"I'm Elder Paradon." The man entered the room, moving more spryly than his long white mane would indicate. He had a long, slender, kindly face. He wore a floor-length gold robe with a gold metal chain of office around his neck. He reached out his hand and she shook it. His skin was warm and dry.

He studied her with wise gold eyes. She could feel the weight of age that hung about him, now that he stood close to her. He must be a century old.

"You're Mala Avonee. You caused quite a stir when the shuttle disappeared, and then again yesterday when you were found."

"I'm glad to meet you, Elder. Deni's in the shower. He'll be out shortly."

"Then I'll wait with you. Do you know the function of a Felisian Elder, Madam Avonee?"

"I was told it was to help Felisians adhere to Felisian law."

"Yes, that's right, and to make policy decisions where there is no law. I understand from First Officer Marwan that you're Denali's mate."

"That's what we're trying to determine."

"What's to determine? Either you are or you aren't his mate. There's no status in between. You're either bonded or you're not. Are you bonded?"

Mala frowned, quashing a spurt of irritation. She'd met plenty of officials like him in her career, sure they knew what was best for the people they served. He meant well, but he'd never met her. He couldn't make judgments about her.

"Yes, I'm bonded. But Bonwee form partnership bonds, so it could be that, instead. Bonwee don't take permanent mates, except with Grimaris, and Denali's not Grimari. I have no idea what it would feel like to have a permanent mate."

Paradon frowned and stroked his chin with long fingers. "You say Bonwees can become mates with Grimaris. Logic would say that if it's possible with one species it's possible with another."

"I wish it was that simple. I'm only sure of two things: that I'm bonded to him and that I have an emotional attachment to him. If circumstances were different I would have married Denali by now."

The Elder cocked his head, his eyes bright gold. "What prevents you from marrying him?"

"He's Felisian. I have to know for certain that his bond with me is stronger than his species bond next mating time."

"I can understand that for a species who values chastity, fidelity would be important." He looked speculative. "What will you do until mating time?"

"I'll wait. I'll stay on board with Deni."

"You lived as Denali's mate on the planet, didn't you?"

Mala's face burned. The man was far too nosy. "Yes."

"Will you live with Denali while you wait?"

"No--" She drew out the word. She didn't want to be without Deni, but on the other hand, how could she live with him?

Paradon stared at her, expectantly. Her cheeks continued to warm and she swallowed. The bathing room door opened and she jerked her glance to Denali. Relief washed over her. Then she perused his mane, dark golden with dampness and hanging almost to his waist. The weight he'd lost had thinned his face until he was sleek like the racing kaydoos of the planet Caris. The casual black slacks and soft black shirt framed his golden perfection. His gaze crossed hers and her heart beat a powerful tattoo in her chest. He was so beautiful.

Denali noticed their visitor and the heat left his eyes as he straightened. Striding to Mala's side, he slipped an arm around her. "Elder."

"Denali, I was just discussing your relationship with Madam Avonee. It seems quite complicated from her point of view."

Denali glanced at Mala. "She needs confirmation that we're mates."

Elder Paradon nodded. "You sent a message to USP yesterday, asking them for help in this matter. Captain SoAhnor asked me to relay that a USP ship will rendezvous with ours in two days."

"That's wonderful," Mala exclaimed.

"Madam Avonee," the Elder drawled, "I don't understand your needing USP to answer a simple question."

"Bonwees are a protected species in several ways. They can't be in service to USP without a partner--either bonded partner or bonded mate--because they can't protect themselves. It's the law. Denali and I are bonded, but I don't know how. Any question about bond identification must be investigated by USP. It's the law. A partnership bond with a Bonwee is sacrosanct. It's--"

"The law," Denali finished for her. "I didn't know I was bonding to an institution. How will USP identify our bond if even you aren't sure what it is?"

"USP has years of research on Bonwee partnerships in their computers. I assume the USP Bonwee and his or her partner will do an evaluation as well."

The Elder looked enlightened. "That's why USP asked for access to a pair of Felisian permanent mates, presumably for comparative purposes." He looked pointedly at Mala. "What if the bond can't be identified?"

Denali squeezed Mala tight. "We've got two days to make our bond stronger so there won't be any doubt what kind it is. I think I'm up for it. What about you, Mala?"

"What about me?" she asked suspiciously.

"Will you work with me to make our bond stronger?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"We'll mate for the next two days. You can come into my mind and I'll finish the empathic binding and I'll see if I can bond you any deeper."

"No. We're not alone anymore and I have to avoid gossip. My behavior has to be circumspect."

Denali turned her to face him. "I don't care about gossip. We're going to mate."

Mala stood toe to toe with him. "I won't. USP will be here soon enough and you can wait for their ruling. Our bond is deep enough already."

"I'm going to mate with you. All I have to do is hold you still until I get inside you."

"Denali! Are you discussing forcing this woman in my presence?" the Elder demanded, his face angry red.

Denali turned to the Elder. "She's my mate and she knows it when I'm inside her body. That blasted Bonwee reluctance makes her want to cling to chastity she no longer has. I'm not going to hurt her."

"I won't countenance the use of force, Denali," the Elder reprimanded.

"Mala is my mate and I won't be separated from her, in way."

"Deni," Mala protested. "You know I'm not sure."

"I'm sure enough for the both of us. I need you. Please come to my cabin with me."

"I can't."

"I'm empty, Mala, so empty. Please come with me and fill me," he begged. "Aren't you empty too?"

Mala was torn between what she felt was right to do--to take a cabin alone--and what she needed and wanted to do. She felt lonely without Denali. The two of them had not gotten past what he described as the "newly mated" stage where they could go the entire day without mating. Even though there had been no mating during the five days that she'd been ill, he'd been with her almost constantly, giving her love, care and concern. She needed that now.

Denali watched her and she knew he felt her conflicting emotions. Then she felt a wave of love from him and his eyes were hot with his leashed need for her. She found her hand in his and as he pulled her out the door into the corridor, she looked back helplessly at the Elder.

"I believe I understand now, Madam Avonee. I'll be seeing you." The door to the infirmary room closed on the Elder's contented face.

They passed a smiling Dr. Lazara on their way out of the infirmary, but no one else registered on Mala. Denali thrummed with desire so hot she felt scorched. Her body clenched with the need to belong to him. She had no idea how long the trip to Denali's cabin took. She knew only the haze of heat and the flames in his eyes.

Mala followed as Denali pulled her through his small cabin to the bedroom. While he disrobed them, they nuzzled. She stroked his arms, neck, face and mane until he lowered them to the bed. He looked into her eyes as he made them one and she had the feeling of coming home.

"You're not empty any more, Mala. This is where I belong: with you and in you. It's time to ride." Denali echoed the phrase he'd used many times over the past four months to begin the dance of mating.

Their first mating was wild and hot as they reestablished the physical ties that bound them. It was over too quickly, but Denali continued to thrust while his body hardened again. Mala gasped as he shoved hard at their bond and it pushed deeper into her body. She arched like a bow as he shoved again. This was the first time in four months that he'd attempted to deepen the bond between them and she knew she was vulnerable to a deeper connection with him.

"Deni!" she gasped, part protest, part plea.

"Let it in, Mala. Here, this will help." His fingers slid down her body between her legs to rub her clitoris and bring her to orgasm while he pounded into her. As her body convulsed, he worked the bond into places where it hadn't reached before. He forced her to

orgasm again, and again she could feel previously empty places now filled with the connection to him. Cells that had belonged to her alone--belonged to him now, too.

"Deni! Deni, not so deep!" she gasped, afraid of so intense a bond.

"This isn't a one-way bond, Mala; it connects me too. I want you completely bonded to me. I want you to know you're mine."

He pushed against the bond again and suddenly Mala slid over into his mind and body with him and let him feel her very real fear of what his next mating time would bring for her if she was bonded further to him.

"Oh, love, don't be afraid. This deeper tie will prevent my species bond from overpowering me next mating time. Don't you understand that? Don't be afraid, Mala. You're part-Felisian now; even I can feel it. I'll be drawn to you as both my permanent mate and as a Felisian."

"I want so much for you to be my husband, Deni. I want what you say to be true, but not everything is true just because you wish it so. Please wait for a deeper bonding. I'm so vulnerable to you right now and you know it. Please don't push any deeper."

"Mala, I love you so much that I don't want to wait. I want everything settled between us. I want to begin our life together. Can't you take just a little more? Please, Mala, once more and then we'll just mate."

"No. You can feel what I feel. Must you force me this way too?" Mala's shocking statement threw her back into her own body and she turned her face away from him.

"No, love," Denali held her tight and love flowed from him to her. "I wouldn't want to force you in that way. I'm sorry." He nuzzled her with tenderness.

She felt assurance from him that the moment of crisis had passed and there was only mating now. She responded to his nuzzling and soon they were crooning to each other in the Felisian way.

"Come back inside me, love. I want you in me."

As he kissed her hungrily, Mala again slid into his skin and mind. There was only love for her here, and they lay cuddled quietly together still joined, with her cradled in his mind. Their kiss ended and they moved their heads close together to be cheek to cheek. Denali wove threads from her to him and back, as they lay intertwined for most of the day. She allowed this additional binding as she lay within the warmth of Denali's skin, beating with his heart and breathing his breaths.

She gloried in his emotions: his happiness at being with her, his comfort at her nearness, his joy at working the binding and his love. Oh, his love was wonderful! It filled every crevice, every pore of her body, even where the bond didn't go. Denali was a beautiful, decent, caring, loving man and she loved him in return. Her heart was filled with love for him and she shared it with him there in his mind.

All day they knew nothing else but their nude interlocked bodies and their interlocked emotions. Mala had lived with empaths all her life, but had never been this close or connected to one. Bonwees respected other people's personal space, even to the extent that Bonwee parents were restrained with their own children. Because they were empaths, they knew how others around them felt and there was not as much need for touch. And with their species practice of chastity and lack of public displays of affection, Mala hadn't ever known what she was experiencing now existed.

Late in the afternoon Denali completed the binding of empaths. Then he stirred and began to mate again and Mala held him tightly to her. The desire for Felisian mating was

almost overpowering and he bit her shoulder and neck, strumming her nerves with his feline cries. Encased as she was in his mind he felt her response to the stimulated nerves and he became more and more fervent. He bit deeper into the nerve bundles. The eerie howling spiraled up into the higher frequencies until her body convulsed and his hot seed filled her.

As they relaxed, Mala slipped back into her own body. It was strange how much colder it was in her own skin and how alone she was in her own mind. She knew they'd been joined empathically for hours, although she had no idea how long, but she felt very hungry.

"Mala," Denali rubbed his cheek against hers. "Come back inside me."

"I'm hungry. I need to eat."

He drew in a breath. "All right. Are you ready? It's going to be bad this time."

"I know. I'm ready."

Denali slowly separated from her body and the wrenching was terrible. Mala leaned her forehead against his and panted, regaining her separate identity once again. He climbed from the bed first, then she scooted to the edge and he helped her out. Mala caught sight of the chrono and gasped.

"Deni, it's already time for supper."

He looked at the chrono and smiled. "So it is. Come on, we'll go have supper in the canteen."

"I need a shower. I can't look like I spent the day in bed with you. People will know what we've been doing."

"We're Felisian. We don't care about other people's mating habits."

"I care. I want a shower."

"Okay, come with me. You can shower first."

Mala showered while Denali shaved. Then as she combed her curls he stood behind her and stared at the two of them in the mirror, looking at her pale Bonwee skin against his golden Felisian skin. She saw his hungry look.

"No, Deni. I need to eat. I'm beginning to feel faint."

He was suddenly concerned. "Do you need to sit down? Maybe you should lie down."

"I just need to eat. If you'd shower and get dressed we could go eat."

"All right, I'll get ready. You're sounding like my wife, Mala."

"Deni?"

"What?"

"Make sure to comb your mane. We don't want it to be so obvious where we've been today."

\* \* \* \*

Mala left the bathing room, and Denali looked at his mane in the mirror. It was in total disarray. He grinned, knowing how it got that way and who helped make it so messy. Then he sobered. Mala wanted to be circumspect about their relationship for now, and he would abide by her wishes as much as he could. He would be her husband soon, but that wouldn't change Mala from the reserved Bonwee she was. She would probably never be comfortable with public displays of affection. He'd have to get used to that about her, but as long as she was passionate in private, he wouldn't care.

His face had thinned, making his cheekbones sharper. He took a quick shower, feeling the ribs prominent under his skin. As he dressed in casual clothing he found his clothes were loose. He tightened his belt another notch to keep his pants up. He needed to

eat as much as Mala did.

When he was dressed, he walked out into the sitting room and Mala rose from a comfortable chair. He felt a surge of possessiveness that she was here in his home. She looked quite striking in her chocolate brown tunic and pants, but she was thin and pale. He looped her arm through his and they left the cabin heading for the canteen.

"Mala, everyone knows you're Bonwee, and they probably know your name, but how do you want me to introduce you?"

"You don't have to introduce me. I can speak for myself." She gave him a piercing look.

She'd obviously misunderstood the question. "I meant how do you want to classify your relationship with me? I'm sure you don't want me to introduce you as my lover."

"Certainly not."

"And you're not yet ready to accept me as your mate, even though we have a better-defined bond now than we had this morning. Have you noticed that?"

"Yes, I feel very connected to you now. But it still doesn't feel like a partnership bond or like I imagine a mate bond would feel. I think it's because you're Felisian, and this is unknown territory we're in. So the answer to your first question is that we're engaged with the intention of being married in a few months."

"Mala," he sighed as he gave her a pointed look. "We discussed this. Felisians don't have engagements. You saw how the first officer reacted; he didn't understand. We have lovers and a further step would be mates. And the lovers are broken down into occasional lovers and regular lovers."

Mala looked at him with worried eyes. "Deni, do you have regular lovers?"

"You've been my only lover for four months and I bonded you as my mate. But before the crash I had both types of lovers."

Denali felt her sense of betrayal. He put his arm around her and held her close. She was stiff against him in the public corridor. "I'm Felisian, Mala. We mate from the time we're eighteen because we're biologically compelled to. So there's no way I could have come to you a virgin at my age."

"But you didn't confine yourself to twice a year," she accused.

"No. Felisians don't believe in chastity. We're a close species because we're bonded together, so when we take lovers we already have a tie to them."

"But you said Felisians didn't bond until they were twenty. So you were unbonded for two years. Did you have lovers then?"

"Yes," he sighed. Mala wouldn't understand this difference between her species and his. "While I was unbonded I had hormones for the first time. I was a young man and I wanted to experience women. It's not prohibited or discouraged among Felisians. You can't judge my actions against your own moral code. I don't understand your species' practice of chastity, but I don't judge you negatively because of it. I would have preferred that you came to me tutored and experienced as a lover simply because then you could see the difference between what you and I have and what came before."

Mala radiated unhappiness and uncertainty and he knew it was because he'd had other lovers. She quivered in his arms, biting her lip, but he felt clearly her fear that she would lose him.

He wrapped his other arm around her. The corridor was clear so he crowded her against the wall. "I've never loved any woman but you, Mala. I cared for other women, but

I've loved only you and I want to be your husband. I never wanted that with the others. Never. I can't wait until the next mating time is over and you're sure of me so that we can marry.

"You don't have to be afraid of losing me to another female because I'm staying right here where I belong. I can't change what I did before I met you, but you can face my past, because you're my future. Our baby is my future, and so are the rest of our children. Now show me the brave woman who survived a shuttle crash."

"All right," Mala agreed. She put her shoulders back and held her head up. She was the picture of the confident Bonwee he'd first met. He released her and they walked the rest of the way to the canteen.

\* \* \* \*

Conversations hushed when they appeared in the doorway of the canteen, then people greeted Denali as he and Mala made their way to the food dispensers. Friends and acquaintances come up to Denali and shook his hand or slapped his shoulder. They welcomed him back and expressed their gratefulness that he'd survived the shuttle crash. Many eyed Mala, openly curious, even more curious that Denali held her hand. With many of the females he exchanged nuzzles and she realized these females had been his lovers. Denali had explained the nuzzle was between former, current or future lovers. When pain seized her heart, he squeezed her hand in reassurance.

He introduced her to his friends and to the others in the room, and possessiveness tinged his voice. She tried to absorb all their names and appearances. It was a sea of beautiful people; not an ugly or plain Felisian to be found!

They got hot food from dispensers and were invited to join a large table of Denali's friends. Many other people who'd already finished eating pulled up chairs nearby to listen.

Denali encouraged her to eat the mildly spicy yellow vegetable and pasta dish. Even this long away from their home planet, the food had a freshness to it that spoke of regular resupply. Mala ate with relish.

When Denali's plate was empty, he looked around at the surrounding faces. "Mala and I are bonded. I believe we're permanent mates, but Mala's not sure because her species only bonds with Grimaris. I also believe I'm her Bonwee partner, but we're not sure about that, either. USP is coming to determine how we're bonded."

"But a mate bond is a mate bond," one man said, frowning. "If you feel bonded, you must be mates."

"Yes, Deni," a stunningly beautiful woman agreed. "If you're her mate, then she's yours."

"If we were both Felisian, there'd be no doubt," Denali stated. "But Mala's Bonwee."

Everyone turned to stare at her and Mala met their stares head on. She was amazed that the women around the table accepted Denali's relationship without jealousy, while defending his alleged mate bond. Felisians were strange with reference to relationships. Denali reached under the table to squeeze her hand, again in reassurance.

"Congratulate me, everyone. In case you didn't notice, Mala's pregnant with my son, Jeran, who'll be born in less than five months."

The crew cheered, offered congratulations, shook hands and slapped Denali on the back. Mala received her share of congratulations too. She blushed at some of their remarks.

"Jeran's a Felisian name. What species will the baby be?" someone asked.

"He's Felisian, confirmed by a DNA test done yesterday. Felisian genes dominate



Bonwee genes in any mixing. By the way, Mala had a DNA gene splice and she's now forty percent Felisian."

There were murmurs of surprise and Mala was shocked to feel more accepted now that the people around them knew she shared their DNA.

Denali told everyone the tale of the last five months. Word had obviously preceded him about the people who died in the crash, but there were tears just the same as he described the final few minutes of those people's lives.

Denali answered questions and she answered the ones addressed to her. The people wanted to know about the planet, about the personnel who died, about their injuries, and about Denali's last mating time (she blushed furiously during his answers to that question).

Then talk around the table turned to what had been happening on the ship during the past five months. Names were mentioned that meant nothing to Mala but Denali seemed to know them. She found it interesting listening to gossip about politics and life aboard the spaceship. Yes, Felisians were different from Bonwees and what she was used to, but they had some similarities too. There was common ground. She could learn to be one of them, as much as they'd let anyone who wasn't bonded to them.

## Chapter Fifteen

"When will you return to duty, Deni?" someone asked.

"Well, USP will be here tomorrow. I assume they'll investigate our bonds and make their rulings quickly. Then I have to be declared fit. As soon as that happens, I can return to duty."

"If USP says your bond with Mala is a bond of mates, will there be a wedding?" someone else asked.

"Mala and I will wait to marry until after next mating time." There were protests about the delay.

"But permanent mates marry immediately," someone argued.

"We don't know for sure we're mates. Until we know, Mala needs a six-month engagement. Her species doesn't marry quickly and they marry for life. Please respect her customs as she has tried to respect ours."

Everyone at the table looked at Mala and she blushed. He knew his announcement of an upcoming wedding wasn't something she'd wanted said. But he was fighting for their relationship. He'd force her into having to go through with a wedding, no matter what.

Denali worked hard to include her in the conversations since these core friends of his would be her core friends too while they were aboard the ship. Of course, Mala would make her own friends. She might want to become friends with the mothers who had children. He would have to seek them out for her.

He might want to make the acquaintance of the fathers on board. He looked around at his good friends and realized that none of them had mates or children. These were a bachelor's friends. His life would change dramatically when his son was born and he would have to change with it. Already he'd had to change to accommodate a mate and her needs, to remember to include her and ask her opinions. Startled, he realized he'd done it naturally. Contentment filled him and he smiled at her.

\* \* \* \*

The next day Denali made room in his closet and dresser for Mala's clothes, and in his bathing room, he made room for her toiletries. He stood next to her in the bedroom.

"There's room for a small crib in here if you want the baby with us; otherwise, we'll have to ask for a two-bedroom suite. Eventually the baby will need a room of his own."

"You're assuming that we'll be married."

"I'm sure we'll be."

"If we marry, we should get a two-bedroom suite."

"Good. We'll need privacy when our son gets older. By the way, how many children do you want?"

She snorted in exasperation. "We're not even married yet."

"We will be. How many?"

"Two, maybe three. Is there space on this ship for three children?"

"The third child may have to wait until we're back on the planet. Will you be able to do your job from there?"

"I hadn't thought much about it. Which planet do you mean?"

"Felis I, if you only want two children. But if you want three children, it will have to be Felis II, where they're not limiting population growth. If Felisians claim this planet, we could even make our home here."

Mala shuddered. "I don't think I want to live here. I've had enough primitive life for awhile. Will we always have to live with Felisians?"

"Yes, because I'm bonded to the species. These past five months without other Felisians was hard. My bond with you helped, but I missed the security and sense of being grounded that my Felisian bond provides. I don't think I could live away from the rest for long periods of time."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Mala asked, and her voice was accusatory. He was alerted that he'd said something wrong. He sensed an underlying fear in her, and then he understood.

"Don't worry. I won't choose my species over you. I just can't live apart from them, just as I can't live apart from you. It's a different need, but a need just the same. I don't think anyone can claim that living with the one they love is enough. Most people need more than just a mate, and in my case I need my species."

"I'll have only you, Deni--I won't have anything or anyone else. And yet I'm willing to give up my planet, my species and perhaps my job for you."

"Your species lives for self-sacrifice, don't they, Mala? They give their lives for peace, for planetary and USP unity and for various other worthy causes. They leave home at age eighteen and rarely see their homes again. I could never do what you've done, but in return I'll give you all my love, children, a home and a species to adopt you. Felisians are very friendly and they'll accept you. I hope what I'm offering will be enough."

"Oh, Deni. You make me feel so selfish for wanting you to need only me. I'm sorry."

"I understand you're feeling out of sorts right now, but I'm here to hold you and make you feel comfortable and safe."

\* \* \* \*

"I can't eat anything, Deni." Mala's stomach was a hard knot. USP would be here in three hours. In too short a time, she'd have a title for her relationship with Denali.

"You need to eat and the baby needs nourishment. You'll feel better if you have something in your stomach."

"Stop badgering me. I'm a grown woman and I know what I need. I'll eat after it's over." Mala softened her sharp words by leaning her cheek against his chest. "Don't fuss. Go eat and I'll be here when you get back."

"We need to show a united front right now. I want you with me."

"I'm too nervous to go with you and I can't make polite conversation at the moment. I'll be fine here."

"It's going to go well with USP, Mala. We're mates and they're going to confirm it."

"Go and eat." She nuzzled his face, and then moved away from him to sit in front of the computer. There was silence behind her and she knew Denali fought himself to stay with her. When she heard the door open and close, she let out a long breath. So much was riding on what happened today and yet today's decision--if they were declared mates--would make Denali's next mating time all the harder on her. To be his mate and wonder if biology would be stronger than an unbreakable bond of love would be like a slow death.

Yet not to be his mate when she loved him like this seemed unlikely. To be only his

partner when she loved him didn't mean they still couldn't become mates and marry. In fact, if Denali were Grimari instead of Felisian they would be expected to marry, because all male Grimaris married their female Bonwee partners.

Since she, by virtue of Denali's species bond, was confined to Felisian territories, his job as a partner would be easier. He would still be able to perform his duties as Second Com most of the time. She doubted that he'd even contemplated the ramifications of being her partner.

\* \* \* \*

When Denali returned from breakfast, Mala looked up from the computer. She was so pretty in the soft green tunic and trousers that matched the green of her eyes. Yet she was paler today, showing her distress. He had no doubt about the outcome today and the outcome between them in two months, but he was unable to transfer his confidence to her. Maybe he got his surety by being grounded by his species bond; it gave him strength and certainty of his place in life. And Mala's place was by his side. He would anchor her through this as his species bond anchored him. He went to her and shared a nuzzle and projected his love to her.

At 0945 Denali was dressed in his navy blue dress uniform, spotless and pressed with his rank and insignia proudly displayed. His mane was combed and as tamed as he could get it. He'd had it trimmed finally yesterday to below his shoulder blades, removing five months' growth. He'd liked the longer waist-length mane, but it just wasn't practical for his job on the bridge.

He placed Mala's hand on his arm and they walked down to the hatch together. They met the captain and the other officers at the hatch. The Elder was there too, as was security.

"Madam Avonee, I'm Captain SoAhnor," the Captain greeted her. He was a robust man in his seventies, just beginning to gray in his shoulder length mane.

Mala shook his outstretched hand.

The captain studied Mala, intensely curious. Denali held his breath. What would the captain say about his mate? Then Captain SoAhnor smiled and Denali released his breath. "I'm glad to finally meet the woman who captured Second Com."

"Captain," Denali acknowledged with a smile.

\* \* \* \*

At 1000 hours the indicator lights above the hatch showed the shuttle had docked and that the shuttle hatch was now open. Security opened the hatch on their side and a USP security detachment came through dressed in full USP forest green dress uniform and insignia. Next came a male Grimari, armed with black laser pistols on both hips, two meters tall with hair and eyes black as pitch. After a moment, the USP Bonwee stepped through. His warm gray eyes looked over Mala with curiosity.

Last onto the ship stepped the tall, slender Carisi ambassador and her attendants. Her honey-colored hair was woven into an elegant, elaborate braid around her head. Her gown was of multiple layers, each a stunning jewel tone. Mala knew there was mathematical significance to both the hairstyle and the gown. The Carisi loved numerical patterns.

"Captain SoAhnor?" the USP Bonwee asked in Felisian.

"Yes." The Captain stepped forward.

"Captain, I'm Emir Perronee, translator for the ambassador. May I present USP Ambassador Nece Cobara, emissary from the planet Caris?"

"Ambassador Cobara, welcome. My ship and staff are at your disposal." The USP Bonwee performed introductions in the other direction and interpreted the Captain's words to

the ambassador.

"The Ambassador asks introductions to those individuals gathered here," Emir translated.

The captain introduced his officers, the Elder and the Felisian permanent mates. When he got to Denali, Mala stepped forward.

"Ambassador, I'm Mala Avonee and this is Felisian Denali," she said in Carisi.

The Ambassador's serious expression became concerned. "Madam Avonee, I understand the ambiguity of your situation and why you turned to USP for help, as is your right. We'll investigate your bond first thing. Emir, would you please relay that to the captain."

Emir translated. "Captain, we need a room with a table and chairs. We'll require the Felisian permanent mates, yourself and the Elder to be in attendance."

The captain added, "I'd like my First Officer to be present as well."

Captain SoAhnor led the group to a large conference room down the corridor where the Ambassador explained the purpose of determining Mala's bond with Denali. "Madam Avonee is an employee of USP. Bonwee, because they are pacifists, are unable to protect themselves. By law, USP provides each Bonwee in service with a partner for protection. We need to ascertain if Felisian Denali has bonded to her as her partner."

"Madam Avonee and Denali, please remain standing. Charlta and Kosimer," Emir instructed the Felisian permanent mates, "please stand beside Madam Avonee and Denali. Everyone else, please have a seat."

Emir addressed the Felisian permanent mates. "Charlta and Kosimer, have you ever been in the presence of another pair of Felisian permanent mates?"

"Yes," both responded.

"Are you able to tell when other Felisians are permanently bonded as mates?"

"Yes."

"Please try to ascertain if Denali and Madam Avonee are permanently bonded as mates."

The permanent circled Mala and Denali several times. Both frowned.

"What have you determined?" Emir asked.

"There is a bond," Charlta said. "Denali is definitely bonded. I feel the bond strongly when I'm near him."

"Yes, I agree," her mate concurred. "But the bond is different from ours. It's strong, though, and has a Felisian feel to it."

"So there is a mating bond?"

"I believe so, but it's not exactly like ours," Charlta replied and Kosimer agreed.

"Thank you. Each of you please stand beside one of the other pair." Emir addressed his partner in Grimari. "Joarnon, shall we try?"

They approached her and Denali, and as the Grimari came closer to her, Mala felt Denali bristle. Denali took hold of her hand. Belatedly she remembered that he didn't want her near a male Grimari. Denali and Joarnon assessed one another across the eight-inch height difference, and then Denali's eyes narrowed as Joarnon took hold of her free hand. She couldn't help curling her fingers around Joarnon's as she felt the symbiosis their two species shared. He was safety and security. He smiled down at her, feeling it too, and his black eyes glittered. She resisted the urge to fall into his arms so he could hold her tight.

"Madam Avonee has a partner bond," Joarnon reported in Grimari, his voice a deep

base. "Pardon my familiarity, madam, but I want to see this Felisian's reactions to a male Grimari near his alleged mate. Emir, watch him closely."

Joarnon ran his hand up her arm and as he tried to touch her face, Denali growled threateningly and bared his incisors. At that moment Emir touched Denali's hand and Denali turned on him. Even from several inches away, Mala felt Denali's emotions and she knew that he was wide open to be read by the other empath.

"Madam Avonee is your partner," Emir said in Felisian, "but more than that she is your mate." He asked Joarnon's opinion in Grimari.

"I agree. When the Felisian became riled, both bonds were easier to sense in him."

"But why don't I feel like a permanent mate?" Mala asked in Felisian. Denali had moved behind her and wrapped an arm possessively around her. "And it doesn't feel like the bond I had with my Grimari partner."

"The partnership bond couldn't feel the same because Denali is a different species. But you're definitely partners. Denali, how difficult was it to bond Madam Avonee?"

"Most of it was extremely easy. She was empty inside, unbonded and unmated. I also felt empty inside. I'd been unbonded for a month--for the first time in fourteen years--and I needed to be bonded. I was also unmated. I wanted her bonded to me as mate and partner and I slid the bond right into her. I didn't meet any resistance until the majority of it was in. And as the bond went into her it went into me too. It was almost like a Felisian species bond going in."

"Is it a species bond?" Emir asked sharply.

"No. Mala's not fully Felisian."

Emir asked the others in the room to confirm this and they also said no. "So you intended to bond Madam Avonee as both mate and partner?"

"Yes. I wanted it and we both needed it badly. And I didn't want to have to share her with a Grimari later on, male or female." Denali glared at Joarnon.

"Well, you've succeeded." Emir verified with the permanent mates that the bonds were stronger in Denali, then thanked them and dismissed them from the room. "Madam Avonee, I believe the reason that you don't feel like a mate is because you aren't fully bonded as one."

When Denali protested, Emir explained further. "Denali you're completely bonded as a mate. You said that as you bonded Madam Avonee you were bonded yourself. You wanted the bond and you accepted it completely and you feel that she is your mate. She, however, is unsure that she's your mate. Apparently Madam Avonee wasn't completely receptive to being your mate and that's why she's not fully bonded to you."

"Madam Avonee, is there a problem with your accepting Denali as a permanent mate?"

"It's a personal matter between Denali and I, having to do with him being species bonded, which I hope will be resolved in two months."

"And yet you accepted the partnership bond completely."

"Denali had been caring for me for a month, directing us, leading and making decisions, taking the place of my partner. As he said, I was empty inside and he filled me, and it felt natural to be bonded that way. I can't explain it any other way."

"Let's all sit down. The Ambassador must handle the rest of the proceedings."

Everyone was seated and the Ambassador addressed the group. "Madam Avonee and Felisian Denali have been found to be a doubly bonded pair. Their first bond is a Bonwee

partnership bond, which is protected under USP law. A Bonwee partnership bond is an unbreakable professional relationship, which lasts for the life of the partners. Any person attempting to interfere with the partnership bond is subject to punishment under USP law.

"Denali, do you understand what it means to be a Bonwee partner?"

"A little. I only saw Mala with her Grimari partner for a day."

"Under USP law, as long as Madam Avonee remains an employee of USP, she must always have a partner for protection. I understand that Bonwees experience no threat from Felisians; however, in the presence of any other species, except Bonwees or Grimaris, or during the performance of her USP duties, her partner is required to be with her and be armed to defend her. Are you able to carry out the duties of partner?"

Denali glanced at Mala and then turned to his captain. "Captain, there will be times when being Mala's partner will interfere with my duties on this ship. Although I'd like to retain my current position as Second Com, I understand that for you the ship must come first. For me, Mala must come first."

"I understand that now, Lieutenant Denali. We'll discuss options later. I don't want to lose your talents completely."

"Is there any problem with Denali being armed as a Bonwee partner, Captain SoAhnor?" the ambassador asked.

"No, Ambassador."

"Captain, do you and your First Officer understand that a Bonwee partnership is sacrosanct and protected under USP law?"

"Yes, Ambassador," both responded.

"Captain, do you understand that as Madam Avonee's partner, Denali becomes an employee of USP?"

Captain SoAhnor looked startled. "I didn't know that. Lieutenant Denali, that's something else we'll have to discuss."

"Captain, we've proven here that Denali is fully Madam Avonee's mate. Madam Avonee is partially Denali's mate. As full mates they would have had the standing of married spouses. As their relationship stands now, however, they don't have legal standing because it takes a pair to be married. We've never heard of anyone who was only partially a permanent mate before.

"Madam Avonee, can you solve your personal problems with this man in less than two months?"

"The timetable is not under my or anyone else's control, Ambassador," Mala responded.

Elder Paradon spoke up. "Ambassador, I must remind USP that Denali cannot be separated from the Felisian people."

"Elder, USP did learn that lesson the last time a Bonwee became mate to a Felisian. As you know, that Bonwee is now ambassador of Felis II."

Ambassador Cobara stood up, her gown flowing around her. "Thank you, Captain SoAhnor, First Officer Marwan and Elder Paradon for witnessing this historical event. I have additional business with these new partners. I'll meet with you as soon as I'm finished here."

The Ambassador shook hands with the three men. She stood almost as tall as they did without wearing heels. But as attractive a woman as she was, the Felisians males were more beautiful.

After the Felisian officials left, Denali pulled Mala up from her chair and into his arms. He crushed her with his exuberant embrace, while his happiness poured over her like heated honey.

"I'm your mate. I told you I was but you wouldn't believe me. Soon everybody in USP will know that I belong to you." He spoke rapidly into her hair, his voice eager and his tone smug.

She still felt stunned that he was her mate, verified by USP and announced to the highest echelon of the crew and to the Elder.

"I love you, Mala. Soon you'll belong to me too."

She hugged him to her, smelling the warm musk of his skin. "I want that with all my heart, Deni."



## Chapter Sixteen

A throat cleared and Mala looked out from the shelter of Denali's arms. Emir and his Grimari partner Joarnon stood beside them. She blushed while Denali stiffened. Joarnon's eyes glittered with laughter and curiosity. Mala tried to pull away from Denali, but he held her tighter.

"Denali, you're a very strong empath," Emir remarked.

"I wouldn't know how to judge that. Very few Felisians are empathic. I have no trouble connecting with Mala though." He squeezed her to emphasize his words.

"Perhaps that's why you were able to become her partner. Do you realize how much scrutiny you'll be under as the first Felisian partner to a Bonwee?"

"That doesn't matter to me as long as it doesn't interfere with my position on this ship or with taking care of Mala."

Mala pushed away from Denali, but he kept an arm around her waist. "Messer Perronee, will Denali have to go through USP training?"

"Normally he would, but there are extenuating circumstances in his case. We'll be staying here awhile, so Denali can receive his training from us."

"Do I really need training to take care of my mate? And I've had officer's training, so I know about protocols and such," Denali objected.

"I think you'll probably have the shortest training on record," Emir noted dryly.

"Madam Avonee," Ambassador Cobara smiled as she observed Mala and Denali. "I'd like to continue."

Except for the Ambassador's personal security, there were just the five of them in the room. Joarnon stood behind Emir's chair in a protective stance, but the Ambassador gestured to Denali to be seated.

"Madam Avonee, I'm having Emir translate to Denali as I speak to you so that he'll know what we discuss. You know that you don't have to accept Denali as your partner if you don't want him, even though you're bonded. I understand the traumatic circumstances under which you allowed the bonding to occur."

Denali protested this, but Mala took hold of his hand to quiet him and he entwined their fingers. In Felisian she said, "I don't want a different partner, Ambassador. I'm bound to Denali in more ways than the partnership and the mating bond. He's the father of my child, and that relationship will last the rest of his life. I've allowed Denali to completely bind me to him as one empath to another. That binding is unbreakable. And I'm emotionally attached to him. Denali and I love each other deeply."

"Madam Avonee, please know that I make no moral judgments against you, but USP will expect you to marry your male partner, and other Bonwees will also expect it."

"If things go well in two months, I'll marry him."

"And if things don't go well?"

Mala took a deep breath. "Then I'll be his partner, but I won't ever marry anyone."

"Mala," Denali protested again. "You'll be my wife."

"My partner is very sure, Ambassador."

"That brings me to the next topic. Denali, you'll train each day with Joarnon and Emir to be a Bonwee partner."

"Ambassador, I'd hoped to return to my duties as Second Com."

"But you must be trained. We'll have to work around your duty schedule. We'll download the computer files from our ship to yours so that the training can be done here."

"I'll talk to my Captain and let you know my schedule."

"Very good. Madam Avonee, your original assignment has already been filled. I'll send a communication to USP base requesting an assignment involving Felisians, but it will be some time before we receive a response. In the meantime, your partner will be trained, but what do you plan to do?"

"I can act as interpreter on the planet or on this ship if USP plans to stay."

"We'll be staying for awhile, loaning our scientists to the Felisians while they study this planet. Your services will be greatly appreciated here. Denali, I'm afraid your return to duty will have to wait while Madam Avonee performs her USP duty."

Denali looked into Mala's eyes and nodded. "I understand. Ambassador, Mala nearly died on the planet. I don't think USP should give her too strenuous a work schedule for the first week or so while she recovers fully."

"We'll consider her health when we ask for Madam Avonee's assistance."

Joarnon spoke up suddenly in Grimari. "Who will send the death notification to Grimar?"

Grief stabbed Mala at the reminder of her first partner's death. Denali put his arm around her shoulders, trying to comfort her.

"I'll do it," Mala said. "Tarana was my partner after all, and I knew her family."

The Ambassador took Mala's hand in hers. "The loss of a partner and friend is a terrible thing. I offer you my personal condolences as well as those of USP. I'll send my official notification along with yours to the family, but I think it would be best if Grimari officials delivered the news."

"Was Tarana's family notified that she was missing? Was mine?" Mala tacked on belatedly.

"Yes, both families were notified. We'll let your family know you're safe. I assume you'd like a message carried to them?"

Mala's eyes filled with tears. Her mother and father had been in limbo over her status for months. With the changes in her life she'd never be going home again. "I have many things I want to tell my parents. I'll make a communication for both families later today. Thank you, Ambassador."

"I don't want to diminish the loss of your friend, but I'm glad for your sake that you have another partner."

"So am I. After Tarana died I was so terribly empty and lonely. I think I would have died of loneliness if Denali hadn't been there first as my betrothed and then as my partner. He drove the loneliness away." She squeezed his hand and Denali's loving smile appeared and warmed her all over.

"Denali, I suggest that you learn the Grimari language in order to converse with other Bonwee partners. Madam Avonee can teach you."

"Yes, Ambassador," Denali responded. "I welcome the opportunity to learn other languages."

"Good. You should learn the Bonwee language as well. There will be times when

you and your partner need to converse privately and the Bonwee language will allow that. And it will be helpful if you understand what your partner and other Bonwees discuss. You should become fluent in Basic as well."

"Yes, Ambassador," he replied. He fizzed with excitement.

"Denali, how do you feel about going wherever Madam Avonee is assigned by USP within the Felisian owned territories?"

"I'd hoped to give my twenty years' service in the Felisian military, as my species is encouraged to do. I still have six more years left. And our son will be born in less than five months. Mala said she'd like to take time off to raise the baby." He looked at Mala and she nodded agreement. "Can USP service accommodate these things?"

"I'll put that in my report to USP. Does your military service have to take place on this ship?"

"No, I can do it on either planet as well."

"I'll include that in my report. Denali, you understand that USP will have to take tentative steps with you? It will be trial and error trying to accommodate your species requirements into your job as a USP partner."

"I understand. I never thought about the ramifications when I bonded with Mala. I just didn't want to share her with anyone else. She's mine." This last statement was said in a possessive tone.

"Your loyalty to your mate is laudable."

Denali leaned towards the Ambassador. "Ambassador, tell me the truth. Is Mala safe from this Grimari?" He gestured to Joarnon.

"Deni!" Mala gasped.

Emir jerked, surprised, and faltered in his translation. He told Denali, "I assure you, Joarnon is no threat to Madam Avonee."

"Please translate to the Ambassador. I want to hear assurance. Mala says there's a natural affinity between Bonwees and Grimaris, and I witnessed it earlier. Will this Grimari try to steal Mala from me?"

"Deni, that won't happen!" Mala exclaimed.

"Joarnon is already bonded to me," Emir explained.

"But he's not your mate. He's male and unmated and Mala is female and not yet completely bonded to me as my mate. I don't understand how these Bonwee-Grimari relationships work. I want to know if I should keep Mala away from him so he won't try to claim her."

"Deni--" Mala protested.

"Denal--" Emir began.

"Please let the Ambassador explain it to me," Denali demanded. His face flushed with anger.

Emir translated quickly and the Ambassador's face showed surprise and then she sobered. In Basic she slowly explained to Denali, "Emir is tied to Joarnon and Joarnon to him. Madam Avonee is tied to you, and you are tied twice to her. Joarnon cannot be tied to her while first he is tied to Emir and second she is tied to you. Do you understand?"

Denali struggled to explain clearly in Basic. "Mala said a male Grimari tried to claim her as his mate five years ago while she was tied to her first partner."

The Ambassador looked startled, Emir and Joarnon shocked. The Ambassador asked Mala, "How is this true?"

Mala explained and the Ambassador and Emir looked at her like she had sprouted wings in front of them. "This does not happen!" the Ambassador exclaimed.

Joarnon agreed with them.

Denali pointed to Joarnon. "He is Grimari. Mala is Bonwee."

Joarnon stepped forward to face Denali. He replied, "She is your mate. I do not want her."

Denali turned to Emir. "Ask him if he's attracted to her."

"Deni!" Mala cried in protest.

Emir blushed, but translated to Joarnon.

Joarnon looked at Denali. "As a Bonwee."

"What does that mean?" Denali demanded of Emir. "I'm attracted to her as a Bonwee. And I took her as my mate because of that attraction."

Joarnon clarified, "Not as a woman. As a Bonwee."

Denali stared hard at Joarnon, trying to grasp his meaning, and repeated, "Not as a woman. Not as a mate?"

"No, not as a mate," Joarnon confirmed.

"What about later as a mate?"

"No. I like very tall women. With black hair."

Suddenly Denali and Joarnon smiled smugly at one another. They had reached a testosterone level of understanding based on what men found attractive in women. When Denali turned to Mala, she knew her face was red with mortification.

"I'm satisfied now," he informed her.

The ambassador asked, "Do you have any other questions or concerns?"

Denali shook his head.

Emir announced, "Then we're adjourned. If you need her, the Ambassador will be on board for awhile talking to your captain about the planet."

Everyone rose and shook hands. Mala and Denali thanked the ambassador and Denali steered her out of the room and towards the canteen.

"Deni, you embarrassed me back there!" Mala hissed.

"I had to know, after what you told me about Grimaris. I had to be sure."

"I was mortified. You embarrassed Messer Perronee too."

"You Bonwees need thicker skins. If you all weren't so chaste and prudish, you wouldn't be embarrassed over things like that."

"You told them you were attracted to me because I was Bonwee. Now you're criticizing Bonwees."

"I don't have to like every single thing about you as a Bonwee. And I love you despite the fact that you blush far too easily."

"Humph," she grumbled and he pressed her to his side. "Where are we going?"

"To get you something to eat. Then we're going back to the cabin to mate. I feel primitive."

"Do you?" she whispered. She narrowed her eyelids in a "come hither" way, even while she blushed.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm trying to take care of you by letting you eat. If you keep looking at me like that we'll turn around and go straight to our cabin."

"All right. I'm only agreeing because I'm hungry." She looked around quickly and her voice dropped to a whisper. "But I expect you to be primitive later."

Denali growled deep in his throat. "You're a seductress. You're going to get a workout when we're in bed."

"Promises, promises," she purred.

## Chapter Seventeen

Denali immersed himself in an intensive study of the Grimari language, USP laws, and how to be a Bonwee partner. The latter two he learned because they were an integral part of Mala's life, but learning another language was his own dream. It was a dream he'd despaired of ever realizing, and Denali basked in his good fortune. Those precious hours of linguistics made everything else worthwhile.

It seemed all his time was spent in conference rooms talking or listening or both. He and Mala dredged the very depths of their memories to answer the questions about the planet that Felisian and USP scientists put to them. Looking back over that time from the comfort of the Felisian ship, it was amazing that he and Mala survived so much hardship. But while they'd lived it, their time had been magic. Her secret smile told him she thought the same thing.

In addition, both Felisian and USP officials wanted specific information about the encounter with the Malchovists, which seemed so long, almost another lifetime ago, to him.

They were also part of the planning sessions with the officers, scientists from both ships, Ambassador Cobara and Elder Paradon. Felisians had first rights to this planet, if they wanted it. The planet was obviously not very hospitable to sentient beings, but it could be domed for living, like bases on airless moons were. The Felisians had to determine if there was any other value to the planet such as ore or mineral deposits.

If domed living was the only value this planet represented, they would cede rights to the planet to USP. Felisians lived free, not under domes. Denali cringed at the very thought of it. The USP scientists explained that it wouldn't be that different from living in a space ship or on a space station, but Denali noticed he wasn't the only Felisian to recoil at the thought of being under glass like a specimen. He winced again. How awful to be trapped like that.

He coddled Mala during the week, watching her carefully so she didn't overtax her returning strength. He reveled in his roles as both mate and partner and as "man" to her "woman." He made sure she ate regularly, got sufficient rest, and mated as often as they could, although the latter needed little enough prodding.

It seemed that being officially labeled as her mate had stimulated his libido and he claimed her as often as he could. Of course, close proximity to the Grimari partner Joarnon served as a prod, too. Even though he no longer feared the Grimari's presence near Mala, he felt a purely masculine need to roar and be "manly" in Joarnon's presence. It was hard to be only one point eight meters tall next to the two-meter Joarnon. Joarnon was broader across the shoulders and chest than he was, too. Denali felt like he had to prove himself next to this giant.

During the week he watched Mala with Joarnon to study their interactions. There was no jealousy to his observations; after all, he trusted the Grimari's word that Mala wasn't his type of woman. He was simply curious about how Bonwees and Grimaris were with one another. Joarnon was protective of his own partner, but he was naturally protective of Mala, too. Joarnon always located Denali to make sure he was keeping watch over his partner. As

though Denali would let anything happen to Mala!

Denali thought Joarnon's doubt of his ability to be a partner to Mala must lie in the fact that Denali wasn't Grimari. Obviously Joarnon wouldn't doubt the ability of another Grimari. Denali held his temper with difficulty. It had been a long time since anyone had so doubted his competency.

Emir allowed Joarnon to be in close physical proximity to him, which was natural since they were bonded partners. What surprised Denali was that Mala allowed Joarnon just as close as Emir did. Neither Bonwee encouraged Joarnon to touch them excessively, but they allowed him completely into their personal space, to within several millimeters of their bodies. It was as though Joarnon were part of them.

Yet the two Bonwee never stood too close together. Their propriety apparently didn't allow them closeness or non-essential touching. Except for the difference in height, Mala and Emir looked the same from the back. Denali's mate bond helped identify which Bonwee was Mala, but the racial similarity was startling to see.

Denali was jubilant to see that once again Mala had no idea Emir was male. Emir was a neuter as far as she was concerned and Denali thanked the planet Bon for making the population so similar that Mala classified all the Bonwee in her mind as "the same."

In this same way Mala classified Joarnon as "Grimari," not as Joarnon the man. She was definitely attracted to the Grimari species, as she'd told him she would be, but it was not a male-female lure. During the first few days when he realized that yet another male was "not male" to Mala, he smiled smugly at Joarnon. Later he just felt pity for the other males in the world who were unsexed by his mate and didn't even know it. Their loss was his gain.

That first week on the ship was difficult in another way for him. He and Mala were used to being alone together in complete privacy. They had been intensely loving for months. Now she didn't want others to see her displays of affection, which she considered to be private. So he had to wait until they were out of sight of others or alone in their suite before he could kiss her or do more intimate things with her. He missed the spontaneity of the planet, of mating whenever and wherever they wanted, of kissing her at any time during the day, of holding her in his arms whenever he wanted.

She did allow him to hold her hand most of the time. He would have gone insane without this one concession on her part. Their hands were often entwined on one of their laps--since they always sat next to one another--or entwined on the tabletop in full view of all present. Joarnon, through Emir, had remarked on Denali's lack of free hands and Denali had glared at him. Joarnon had simply shrugged.

Today they were finalizing plans for the additional Felisian personnel to go down to the planet to join the scientists already there. Since Mala was fully recovered, she was to go downside and act as interpreter between the Felisian and USP groups. He, per force, would go with her.

Joarnon had seen to Denali's physical and weapons training this week and today had presented him with a lethal-looking laser weapon to wear while off the ship. Denali felt the gift was an acceptance of him as Mala's partner. He rubbed his palm over its smooth hilt; it was a finely made weapon with a good heft and fit to his hand. Clearly it was a weapon made by a professional for a professional. It was attached to his belt holster now, the one he'd been wearing around the ship all week as he acted as Mala's partner. It felt strange to be armed around his friends and people he'd worked with for years. It was just one of the many changes that loving Mala had brought to his life.

"If there are no questions, meet at the shuttle hatch tomorrow at 0800. Remember: this planet might be an important find for Felisians. Make us proud down there," Captain SoAhnor ordered.

There were many echoes of "Yes, Captain" from the crew.

As crew filed out the door, Captain SoAhnor came to stand by them. "Lieutenant, Madam Avonee, please stay for a few minutes."

Finally it was just Captain SoAhnor, First Officer Marwan, Mala and him. "Madam Avonee, you're sure you're well enough for this assignment?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Good. We're not very fluent in Basic. Most Felisians don't meet a lot of non-Felisians to warrant learning more Basic. I don't want there to be any misunderstandings on the planet."

"I'll do my best to facilitate understanding, Captain."

"Good. Lieutenant Denali, I know you're working for USP on this mission, but I wondered if you'd be backup Com on the planet?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Thank you. I hope the two of you have better luck down there this time."

\* \* \* \*

The shuttle hatch opened and Denali pried Mala's fingers off the seat arm. "Sorry, Deni. I didn't know I would be afraid like this. I guess the crash left more of an impression than I realized."

"I was a little unnerved myself." Denali looked around. "We're the last ones to offload. Are you ready to set foot on the planet again?"

"I don't fear the planet. Most of those memories are happy ones." Mala smiled at him and he leaned down to kiss her quickly while they were alone.

They exited the shuttle and collected their belongings and followed the rest of the crew into the new camp.

"They moved the camp," Mala exclaimed.

"There wasn't enough space to land shuttles or to set up tents at our old shelter," he reminded her.

"But it was much closer to the water source," she argued.

"Filling the shuttle's water tanks is much more efficient for a larger group of people, especially for showers. don't want to shower in the open this time."

"No, I don't," Mala exclaimed, clearly horrified.

"I didn't think so."

They came into sight of the round, dark gray tents and Mala halted him with a hand on his arm. "Deni, there's no privacy here."

He studied the tents, then her face and made the connection. She wanted privacy for mating. "We can be very quiet, love."

"We can't be quiet!"

"I'll ask them to move our tent away from the others. That will give us some privacy." But Mala shook her head. "It's only for a month, Mala," he argued.

"I can't do it. What will we do?"

"We could make our residence in our old shelter, but that's not practical due to the distance from this site. Your job is here with these people, so you have to be here too. You're going to have to compromise in this instance. We'll move our tent three hundred



meters from the others, up against the side of that hill. That will give you complete privacy on one side and distance from the rest of the crew. We need to mate, so celibacy isn't an option. And I'm sure that mating in the open isn't a choice for you, although parts of the forest are thick enough to veil our activities. You can do this, Mala."

"All right," she said quietly. "Deni, will you kiss me again before we join the others?"

He wrapped her tightly in his arms and eagerly devoured her lips. Mala was being brave again and pride swelled his chest. When they broke apart finally they were both panting hard. She reached up to press two fingers to his lips.

"Your lips are the most powerful aphrodisiac."

He growled at her. "Keep talking like that and we're going to need the tent before it gets moved."

"I love you, Deni."

"I'm the luckiest man in the universe."

\* \* \* \*

The days flew by. Mala translated for the Felisian and USP scientists working closely together. During the precious daylight hours, excursions were made in the shuttle to outlying sites to collect geological data and mineral samples.

After the sun set there was more translating to do as the scientists pored over their samples and scan results. The days were long and mentally draining, but not often physically demanding. Mala felt sorry for Denali, who merely stood by protecting her. His eyes, wide and curious, roved the various species he'd never seen before and he stared at them intently when they spoke their own languages. She sensed his frustration that he wasn't able to understand them. He was like an eager child kept with his mother while children played noisily nearby.

Denali admitted as much to her in the privacy of their tent. "I want to understand what they say. I want to be able to speak to them in their own language. I've always wanted to be a linguist."

"Then why didn't you pursue a job in languages instead of the military?"

"Felisians don't interact much with other species so there's little need for languages. The only jobs that do are communications positions on ships and space stations."

"That's why you're stationed at Com," Mala said. How terrible to have a dream he could only partially realize.

The late evenings were their private time, spent naked in one another's arms loving and learning. Mala had found Denali to be a faster learner of languages when he was properly motivated and rewarded. The combination of physical pleasure and phonetics had significantly increased his fluency in the almost three weeks they'd been on the planet.

The few opportunities they'd had to be with Emir and Joarnon showed a marked improvement in Denali's ability to converse independently with the Grimari. Joarnon, for his part, had been learning Felisian and Denali was happy to help him with fluency in his own language. Mala was sure Joarnon wasn't having nearly as enjoyable an education in languages as Denali was.

Mala should have been happily content. She was doing the job she loved, she was with the man she loved and her son was growing well in her womb. She had everything a woman could want. But there had been tension among the crew, a few arguments, sharp words, shortened tempers, and she'd begun to feel uneasy. Something wasn't right. Was the

crew short-tempered because it was harder living on the planet? Their lives here were definitely not luxurious or entirely comfortable. But the Felisians had seemed excited to come down to the planet.

Was it the shortage of daylight that caused the tension? The shuttles were lighted all around the clock. Mala couldn't recall her and Denali being short-tempered and they'd lived on the planet for five months. But she and Denali had been in the throes of first love--still were, in fact--so they'd been tolerant of many things.

Denali seemed tense lately too, but perhaps he was picking up on her uneasiness. His temper didn't seem to be affected; in fact, just recently their matings had become much more frequent during the day. She tried to shrug off the feeling that prickled at her neck and shoulders like small-clawed crustaceans. But the feeling wouldn't go away. Maybe it hormone-induced. After all, she was going into her fifth month of pregnancy.

"Why are you frowning, Mala?"

"Do you sense anything wrong, Deni?"

"Nothing more than you frowning. Do you sense something?"

"I don't know. I was just wondering if it was my hormones."

"I've got a cure for that."

"Birth will cure them."

"But that's not for four months yet. I've got something that will relax you now."

"I'm sure you do. Does it involve being naked?"

"It can. Are you interested?"

"Do I get to run my hands over your body?"

Denali's eyes darkened with arousal. "I insist."

Several hours later Mala was boneless in Denali's arms. Nothing nagged at her now. She turned her head to see Denali's chest heaving and his skin flushed and sweaty.

"You're fabulous, Deni."

"Only with you, love. Only with you."

## Chapter Eighteen

"Are you tired, love?" Denali's voice was concerned.

Mala turned from watching the Felisian and USP personnel interact. "No, why do you ask?"

"You're frowning and rubbing your back. What's wrong?"

"Deni, have you noticed how short tempers are today? It's so strange; it seems to be the Felisians causing it."

"That can't be true. Felisians are a very congenial species."

"I've noticed edginess in certain of the Felisians, but I assumed they were preparing to mate." Mala felt her face warm with a blush.

"Which Felisians? Do you know their names?"

"Ferlander, the head geologist, Gerlaine, the surveyor and Jademus, who's in charge of testing samples, to name three."

"None of them are mating soon. Wrong ethnic. Maybe they're under a lot of pressure. We're military, remember, not scientists. They have to fall back on what they learned in school and their secondary training to do an important job."

"You may be right. Do you feel all right, Deni?"

"Sure, why?"

"You seem restless and tense."

"I need to mate."

"Again? We just mated two hours ago. Twice. We've been mating more frequently since we came back down to the planet."

"I noticed. I think it's Joarnon's presence."

Mala lightly slapped his arm. "It is not. Joarnon's no threat to you and me."

"But you're not a bonded mate yet. And he's a male."

"Deni, Joarnon told you he's not interested in me that way."

"I need to mate, anyway."

"All right. But we can't take long." Mala put her hand into Denali's and could feel his tension like a vibration under the skin. It was strange how much calmer he'd been on the ship. What was it about this planet?

She heard an angry shout from over to her left and she turned that way to see what was going on. Her job was to facilitate communication between the two groups in order to prevent conflicts. A female screamed, and then a number of bodies interacted violently. It was difficult to tell what was going on.

"Stay here," Denali commanded and began to move forward towards the fracas.

Suddenly she noted that Denali wore his officer's uniform. He would try to exert authority and break up whatever was going on. At that moment she realized the tension she'd felt in Denali was magnified in the other Felisians on the planet.

She grabbed for him. "Don't go, Deni!"

"I'm an officer; I can break this up." The crowd of people was clearly fighting now. Fists flailed and the sound of flesh hitting flesh came clearly to her.

"Deni, they won't listen to you now!" Mala said with surety. There was something wrong with the Felisians. The USP personnel didn't seem to be affected.

The crowd surged toward them and she could see Denali debated two courses of action: whether to stay and try to reassert order in the Felisian crew or to get her to safety, as a Bonwee partner should. She was of two minds also. As a non-Felisian with previous experience on this planet, she might be able to detect abnormal behaviors and report them to officials. But as a small, pregnant female she didn't want to be anywhere near a riot.

A Felisian male approached them, wild-eyed with his mane in disarray and a bruise forming on his cheekbone. He lunged for her, but Denali fended him off.

"I need a female!" the man cried hoarsely and lunged again.

Denali hit the man hard in the face with his fist and the man fell on his back in the dirt. "Mala's my mate!" Denali growled threateningly. "Get hold of yourself and act like the crewman you are."

The crewman leaped to his feet and Mala backed away from him. The look on his face was feral and she'd seen that look before--on Denali's face the second week on the planet. She backed into someone unexpectedly and let out a squeal of fright. They were surrounded by people. The crowd's lust and aggression swamped her, like a wave of polluted water. She choked, gasping for untainted air.

Their eyes held madness. Some had jaws slack with need, other had skin taut over cheekbones with jaw muscles bunched. Still others bared their teeth. Some growled like dangerous animals readying their attack.

When she screamed, Denali spun back around and lunged towards her. Behind him the crewman's hand rose with a gleaming knife in his fist.

"Deni, look out!" she screamed.

As though in slow motion Mala watched the action unfold as she struggled to get to Denali. Denali turned and the crewman slashed downward with the knife. Denali staggered backward a step but his right arm rose to deflect the next slash of the knife. She screamed frantically; why didn't anyone help Denali? She had to get to him!

The knife descended again. Mala threw all of her weight against Denali and knocked him out of the way. The knife sliced lightly across her outer bicep with the hiss of a severing sleeve and her skin burned. She landed hard on Denali and had the wind knocked out of her. Before she could scramble out of the way, the crewman grabbed her by the arm and dragged her off Denali.

"Let go of me!" she yelled.

"Do as she says." Denali's voice was as lethal as the weapon he pointed at the crewman's chest. He lay sprawled on the ground on his back with the weapon propped up on one knee. With a corner of her mind Mala wondered why he didn't get up. She tugged again and again at the crewman's arm, but she couldn't get loose from his lust-induced strength. Whatever madness had the crewman in its grasp had made him very strong.

The standoff ended suddenly when USP soldiers stormed into the melee and indiscriminately knocked combatants to the ground. There were loud shouts in Basic for everyone to get down on the ground and a number of the Felisians complied. A burly soldier thrust between the crewman and Mala and gave the crewman a hard tap on the jaw with the butt of his laser rifle. The crewman crumpled to the ground unconscious. Mala stared down at the normally friendly man who'd been infected by some kind of insanity.

"Are you all right?" the soldier asked her in Basic.

Mala looked up to find the man was a Petrosian and she replied in that language. "I think so. The Felisians are infected with some form of madness. Tell your superiors."

"Yes, Madam Avonee. Madam, your partner--"

Mala whirled to see Denali lying flat on the ground. "Deni!" She rushed to his side and dropped to her knees. "Deni, what's wrong?" But her denying eyes saw the dark stain spreading across the chest of his navy uniform. Denali's breathing was harsh and his eyes were glazed with pain. Mala fought blind panic. No! !

The soldier shouted for a medic.

"Deni, how bad is it?" Her hands tried to assess the damage without causing him further pain.

"Bad," his voice was breathy and strained. His hand grabbed for one of hers. Through the physical connection she was inundated with his feelings--pain, sadness, despair, grief. He believed he was dying!

"You're not going to die, Deni! The medic is coming. Hold on to me. Hold on!" was the medic? How long did it take to get a medic here? Mala ripped open Denali's uniform. There was so much blood on his chest and more of it on the left side. Then she found the knife wound bleeding freely in the area of his heart and her own heart clutched in fear.

Denali gave her hand a weak squeeze. Even now he tried to comfort her. His eyes had become very golden as his pupils contracted. "Please don't leave me, Deni!" she begged. No fate could be so cruel as to take Denali from her now. She didn't think she could live without him. No, she she couldn't live without him.

"Deni! Deni, come over into my body. Please, come over with me now. I'll keep you alive." Mala made her mind into a warm cocoon filled with her love for him to rest in. Then she leaned over him and placed her lips on his. Shock coursed through her at their lack of warmth. He tried to slide over under her skin, but was too weak. She grabbed hold of his essence, pulling him inside with her with all her willpower and a strength born of desperation. Then she felt his love in her mind with her. His physical presence in her body was quiet. He had no extra energy to do anything more than rely on her strength to support his presence where there was no pain. The cocoon of Mala's love comforted him.

But the strain of holding him alive and completely out of his body without his help was enormous. Mala sat upright again, and now her only attachment to Denali's body was their entwined hands. She needed bolstering; she needed another empath to support her. Where was Emir?

"Emir!" Mala screamed at the top of her lungs. "Emir!"

"The medic is coming," the soldier assured her.

"Get Messer Perronee," Mala ordered him. "I need him now!" She had no extra energy for politeness.

The first soldier was joined by another who communicated her request to an unseen voice on his Com unit. "Messer Perronee will be here shortly," the second man reported.

Mala simply breathed. She dared not expend any energy on any other task but one right now. Denali live. She would see to it personally.

The medic, Emir and Joanon arrived almost simultaneously.

"Madam Avonee!" Emir cried in distress.

"Emir, I need you!" Mala grabbed his hand with her free one and projected her feelings to him with all her might. His warm gray eyes flew wide open and she knew he sensed Denali's presence inside her.

"Move away from Denali please," the Felisian medic, newly arrived, commanded.

"No!" Mala refused adamantly and again projected the need for help to Emir, tugging him down beside her.

"What's wrong?" Joarnon demanded in Grimari.

"Her partner is empathically linked with her, inside Madam Avonee's body. I don't think she can let go of him physically and maintain the empathic link. Can you, Madam Avonee?"

Mala shook her head no.

Emir explained what she was doing to the medic, who made no further effort to displace her at Denali's side. Her strength faltered and she squeezed Emir's hand hard. An idea born of desperation grew in her mind and Denali's presence fought it. But Mala needed help and there was only one other empath on this planet. She turned to Emir.

"Forgive me," she whispered to him and fused her lips hard to his. He wasn't bonded to her in any way, so it would be difficult to slide into his skin. The whole idea of kissing Emir and sharing his skin felt wrong, but she couldn't continue to hold Denali alone. She knew the transfer to Emir's body could be done; after all, she and Denali did it regularly.

Emir stiffened, all affronted Bonwee, but Mala couldn't allow Bonwee propriety to stop her. She forcefully thrust her essence at him until on the fourth try she propelled herself into his body and his mind. He was completely different from Denali. There was no warm love here, no smoldering desire, and no mate. Emir was solidly logical, caring, conscientious, loyal and an excellent representative of the Bonwee species' desire for interspecies peace.

Emir jerked back and their lips separated, but she held on firmly inside him. In her own body she felt Denali stretching out and breathing more easily. He needed all the strength her body held. She curled up quietly in Emir's body to use less energy.

"What's going on?" Joarnon demanded.

Mala knew he was shocked that one Bonwee would kiss another on the lips, as she has just done, especially when one already had a mate.

"She's inside me!" Emir whispered to his partner in an awed, incredulous voice.

"Mala's inside here," he pointed to his head.

Joarnon cocked his head. His eyes were curious. "How?"

"Through the kiss. That's how her partner came over to her. Her partner is alone in her body. Jo, Mala's tired and she needs my support."

"We need to get the lieutenant up to the ship," the medic reported. "There are a number of casualties, but he's the gravest. We need to move."

"Fine. We're all going," Emir replied in Felisian.

"How long will she stay with you?" Joarnon asked. He watched Mala's body walk along towards the shuttle. His brow furrowed. It was clear from his expression that he didn't understand how Mala and Denali made the transfer.

"Probably until the infirmary. Jo, she's injured."

"I see it. Does she know?"

"Yes. She's trying to communicate with me but it's just feelings, not words. I don't understand what she wants," Emir exclaimed, frustrated.

The trio followed the stretcher carrying Denali onto the shuttle. The stretcher was laid in the aisle with Mala, Emir and Joarnon on one side and the medic on the other.

From Mala's perspective in Emir's body she watched Denali. His body was slackly

unconscious. The medic had stopped the bleeding and pumped plasma into one of his veins. Denali's skin was very pale, but he was still alive. If she could just keep holding on, he would live!

"No too much longer, Mala," Emir comforted her. "Jo, we'll need to report to the ambassador as soon as Mala is separated from me. I hope they've restored peace on the planet."

Mala felt frustrated in her little cocoon. She couldn't tell Emir what he needed to know; but she couldn't yet return to her own body until Denali was safe.

"What is it, Emir?" Joarnon asked.

"She's frustrated. She needs me to know something. Jo, please remind me to document this experience later."

"I'll be interested to hear all about it. There's no pain, is there?"

"No. None at all." Emir's voice was odd and Mala caught a stray feeling of male pleasure at her female presence in his body. How odd for a Bonwee to feel that way.

The shuttle docked at the Felisian ship and the medical staff met it, along with a contingent of security guards. Too late. Where had they been when their species was going crazy on the planet? Their party followed the stretcher straight to the infirmary where Dr. Lazara met them inside the door.

"Mala!" he exclaimed.

"Stab wound just missed the heart," the medic reported. "I've given him a unit of plasma already." The medic's eyes slid to Mala and back to Dr. Lazara. "I don't know how he's stayed alive, but it has something to do with his mate."

"Thanks, Jari. What's it like on the planet?" Dr. Lazara checked the wound while he spoke.

"Quite a few casualties. We brought up a dozen with us in the shuttle. Some kind of riot broke out."

"You go treat the other injuries. I'm taking Denali into surgery." Jari left the room and Dr. Lazara turned to Mala.

"Doctor, Mala can't speak right now. You know that she and Denali are empaths?" Emir asked.

"Ah, they're linked now?"

"You know about the linking?"

"Yes, I walked in on them when they were linked the day they were rescued. They don't hear or see anything else." He frowned. "Mala looks like she's aware, though."

"Mala's linked with me. Denali's alone in her body, but she's holding him there. That's why he's still alive. But she can't hold him for a lot longer--she's tired and injured herself. How long will the surgery take?"

"That's all very unusual, but then everything about Denali and Mala is unusual. The surgery could take as long as an hour. I won't know until I get inside Denali's chest. I don't want all of you in the surgery."

"You're sure Denali will be all right without the link?"

Dr. Lazara considered for a moment, and then shook his head. "Can you maintain it through the surgery?"

"Yes. I'll buffer Mala. How soon can you start?"

"Now. Have your partner help the two of you put on gowns and masks."

The surgery took only thirty minutes as Mala objectively watched the doctor repair

the wound close to Denali's heart. Emir provided a stronger buffer for her during the surgery. She'd grown used to him now and though he wasn't Denali, he was comfortable to be with. He reminded her of her youth where all she'd known were Bonwees--her mother, father, siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents. Emir was her own species and she nestled comfortably in his mind with his feelings of concern for her and Denali.

"Done," Dr. Lazara said suddenly. "You can let go now, Mala."

Mala propelled herself from Emir's mind and body back into her own body, rocking Emir backward into Joarnon. Suddenly she was with Denali again. Their reunion was joyous and intensely loving for the moments it lasted and then he slid over into his own body. She crumpled to a heap on the floor, despite Joarnon's and Dr. Lazara's attempts to catch her. She sat dazed for several moments as the doctor leaned concernedly over her.

"There's a contagion on the planet," she breathed.



## Chapter Nineteen

"There's a contagion on the planet which only affects the Felisians," Mala repeated to Dr. Lazara, Emir and Joarnon. "It takes two to two-and-a-half weeks to infect the person. Deni had it when we were alone on the planet. He's had it again the past few days. All the Felisians have it.

"Their faces ... I saw that same look the first time on Deni's face at two weeks. He needed to mate with me fiercely, but he resisted until mating time made it impossible to resist any longer. Once he bonded me doubly to him the contagion took the form of frequent matings and several mating times. There's a contagion ..." she paused, panting.

"Neither of you said anything to me about a contagion!" Dr. Lazara accused. "We've tested both your blood and found nothing!"

"Because you weren't looking for it, but it's there, nonetheless. I knew Deni for only a day before the crash, so I had no idea what he was like outside of a crisis situation. After we were rescued, he was much calmer, less ... aggressive. The past few days I've noticed him becoming tenser and more aggressive, just like before we were rescued. I noticed the same behavior in the other Felisians, but it was markedly worse in them, I believe, because they don't have mates as Deni does. There was a riot, doctor, caused by lust. The Felisians were feral, completely feral. A contagion of some kind."

The doctor began to believe. He reared back from her and stepped quickly to a communications panel. "This is Dr. Lazara. I need to speak to Captain SoAhnor immediately. It's a medical emergency." The doctor looked down at her. "You saved Denali's life. That wound should have been fatal."

Mala was horrified by what might have happened if she hadn't linked with Denali. "None of this would have happened if I'd recognized what was going on down there sooner. I knew something was wrong, but there was so much work to do."

"Don't blame yourself Mala. I was down there too and didn't know what was going on," Emir comforted her as he and Joarnon lifted her to her feet. She was wobbly and Joarnon supported her. She reached over to Denali's body, so still and quiet now that he was unconscious. The wound looked so small to have been nearly fatal.

"Captain, it's Dr. Lazara. I need you to recall every crewmember to the ship immediately. They need to be confined to their cabins under quarantine until the medical staff can do a complete analysis. Madam Avonee says there's a contagion on the planet that affects only the Felisians."

"Why didn't Madam Avonee and Lieutenant Denali report the contagion when they were rescued?"

"Denali did report the symptoms to me, but I attributed them to the stress and trauma of the crash and to being newly mated. Madam Avonee reports his symptoms to have been worse than he told me and that the crew on the planet has gone feral. Captain, Denali was feral the day he was rescued."

"I'll order an immediate withdrawal. I'll want a complete briefing as soon as possible."

"Yes, Captain. I suggest that the crew who've been on the planet the longest should come up first. They'll have the greatest level of infection. I don't believe the contagion can be transmitted to the crew on the ship."

"We'll take precautions, anyway. Send Madam Avonee to me for a debriefing."

"You'll have to come to her, Captain. Denali was stabbed and will be here recovering from a near-fatal wound."

"What!" the Captain thundered. "I'll be there shortly. SoAhnor, out."

Dr. Lazara returned to her side. "You knew about the contagion and did nothing?" she demanded.

"I didn't know what it was. Denali reported his stay on the planet was very odd and he described his symptoms to me. Since both your blood tests came back negative, I incorrectly attributed those symptoms to the crash. I apologize for my oversight."

"Deni could have died today and you had the power to prevent the riot from happening," she accused.

"So did you," he fired back, not intimidated by her anger.

Mala reared back from him, and then consciously calmed herself. No one could have foreseen this. "I beg your pardon, doctor. I'm overwrought."

"I understand. Let me take care of your wound while the staff settles Denali in a room."

"What wound? Oh, that. You know I can't allow you to touch me medically."

"That's your choice, but I think your wound needs to be tended."

"I'll allow the medic to treat me when he has time, but you can't direct him."

"Ask him to make sure your baby is all right too."

Mala clasped her belly protectively. "Nothing happened to Jeran!"

"Have him check your son anyway, for my peace of mind."

"All right. How long will Deni have to be in the infirmary?"

"Maybe a week. May I say one thing to you privately, Mala?"

She nodded and then looked at Emir. "I need to speak with you, Emir, if you'd please wait for me."

"We'll be in Denali's room." Emir and Joarnon left her alone with the doctor.

"Mala, let me know when you need privacy for mating. I know Denali is very possessive about you as his mate."

Her cheeks warmed, but she couldn't deny the truth in the doctor's words. "When may I sleep with him?"

"I know he'll want you with him when he wakes. There's no use telling him there can't be mating, so I'll sedate him for today. If he doesn't wake up tonight, then wait until tomorrow. But be very careful."

"Thank you, doctor."

"I'll want to talk to you later about the symptoms of the contagion."

"I'll be available."

Mala went out into the hall and saw Joarnon a few doors down. She walked to him and he followed her into the room. She glanced at Denali and he looked peaceful, his bandaged chest rising and falling regularly. She sighed in relief and turned her attention to Emir. She owed him in several ways. She slipped into the Bonwee language.

"Emir, I'd like to thank you for helping me save Denali's life. I would die without him. That's why I acted as I did on the planet."

"I couldn't very well stand by and watch your partner die, Mala."

"No, but I also owe you an apology. I breached your privacy. I crossed lines of Bonwee propriety with you that are the domain of a mate or spouse, especially in sharing your feelings. If I felt any of your emotions you wished had remained private, I ask your pardon. I wish there had been some other way to save Denali than to impose myself on you like that. Please forgive me."

"I accept your apology. I found the experience to be very interesting. Yes, it was quite shocking at first, but I got used to it. How did you know you could link empathically with me, though?"

"I assumed that if Deni and I could link, then any two non-mated empaths could do the same if the need was great. And my need was very great."

"USP will want to know all about this ability."

"Would you make the report for me, Emir? I have to stay with Deni and speak to the captain and make a report of my observations of the contagion to the doctor."

"I'll report to the ambassador soon, but you could make a report any time in the next few months. The linking will be much less newsworthy than the contagion, but it needs to be made known."

"All right. I'll do a report in a few weeks."

"About the contagion, are you certain it affects only Felisians?"

"I'm pretty certain. I lived on the planet for five months, yet I never felt lust or aggression like the Felisians feel it. Deni started having periods of being feral two weeks after we crashed. I just didn't know what was happening to him."

"Then how did you come to love him and allow him to bond you in so many ways? I would think you would have been afraid of him."

"Deni and I have been engaged to be married since a week after we crashed, yet he controlled his feral side until mating time. He fought hard and I never understood what he was fighting against until today, so I didn't really know that I should have been afraid. Deni is very loving towards me and has been since the crash. How could I not love someone who loved me like that?"

"I guess your relationship with Denali is something I can't understand. Anyway, what will you do about protection until your partner is well again?"

"I don't really need protection on this ship."

"Clearly you were in danger from these very people today. You need protection."

"The contagion isn't active on board this ship, so I'll be safe here."

"I believe the ambassador will order you to have security for the next few weeks, at least until scientists can identify the contagion and determine its life span."

"All right. I'll ask the captain if I can have a security guard who wasn't on the planet."

"Good. We need to get over to the USP ship. Will you be all right, Mala?" Emir's voice was heavy with concern.

"Yes. Deni will live and that's all that matters."

"Contact me if you need anything."

"I will. Emir, thank you for all you did for us today."

"It was my pleasure."

Joarnon came forward and held out his arms to her. She hesitated, and then spoke in Grimari. "You know Deni wouldn't like it. I'm not supposed to touch male Grimari, even you, until I'm his permanent mate."

"He has nothing to fear from me. I sense you need a partner's embrace right now. Come here."

Mala went eagerly into his arms and felt the instinctive trust a Bonwee had for a Grimari as Joarnon's arms closed around her tightly. She rubbed her cheek against his chest in a totally non-sexual way as he rested his cheek on the top of her head. Their two species were like halves of a whole, only Denali was her other half. She raised her palm to his rough-hewn face.

"You would be quite striking with Felisian ethnic markings, Joarnon. No woman of any species could resist looking at you."

Joarnon growled in his throat. "You're quite a firebrand for a Bonwee. No wonder the Felisian claims you."

"I love him so much. And he loves me."

"I know. I just wanted you to know I would guard you if you needed me to. It's not in me to see you left unprotected and vulnerable."

"I'm safe here. If necessary, even the doctor would defend me. The captain and first officer, First Com, First Nav--they'd all shield me while I stay on the ship." The baby chose that moment to kick hard.

"Your little one is awake and feisty. I believe he's protecting his mother while his father is injured."

"Not from you, Joarnon. Go on. Emir needs to be on his way."

He gave her a last squeeze and then stepped away from her. She was momentarily bereft without a Grimari, but she lifted her chin and was strong. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mala," Emir said warmly.

"Contact us if you need us," Joarnon reminded her.

"I will."

\* \* \* \*

Mala was alone, sitting by Denali's bedside and holding his hand when the medic arrived a while later. After a cursory examination he spoke the words she dreaded hearing. "You're going to need sutures."

"I was afraid of that."

"I'll numb the area so you won't feel any pain."

As the medic was suturing there was a knock on the door. "Come in," Mala called. Captain SoAhnor and First Officer Marwan entered the room. She watched as the Captain took in Denali's bandaged form on the bed and the medic sewing up her bloody gash.

His face darkened. "Madam Avonee, you're been injured?" his voice was outraged.

"Yes, Captain. By the crewman trying to kill Denali so that he could mate with me." She was surprised to hear the angry bite in her voice.

"We have dozens of injured and security is still rounding up crew on the planet. I gave the order to withdraw, but some crew refused to obey it. Never in Felisian history has there been rioting, violence and insurrection like this, I assure you."

"I believe you, Captain. I saw it happening. I'm an empath and I sensed the tension in the crew. I knew something wasn't right but I didn't have enough experience of Felisians to make sense of what I saw and felt."

"Will you tell me and First Officer Marwan what you know?"

"Certainly. It will take my mind off what the medic is doing." Mala relayed what she knew from her initial stay on the planet, her week on the ship and the last three weeks again

on the planet.

"But you weren't affected, Madam Avonee?"

"No, and neither was Messer Perronee or his Grimari partner. The USP personnel seemed fine as well. It was the Felisians who were affected."

"But why one species and not the others?" Marwan mused.

"Yours is the only species based on animal DNA. Yours is the only species to bond together as a species. Your species is the only one that has mating time, again, tied to the animal DNA. I would look there for answers."

"Tell me how you and Lieutenant Denali came to be wounded," the Captain ordered. Mala described in horrifying detail how the riot began and spread, the crewman's lust to mate, the attack and what happened afterward. She was transported again in her mind to the scene of violence, to her feelings of helplessness and horror. She had felt safe with the Felisians, and now that trust was broken and she relayed this wariness to the captain and first officer.

"Would that man have raped me?"

"No!" the captain denied, but the first officer's silence and the look on his face claimed just the opposite.

"To kill Denali and rape me, and all for lust? Is that what Felisian society has lying dormant beneath a light veneer of civilization?" she asked, horrified at the idea.

"No!" Captain SoAhnor exclaimed. "Madam Avonee, don't think such things about Felisians or report them as fact or suspicions to USP. We have a long history of relatively peaceful existence, I told you that. You're badly shaken, as anyone in your position would be, but don't distrust the thousand crewmembers that stayed on board the ship because of what happened to the two hundred who were infected on the planet."

"I thought I was safe here. I know the doctor will protect me, but what about when he's asleep. I'm defenseless, Deni is helpless, and we're unprotected against anyone infected with the contagion. The USP Bonwee suggested I have a guard while my partner is recovering. Is a guard available, one who didn't go down to the planet?"

"Unfortunately, the security staff is very busy at the moment."

"Then would you ask USP to please send a guard over from their ship, Captain. When your security is less busy the USP guard can return to their ship."

"Do you really believe you're in danger from us, Madam Avonee?"

"I can't risk it. Blame it on hysteria if you want to, but I felt Deni dying today and I used all my strength to hold him to life. I don't have enough strength left to save him from another attack and I won't live six months after he's dead. I would die immediately with him except I carry a life form in my body that I cannot kill."

The captain and first officer protested her statement.

"A Bonwee bonds deeply with a partner, as I've done with Deni. A Bonwee suffers deeply when a partner is lost, as I suffered when my first partner died, but we're not made to survive the loss of more than one partner. And Deni is bonded to me emotionally, empathically and partially as my mate. I can't live without him alive. So is it any wonder I feel vulnerable and helpless here? Please, I'm so tired but I'm afraid to go to sleep."

"I think her adrenaline just bottomed out," the medic explained to the officers.

So that explained her sudden fear and uncertainty. She turned to the medic. "Are you finished yet?"

"Yes. I'll give you a shot for the pain if you want one."

"No. Please get Dr. Lazara for me."

"What do you need? I can help you."

"No. Please, I need Dr. Lazara." The medic looked confused by her request, but he went in search of the doctor.

"What do you need from us, Madam Avonee?" the Captain asked, looking concerned.

"I just want the Felisians off the planet and confined for awhile. Perhaps they'd better have mates with them, but I don't know about things like that. Your scientists and doctors should work with those from USP to isolate and identify the contagion as soon as possible. Would you contact USP as soon as possible regarding the security guard? Oh, I'm not sure yet if Deni and I will press charges against the crewman who attacked us. Attempted murder is a serious charge. I'm not sure I can prove attempted rape--and I know the penalty for rape."

"I believe we can handle things now, Madam Avonee." She was clearly making him nervous with her quick speech, but she was afraid of forgetting anything or running out of energy before she'd told them everything they needed to know.

"Thank you, Captain, First Officer. Deni will need time off to heal." This last statement came completely out of the blue.

The captain looked down at her and a paternal look was on his face. He reached out his hand to her and she gave him hers. She could feel her eyes fill with tears, which she felt shamed her with a show of weakness.

"Everything's going to be fine, Madam Avonee. Denali will heal. You take care of him and yourself and we'll take care of everything else."

He let go of her hand and turned to leave the room. First Officer Marwan stopped in front of her. "Madam Avonee. You have every reason to be distraught in the wake of what happened today. I know that you'll be strong and fierce again tomorrow. We'll protect you and Lieutenant Denali, don't doubt it."

"Thank you, First Officer."

Marwan passed Dr. Lazara on his way out of the room. Mala breathed a mixed sigh of relief. This would be difficult, but necessary.

"Mala, what do you need that Medic Jari couldn't help you with?"

"Dr. Lazara, you haven't set foot on the planet, have you?"

"No, I've been too busy. Why?"

"You wouldn't hurt me. The only thing I have to fear from you is that you'd make me Felisian, is that right?"

"Yes," he said dryly, and then he sobered. "But not today. Today I'm ashamed of the behavior of my species."

"Doctor, I'm very tired, but I'm afraid to sleep. Will you guard me and Deni?"

Dr. Lazara's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. "You'd trust me to guard you?"

"Yes. You won't let anyone hurt me. Will you do it?"

"What about security? Oh, they must be very busy right now. What about USP?"

"A USP guard will come eventually, but I need to sleep now. Please help me."

"All right. Let me get some work to do while you rest. I won't be long."

Mala took off her boots and climbed onto the second bed. She would rather be in Denali's bed, but he had to heal now and his wound didn't need jostling. The doctor returned with an injector and she was frightened that he meant to sedate her.

Seeing her fear, Dr. Lazara quickly explained, "The sedative is for Denali, as I promised you." He injected Denali and put his instruments aside. Mala looked at Denali and was satisfied that he was doing well, and then she lay down. The doctor covered her with a soft blanket and she felt like a young girl again under his ministrations.

"You won't let anyone hurt Deni?"

"No. Why didn't you ask Medic Jari to guard you?"

"I don't know him. I know you," she answered simply. She yawned. "Thank you for saving Deni."

"You saved Denali. I just sutured his wound."

"Thank you, doctor," she murmured. She couldn't hold her eyes open. She was safe now. The only thing she had to fear was waking up Felisian. She smiled at that thought.

## Chapter Twenty

When Mala woke several hours later, she found a USP security guard in full uniform, insignia and heavy weaponry in the room with her. She sat up on the side of the bed, and the female guard approached her. This was another Petrosian with flattened nose and scaly brown skin.

"My name is Lexar," the guard said in Petrosian. "Ambassador Cobara assigned me to guard you and your partner until Felisian security can take over. Messer Perronee briefed me on your situation."

"Thank you, Lexar. You weren't on the planet today?"

"No, I'm part of the Ambassador's personal security."

"Oh, then I very much appreciate your taking time away from the Ambassador."

"I know how important Bonwees are to USP unity, so I volunteered to come here. Messer Perronee said your partner is your mate."

"Yes. His name is Denali, or Deni. My name is Mala. Deni won't be awake until tomorrow. The medical staff will be in and out of the room checking on us."

"Do you expect other visitors?"

"The captain might return or one of the ship's officers. They wear rank and insignia on their navy dress uniforms. You won't have trouble recognizing them as officers." Mala hesitated, and then pointed to Lexar's weaponry. "Lexar, were you planning to use lethal force?"

"If necessary. The Ambassador was adamant that nothing further should happen to you. I understand that Bonwees don't want people to die, and I'll do my best to honor your wishes, but if there's no way to avoid it, I'll shoot to kill. I was first in my USP class in shooting accuracy. That's why I'm in the Ambassador's guard."

Mala nodded. "I'll remember that." She climbed off the bed and walked over to Denali's bedside. Blood products dripped steadily into his veins, making him less pale. She placed her hand lovingly on his chest. His heart beat steady and strong, and his breathing was regular. His chest was warm again, like it should be. How she wished he wasn't sedated, but knowing Denali as she did, sedation was best for him right now. She studied his beloved face, untroubled now by pain lines. His life was very dear to her. She looked up to see Lexar watching her with intent curiosity.

"May I ask you questions, Mala?"

"Go ahead. I can see you're curious."

"He's obviously not Grimari and yet you're partners?"

"Yes. We're the first such partnership."

"You love him very much."

"Oh yes, very much."

"Petrosians don't take permanent mates, which I think is a shame, but we usually marry for life. Don't you think it's strange that Bonwee females don't take mates within their own species, but now they can take a permanent mate with the only other two species who can?"



That startled Mala. "Lexar, Deni and I may be further proof that Felisians were derived from Grimaris, based on what you just said. You weren't just first in shooting accuracy, were you?"

"I was rated first in intelligence," Lexar admitted modestly. "I was giving my service to USP, as Petrosians should, but I think I'd like to train to be an ambassador so I can do more good. Do you know how I might get into the training?"

"Tell Ambassador Cobara. She'll recommend you to USP if she feels you're ready."

"I'll do that. Thank you for your advice."

"You're welcome. Excuse me, but I need to make some calls." Mala contacted Dr. Lazara and thanked him for guarding her. Then she recommended limiting visitors to Denali's room. He agreed to discourage visitors at the infirmary entrance.

She contacted the captain next and asked that word be spread about the visitor restriction. Then she asked for an update on the situation on the planet.

"All Felisians are back on board ship and confined to their quarters. The crewman who attacked you and Lieutenant Denali is in the brig. Medical testing has begun of everyone who was on the planet, but many crewmembers are still feral, so interviews will have to wait. You'll be interested to know that both First Officer Marwan and Dr. Lazara confirm from seeing the crew that this was how Denali behaved on the day you were rescued. His behavior was attributed to several other causes, your condition being one of them."

Mala felt excited. "Then I was right! And Deni was calmer when I awoke later that day. The doctor could pinpoint how long it took for Deni to calm down."

"Dr. Lazara had to sedate Denali that day after he attacked a medical assistant. The sedative would have calmed him."

"Oh, I didn't know that."

"I didn't either. Lieutenant Denali had informed Dr. Lazara on the shuttle ride up to the ship that the two of you were mated. So when he attacked the assistant Dr. Lazara thought it was because the two of you were newly mated. The doctor simply informed First Officer Marwan that Denali was unconscious, but not why. There have been clues about the contagion but different people held separate pieces. All the evidence together would have alerted us there was something on the planet we needed to stay away from."

"Captain, what is USP doing?"

"They're taking samples of everything up to their ship for analysis. They're taking blood samples of everyone who was on the planet for two weeks and interviewing everyone. Ambassador Cobara says they should have a preliminary report by tomorrow."

"That's very good news."

"Are you feeling better, Madam Avonee?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I became hysterical in front of you."

"I wasn't upset by your becoming emotional. I understood."

"Captain, I know you have many things to do, but could you let me know when the equipment is brought up from the planet? I left my computer down there."

"You're in luck. Someone brought your computer with them. I'll have it delivered to you."

"Thank you, Captain."

"SoAhnor, out."

\* \* \* \*

A little while later, a young woman arrived at the doorway with Mala's computer.

She looked warily at the weapons on Lexar's belt.

"It's all right, Lexar. She's brought my computer."

Lexar let the young woman pass and she came straight to Mala and handed her the computer. "The captain said you needed this." Her eyes traveled over to the still form on the bed and she frowned. "You and Denali were injured?"

"Yes, there was a riot on the planet."

"I'm sorry you were hurt. I've never heard of a riot happening before."

"I can't give you details. That's for your captain to do."

"I understand. There's a lot of tension and grim faces on the ship today. The bridge has two shifts on duty right now. Security is everywhere." Her glance went to Lexar and back. "Even here. And you have USP security."

"The captain will tell you what you need to know. Be calm. What's your name? Will you run an errand for me?"

"Of course. My name's Elene."

"Elene, I have no clothes. Would you use my passkey to get into my cabin and bring me clothes to wear for several days? And my toiletries. And a book from the shelf by the bed, it's small with a dark brown cover."

"I'll be back with your things soon."

When Elene had left, Lexar turned to Mala. "Was that one a child?"

"No," Mala laughed. "Felisians tend to look younger than they are because they live so long."

"She seemed very young. I've never met any Felisians before."

"Most people haven't, Lexar. Felisians stay in this part of the universe where their two planets are. If you're going to be an ambassador someday you'll need to know that Felisians are different from the rest of USP because they're bonded together as a species. They don't really need the rest of USP, but they seem to like being a part of the group."

"I'll remember that."

"These next few days here may be your best opportunity to learn about, study and observe Felisians up close."

"I'll certainly take advantage of the opportunity while I'm here!" Lexar exclaimed excitedly.

Mala smiled to herself. Positive curiosity about other species helped eliminate fears about those species. Helping to eliminate fears and fostering communication and understanding between species were what Bonwees in USP service devoted their lives to. Today she'd done her job with Lexar. Pride blossomed in her chest.

The late afternoon passed uneventfully. Elene returned with Mala's things. The medical staff checked on Denali regularly. The medic checked on her. The quiet soothed her, gave her a chance to control her fears, to regain her strength and to simply watch Denali breathe. Her calm reasserted itself as she worked on trivial things and finally she was ready to make her reports to Ambassador Cobara on what she knew of the contagion, the riot and empathic linking.

A step at the door interrupted her thoughts and she looked up from the computer. Dr. Lazara was there with an assistant and both bore trays of food. He brought his tray to her table and placed it before her.

"It's time you had something to eat, Mala. I believe you missed lunch. I wasn't sure what your guard ate. I should have asked her, but I've been extremely busy. Please tell her

not to be offended if I've brought something she can't eat."

"Petrosians eat everything, doctor, but they like food very spicy."

"Then she'll be disappointed. I'll ask the staff to do better tomorrow. Mala, we're analyzing blood samples from every Felisian who went down to the planet. It's a great deal of work and I don't really expect to find anything in the blood since we found nothing in yours and Denali's. We've sedated most of the crew who were downside."

"Could the contagion be in the body tissues?"

"If that's so, we should find traces in the blood."

"Not if you're not specifically testing for it." Mala shook her head. "We need a sample of it so we know what we're looking for in the blood. The contagion is in something on the planet. Deni and I ate plants and drank the water during the second week. We breathed the air every day. What about the landing parties?"

"They ate food from the ship, so that rules out the plants from an ingestion perspective. They've been drinking the water and, of course, breathing the air. USP is testing the water and air."

"If it's the Felisian feline DNA that's susceptible, we should catch some of the small mammals and test them."

Dr. Lazara looked at her in awe and she blushed. "Mala, you're brilliant!"

"I'm just desperate. There's a large pond two hours walking distance to the north of our former base camp that contains aquatic creatures. They're not mammals but we might test them for comparative purposes. And we seemed to find mammals there more easily. Winged creatures live in the cliffs about two hours to the northwest of camp. Again, they're not really mammals."

"And you traversed this large an area every day in search of food?" Dr. Lazara marveled.

"We walked farther than that, but we had to eat."

"I'll let the Captain know and contact the scientists at USP."

Mala took a deep breath. "Doctor, why don't you take tissue samples from Deni and me while you're here? Deni won't feel anything and I'll bear any discomfort to help you."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. As Deni's mate I give you permission to take tissue samples. And for this procedure only, I give you permission to touch me medically."

"Let me get my equipment. I'll bring an assistant with me," Dr. Lazara replied excitedly.

"Doctor, could the contagion have bonded to the Felisian DNA in some way and you didn't catch it in the blood test?"

Dr. Lazara's face changed from alarm to surprise. "Bonded to the DNA? Mala, that's another brilliant thought! Why aren't you a scientist?"

"I work with people. My job is to investigate and troubleshoot and find workable solutions. I'm applying myself to the problem of the contagion in the same way."

"I'll be back. Keep thinking!"

When they were almost finished eating their dinners Dr. Lazara returned, bringing another man with him. "Mala, this is Chief Geneticist Badran. He helped do your DNA gene splice. He'd like to help take the tissue samples, if you agree. We'd like a blood sample, too."

She eyed Badran warily. He was too thin, as though he didn't remember to eat often

enough. His long mane was held off his face by what appeared to be a small surgical clamp. There were several other items holding back his mane, as though someone else had restrained it for him in a hurry. His gold eyes were bright with excitement.

"Your interest is in the possible DNA aspect of the contagion?" Mala asked him.

"Oh yes. Such an interesting theory, Madam Avonee. I can't wait to test it."

"You must confine your analysis to the specific question, Badran. I refuse permission for any other experimentation on Deni's or my DNA, especially mine."

"Madam Avonee, I have no intentions of angering you in any way. Dr. Lazara warned me about you."

"Very well. You may proceed." Mala felt a cold dread in the presence of the two people who could completely steal her Bonwee identity. She tried to shrug off the feeling, but was unable to. They had already made her forty percent Felisian, and it was a forty percent she would never regain.

"Mala, you don't have to fear us," Dr. Lazara said for her ears alone, and she looked up into his concerned face. She'd thought that outwardly she gave no indication of her fear, but she was obviously wrong.

"I'm trying not to," she whispered.

"I'll draw samples from you, and Badran will draw the same samples from Denali. I'd like to take a sample of the lung tissue. It requires using a long thin needle and will hurt some, but if you're right about the contagion being in the planet's air and stored in the tissue, the sample could provide valuable information."

"Go ahead, but warn me before you do it. You'll take a sample from Deni, too?"

"Yes. Badran and I can do them at the same time so you're able to see the procedure."

"I'd like that."

Mala turned her head and watched Badran as he took his samples from Denali: hair, including follicles, skin, inside the nose and mouth, blood and finally the lung tissue. The procedure was painful, as Dr. Lazara had said it would be, and she could do nothing but breathe shallowly through it. She was glad that Denali was sedated for this procedure--he didn't need to feel any more pain. After what seemed a long time, but was in reality only several minutes by Mala's wrist chrono, the procedure was finished and the small puncture wound bandaged. She breathed deeply again.

"Doctor, I've had another thought regarding Deni's blood."

Dr. Lazara looked eager and alert. "What is it?"

Badran turned to listen as well.

"You've just diluted Deni's blood with blood products from other people, people who weren't on the planet. You won't get an accurate evaluation from his blood now."

"Blast!" Dr. Lazara cursed in frustration. "Why didn't you say something before we gave Denali plasma?"

"I just thought of it. Besides, the medic gave Deni plasma on the planet and I was unable to speak until after Deni's surgery."

"I don't mean to blame you, Mala. I should have thought of it sooner. It's just that Denali has had the longest exposure to the contagion."

"Would there be any undiluted blood anywhere in Deni's body?"

Dr. Lazara's face was luminous with excitement. "Mala! Denali's bone marrow contains new blood that hasn't yet mixed with the other blood in his body! Will you give us permission to draw a sample of his bone marrow?"

"That's invasive and very painful. Besides, his bone marrow is inside me and I'm not affected by the contagion."

"Mala, please, we need an undiluted blood sample. We only need a small amount so it will be much less painful than when we did the bone marrow transplant."

Mala considered for a moment, and then nodded. This was too important to refuse. Denali's body might contain the answers they were seeking. "Please cause Deni the least amount of pain possible," she begged them and both men nodded.

"I'll get what I need and be right back."

Mala moved to Denali's side and took hold of his hand. Dr. Lazara reappeared in her peripheral vision and she turned to watch him work without letting go of Denali's hand. The procedure took only a little longer than removing tissue from the lung and the needle was only a little bigger. When they were finished, Mala sighed deeply.

"Have you thought of anything else we should test?" Dr. Lazara asked as he covered Denali again.

"No. I hope you'll get the answers from the samples you've just taken. I do suggest you test several other people who spent more than two weeks on the planet the same way you're testing Deni."

"Good idea. We'll be in the lab if you think of anything else."

"Dr. Lazara," Mala halted him with a hand on his arm, "When will Deni wake up?"

"The sedative will wear off in about three hours. He might sleep the rest of the night or he might wake up on his own," he answered knowingly. "You need your mate."

"I'm lonely without him."

"Try to sleep while you wait. You still look tired."

"I feel tired. You didn't give me a sedative, did you?"

"No. It's natural from everything you've been through today. It's early evening. Why don't you lie down and try to sleep."

"The guard can't stay up all night."

"I'll have a cot brought in for her. It will be a tight fit in here, but someone would have to get through her to get to you or Denali."

"Thank you, doctor."

"Thank , Mala. You've been an inspiration to me today."

Dr. Lazara and Badran left with their precious samples. They were like two boys granted the toys they desired most. They were too excited for her peace of mind. She closed her computer, explained about the cot to Lexar and what to do if Denali wakened. She fell asleep almost as soon as she lay down in her bed.

In the middle of the night she awoke with a start. Her heart hammered in her chest as she listened for whatever had woken her. She fought against the fear.

"Mala!" Denali's voice was weak and hoarse.

With relief she scrambled from the bed. Lexar watched from the cot, her weapons ready. Mala stepped to the side of Denali's bed and his hand clutched at her. His eyes, reflecting the dim lighting, stared hungrily at her.

"Mala, I need you." The grip of his right hand was strong, as he tugged her close.

"How do you feel, Deni?" She placed her palm on the side of his face and smoothed back his mane.

"Wretched. It didn't hurt when I watched the surgery from your body. Now it hurts!"

"I'll call for pain medication."

"No. I just need you. Come up here with me."

"We're not alone, Deni." Denali's eyes followed her glance to Lexar.

"Who's that?" he whispered, grimacing and rubbing gingerly at his bandaged chest.

"Her name is Lexar. She's Petrosian and she's our USP guard, courtesy of Ambassador Cobara."

"Why do we need a guard on the ship?"

"It's a long story that I'll tell you in the morning. Tonight just know that she's keeping us safe. I'll come up there with you, but we can't mate while she's here."

"I don't know if I mate right now, but I could try."

"Not tonight." She climbed carefully into his bed and under the covers with him. He groaned with pain as she lay down beside him. "Lie still, Deni. Come over into my body and mind and I'll take your pain away."

"Yes, that's what I want," he sighed heavily.

She kissed him deeply and he flowed over into her body and her mind where there was no pain. "Mmm, Deni," she savored his loving presence.

"I love you, Mala. You saved my life ...."

She placed two fingers on his lips. "We're not going to talk tonight. I have you now, so go back to sleep. I'm here and I love you."

"Bossy," he murmured sleepily. "Sweet Mala--" His grip on her lessened as he curled up in her mind.

Mala wrapped her arm carefully around his waist and tucked herself up against his warm body. She was content now that she was next to her love. She sensed that Denali was asleep, sighed deeply and followed him into slumber.

\* \* \* \*

In the morning Denali woke to the softness of his mate lying within the circle of his right arm. He nuzzled her face and then sought her sleep-warmed lips. She kissed him back automatically and he tightened his arm around her. The kiss was lengthy and loving and his body became slowly aroused. There was still an aching pain in his chest and movement of his left arm pulled painfully on the wound. If there was to be mating this morning--and he wanted it desperately--Mala would have to take the dominant role.

"Ask the guard to wait outside so we can mate. She knows you're my mate, doesn't she?"

"She knows." Mala sat up in the bed and turned toward the door. He looked in that direction too. Lexar was awake and getting up from the cot. Apparently no explanation would be necessary.

Mala spoke to Lexar in a gentle voice. The guard bobbed her head in acknowledgement and left the room.

Denali made the loving last as long as he could, but his lack of strength frustrated him. He needed to reaffirm his love with Mala after almost dying yesterday. They'd always been physical in showing their love for one another and today couldn't be any different. Afterwards Mala lay on his right side facing him.

"I love you, Mala," he panted.

"I love you, too, Deni. It wasn't too much for you, was it?"

He smiled. "No. I needed you."

"I missed you while you were unconscious. I needed to hear your voice and see your eyes, to see you move on your own and see your smile."

"How long has it been since the surgery?"

"About seventeen hours I think."

His heart rate had been slowing. Now it sped up again. "Why was I unconscious so long? Were there complications? Is that why I'm so weak?"

"No, Deni. Dr. Lazara sedated you afterwards so I would sleep."

"I don't understand. He sedated so would sleep?"

"He knew you'd want to mate if you were awake. And he was right. I was very tired after the surgery. I used up all my strength keeping you alive and I needed to recharge. Anyway, you feel weak because someone almost killed you and you had surgery to repair the damage. No one jumps out of bed and runs around after that happens to them."

"It's so frustrating. I'm tired just from mating with you."

"We're pretty vigorous when we mate. We're usually a little tired afterwards."

"We weren't vigorous today."

"Deni, you have to be patient. It's going to take a few weeks for you to heal. I need to let Lexar back into the room."

"All right," he sighed. "I can't mate any more anyway." He made his tone regretful.

"Deni," Mala chided him. He bared his incisors in a toothy smile.

Mala pulled up his pants and covered him, then climbed from the bed to get dressed. She leaned over the bed and he lifted his lips for her sweet kiss.

She went to the door and let Lexar back in. This was the first Petrosian Denali had ever seen and he wished he knew how to speak her language. Why did he and Mala need a USP guard anyway? Mala brought Lexar to his bedside where he studied her curiously. Her brown eyes were bright and full of intelligence. Her skin was brown and smoothly scaly. Mala made introductions to the guard in a language with sliding sounds, and then she turned to him.

"Deni, this is Lexar. She's one of the ambassador's personal security guards."

"Thank you for guarding Mala," he said in determined Basic.

Lexar questioned Mala, who shook her head and said something in a language using sibilant sounds. Lexar nodded and left them alone.

"Deni, Lexar is guarding both of us."

"Why? I don't need protection."

"I felt you did. I didn't feel safe here after your surgery."

"Who did you tell that to?" he demanded.

"I told the captain. The captain told USP. Ambassador Cobara sent Lexar personally."

"No," he groaned. He couldn't believe what she'd done. "Mala, this is my ship."

"I was afraid and I was all alone." Her words made his heart hurt. He'd shirked his responsibility to her.

"I'm sorry I left you alone." He took her hand in his. "I'm awake now, so you don't need a guard. You can send her back to her ship."

"No I can't. Not until Felisian security becomes available."

"What is security doing? Is the riot still going on down on the planet?"

"No. All the Felisians are confined to the ship until the scientists can identify the contagion."

## Chapter Twenty One

"What contagion?" The forcefulness of his question made Denali grab his chest as pain stabbed him at the incision sight. It wasn't as painful as the original wound, but it still stole his breath for several moments.

"The contagion that's affected you and every other Felisian who spent more than two weeks on the planet. Medics and scientists on both ships and USP scientists on the planet are searching for it right now. I believe Felisian security is still helping the medical staff take blood and tissue samples from everyone involved in the riot. I gave permission for Dr. Lazara and Badran to take samples from you and me."

"I'm not infected by any contagion! Except for the knife wound, I feel fine."

"You infected, and your behavior is how I proved to the doctor and the captain that a contagion exists." Mala laid out her chain of reasoning and as he listened. He was at first stunned, amazed, horrified and then convinced of the rightness of her theory.

"So the contagion caused me to feel the way I did, to feel crazy and out of control?"

"Deni, you asked me yourself if there was something in the food or water. There must be."

"But I feel all right."

"When you're on board ship you feel all right. But when you're on the planet you feel odd and tense. You feel like you need to mate frequently."

"Do they know anything about the contagion yet?"

"No. They've only known about it for seventeen hours. They started taking samples from people fourteen hours ago. I'm sure you'll be one of the first people to find out, since you've had the greatest exposure."

"I never grew violent like the people in the riot. I've never seen Felisians act like that before."

"You took your violence out on me through the act of mating--"

"No! I never hurt you, Mala. Only that one time did I force you."

"I was going to say that our matings weren't violent, but they were aggressive and very energetic. That's how your violence was channeled, directly into my, admittedly, willing body."

"I disagree. I think we just love to mate together."

Mala blushed prettily and his heart beat faster at seeing her small smile and her dimples. She'd been too serious for the past twenty-four hours, and with good reason.

"I do love mating with you, Deni, but that's because I love you."

"As I love you. So your theory about us is wrong."

"I've been thinking about us while you were unconscious." Denali clenched with anxiety at her words. "I was wondering if the contagion forced your actions when you bonded me as your partner and mate, maybe even when you got me pregnant. Perhaps you were seeking stability in a world where you questioned what was wrong with you."

"No, Mala! Stop thinking that way. You promised yourself to me as my mate and wife. Mating time gave me the opportunity to claim those promises from you early. I love



you."

"Maybe that's the contagion, too. It feels real enough though."

"It is," Denali said forcefully, but his strength had waned. He pressed his left hand lightly on the bandage near the wound to ease the ache in his chest. "Mala, I'm tired. I can't argue with you any more. But don't do anything we'll regret. You're mine and you're going to stay mine."

"But Deni, what if ...?"

"I need some pain medication," he interrupted, deliberately derailing the conversation. Mala was extremely vulnerable to doubts right now and he was physically incapacitated and only able to offer limited comfort to her.

She hesitated for a moment. He was sure she could sense his attempted misdirection. "I'll get the doctor." Mala paged the doctor and Dr. Lazara arrived in moments.

"I was just coming to check on you, Denali. What do you need?"

"Do you have any pain medication without a drowsy side affect?"

"I have a mild painkiller. How bad is it?"

"It's a deep ache. I just need you to take the edge off."

"You sound tired already. I think you may have done too much too soon this morning." The doctor's eyes slid pointedly to Mala and she blushed.

"Mala, why don't you take a shower while Dr. Lazara is here? That way you know somebody is taking care of me and you won't have to worry." He made the request a command so that she would go. He needed time alone with the doctor.

She looked at them--trying to read their feelings--and he projected his love to her. She nodded and went into the bathing room.

As soon as the door closed, Denali asked, "There's a contagion, and I'm infected?"

"We believe so. Did Mala tell you we took blood and tissue samples from you?"

"Yes. I feel fine now, but Mala's concerned the contagion has dictated my behavior, that it forced me to bond her as a mate. I need to ease her mind that that's not possible."

"I've found your mate to be a difficult woman sometimes. She won't let me treat her medically, but she asked me to guard you both after your surgery."

"What! Why would she do that?"

"She had a major adrenaline crash yesterday. The medic treating her reported that she was talking calmly with the captain and first officer when it happened and after that she became emotional and frightened. That's when she asked for me. Maybe her fear about the bonding is residue from her crash yesterday."

"I don't think so. I slept in her mind part of the night and she was calm. And she was anything but fearful during our mating this morning."

"Denali, Mala is forty percent Felisian now. Perhaps she's affected by the contagion after all and this is one of her symptoms."

"No! Mala can't have an infection of any kind. She's carrying our baby!"

"I don't know for certain that she has the contagion, so don't panic. We'll know from her blood and tissue samples after we identify the contagion. I was just speculating on a possible cause for her insecurity."

Denali breathed deeply with his left palm flattened against his chest. Mala was fine; he couldn't believe anything else. He calmed himself the best he could.

"Let me check your wound. The surgery went perfectly, by the way. Could you tell that from where you were?" Dr. Lazara peeled back the bandage to view the wound.

"It was strange to watch, knowing it was my body lying there and your hands were in my chest. I think you're a skilled surgeon."

"Thank you. I had to do my best after what Mala did to save you. I was afraid if I did less than my best I'd have to face her anger again, and I couldn't do that."

Denali laughed weakly, holding his chest. "How deep did the knife go in? I couldn't tell."

"About ten millimeters. You were incredibly lucky to have Mala to keep you alive."

"I know. Now I have to convince her. How long will it take to locate the contagion?"

"I don't know. Mala suggested where to look, but it could still take days, maybe even longer. We're working non-stop to find it. Do you want to sit up today?"

"Of course. I'd like to stand up. I need to be able to take care of Mala and protect her myself."

"That's going to take a week or so. You'll take several naps today, maybe only one tomorrow and probably none the day after that. You're young and healthy, but it's still going to take at least a week to feel better. I'm going to put your arm in a sling for the next few days to keep pressure off the chest muscles."

As the doctor put a sling around Denali's arm he asked, "Denali, did you feel like rioting at the time the riot broke out?"

"No, I felt like mating. Mala and I were heading back to our tent. I admit, the feeling was overpowering and we'd just mated two hours before that."

"So your feelings of aggression were channeled to your mate."

Shock vibrated through Denali. "Mala said the same thing before you got here. I'd never hurt her, doctor. I love her."

"I didn't think you would hurt her. Calm down. I'm curious about how the contagion affects you."

"I've never felt violent, except yesterday when the crewman attacked us. I've always felt very strongly compelled to mate with Mala."

"I wonder what your reaction would have been had you been stranded on the planet with a man. Would the two of you have fought and perhaps killed one another?" Dr. Lazara mused.

Once again Denali felt stunned. "You think the reaction to others depends on gender?"

"I'm just gathering data. The crewman who attacked you wanted to mate with Mala. He had one reaction to her and another reaction to you."

"That's because I prevented him from having what he wanted."

"How did you feel during the confrontation with him?"

Denali remembered the details of the fight with the crewman. "I was angry. Mala is my acknowledged mate after all. I was territorial. I became coldly furious and after he stabbed me I wanted to kill him as soon as I could get Mala to safety. I never wanted to kill anyone except Malchovists before."

"And while you were fighting with the crewman, how did you feel about Mala?"

"She was mine!" Denali exclaimed, then tempered his voice. "And I needed to protect her."

"Hmm. I'll document your answers so we can compare them to what the others felt. We'll be interviewing the other crewmembers today. They needed to calm down so we sedated most of them."

"You'll keep me informed, doctor?"

"Mala wants updates so I'll tell you both at the same time."

"Mala seems to be very involved with the search for the contagion."

"She's your mate, Denali. You know what she's like. She put her brain to the problem yesterday and got amazing answers. I expected her to have more answers today."

"She's too busy being my mate today."

"Yes, I noticed the guard in the hall this morning."

"What are you two talking about?" Mala asked, her voice dripping suspicion. She took Denali's outstretched hand. Her curls were damp and her face freshly scrubbed.

"I told Denali I expected more answers from you about the contagion this morning. He said you've been busy."

Mala blushed fire red and looked accusingly at Denali.

"I get to sit up today," he tried to deflect her.

"Good. Then I can sit in a chair next to you instead of standing. Dr. Lazara, what's the status on the investigation?"

Dr. Lazara gave Denali a pointed look. "Help me get Denali sitting up and I'll update you."

As the doctor slowly raised the head of the bed, Denali breathed deeply. He watched Mala's mobile face to take his mind off the pressure on the wound caused by his body resettling in bed. Her face was vibrantly alive as she fired questions at the doctor. Her eyes sparkled, her brows rose and fell, and her dimples flashed intermittently.

She wasn't nervous around the doctor now that she was no longer a patient. She stood proudly erect and her hand gestures were fluid and expansive. Lazara was another man that Mala was unaware was a male. He was just the doctor. Denali sighed contentedly at this further proof that he stood out from every other man in her mind.

"Deni? You're staring at me."

"You're beautiful and you're mine." He made his words a caress.

"Stop it." Mala's blush was rosy and she peeked at him from her lowered face. She squeezed his hand.

Dr. Lazara cleared his throat. "I don't think I'm needed here. I'll check on you later, Denali. Mala, the medic will check on you, too."

"Thank you, doctor."

\* \* \* \*

That afternoon while Denali napped Mala worked quietly at her computer. Lexar sat in a chair by the door. The snap of Lexar's weapon alerted Mala to a visitor and her head jerked up to see if the visitor should be welcomed or feared. Lexar stood at attention with her weapon down, so Mala wasn't surprised to see Captain SoAhnor in the doorway.

"Hello, Captain."

"I came to check on Lieutenant Denali, but I see he's asleep."

She followed his eyes to the bed, where Denali's head rested to one side, trapping some of his tawny mane between his cheek and his shoulder. His eyes were shut, the lashes bronze crescents against his golden skin. His face was peaceful. "Deni's been asleep awhile. I'll wake him." She went to his bedside and gently shook him. "Deni, wake up."

His golden eyes slowly opened and then he smiled at her. His eyes swung past her shoulder and he straightened noticeably. "Captain." His voice was slightly blurred from sleep.

"Lieutenant Denali, how are you feeling?"

"My chest aches, I'm weak and I tire quickly, but I'm alive."

"I'm very glad about that. There would have been far too many repercussions from your death. I want to hear about the riot from your point of view, and about how the contagion affects you personally."

Mala listened as Denali answered the Captain's questions. Several times his eyes slid to hers to reassure and apologize to her for his answers, especially when he talked about his mating urges. Why were these Felisians so open about their mating habits? Denali squeezed her hand, but how could she feel comfortable? When he discussed mating, he divulged private information about her that was no one's business but theirs. This part of loving a Felisian was hard and uncomfortable. But to love someone you had to take their faults with the parts of them that were wonderful, didn't you? Mala hadn't paid much attention to other people in love, and now she wished she had because then she would know the answer.

Behavior of the different species--such as Denali's Felisian behavior--was stored in the brain. "What if the contagion is stored in the brain tissues?"

## Chapter Twenty Two

"What do you mean, stored in the brain?" Captain SoAhnor snapped. He stiffened, obviously horrified.

Denali looked decidedly uneasy.

"Don't certain parts of the brain control certain behaviors? Lust and aggression are symptoms of the contagion and aren't those two behaviors in one part of the brain? How different is the Felisian brain from, say, my brain? I certainly think differently and act differently than Deni does and I'm not infected with the contagion. Can we find out in a non-invasive way?"

"The contagion doesn't appear to be destructive to the host. Look at Deni. He's been infected for almost five months and he's had no breakdown in his ability to function. Or should he be tested to see if he's lost such insignificant amounts of function that we can't tell yet? Could it be a slowly debilitating disease--?"

"Stop it, Mala!" Denali demanded. His ethnic markings stood out starkly against the pallor of his face. "There's nothing wrong with me."

"How do we know? For that matter, how do I know I'm not affected in a different way than you are? Captain, I could have been mistaken in saying only Felisians were affected. If this contagion resides in the brain then it's possible it's in my brain too. I don't know the physical differences between our two species, so non-Felisians could be at risk just being on the planet. Captain, I'd rather not risk anyone else. Would you contact Ambassador Cobara and express my concerns and ask her to order an immediate withdrawal of personnel from the planet?"

"Madam Avonee, are you certain?"

"How can I be certain? I'm just trying to find the contagion." Mala was frustrated with her lack of scientific background and medical knowledge. "Someone trained in science and medicine should be here to direct us. Captain, find Dr. Lazara and talk to him, but I think it would be prudent to have USP withdraw quickly."

"Your caution is infectious." The captain moved to the Com panel and gave instructions to First Com to contact the ambassador.

"Mala," Denali's voice was tense. She turned back to him. He'd regained most of the color in his face, but there were lines of tension around his mouth. "It can't be true. I'm fine. You're fine. The baby's fine. What you're describing is horrible."

"I was taught to think, Deni, and these are the conclusions I've drawn. We can't discount the possibility because it's too horrible to consider. We need to find answers and there's the logical place to look."

"But you're alarming the crews of two space ships, and possibly for nothing."

"It's not for nothing."

"What's going on?" Dr. Lazara demanded from the doorway.

"I've just asked Ambassador Cobara to pull the USP crew from the planet," Captain SoAhnor explained. "Madam Avonee thinks the contagion might be in the brain tissue. She thinks it might be in everyone's brain tissue, but that it might affect the Felisians differently

due to physical differences in the brain."

"Of course!" Dr. Lazara exclaimed. "Mala, you're brilliant. We need to scan someone's brain immediately to see if your theory proves correct. Denali--"

"No! You're not doing anything to my brain!" Denali pulled his hand away from Mala's and splayed his fingers into his mane on the right side of his face.

The doctor walked to Denali's bed. "But you've had the greatest exposure."

"I said no!" He looked accusingly at Mala. "I don't want anyone doing anything to my brain!"

"A scan is non-invasive, Denali," Dr. Lazara explained. "We take a look into your brain without physically going inside."

"Then you won't find any contagion if you're just looking into my brain. Whatever the contagion is, it's too small to see."

Captain SoAhnor intervened. "Lieutenant Denali, I don't want to order you, but I will. We need this information for the good of the crew."

"Captain, that's unfair. It's my brain we're discussing, not my arm or my foot!"

"Dr. Lazara says the scan will be non-invasive. Let him perform the scan," the captain insisted firmly.

Denali's face worked through anger, fear, despair and finally resignation. "All right. Do the scan."

Dr. Lazara hurried from the room. Mala sensed Denali's anger so she didn't attempt to hold his hand. Everyone in the room remained stationary until the doctor returned with a gurney and a team of assistants. The team carefully transferred Denali to the stretcher and she stood to the side as they wheeled him from the room. She was both afraid of what they would find and anxious to have answers about the contagion. Her heart beat faster.

In a few minutes, Dr. Lazara came back into the room. "Come with me Captain, Mala."

She caught her breath in alarm. "What happened? What's wrong?"

"Wait until we get back to Denali," he instructed her.

When they arrived in the scanning room, she went immediately to Denali's side. His face was white and she gripped his hand hard.

Dr. Lazara pointed to the scan. "There's a presence in the left side of Denali's brain. That's the part of the Felisian brain that controls aggression and lust, where the feline DNA is centered. Mala was right. The contagion has clustered there. We'll have to do a scan on several others who went down to the planet to compare their brain tissue to Denali's, and we'll need to scan some non-Felisians who were on the planet, as well."

"You can scan me," Mala offered.

"I wish we could, but your pregnancy won't allow us to scan you unless it's an emergency."

"Oh."

"What's the next step, doctor?" the captain asked.

"Invasive procedure, I'm afraid. We'll need to do a tissue biopsy. That will give us the contagion. Denali?"

"I don't want you going inside my brain!"

"Deni," Mala spoke quietly and he turned pained eyes to her. "There's a foreign microorganism in your brain. I don't want it there, I don't want it to dictate your behavior and I don't want anything to happen to you. Please let the doctor find out what it is and how

to cure it."

For long moments he digested what she'd said, and then he said resignedly, "All right, I'll do it for Mala. When do you want to do it, doctor?"

"Now. We need answers. I'll have to sedate you and shave a small spot of your mane. You won't notice any mane missing the spot will be so small. I'll need to gather geneticist Badran while you're being prepared, then we'll begin. Captain, Mala, please wait in the hall. We have to move Denali into the surgery for the procedure."

As Mala watched the gurney being pushed out of the room ahead of her she could feel Denali's fear. She had to comfort herself with the knowledge that Dr. Lazara was a skilled surgeon and this procedure would give them answers.

"Madam Avonee, do you want to go back to your room to wait?" the captain asked her solicitously.

"No, I don't want to go far from Deni. Captain, since Deni was rescued have you noticed any change in his behavior?"

"He's a devoted and loving mate to you, and very possessive. That's the only difference I've noticed, but his actions towards you aren't unusual for a permanent mate, except perhaps they're fiercer because you're not fully bonded to him."

"That's reassuring. I wondered about his behavior after I realized there was a contagion."

"Madam Avonee, may I be blunt?"

Oh no, Mala gulped. Now the captain would talk to her about things her own mother would find embarrassing to discuss with her. "Captain, I'm very uncomfortable with Felisian bluntness."

"This won't embarrass you. Lieutenant Denali's a good man, a good officer and well liked by many people on this ship. It's obvious to me and to other people who've seen the two of you together that he loves you deeply and wholeheartedly. That's why he chose you as his mate. I've been told that your species doesn't take permanent mates, except with Grimaris, and those instances are rare. But you've allowed a partial bonding with Denali. Trust in that bonding and don't doubt his actions. Don't assign motives other than the real one--that he's completely in love with you."

"I'm fond of Denali; I feel almost fatherly towards him. He's been on board my ship for five years and I've always been able to trust him. Before the mission to retrieve you he was happy and content, but now as your mate he almost glows with happiness. And when he's touching you or holding you there's serenity on his face I've never seen there before. I'm glad he chose you as his mate if that's how you make him feel. He's a good man, Madam Avonee, and he deserves the happiness he's found with you."

Mala swallowed a lump in her throat. Her heart was so full after listening to the captain's words. Other Felisians could see what Denali felt for her, so it must be real. It had to be real. "I love him, Captain, very much."

The Captain smiled. "That's very good to know. He deserves nothing less. I just wanted you to know that I'm glad he has you now."

"Thank you, Captain."

In a little while Badran appeared from the surgery carrying a bagged syringe in his gloved hands. His surgical mask was still on and his eyes shone bright above it. "Captain, I'll begin analysis of this immediately and let you know as soon as I know something."

"Is that contagious?" the captain asked, pointing to the syringe.

"I ... don't believe so, but we'll take extra precautions. Excuse me." Badran hurried past them. He was radiating intense excitement.

Mala looked expectantly towards the surgery doorway and soon Dr. Lazara appeared, followed by the gurney with a pale Denali on it. She took Denali's slack fingers in her hands. His fingers were chilled.

The doctor laid his hand on her arm. "Everything went perfectly. It's a fairly easy procedure to perform once a hole is made in the skull. We just take extra time and care because we're working with the brain. The only reason I sedated Denali was to keep him completely still, but it's a short-lasting sedative, so he'll wake up very soon. He might feel some pain at the incision site, but I don't expect any other side effects."

Mala expressed her greatest fear. "How long until we know how to destroy the contagion without hurting Deni?"

"That question has top priority on this ship right now." Dr. Lazara looked to Captain SoAhnor for verification and the captain nodded. "Most of us will lose sleep working long hours until we find an answer. This is all unknown territory, Mala, so I couldn't begin to guess at the time involved. Try to keep calm. Your mate needs your support right now."

"I'll try. I'm just so frightened for Deni!"

Dr. Lazara gave her arm a squeeze. "Denali's fine as far as we can tell."

"Doctor," the captain addressed him, "I need to return to the bridge. You'll test the others as you did Denali?"

"Yes, Captain. I'll begin as soon as I get Denali settled. What if any of the crew refuses the scan or the biopsy?"

"Consider it an order for the crew to follow and tell them I said so."

"Yes, Captain."

"Madam Avonee," the captain held out his hand and she placed her much smaller hand in his. He projected confidence and comfort. "Remember what we talked about."

"Yes, Captain." He released her hand and strode away toward the infirmary exit.

Mala watched the medical staff gently transfer Denali back into his bed. Dr. Lazara checked his vital signs, and then hummed his satisfaction. "He'll be awake soon. Keep him calm and stop worrying."

In a few minutes Denali began stirring and Mala entwined her fingers with his. His hands had warmed since the biopsy was performed. His burnished lashes lifted slowly and he smiled at her, then a furrow appeared between his brows and the smile faded.

"The procedure is over and you're fine Deni. How do you feel?"

Denali's right hand lifted to his head and he gingerly felt the area of the biopsy. "It hurts a little. Do they know anything yet?"

"It was only fifteen minutes ago. Even Badran isn't that good," she joked lightly.

"I was hoping the answer would be immediate."

"Dr. Lazara said he had no idea how long it would take because they're working with the unknown. He went to test the others who were on the planet. That's going to take awhile."

"Is he going to scan them and take brain tissue from them, too?"

"Yes. You were the first."

"Mala, there's nothing wrong with me. I'm the same man I've always been. You've got to believe me."

"Your captain believes that, too. He talked to me about you while you were in



surgery."

"What did he say? And did you believe him?"

"He said what he's seen of your behavior is normal for someone who's permanently mated."

"You didn't answer my other question. Did you believe him?" Denali demanded.

"I want to believe him. He seemed so sure and I know he wasn't lying--"

"But you still have doubts."

"Deni--" She looked into his eyes with all her doubts and insecurities reflected there. "I'm so plain and ordinary, and you're so beautiful. You could have any mate in the universe. Why would you want me?"

"You think unless some microbe affected my mind that I wouldn't want you?" he asked incredulously. "Mala, from the very first moment I saw you I wanted you. I looked into your eyes and froze, all thought, breath and speech locked into immobility at the sight of you. And then you smiled at me and I was lost. I was yours from that moment on."

He gazed at her with such love in his eyes that her heart nearly burst with love in return. He continued, his voice ringing with truth. "I should have loved you right then. I knew that day that you were the one for me, my other half, and that was on the shuttle. That was long before any contagion infected me. I wanted you as my mate and the mother of my children." He smiled at her, and then grew serious again.

"I had to go slowly for you. You wouldn't have believed what I knew to be true had I told you on the shuttle. You told me you needed time, so I gave you as much time as I could, and then I claimed what was rightfully mine. But you were mine from the very first day."

"How could you know such a thing?" she breathed with a mixture of hope and incredulity.

"I became eligible to have children two years ago and started looking for a mother candidate. I wanted to contract a long-term marriage so my children would have a stable home, so I evaluated each woman I knew and met based on the characteristics I wanted in a wife and mother. But there was no one on the ship who embodied those characteristics. There was no one I remembered from my childhood who fit the criteria either.

"I was looking for a wife and mother when you came on board, and I found you were perfect for me. You met all my qualifications and more. You have laughter and passion, compassion and joy, loyalty and truth, fidelity and honor. And you're beautiful, compelling, sexy, and absolutely magnetic.

"You look at me with hungry eyes--to see me, to touch me, to hear my voice, to kiss me and to mate with me, hungry to love me. You have a brain and a heart and a body that I love. I feel decadent and rich reveling in your voice, running my hands through your curls, hearing your intelligent thoughts, watching your passion for justice. I love kissing you and mating with you. How could I not want all that when it's what I want too?"

"Deni, I love you so much."

He carefully pulled her down to him and she went willingly into his half embrace. She pressed her warm lips to his and sighed into his mouth. His kisses were marvelous. They were warmth and joy and love, a tingling pleasure, an emotional connection. The kiss lingered until Denali broke it finally, gasping for breath.

He huffed a laugh. "Too weak ... for kissing."

"You've done too much today. You need to rest."

"Yes. I'll need my strength ... for later."

"I believe you will," she purred.

That night Dr. Lazara joined them for dinner. "This is the only break I'm going to get for awhile, so I thought I'd combine two things and eat dinner with the two of you."

"Have you found out anything yet?" Denali asked eagerly.

"Deni, let the doctor eat a little first. Then he can tell us everything," Mala chided. Dr. Lazara gave her a sardonic look and she blushed. She was just as eager as Denali to hear an update and the doctor knew it.

After he'd eaten quickly, the doctor gave them an update. "We've scanned twenty-five crewmembers and had time to biopsy ten of those. The infection affects a larger area of the brain the longer the exposure to it. Needless to say, Denali, you have the largest area of infection so far. The biopsy samples all appeared similar to the naked eye, but I'll await further information from Badran and the scientists.

"I've not heard anything from him, by the way, and I doubt he'll remember to eat. I haven't received an update from the USP ship either, although I did send them my findings just now. They did manage to capture several mammals on the planet and the USP scientists have those too.

"All the crewmembers that went down to the planet are calmer today, though most seem restless. Mala, you were right. From interviews with crew it was discovered that sexual activity on the planet had tripled and one person experienced half a day of unscheduled heat."

Mala blushed, but she nodded acknowledgement.

"We also did as you suggested and paired crew from the planet with lovers and that helped channel their aggression. We didn't like to expose crew on the ship to the crew from the planet, but some of the rioters wanted specific lovers. Besides, the crew had already been exposed to the two of you for over a week after you were rescued. Denali, the solution of having a lover confirms your own experience on the planet."

Denali stared at Mala, looking flabbergasted. "You suggested giving them lovers??"

"I'm not much of a prude, Deni. I simply extrapolated using you as an example."

Mala knew that her face was fire red, even though she'd tried to disguise what she'd admitted about their experience on the planet.

Denali slipped into the Grimari language. "Is that what you call what we were doing? I hope you left out the details."

"Deni!" she chided him, but he was unrepentant.

Dr. Lazara cleared his throat. "Mala, if you think of anything else, page me. Denali, if you need anything, contact the staff. The infirmary is full of helpers now. I've got to get back to work."

"Thanks, doctor. We'll see you later," Denali said.

Dr. Lazara waved acknowledgement as he exited the room, clearly distracted by the work he was returning to.

"I wish we knew more. I wish USP would tell us what they've found," Denali complained as he adjusted his torso to a comfortable position. He grimaced at the movement and his left arm pressed his chest.

"I'll call Emir on the USP ship. He probably knows everything that's going on over there," she offered.

"Emir? When did you start calling Messer Perronee by his first name?" There was a slight edge to Denali's voice and his gaze sharpened. Then Mala felt his jealousy and

underlying it was a little uncertainty.

"After I shared his mind it didn't make sense to call him by his surname any more," she explained.

"I didn't want you to go to him. You're mine and you shouldn't have shared yourself with him like that."

"It was necessary to save your life. Besides, it felt different being with him than it does being with you. He didn't feel ... like my lover." She blushed fiercely as she tried to explain how she felt at that time. "Emir was comfortable to be with because he was Bonwee, but he wasn't you. You're so ... male."

Denali suddenly looked very satisfied and she wondered what she'd said to put that look on his face. He pulled her down for a kiss and she went willingly. She savored the warm fullness of his lips until he released her. "Go make your call. There's plenty of time tonight to show you how male I am. You're going to be very glad you're female."

Mala blushed again and purred, "Yes."

Second Com put through the call to Emir on the USP ship. In minutes Emir answered. "Mala, what's wrong?" he asked immediately in Bonwee.

"Nothing's wrong, Emir. We need an update from USP on the search for the contagion. Nothing official has been reported to the Felisian ship."

"The Ambassador gets frequent updates, so I can tell you the USP crew is working very hard here. The doctors have scanned a quarter of the crew who spent time on the planet and found no contagion in anyone of any species. Jo and I were both scanned and found to be clear. We knew you'd want to know that, so we asked to be scanned first."

"Thanks. I'm so relieved that you're both unaffected. I hope this means I'm unaffected too."

"If you were completely Bonwee that would be the case; however, I think you should talk to the Felisian doctor about testing you and your baby. Remember, you're forty percent Felisian and your baby is fully Felisian."

"I've felt no distress or aggressive behavior from the baby."

"Mala, please discuss it with the doctor. Jo asks that you look to your own health as well as the Felisians' health."

"All right. I'll discuss it with him."

"The medical staff has taken blood and tissue samples from everyone who was on the planet and are busy analyzing them. Nothing unusual has shown up yet in any species. We're waiting for test results on the animals brought up from the planet."

"You should have received a transmission from Dr. Lazara a little while ago telling you that we've located the contagion in the Felisians."

"Yes, I translated the message to the medical personnel, the scientists and to the Ambassador. Your partner is heavily infected, Mala?"

"Deni's the worst case so far. I knew there was a contagion, and I was the one to guess it was in the brain, but when I learned I was right it was still quite a blow. I'm afraid for Deni."

"There are so many people working on the problem, I'm sure they'll find a cure quickly. And Denali has been infected for more than four months, so I think it's a slow-moving disease."

"You're right, of course, but I don't want anything to happen to him."

"Denali survived a shuttle crash and a stabbing; he'll survive this crisis, too. Do you

need anything, Mala?"

"No. Deni and I are tired. It's been a wearying day for us. But I feel better just talking to you. Thanks, Emir."

"I'm glad you contacted me, Mala." Emir's voice had become husky, but it became brisk again as he continued. "I'll update you tomorrow morning, whether there's news or not."

"Thanks, Emir. Deni and I appreciate any news."

She returned to Denali's side and he entwined his fingers with hers. "How much of that did you understand?"

"A lot of it. So, none of the non-Felisians have the contagion."

"This just confirms that Felisian DNA is what attracted the contagion to your species. Deni, Emir and Joarnon want the baby checked." Her voice had gone high with strain.

His hand slid to her rounded belly. "Don't get upset. We should have expected it since Jeran is Felisian. But he's going to be all right."

"I don't want anything to happen to you or Jeran."

"I'm not leaving you Mala. Not ever."

## Chapter Twenty Three

Dr. Lazara joined them for lunch the next day and Denali was relieved for a news update at last. He'd spent most of the morning sitting upright in a chair, glad to be freed from the bed. The simple feat of being out of bed made him feel confident of his ability to take care of Mala again. He hated his helplessness when she needed him. She was his responsibility, she and his child. She was emotionally needy right now, as well as being physically at risk. He to protect and care for her.

He hoped Dr. Lazara brought good news, but it was difficult to wait while the doctor ate hardily. Denali used the time to study the doctor's face and he noted the signs of tiredness and strain--the shadows under the bloodshot eyes, the furrowed forehead, and the slight pallor of the skin. He wondered if the doctor had slept at all.

"Is Badran having lunch?" Denali blurted in concern.

Dr. Lazara flashed them a grim smile. "Oh yes. I sent Steffay to see that he ate, showered and changed his clothes. I knew he wouldn't stop otherwise."

"Have you stopped at all before now?" Mala asked him, her green eyes bright with concern.

"I slept a few hours, quite by accident I admit," Dr. Lazara informed her with a grin. Denali was amazed at the gentleness--and affection--in the doctor's tone towards her. Here was another male drawn to her and she didn't even see it. He was once again filled with smug satisfaction that he was the only man for her, the only male who could experience the fiery union of bodies they'd experienced last night. He'd used all his remaining strength to do it and now the doctor's demeanor towards her made him glad he'd exhausted himself that way.

Finally the doctor finished eating and he imparted the news. "We've had word from USP. They found the contagion in all the mammals from the planet. USP's analysis of the contagion exactly matches our analysis of the samples we took from the crew. We must concur that it is our feline DNA that the contagion attacks. Mala, once again you were right."

"It seemed the logical conclusion," she demurred, clearly not happy at having her theory confirmed.

"So what happens next?" Denali asked.

"Now we find a cure that doesn't hurt the host."

Mala's quiet gasp made Denali reach for her hand and squeeze it in support. "How long will that take, doctor?"

"There's no way to tell. I would guess a few days at the earliest, but I don't want to say anything to raise your hopes prematurely."

"Doctor, before you go, USP wants the baby and I tested for the contagion," Mala admitted.

Dr. Lazara studied her anxious face with its clear worry lines. "I knew it should be done, but I also knew you weren't emotionally ready. And I admit I wanted your mate awake and available to be with you." He turned to Denali. "Will you feel up to moving around

tomorrow? We'll do the scan on Mala first. The test on your son won't take long and she'll be awake during it."

"I sat up all morning and I walked a little today. I'm sure tomorrow I'll be able to go with her without any problem."

The doctor turned to Mala and once again his voice gentled. "Mala, who do you want to perform the test?"

"I can trust you in this, can't I?"

"You know you can."

"Then if you have the time, I'd prefer it be you."

"Good. We'll do the test at 1000."

"How will you test the baby?"

"The baby's discarded cells are in the fluid of your uterus. The cells contain his DNA. We'll insert a long needle into your uterus and withdraw the fluid containing the cells. It's called amniocentesis. Then we'll check the cells to see if any contain the contagion."

"What if they do?" Her voice quavered.

"Then we'll treat the baby along with everyone else, only your son will receive his treatment in the womb."

"Will there be any risk to me?"

"I don't think so, but I'll keep that in mind when we find the cure. I've got to go back to work. Denali, let me check your wound first. He quickly examined the wound and nodded his head in satisfaction. "I'll check your wound again before you go to sleep."

"We appreciate your taking the time to give us an update," Denali told him.

Dr. Lazara left the room, striding purposefully.

Mala turned to Denali. "I have a feeling the test on Jeran will be positive, but I don't want to be proven right again."

He silently agreed with her. The contagion wasn't fatal to adults, but how would it affect a fetus? "You have to be strong now, like you were after the shuttle crashed. Can you do it?"

Her chin slowly came up, although her eyes were still shadowed with distress. "I can do it."

\* \* \* \*

Mala's scan was negative, but as they waited for the test results on their son, Mala reached for his hand. "Do you feel all right, Deni?"

He recognized her ploy to divert her attention from the waiting. "I feel a little tired, but that's to be expected until I get my stamina back."

"We don't seem to have long periods of peace together," she blurted suddenly.

"Things keep happening to us. Other people lead peaceful, mundane lives, but not us."

"We had four relatively peaceful, unexciting months on the planet once we were mated."

"But they didn't last."

"I think once we get away from this planet we'll have a more ordinary life. Because of your profession, I don't think we'll ever lead a completely routine life, but it should be less eventful. This is the most excitement I've experienced in my entire career."

"Negative excitement," she argued.

"But some of it's been positive, like the thrill between you and me."

"You're an exhilarating man."

"It's the combination of me and you that's thrilling, it's not just me."

"Will that fade, too, when things become mundane?" she asked.

"No," he told her firmly. "Some of the urgency might fade some day, but you're going to smile at me when your hair is white and that's all it will take to make me claim you. By then we'll need to mate somewhere soft." He grinned wickedly at her and she blushed.

"Deni," she protested and he leaned over to kiss her warm lips. For precious moments he knew nothing but the excitement of touching his lips to hers. It was always like this with her.

A sound in the doorway shattered the moment and they both turned to see Dr. Lazara standing there. His face told a story of loss and disappointment and Denali's throat constricted with tears and his chest tightened painfully. His baby!

At his side Mala's strangled cry of anguish and denial was torn from her throat.

"It's positive," Dr. Lazara confirmed as he walked towards them.

Denali turned to Mala as the first harsh sob broke from her lips. Her cheeks were already wet with the trails of her tears. He put his right arm around her and drew her as close to him as the two chairs would allow. She continued to sob noisily while the doctor crouched in front of her chair. Lexar hovered uncertainly behind him.

"It's not a death sentence," Dr. Lazara rebuked her. Denali's hind brain again noted the tenderness and concern in the doctor's tone.

It was the wrong choice of words and instead of calming Mala, her sobs became a wail. Denali dragged her from the chair and up into his lap, grunting a little in pain as she snuggled her face into the curve of his neck on the left side, as though she couldn't get close enough to him. He wrapped her tightly in both arms, ignoring the painful pull on the wound. His mate was in emotional pain and needed what only he could provide. She soaked his neck but he didn't care. His eyes filled with tears. Mala's pain tightened his chest. Anxiety over his son's welfare choked him. He raged in frustration at his physical weakness at a time when his family needed him most.

A light touch on his arm brought his attention back to the doctor and he saw Dr. Lazara through a thin mist of tears. "Your son is otherwise healthy. He's strong and growing well. We'll find a cure and he'll receive it just as you will. Do you believe me, Denali?"

He wondered if he did believe the doctor. For his own sanity he had to trust his son would be cured. But how deep did the belief go? He voiced his fear aloud, but quietly, in a husky voice. "Jeran's only a baby and still developing."

"Jeran has our strong Felisian DNA. Badran's going to double check, but his preliminary report is the DNA is otherwise not affected. He found no birth defects, and no other known disorders. Once your son receives the cure he should be all right."

Denali ducked his cheek against Mala's curls, his relief at the news warred with his empathy for her distress. She had clearly not heard anything the doctor said. As he closed his eyes, the tears fell unheeded down his cheeks into her hair.

"Denali, she'll make herself sick if she keeps crying like that and it's doing neither of you any good. Let me sedate her and put her to bed."

Denali nodded and held her tighter to him as Dr. Lazara sedated her.

"Do you want sedation too?" Dr. Lazara asked.

"No. I'm already tired. If you'll help me get Mala to bed I'll lie down and sleep with her."

"Give her to me. It's too soon for you to be lifting anything heavy."

Denali hesitated, but then gave in to the logic of the suggestion and loosened his hold from around Mala's now slack body. The racking sobs had ceased, but her face was wet and tears still leaked slowly from under her closed lids. Dr. Lazara carefully scooped her up and Denali fought jealousy that another male had his mate in his arms. He followed the doctor and watched him gently lower Mala to the bed, and then wipe the tears from her face.

"Do you want me to undress her, Denali?"

"I'll do it."

"Do you need privacy?"

"Just a few minutes right now, then much longer when Mala wakes up. I'll tell Lexar."

"I'll send a report to the USP ship."

"Thanks. It was just one thing too many that went wrong for her, you see. Too many questions, too many worries and not enough answers for her."

"And she's pregnant, partially mated and full of Felisian DNA--"

"And in love for the first time in her life. She needs privacy for what she's going through and the infirmary is hardly the place for that. Could you release me soon? I can finish recuperating in our suite where she'll have privacy."

"I'll think it over and let you know. I'll see you later." Dr. Lazara looked down once more time at Mala's still-troubled face, before he left the room.

Denali explained his needs to Lexar and she stepped out of the room. Then he partially undressed Mala and rolled her to her side. His chest ached by the time he'd finished. He removed his own clothing as quickly as he could, while fatigue pulled at him, then climbed into bed and snuggled up to her back. Slowly he joined their bodies. He sighed, feeling at home at last with his mate. The lines of strain had eased from her face with his presence in her bed and in her body. She knew her mate was with her. The thought pleased him and helped ease the pain of knowing his son was infected with the contagion.

\* \* \* \*

Mala stirred, still groggy with sleep, and allowed impressions to sink into her mind and form thoughts. A warm male body behind her filled the most intimate recess of her body. His arm clutched her possessively. A thick silkiness tickled her chin. She was in bed with Denali, partially dressed, ready to mate and the room lights were on.

She opened her eyes to see the infirmary room. Part of Denali's tawny mane spilled over her shoulder, across her upper chest and under her chin. The covers had fallen back to reveal the beloved design of the ethnic pattern on the bare golden arm that encircled her. She leaned back into him and the movement drove his penis into her to the hilt. She sucked in her breath at the exquisite feel of him inside her, and wriggled her hips to adjust the fit.

The arm around her tightened and Denali withdrew a ways before thrusting deep again. His warm lips sought the smoothness of her neck to nibble. He thrust again and she groaned.

"Deni, where's Lexar?"

"Outside by now. Come inside me, love."

She slid over into the loving warmth that was Denali. There was strength here in the muscles of his strong body and the confidence of his mind. There was protectiveness and safety in his resilience, his determination and his possessiveness. There was comfort in his shared emotional pain. And overlaying everything was the urgent passion he felt for her.

She turned her head to seek his lips, and found they were warm and moist and tasted



like him. She hungrily fed on them as his tongue pressed entrance to her mouth and she eagerly sucked it in and stroked it. His body was wonderful, but his mouth--oh, his mouth was simply exquisite. It had been this way since their first kiss.

It was no wonder kissing was denied to unmarried Bonwee, because with her and Denali kissing was physical communication and the communion of two mates and two souls. It was greedy and carnal and deeply loving, and it destroyed any barriers between them, not that there were any. Well, there was that one sense of holding back on her part, the refusal to become a full mate yet. But in every other way she was naked to him through their kiss.

She strained against him with lips and body, wanting ... such a weak word for the raging need she felt for him and the need to be a part of him. She felt his answering want and need, and then she was hurtled into ecstasy and felt him riding the rocket ship with her.

She lay gasping in his arms--back in her own body once again--her mind blank in the aftermath of soaring passion. She was content for the moment just being in the arms of her almost-mate as he nuzzled her.

"I love you," she murmured, so grateful to have him.

"You're everything to me Mala. Everything. So I'll be your strength for now. Hold tight to me and I'll help you be strong. I'm going to lead and you simply follow me, just like we did on the planet."

"Will it really help?" She wanted to believe him.

"Yes. I'm your mate, the other half of you. I have confidence in our relationship and in the future. Jeran is our first child, but you'll bear me other children and he'll be their older brother. You'll be mother to them all, and I'll be their father. This was meant to be. You were made for me and we were meant to be a family. I believe Jeran will be all right; all you have to do is believe in me."

She grew a little choked remembering Jeran's diagnosis. "It's harder than that."

"No, it's that simple. You can do anything because I love you. You can be strong, you can be brave and you can hold onto me and believe, because I believe."

"I want to."

"Then trust in this. We're Felisians, advanced in genetics and advanced in technology. We can do anything."

His arrogant statement, so confidently spoken, made warmth blossom inside her. "I almost think you can."

"Let me love you once more, and then maybe you'll believe."

"I want to face you, Deni."

Careful maneuvering got her turned around and Denali on his back. She mounted him quickly and he drew her down for a deep kiss as the long loving began. And somehow through their triple bonds, or simply through his love, Denali managed to transfer his strength and faith to her.

As if to confirm her foundling conviction, little Jeran moved energetically between them as she lay on Denali's chest afterwards. He huffed a laugh. "You're squashing the boy, love."

"No. He's complaining because you've given him such a workout," she said bawdily. He laughed again while she blushed. She sat up to give the baby more room and Denali's hands came up to frame her face. "It's good to see you smile. I love your smile."

"You made it possible. I love you."

"I love you, too. Hold onto that and we'll be all right."

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Lazara joined them for dinner again that evening. "You're looking better, Mala."

"I'm feeling better. I'm sorry I became hysterical earlier."

"I understood why you did. I have news! Badran confirmed there's no mutation or genetic abnormality in your son's DNA. Except for the contagion, your son is perfect."

"Thank God," Mala swore fervently. "What about the contagion?"

"Ah, more news. Its makeup is somewhat similar to another virus in our database and Badran is trying to modify the cure we used on that virus."

"That's great!" Denali exclaimed, and then he turned to her. "See, I told you Felisians could do anything."

"And there's a third piece of good news." Dr. Lazara was clearly enjoying his stint as bearer of glad tidings.

"What is it?" she cried excitedly.

"I've spoken to the captain, Denali, and he agreed that you may continue your convalescence in your own suite."

"That's wonderful!" Mala clapped her hands together with delight. "We can go home."

"I thought you'd both be pleased."

"We are. Are Deni and I safe among the crew who went down to the planet? Or should Lexar move with us to our suite?"

"I anticipated your question, so my staff and I checked on the crew today. They're still confined to quarters, by the way. There's generalized restlessness, but they're all much more rational today. There have been no incidents of violence in days. The contagion appears to become inactive when it leaves the planet. Also, the crewman who attacked you is still in the brig."

"So you don't know how they'll act when they're with the other crew on the ship?"

"No. The captain and I discussed that as well. We don't know the life expectancy of the contagion. You say it takes two weeks to infect a host. You and Denali were only back on board ship for a week before you returned to the planet. We don't know if hosts can also be carriers and infect others or if someone has to be on the planet to become infected. Without that knowledge it's dangerous to allow the crew from the planet out of quarantine. We're taking chances just letting unprotected medical personnel interact with them as I'm interacting with you.

"The captain and I prefer to limit the spread of infection so we've agreed everyone from the planet will remain sequestered. That will include the two of you when you return to your suite tomorrow. Meals will be brought to you in your suite. Captain's orders."

"Not-so-solitary confinement Mala. What will we find to do to pass the time?" Denali's eyes twinkled with heat and devilment.

"Deni," Mala chastised him.

"Doctor, that's the best news you've given us yet," he exclaimed.

## Chapter Twenty Four

Denali answered the Com unit's insistent bleeping. It was probably one of his friends calling to chat. The Com kept the confined crew from going stir crazy these past ten days. The species bond insisted the crew--the confined as well as the free--keep in touch verbally. The contact reassured them in each other. And it helped combat the fear ... Denali's mind shuddered away from completing that thought.

"Denali here."

"Denali, it's Dr. Lazara. We've found it! A way to kill the virus--we've found it!"

Denali was temporarily deaf and dumb, reeling with the wonder of the shocking news. A cure! Slowly he became aware of two things--Dr. Lazara's voice recalling him to the Com unit and Mala's softness pressed against his side, her arm sliding around his waist. He gathered her tightly to him and directed his attention back to the doctor.

"How soon can we have the cure?" Denali's voice was thick.

"That's what we need to discuss. You're ordered to the large conference room immediately. Where's Mala?"

"Here, doctor," she responded.

"Mala, your presence is requested as well."

"Who'll be at the meeting?"

"We'll answer all your questions in the meeting. Come immediately." The doctor disconnected.

Denali looked into Mala's glowing face. "A cure! I told you we could do it." He crushed her soft body to him.

"It's wonderful. But why all the secrecy?"

"Come on. Let's find out."

They left their cabin for the first time in ten days. He was glad to be released at last, and yet their forced confinement had allowed his wound to heal and had given him and Mala the time and privacy to strengthen their bonds as a couple. Their matings had been frequent, often fierce--more so as his stamina returned--and intensely Felisian. Over and over he'd welded himself to her in mind, heart and spirit, pushing his strength into her through all of their bonds. He'd known this time alone together was a reprieve during which they had to prepare themselves for what was to come.

On their way to the large conference room they met other crew who'd been on the planet. Some had glowing faces and talked so fast they sounded like chattering animals. Others had wide eyes and darted looks at those around them.

"Deni, I don't see anyone who wasn't on the planet," Mala whispered.

"The others must have been ordered to their quarters to prevent the crew from mixing too much."

"That sounds logical."

As they entered the conference room, Dr. Lazara caught hold of Denali's arm. "Sit up front."

Denali tried to question the doctor further, but was waved to silence. They followed

the doctor to the front of the room.

The crew's reunion was quite loud. Denali carefully scanned the crowd for signs of aggressiveness like the day of the riot, but he saw only normal Felisian friendliness. It hurt him strangely to even look for negative behavior in his own species, but these crew members were all infected with the virus and he'd seen the violence they were capable of. Mala must be protected from any recurrence.

As silence began to spread through the crowd, he craned his head to see Captain SoAhnor, First Officer Marwan and the Third Officer striding towards the front of the room. Denali felt the crew's shame as they faced their top officers for the first time since the riot. As the captain reached the front of the room, not a word was spoken. He turned to face the crew and the first and third officers flanked him on either side. Dr. Lazara and geneticist Badran stood next to First Officer Marwan.

"Crew, we've found a cure for the contagion--" Captain SoAhnor began, only to be drowned by the crew's loud roar of approval. Denali felt joy, relief and the suspension of the coiled tension in the crowd.

The captain signaled for quiet and the crew subsided. "The medical staff, the genetics staff and the scientists of our ship and the USP ship have worked non-stop these past twelve days to find this cure. In a moment Dr. Lazara and geneticist Badran will explain what's going to take place. But I want to make one thing perfectly clear: receiving the cure is not an option for any of you. This is a direct order. Anyone who refuses the cure will be put off this ship. The USP ship won't accept you. And no Felisian territory will accept you either. So if any of you choose to disobey my direct order, you'll be exiled to this planet permanently. Is that understood?"

There was a shocked pause, and then a trickle of "Yes, Captain" followed by a larger murmur of agreement.

"Doctor, Badran. If you please."

Dr. Lazara spoke first. "We've found a way to kill the contagion. I won't bore you with the details. The important thing for you to know is that in the next few days we'll be making the contagion into a retrovirus to be injected into each of you. The retrovirus will seek out the contagion or virus and destroy it."

The crew roared its approval again.

"That's the good news. There's also bad news in a way and geneticist Badran will explain that part."

There were nervous murmurs as Badran cleared his throat. "Most of you are aware the contagion attached itself to the feline DNA in your brains." He paused and people in the crowd nodded. "When the retrovirus kills the virus it will kill the cell which contains the virus. In this case those would be brain cells."

Denali's heart clutched in fear and he couldn't prevent a physical start of horrified surprise at Badran's words. Mala's hand gripped his forearm like a vise. There were other gasps and denials from the crowd.

Badran waited patiently through the stunned disbelief. When the first moments of horror had passed, he continued. "We can replace the dead brain cells with stem cells from each of you. You'll be as good as new once the stem cells pattern themselves into brain cells.

"However, there will be an unknown period of time--days, perhaps weeks--while the patterning takes place. During that time, you'll have to function without the infected brain cells. For those of you with the least infection, you shouldn't notice any difference at all. For

those of you with large areas of infection--" his eyes swung to Denali, and Denali cringed inwardly. Other people looked his way and he felt their concern for him. Mala was stuck fast to his side, giving and receiving comfort.

Badran continued. "For those of you in this last group, this time of patterning will be an adventure into the unknown. Questions anyone?" A number of people quickly raised agitated voices in question. "One at a time, please!"

"How will the stem cells replace brain cells?" one voice demanded.

"Your stem cells are immature cells. That means they haven't yet patterned themselves into skin, tissue or organs. But they contain complete DNA, so they can become any part of your body. We just have to get them to where they're needed--in this case that means into your brain--and switch on the part of the DNA which tells them to become brain cells. Once they're switched on, they'll take over for the dead cells.

"Before you ask the next logical question, let me tell you where stem cells are in your bodies. They're manufactured in the bone marrow in your larger bones and they're in your blood. We don't have time to strain your blood for enough stem cells, so each of you will be asked to donate stem cells from your bone marrow. We'll begin collecting samples today and growing sufficient stem cells for each of you, beginning with those most infected. A few days after that, you'll receive the stem cells back when you get the retrovirus. The stem cells and the retrovirus will be part of the same injection."

"Explain about the retrovirus," someone demanded.

"Now that we've found a way to kill the virus, we make the harmless virus into a retrovirus. It acts just like a virus--it goes and attacks the virus and kills it, but it doesn't reproduce itself like a virus would. Then the stem cells will replace the cells the retrovirus killed. It's a two-step process we'll do in one step.

"Retroviruses are nothing new and they've been used safely in genetic engineering for thousands of years. We use a special retrovirus to splice Felisian and Bonwee genes when we're making a Bonwee more Felisian, as in the case of Madam Avonee."

Mala jerked as though shot and now many eyes were upon her. She was distressed and Denali knew she didn't like being reminded that she'd been genetically altered.

There were a number of other questions directed to Badran and to Dr. Lazara concerning the stem cell removal, the length of time to multiply the stem cells, side effects and possible complications of the procedures. Crewmembers who had larger areas of infection were obviously frustrated at the vagueness of the answers where they were concerned. Denali shared their frustration with an added touch of fear since he had the greatest area of infection of anyone.

"Crew, harvesting and growing stem cells, and preparing each of you for the procedure is a massive undertaking. USP personnel will shuttle over to assist our medical and scientific personnel, but the brunt of the work will be on us, and necessarily all infected personnel must remain on board this ship to be treated.

"Within days of receiving the cure and verifying its success by a negative scan, each of you will be released from confinement to rejoin the rest of the crew. If there are no more questions, medical staff will be asking each of you when you want to receive treatment."

Several dozen medical staffers began to wend their way through the crowd with hand-held computers. While the crew was thus occupied, Dr. Lazara approached Denali and Mala.

"Quickly, follow me."

They followed the doctor and Badran to the small conference room next door. There

they found Captain SoAhnor and First Officer Marwan already seated. Denali sat next to Mala, gripping her hand.

"Denali, you'll be the second one to receive treatment," Dr. Lazara began, confirming his fears. "We'll begin within the hour. Because you have the greatest area of infection we'll need more stem cells for your treatment."

Dr. Lazara paused and Denali sensed his concern over what he was about to say next. Denali braced himself. "Due to the size of the infection, there will be many brain cells destroyed and replaced with new cells. As a result, your period of recovery is the greatest unknown factor."

"You're sure I'll recover completely?" Denali was amazed at how calm his voice sounded.

"Absolutely!" Badran exclaimed. "The retrovirus work and the new stem cells will become brain cells fairly quickly."

Dr. Lazara added, "We just don't know what the period of recovery will be like for you and we want you to be aware that any differences in perception or behavior you might experience will be temporary."

"What differences?" Denali demanded to know.

"There will probably be some disorientation, awkwardness, memory loss--"

"Memory loss!"

"We don't know for sure. That's why we're cautioning you beforehand. There might not be any differences, but for a short time a part of you will be shut off. Just prepare yourself for anything to happen and realize it's only temporary."

Denali breathed in calmness. "Okay. I assume I'll be watched more closely than the others?"

"Yes. Report everything you experience to Badran or me."

"Will I be able to return to duty once the virus is dead?"

"If you feel up to it," the captain agreed. "And if you experience no negative temporary differences."

Denali felt a chill at the captain's words. "Negative temporary differences" was a terrifying description of something dark and nebulous that he didn't want to experience.

Mala gripped his hand harder and spoke up. "What about our baby, doctor?"

Dr. Lazara smiled. "The baby will be the easiest to cure and one of the hardest to treat simply because we'll have to do everything in utero. Your baby is still developing, so he'll accept the retrovirus and the stem cells without a problem."

"The discomfort will be to you, Mala, when we remove the stem cells and when we inject the retrovirus. I know how you feel about genetic engineering for yourself, so should I assume you'll want the USP doctors to handle your son's treatment?"

"Clearly Felisians know more about genetic engineering." She shared a sardonic look with the doctor. "But if something goes wrong, USP personnel won't cross the line I've set when they're deciding what's for my own good. I'm afraid you would." She paused and took a deep breath. "But I'd feel more comfortable if you assisted them."

His eyes widened, then he smiled. "Fine. USP personnel will arrive shortly. We'll treat the baby first, so that Denali can be with you during the procedure, then treat Denali afterward so that you can be with him during his procedure. Do either of you have any questions?"

Denali spoke up quickly. "Mala won't have side effects, will she?"

"Some pain at the incision site, a little discomfort, but nothing else."

"And we'll get to return to our suite afterwards?"

"Yes."

"Won't you need me to help translate?" Mala asked suddenly.

"Messer Perronee will be here for that. Also, you'll be happy to hear the medical staff has spent the past few days learning how to speak specific medical terms in Basic. Messer Perronee made up a short tutorial for us."

"Oh, I should have thought of doing that." Mala was chagrined.

"You had the recovery of your mate and the health of your child to think about, Madam Avonee," the captain injected with sympathy. "You did enough just helping us pinpoint and identify the contagion. We already owe you for that."

"Thank you, Captain."

"If there are no further questions, we'd like the two of you to come to the infirmary now," Dr. Lazara urged.

Denali and Mala followed the doctor into the first phase of their treatment.

\* \* \* \*

Two days later Denali sat by Mala's side for the second phase of their baby's cure. The USP doctor was deadly serious, using the instruments with skill and care while he and Dr. Lazara performed the microscopic procedure in utero. The stem cells and the retrovirus were meticulously implanted in the baby's brain while Denali and Mala held their breaths.

Denali didn't want to observe the doctors moving their laparoscopic equipment around in Mala's womb; neither did he want to view the monitors, which showed the doctors what they were doing. But he was afraid not to pay attention, for fear something would go wrong otherwise. So he watched while the bodies of his mate and child were violated with sterile metal instruments. He felt helpless and he hated it.

It was hard facing reality head-on by viewing his son's treatment. In two days it would be Denali's skull cut open, his brain invaded by metal instruments, his brain cells destroyed. It would be going through an unknown period of recovery, of possibly frightening, frustrating, humiliating, even debilitating, recovery.

His turn was imminent and there was nothing he could or would do to stop it. He wanted to be cured. He would never choose exile to this forsaken planet, cut off from his species, instead. The cure was the lesser of two evils, but it was frightening all the same. As he'd told the captain, it was his brain, not his arm, they'd be working on.

He breathed deeply, attempting to calm himself. Mala needed him to be strong, so he would be. He was her protector, therefore, the one who led. He was the full mate, a position of strength. He projected reassurance to her. Their baby would be cured soon. This was a day to rejoice.

Finally the doctors finished and Dr. Lazara took Mala's hand. "All finished. We know the cure works, but you'll want proof, so in a week we'll do another amniocentesis and prove to you the virus is dead."

"How will you know the stem cells grafted correctly?" she asked.

"Because that's what stem cells are designed to do." The doctor patted her hand.

"Don't worry. The geneticists know what they're doing. Do you feel all right?"

"There's a little pain."

"You rest today and you'll feel better tomorrow. I've got to help with the other procedures so I'll see you both in a few days."

\* \* \* \*

Denali's operation mid-morning two days later followed some exciting news. Several of the crew treated on the same day as their baby--those with the least amount of infection--had received negatives scans, meaning they were completely cured. The medical staff was jubilant as they prepared Denali for the procedure.

Mala felt a lighter atmosphere on board the ship and was glad for Denali's sake. He'd been very nervous and had tried unsuccessfully to shield it from her. But when he heard the cure was successful, he'd turned to her and crushed her to him. She could feel the hope rocketing through him at last and her eyes filled with tears of relief.

Denali took the news gracefully that a little more of his mane would have to be shaved and a slightly larger hole drilled in his skull to allow the surgeons to work. He slipped peacefully under the sedation with a slight smile on his lips, and finally Mala could breathe freely again. All morning Dr. Lazara's admonishment to be strong for Denali had reverberated through her mind. She was physically tired from projecting reassurance to him, but she wouldn't fail either the doctor or Denali. She was a Bonwee after all, capable of giving her life for the greater good.

"Ready, Mala?" Dr. Lazara's soft words seeped gently into her ears.

"Yes."

"You know the first part contains some sounds you might not want to hear. Would you rather wait in the corridor until I call you?"

"No. It's happening to Deni so I'd rather stay with him. I'll pray if you don't mind."

Dr. Lazara looked startled. "That's right, you're a theist. No, I don't mind."

Mala held Denali's hand, bowed her head and closed her eyes. She emptied her mind of what was happening in the room and reached for her beliefs. "Let Deni be cured. Give skill to the surgeons' hands to make him well again," she silently begged her God. As she'd been taught as a child, so she now asked for what was needed in the room. She sought and found comfort in submitting herself to a higher power, and there she found peace.

"Mala," the voice slipped into her consciousness like a gentle beam of light into the darkness. She looked up into Dr. Lazara's face.

"Is something wrong? Why are you stopping?" she asked, concerned.

"We're finished. You've been deep in contemplation." He paused and she realized his hand was on her shoulder. "You looked serene."

"I feel more at peace. How's Deni?"

"It was a flawless procedure, my most brilliant piece of work ever. Now we wait while Denali is cured. Because of the extent of his infection we won't scan him for three or four days. I want the scan to be negative when we do it."

"I do, too. How long until he wakes up?"

"Probably thirty minutes. Staff will transport him to your suite now. Keep him quiet today. Don't look for anything different for several days, all right?"

"Yes, doctor. Thank you for what you did today."

"You're welcome."

In thirty-five minutes, Denali's eyes fluttered open. "It's over?" he asked in a still-slurred voice.

"Yes," Mala whispered with contained joy, "the cure's begun."

Denali's smile pierced her heart with sweet joy.

\* \* \* \*



On the morning Denali and the baby were to be scanned something seemingly insignificant happened that Mala attributed to the excitement of the day. Denali couldn't locate the passkey to their room and became extremely frustrated while searching for it. He'd never mislaid anything before, but he'd been unconscious the last time they returned to the suite. His reaction to the key's loss seemed out of proportion. She finally located it and they left for the infirmary and the promised good news.

## Chapter Twenty Five

Denali and Mala waited with baited breath for what seemed an hour. In reality, only ten minutes passed for the scan results on Denali and their baby.

Dr. Lazara's smile when he entered the room negated the need for words, although he gave them anyway. "Both scans are negative!"

"Thank you, God!" Mala breathed before Denali crushed her to his chest.

Denali was light-headed with relief and unable to contain his joy. He grabbed Mala in his arms and swung her around in a half circle, laughing. Her laughter spilled out like the sound of a babbling brook. He set her on her feet and smiled into her happy face.

Denali pumped Dr. Lazara's hand vigorously. "Thank you, doctor."

The doctor smiled benevolently. "I wish it was all my doing, but a lot of people worked extremely hard to bring you to this point." The doctor's eyes were suspiciously moist.

"Are all the crew well then?" Denali asked incredulously.

"Eighty percent so far. We've got a lot of people to scan and release today. But in another day or two everyone will be well again."

"That's wonderful news. I'm sure the crew is happy to break confinement. Are we released then?"

"I'll log your release into the computer so the captain knows. Go and join the crew. I've got work to do."

Denali took Mala's arm and escorted her out of the infirmary. He felt like a prisoner being released from prison or like someone living in the dark who had stepped into warm sunshine. Mala wore a beautiful smile, and he knew he must look the same. "We're free, Mala. Let's go to recreation and see if anyone's there."

Denali was surprised to find a number of his friends and people he knew in recreation. It seemed to be some kind of free day.

"Deni!" a chorus of excited voices called. A mass of laughing people moved towards them and Denali was overjoyed to receive such a welcome. He was hugged and kissed, slapped on the shoulders and back, and he shook hands with everyone. He was bombarded with questions while he tried to greet everyone.

He'd just shaken someone's hand, then he turned and a female hugged him. But when she would have nuzzled his face he pulled away. There was a brief, charged silence and he was aware something was amiss, but he couldn't pinpoint what it was. The woman seemed familiar but he couldn't place how he knew her, and her name eluded him.

Mala looked around with a slight frown on her face, so she must have sensed something wrong too. But the woman moved away, the crowd grew noisy again and Denali put the moment behind him.

He and Mala sat at a table where his good friends questioned them. They shared anecdotes about their confinement. Denali compared his skull sutures with others in the room and compared stories about the riot with those who'd been on the planet.

Talking about it was a catharsis for him and the others. Friends and lovers had been

separated for three weeks, isolated and physically alone. It wasn't a situation most Felisians had ever experienced before. Denali felt the near-desperation as his friend's reestablished physical contact with him and others in the room. It was almost like a sigh of relief, silent but felt, to be together again.

Even Mala seemed moved. Perhaps her response was only because she echoed his emotions; after all, they were often one emotionally because of their empathic connection. So even though she wasn't Felisian, she could experience, through him, the joy of reunion and species bond affirmation.

Denali finally tore himself away from the group late that evening and he and Mala walked back to the suite arm in arm in deep accord because of the evening they had just spent.

\* \* \* \*

When Mala awoke in the morning, she was alone in their bed. That had never happened before, so she quickly donned her robe and went in search of Denali. She found him in the sitting room pouring over a computer translation program. She touched his shoulder to get his attention.

"Deni?"

"Hmm?" he murmured without looking up.

"Deni, are you all right?"

He looked up then. "What? Of course. Is something the matter?"

"I woke up and you weren't there."

"I know you're tired. Go back to sleep. I've got things to keep me busy."

She'd never found it hard to initiate mating with the man she loved--and they always mated in the morning--but Denali's manner was so aloof it discouraged intimacy. She wavered with uncertainty. Would he respond if she began the mating rituals? Surely this aloofness was one of those temporary side affects of the cure and all she had to do was shake him back into awareness? She took a deep breath and plunged ahead.

Afterwards Denali kissed her on the lips and enthused, "That was great. What brought that on?"

She felt dumfounded, the heat of passion turned to icy fear in her veins. There had been no Felisian nuzzle afterwards, as there always was, and no languishing in the aftermath. And now he acted like the mating was an out-of-the-ordinary event.

"Deni, we mate every morning."

His tawny brows furrowed. He appeared to search his memory ... and seemed to come up empty. "We do?"

Cold fear clutched her. How much of his memory had been destroyed by the cure?

"Deni, who am I?"

"Mala."

She sighed in relief. At least he knew her. "What am I to you?"

Again his brow furrowed and she held her breath. If he didn't know ...! "You're my mate. That's right, isn't it?"

"You're mate, Deni. You're fully mated."

"I don't understand. A mating bond takes two people ... wait, I remember a meeting ... something about partially bonded mates."

"That's right. I'm only partially bonded to you as a mate. Do you remember anything else?"

"I'm your partner, although I don't know how that happened. Why can't I remember?" He clenched one hand while the other threaded through his mane.

"I believe the cure has affected your memory."

"What cure?"

Mala took a deep breath. calm. "Why don't we go see Dr. Lazara and try to get some answers."

"Who's he? Wait, I remember him from the infirmary."

"Let me call and tell him we're coming." Mala contacted the doctor, then she got dressed and they made their way to the infirmary. Geneticist Badran waited with the doctor and they were quickly ushered into an exam room.

"There's a problem?" Dr. Lazara prodded.

"I don't remember some things," Denali explained. "You, for instance. There are vague memories of seeing you, but nothing else. Mala said I received some kind of cure."

"Why don't we test the extent of your memory problem and then we'll answer your questions."

"Okay."

Dr. Lazara tapped something into his computer. "What's your name?"

"Denali."

"Where were you born and when?"

"Felis I, 14 Aineth, 4216."

"What are the names of your parents?"

And so the questioning went. Mala was relieved to hear Denali answer all the questions about his childhood, teens, entry into the military, early postings and his transfer to the ship. Denali knew the names of the ship's officers and the ship's registry number. He knew the names and postings of all his friends.

"How did you meet Mala?"

Denali's face glowed with love. "We picked her up from the Panesh ship. She stepped through the shuttle hatch and looked at me with those eyes and I was lost."

She couldn't help the warm blush that crept into her cheeks. She entwined her fingers with his and looked directly at Dr. Lazara. She was surprised to see him nod.

"Do you remember the shuttle crash?"

"Vividly. I'll never forget it."

"How did you survive on the planet?"

Mala was again encouraged to hear those memories were intact.

"Whose baby is Mala carrying?" the doctor asked suddenly.

Denali looked startled. "Mine."

"What's your baby's name?"

"Jeran."

"How far along is he?"

Denali's eyes flew to her and she drew in breath quickly. His gaze dropped to her rounded belly and she was disturbed to realize that he was trying to remember. Finally Denali turned back to Dr. Lazara. "I don't know."

"Do you remember conceiving your son?"

This time Denali didn't turn to her and there was a long silence. He radiated distress, but it was no less than Mala felt. Quietly he answered, "No."

"Do you remember making Mala your mate?"

"Yes!" he exclaimed vehemently and gladly.

"Do you remember being rescued from the planet?"

"No."

Dr. Lazara mentioned various things that had happened over the past month and a half and found many of those memories missing. Denali retained no actual memory of being stabbed; however, he had a vague recollection of something terrible happening to him and of pain and deep despair. He also remembered being empathically joined with Mala.

"Who was your mating tutor?" Dr. Lazara asked suddenly.

Denali stared at him, obviously searching his memory. "I don't remember."

"Who were your regular lovers on this ship?"

Again Denali paused, then, "I don't remember."

"Who did you have mating time with last year?"

"I don't remember."

"Where was your last mating time?"

Denali furrowed his brows. "On the planet ... with," he turned to Mala, "you." His golden stare was quite intense and his emotions were in turmoil. Mala waited, guessing what he was remembering. "You had no choice and you cried."

"You remember that, Denali?" Dr. Lazara asked, curious.

"Vividly, but not much else. Mostly I just remember feelings until I claimed her as my mate. I remember that vividly too, but not much after that."

Dr. Lazara then asked Denali quite a few questions about his sexual habits and mating time, almost none of which Denali could answer. To Mala's amazement and confusion, the only clear memory Denali had of any recent mating time was the one he'd had with her.

Dr. Lazara and Badran conferred quietly and then nodded their heads. Badran turned to Denali. "Your memory loss is in the memories directly linked to your feline DNA, mostly mating habits and things that happened to you since the contagion infected you. During mating time you function mostly automatically, so there's little emotion attached to your actions, and the automatic actions become stored in that section of your brain where your feline DNA resides.

"The reason you remember parts of your last mating time with Mala is because there were emotions attached to your actions. Those emotional memories are stored in a different part of your brain. The more emotion you felt, the more memories you stored. The virus didn't touch that part of your brain and that's why you still have those memories."

"Denali couldn't find his passkey to our suite yesterday. That memory didn't have anything to do with his feline DNA," Mala argued.

Dr. Lazara replied. "I believe that right now Denali's brain is in shock from the treatment. It's disoriented and its functions are disturbed. Denali, you probably don't remember, but I told you and Mala these changes would be only temporary. You've told me nothing today to make me think differently."

"But the memory loss is permanent," Denali stated.

"Yes. Perhaps, under the circumstances of your being mated," Dr. Lazara nodded his head towards Mala, "you might consider the loss of certain of those memories to be a positive thing."

"I don't know. It will take some getting used to having blank spots in my mind. Those were memories of my life that were destroyed."

"Do you have any other symptoms to report?"

Mala bit her lip, wondering if and how she should report Denali's odd behavior of that morning. And now he was achingly vulnerable with a decided lack of possessiveness towards her. She didn't want to worry or embarrass Denali by bringing up his behavior, yet Dr. Lazara had said to report anything odd.

"Mala, you have something you wish to say?" Dr. Lazara startled her by saying. Clearly she hadn't kept her thoughts hidden.

She slid her eyes to Denali, who frowned at her, then back to the doctor. What was safe to say? "Deni seems ... subdued."

"What does that mean?" Denali asked at the same time Dr. Lazara asked, "In what way?"

"He's more quiet, distracted," she tried to explain without mentioning mating.

"The distraction is probably due to confusion caused by the memory loss. It's only temporary, Mala."

"All right. I'll wait for it to pass."

\* \* \* \*

During the following week, Denali's distraction became worse instead of better. Mala waited, each day growing more concerned, but she kept her worries to herself. She was sure Dr. Lazara would tell her to be patient, so she didn't contact him.

Denali seemed oblivious to what she considered a major personality change. He lacked fire and aggression and was a pale shadow of his former self. He lacked the magnetism and feline sensuality that had attracted her. Could it be that what they thought was love was just a very strong physical attraction to each other or the contagion at work? It had felt like real love. She didn't know if she could live with this subdued version of Denali.

In the week since they'd visited the infirmary, they'd mated only twice, early in the week, and she'd initiated both of those. She'd writhed with unfulfilled need in the first few days, but as he remained aloof, her lust had gradually cooled. Denali seemed to have no sex drive. There were few exchanges of intimacies between them and even less of a feeling of closeness in their relationship. They'd had more intimacy in the week after the shuttle crash than they had now. She feared the mating bond was dissolving because she hardly felt tied to him at all. Was this to be the end of their relationship? If so, what was to become of their Felisian son? Could he live with her on Bon? If not, could she bear to leave him here with his own species?

At the end of the second week, her nerves were raw and Denali showed no sign of improvement. He'd gone back to work and she was alone with her thoughts all afternoon and evening after spending a platonic day with him. She couldn't go on this way much longer. Something had to change and soon.

Change, however, came in an unexpected form. Dr. Lazara visited one afternoon while Denali was on the bridge. She showed him into the sitting room. "What brings you here, doctor?"

"I want to know what's wrong, and don't tell me 'nothing.' Enough people have seen you taking walks in the afternoon and have commented to me on your sadness to alarm me. I've received some unusual comments about Denali's behavior as well. You can confide in me."

His gentle concern was too much for her and her eyes filled with shameful tears. Her lower lip trembled and she bit it to keep it still. She didn't want to display weakness in front of this particular man, but to her horror a tear spilled over, then another. She ducked her

head as the tears continued to fall. "I think the cure destroyed the mate bond!" she wailed.

Dr. Lazara's eyes widened. "Why do you think that, Mala?"

"There's no kissing, no hugging, no nuzzling," she drew in a ragged breath, "and no mating." She whispered the last, a shameful admission for her.

"None at all?"

She shook her head and more tears fell. Then she lifted welling eyes to the doctor. "I can't live with a man who isn't my mate. It's forbidden. You said his behavior would be temporary, but it isn't. Now he's a stranger to me and I can't live with a stranger. I'll have to leave."

"It only temporary, Mala ..."

"No! The Denali I knew and loved is dead. The cure killed him. The man I live with isn't him. Deni was a flame, scorching hot. He was alive with electricity. Deni was a powerful force I could feel on my skin without touching him. He was potent, like strong liquor. Deni was Felisian with everything that stands for. The man I live with is none of those things."

Lazara frowned. "You don't feel Denali is Felisian?"

"No."

"Hmm." He rubbed his fingers and thumb across his chin. "Mala, how did you and Denali act before you were mated? Were you physical with one another?"

"We always touched, beginning the day of the crash. We kissed and nuzzled and slept in each other's arms. Deni was passionate about me and could barely keep his hands off me. There's no passion in him now."

Mala wrung her hands. "Oh, I'm phrasing this badly. I sound shallow complaining about the lack of ardor. I, more than anyone, should know that love is more than physical passion. Bonwee are taught that all species have good and desirable traits. We're taught to look for the beauty of a person's heart, mind and soul. I don't want to think I've been blinded by Denali's beauty and his passion into believing we're in love when we're not."

She held her palms out to the doctor. "What am I to do? Deni used to make me feel so special. Now he doesn't even notice me. I live with him, but I'm so lonely. I miss him terribly." Fresh tears ran down her cheeks. The helplessness, confusion and despair she felt were finally let loose from her tight control.

Dr. Lazara knelt in front of her and took her hands in his. "It may be just a hormone imbalance, Mala. It sounds like that might be behind his behavior. I'll ask him to stop by the infirmary tomorrow to be tested. Don't do anything rash before we find out what the problem is. Remember, I've seen you two together and what you have is real love. Ask anyone on this ship who's seen you together and they'll tell you the same thing. Don't take any action you'll regret later."

His eyes were sad. "I was wrong to tell you to wait for changes in Denali's behavior to correct themselves. You've suffered needlessly these past two weeks, and for that I'm very sorry. I forget that you're not Felisian and that you don't have the emotional connection we have to each other. It wasn't my intention to hurt you."

"I don't blame !" Mala exclaimed. She was dismayed that he would take responsibility for her feelings.

"Give me a chance to find out what's wrong with Denali. I promise you I'll work as quickly as I can."

"All right." She breathed a ragged sigh. "You said other people had mentioned

Deni's behavior to you. What did they say?"

"They said he was very passive and seemed unlike his usual dynamic self. You have my word that I'll find out what's causing his odd behavior." He rose and Mala saw him to the door.

"Thank you for listening to me," she told Dr. Lazara. "It felt good to talk about it to someone."

"Thank you for trusting me, Mala." With a nod of his head, he was gone and for the first time in two weeks she felt hopeful.



## Chapter Twenty Six

"Does Mala know why I'm here?" Denali asked Dr. Lazara in the infirmary the next morning.

"Yes, but I thought it would be better if you came without her today. We'll know the results of the blood test in a few minutes. You know something's different in your behavior, don't you, Denali?"

Denali sighed. "Yeah. The passion's gone, all of it. Mala knows something's wrong with me, too."

Dr. Lazara steepled his long fingers in front of him. "Tell me about it."

Denali rubbed his fingertips against his temple. "I have most of the emotional memories of Mala and I on the shuttle and the planet. So I remember the ties that bound us were strong." His hand dropped to rub over his heart. "Now I'm surprised to find her in my suite and in my bed. I she's my mate and that I love her, but I can't those bonds."

Denali looked away from the doctor, to study the seascape on the wall. "We must have mated frequently, but I don't remember anything except the first one at mating time and the few occasions in the past weeks." He turned back to the doctor and held his hands on either side of his head. "What's left in between are vague impressions attached to memories of strong feelings, feelings of deep emotional attachment, intense love, passion beyond control and an unending need. But I can't seem to access any of those feelings now."

Denali lowered his hands to his lap. "I feel peaceful, calm and unruffled. I should feel stronger emotions, but I don't. I remember myself as a passionate, vibrant man, but I'm not that man now. I know the change has something to do with the cure. How can I be the man I used to be?"

A rap sounded on the door.

"Come," Dr. Lazara ordered.

Steffay handed the doctor a disc. She gave Denali a sympathetic look, then left and closed the door behind her.

Dr. Lazara inserted the disc into his computer. He frowned. "The blood test shows that you have almost no hormones in your system. You're seriously low in levels of both Felisian hormones and testosterone. That's why the passion is gone." He looked at Denali. "For some reason you haven't been producing any new hormones. I'll discuss the problem with Badran, but in the meantime, I'll give you hormone injections daily. You should feel like your old self in a few days."

"Good, then Mala won't look at me so strangely. Did she tell you about us? Normally she wouldn't, but she trusts you."

"She told me. Your mate is alone with her doubts and fears. I should have realized she had no one on board except you to talk to. When you're better, you need to encourage her to make friends. In the meantime, I recommend you work on your relationship with Mala. I know it's hard for you now, but you need to do it."

"I don't know where to begin."

"You said you've got memories of how you feel towards her. You know you love

her."

Denali nodded. "It's like I'm disconnected from those feelings."

"Go through the motions with her. Think of it like retraining a muscle after an injury or strengthening a limb after a broken bone. Go through the motions you remember until you connect with those feelings again."

"I'll try."

Dr. Lazara's face turned fierce. "Mala needs it, Denali. Do it for her."

Denali took a deep breath. "I will."

"Let's get your first injection and then you can go to her."

Denali entered his suite to find Mala hovering by the doorway to the sitting room. Her green eyes were darkened with worry and concern. He called on his memories and went to her and took hold of her hand. She looked at him in question and he remembered the love he felt for her.

"I'm sorry I worried you. I do love you. I remember how it felt and I know the feeling's still there. I care deeply for you. It's just that the feelings are far away right now, like there's a thick wall between me and them. But they're still there."

She swallowed. "What did the doctor say?"

"I have deficiencies in my testosterone and my Felisian hormones. He gave me an injection and said he'll talk with Badran to find a reason for the deficit."

"Hormones?"

"Yeah. It's sort of like it was when I was a child, before I ever had hormones. Except I had my Felisian hormones then. I don't have many of those right now."

"Is it temporary?" Her question was tentative.

"Dr. Lazara didn't know why it happened. That's why he's going to discuss my situation with Badran. Mala, I want to regain what we've lost, but nothing's easy or automatic for me right now. Will you help me?" It was hard to make himself vulnerable as a male this way, but Mala was the woman he loved. Any sacrifice was worthwhile in the pursuit of their relationship.

Her face was full of hope, a gentle glow to warm his falsely-imprisoned heart. "I'll help you. What do you need?"

"Mating isn't impossible for me right now, but it isn't easy and I can't do it frequently. If you'd initiate mating and be patient with me, we can enjoy a physical relationship again until the hormones take effect. I think if we spend time in each other's arms each day and work from there, things will get better for us."

"And there'll be kissing?" she asked hopefully.

"I'll be a slow starter for awhile, but the kissing will come if you take the lead."

"I can do that. I've been so afraid, Deni."

"Come here. Let's begin right now." Denali forced himself to gather her softly rounded body to him. His arms remembered what to do and his heart remembered why to do it. "I love you, Mala," he said into her hair. Her arms tightened around him, her hands gripping his back. It felt good to have her in his arms again. Why hadn't he thought about doing this over the past few weeks? He nuzzled her temple. "You're beautiful and you're mine."

"Oh, Deni," she rubbed her cheek against his chest. Her hands played with the ends of his mane and he remembered that she loved his mane best of all. He maneuvered them to a chair in the sitting room and sat with her on his lap so that her hands would be free to roam.

Her hands went immediately to his face, to his cheeks, and then she smoothed his mane back from his face. He pressed into her touch. It felt wonderful. He remembered the arrested look on her face and the love that shone only for him. Joy warmed his heart.

Her hands sank into the mane on the sides of his head and slowly, slowly she brought her lips to his. His lips, too, remembered what to do and he savored the warm lushness of her mouth. A memory of devouring hunger tickled his mind, although he felt only a slight appetite now. But he wrapped his arms around her to anchor her in place. He knew the hunger would grow eventually and he wasn't letting her get away until he got to that point. Vividly he remembered the mating in this same room two weeks ago. That was a recent memory, more powerful than the ones locked behind the glass wall in his mind. That memory had the power of promise and he followed it like a guided laser missile.

"Come inside my mind and body, Deni. Feel what I feel."

His empathic ability hadn't been affected by the cure, although he and Mala hadn't been empathically linked for weeks. Carefully he slid over into her mind and body. The joining was just as he remembered, and he sighed in relief. He was surprised to find Mala aroused, her loins pulsing with need, the need for him. And all they had done so far was kiss.

"Take me to bed, Mala. Help me to mate," he pleaded. She needed him and he needed to fulfill her.

Mala climbed from his lap and led him by the hand to their bed. She disrobed for him, allowing her soft garments to slither sensually from the flesh he remembered with visual and tactile memories. Her breasts were full, heaving with panted breaths, the nipples taut and flushed with arousal. As she revealed her flesh, he ran his fingertips over her arms and shoulders.

She looked at him after the last garment fell and her pupils had darkened. She reached for his shirt and he helped her remove it. Then her hands caressed his chest and he reveled in the feel of her soft hands touching him. He threw back his head and breathed deeply as she aroused his nipples.

He should be proud; after all, he'd taught her what she was doing now. Her palms followed his ethnic markings across his clavicle, up his shoulders, and down his arms to his fingertips, branding him all the way. He felt seared in his ethnic markings, which he knew was impossible, but that was how Mala's touch made him feel.

Then her hands were on his hips and she stepped forward to slide her hands to his buttocks to cup and mold them. His arms slid around her and then he found her lips again and joined empathically with her at the same time. Oh, this was good! Her hands stroked and molded, her tongue dueled with his, and her arousal seemingly burned into his own loins as though it was his own. He groaned deep in his throat.

Her hands moved to the front of his thighs and rubbed. He groaned again into her mouth. He became aroused at last. He knew there would be only one mating, because with limited hormones he couldn't attain repeated arousal. He had to make the mating good for Mala.

Suddenly her hands moved inward to his penis where he needed stimulation most. As she stroked him, there was fire in his loins at last. He threw back his head and groaned. The burning heat made him feel strong and masculine again. He lowered his trousers and Mala's hands quickly became greedy on his aching penis. He pulled her down to the bed to continue her torturous explorations.

His lips moved to her breast, hungry for her nipple. He slid a hand down between her

legs and they opened eagerly for him. He found her swollen clitoris and stroked. Her restless movements and gasping breaths told him her pleasure was escalating. He rubbed faster. Suddenly she strained upward and groaned. His fingers rode her through her climax and satisfaction sang through him that he'd brought her to fulfillment.

"Rub harder," he ordered.

He groaned as her slender fingers kneaded his penis until he was ready. He moved between her legs and slowly pushed inside her. Possessiveness and hunger surged through him when he was seated fully in her body at last. They both groaned in relief.

"Join with me again, Mala," he urged.

Then she was with him, a loving, burning presence in his mind and body. He mated and all his emotions engaged, his memories coalesced with the present and he remembered his past with Mala in the only way he could now. He had the memory of the feelings and now he had the physical carnal knowledge to go with them. This was his mate. This was as natural as breathing. This was tremendous affirmation of their love for each other.

He found something good, finally, in having limited hormones. He was very slow to come. For a time he wasn't even sure he could have an orgasm. In the meantime, he rode Mala for a long time, enjoying the thrust of his body in hers, feeling the stirrings of the chains of passion that bound him to her, and reveling in being physically bound to her.

Eagerly he caressed and sucked her nipples. She thrashed her head and held his mouth in place while he suckled. His hand slid between her legs, plucking and rubbing her clitoris while he thrust. He brought her to gasping, screaming orgasm three times--tickling a vague memory in his brain of mating time with her.

He felt her concern and guessed at its cause. "Can you climax, Deni?"

"I'm not sure."

"Come here," she urged and he lay on her rounded body. She wrapped her legs around him and tilted up her hips to drive him deeper inside her. He groaned and then he felt her projecting the feeling of her burning loins. His loins burned, too. She clenched her inner muscles and he clenched his teeth.

"Harder, Deni!"

He drove and drove into his love, his mate. She filled his every pore, his mind and his heart. Suddenly he was too full of her and he exploded in orgasm, groaning long with relief. He'd done it! He collapsed onto her, gasping, pushing his face into her throat.

"I love you!" he declared. His mate! He could feel the primitive echo from the past ringing with today's surety. "I love you."

"I love you too, Deni."

"I can do this if you help me like you did today. I do this. I won't fail you any more." Once again he felt strong and confident.

"I'll help you, Deni. It was my fault. I wasn't thinking. I should have been stronger. I failed, not the other way around."

He turned his face and kissed her. "We'll try harder from now on. I remember on the planet promising to keep the goal of marriage foremost in our minds. Maybe we need to promise that again."

"Yes, I think we do. I promise."

"I do too." He smiled at her and she smiled back. Then he sobered. "You understand that I won't be able to mate again today, maybe not even tomorrow, don't you?"

"I do now. We'll do other things. Love is more than just physical, but the physical

things help."

"It was good between us today. It solidified my memories."

"Really?"

"Yes. I hated losing the memories of you and me, of being mates. To know I was something and not be able to remember it or feel it haunted me. It made me feel helpless and frustrated and angry. I wouldn't wish memory loss on anyone."

Her palm rested against the side of his face. "Don't think about it any more. Can I have one more kiss?"

He rose above her and leaned down to join his lips to hers. "Umm, good," he murmured, pleased.

"Deni, I want to lie in your arms today, just to talk and be with you."

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "That's rather a lazy way to spend the day."

"I know, but we need it. Will you?"

"Yeah."

He spent a wonderful day in bed with his mate, talking quietly about a wide variety of things. They remained intimately pressed together and he found he didn't need hormones to want to kiss and nuzzle the woman he loved. And holding her in his arms didn't require hormones, not when he loved her. He didn't need to be Felisian at all, because love crossed the species barrier easily in their case.

Mala purred her contentment. That feeling had been absent in her these last two weeks and now he realized he'd missed it. He wanted his mate to be happy, always.

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Lazara assured Denali that in the best opinion of both he and Badran, the hormone injections would stimulate his body's production of hormones. Once that happened, he wouldn't need injections any more. So Mala was only slightly surprised on the fifth day when Denali came off his shift and mated in the Felisian way they had shared for months, just as if nothing had ever happened.

Afterward tears filled her eyes. Deni was back! Her love had returned. She rubbed her face against his silky mane, feeling the bonds with him again and relishing them. For five and a half months she'd been mated to him, but she hadn't realized how much that bond meant until it was locked away from her.

Denali was first and foremost a Felisian. Until he was robbed of his Felisian hormones, she hadn't realized how much of what she loved about him was Felisian. His arrogant confidence, his vitality, his love of life, his roaring sensuality and sexiness, and the depth of his passionate love for her were all Felisian. It was those particular hormones that set him apart in her mind from every other person. He was the most special and wonderful man, and he was Felisian.

"I love you, Deni," she swore to him.

"My own love. My Mala." He kissed her cheek and Mala felt his love wash over her like a balm, cleansing away the fear and the loneliness of the past few weeks.

"I've missed you, Deni."

"I know. I'm here now and I love you."

He kissed her hard and Mala grabbed handfuls of his mane to hold him close. She never wanted to be apart from him again. These past few weeks had shown her what an empty, lonely wasteland her life would be without him. Today had made clear to her that it was the Felisian aspect of Denali she wanted. She had nothing to fear from that part of him,

and everything to gain. He'd shown his commitment to her. He was ready, willing and able to finish the mating bond. She'd chosen him above all others. Seemingly her fate was sealed. It was long past time to commit to him completely.

"Deni, bond me as your mate."

## Chapter Twenty Seven

"Are you sure you want to finish the mating bond, Mala?" Denali asked. Hope made his face glow.

"Yes. I want to marry you, Deni."

"Good." Satisfaction oozed from him.

He mounted her once more and thrust home. He thrust hard and this time instead of shoving the mating bond into her, his essence flowed into her and flooded her cells with warmth, love and the bond. She offered no resistance as he went deep into her body to where the bond currently ended and penetrated much, much deeper than that. She gasped as he drove to her very soul and found every empty place inside her and filled them with the mating bond. Her heart had been bound to him for months but her soul had been free. Now he carefully, respectfully and lovingly seeded her soul with the bond. This was the deepest penetration of all and the greatest invasion of her most private self, but Mala accepted it.

Over and over she arched under his heavy thrusts as he tightly wove the mating bond. Even though she was now receptive to it, the feeling of fullness and breathlessness as her Bonwee cells were invaded and bonded was slightly uncomfortable.

"Almost done, Mala. Hold on," Denali encouraged her.

He was almost incandescent in his joy at making her his mate. Sweat ran down his face from working so hard to make a perfect bond, tediously tying it to every fiber, cell, tendon and bone in her body. He knit her sexuality tightly to his so that lust would always be dual for them. Every atom of her being was branded with his name and sewn to every atom of Deni. Their halves were welded into a seamless whole, making them a permanent pair for life.

"Hurry, Deni," she gasped. "I can't take much more."

There was a physical snap and Mala gasped as the mating bond was completed and attached her and Denali permanently together in the strongest of ties. She belonged to him now as he'd belonged to her all along. She was now a separate half of the whole that constituted her and Denali. Yin and yang. He hung over her, arms extended, breathing heavily, while she absorbed the wonder of being his mate. And he had felt like this all along.

"You're mine now, Deni!" she exclaimed in awe.

"Yes, for all of our lives. Thank you."

"You're a good man," she told him because it was true and because she sensed that he needed to hear it from her. She shouldn't have distrusted him. She should have believed a mate--not even a Felisian mate--would never seek another lover. There was no room in a mating bond for a third person. Denali had known it all along.

"I am a good man. And a tired one, but a very happy one."

"I love you, Deni." She caressed his cheek with her palm and fingertips.

"I love you, Mala. You're my mate." He disengaged their lower bodies, and to her astonishment there was no wrenching like what they'd experienced for months.

"Deni, there wasn't any discomfort this time when you left me."

"I told you the bond wanted to be completed. It wanted us to remain lovers until I was your mate. And now I am."

## Chapter Twenty Eight

Two days later Denali wore his navy dress uniform, neatly cleaned and pressed. Mala wore a shimmery pink dress his female friends had found for her. She'd marveled at the dress, which was held up by thin straps made from some sparkly material. She was still trim everywhere but around her belly, and the dress draped very flatteringly around her as it fell to the floor. The color went well with her pale skin and light ash brown curls. A fabric ring made from the same shimmery fabric as the dress encircled her hair, with pink ribbons hanging down her back. Mala was sure someone had made the dress and fabric ring especially for her.

Denali stared hungrily at her when she finished dressing. Mala ate him up with her eyes. He knew the navy color was the perfect background for his long tawny mane and golden skin. Mala liked how he looked in his uniform. He thought of being out of uniform with her, skin to skin, in bed.

"Don't muss me, Deni. I want pictures and I want to look like this. You always look beautiful so you don't have to worry if you're mused."

"You look very beautiful today, Mala."

"That's because you've made me pregnant, and you've made me your mate, in that order," Mala teased.

Denali laughed. "Let's go get married."

The ceremony was held in the largest conference room on the ship and it was standing room only. If the number of people attending was any indication, only a skeleton staff manned the ship. Denali halted in the doorway with Mala on his arm. He wanted everyone to observe the beauty he saw in the woman he was about to marry, glowing with love for her mate. Her eyes were the vivid green that so attracted him (and other males, he'd noticed).

There were sighs and indrawn breaths, he noted with satisfaction, as he started down the center aisle to the front of the room. There were louder gasps and whispered comments as they passed, for only now could others see what only he'd been allowed to see. Mala's shoulders, back and arms were patterned with Mitzli ethnic markings that were usually hidden by her clothing. Because she was only forty percent Felisian, the markings hadn't spread to her face, neck and hands, where everyone could see them. By accepting the wedding dress, she'd tacitly agreed to publicize the change in her DNA.

They reached Emir, Joarnon and the Petrosian stranger who was the USP theism leader. As Denali looked at Emir for confirmation, he caught the look of love on Emir's face as he stared at Mala. A multitude of emotions roared through Denali: jealousy quickly snuffed out, possessiveness, amazement and finally sympathy. Denali had won the woman that Emir could never win, because Mala saw only Denali as a potential husband.

Emir glanced at Denali and blushed, caught displaying an emotion he didn't want known, especially today. Denali nodded acknowledgement and the ceremony began. He and Mala had been legally mated for days, but this ceremony was for public acknowledgement of their union.

They answered and spoke their vows confidently. They received the blessing of



Mala's God, and Denali voicelessly thanked that same God for answering his plea for help from the little grassy glade. Mala looked questioningly at him, sensing something, but he said nothing to her. The seeds of theist belief in him were very private right now, newly sprung from the grassy glade and from being bonded to Mala's soul.

Finally they were married and he framed her face for their first public kiss. He kept in mind her instructions not to muss her, but firmly fused their lips together. The crowd applauded noisily and he raised his head to find Mala's smile that he loved so much, her dimples deeply etched in her cheeks and her green eyes vivid with love.

\* \* \* \*

Denali and Mala moved into the crowd to accept congratulations. Elder Paradon beamed at them. "Madam Avonee, I had no doubts from the day I met you. May I call you Mala now?"

"Yes, Elder. I'm glad you approve." And what a weighty endorsement it was! She and Deni had just received the official Felisian government sanction from this powerful man.

"You act very Felisian when you become righteously indignant. I see your real colors are finally displayed." He indicated the Mitzli markings.

Then he turned to shake Denali's hand, leaving Mala gaping at his statements. Is that why Denali was attracted to her, because she had characteristics similar to Felisians? What an amazing thought. She'd always had more passion than was appropriate for a Bonwee. But his theory made her dizzy. She'd put that idea away and analyze it another day.

\* \* \* \*

When mating time came at last, Mala was consumed by a ravenous hunger for her mate. Denali sensed her Felisian hormones heating her blood to boiling. The pheromones she exuded lured and captured him in their grip. When she fell on him with an almost violent need, Denali's answering greed rose up to devour her with passion. He was driven by a single desire--to be one with his mate.

For three days the newly mated, newly married, triply bound couple carried on an absolutely torrid, completely Felisian mating with both of them in heat. Mala was completely wanton and Denali was wild for her. They had an eager love that wouldn't be denied.

Early evening on the third day the fever left both of them and they collapsed on the bed gasping. He turned his head and found her watching him.

"That was marvelous, Deni. It's too bad it only happens twice a year."

He groaned. "I did most of the work. But next time you won't be pregnant and you'll have to work harder. You were completely Felisian, did you notice that?"

"Yes, I felt all hot and lusty, totally ravenous for you. You're magnetic, Deni."

"It's the Felisian DNA. I told you it would be like that. I couldn't get enough of you. If you hadn't been pregnant I would have been an animal."

"You an animal, but so was I. You're fantastic."

He kissed her in appreciation. "It's because I love you. Now roll over and open your legs. I'm exhausted."

Mala yawned and did as she was told and they were united once again. "I love you, Deni," she said sleepily.

He held his mate/wife tightly. They'd made it. Mala's Felisian DNA attracted him like a magnet, as she had said. The deep emotional commitment he shared with her and the love they felt for each other made mating time almost a spiritual experience.

What had he ever done to deserve a love like this? To deserve a woman of fire and passion, modesty and loyalty like her? A year ago he'd been content in his life, but only with her did he know what contentment really was. He'd thought he was happy in his bachelor life, but he was made for this, to be Mala's husband.

Denali was fortunate he'd been chosen to pick up Mala from the Panesh ship. He was luckier still to have had five months alone together, severed from their individual bonds and dependent on each other for their lives. And he was most fortunate of all to have had mating time early on, allowing him to bond her to him so easily and in so many ways. If those things hadn't happened, she might not be his wife now. But those things had happened, and Mala was his wife. He was the most fortunate man in the universe.

The End