

MATING SEASON

"Morgan, I don't think that's a good idea," Alonzo said, cautiously. "Bess wouldn't like it if you tricked her."

For a moment Morgan stared back at the pilot, indecisive. He shook his head. "I guess you're right," he sighed. "We should both want it."

Morgan and Alonzo were sitting together around a small campfire. They'd been away from the main camp for four days already, scouting ahead, searching for a passable route through the mountains. And they had been discussing babies. Or at least, Morgan had. Alonzo was getting pretty tired of hearing him go on and on about how much he'd like to be a father. The false alert, triggered by the powder of the spring flower that Bess inhaled, had put the thought firmly in his mind. Morgan had been talking about it ever since and no matter how often Bess told him she didn't think this was the right time, he wouldn't stop. Now Morgan had suggested that maybe he should secretly lay off the suppressors for a while.

"And I still don't understand why she doesn't want to have a baby," Morgan continued, a slight whine edging into his voice.

"Morgan," Alonzo sighed, "I --" Before he could finish the ground rumbled deep inside in the earth, a tremor rippling through it. Their tent shook briefly, but held. Sparks flew from the fire as the logs shifted. Both men glanced around briefly.

"Okay," Morgan said, "that's it. I'm going to put a stop to this. I'm sick of my bed shaking and keeping me up half the night." And with those words he got up and began to climb the nearby slope.

"Morgan, wait," Alonzo called. But Morgan didn't pay him any attention; instead he continued to clamber up the side of the mountain. With a sigh, Alonzo began to climb after him. The slope was treacherous, loose rocks sliding down when the two men dislodged them. Suddenly Morgan disappeared from sight. When Alonzo scrambled over a ridge, he discovered the opening of a tunnel. Morgan obviously had disappeared into the dark cave.

Alonzo switched on his Luma light and continued to follow his scouting partner inside. They had been feeling the slight tremors that made the ground quiver for several days now. And earlier today they pinpointed the source of the tremors as being *inside* the mountain that they were currently camped on. But they had no clue as to what might be the cause.

Uncharacteristically, it was the bureaucrat that wanted to investigate. Alonzo was a little more reluctant. He hadn't been able to contact the Terrians for a while now and worried that the tremors deep in the earth might have something to do with the aliens' reluctance to talk to him. However, when Morgan set out to climb the mountain and look for a way in, Alonzo couldn't help but follow, curious despite himself.

When his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he realized it wasn't totally dark inside the cave. At the far side of the room a tunnel led off, deeper into the mountain. A soft glow emanated from the tunnel and in its light he noticed it branched off in two directions. He caught a last glimpse of Morgan turning to the left. Alonzo hurriedly followed.

The tremors became stronger as the two men moved deeper into the earth. The air was moist but smelled fresh. It also felt warm inside, very different from the cold, dank caverns they were used to.

Turning another corner a soft noise reached out to them. A low humming, garbled, the way static sounded sometimes over Gear. It seemed to call them. The sound got louder as they moved on. Suddenly brighter light glowed ahead. Alonzo grabbed Morgan's sleeve to slow him down.

"Careful," he admonished. "We don't know what's out there."

They cautiously crept in the direction of the light. Long cords of sunstones glowed softly along the walls of a large cavern and provided the illumination. The two humans found themselves on a high ledge, hidden from view by pillars of rock. At the bottom of the cavern an immense pool was steaming, white vapor drifting up from it. And there were Terrians. Scores of them. The creatures slowly moved around, circling each other, as if they were engaged in some kind of ritual dance.

The humming sound rose up from the cavern floor as the Terrians trilled amongst themselves. Alonzo couldn't make out the words; too many of the creatures were speaking at once. And it seemed, incredibly, as if the Morganite was answering the aliens with a song of its own.

It was a captivating sound, one that struck a chord deep inside Alonzo, an emotion so primitive he couldn't quite grasp it. The singing made him feel happy, alive. He wanted to join the Terrians in their dance, their ritual, whatever it was. He glanced over at Morgan. The bureaucrat's eyes were gleaming brightly, his mouth slack. He stared at the pool, mesmerized.

Alonzo realized they'd walked in on a special event, some kind of ceremony, reminiscent of MoonCross. He didn't know what it was about though. And he didn't think it'd be a

good idea to try and contact the aliens about it, not right now. Alonzo feared the Terrians would not appreciate their secret peeping in.

Fascinated they watched.

Below them the Terrians continued their slow-moving dance. After a while Alonzo discerned a pattern to their movements. Several of the creatures crossed their staffs and entered the pool in pairs, to be totally submerged. The earth rumbled whenever another pair stepped in. The two humans looked on in awe. As more and more Terrians disappeared, the noise of the many singing voices faded until only a few distinguishable ones were heard.

Suddenly Alonzo gasped and he paled visibly in the glow of the sunstones.

"What?" Morgan asked urgently.

"I can make out what they're saying," Alonzo whispered. "Morgan, we have to leave. Before they realize we're here."

"But why?" Morgan wanted to know. He was clearly reluctant to leave the place.

"Morgan, trust me, you don't want to be here."

"Why? What are they doing?" Morgan asked and glanced over at the pool as another pair stepped in and disappeared from sight.

"They are mating," Alonzo said. "This is their mating dance, a procreation ceremony."

Slowly his words sank in and it was Morgan's turn to go pale.

"You..you mean," he stuttered, "they are having se--"

"Yes," Alonzo interrupted. "That's exactly what I mean. At least, their variety of it."

"Bu... but," Morgan stammered, "you said they were all males!" Alonzo nodded grimly. "Then how --" Morgan began.

"I don't know!" the pilot snapped. "But I don't think they'd like us watching them. You wouldn't, would you?"

"No... no..." Morgan whispered, taken aback. He scurried backwards. Silently they turned to leave the inner chamber. It was too late. A single Terrian blocked the exit. He trilled

at them loudly but before Alonzo could make out what he was saying, the creature shot off an energy bolt that hit the two men. Unconscious, they fell to the floor.

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"Alonzo?" A soft feminine voice drifted through the tranquility of the meadow Alonzo lay on. Gaily colored flowers were scattered haphazardly around him. Bees buzzed from one bloom to the next, dispersing pollen that clung to their tiny legs. He could see it all very clearly. His senses were incredibly sharp. He could see millions of different colors among the flowers. And the smells! The blooms smelled so good.

But again the voice called him. He knew that voice. Julia was calling him, forcing him to leave the peaceful place he rested in. He didn't want to leave. But Julia insisted, the urgency clear in her voice. He sighed and allowed himself to drift upward from the meadow, into the sky, higher and higher until at last he floated in the darkness of deep space.

Suddenly, he crashed back to earth and his body felt very heavy after the near weightlessness of the dream. Every muscle hurt. A moan escaped his lips when he forced his eyes open. He stared straight into Julia's concerned face. As soon as she noticed he was awake, obvious relief washed over it.

"Thank God," she muttered. "Lonzo, how are you feeling?"

He tried to reply but his mouth felt so dry, his tongue like leather. She held a cup to his lips and he drank greedily from the cold water.

"What happened?" he managed to ask when his vocal cords were sufficiently lubricated.

"I don't know," Julia replied. "When you and Morgan didn't call in when you were supposed to, we sent out a search party. We found you at the foot of the mountain, near your tent. You were both soaking wet, covered in mud. And both of you had a deep cut on your wrist."

Alonzo lifted his right arm to find his wrist neatly bandaged. He suddenly became aware of a dull throb beneath the bandage. He tried to shake off the fog in his mind and sat up. Too quickly, it turned out, as his head reeled and he had to grab on to Julia for support.

"Woah there, fly-boy," she smiled, "take it easy. Just stay down for a little while longer, while I go check on Morgan." She gently pushed him back on the bed. Confused, he let her. What *had* happened?

Vaguely, he remembered something about dancing near a MoonCross pool. But the memories escaped him and the more he tried to grasp them, the more they eluded him. Terrians. It had something to do with the Terrians.

On the nearby cot Morgan's whimpering distracted him. Morgan was muttering about the Terrians too. Alonzo turned his head to glance over at him as Julia bent over the man.

"Julia, what if they did something to him?" Bess asked. She sat crouched near the cot, holding Morgan's hand.

"They didn't," Julia reassured her. "We don't even know if the Terrians *were* involved. And I've examined him thoroughly. Aside from some short term memory loss and the tear in his wrist, Morgan is the same healthy individual as before."

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Weeks went by and Eden Advance soon forgot about the brief yet mysterious disappearance of Alonzo and Morgan. They passed through the mountains and continued their hike across another vast plain. The two men themselves couldn't remember a thing about their scout.

"Walman, would you mind!" Alonzo yelled one morning. He pushed the cup of steaming coffee away from him so violently that the liquid sloshed over the rim and burned his hand. "Sh--" he swallowed the oath.

"I didn't *ask* for this, did I?" he snapped at the other man, who looked somewhat surprised. They all appreciated a fresh shot of caffeine to get them ready for a new day. And Walman made the best brew; it was up to him to hand out the coffee first thing in the morning.

Alonzo ignored him and turned to Julia. "Can I have another semolina bar? I'm hungry." Julia exchanged a quick glance with Walman, who looked miffed.

"I thought you hated semolina?" she wondered aloud.

"Yeah, and you *always* want coffee in the morning," Walman piped up. "Sheesh." He shook his head in disgust.

Alonzo glared at his two campmates. "Well, now I don't," he snapped. "A man is entitled to change his mind, isn't he?" He got up and stretched to relief the nagging ache he'd experienced lately in his lower back. Too many hours on the ATV, he figured.

Julia followed him as he walked away. "Alonzo, are you okay?" she asked him, concern in her eyes. He couldn't stay mad when she looked at him that way. He shrugged.

"Yeah," he said. "Just been feeling a little under the weather lately. I'm tired of all this hiking. That's all." She appraised him a moment.

"I want you to come back to the med-tent with me," she said, coming to a decision. "You're due for a physical anyway and I want to do a full medical check-up."

"Aw, c'mon," he said. He was beginning to feel really lousy and wanted to get away from the doctor, before she noticed his discomfort. "It's probably just a flu bug or something."

Before Julia could reply, Walman walked by the couple, carrying two more steaming mugs. The strong smell of fresh coffee wafted over them. Alonzo suddenly turned very pale, sweat broke out on his brow as a wave of nausea washed over him.

"I... scuse me," he mumbled and dashed off into the brush. A moment later he relieved himself of the breakfast he just ate. As he tried to get his upset stomach under control again, a determined hand touched his shoulder.

"Alonzo, you're coming with me *right now*," Julia told him. "You're obviously very sick. This is not just the flu." Her blue eyes were hard, telling him further objections would be fruitless.

Alonzo sighed. "Okay," he relented. "I guess you're right." He followed her into the med-tent and allowed her to push him onto her bunk. The downward motion made his nausea return with a vengeance and he swallowed hard.

"Lie down," she instructed and with a soft sigh he rested his head on her pillow. Lying down made him feel a little better as his stomach settled. Julia bent over him, her glove firmly on her left hand. She activated it and moved her hand across his body. A tiny frown creased her brow, deepening as she placed her hand against his neck.

"What?" he asked. "What is it?"

"I don't know," she muttered. She pushed a couple of buttons and placed her fingers on him once more. "No wonder you're feeling sick. Your hormone levels are way off the scale. And --" She halted and squinted closer at the glove's display. "That's odd..." she muttered. Her voice trailed off as her eyes glazed over momentarily. Then she focused on his face again.

"Stay here," she said. She turned and began rummaging in one of the crates that cluttered the med-tent.

"Julia, what is it?" Alonzo asked, trying to follow her movements without having to sit up. He was afraid sitting up would make him sick again.

"Your DNA," she muttered, reading the label on a small box before she discarded it. "It appears to have changed. But I can't be sure... Ah, there it is." She showed him the box. Its label read 'Eden Advance crew - DNA samples'.

"Before we departed from the stations, I took samples of everyone's DNA, remember? That way, I always have some original material to work with when needed."

She opened the box and took out two of the small slides. She turned on the scanner pad, plugged in her diaglove and inserted the first slide into a slot at the scanner's side. An image of helix-shaped strands showed up on the screen.

"That's yours as it is now," she said. With a few clicks, another image showed. "And that's yours as it was before." Alonzo peered at the two images and thought he could make out a few distortions to the first display.

Julia superimposed the second image over the first. Now it was obvious. His current DNA was slightly different from the sample taken decades ago. Julia inserted the other slide into the pad. A third image blinked on the display.

"Whose is that?" Alonzo queried.

"Morgan's," Julia replied absently, studying the images. Then she slid the image of Morgan's DNA across the two already joined on the screen. It fit perfectly, merging with the differences between the two projections of Alonzo's genetic structure. Alonzo drew in a sharp breath in surprise.

Suddenly he remembered the scout, when he and Morgan had gone missing. Memories flooded back, flashing before his eyes. Morgan, the Terrians, the mating dance. The aliens cutting their wrists, he and Morgan bleeding. Then he had nearly drowned in the pool... He gasped, his head spinning with the images. Wide-eyed he looked at Julia. She stared back at him, her expression unreadable.

"What does that mean?" he asked anxiously.

"It means --" Julia said. She was silent for a moment. "It means that you're ... pregnant. And that Morgan is the father..."

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