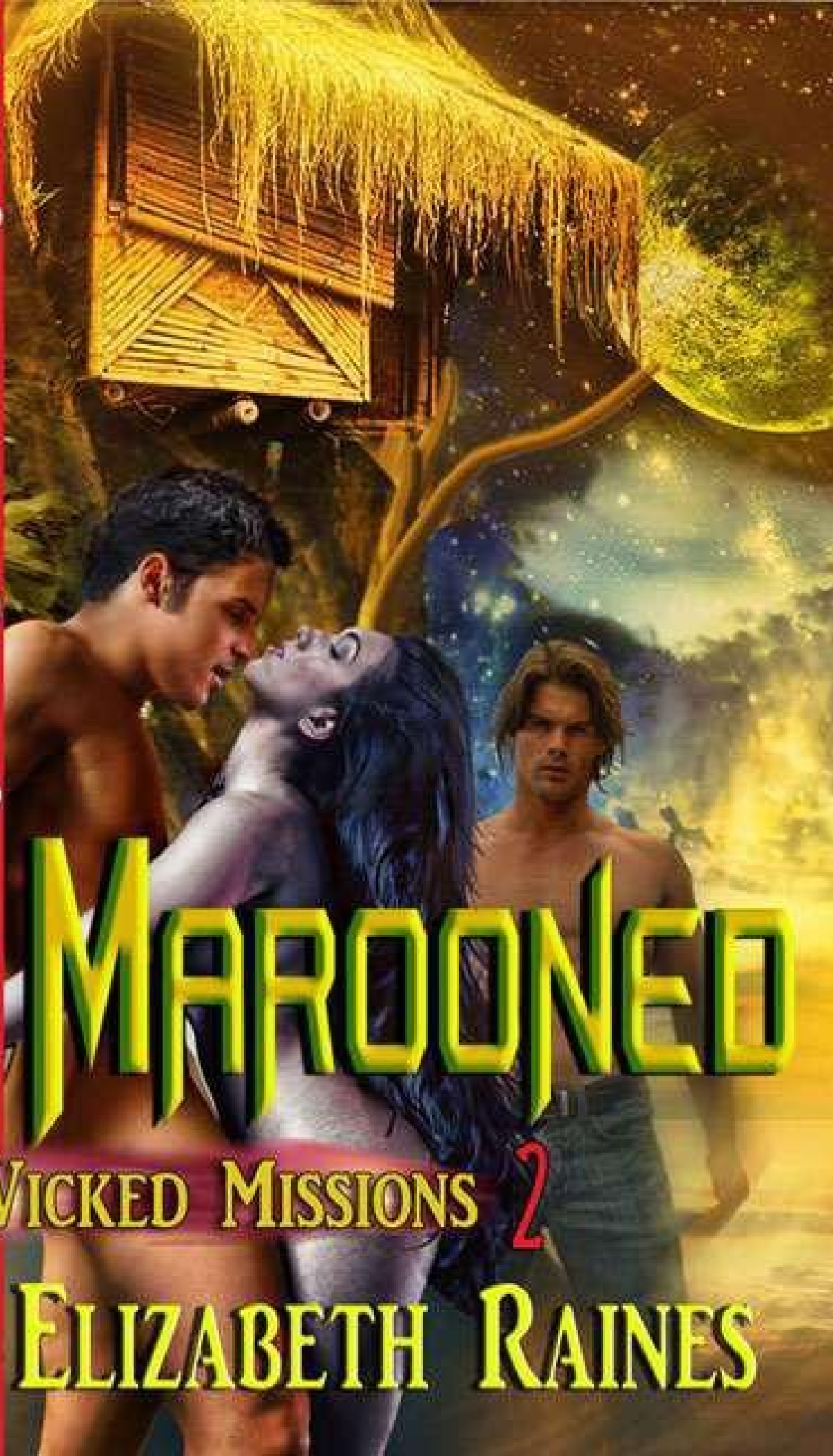


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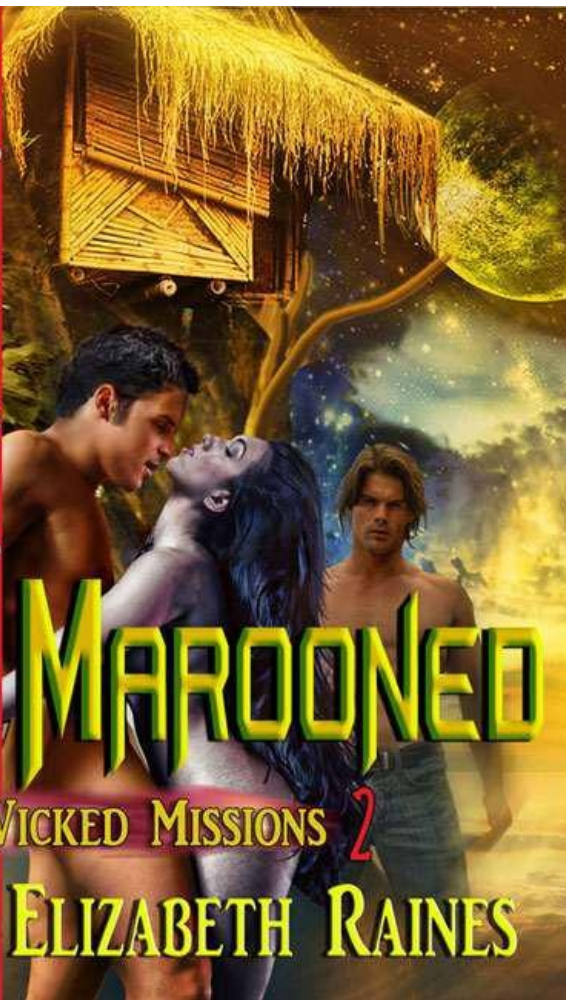
MAROONED

WICKED MISSIONS 2

ELIZABETH RAINES

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MAROONED

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Wicked Missions 2

Marooned

Marooned on a tropical moon with two handsome men—one her Earth Bureau of Investigation partner—Betinsa Nungio faces the comchi, the time in her species' lives when they must take mates or risk death.

Agent Matt Newton has hidden his attraction to his partner. Now, he has the opportunity to explore his feelings. Can he find the courage to share her with another man, one she needs to complete her transition?

Ambassador Drake Keller faces a dilemma—he's supposed to observe other cultures, not participate in them. Yet Betinsa needs him—as she needs Matt—and the more time Drake spends with her, the more his passion grows. How can he possibly leave her behind when they are rescued?

As the trio explores their growing bond, they stumble across a terrorist group plotting to destroy Betinsa's planet and must work together to try and save her world.

Genre: Futuristic, Ménage a Trois/Quatre, Science Fiction

Length: 28,680 words

MAROONED

Wicked Missions 2

Elizabeth Raines

MENAGE EVERLASTING



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Ménage Everlasting

MAROONED

Copyright © 2011 by Elizabeth Raines

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-461-8

First E-book Publication: May 2011

Cover design by *Les Byerley*

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PUBLISHER

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DEDICATION

To Nancy—Thanks for being such a terrific friend!

MAROONED

Wicked Missions 2

ELIZABETH RAINES

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Chapter 1

"I hate space travel," Matt Newton grumbled as he strapped on his safety harness. "I've yet to have a flight that didn't have some kind of problem." With each pitch of the *Mirhala*, his stomach lurched until he worried that the small amount of food he'd managed to choke down for lunch was going to come right back up.

"It's just an asteroid field," Betinsa Nungio replied, not sparing him a glance over her shoulder as she piloted her ship through the barrage of enormous rocks that seemed intent upon pounding the ship to smithereens. Her ponytail of thick, ebony curls bobbed with each sway of the ship. "Did you get the prisoner buckled in?"

"Yeah. He's strapped in good and tight." With a look to the rear of the spacecraft, Matt checked again on the terrorist he, his Earth Bureau of Investigation partner Betinsa, and Ambassador Drake Keller were escorting back to the Rhotan System. While he would have preferred to put the guy on trial back on Earth, the recent and still-fragile treaty between Earth's United Continents and the new Fraiqua government required any full-blooded Fraiquan to be handed over to their home planet for judgment. Since Matt and Betinsa were E.B.I. agents, they'd been asked to guard the prisoner on the trip and accompany the ambassador. He figured they'd also been invited since the investigation he conducted with Betinsa led to the guy's capture, so they would be there in case there were any questions about how everything went down.

A loud bang sounded to the left of the ship and it jumped hard to the right. "*Kazom*," Betinsa whispered as she gave the control a tug and the ship shifted sharp to the left again.

Matt dug his fingers into the handle on his seat and swallowed hard. He'd been learning Fraiqui from his partner, and he'd heard Betinsa use *that* word enough to know things weren't good. "Fuck, Tinsa? Why *fuck*?"

She didn't answer, clearly concentrating on what looked to Matt like an impossible number of asteroids flying at them.

Drake turned around to smile at him, and all Matt could do was shake his head at the ambassador's aplomb. He co-piloted the ship as if he'd been at Betinsa's side for years. "Hang on there, buddy. This little lady is a helluva pilot. She'll pull us through."

Typical ambassador. Always trying to calm people down. "You don't have to praise her to me. She's my partner. I know how wonderful she is."

Well, hell. His frayed nerves weren't helping him guard his feelings, and fear had obviously shorted out the buffer between his brain and his mouth. Sure, he nurtured a growing attraction to his blue-skinned partner, but he'd always figured it was best to keep things strictly business. Not that he was able to keep her out of his fantasies.

When they'd set the trap to capture the group of Fraiquans who'd plotted a terrorist attack on Earth—including the one they were now escorting to his homeworld—Betinsa used her species' unique shape-shifting abilities to effect one of the captures. Matt had discovered that she could change her own appearance, but it required her to strip out of any clothing because she couldn't bend the rules of the universe enough to cause inanimate objects to shift. Betinsa had been so uninhibited, she'd yanked her clothes off without a moment's hesitation before jumping to a spaceship's wing and transforming her body into a piece of equipment. But not before he'd gotten a good, long look at every sensuous inch of her.

From the moment he'd seen her naked, Matt was lost. While he'd always thought women had the most beautiful bodies, he'd discovered that Fraiquan females excited him even more. Or maybe it was just Betinsa...

Her skin was the most delectable shade of sky blue. Smooth. Elegant. Ethereal. Her breasts were firm and high and tipped with ruby nipples. He longed to nestle them in the palms of his hands, somehow knowing they would fit perfectly. Her waist was as narrow as any he'd seen, but her hips flared beautifully to a taut ass he had an overwhelming urge to kiss. A triangle of ebony curls crowned her mound, and he wondered if the sweet folds he'd find hidden beneath would be pink or the same sensuous blue of her skin.

"Kazom!" This time she shouted the curse right before a loud bang forced the ship to drop so fast it made Matt dizzy. Muttering a string of words in her own language, Betinsa worked the controls. "Hold on!" she finally screamed.

The next strike hit the side of the ship, tearing a hole in the wall next to the prisoner. Just as the vacuum of space tried to suck everything—including the Fraiquan—out of the ship, a quick flash of blue light rose, creating a force field. With a huge sigh of relief, Matt called, "Good job, Tinsa."

"Don't thank me," she replied, not sparing him a look. "Thank Drake."

The ambassador shrugged. "Just a few buttons on the com. Didn't figure the Fraiquans would want us to lose the guy before we got him back home."

"Ever the diplomat," Matt quipped before sucking in a breath as the ship shifted yet again.

"The job is my life. Figured a couple of E.B.I. agents would understand that."

"Oh, I do." When the ship pitched, Matt groaned.

"You okay, partner?" Betinsa asked.

She clearly had enough on her mind to thread the ship through the dense asteroid field. She sure as hell didn't need to be worrying about him or his stupid motion

sickness. “I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. Just fly.”

The next hit made him rethink his answer. This time the ship was thrown to the left and started a spin that seemed to increase in speed with each rotation. “Tinsa?”

“I can’t...seem to...” The rest of her words were Fraiqui, and Matt wasn’t even attempting to translate. He was more occupied with trying to figure out if anyone in the whole universe would even give a damn if he died when the *Mirhala* crashed or if he was reduced to nothing but ash as they burned up in whatever atmosphere they were going to enter in a free fall. Had bile not been blocking his throat, he would have asked what planet was going to be his final resting place.

Betinsa frantically worked at the controls as Drake did the same. Fighting against the centrifugal force, Matt tried to look back at their prisoner. The guy was softly muttering to himself, probably a prayer to whatever god his species worshipped. Matt figured a prayer was wasted on himself. With all the shit he’d done in his life, both on the job and off, forgiveness most likely wasn’t coming his way.

The spin slowed and the ship bucked as it seemed to jump over some sort of celestial speed bumps. Straining to see if he could figure out where they were going to crash—or maybe even...land—he realized he didn’t recognize the fast-approaching sphere. Mixtures of green made him hope they’d find an oxygen atmosphere to breathe. *Fuck*. Now he was thinking they might survive. Not at the speed they were hurtling down.

“Brace for impact,” Drake shouted back, hands still moving furiously over his com.

The *Mirhala* hit moments later. Matt felt like some rag doll being tossed from one overenthusiastic child to another. His arms flopped around helplessly as his head fell from side to side, forward and back like a newborn infant. The ship skimmed over the tops of dense trees, pitching up and down until it slammed into the side of what appeared to be a rather impressive forest before Matt’s world went black.

* * * *

Golanna! Alive! Golanna!

The words—a mixture of Fraiqui and English—kept echoing in Betinsa’s mind as the world slowly came back into focus. She blinked against the light from the dual suns, her trembling hand rising to shield her from the painful brightness that now shone freely through what used to be the front of her ship. “Matt... Drake...”

A groan beside her made her heart leap into a faster rhythm. Her neck was stiff as she turned to her right to see if her copilot was making the pitiful sound. “Drake?”

“Yeah...” Another deep groan. “You okay, Betinsa?”

“I’m...*golanna*...” How else could she respond? She was too busy worrying about her passengers to take inventory of her own injuries. She was alive. That was all that mattered right now.

He actually chuckled. “I kinda figured you were alive. Hard to reply to me

otherwise.” The click of his harness was followed by the creaking of the copilot’s chair. His shape blocked the bright suns. A hand gently touched her cheek. “You look like hell,” he said in her tongue.

Betinsa hadn’t realized he spoke any Fraiqui. She couldn’t believe she replied with her own chuckle. Drake’s long brown hair had escaped its leather band, tumbling in a riot around his shoulders. His brown eyes showed compassion that reached her heart. A cut marred his handsome cheek, the red blood oozing in a small trickle. She reached out to wipe it away, only then realizing her left arm would not obey her commands. “You are a bit ragged yourself, ambassador.” Working up the nerve to look at her swelling left arm, she frowned. “I fear I’ve been injured.”

“Let me see,” he said in English. Warm fingertips followed her arm from wrist to elbow. She gritted her teeth, anticipating great pain. To Betinsa’s relief, it never came. She felt nothing but a dull ache she could mentally block. “I don’t think anything’s broken.”

Tears brimmed her eyes when she finally found the courage to ask after her partner. “Matt?” She glanced to Drake as he worked to unbuckle her harness.

Drake looked past her for a moment before again trying to free her from the pilot’s seat. “*Golanna*. He’s breathing and moving like he’s about to wake up.”

The threatened tears spilled over her lashes as she whispered a quick prayer of thanksgiving. The wreck had been her fault, her arrogance causing her to misjudge her ability to fly through the asteroid field. Had she cost Matt his life... Or Drake his...

A gentle hand wiped away her tears. “We’re okay, Betinsa. You got us down safely.”

She sniffled and nodded, embarrassed to have allowed anyone to see her weakness. Weeping in front of others wasn’t proper for a warrior. Her mother would feel shame at knowing Betinsa had let another see her tears. Straightening her spine and raising her chin, she said, “I can see that. Now I must see to my prisoner.”

The speed of the change in Betinsa’s demeanor took Drake’s breath away. The fear she’d shown for him and Matt Newton had been the first crack he’d seen in that stoic shell. From the moment he’d met the woman, she’d been the model of her culture—the Fraiquan warrior woman. Hard. Calm. Serious. Drake had begun to believe that any softness had been trained right out of her, never to be seen again. But when he’d told her that her partner had survived the crash, she’d given him a glimpse of feminine vulnerability, and despite the scary circumstances, he’d felt a magnetic draw to her. A need to reach out and comfort her.

He’d studied the Fraiquan culture in-depth for this mission, even learned a little of their language. Their world had been nearly destroyed in the Rhotan System civil wars, the worst of the damage inflicted by the neighboring Dracorians. Now they struggled to rebuild, keeping meticulous track of any Fraiquan who left their planet and constantly watching for another Dracorian attack.

The society was matriarchal, the women being the breadwinners and protectors of the family. Men were the intellectuals, and although as strong as human males, they

seemed content to let their women take the physical lead. Betinsa had seemed the embodiment of a Fraiquan female, and she'd fascinated Drake from the moment they'd met. He loved her forcefulness and her stubborn nature, and yet seeing the softness hiding behind that tough exterior had touched his heart somehow. And his body. He felt himself physically responding to her sweet scent and soft skin.

Shaking his aching head at his ridiculous romantic thoughts, he chalked them up to surviving a near-death experience. His desire to make love to Betinsa had to be a reaction to still being alive. If there was more hiding there, now was certainly not the time to be exploring it.

He helped her get to her trembling legs, and she immediately pushed his hands away from her waist. "See to the prisoner," she snapped. Her sturdy façade was firmly back in place.

Drake moved to the back of the wreckage and realized their prisoner had been thrown from the craft. He moved pieces of debris aside and stepped through the largest hole in the hull, breathing in the air and sighing in relief that they'd landed in an atmosphere that obviously contained enough oxygen to survive.

The man had been thrown almost ten meters. His body lay on the ground at an odd angle against a tree that told Drake he need not hurry to his side. By the time he reached him, Matt was awake and helping Betinsa out of the wreckage. Drake knelt down to press his fingers to the prisoner's neck. As he'd expected, no rhythm of a heartbeat was found.

"He's dead." He shook his head as he got back to his feet with a groan over the soreness in his body. "That'll be a thrill to explain to the Fraiquans." He glanced over to see Matt holding Betinsa's arm and gently testing for injuries. The woman suddenly appeared...fragile again. As she stood next to Matt, the top of her head barely reached his shoulder. How could he not have noticed how tiny she was? Probably because her personality was so full of life and strength. "I didn't think that arm looked broken."

Matt shook his head. "Just sprained I think. But I'm not a doctor."

"Is there a medscanner on board?" Drake asked Betinsa.

She chuckled, despite the fact she was in obvious pain. Glancing back to her mess of a ship, she said, "I *had* one. But looks like I don't have much of *anything* now." She blinked a few times as she stared at the tangled mess of metal that had been the *Mirhala*. "How in the universe did we all survive that crash?"

"*You*," Drake replied. "You're the reason we survived."

Her eyes moved to the body of their prisoner. "He didn't."

"That's not your fault," Matt said, not letting go of her arm. Drake realized Matt had a few injuries as well. He favored his left side, guarding what might be cracked ribs. "He was just sitting in the wrong place on the ship when that monster hit us."

"I should have been able to avoid that collision." The hurt was plain in her voice.

“Betinsa...” Matt said in a soothing tone. “You saved our lives. Drake and I are alive because of you.” He leaned in to kiss her forehead, and when he pulled back, she laid her cheek against his chest.

So...the *warrior* became a *woman* when near Matt.

Drake swallowed an entirely strange burst of jealousy at watching the E.B.I. partners exchange such an intimate moment. Wondering if there was more to the couple than a working relationship, he had to admit they looked great together.

Perhaps jealousy wasn't the right word... *Envy* seemed to fit much better. Drake envied their closeness, especially since they could overcome the fact that they came from different species. Being an ambassador, he'd seen time and time again how much prejudice still existed in the universe. Even on his home planet, different ethnicities still bore the suspicion and hatred of centuries long gone. United Continents Ambassadors were discouraged from forming relationships with aliens. To see Betinsa leaning on Matt and to see him offer her solace touched Drake's cynical heart.

Betinsa pulled away from Matt. “Now we must find a way to survive.”

“Until we can be rescued. At least we have a decent environment,” Drake replied. “Plenty of trees, and it appears several have fruit. The weather's kinda nice. Reminds me of where I grew up.”

“On Earth?” Betinsa asked.

Drake nodded. “On the Florida peninsula.”

“We should see what we can salvage from the ship,” Matt said before nodding at her injured arm. “I should make you a sling, Tinsa.”

“'Tis unnecessary. I'm able to work,” she insisted.

Drake let his gaze wander, taking in their surroundings. “Were you able to figure out where we are?”

With a nod, Betinsa said, “I brought us to Katenya.”

“A planet?”

“A small moon. I couldn't keep the *Mirhala* together long enough to make it to Fraiqua. I chose one of her moons—one with a proper atmosphere.”

That sounded encouraging. “How far do we have to walk to find a settlement?”

A shake of her head set her long curls swaying. The tie holding them in a ponytail must have broken in the crash because the dark ringlets of hair now spilled down to rest against her shoulders and back. “There are no settlements on Katenya. 'Tis a sacred moon—home of the Charhock.”

“The what?” Matt asked.

“The Charhock. Fraiquans believe the Charhock brings peace and prosperity to our world. He's our savior.”

Drake couldn't help but snort a laugh. Fraiqua—the entire Rhotan System for that matter—had just ended over a century of violent civil wars. The five planets in the system had united in a fragile peace, but there was still much danger from terrorists. *And prosperity?* Most of the planets were scrambling to keep their populations from famine.

“You mock my traditions, ambassador?” Betinsa asked, her voice hard.

“I just...” Shit, he knew better than that. Ambassadors never made mistakes like that. Hell, his head hurt, his body felt like he'd been plowed over by a bullet train, and he wasn't guarding his thoughts or his words. “I'm sorry.”

Betinsa's dark blue eyes flashed fire. “The arrival of the new Charhock brought our peace. After so very long, we again have a Charhock to help us rebuild all that was destroyed.”

“Maybe we should find this Charhock,” Matt said. “Think he can help us get home?”

“Like the Wizard of Oz?” Drake couldn't stop himself from asking.

“I've heard of that story,” Betinsa said, her voice softer. “We shall not see the Charhock, nor shall we ask him to fulfill our wishes or if he's controlled by a man behind the curtain.”

Matt chuckled, then winced. “Let's see what we can use from the *Mirhala*. We can build some kind of shelter until help comes. Tinsa, you *did* send a distress signal, right?”

Chapter 2

Tinsa, you did send a distress signal, right?

Betinsa hesitated with her answer. The men had no idea what saving their lives was going to cost her. But what would it cost *them*?

Nothing! She'd find a way to get them off the moon, even if it was the last thing she did in this life.

Had she sent a distress signal that her ship was going to make an emergency landing on Katenya, her family's life on Fraiqua would have been over. They would've been disgraced for centuries to come and their honor stripped away. Were she to show her face after this, her mother would be obliged to rip Betinsa's throat out with her bare teeth and leave her corpse to rot on their front doorstep for a full month to serve as an example for others who might consider disgracing themselves in the future. It was the only way to restore their name.

So why had she committed such a profoundly unforgiveable sin? Why had she risked losing everything that she held dear? Why had she not simply taken the honorable route and hit the *Mirhala*'s self-destruct when she realized there was no other place she could reach?

Because she couldn't let Matt Newton die. Nor could she let her arrogance and overconfidence kill Drake Keller. She now bore the responsibility for the death of their prisoner, even though his life had been forfeit from the moment the new Fraiquan government demanded that he be returned to his home planet. Had he stepped foot on his home soil, his execution would have been swift and not horribly merciful. That notion did little to alleviate her profound guilt.

How was she supposed to tell these men—these two men she respected and admired—that she'd landed on Katenya—the forbidden moon? How could she reveal that no one would ever come to their rescue here unless she could arrange a miracle? How could she admit that by bringing them here, she'd made herself a potential sacrifice to the Charhock?

"Tinsa?" Matt's hand settled on her shoulder. "You did send the distress call, right?" he asked again.

She couldn't lie to her partner. "No. I didn't send any messages."

His brown eyes widened, and his hand tightened. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I." Drake's tone was harsher than Matt's. Probably because her partner would have a harder time accepting her betrayal than an ambassador, a man who was probably more accustomed to duplicity.

"I...couldn't. I couldn't let anyone know that we've come to Katenya. It's forbidden for anyone to set foot on this sacred moon."

Matt turned her toward him, making her tilt her head up to be able to look him in the eye. She owed him that much despite how desperately she wished she didn't have to face him. To turn away would have shown cowardice. Her honor made her straighten her spine and meet his dark eyes with her own. "Sacred?" he asked. "If this place is sacred, why did you put us down here? Surely we could have—"

"There was no other place. The *Mirhala* was breaking apart. I couldn't let you die. I couldn't let the ambassador die."

"And what will your punishment be, Betinsa?" Drake asked, stepping to Matt's side. He was taller than her partner, but leaner of build. The two of them seemed to tower over her, but she felt no fear. Their curiosity radiated from them like auras.

Betinsa had expected anger, yet none came. How could they forgive her for so great a crime against them?

They don't understand. She would have to explain it to the men, wanting to incite their anger. Anger would be righteous. Anger would be deserved. Anger would strengthen her to handle the choices she'd have to make in the days to come. "I have let aliens touch the pure land of the Charhock. My punishment can be only death. But I've placed you both in danger. That was my greatest sin."

There. She'd admitted it. She'd confessed. She waited for either—or both of them—to strike her for her impudence.

Matt's dark eyes grew soft and warm. "Oh, Tinsa... You didn't do anything wrong. You saved our lives."

His understanding only made her feel worse. She clenched her fists at her sides, wanting them to hit her. "I should never have done such a thing. I vow to you now that before I face what I must, I shall see you both away from this place and safely home to Earth." She pounded her fist against her heart to seal her promise.

"You knew death might be a consequence when you landed here?"

"Landed? Hardly," she replied. "I put down a ship that was being torn apart by an asteroid field I should have been able to fly through."

Matt's smile seemed too knowing for her taste. "Ah... So *that's* it. You're blaming yourself for the crash."

"I was the pilot! I should never have put your lives in jeopardy! I let my pride take control!" Her frustrated shouts seemed to hang in the air for a long time, adding to her humiliation. Warriors never showed emotion. They made decisions with clear heads and only the thought of doing what honor demanded. She'd let her feelings for Matt get in the way of her duty. To add even more disgrace, she'd wept in front of the men and now aired her emotions freely. "You're supposed to hate me now! I *want* you to hate me now!"

Matt gathered Betinsa into his arms, as if knowing she was losing the self-control she held so dear. She only allowed his comfort for a moment before struggling against him. He released her with a sigh heavy enough to brush her cheeks. "We need to find

out what we have left to use,” she snapped, hating how much she wanted to throw herself back into his embrace to let him comfort her. “Then we need to create some kind of shelter until I can figure out what to do.”

“Until we figure out what to do.” Drake pointed to the closest copse of trees. “We can use some of those branches to make a lean-to.”

Betinsa shook her head. “We mustn’t stay on the ground when the suns set.”

“Why?” the ambassador asked.

She nodded at the holes dug in the ground around the bases of several trees. “I believe those are gremtil dens. If they are, we’re in danger.”

“Gremtil?” Matt asked.

“We have them in Fraiqua’s forests as well. They come out at night to scavenge the ground for carrion, but they would destroy anything living as well. Should we sleep down here, we’ll become their feast.”

Looking up to the twin suns, Matt frowned. “How long do we have before they set?”

“Perhaps six hours,” she replied. “We should get to work now.”

* * * *

“Hey, Drake?” Matt asked. “Ever read *Swiss Family Robinson* back on Earth?”

“Not familiar with that one,” Drake called down as he reached for another piece of wood that Matt passed up before Drake raised it higher to Betinsa. She’d done a good job lashing together a deck for them to use while they slept. “What brings it to mind?”

“It’s the story of a family who was shipwrecked and built themselves a wonderful tree house to call home.” The platform they’d constructed was larger than some bedrooms back on Earth. “We did a nice job of this, didn’t we?”

Drake laughed. “We did. Seems like the three of us work well together. We’ll have to write a book about our adventures when this is all over.”

They’d salvaged more from the *Mirhala* than Matt had ever dreamed. A medical scanner that still worked. Some first aid supplies. A couple of laser rifles. Plus, both he and Betinsa had their personal laser pistols. A small amount of food. Even some bedding.

Since their E.B.I. standard black suits and Drake’s dress clothes were too hot, they had all changed to some of the more casual clothes they’d packed. He and Drake had started with shirts and shorts, but their sweat-soaked shirts now lay draped over one of the higher branches. Betinsa wore a formfitting tank top and tight workout shorts. Matt had seen her in similar outfits many times before when they’d gone for runs or practiced take-down maneuvers. Sure, he’d always admired her svelte, athletic shape. Now, what he noticed was Drake noticing her as well. What Matt couldn’t decide was if that bothered him or if he wanted Drake to envy him because he was close to her.

Despite Betinsa’s lack of a distress message, he knew someone would eventually

come looking for them. Drake Keller was one of Earth's ambassadors—he wouldn't be allowed to remain missing without a search being conducted. Nor would the Earth Bureau of Investigation allow two of its agents to be considered missing-in-action without checking into all possibilities of how they could have survived.

Several of the thick trees on Katenya were similar to Earth's bamboo—thick bark but hollow on the inside. He, Drake, and Betinsa had even been able to strip wire from the communications consoles to use to bind the logs they cut down with an ax Drake fashioned from a sharp piece of the ship's hull. With the three of them working as a team, they would have a safe place to sleep for the night. He hadn't had the nerve to ask what the gremtils she spoke of were, but the shiver in Betinsa's voice told him all he needed to know. No way in hell he'd be on the ground when the suns set.

Betinsa hadn't complained about her injured arm, not even seeming to favor it. He wouldn't wound her pride by inquiring after her. He knew better.

"Matt?" she called down. "The time?"

She'd asked often enough, it was starting to make him nervous. "An hour 'til the suns set."

"We should fetch the rest of the supplies from the ship and make our places up here," Betinsa said as she shimmied past him down the tall tree. She'd found something to bind her long hair with, and though he understood why she'd want the thick curls up while she worked, he missed seeing it loose and bouncing around her shoulders. *Such beautiful hair*. Black as a raven's wing with long ringlet curls he'd always wanted to tangle his fingers in to see if they were as soft as they looked.

His gaze followed her down the tree, and he couldn't help but admire the sway of her petite but nicely rounded hips as she hurried to the remainder of the wreckage. Maybe having her here—away from the stress and strain of their jobs back on Earth—might give him a chance to cultivate a deeper relationship with her. He'd desired that for a long time. He'd desired *her* for a long time. Yet they'd hopped from one investigation to the next with no time in between for them to get to know each other a little better.

Now, they had time. *Plenty* of time.

Matt climbed back to the ground, wincing at the soreness in his ribs. He'd evidently hit his side hard against the armrest of his seat. Not that he had a memory of it since he'd blacked out before they'd hit ground. His ribs were tender, but he didn't believe they were broken. If Betinsa could tough out a banged-up arm, he could suck it up over a sore rib cage.

"Doing okay?" Drake asked as he dropped to stand next to Matt. Leaning back against the tree, he folded his arms over his chest. "She's something else, isn't she? Never met a woman quite like Betinsa."

"Probably 'cause you've only dated human women. Need to broaden your horizons, my friend."

Drake shrugged. "Being an ambassador for Earth, it would be...frowned upon for me to set my sights on another species. Some humans would see that as a sort of ...betrayal."

"I suppose..." At least that meant that Drake wouldn't be competition for Betinsa's affections. "My parents feel the same. Dated a woman from Remiza once. She looked human, but her eyes were the most interesting shade of purple with yellow flecks. Gave her away—not that I'd tried to hide her origins. But my parents acted like she had the plague."

Both men stopped as Betinsa crawled back out of the wreckage. Her face lifted to the setting suns, her blue skin glowing like the sheen of a pearl. "What do you think your parents would say about *her*?" Drake asked.

Matt didn't answer, fearing for the first time that an event like that might be closer to being reality than he'd ever planned should he and Betinsa find some common ground while they waited to be rescued.

A sound much like a rather large swarm of cicadas rose from the floor of the forest. Betinsa shouted a warning as she headed toward them in a full sprint. "Up! Go up!"

Drake obeyed immediately, but Matt waited, wanting to be sure Betinsa didn't need his help to climb, especially since she had an injured arm. "Go!" she shouted. "Climb!"

Then he saw the movement, as if the ground had suddenly come alive. Little brown animals that looked a lot like gophers flooded from the dens next to the trees in a seemingly unending stream of fur. "Holy fuck!"

Betinsa scrambled up the tree with Matt right behind her. When they finally reached their platform, he peered over the edge as Drake and Betinsa joined him. In a matter of moments, the small creatures descended on the shrouded body of their prisoner, ate away all the clothes, and then devoured the flesh—even the bones—until nothing was left behind. "Holy fuck!" Matt said again. "Those come out every night?"

Betinsa shook her head. "Three nights each rotation of the moon. If I made calculations correctly, this is the second night. After one more, we shall enjoy thirty-one days free of them."

"That's a relief," Drake said, grabbing the rest of the supplies Betinsa had carried up in the canvas bag slung over her shoulder. "Can't say I'd like to see any of those little bastards up close and personal."

"Their fur is very warm," Betinsa replied. "But many must be captured to make a proper coat. Because of the danger, few seek to harvest them." She shuddered like a dog ridding itself of water on its fur. "I cannot abide creatures such as that. They make my skin crawl."

"Like rats on Earth," Matt said. "Hate those things." He inclined his head toward the edge of the platform as he walked to the middle of their new home. "How late do they stay out? Sunrise?"

“No. They feed for only a few hours. Well before the suns rise again, we’ll be safe and will stay that way until dark.”

“Don’t know about you two,” Drake said. “But I vote we stay up here, get something to eat, and catch some shut-eye.” His eyes studied Betinsa for a long moment. “You feeling okay?”

Matt tried to see whatever Drake thought he was seeing. Betinsa appeared fine. The only thing amiss, if one could even call it amiss, was that her cheeks had flushed a deeper blue. Was she out of breath? Probably because she’d just climbed the tree so quickly...

“I’m *fine*.” Her words were clipped as if the question embarrassed her.

Then Matt thought he understood. “We can find a way for all of us to...relieve ourselves. Shoot, I plan on peeing over the edge and trying to nail a few of those little balls of fur.” He added a chuckle that quickly changed to a fake cough when he realized neither Betinsa nor Drake found him amusing.

Drake’s scrutiny wouldn’t let up. “Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked her again.

“I’m just...anxious about what we’ll do.” She grabbed her bag. “We should eat.”

* * * *

“I can’t keep my eyes open a moment longer,” Matt said, grabbing one of the pillows they rescued and punching it hard with his fist. Flopping to his back, he closed his eyes. “Aren’t you two exhausted?”

“It *has* been a long day,” Betinsa replied. “Perhaps...perhaps we should all rest now.” The strangeness of her tone made Matt open his eyes to stare at her.

“You okay, Tinsa?” he asked before patting the blanket he’d spread out next to him. “Come get some shut-eye.”

“I tire of you two asking about my health,” she snapped. Then she shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’m merely weary.” Yet she made no move to lie down.

Drake dropped his pillow on the other side of the large blanket, effectively sandwiching Betinsa between the two men. She had to hate that, but Matt couldn’t help but smile. He’d been thinking about the same arrangement when he’d spread out their bedding. Yes, Betinsa was a Fraiqua woman—a warrior—as well as an E.B.I. agent. But she was still a woman, and he couldn’t overcome years of conditioning that men were supposed to protect women. Even women who could probably kick his ass.

Drake’s gaze hadn’t left her, and the frown on his face raised Matt’s radar a notch. What was the ambassador so worried about? Betinsa appeared to be fine. Her arm didn’t even seem to cause her any pain, unlike his ribs that had started to turn a delightful shade of purple and blue. “Are you feeling...strange, Betinsa?” Drake asked.

Her eyes locked with Drake’s, and the two of them seemed intent on some kind of staredown before Betinsa finally shook her head again.

Matt felt like he’d missed something important between the two of them. About to

ask, he swallowed his question when his partner finally grabbed the last pillow and dropped it next to his. Then she lay down, rolled to her back, and stared up at the same boring leaves he was seeing. The canopy of trees was so thick, he couldn't even find Fraiqua through the foliage. Closing his eyes again, he finally sighed and gave up the fight. "Night," he muttered before much-needed sleep overtook him.

Chapter 3

Strobe lights flashed through her mind—images of her and Matt and Drake, locked in a sensual embrace. Limbs entwined. Heated kisses. Calloused hands on her breasts, on her thighs, and between them. Her fingers closing around Matt's erection. Around Drake's. As Dream Matt covered her body with his and he sank his thick cock deep inside her, Betinsa woke.

The sexual haze of the dream refused to clear, and her hand extended toward Matt's chest as she lay on her stomach, squirming with a need to mate so profound she suddenly understood the dream. Drawing back her arm, she pounded a frustrated fist into her pillow.

No. No.

No!

The word echoed in Betinsa's mind, again and again as she felt the changes beginning.

She was past due for the metamorphosis, and the danger of coming home was that the nearness of Fraiqua would force her to finally face it. She still thought she had much more time. Days. Even weeks.

It's not supposed to happen this fast! It's not supposed to happen with them!

Why couldn't it have waited at least until she could reunite with her family—so her mother could give her advice and her fathers could help her find the proper partners to bring about the transition. The *comchi* was supposed to occur only with the two Fraiquan males who would be her lifemates, not with two *human* men! Never with two aliens!

Her timing in life had been off from the moment she'd arrived in the universe early—almost too early to survive. Her strength had pulled her through, an inner strength her mother and fathers always said made her a fine warrior despite her small stature. Seemed that despite the passing of twenty-seven years, her timing had not improved one damned bit.

Betinsa rolled from her stomach to her back, panting for each breath as she fought the heat roiling through her. Sensual need made dampness appear between her thighs, and she squeezed them shut as if to hold off what she knew couldn't be stopped. Yes, she was past due, so past due it explained why *any* two males had triggered the metamorphosis. Most Fraiquan women went through their change around age twenty-three. But by living on Earth most of her adult life, Betinsa had held her time at bay, needing to be exposed to the twin suns, the nearness of her home planet, and the scent of her mates to start the *comchi*. Now it was upon her in the absolute worst of circumstances with the only two men near being humans who would never recognize what was happening to her and what she needed them to do if she was to survive.

Tonight, she would surely die.

Her tongue ran over the feline fangs that seemed to grow with each passing moment—fangs that only appeared when vengeance was necessary or when she was supposed to claim her mates. The fire in her gut settled in the juncture of her thighs, making her squirm with a sexual desire she didn't understand, one so overwhelming she knew it must be assuaged at any or all costs. The need was so consuming, it scattered her thoughts to the point she would soon lose her ability to reason her way out of facing Matt and Drake and letting them know what was happening to her. To give them a chance to escape before it was too late.

She should reach out to them now, shake them awake and have them hurl her to the ground to be gremlins' food. A much better end than facing what she would need of both Matt and Drake should she allow the change to happen with them near.

She was ashamed, embarrassed that these two men would now know the secrets of her world, especially those held so closely by the women of Fraiqua. But her partner and the ambassador were human. They would *never* understand. They'd think her ways disgusting and would never look at her again the same way should she stay. Nor could they ever truly be her mates. So why did their presence set off the *comchi*? No, she should jump. *Now*.

A low groan rumbled through her as more and more of her intellectual control was swept aside by the growing needs of her body. Her nipples hardened as the exquisite scents of the men lying on either side of her rolled through her, branding her heart and sending spasms to her core. Despite one last fruitless struggle against the urge, she couldn't help herself from turning to Matt, the man whose fragrance she recognized and desired even before the *comchi*.

As he slept, sprawled on his back, she pressed her nose against the soft spot where his neck met his shoulder and inhaled his masculine aroma. She'd always loved his cologne, but that wasn't what caused her to growl in want this time. It was his essence, his own unique scent that ended the last of her ability to think at all.

Betinsa became a creature of a sexual need so strong, nothing would stop her from claiming her mates, from doing whatever she had to so that she could feel their cocks deep inside her sex. With a feral snarl, she ripped the clothes from her body. Then she crawled on top of him, bared her new fangs, and sank them into Matt's shoulder.

"What the fuck?" Matt woke with a start, a warm weight pinning him to the platform and a sharp pain slicing through his sleep. Funny, but the hurt quickly changed to intense pleasure that shot straight to his dick, especially when he realized the weight was Betinsa lying on top of him as if lost in some erotic dream.

Shit, but she'd be embarrassed when she woke up, especially when she found out she was naked and had been trying to give him a hickey, albeit roughly. She wanted to mark him? *Fine!*

Wrapping his arms around her, he tried to gently move her away before things got

too out of control. She clung to him like her life depended on it. Her teeth were still embedded in his skin, and he wasn't sure why she bit him or why she tenaciously held tight to his body. The haze of sleep had burned away to become a desire so fierce, he had to fight hard not to jerk down his pants and thrust deep inside her. He no longer cared where they were or that Drake was only a few feet away. He wanted this woman, and he wanted her so fiercely, he feared he'd die if he didn't have her. *Now*. "Tinsa... God, I want you."

His hands wandered her body, down her back, over her hips, settling against her firm backside as he pulled her hard against his groin. Her hips undulated against his, and a feminine growl rose from her chest. She released the hold her teeth had on him and pushed back to stare down into his eyes as she straddled him. Her fingers tangled in the patch of hair on his chest, tugging hard as she panted for breath.

Her pupils had dilated so wide, her sapphire eyes were now nearly black. Her tongue darted out to lick her lips that were still moist with drops of his blood. That's when he saw the fangs. "What's happening to you?"

Drake replied as he moved closer before he knelt next to the couple. "I was warned this might happen. It's the *comchi*."

Betinsa turned her head, crooked her finger, and purred at the ambassador, "Join us..."

Matt was fighting his own crushing desires as he tried to figure out exactly what was wrong with his partner. "What's the *comchi*?"

"She needs to mate. With both of us."

"Excuse me?"

Before Drake could answer him, Betinsa reached over to grasp his upper arm and jerk him closer. Lowering her head, she sniffed and licked from his neck to his ear. "You smell wonderful..." With no warning, she bared her fangs and sank them into Drake.

His arms shot out to wrap around her shoulders, and a groan rose from his chest. All Matt could do was watch the couple completing some sort of ritual, the same one she'd just inflicted on him. What the hell did it mean? And what did Drake say about needing to mate with...*both* of them?

Betinsa pulled back, smiling the same sensual smile at Drake she'd given Matt after she'd bitten him. Then she turned her attention back to Matt. Her hands spread over his bare chest, her fingers stopping to tweak his nipples before moving lower. She popped the snap on his shorts and then dragged the zipper down.

He grabbed her wrists. "Tinsa..." All she did was smile and pull away from his hold. Not that he'd given her much resistance. Everything inside him was screaming for her in a way he'd never felt for any other woman. Having Drake near wasn't even a deterrent. He was going to fuck this woman, the one he'd dreamt about for as long as he'd known her. He would deal with all the ramifications later.

His shorts and briefs were dragged down his legs before Betinsa threw them aside. He tried to take control, to roll her to her back, but she pushed his shoulders down. Then her blue fingers wrapped around his cock. He groaned and dropped his head back against the pillow.

Betinsa's thumb brushed over the fluid leaking from the head of his cock, smearing it around and around before she bent her head to lick him. Matt groaned again and tried to sit up on his elbows so he could watch what she was doing to him. Her tongue swirled around the crown once, twice, then she trailed it down his length all the way to his scrotum before she sat back up and again straddled his hips.

From behind her, a pair of hands reached around to palm her breasts. Drake was evidently ready to be included in their little party. Matt hadn't been part of a threesome before, but at that moment, anything Betinsa wanted, she was damn well going to get. He was helpless to deny her, and he figured Drake was as consumed by what was happening to all of them as he was. The bite had worked some kind of magic on his body and through his thoughts. The only thing that mattered at that moment was the beautiful woman pressing her hot, wet pussy against his hard cock.

Betinsa leaned back, drowning in the touch of her mates. Drake pressed kisses against her neck, his hands massaging her breasts before his fingers tweaked the nipples into hard nubs. She arched back, pressing against his firm chest. She couldn't think, only feel as she became a creature of need and want. "Now, Matt!" was all she could manage as she feared the passion building inside her would flare so hot it would consume her body and her soul.

His hand reached between him, but instead of holding his cock and surging inside her, he separated her folds until his fingers found her clitoris. One rub and a cascade of sensations ripped through her womb, making her rock hard against his teasing hand. Words spilled from her lips, Fraiqui words that her mates would never understand of how much she loved them, of how wonderful they were making her feel, how she could never leave them. She felt free to say anything—everything—knowing they could never understand her words. Even if they could possibly figure out the meaning, Betinsa couldn't hold them back.

Matt continued his torture until she reared her head back and shouted as everything inside her tightened to a hard knot, threatening to snap at any moment. "Please!" she begged. "Now, Matt!"

A gentle probing of the swollen head of his cock was followed by a sharp pain as he pierced the veil of her innocence. She cried out, grabbing his shoulders and sinking her nails into his supple muscles.

"Tinsa..." He stared down at the flecks of blood on his lap. "You're a virgin?"

"Don't stop! Please!"

Matt couldn't have stopped if he wanted to. He hadn't known he would claim her virginity, but he brushed that concern aside for now, helpless against the demands of his body and his need for her. He pushed his hips up to thrust deep inside her again,

nearly spilling himself at the tight, hot feel of the walls of her pussy squeezing him tight. A woman had never felt so right to him, fitting his dick like a second skin. Her words were a melody, ringing in his ears along with her cries of pleasure.

Gripping her hips, he increased the rhythm of his thrusts, wanting to bury himself so deeply inside her that they became one body. "Betinsa... God, you feel...so good."

Something inside him—some urge he couldn't contain—forced him to sit up, grab the back of her neck, and pull her back down with him. Capturing her mouth for a fierce kiss, he ran his tongue over her fangs before feeling his own teeth start to grow. He thrust his cock up into her tight sheath, again and again, and when his orgasm began, when his balls felt as if they would explode from the intense need to spend his seed inside her, he pulled her down against him and sank his teeth in the softness of the crook of her neck.

The tangy taste of her blood filled Matt's mouth as his cock filled her body with his essence in a release so strong, so overpowering, he hoped it would never end. Pulling back his teeth, he licked the small, round wounds he'd made in her skin as his fangs receded. After a few more small pushes into her body, he collapsed back onto the bedding, too exhausted to move.

Betinsa leaned down, brushed a kiss over his handsome mouth, and then rolled away from him, breaking her first sexual connection with a man.

No, not a man. *A mate*. Matt was a part of her now, his essence nurtured deep inside her body. But it wasn't enough. She wasn't done. With a growl, she turned on her knees to face Drake—her other mate. On hands and knees, she stalked him.

Drake was ready for her, having cast aside his shorts when he realized what was happening to Betinsa. The feral smile on her face filled him with lust strong enough to block out all his training to be an ambassador—a witness to other cultures and not a participant. Damn, but he wanted her. All rational thought fled as he dropped to his own hands and knees and met her in the middle.

Betinsa tried to take the lead, to force him back against the platform, but Drake wouldn't allow it. He fought with her, grabbing her shoulders and wrestling until he pinned her beneath him. When her arms shot up, her nails prepared to scratch his face, he grabbed her wrists. Stretching her arms above her head, he blanketed her with his body.

Skin to skin was paradise. She felt feverish, the heat of her blood infecting his. Shifting to keep her wrists secure with one hand, he buried the other in that luxurious mass of dark curls he'd fantasized about touching from the moment he'd met her. The strands were softer than silk, and so long, he could twist them around his fist. Pulling her head back, Drake covered his lips with hers, his tongue claiming her mouth in a kiss almost brutal in its intensity.

Betinsa answered his urgency with her own, her tongue every bit as wild as she raised her legs and wiggled her core against his swollen dick. He couldn't wait any longer, and just as she wrapped her legs around his hips, he felt his canine teeth grow

from his gums, forming small fangs. Instinctively, he knew exactly what to do with them. Releasing her hands, he grasped her shoulders as he pushed the head of his cock against her pussy. With one thrust, he entered her as he sank his new sharp teeth into the soft skin of her neck.

Betinsa screamed, but not in pain. Drake was such a large man, his invasion feeling as if he'd slammed against her womb. Yet she craved it, the pain warring with the pleasure as she rocked her hips hard against his, matching him each time his body pounded into hers. Harder. Faster. More. More. More.

Her nails scored his shoulders before she tangled her fingers through his long hair. Then the raging fire again swept through her body just as it had when Matt had reached the pinnacle with her, starting in her core and fanning out to consume Drake. As he wrenched his mouth away, he shouted her name as his hot semen blasted inside her, creating even more spasms from deep within her core.

After a few moments of bearing her mate's satisfying weight, she sighed as he rolled to his side. Hopping to his feet, he crouched down, swept her into his arms, and carried her back to where Matt lay on his side, propped up on an elbow and clearly watching them. Drake set her down next to Matt and then sprawled down on the blankets.

Matt turned her to face him, laid down, and hauled her up against his chest. Drake molded his front to her back. Snuggled between her two new mates, Betinsa closed her eyes.

Sanity slowly returned, and she realized the morning would bring questions, but hopefully no regrets. Although she should be anxious about their reactions and whether they would view what had just passed between the three of them as beautiful or as sordid, her body and mind were so sated and at peace, worry simply couldn't take hold. With a sigh, she surrendered.

And she fell asleep with a smile on her face.

Chapter 4

The first rays of light filtered through the canopy of leaves to hit Betinsa's eyes, making her blink as she awakened. Breathing in, she recognized the scent of her mates and smiled. Then she saw Drake's eyes were open as well, and his mouth had curved into a sensuous smile that made her insides do a delightful little flip-flop.

"How did you know?" Betinsa asked, whispering because she wasn't sure if Matt was awake as well. She was sprawled on top of her partner, enjoying the contented lethargy that still permeated her being. Part of the night, she'd slept on top of Drake, part of it on Matt, and part of it nestled between their two strong bodies. For the first time in her life, she felt almost...loved. Well, cherished, at least.

She should probably feel awkward around them both now. She'd been so uninhibited, giving so freely of her body to the men, and they'd obviously held no shame or shyness with sharing themselves with her. Both Matt and then Drake had allowed her to claim them by sharing their blood, and both had claimed her as well. She'd never known humans could participate in the entire *comchi* ritual, that their teeth would appear when the right moment arrived. But both of her men had marked her as their mate, and neither appeared to be too shocked or revolted by the exchange.

Yet even after all that had happened in the night, she simply wasn't uncomfortable. Everything about them—from the way they smelled, to the feel of their skin, to the touch of their hands—was now branded in her mind and on her heart. She couldn't hide anything she felt from either of them. "About the *comchi*... How did you know?"

"Your mother," Drake replied as he pushed up on his elbow from where he lay on his side next to her and Matt. His hand smoothed some of her mussed hair away from her face, and he made no move at all to cover his magnificent nudity. The man was a work of art. Chiseled face with a strong jaw. Lightly muscled without an ounce of fat. His chest was smooth, so in contrast to the soft hair on Matt's.

Matt was no less attractive than the ambassador. Shorter, but bearing more muscle mass. His face was round and so youthful looking, she knew it would never reveal his true age. She loved that he kept his tawny hair so short because it added to his appeal just as Drake's long brown hair complemented his.

Matt had been a tender and giving lover, Drake a forceful one. Something deep inside her flared to life at the erotic and satisfying memories.

Kazom, but her mates were perfect.

"She contacted me right before we left on this trip, after you told her you were escorting me to your planet," Drake explained. "She was concerned for you, worried that this trip back might be...difficult because of your age. She told me about the *comchi* and explained the importance because she figured I was an ambassador to other worlds and might understand. I had to promise her I'd bring you directly to her just as soon as we landed so she and your fathers could help you. I think they were hoping

to choose your mates.” His smile forced one from her. “Obviously, we had a change in plans. So...you’re stuck with us.” A wink made her smile.

“Obviously,” Matt drawled as he trailed his fingers up and down her spine, sending more shivers racing over her skin. “Good morning, Tinsa.” His hot breath touched her face before he pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“Good morning, *saramie*.”

“*Saramie*?”

My love. She would never tell him that’s how she’d thought of him for a long time, almost since they’d become partners. She chose to ignore his question.

Thankfully, Matt let the lack of translation pass. “Not that I’m complaining about last night,” he said, “but do either of you want to tell me what this *comchi* you’re talking about is?”

“A...change of life,” Betinsa replied, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder.

His responding chuckle rumbled through his chest. “Isn’t it kinda late for puberty and kinda early for menopause, honey?”

“*Comchi* is a transition to becoming...sexual,” she said, not knowing exactly how to explain the whole thing to him. Humans, she’d discovered, began to deal with sexual issues at a fairly early age. Fraiquans were told of the *comchi* when they were around ten, but only the bare details. No one had prepared Betinsa for the pleasure that could be found with her mates.

“Hence the virginity,” he said before kissing the top of her head. “Thank you.”

She pushed up to look into his gorgeous brown eyes that seemed to be able to see all the way to her soul. “Thank you? For what?”

“For sharing that amazing gift with me.”

“With *us*,” Drake added.

After what the three of them had done, Betinsa figured her body should be too tired to respond. But respond it did, especially to the scent of lovemaking that still lingered in the air around her and her mates.

Mates. Just how in the hell was she supposed to handle *that* revelation? No Fraiquan was supposed to take mates of another species, although she knew it had happened on a few occasions. Her race tended to follow the old ways, believing in vengeance serving as justice and constantly preaching the necessity of keeping their blood pure. The few who had taken mates from other species were ostracized by other Fraiquans and often considered to be traitors.

Now, she’d taken two humans as mates—mates who were supposed to be by her side until their deaths. But Matt and Drake wouldn’t understand the significance of what happened between them, despite what her mother had told the ambassador. No, humans would use logic and see their exchange as a strictly biological function, her

comchi being much the same as their species going through puberty and adolescence. They couldn't possibly know just how deeply they were both now a part of her, especially how strong her love for them now ran. From this point on, her world should revolve around a life the three of them could build and share. Should they leave her—as she was convinced they would—her life would be nothing but emptiness, loneliness, and despair.

But Betinsa couldn't ask them to be what she needed them to be. Sure, sharing their bodies with her would be allowed. She'd learned Earth's culture and knew that sex to many humans was nothing more important than a "fun time." Matt and Drake wouldn't know that she couldn't have sex with any other male for the rest of her life. Just her mates. They were both accomplished men who lived independent lives. Matt was an E.B.I. agent, Drake an ambassador. Neither would feel the need to settle down, nor would they have chosen her—a Fraiquan—to be the woman to settle down with.

Tears stung her eyes, stealing away all the contentment that loving her men had left behind. Even if they did understand, her life had been on borrowed time since she'd set the *Mirhala* down on Katenya. Too many things stood in the way of her *ever* having a future with her mates.

She tried to roll away from Matt, to put some distance between her and the guys. Matt's arms squeezed her tighter.

"What's wrong, Tinsa?" he asked, lifting his head to kiss her forehead, an act so tender and loving, she breathed in a shuddering sigh.

Not trusting her voice, she could only answer by shaking her head.

Drake's hand settled on her shoulder. "Why are you upset?"

"I'm *not* upset." The snap in her voice had to tell them she was lying. Both men chuckled in response, causing her to struggle harder to get away.

Then she heard it, the call so soft, she froze in response.

"Tinsa—"

"Hush!" she ordered, cutting off Matt. The sound grew louder. "Something's coming."

"I don't—"

"Listen!" This time she had to silence Drake. The men really needed to learn to follow her commands as proper mates should.

The sound became a roar so strong and loud, both men's eyes flew wide. Betinsa couldn't contain a self-satisfied smile.

Another roar, loud enough to make some of the birds in the tree take flight.

"What the hell is *that*?" Matt asked.

"I believe, gentlemen, that the Charhock now knows we're here."

Drake could hear the fear in her voice and sat up so that he could hug her in

comfort. Betinsa wouldn't allow it, scrambling off Matt and grabbing her clothes. The three of them awkwardly dressed as her gaze darted over the side of their platform. "What does it look like?" he asked.

"I've never seen it. No one has ever seen it."

"Then how do you know that's what's making that god-awful racket?"

"I can...feel it. My heart knows."

His new girlfriend said the strangest things—one of the reasons Drake was attracted to her, an attraction he'd felt from the moment they'd been introduced more than a week ago. Matt and Betinsa had presented themselves and their credentials to consult with Drake about when he would like to accompany them and the terrorist they'd captured back to Fraiqua. Although he'd met more species than he could remember—some strange, some exotic—he'd been taken by her natural beauty and grace, hardly able to glance away from the iridescent sky blue of her flawless skin or the cerulean brilliance of her sparkling eyes. Her hair was a thick mass of black curls that made his mouth go dry. And when she first spoke, her voice contained such a husky sexuality, his cock had instantly hardened. Quite an embarrassing situation to not be able to politely stand when she left his office.

Girlfriend. Was that what Betinsa was? According to the research Drake had done after her panicked mother had contacted him, Betinsa was a helluva lot more than that now. *Lover? Wife?*

Mate? That was the closest translation from Fraiqui. It implied that her family would be offended if he treated her as anything less than someone he'd chosen to spend the rest of his life with. How was he supposed to make a choice like that about a woman he barely knew?

Drake realized he'd had no alternative last night. Had he—or had Matt for that matter—denied her the release her body needed, her life would have been in danger. Of course, once she'd sunk those fangs into his skin, he couldn't have refused her even if he would have wanted to. In that moment, every cell in his body had craved her with a desire that simply couldn't be denied. Waiting while Matt claimed her virginity had seemed more than he could bear, and the moment Drake had planted his cock inside her, he would have indeed declared her his mate—forever more. Even this morning, the pleasure of the most intense release of his life still hummed through his body, but some sanity had returned.

Drake wasn't sure where they would all go from here, but it appeared they'd have some time together to figure out whether this was going to be something more than simply a passionate interlude. Despite what Betinsa said about no one coming to this "sacred moon," he didn't believe the search for them would be abandoned just because they'd crashed someplace inconvenient. Matt's and Betinsa's statuses in the E.B.I. and Drake's job would eventually bring people to Katenya, but it might take time—time the threesome could spend together, exploring their new connection. At least they could if whatever the extraordinarily loud Charhock was didn't kill them all first.

“What do we do, Betinsa?”

“We hide,” she replied as the men donned their clothing and shoes. “Follow me.” Wrapping her legs around the tree trunk, she slid toward the ground.

“What about the gremtils?” Matt called down as he slipped on his shoes.

“’Tis daylight. They’re back in their dens,” she shouted up. Another loud roar echoed through the air. “Hurry! We must hide.”

The men scrambled down after her as Betinsa scanned the area. Drake was having a hard time seeing anything but trees, especially since the suns hadn’t risen too high yet. “Where do we go?”

“There,” Matt replied, pointing toward a break in the trees.

“Where?” Drake asked because right now, all Matt looked to be indicating was a path. The agent didn’t answer. Instead, he grabbed Betinsa’s hand and sprinted toward whatever the hell it was he’d pointed at.

Betinsa snatched up Drake’s hand and dragged him along. About to ask again where Matt was heading, the entrance of the cave stopped him. He hadn’t even seen it until they were right on top of the thin break in the rocks that had been hidden by the lush trees. “I’m impressed. How’d you see that, Matt?”

He shrugged. “Found it yesterday when we were gathering wood.”

“And you remembered it?”

“Matt remembers everything he sees and hears,” Betinsa replied. “He has an eidetic memory.”

“Must come in handy for an E.B.I. agent,” Drake replied.

Matt tossed him a curt nod before focusing on the rocks. “Let me see if anything scary’s calling this place home.” He turned his body sideways to try to fit through the stones. After a lot of wiggling, he suddenly slipped inside. A few long moments passed before a hand came back through and waved them both in.

Drake waited for Betinsa to squirm her way through, then he pressed himself tight against the stones and worked his way between them as another roar and a flurry of what sounded like a large pair of wings echoed through the forest.

The interior of the cave was engulfed in darkness. About to ask if either of his companions remembered to grab a light, Drake was interrupted by another loud roar, this time near enough he figured the Charhock had to be close to their tree platform. He almost asked Betinsa to explain what the thing was when a soft hand covered his mouth as if she’d known he was going to speak. He nodded to let her know he understood that she wanted quiet.

Time seemed to stand still as all that he could hear was his companions’ rapid breathing, his own breath just as ragged from fear. Betinsa’s hand had dropped to grasp his, and somehow Drake knew that Matt was holding tight to her other hand. If the three of them were this close already, what would happen if they spent more and

more time together?

Minutes passed, even though he felt as if each and every one stretched the limits of his usually long patience. Finally, Betinsa spoke. "It has left. For now."

"Can we go back out?" Matt asked in the darkness.

"Yes. I'm going to the *Mirhala* to fetch some soap and towels, then I shall search for some water. I would like to bathe."

Drake eased toward the thin shaft of light coming from between the two rock walls. "Sounds like a plan. Can I join you?"

Matt chuckled, as Drake struggled back out of the cave. "How about we make it a threesome? I saw a lake not too far from here."

* * * *

Just seeing the *Mirhala* again made tears brim Betinsa's eyes. She swallowed hard and pushed the melancholy aside. Her beautiful ship was now nothing more than a pile of twisted metal, but it could still serve a purpose.

She'd vowed that Matt and Drake would not stay on Katenya. That meant she would face death at the hands of her family to restore their name or at the will of the Charhock as punishment. But to save her mates, to restore the lives of service to Earth that they loved, she'd sacrifice herself.

Now, she needed a few moments alone in the *Mirhala* to enact her plan.

Turning to her mates at the entrance of her shattered ship, she gave them a coy smile. "I'll find the supplies we need. Would you two please return to our...tree house, as you call it...and retrieve some clean clothing? After we bathe, I'll wash out what we're wearing so we can hang it to dry."

"Or we could just stay naked all day," Matt retorted with a handsome grin.

Betinsa's body leapt to life as her heart's rhythm increased. While it was a tempting thought, and she felt no shame baring her body to Drake and Matt, *that* plan didn't suit *her* plan. "If rescue should come, we would be embarrassed..."

"Thought you said no one would come here for us," Drake replied, his dark eyes searching hers as if seeking her veracity.

"Um...I said that I *believed* no one would come. We don't know that for a fact. They may not come for me...I'm a mere Fraiquan. But an Earth ambassador? Surely someone will notice your absence. Do you wish to be discovered naked with Matt and me?"

His face blanched. "I'll go get our clothes."

Matt stood his ground, not that she was surprised. Her partner knew her well enough, he had to suspect she was trying to create a diversion.

"Please, *saramie*. I need a moment alone."

“I should ask why.”

“Not if you trust me.”

He frowned. “Promise me one thing...”

She arched an eyebrow in question.

“You’re not doing something stupid like thinking of going after the Charhock on your own.”

So that was the way of it. He was worried about her safety. “No. Nothing like that. I just need a few moments to myself—to gather my thoughts. Much has happened, and I must create some peace in my mind.” A blatant lie, but for his own good.

With a nod, Matt headed back toward their new “home.”

Betinsa swallowed her hurt over seeing her dilapidated ship and crawled inside what was left of the cockpit. The copilot’s seat was still intact, but her pilot’s chair was in two pieces. Taking a seat where she’d seldom put herself before, she looked through the shattered windshield. Sighing, she realized the *Mirhala* was beyond repair.

Fingers flying over the com they hadn’t destroyed to use the wiring, she tried to bring the communications console back from the dead. She used every trick she knew to no avail. In one last-ditch effort, she rerouted power from what was left of life support and the module sputtered to life. Fearing that checking her pending hails would drain what little life the console had left, she focused on sending her vital message.

I am calling in the favor. Please find a way to come to me on Katenya.

Chapter 5

The lake Matt led them to seemed to be more of a pond, but Betinsa didn't mind. Water flowed down an eroded wall of tan stones into a crystal clear pool surrounded by soft grass. The smell of flowers in bloom permeated the air. Katenya was truly a paradise. All she wanted to do was scrub every inch of her body and hair and immerse herself in the beckoning water.

"Think it's cold?" Drake asked as he set down the small bottle of shampoo and dropped the stack of towels.

"The air's pretty tropical," Matt replied. "Bet the water feels great." He whipped his shirt over his head, toed off his shoes, and dropped his shorts.

Betinsa's mouth went dry. The man obviously had no qualms about his nudity, which was a bonus for her because she could never tire of staring at his gorgeous body. Broad shoulders. Strong arms. His abdominal muscles were nicely rippled. The thatch of brown hair on his chest narrowed to a thin line that fanned out to nestle a cock that seemed to harden under her gaze, growing stiff and thick. Her eyes quickly returned to his face to find an arrogant grin that said he knew she'd been admiring him.

As she peeled off her own shirt, she caught a glimpse of a now-nude Drake standing on the edge of the pond and dipping his big toe into the water. Tall and lean, he moved with the sleekness of a cat, his long hair brushing his shoulders as he pulled his foot back and smiled. Betinsa returned the smile, pushing her shorts over her hips and dropping them to the ground. If her mates could stand before her bold and naked, she would bestow them the same honor. Drawing to her full height, she turned to face Matt and Drake.

Matt moved first, running to her side and sweeping her into his arms. His mouth dropped to cover her lips, and she moaned when he thrust his tongue inside to rub against hers. Another smug grin crossed his face as he pulled back and held her away from his body. It only took a moment for her to realize he was hip-deep in the pool and was dangling her over the water. Instead of squealing in fear, Betinsa returned his grin, daring him to drop her and knowing he would see it as a challenge.

A splash sounded beside her as Drake bounded into the water. Only a few moments later, wet hands wrapped around her waist and dragged her from Matt's arms deep into the pool. Drake's face smiled at her through the clear water as Matt dove in beside her and settled his hands against her backside.

So her mates wanted to play...

Betinsa surfaced, took in a big gulp of air and dove deep beneath the water until Matt's cock bobbed in front of her eyes. Opening her lips, she took him into her mouth and swirled her tongue around and around the swollen crown. One hand held him still as she savored him, the other slipped between his thighs to squeeze his soft sac. The two firm testicles fascinated her, so she ran her fingers over and over his skin to learn

their shape as she marveled at how solid they were beneath such supple skin.

His hands shot out to tangle in her hair as it floated all around her, blocking her vision like some kind of seaweed. She wished she could sweep it back out of her way so she could see Matt as she loved him, but she was too busy trying to bring him pleasure, wanting his needs to take precedence over her own selfish wants. Pulling back, she slowly dragged her teeth over the purple head of his cock, savoring how he tugged on her hair in response. She traced the ridges of the mushroom shape with her tongue, fascinated by her mate's body. The textures, the taste, the feel of his skin against her tongue and her fingertips.

Since she could stay underwater for several minutes without taking another breath, Betinsa used that skill to her advantage, sliding Matt's shaft in and out of her mouth as she squeezed his scrotum until a sudden distraction turned her attention.

Drake was also below the surface again, and he'd grasped her hip with one hand and slipped the other between her thighs. Clever fingers separated her lips to find her clitoris before he proceeded to slowly torture her with friction and sharp flicks. She released Matt as he used his strong legs to kick his way up, probably to get air. As long as Drake kept doing what he was doing, Betinsa wasn't sure she'd want him to stop even if her lungs burned for want of a breath.

Her vision cleared as hands began to separate the strands of hair floating in front of her face until Matt appeared before her eyes. He reached under her arms and dragged her forward until his mouth covered one of her breasts, drawing the nipple deep inside, sending tingles racing all the way to her toes. The muscles of her lower abdomen tightened in a familiar twist that suddenly pushed the rest of the air from her lungs, forcing her to reluctantly surface.

Her mates came with her, all three of them gulping in air as if they'd been starved for it. "I think..." Matt said between gasps, "that if we...don't want to drown...we better move this on land." His hand clasped hers as he floated on his back, kicking his legs as he headed for the edge of the pond.

He climbed onto the grass first, pulling Betinsa along with him. Drake followed close behind, grabbing her hips when they both stood on solid ground and pulling her backside hard against his swollen cock. "Me first, this time," he whispered in her ear before his tongue swirled deep inside to tickle and excite her. She tried not to giggle as she leaned her head toward him to get more of his delicious teasing.

Before she could respond, Matt dropped to his knees in front of her. "You can fuck her first—just as soon as I have some fun." He looked up into her eyes. "I've been dying to know what you taste like since the moment we met." His hand slipped between her thighs, forcing them farther apart. He pressed a kiss against the curls on her mound before he separated her folds with his fingers and impaled her with his tongue.

Pleasure shot through Betinsa, making her moan and arch back against Drake at the same time she turned her head to see him. Her hands stretched up to reach behind to bring him down to her. His hands covered her breasts, rubbing and kneading gently as he nibbled on the tender flesh of her lips before capturing her mouth for a

proper kiss. A rush of heat flooded her core as she hoped Matt wouldn't be shocked by the fluid her body released in desire for her mates.

From the way he reacted, she knew he didn't mind. His tongue lapped at her as he hummed like a child savoring a sweet piece of candy. When he pulled her clitoris deep into his mouth, using suction to torment her, Betinsa lost her fight for control. Breaking away from Drake's kiss, she brought her arms back in front of her to weave her fingers through Matt's short hair. Her body clenched before snapping like a tightened spring suddenly released. "*Saramie!*" she shouted, bucking against his mouth as he kept forcing his tongue deep inside her. Between Matt's hands on her hips and Drake's on her breasts, she could barely move, only quiver against the sensations ripping through her as spasm after spasm of pleasure shook her body.

By the time she recovered from the tantalizing orgasm, Betinsa found herself lying on top of Drake as he reclined on a towel spread over the soft grass. His cock pressed hard against her pussy as he rocked his hips up. Desire resurrected at light speed, and she nodded, somehow knowing he was waiting for her approval.

He surged up inside her with one powerful thrust, and she sat up, spreading her thighs wider to take him as deeply into her body as she could. Matt's hands settled on her shoulders as Drake stilled, looking past her to nod at Matt.

Matt captured her chin with his fingers and turned her face toward him. "Can we please try something, Tinsa?"

"Anything." And she meant it. Nothing her mates wanted to do with her—to her—was forbidden. Her body, her heart, and her soul belonged to them.

"Can we both be inside you at the same time?"

"How?" Her question was a breathless whisper as her insides tightened at the thought of loving both Matt and Drake at the same time. She squeezed Drake's cock with her inner muscles as he groaned in response.

Matt laid his hands on her shoulders and smoothed his palms down her back, leaving gooseflesh in his wake. Then he cupped her backside before sliding a long finger over to the cleft between her cheeks. He slid down the sensitive skin until he reached her most private of places. "I can love you here." The tip of his finger pressed up inside her.

Betinsa had never felt anything half as marvelous. Drake's cock filled her, and yet her other mate could claim her body as well. Taking a shuddering breath, she gave him what she hoped was a seductive smile. "Show me, *saramie*."

Drake's hands stroked her breasts, working his way up until he could hold her neck. He pulled her forward until her face was only a hand's breadth away from his. "Relax. Let us show you how."

"Yes, *lamanna*." *My heart*. "Yes."

His mouth claimed hers as Matt settled behind her, spreading her buttocks with his warm palms. A moist finger probed her tight hole, pushing up inside her, gently stroking

and stretching her for his invasion. Drake kept her occupied, kissing her deeply, his tongue coaxing hers into his mouth where he sucked. She whimpered against his lips when a second of Matt's fingers joined his first, still warm and wet from their swim. The pain and pleasure mixed, drowning her in sensation until she wanted nothing more than to feel both her men buried inside her.

"You ready, Tinsa?" Matt asked as he removed his fingers and pressed the hot, damp head of his cock against her entrance.

"Yes," she said between the kisses Drake used to keep her so blinded with passion she could barely think.

Centimeter by agonizingly slow centimeter, Matt eased inside her body until she couldn't take the wait a moment longer. Rocking back hard, she impaled herself on him, her buttocks slapping against his stomach. "God, Tinsa... You're so tight."

Drake rocked his hips up at the same time Matt pushed hard against her. Then they both pulled back just enough to make her fear they were leaving her. Clenching her muscles, she almost cried out that she needed them to stay when both men surged deep again. Soon, they set an easy rhythm, rocking in before pulling back enough to plunge inside again.

Her body felt so wonderfully full. Never had she imagined loving her mates in such a fashion was possible. All too soon, release approached, the orgasm building quickly inside her until she feared she would splinter apart with the intensity.

Tearing her mouth away from Drake, Betinsa gasped for breath, wanting to tell her men how wonderful they were making her feel, how beautifully they were making her body sing. All she could manage were moans and cries of pleasure that built into a scream as fire erupted in her sex and fanned out to reach every cell.

Matt came next, surging inside her before shouting her name as his warmth flooded her. Drake followed right behind, slamming up once, twice, a third time before he cried out in release, his semen spurting against her womb.

* * * *

"Little fuckers," Matt said as he climbed back up their tree. "I'm seriously pissing on some of them tonight."

"Gremtils only do that which they were created to do," Betinsa called up as she waited for Matt to reach the platform. He leaned over and clapped, to let her know to toss up the last of the things they'd rescued from the *Mirhala*.

He hadn't had a chance to talk to Betinsa about whether she was able to do whatever it was she needed to do alone. After their swim, he and Drake had made love to her. Then they'd shared a meal of fruit Betinsa helped them gather from the forest and some protein bars from the ship.

She tossed up another med kit she'd dug out of the wreckage. Next came some of the large pieces of the spiky fruit that reminded him of a pineapple. The last thing she sent up was a small communicator. It had been smashed in the crash, but Matt always

liked tinkering with things, seeing if he could get them working again. Betinsa told him to have fun but that she thought it was beyond repair. Damn, but he loved a challenge, especially if he could impress his woman.

My woman. He liked the sound of that. Of course, she was Drake's woman too... Yet no jealousy rose up inside Matt. Sharing her with Drake had just seemed so ...natural. So right. Not that he was ready to get to know the ambassador up close and far too personal. Drake probably felt the same. No, Matt loved the feel of a woman's body—Betinsa's body—not a man's.

The day she'd been assigned as his partner, he thought his Earth Bureau of Investigation supervisor had been playing some kind of a fucking joke. She was an alien. Hell, that was supposed to be who Matt was trying to stop—aliens who threatened Earth. Then he got to know her, learning just how intelligent she was and how her mind could quickly unravel any kind of puzzle. Being a shape-shifter only added to her talents, not that he'd ask her to shift often. Changing took a huge physical toll on her, but she never hesitated when it was necessary to effect a capture. He'd discovered that not only was she the perfect partner, she was damned near the perfect woman.

Not that he thought he'd ever have a chance to get to know Betinsa the way he wanted to. Sure, as partners they shared the same kind of personal connection as a married couple. They talked. They argued. They supported each other. But Matt had always desired...more. *Much, much more.* He wanted her to know how many things about her he noticed—from the smell of her favorite perfume to what she ordered every morning when they stopped at the coffee cart. And he'd dreamed of holding her in his arms, kissing those sexy lips, and touching every inch of her smooth, blue skin.

The crash had seemed a tragedy at first, especially after Betinsa told him about what she faced for landing on this moon. Matt vowed to protect her, no matter the cost. She'd done nothing wrong—and she had saved three lives, one of which was an ambassador for the United Continents of Earth. Surely that would count for ...something.

Now, he no longer viewed the crash of the *Mirhala* as anything short of a miracle, and he actually felt as if he owed those fucking asteroids some kind of thank you. Because of them, he could now claim Betinsa as his own. As could Drake, although Matt wasn't sure what the future would hold in store for the three of them. Should Drake have to walk away, Matt would be there for Betinsa. And as far as he was concerned, they would be together for the rest of their lives. He just needed to work up the guts to tell her about his decision.

Damn, but he needed to find out more about the Fraiquan culture so he knew what he would have to do to win Betinsa and keep her by his side. At least he was now her lover, which had to be a big step for her. The woman had been a virgin—yet she'd forfeited that important status for him and for Drake.

Betinsa broke his train of thought when her blue hand reached the platform. Matt grabbed her arm and helped her hoist herself up. Drake followed close behind. Since

the suns were beginning to set, it was time for them to settle down for the night. “Any sign of those furballs yet?” Matt asked Drake.

“Not yet.” Drake turned to Betinsa. “Last night for those piranha rats, right?”

She nodded.

“Thank God,” Matt said, picking up the blanket and shaking out the leaves that had settled on it during the day. After spreading it back on the platform, he flopped down and kicked off his shoes. Grabbing a pillow, he jammed it under his head. “Well, while they eat everything in their path, I’m getting some sleep.” He patted the spot next to him. “How about you, Tinsa? You tired?”

“Yes, *saramie*.” Her gaze shifted to Drake. “And you, *lamanna*? Are you tired as well?”

Drake swept her into his arms, set her down next to Matt, and sprawled at her other side on the blanket. He turned to face her, threw a thigh over hers and an arm over her waist before he closed his eyes. In the span of a minute, the ambassador began to snore.

“I think that was a yes.” Matt rolled to his side and put his palm on Betinsa’s flat belly. He gently rubbed small circles until his hand slid low enough to slip under her shirt. Then he tickled his way up until his palm covered her breast. “Ah... *Now* I can sleep.”

“So happy to know you’re comfortable,” she replied with a grin. Her hand brushed his groin until her palm rested against his cock. “Ah... *Now I* can sleep.”

“Indigo?” a husky female voice shouted from the forest floor, scaring the birds that had settled in their tree. “Hey, Betinsa! You called me here! Where the fuck are you?”

Chapter 6

Matt had been correct all along—someone *had* come looking for them.

“Hannah!” Betinsa sat up just as the sound of the gremtils emerging from their dens began to build. “Up here!” Scrambling to the edge of the platform, she looked over the edge, waving her arm. “Hannah! Here! Up here!”

Matt hurried to her side, searching the ground until he saw the slim human woman dressed in camouflage pants, a tight olive-colored tank top, and combat boots. A large knife was sheathed against one hip, a laser pistol was holstered against the other. Hands on her waist, she glared up at them. “What in the hell are you doing up there?”

More of the humming rose from the gremtils. “If I were you, lady, I’d get your butt up here. *Quickly*,” he called down. “Some nasty little creatures are going to start eating everything on the ground in a few minutes, including you if you don’t haul ass.”

She gaped at him like she thought he’d lost his mind. “Some *what*?”

“Get up here! Now!” Betinsa shouted again. “Isn’t Lincoln with you?”

“Nah. He’s on the *Fearless*,” the woman replied as she grabbed the lowest branch and started to climb.

Fearing she might not have Betinsa’s strength, Matt hurried to find their rope to lower down to her. He need not have bothered because by the time he was ready to drop it over the side, a tanned hand reached the platform. He dropped the rope and helped Betinsa haul the woman the rest of the way up.

As they all stood up, Betinsa threw her arms around the woman and hugged her tight. “Hannah...I’m so very happy to see you. Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“Missed you too, Indigo.” Hannah’s hands pounded Betinsa’s back before she pulled out of her embrace. “What did you get yourself into *this* time?”

Before Betinsa could answer, the gremtils poured from their dens and started canvassing the area. “What in the fuck are those?” Hannah asked as she glanced over the side.

“They’re gremtils,” Betinsa replied. “Scavengers of carrion—or any living thing that puts itself in their path.”

“They’re fuckin’ furballs I’d like to stomp flat,” Matt added as Drake came to stand at his side. He extended his hand to Hannah. “Hi. Matt Newton. I’m Betinsa’s E.B.I. partner.”

A knowing smile crossed Hannah’s lips as she gave his hand a quick shake before flipping her long, blonde ponytail over her shoulder. Blue eyes seemed to take his measure before she finally spoke. “Heard an awful lot about you, Matt, my man.”

So...Betinsa had told Hannah about him... He tried not to read too much into that

notion. They were, after all, partners. She might have only been discussing the job rather than any personal feelings she had for him. “Um...good. I mean, I *hope* that’s good.”

“Oh...trust me. It *was* good.” She winked at him before she pulled a communicator from her belt and tapped in a few commands. Then she turned back to Betinsa. “Told Lincoln to shut the hatch and stay in the ship so his furry ass doesn’t get eaten by those brown buggers. Of course, they might think he’s a distant cousin.” Her gaze settled on Drake. “And you are...?”

“Ambassador Drake Keller, ma’am. From the United Continents of Earth,” he said, reaching for her hand. She shook it hard enough to rock his shoulder, making Matt grin. The woman had grit.

“Earth ambassador, huh? Sweet. Maybe you can help me next time I get in a scrape with some local yokels. You sure know how to pick ’em, Indigo. How in the hell did you end up here anyway? No one’s supposed to land on Katenya. Gonna be really difficult to sneak you guys off, you being Fraiquan and all... Saw the *Mirhala*. Actually, I saw what was left of the *Mirhala*. Ouch. What hit it?”

“An asteroid field,” Betinsa replied. “And I don’t expect you to sneak me off. I shall face my due punishment, but my mates—” Her mouth closed fast enough her teeth clicked.

“Your...mates? Did you just say these guys are your *mates*?” A laugh slipped out of Hannah. “Oh, hell, Betinsa. I never thought you’d take the marriage plunge!” Her gaze shifted between Matt and Drake. “And with *two* guys...? Didn’t think you were that culturally strict. I mean, you work for E.B.I., for pity’s sake. But you took two mates?” She pumped her fist in the air. “Way to go, girl! Why didn’t you make them take your last name then? Isn’t that what Fraiquans do?”

Blue eyes raked first Drake and then Matt from head to toe, making Matt feel like he stood there without a stitch of clothing. He knew men made that kind of visual appraisal of woman all the time, but he’d never been on the receiving end of such intensely sexual scrutiny. Why did he suddenly feel like he wanted to cover his groin with his hands? Having Betinsa stare at him was one thing—it made him hot to see the appreciation in her eyes—but this lady made him feel like she had X-ray vision. She was human, wasn’t she?

Hannah heaved an exaggerated sigh. “Two handsome guys you got there, Indigo. God, I envy Fraiquan women. Humans only get one guy, and far as I can tell, there’s not a human male worth a damn who isn’t already taken.”

She *was* human. When he glanced over at Betinsa, Matt saw her cheeks had turned a deeper shade of blue, her version of a blush. As quickly as she’d suddenly stopped her words when she’d let the word “mates” slip out, he figured she hadn’t meant to reveal so much about what had happened between the three of them.

So caught up in Hannah’s arrival he had barely been able to think straight, his brain finally kicked back in. “You said Betinsa called you here? When?”

“Got the message a few hours ago,” Hannah replied. “Was already in the Rhotan System—on my way to Tiber to try and pick up a guy so I can finally collect that bounty, but—”

“You’re a bounty hunter?” Matt knew a lot of mercenaries who made a fortune hunting for criminals or for people and aliens who’d done things like skipping out on debts or court dates. But he’d never known someone as delicate as Hannah who could make a living bounty hunting. She was so tiny—the top of her head would barely reach his shoulder. Sure, she was lightly muscled, her arms well-defined despite her slender build. She was probably damn strong for a woman. *But a bounty hunter?*

Hannah crossed her arms over her breasts and narrowed her eyes. “Shit, I get sick of that look.”

Matt threw her a frown. “What look?”

“The same look big guys like you always give me when they find out what I do—like you think I’m some poor, helpless female who couldn’t possibly catch someone with a bounty on his head. I can’t wait ’til you see Lincoln. Betcha won’t think he’s a bounty hunter, either.”

“Who’s Lincoln?” he had to ask.

“My partner—more like my adopted son. Been with me since he was a cub. Rescued him from a hunting party on Odirus. He’s my best friend now.”

That sounded...interesting. Instead of asking, Matt yawned, figuring he’d find out what she meant about Lincoln being a “cub” as soon as he came face-to-face with her partner. “Looks like we’ll have company for the night.”

“I have to stay up here? How long before those groan-tails—”

“Gremtils,” Bentinsa corrected with a giggle. “You never get the names of things right, do you?”

Hannah shrugged but smiled. “Whatever... How long before they crawl back underground?”

“Several hours,” Drake replied. “You might as well catch some shut-eye with us.”

“I don’t know,” Hannah replied. “Do you mind me sleeping with your husbands, Indigo? You can have first choice. I’ll take the leftovers.” She wiggled her eyebrows.

Matt liked her pluck and her sense of humor. No wonder she was a close friend to his partner. Which might explain why Betinsa had reached out to her. “Tinsa, you ever gonna tell me how you sent Hannah a message? I assume that’s what you were doing when you needed time alone on your ship, right?”

Having never expected Hannah to arrive so quickly, Betinsa hadn’t thought of how she could explain to Matt and Drake what she planned to help get them off Katenya. “Yes. I sent her a message. I had to rewire what little was left of the power to the com, and I didn’t need you to know at the time because I feared how you would react.”

"Why?" Matt asked. "Sure, this has been...fantastic... But we have to get back home eventually. The only thing I might've said if I'd known there was any power left was to ask you to wait a while. Katenya has been...paradise. Wouldn't mind staying here...with you...a little while longer."

"What aren't you telling us, *lamanna*?" Drake asked, parroting back the endearment she'd used earlier. Could he possibly know what it meant?

No. He was simply acting on instinct, being an ambassador by trying to put her at ease with her own language.

"She's calling in a favor—a blood debt," Hannah replied. "She saved my ass once upon a time, and now I'm returning the favor. No other way I'd have risked landing here. The Fraiquans find out, I'm toast."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Matt's gaze kept shifting between Betinsa and Hannah, his investigative mind probably trying to connect all the clues.

Betinsa loved her mates and owed them her honesty, especially about something as important as this. "I asked for Hannah to come because I needed her help. She can get to places undetected and get out quickly. I want her and Lincoln to get you and Matt off this moon and back to Earth before the shaman knows you are here."

"Wouldn't your planet's security already have tracked us?"

She answered with a shake of her head. "Our ship would have been off their grid whenever we drew close to Katenya. They might have guessed we crashed or burned up on entry, but it's forbidden to scan the moon's atmosphere or surface. They would never think we would *land*—no Fraiquan ship would dare such audacity. No, they would believe I'd destroy my own ship and take all of our lives rather than desecrate sacred ground." No radar would detect them. *But a shaman?* He would know. He would send the Charhock to punish her. And she would deserve death. "Hannah, you must take Matt and Drake back to Earth as soon as possible."

"What about *you*?" Drake asked, taking Betinsa's hand in his. She loved the worry in his voice for it revealed that he had feelings for her. Surely not the same kind of love she held for him, but at least there was affection. "You meant take *all* of us back to Earth. Right?"

"I must go to Fraiqua to answer for my trespass." *Or die at the hands of the Charhock...*

"No one knows we're here," Matt countered. "If they did, we would've been rescued or captured or...*something* by now."

If it was only that simple... "They wouldn't come for you," Betinsa replied.

"I want the whole story," Matt said, settling his hand on her shoulder and squeezing. "I know you, Tinsa. You're my partner. There's something you're not telling us." His hold on her tightened. "Out with it."

"Tis the Charhock. It must have...time. Time to...decide."

“What the fuck’s a Charhock?” Hannah asked. Her narrowed eyes told Betinsa that she knew her as well as Matt—both realized that her evasiveness was ominous. “Like Matt said, Betinsa. Out with it. What’s going on?”

“The Charhock is our savior. His arrival brought an end to the wars and will bring prosperity to Fraiqua. I’ve...defiled his home. He must be given time to decide my punishment. Should he wish my sacrifice, he’ll destroy me. Soon. Should he wish I be brought to justice on Fraiqua, he’ll spare me and signal the shaman to come and fetch me.”

Drake put his hands on his hips and frowned. “Signal? How will he *signal* anyone? The thing can only roar.”

“The same way he told of his arrival—he can communicate with the head shaman to make his wishes known.”

Drake had heard enough. If there had been any doubt in his mind that he would stay by Betinsa’s side, it vanished at the thought of anything happening to her. He might be an ambassador, and he might have sworn to put the best interests of the United Continents ahead of all things, but that didn’t mean he’d surrendered all of who he was to his home planet. While his loyalty and his allegiance would always be to the U.C., he now realized his heart belonged to Betinsa. He gathered her into his arms and held her tight. “There’s no way in hell I’m leaving this moon without you.”

Matt put his other hand possessively on Betinsa’s shoulder and stared Drake in the eye. Drake could read the agent’s mind as clearly as he could hear his own thoughts. They were both claiming this woman, and somehow that seemed like the most natural thing in the universe. Drake gave him a curt nod.

“Neither of us is leaving Katenya if you’re not with us,” Matt said.

“Um...hate to break up this little...party,” Hannah said with a chuckle. “But if you think no one but you three lovebirds has set foot on this...sacred planet, you’re crazy.”

Betinsa turned to gape at Hannah. “What are you talking about? No one has been on Katenya—none but the Charhock may be on this sacred moon.”

“Well, no one told the Dracorians that. ’Cause they’re hanging out about twenty kilometers from here.”

Betinsa gasped. “Dracorians? No. No, you’re wrong. There can’t be... Here? You saw them *here*?”

“The yellow bastards had a camp. Saw it all when I flew in. Actually, Lincoln saw it. His vision’s fantastic.”

“Did they see you?” Matt asked.

“Nope. Flying stealth, looking for Indigo, and trying not to disturb the wildlife.”

The ambassador in Drake asserted himself. “Dracorians? You’re sure?”

“Fuckin’ positive,” Hannah replied. “Took every bit of my self-control not to launch a

photon grenade or two at 'em. Didn't figure I'd be paying Betinsa back if I bombed my way to her rescue."

He was having a hard time believing it because the ramifications were mind-numbing. Millions of souls had died in the wars. Should the fighting begin again, millions more would perish. "They're the ones who committed most of the war crimes against the Fraiquans. The United Continents has condemned their government. One of the reasons I was heading to Fraiqua was to bring back a terrorist who conspired with the Dracorians to attack Earth."

Drake swung his head around to Matt's growl. For the first time since he met Matt Newton, Drake saw the Earth Bureau of Investigation agent he'd heard so much about—the one who methodically brought down anyone he was sent to capture. Gears were turning in the man's head, and an angry flush rose on his cheeks. "Then what the fuck are they doing on this moon?" Matt asked. "And what the fuck are we going to do about it?"

Chapter 7

Sleeping was impossible. Matt tossed and turned, his mind unable to turn off the tumbling, troubling thoughts. *Dracorians. On Katenya.* There was only one reason he could figure for why they would have the audacity to land here—they were planning a new attack on Fraiqua. Soon.

And he was damned well going to stop it!

Matt had always believed everything happened for a reason. It was no coincidence that they'd crashed on this moon. He and Betinsa were here to do their job. Catching terrorists. Having the help of an ambassador and a bounty hunter would only make their task easier.

A noise drew his gaze to Hannah, the first to get to her feet as she stood and stretched her lithe body. Betinsa was still snuggled up against him with Drake pressed to her back, his arm and leg draped over her. Far as Matt could tell, they were both still asleep, their breathing deep and even.

Footsteps sounded, drawing closer. Matt looked up to find Hannah staring down at them in the first light of the morning suns. She smiled. "I'm heading back to my ship. I need to see how Linc's doing and get some supplies." Her smile grew to a smirk. "I'll be gone an hour. Maybe more."

"You're telling me this because?" Matt whispered.

"So you can get it through your thick male skull that you three can be alone for a little bit. No one to bother you. Perfect privacy. Can do what comes naturally and all that..."

"My thick male skull understood exactly what you meant when you said you'd be gone an hour."

"Then stop asking stupid questions." She strode over to the edge of the platform, the soles of her combat boots clomping against the wood. "And here I thought all guys were stupid." With that, she sat down, flipped around to grab a branch, and dropped over the edge. The noise of her shimmying down the tree slowly faded away.

Since Matt's cock was already at attention from the feel of Betinsa in his arms, he didn't need any encouragement to follow through on Hannah's suggestion. All night, he'd lessened horrible thoughts of Dracorians by imagining what he wanted to do to Betinsa, fantasizing about touching her again, remembering the feel of her squeezing him tight as he made love to her.

But the attraction wasn't just sexual, not like it had been with other women. Everything about her reached him on such a deep level, he wasn't sure love was even the proper word to describe it. And he did love her. Hell, he'd loved her for the longest time. Probably from the moment he'd seen the first smile on her exotic face. Now that she'd taken him as her lover—as her *mate*—he had no intention of ever letting her go.

Leave her here, alone on Katenya? *Never!*

Drake hadn't said as much, but Matt knew the ambassador felt the same. How in the fuck the three of them could manage to pull off a relationship was beyond him at that moment. Maybe they could go someplace like Remiza to get married—that planet allowed unions among multiple partners. Or so a friend of his told him before she headed there to marry two men she'd fallen for while quarantined with both of them on Earth's moon. Until Matt had seen the three of them together, he never would have believed a relationship like that could work. Just watching the tender and loving way those two men treated their shared woman gave him hope that he, Betinsa, and Drake could really make what they shared permanent.

Pledging themselves to each other on Betinsa's home planet probably wasn't an option. He wasn't sure any Fraiquan official would marry human males to one of their women. The ramifications of how the three of them being married would affect Matt and Betinsa's standing with the Earth Bureau of Investigation or Drake's job as ambassador wouldn't even register yet. No, they'd handle those problems as they popped up and not let fear keep them from making this a permanent union. Truth was, however, that all of their careers could be in jeopardy.

None of that mattered. Betinsa Nungio belonged to him and to Drake Keller. They would make it work. *Somehow.*

Matt leaned in to press a kiss to Betinsa's lips. She hummed as she awakened, looking like Sleeping Beauty blinking herself back to the world of the living. As she smiled up at him, his breath caught. She was so beautiful. His heart skipped a quick beat and then started slamming in his chest. Desire welled up, making his cock jerk as all he could think of was being inside her again. "Tinsa..."

"Matt..."

Grabbing her shoulder, he rolled her toward him, letting a still-sleeping Drake's arm and leg fall away. Matt captured her mouth for a long, searing kiss. Her tongue slid between his lips, and he grasped it gently with his teeth before sucking it deeper into his mouth. A sexy growl rose from her as she ground her hips against his swollen dick, making his balls tight and heavy.

He continued to kiss her, drawing her closer, wanting to feel her soft skin and breathe in her flowery scent. His hands peeled off her shirt and tossed it aside. Her shorts quickly followed, as did Matt's clothing.

Betinsa's skin was like hot silk beneath his fingertips. No woman had ever felt so perfect. Her breasts fit his palms as if they were made for him. Tearing his mouth away from hers, he kissed her slender neck, tracing his tongue and lips across her collarbone and lower until he pulled a puckered nipple into his mouth. The hard nub tasted so sweet, and as she arched against him, he shifted to her other breast, laving it with his tongue and enjoying how she cried out and clutched at his head as if to hold him closer.

Matt reached between her thighs, spreading them as he reverently stroked her

pussy. So hot, so moist, as if her body was begging for him to come to her. His finger found her clitoris, and he caressed the swelling nub, rubbing gently and listening to each of her gasps as if they were notes to a love song. She held nothing back, and by giving so much of herself, she freed Matt to give her everything he had. Stretching a finger deep inside her tight sheath, he stroked her sweet spot, trying to hold on to his fragile self-control so that he could bring her as much pleasure as she was bringing him.

“Matt, please,” she whispered in a throaty voice before she pressed her lips to his neck, licking the small wounds her fangs had left on his flesh. Bliss shot straight to his cock, forcing fluid to leak from the tip. Her hand grasped him, her thumb smearing his juice around and around the sensitive crown. “Please, *saramie*... Come to me now.”

He needed to be inside her as badly as she seemed to want him there. His passion for her ran through his blood, pouring through each vein like molten lava, fueling his desire. Grabbing her hips, he forced her on top of him, rubbing his stiff dick against her core. “Take me inside you, Tinsa. Show me how much you want me.”

Holding his shaft, she guided him to her entrance and then thrust down to impale herself on him. Matt groaned at her encasing him, squeezing him tight, and surrounding him in her dewy heat.

Betinsa knew she’d never tire of feeling Matt buried in her body. His thick cock stretched her, making her feel so wonderfully full, and her heart near to shattered at knowing they were now as close as any two creatures could be.

“Ride me, Tinsa.” His hands caressed her hips before his pelvis thrust up hard, forcing a moan from her lips.

And ride him she did. Arching back, she braced her hands against his strong legs and bucked, driving him deep inside her again and again. His palms covered her breasts as he growled his approval.

The peak came quickly, starting as a tight knot deep inside her and then spreading like tendrils through her body until she couldn’t take it a moment longer. Lights appeared, flashing through her thoughts as her heartbeat echoed in her ears. Her body clasped him deep inside when her release blasted through her. Matt must have felt her orgasm because his fingers dug into her skin as he drove into her and shouted her name, the sound echoing through the forest.

“Damn, that was hot,” Drake said from where he lay on his side, watching them and stroking his cock. Beads of moisture glistened on the surface of the purple head. “Almost as hot as fucking you myself, *lamanna*.”

Betinsa hadn’t known he was watching, but his words hit her gut like a ball of fire. Loving Matt was wonderful, but she needed Drake, too. Tears stung her eyes when she thought about life without them, because should her mates leave her—*either* of her mates—her heart would be broken forever. But how in the universe could she hold on to both of them? How could she convince them that the three of them could make a life together?

She was being impractical and selfish, imagining a future that might never be. The Charhock. The Dracorians. Her own culture. They all conspired against them. Should they find a way to be together, it would defeat almost insurmountable odds. She could never ask them to stay at the cost of their careers, nor would she beg them to be with her should they not wish to stay.

So for now, she intended to take greedy advantage of every moment she had left with them. "*Lamanna*... Come to me."

Drake's hands reached under her arms, pulling her off a sated and relaxed Matt, who helped lift her from him with a smile. Drake dragged her closer before flipping her to press her back against the blanket. "I'll have to remember to thank Hannah for her consideration in leaving." His grin highlighted the handsome dimple in his left cheek.

"Ever the diplomat." The teasing ended when his mouth covered hers, his tongue sweeping inside in blatant possession. Matt was always a giving lover, Drake a forceful one. Blanketing her body with his, Drake wedged a knee between her thighs to force them open. She gladly obliged and gasped against his mouth when he settled himself between her legs. His enormous cock pressed against her sex, tempting her when she was past that point already. Didn't he know how much she needed him to take her now?

"God, Betinsa..." he whispered. "I wanna go slow but..." He rubbed against her again, the crown of his shaft pressing against her entrance.

"I don't wish you to go slow. Take me now, Drake. Please."

And he did, thrusting inside her as she shouted in pleasure, as if her orgasm with Matt had never truly ended. Her nerves were sensitized, and as Drake slowly pulled out, she wrapped her legs around his hips, fearing he was leaving her. He didn't. Instead, he slammed back inside her, dropping his head to tuck it against her neck. His sweet breath raced over her skin, caressing the bite mark where he'd claimed her. Desire licked her skin like flames, and she drove her pelvis hard into his. Using the crude words of his language, she let him know what she wanted. "Fuck me. I need you to fuck me, Drake."

He groaned before increasing his rhythm, pounding into her again and again as she welcomed the strong and powerful way he took her. A cry rose from her chest, rising to a shout when her body again found the pinnacle she craved. Her release was fierce, brutal in intensity, and so loving she could only cling to Drake as the pleasure raced over her.

His teeth scraped her skin as he pushed into her and groaned, his scorching essence pouring into her in short bursts. Betinsa pressed her lips to his shoulder, swiping the sweaty skin with her tongue to taste the saltiness.

A long time passed before her heart stopped slamming in her chest, and she surreptitiously sniffed to enjoy the smell that loving her mates had spread through the air around them. Nothing had ever seemed so right as to know that what the three of them shared belonged to this special place, that they'd left their essences behind to be

forever a part of Katenya.

After Drake rolled away, he gathered her in his arms. Matt slid over and set his palms against her backside. She let her love for them comfort her for a few moments before the troubling thoughts took hold.

“Now,” Betinsa finally said. “We must decide how we can save Fraiqua from the Dracorians.”

* * * *

Betinsa waved at Hannah. Her friend was standing near one wing of her ship, clearly working on some adjustment. “Hannah!”

“Indigo!” Hannah tossed her silver tool back into a small box. “I see you brought your guys with you. I’m sure they’ll come in handy.” She turned toward the hatch of her ship. “Hey, Linc! Come on out and meet everyone.”

Betinsa watched her men, waiting until Lincoln came waddling down the ramp leading from Hannah’s ship, the *Fearless*. The short, furry, honey-colored bear who stood a bit over a meter tall stopped at the bottom of the ramp, probably because he saw her and her men. His pink lips dipped into a frown.

“Hello, Linc. I’ve missed you,” she said, motioning for him to come closer and waiting for Matt and Drake to make the same mistake most people made when they saw their first Odiran. Perhaps Drake had some hope not to step into the trap. He was, after all, an ambassador who shouldn’t be surprised at how different other species could be.

She was wrong.

Just as soon as Lincoln stood in front of them, Drake bent down and patted the weathered baseball cap on the alien’s head. “Oh, my God,” he said, his voice softening as if speaking to a child. “Aren’t you just the cutest little thing ever!”

“Fuck off,” Lincoln replied before growling and smacking Drake’s hand away.

Betinsa swallowed a laugh, not wanting to hurt Lincoln’s feelings but still amused that no matter who it was that saw him, everyone thought Lincoln was some kind of live teddy bear. Probably because he looked so much like one.

She’d known the Odiran since Hannah had saved him from alien poachers who treated that planet like their own personal hunting ground. After the poachers killed Lincoln’s parents, Hannah captured them and sold the three Dracorians for a bounty to the Odiran government. Lincoln had refused to leave her side, so when she left the planet, the cub went with her. They’d been inseparable ever since.

“Fuck off?” Drake seemed shocked to hear the crude language from such a cuddly looking creature. “I’m...sorry, sir. I shouldn’t have... Please, let me start again. My name’s Drake Keller. I serve as an ambassador for the United Continents of Earth.”

“Fuckin’ diplomat,” Lincoln replied with another growl. “Pussy. My dick’s probably longer than yours.” He shifted his large amber eyes to Matt. “What’s your story,

asswipe?”

“Linc!” Betinsa scolded, although the giggle in her voice softened the censure. “You’ve taken on too many of Hannah’s bad habits. Such language...”

“I’m an agent with the Earth Bureau of Investigation,” Matt replied, showing a lot more aplomb than Drake had. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lincoln.”

The bear shook his head. “Just Lincoln. Linc if you’re my friend, which you’re not since you’re nothing but a damn government snoop.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you.” Drake offered his hand.

Pursing his lips, Lincoln seemed to think it over a long time before he stuck out his own paw, which looked more like a human hand than a bear claw because of its opposable thumb, for Drake to shake.

“Now,” Linc said, turning back to Betinsa, “what in the hell are we going to do to kill those fucking Dracorians before they go after your planet again?”

Chapter 8

"I need to get up a little higher so I can see." Betinsa grabbed the branch above her and hoisted herself up. Until she could get above the canopy of the thick leaves, she would never be able to get a good look at the Dracorian camp. How Linc and Hannah had been able to see it was beyond her because the whole area was blanketed with netting the same color as the surrounding trees. Yet, if she could get just a little higher ...she might be able to see what the yellow-skinned bastards were concealing beneath the camouflage. "Almost there."

"Careful, Indigo," Hannah said, her voice buzzing in Betinsa's ear. "You're getting awfully high up there. Hate to explain to your mates that you fell and splattered your pretty little ass on the ground."

"Tinsa... Be careful," Matt said.

"Please, *lamanna*," Drake added.

Thank God for the communicators Linc had given all of them. Hannah had trained her adopted son well in technology—her specialty. But he'd surpassed his teacher, tinkering with all sorts of gadgets, including the tiny earbuds they all now used to communicate. It was such a comfort to hear all of their voices and to know they could hear hers. "See anything yet?" Hannah asked.

"No, not yet... There is no—" And then she finally reached a level where the leaves thinned, and Betinsa saw exactly what the interlopers were hiding. *Both things* they were hiding... "Oh no... Please no... It can't be..."

"Betinsa?" Matt said in her ear. "What's wrong?"

She couldn't even bring herself to say the words aloud, so reprehensible was the Dracorians' crime against the Fraiquan people. Twin roars suddenly rent then air as if the prisoners held down by ropes knew she'd discovered them. "They've captured ...the Charhocks."

"Charhocks?" Drake asked. "You said *Charhocks*? I thought there was only one."

"As did I," she whispered back. "It would seem the shaman hasn't told us all we should know about our sacred protector. Rather...*protectors*. Two are before me, bound to the ground with thick ropes."

For her whole life, Betinsa had seen her paths laid before her and somehow immediately recognized their importance. The moment she'd arrived on Earth, she'd known she would make it her new home. The day she met Matt Newton, she'd realized that they would one day mean a great deal to each other, something more than being partners. And the first time she'd seen Drake Keller, she knew that she was truly Fraiquan, desiring two men rather than merely one.

Now, Betinsa finally understood why her creator had seen fit to have her ship crash on Katenya. She now knew her sacred duty and why the Charhock hadn't come for her

to make her life a sacrifice for violating his hallowed ground.

She was here to save him. And his mate.

Should the Dracorians succeed in killing the Charhocks, the despair would bring Fraiqua to its knees, spiritually crippling her people to the point they would never be able to mount a proper defense against another Dracorian invasion. A brilliant plan, but one Betinsa would be sure never came to fruition. No matter what it cost her, no matter what she had to do, she would make sure the Charhocks were freed.

Hannah was waiting when Betinsa reached the ground. "What's the plan?"

Betinsa popped her communicator out of her ear, dropped it to the ground, and stomped it flat.

"What the fuck...?"

Before Hannah could move, Betinsa plucked the small earpiece from her friend's ear and destroyed it as well. "From here, we go alone. I would prefer going without you, but I know you, my friend. You won't be left behind."

"But what about the guys?"

"I won't put them in any more danger."

With a small tilt of her head, Hannah considered Betinsa for a few long moments. "You love those two, don't you?"

Since lying seemed futile, she nodded. "With all that I am. They are my mates, and I must protect them. I'll go for the Charhocks myself. I would be honored should you choose to guard my back."

"Fuck that. I'm with you, Indigo!"

"No. You may not go. The Charhocks will not understand. I'm Fraiquan; they'll ...recognize my breed."

Settling her hands on her slender hips, Hannah frowned. "The guys seem like they can handle themselves. I know the women are the warriors in your world, but surely—"

"I won't place them in danger!" Betinsa lowered her voice and tried to calm her panic at the thought of anything bad happening to Matt or Drake. "I must be sure they return to Earth. I vowed they would go home."

"So you'll marry them there? Didn't know Earth allowed that yet..."

Betinsa shook her head. "They won't join with me. They don't love me as I love them. They would suffer should I make them my husbands. I can't go back to Earth with them. I'll...stay on Fraiqua. I face my punishment for being on Katenya." Hannah's frown deepened, but when she tried to speak, Betinsa stopped her with an angry slash of her hand. "We'll discuss this no further." Taking a deep breath, she softened her tone. "Don't worry, Hannah. I'll protect all of you from the shaman. This was my sin and my sin alone."

Hannah snorted an acerbic laugh. "You really think your...*mates* will just leave you

here and fly back to Earth? Just like that?”

“I’ll be sure that they do.”

“You love them, but you’d drive them away? Why not tell them how much you love them, then propose and let them decide?”

Betinsa emphatically shook her head. “I can’t tell them of my feelings, nor may I propose a joining. Drake is an ambassador. He cannot marry another species. Matt is an E.B.I agent—”

“And your *partner*,” Hannah interjected. “You think he’ll let you go that easy?”

“He must. E.B.I. agents aren’t supposed to marry aliens. I won’t take his job away from him. Or Drake’s away from him.” Trying to fight the threatening tears, Betinsa swallowed hard. “I’ll do what I must to protect them both. Now, I wish to put this matter aside so that I can go after the Charhocks.”

Although Hannah clearly had more to say, she finally nodded. “All right, Betinsa... Let’s go get ’em.”

* * * *

Matt crouched in the bushes next to Drake as they waited for Betinsa and Hannah to join them. He counted six Dracorians, but there had to be more inside the tent they’d erected next to the two enormous creatures they seemed bent on torturing by poking them with stun-sticks every time they walked by. He didn’t see any laser pistols, but why should they be armed to the teeth? No one was supposed to know they were on the moon since Fraiqua didn’t monitor it.

“So those are the Charhocks,” he whispered to Drake.

“Impressive, aren’t they?” Drake replied.

Impressive indeed. They had the body of one of Earth’s black panthers, albeit ten times the size. Attached to the shoulders were extraordinarily beautiful blue wings—the same color as Betinsa’s skin—the span of which had to reach at least twenty meters. How had the Dracorians managed to capture and hold them?

How long had the aliens been planning this maneuver? Hard to tell since no one on Fraiqua knew about them. Sacred or not, staying blind to what happened on Katenya was a stupid policy. Perhaps Drake could have a discussion with the Fraiquan government after all this was over and let them know if they didn’t change their strategy, they were nothing but proverbial sitting ducks.

Damn good thing the *Mirhala* had crashed on Katenya. The ship, although now officially “deceased,” had been aptly named. It truly had brought about a miracle. *More than one.* The rescue of the Charhocks would be Betinsa’s miracle.

But *she* was Matt’s miracle.

He also had to admit that he’d grown closer to Drake than he had any other man he’d ever known. Since Matt had been an only child, he imagined Drake was the

closest thing to a brother he would ever know. When this whole thing was over, Matt was going to marry Betinsa come hell, high water, or alien invasion. He imagined Drake felt the same. Something about the *comchi* had changed them all, and he thanked God for that *mirhala*.

Pointing behind them, Matt eased back, belly-crawling until he pulled out of the bushes, intent upon seeing what Hannah and Betinsa had discovered. Once they put all the information together, they could figure out the best way to launch an attack.

“Linc?” Matt whispered. “Heard anything from the girls yet? I can’t seem to get them to reply.”

A snorted laugh sounded in his ear. “For an E.B. I. agent, you’re a dumb ass. Sure wouldn’t let Hannah catch you calling her a *girl*, you overgrown ape. She’ll cut off your dick.”

“Are you sure you’re not related to my boss, Linc?” Matt asked softly, trying not to laugh. “You two sound too much alike.” Drake’s lips had drawn to a thin line, so Matt figured the man’s patience had come to an end. “Have you heard from them?” Matt asked again. “I hate that we can’t hear them now.”

“No word yet,” Linc replied, “and not a clue why the communicators stopped working. Trying to scan the area, but... Wait. There’s a blip. There’s another. Shit. I don’t know how they did it, but they’re both inside the Dracorian camp.”

* * * *

“I don’t like this, Betinsa,” Hannah whispered as she held her laser pistol at ready. “How long do you think they’ve had those panthers tied up?”

“Only a few hours. The gremtils would have attacked all of them before today.” She stared at the beautiful creatures, her heart aching at how brutally they were being treated. “I have to free them.” Strapping Hannah’s knife against her thigh, Betinsa took a steadying breath. She knew Matt and Drake would be furious that she was going in by herself, but her heart told her it was the right thing to do. If she would have been able, she’d exclude Hannah as well. Unfortunately, that wasn’t a possibility now. At least with their communicators gone, they didn’t have to listen to Matt, Drake, or Linc scold them.

“Why don’t you at least shape-shift to look like one of those assholes? Blend in and all...” Hannah suggested.

“I can’t. My energy would be too drained to help the Charhocks. I’ll be myself to keep them calm as well.” With a deep, steadying breath, she said, “Watch my back, Hannah. I’m going in.”

Betinsa crouched in the thick trees closest to the smaller of the Charhocks, knowing it was the female—the warrior—shielding herself in the growing shadows. The suns had set, and she’d waited patiently for the dark to deepen so she could get to the female Charhock without being seen. She knew if she could free her, she would help her defeat the Dracorians and rescue her mate.

The smell of the Dracorians' meal drifted through the air, catching Betinsa's nose and making her gag. Whatever they were eating, it smelled rotten. The last soldier guarding the Charhocks must have smelled the odor as well because he gave the Charhock one last poke with his stun-stick and then headed toward the same tent all the other soldiers had entered.

The moment she'd waited for had arrived. Having studied her enemies' culture, she knew they stopped everything for their last meal of the day, guided by their stomachs as if they had no control. The Charhocks were unguarded, but only for enough time for her to free one.

Running through the dark, Betinsa stumbled once, twice before she reached the first of the thick ropes holding the panther to the ground. Yanking the knife from its sheath, she started sawing through the first tie and whispered in her own language, "Be calm, my friend. I shall free you."

A slow purr rose from the Charhock. She stilled her struggle against the bonds as if understanding Betinsa had come to help. Betinsa wanted to reach out and stroke the ebony fur, but she focused on hacking away at the sturdy rope. Laughter from the Dracorians rang through the air from time to time. She hoped they would take plenty of time to relish their disgusting meals and leave her in peace. "Go ahead and celebrate, you bastards. You won't win this fight."

The Charhock purred a little louder.

The first rope let out a loud pop when it snapped apart. Betinsa looked around, holding her breath and praying that her enemy hadn't heard. More laughter from the tent helped slow the staccato rhythm of her heart, and she shifted to start on the next rope. Gritting her teeth, she worked as hard and as fast as she could to hack away at it.

When the second cord snapped, the Charhock moved, shifting its wing as if to show her which binding she should attack next. Just as she pressed the knife to the rope's surface, a rustling sound caught her ear. Betinsa froze, waiting to see if she'd been discovered by the Dracorians. Sweat trickled down her back, making her shiver.

"It's just me," Hannah said as she knelt next to her and jerked another knife out of her boot. "Let's get this big guy outta here."

"This is the female," Betinsa said, still not entirely sure how she knew that fact. She simply *did*. The women quickly cut through two more ropes, and the Charhock pushed up against her prison of cords. Several broke as she spread her wings. Just as soon as she got all the way to her feet, she let out a loud roar that made Betinsa's heart leap to her throat. She glanced over her shoulder to see the Dracorians spilling from the tent, each with a stun-stick at ready.

"Fly!" she shouted at the Charhock. "I'll free your mate!"

But she didn't leave. Instead, she turned to bite at the bindings of the second panther.

Betinsa stepped in front of Hannah, holding her knife and snarling as her fangs grew. The time for vengeance had arrived. Bloodlust raced through her veins, and she would have met the attack head-on had she not needed to protect Hannah. "Run!" she shouted over her shoulder, needing her friend to understand why she would remain.

Hannah aimed her laser pistol and shot the first Dracorian to reach them right between the eyes. He went down with a heavy thud as two more rushed the women. Hannah got off one more shot before one of the Dracorians lunged out and struck her with his stun-stick. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she went down hard, unconscious. When he pulled out a knife and bent over Hannah, clearly ready to finish her off, Betinsa sprang.

Landing on the alien's back, she sank her fangs deep into his neck and severed his carotid artery. He dropped to his side as Betinsa jumped from him, landing in a crouch next to Hannah. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth, trying to smear away the putrid green blood of her enemy. As two more Dracorians ran at them, she growled low in her throat, ready to kill both of them to protect her friend.

The sound of discharging laser rifle echoed through the camp as small blue bursts of light hit both of the aliens. They collapsed dead at Betinsa's feet just as Matt and Drake came toward her, running and shouting her name.

She wanted to fling herself into their arms, but the Charhock drew her attention with a roar. When she locked eyes with the creature, the Charhock stopped trying to free her mate, folded both of her front legs, and dropped low enough for Betinsa to jump on her back. The panther was calling to Betinsa, telling her what she needed to do to finish this.

Grabbing the silky fur, she climbed the Charhock until she sat straddling its shoulders. With a flap of enormous blue wings, the panther took flight. Betinsa felt the joy the creature held deep in her heart for being free again and dug her fingers tightly into the animal's coat as they swooped back over the camp.

Drake, Matt, and Hannah were firing at the small advancing Dracorian force. They were outnumbered, but the Charhock evened the odds as she swooped down, scooped two of the aliens into her mouth, and took to the sky again. Betinsa could hear their shouts for mercy, but since they'd shown none to the Charhock, she wasn't surprised when the creature didn't grant their requests.

Not sure what the panther would do with her former captors, she gasped when she saw where the Charhock was heading. Settled in the tallest of the trees was a large nest, and in that nest rested four baby Charhocks. Their ebony coats glistened in the dim light, their wings nothing more than pin-feathers.

Their mother swooped low, landing on the edge of her home. The babies scrambled toward her, growling and mewling until she dropped the Dracorians in front of them. Her offspring bit and clawed at their food until the screams of their victims finally ceased.

The Charhock roared as she flapped her wings again to take flight, quickly

returning to the campsite. This time, Betinsa could see that the four Dracorians remaining alive were kneeling in front of Matt and Drake, their hands against their heads. Hannah was sitting up while Linc fussed over her.

The danger had passed.

Betinsa nearly lost her balance when the Charhock dropped toward her mate. Clenching her fists tightly, Betinsa held on to the thick fur as the creature landed next to the second panther. Betinsa took things from there. Sliding off the side, she shouted, "Linc, the knife!"

Linc picked up the serrated blade and tossed it, burying it in the ground at Betinsa's feet. Snatching up the weapon, Betinsa hurried to hack through the ropes holding the male to the ground. Linc, Drake, and Matt soon joined her, and in no time, they'd freed him.

The male Charhock rose as he roared and flapped his wings. Then he turned his head to look at Betinsa.

Drake held his breath, not sure what to expect as the second of the Charhocks padded slowly toward Betinsa. After watching her fly away with the first panther, he prayed its mate meant her no harm. The animal stopped right in front of her, the breath from its large nose rustling Betinsa's long, black hair.

"What's that sound?" Matt asked, coming to stand at Drake's side.

"I think...it's purring at her." And it was. The Charhock also extended its tongue and licked Betinsa's face. "It likes her."

"It should. She just saved both of their lives."

"That she did," Drake replied. "So what do you think will happen now?"

Chapter 9

“*Fearless*, you will land at docking port one,” the flight controller said. “Officials will be there to meet you.”

“Understood,” Hannah replied before silencing the com. “I can still make a run for it, Indigo. My ship can outfly the Fraiquan escorts. I know tons of places you can hide out for a while. Seems kinda shitty that they’re gonna punish you for saving their panthers.”

“No, Hannah. I won’t run away,” Betinsa replied. “I’m resigned to my judgment.” And she was. Her heart was content. The Charhocks—*all* the Charhocks—were safe and would thrive for generations to come, bringing peace and prosperity to her people for many, many years. The fact she’d played an important role in saving them might be considered mitigating circumstances against her charges of trespassing on the sacred moon, but she couldn’t count on it. What she needed to do now was focus on how to get Matt, Drake, Hannah, and Lincoln out of this mess.

“Are you sure they won’t be mad we didn’t bring any prisoners back with us?” Drake asked.

“The Charhocks made that choice, not I,” Betinsa replied. “No, my people will consider the deaths of the Dracorians to be a proper sacrifice to the Charhocks.”

Matt snorted a laugh. “Not like the panthers gave us much choice. Snatched ’em up and flew away before we could even decide what to do with them. I imagine they’re baby panther food by now.”

“Last chance,” Hannah said, turning to look over her shoulder from the pilot’s seat.

Sad instead of joyful to see Fraiqua again, Betinsa realized this return to her homeland might be her last. She shook her head. “I must face my people and accept their verdict.”

A few minutes later, the ship sat down with Hannah’s usual... *finesse*, bouncing twice before it skidded to a stop so she could drop the landing legs. Linc shook his head and laughed on the first skip across the tarmac, probably because he was used to her awkward landings.

Glancing over to her mates, Betinsa couldn’t suppress a grin at how green Matt’s complexion had turned. The man clearly didn’t possess the stomach for space travel. Drake, on the other hand, sat pensively staring out the window, tapping his lips with his extended index finger. Had so many of their things not been lost in the crash, he would probably be wearing his ceremonial robes, ready to offer his official greetings to the Fraiquan government representatives who would be sent to meet them. Now, those same representatives would probably be coming to arrest them all.

That, she could not allow.

Popping her seat belt, Betinsa hurried to the ramp ahead of everyone else. She

ducked to scoot down it before the hatch had even opened all the way. She would present herself as the one who committed the offense, confess what had happened had been all her doing, and then plead for mercy for her friends. Surely they wouldn't execute three humans and an Odiran when it had been all her fault they'd set foot on Katenya.

Three Fraiquans—two dressed in long, flowing, red velvet robes that marked them as members of parliament and one shaman in teal vestments—waited at the entrance to the docking area. As the sounds of footsteps coming down the ramp rang behind her, Betinsa hurried to the Fraiquans. Just as soon as she stood before them, she dropped to her knees and bowed her head. "I'm here to beg your mercy," she said in her own language. "Not for myself, but for my friends. They have done nothing wrong. The sin of violating the sanctity of Katenya falls solely on my shoulders. Punish me. I am ready to face a righteous death. But spare the others. Please. And spare my family shame. Let them keep their name."

A blue hand reached out to cup her chin and force her to look up. The shaman smiled down at her. "My child, you should not kneel before us."

"But, sir, I—"

His hands grasped her upper arms as he forced her to stand. "Do you not see that we are the ones who should kneel before you?"

She blinked, not trusting her eyes as the senators and the shaman doffed their hats, each dropping to one knee and bowing his head. She didn't even have to look over her shoulder to know that Drake and Matt had come to stand behind her. "I...I don't understand..."

"You saved the lives of the Charhocks," the shaman said, his eyes rising to find hers. "And in saving the Charhocks, you saved your world. You're now exalted, an oracle to your people. We kneel to give you our admiration and our love."

"But... I don't want this... I don't wish anyone to kneel before me." She tried to grab the shaman's hand from where it rested against his heart. He reluctantly let her have it, and she tried to tug him to stand. "Please. Please don't do this."

The three Fraiquans got back to their feet, smiling and staring at her with such wonder in their eyes, she felt tears brimming her own. Two strong hands settled on her shoulders and the scents of her mates comforted her. Her heart pounded as she tried to take in all that was happening. Her mind refused to believe it.

The shaman bowed to them all. "Oracle Betinsa Nungio," he said, still in Fraiqui, "we welcome your mates and your friends. We have a feast prepared for the formal joining ceremony between you and your mates tonight. Your family has arrived, your mother ready even now to help you don the robe she wore to join with your fathers."

None of this was happening. She was supposed to have been slapped in chains by now as they dragged her away to await execution. Her mind simply couldn't absorb all that the shaman had just said.

Oracle?

Joining ceremony?

That finally registered. The shaman obviously knew of her *comchi*, probably because he was spiritually attuned to everything that happened on Katenya. But there could be no joining ceremony, it simply couldn't happen. So as to not embarrass Matt and Drake and force them to tell the shaman that they wouldn't marry her, she continued in her own tongue. "There can't be a joining ceremony. I haven't asked these men to stay with me, nor have they asked me to share their lives with them. They're humans and don't follow our customs. They didn't understand the importance of claiming me as their mate."

An angry spark flashed in the shaman's eyes, his frown as fierce as Earth's winter wind. His fingers brushed the small scars on each side of her neck. "You bear the marks of your mates! And they *dare* refuse you the joining?"

She shook her head. "They have never refused me. I can't ask them to take part in our customs. Our ways are not their ways. They may wish to return to Earth without me as their wife. There shall be no joining ceremony."

"But...but..."

Betinsa shook her head again and continued in English, knowing Matt and Drake would start asking questions if they weren't included soon. She prayed Drake didn't know enough Fraiqui to understand all that she'd explained to the shaman. The faster they got through this, the less humiliation she'd feel. Giving the senators and the shaman her best hard stare, she said, "These people and this Odiran shall be allowed to leave on the *Fearless*." Whirling around to face her friends, she tried to find the proper words. "All is well. I'm not to be punished. Since the Charhocks survived because of us—"

"Because of *you*, Tinsa," Matt interrupted. "You saved them. We all just...helped a little."

She couldn't stop the tears at his kind words and the tender tone of his voice. The shame of crying in public would pass. Perhaps oracles were allowed to weep... Her heart was so heavy, so full of love for her two mates, once they left, she would be crying for a long time to come.

When Matt and Drake got on that ship and flew away with Hannah and Linc, her heart would fracture into a million pieces, never to be whole again. But she'd already made up her mind. Her mates deserved to go back to their lives, and she would remain with her family on Fraiqua. Once she'd licked her wounds and cried until she could cry no longer, perhaps she would join Hannah, searching the universe for justice.

Betinsa stroked Matt's cheek with her fingertips and then looked to Drake, feeling as if she was going to die simply saying the words. "It is time for you both to return to Earth."

"For *all* of us to return," Matt added, putting his hand over hers and pressing her

palm to his face.

“No, *saramie*. I won’t be going with you.”

“Betinsa...” Drake drawled out her name, his voice close to a growl.

“Please, *lamanna*. Just listen. I... I’ve decided to remain here on Fraiqua.” She tried not to look at the piercing frowns that suddenly appeared on their handsome faces. Her hand dropped back to her side. “I...can’t...” She took a deep, shuddering breath. “I can’t go back with you.”

“I don’t understand,” Drake said, his gaze searching hers.

“I know that what we shared on Katenya was...wonderful,” she continued. “But I also know you’re not Fraiquan. You have jobs to return to—jobs that make you the great men that you are.”

“Why does that mean you can’t go back with us?” Matt asked. He grasped her shoulder, his fingers digging into the muscles.

“I can’t explain so that you will understand. You’ll simply have to take my word for this. I need to spend time with my family now...” *So that I may properly mourn the loss of the two mates I love with all my heart and soul.*

“I think I know what’s going on here,” Hannah said as she strode over to the group, Linc waddling quickly behind her.

“Please, Hannah. *Please* stay out of this.” Couldn’t her friend see that this was for the best? Betinsa couldn’t work side by side with Matt, knowing she could never be to him what he was to her—one of her lifemates. And should she see Drake again and again and remember all they’d shared...?

No! A clean break was for the best. “Hannah,” Betinsa said, her voice growing hard, “you must stay out of this now.”

“C’mon, Betinsa... You need to tell them how you—”

“Silence!” Betinsa shouted. “I will *not* discuss this...personal matter any longer. I’ll stay here at my home. Matt and Drake will return to Earth, their home.”

Hannah narrowed her eyes, clearly wanting to argue.

“No more, Hannah. Please no more.” Placing her palms against Matt’s chest, Betinsa pushed up on tiptoe to press a kiss to his lips. When he tried to take her into his arms, she backed up. Then she moved to Drake, kissed him once, and then turned to walk away. Trying to hold her composure, she passed the senators and the shaman. Although they appeared to be a bit confused, they turned to follow her inside the dome of the landing facility. As soon as she was out of the sight of her mates, she would run home and let her mother hold her, needing comfort and fearing she would surely die before this day ended.

“You think it’s that easy?” Matt shouted as she reached the door. “You think it’s *that fucking easy?*”

One foot in front of the other . You can do this. Just put one foot in front of the other. She tried to keep moving.

“Stop!” Drake shouted. “Betinsa! I said *stop!*”

Conditioned by a mother who would never let her mates order her about in such a fashion, Betinsa whirled around. “How dare you speak to me that way!”

She’d never seen Drake so angry. He’d always seemed to value self-control, keeping a calm exterior and maintaining an even keel. Now, his cheeks were ruddy and his hands were clenched at his sides. He was breathing so hard, his nostrils flared with each exhale. “How dare *you* walk away from us like this! We’re *your mates!*”

“We won’t let you do this!” Matt added, appearing every bit as enraged. She’d only seen him lose control once when he’d whirled to punch a hole in a wall when she’d known he wanted to put that same fist through the suspect’s face. Right now, his body language was just as taut as that day. “You don’t get to make all the choices here! You don’t get to just...walk away!”

Hannah was grinning like a simpleton while Lincoln openly chuckled at the dressing-down she’d just received. The amused stares of the senators and the smile of the shaman bristled her nerves even more. In fast strides, Betinsa returned to Matt and Drake, stopping when she was directly in front of them. “You don’t speak to me like that! Either of you! I’m the *female!*”

“And we’re your *mates!*” Matt replied, fisting his hands against his hips and leaning over her as if to emphasize his superior height.

“Mates, *lamanna*,” Drake said, folding his arms over his chest. “Not boyfriends, not lovers, not some toys you get to decide when to play with. *Mates*. When you claimed us, you should have realized we’d never let you go.”

Matt reached out, taking her hands in his. “We’re not letting you walk away from us.”

Could they mean it? Did they really know what it meant when she claimed them as her mates?

No. No, they didn’t comprehend, so she would have to embarrass herself further, throw her shredded heart on the floor for all to see, simply to make them understand. “You don’t realize what you’re saying. I can’t be a part of your lives. Matt, you’re an agent of the Earth Bureau of Investigation. Drake, you’re an ambassador. How can I take that away from both of you?”

“You sadly underestimate us, Betinsa,” Drake replied. “Loving you won’t make me lose my job.”

“You...love me?” Her voice had fallen to a breathless whisper.

“God, yes,” Drake replied. “How can you not know that?”

“I love you too, Tinsa,” Matt added. “Hell, I’ve loved you just about forever.”

Her mates loved her. She suddenly had the strength of ten warriors as her heart felt near to bursting. “You do understand that mating on Fraiqua is for life—three people who promise to be together through all the good and bad of life. You do know that, right?”

“For richer or poorer,” Matt said, grabbing her hand and pressing it to his chest. “In sickness and in health...”

Drake took her other hand and held it against his heart. “To love, honor, and cherish. Until death do us part.”

The shaman drew closer, speaking the words of the joining as her mates smiled.

They knew. They understood. And they still wanted her.

“I must hear the words, Oracle,” the shaman said, speaking English in clear deference to her mates.

The strength her mother had always said she had helped Betinsa keep her voice steady as she repeated the promise so many women had before her. “I take Matt Newton and Drake Keller as my lifemates. I ask them to do me the honor of spending their lives with me. Will you join with me?”

The shaman put his hand over the one she held against Matt’s chest. “And will you accept Betinsa as your mate?”

“Hell, yes,” Matt replied, his grin making her smile in response.

Repeating the gesture with the hand she pressed to Drake, the shaman nodded.

Drake’s smile was no less dazzling. “I do.”

“These lifemates,” the shaman said, raising his voice loud enough for all to hear, “are sacred. Nothing but death shall ever part them.” With a bow, he backed away before turning and walking back to the senators.

Hannah came forward, slapping first Drake and then Matt on the back hard enough to make both the men wince. “Told you so! Shit, Indigo... One of these days, maybe you’ll learn to listen to me!”

Lincoln offered his good wishes in his typical fashion. “’Bout fucking time.”

Betinsa didn’t mind. All she could think about was how wonderful it felt to know that her mates loved her and that they’d have the rest of their lives to spend together. Then she realized the one thing that was missing. She owed them the same honesty they’d given her. “I love you, Matt. I love you, too, Drake.”

“So... When we headin’ back to Earth?” Hannah asked.

“I’m not in a hurry to get back on a ship,” Matt said with a frown.

One of the senators came forward. Bowing to Betinsa, he said, “We have a celebration meal planned for you and your mates, Oracle. Then there is a suite prepared for the three of you. Tomorrow, there shall be a gathering of the people to thank you for saving the Charhocks. Will you please follow me?”

Betinsa looked to Drake and Matt, a quirked eyebrow asking if they would agree. It would be a lot to ask of them.

"I'm in," Matt said.

"I would be honored," Drake added.

"Then let's celebrate!" Betinsa held tight to her mates' hands as they followed the senator, Hannah and Linc following close behind.

Chapter 10

Betinsa dropped onto her back on the mattress and stared at the enormous skylight. She could see Katenya shining in the night sky, and she grinned, thinking how fate had smiled on her because of that wonderful moon.

Matt's face was suddenly in front of hers as he blanketed her with his body, holding himself up on his elbows and staring into her eyes. "I thought that would never end."

"Thank you for being so patient," Betinsa said, smiling at her mate. "Joining celebrations can be a bit...lengthy."

The mattress shifted, and Drake crawled toward her, dropping down on his side next to her and Matt and reclining like some Roman senator of ancient Earth. "You've obviously never been to any formal banquets after treaty negotiations. We'd still be there another three hours or more. Just wait until I start dragging you to formal functions with me as my wife."

"You would do that?" she asked. "I assumed it might be best that you not announce our marriage."

"Ah, *lamanna*..." His smile was so warm, so loving. "You know what happens when you assume..."

"People who assume are often mistaken," she replied. "Correct?"

Matt laughed. "It's an old Earth saying. If you break up the word into smaller words..."

It took a moment for Betinsa to understand. Then she frowned at Drake. "So I am an ass?"

"No, no. I was only teasing." He leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Tell me what *lamanna* means, Betinsa. It sounds so beautiful when you say it, and I love saying it to you. What does it mean?"

"It means...my heart."

"And that's what you are, Betinsa. You're my heart."

Tears burned her eyes. "As you are mine, *lamanna*."

"And *saramie*?" Matt asked. "What does that mean?"

She almost sobbed her answer, feeling so much love for her mates, she wasn't sure her heart wouldn't simply burst. "My love. It means my love."

"Then that's what you are, *saramie*. You're my love."

"I love you, Matt. I love you, too, Drake." Only one thing could make this magical night any more wonderful. "Make love to me. Now. Together."

"Anything the little wife wants," Matt said, backing away from her and practically

ripping off the purple velvet robe he'd been given for the celebration. When she saw that all he wore under it was a pair of shorts, she had to laugh. The shorts quickly hit the floor as his erection stood from his body, strong and proud. "Okay. I'm ready! What are you two waiting for?"

Betinsa laughed again as she crawled off the bed, taking off her mother's robe and laying it over one of the chairs in the enormous penthouse suite. She'd never stayed in anyplace half as opulent, but the beauty of her surroundings was lost on her at that moment. All she could think about was being naked with her mates, of the beauty each of them represented to her.

The thin wraparound dress she'd worn under the robe seemed too thick a barrier. Thankfully, Matt came over to help her untie the ribbon holding it together. Her hands were trembling, making it hard for her to unfasten herself. Her desire was suddenly running so hot and so deep, she couldn't seem to calm down.

Drake dropped his robe over hers, looking very handsome in his white tunic and tan pants. But she knew he'd look even better once they were both gone. Matt peeled the dress from her body while she reached for Drake's waistband. If their clothes weren't removed soon, she'd be ripping them off.

She shoved his pants over his hips, and he yanked his tunic over his head. The sight of his cock standing firm made her lick her lips just as Matt took her hand and led it to his own erection.

"Take me to bed," she purred before she stroked Matt and wrapped her fingers around Drake's engorged cock.

"Anything our wife wants," Drake said with a chuckle that turned to a groan when she stroked him from crown to root and then reached between his legs to cup his soft sac.

She continued to caress him, leaning down and swiping her tongue over the head of Matt's cock, licking away the drop of fluid leaking from the slit. She savored his hissing breath as she released them both. Walking over to the table, she picked up a small bottle and said, "Come to me, my husbands. I must anoint you before we love each other as joined spouses."

Dribbling the fragrant ceremonial oil onto her fingertips, she smiled as Matt and Drake stood in front of her, their hard cocks bobbing. So succulent. So virile. So intoxicating.

And now, they were hers forever...

Betinsa smeared the oil over their penises, massaging and caressing every ridge, every vein, until they were both slick. She wiped away the rest of the oil from her hands by running her palms down their chests. Then she sauntered to the bed. With a crook of her finger, she invited them to join her.

Matt tried to take her into his arms. She sidestepped him. "Lie down, *saramie*," she said, nodding at the mattress.

He obeyed with a saucy grin, flopping down on his back, his legs dangling over the side. "I want you, Tinsa."

Crawling over him, she settled herself to straddle his hips, rubbing her pussy against his wet, hot cock. "I want you too, *saramie*."

Without any warning, she grabbed his shaft and lowered herself onto him, letting him fill her completely. His surprised gasp was followed by a salacious growl. Reaching up to her, he tangled his fingers in her hair and tugged to try to draw her closer.

Before she bent forward to give Matt the kiss she knew he wanted, she glanced over her shoulder at Drake. "You know what to do now, *lamanna*." She pressed her lips to Matt's, sliding her tongue into his mouth and moaning when she heard Drake move away. She realized he'd gone back to fetch the bottle of oil when his slippery hands settled on her buttocks.

Running his palms over her backside, he seemed to think he had all the time in the world. She growled her impatience. Didn't he realize how much she needed both of them inside her? Tearing away from Matt's delicious kiss, she tried not to shout. "Now, *lamanna*!"

A long finger slid inside her, quickly joined by a second. "You're sure you're ready?"

The loving concern in his voice made her heart swell with love. "I'm ready. Please, Drake."

The head of his cock pushed against her entrance as he moved forward slowly, easing in, out, and back in until he slid past the ring of tight muscles. A few more gentle thrusts, and he was imbedded inside her.

Her men made love to her, finding a rhythm that seemed to satisfy them all, and three people moved as one—joined in love and respect. All too soon, Betinsa's body screamed for release. She tried to hold back, wanting this moment to last forever, but the feel of two cocks became too much. Pulling her mouth away from Matt's, she panted as the muscles deep inside her core began to clench around her lovers. With a shout of joy, she gave in to the orgasm, marveling at the way her body seemed to want to milk their essences and hold them deep inside her.

Drake's shout of release blended with hers, and his warmth flooded her. Matt thrust a few more times before he sucked in a deep breath and then let out a gasp, his semen bathing her womb.

Sanity was slow in returning, and by the time Betinsa's thoughts cleared, the men had somehow moved her to the middle of the bed and were lying at her sides. Each man faced her, and they seemed to need to keep touching her, putting their hands on her arm or her abdomen. Although sated and content, she knew there were things that needed to be said. Brushing Drake's long hair over his shoulder, she smiled before turning to Matt and running a finger along the strong line of his jaw. "We should talk about your jobs."

"What's to talk about?" Matt said, laying his palm on her stomach and throwing a

heavy thigh over hers. "We go back to work at E.B.I. Drake goes back to being an ambassador."

She frowned. "Our bosses won't like that we've married. They may not wish us to be partners now."

"True. But if they give us a hard time, we file a discrimination claim and make their lives a living hell." His grin was like a balm, soothing away her worries. "We'll work it out. Somehow. Besides, we keep having this much sex, you're gonna be pregnant before we know it." He leaned up to grin at Drake. "Did you think about that?"

Drake shrugged as he tickled a finger down her arm, raising gooseflesh in his wake. "Not like we had birth control when we were marooned. We have a baby, great. I always thought I'd be a great dad. And Betinsa would be a helluva mother."

"A baby... I hadn't considered... So you wouldn't be angry?" She looked at Matt first and then Drake.

"We'll just take things as they come," Matt replied.

"One day at a time, *lamanna*," Drake added.

Turning her head, she frowned at Drake, fearing his job would be the one most at risk because of their marriage. "What will happen to your ambassadorship?"

"I wouldn't be the first ambassador who married a non-human. Perhaps the U.C. officials will view this as a chance to open up better relations between Earth and Fraiqua. Seems like I'd be the perfect guy for the task, being as I've had so much...up close and personal involvement with so many of their rituals." He kissed her cheek and pressed his body closer. "That happens, we can come back and visit your family more often. You do want to live on Earth though, right?"

"I go where you two go. We make our home together. I'm content with Earth, so long as you're both with me."

"Earth it is," Matt said. "And just as soon as we get back, I'm buying you a ring."

"As am I," Drake added. "We want everyone to know you're ours. Two wedding rings should do the trick."

Betinsa smiled, feeling a happiness that reached all the way to her soul. "All someone would have to do is see me with my husbands. Then he would know my heart is spoken for."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Raines makes her home in Indiana. A fan of all genres of fiction, she enjoys blending her love of science fiction with romance in the books she writes exclusively for Siren Publishing. Her favorite movies are *Pride and Prejudice* and *Love, Actually*, and she spends far too much time watching shows like *The Tudors* and *Mad Men*. Elizabeth has been happily married for almost thirty years and tries to express that kind of enduring love in all her stories, hoping to help all her heroes and heroines find their own happily ever afters.

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