

## Clans of Europa: Tina

### Chapter 1

Unwanted. Rejected.

Again.

Tina lay sobbing on her hard bed, her face smashed in her thin pillow. Mother Superior's soft voice, delivering the harsh judgment, played in her head over and over.

*"It's obvious your heart's not in the right place...we need the space for someone more dedicated to the calling...you'll do better elsewhere..."*

Sending Tina out into the cold. Proving once more that she'd never be good enough for anyone to keep. The only consolation was that Mother Superior had visited her room after bedtime to deliver the news. Tina had been spared facing the curious stares of her fellow aspirants. There'd been no witnesses to the humiliating dismissal.

*"What did I do wrong? I'll fix it, whatever you want, I'll do better."*

*"It's not a matter of doing, child. It's a matter of unwavering devotion, of an ardor of the soul. You're a good person, a kind and gentle young woman, but it's not enough."*

She was never enough. That's what it always boiled down to. Valentina Novak always came up short.

*Nobody wants me. They always get rid of me. Where will I go?*

She'd have to return to her father's home. She hadn't been adequate there either. Why would he take her in when he'd sent her away?

Tina was nineteen. She had only a basic education, but she wasn't without skills. She could cook and clean and sew. Maybe she'd be able to land a position as a domestic, but what if she couldn't? Such positions were few and far between. References from a nun on an off-world convent wouldn't take her far.

Her father would have to let her come home.

What if he didn't?

The sobs continued, muffled by her pillow, but loud in her head. She was swamped with grief, hurt, and a terrible loneliness that threatened to consume her.

*Why doesn't anyone want me?*

Deep in grief, Tina didn't hear the bedlam going on outside her cell until the screams were loud enough to seep between her harsh wails. Even then, it took her several seconds to recognize something was wrong.

When she did, she lifted from her pillow. Her moans drifted quiet as she realized running feet were beating past her door. Shrieks echoed, mostly wordless, but a few voices rose in desperate supplication.

"Stop!"

"God, save me!"

"Don't! Please, don't!"

Tina's despair gave way to abrupt fear. Her heart sped up, and she stood, shoving her hair off her damp cheeks. What was going on in the dormitory's hall? What was happening to her fellow aspirants? They sounded as if they were under attack.

Nothing ever happened on Europa. The convent was the only habitation on Jupiter's lonely moon. It made no sense danger should exist in such a place.

Yet the screams went on.

Tina stared at her door. It was locked, so no one could come in. She'd be wise to stay put, to avoid whatever was happening out there. But shouldn't she see if she could offer assistance? Failing to rush to the others' aid would be wrong, no matter how terrified she was.

*It's obvious your heart's not in the right place...*

Trembling, Tina stepped close to the door. Girls and women were still screaming beyond it. Pleading voices, some growing distant. They were running away from whatever trouble had arrived.

Tina leaned so her ear was against the door. Moans. Voices high with supplication before abruptly quieting.

Another scream, nearby. Tina jerked, took a step back. Choked sobs sounded beyond the locked barrier, but they soon quieted. Tina touched her door with trembling fingers. Someone needed her help. But what if danger lurked close by? What if it came after her?

*I'll open the door. Take a quick peek. If I see something wrong, I'll order it closed and locked again. I'll be ready to be quick.*

She drew a deep breath. Her pulse was loud in her ears. For an instant, her resolve faltered. She should stay put. Stay safe.

*It's obvious your heart's not in the right place...*

"Door, open."

It beeped obediently. It slid open, letting in the light of the corridor, but less than it should have.

A dark silhouette blocked much of the illumination. A huge, brown-skinned man, all muscle, loomed in Tina's doorway, gripping a frequency disruptor in his hand. He'd apparently been in the act of forcing the lock on her door. His long black hair framed a handsome, but feral face. Purple eyes, their pupils slit like a cat's, gazed down at her.

A Kalquorian.

Tina gaped at him, her mind frozen. For an endless second, they stared at each other, members of two species who'd been at war for the past year.

A white-gowned girl ran down the corridor behind the Kalquorian, screaming for help. Tina's paralysis broke.

"Door, close and—"

The monster moved at the same instant, grabbing her arm and pulling her close. Tina's slight frame was abruptly against a hard, unyielding body, held in place by his arm curling around her, holding her still as he pressed something against her neck.

He was warm, his gaze holding hers, his expression momentarily contrite. For a bizarre instant, Tina thought he intended to comfort her with a hug. Then his face smoothed into detachment, an unfeeling mask.

She screamed, a long and trailing cry.

"I'm sorry, Matara." His voice rumbled through her bones.

The pressure against her neck increased. Tina managed one more shriek before darkness closed in.

The beautiful alien lapsed into unconsciousness, her terror quieted. Nobek Osopa's shoulders sagged in relief.

Yet guilt, a long-accustomed sensation, nibbled at his guts. Along with shame. In the aftermath of the invasion, there was a lot of both. The sweet taste of victory, the warrior's greatest delight, was nowhere to be found.

Only bitterness.

As he stared at the young Earther female he held, her alabaster face rendered paler in contrast to the copper waves framing it, he couldn't count the attack on Europa as a victory. Hardened warriors overcoming a couple hundred women and girls was no triumph, no matter how much the Kalquorian Empire needed them.

He carried her out of her small room and glanced up and down the stark corridor. The females were all sedated now, thank the ancestors. Lying in rows along the walls, they'd have an hour or two of serenity. How terrible it must have been to be wakened in the deepest hours of night by those their world had declared war on. He couldn't imagine the horror.

He set the young woman down so she lay next to the wall, his arms feeling strangely empty without her slight weight. Osopa peered toward the end of the narrow, featureless corridor of what had evidently served as a barracks for the colony of females. His superiors stood there, conversing amongst themselves. Captain Tranis and Weapons Commander Lidon, along with their clanmate Dr. Degorsk, were flushed with triumph. He wondered if they'd be so pleased if they'd had to subdue crying girls pleading for mercy.

*It's my fault for hurrying over as soon as we'd caught General Hamilton. When Commander Lidon said to check on how the second attack group was faring, I didn't think twice. I was in such a rush to look at the females. So many...*

"Subcommander, I have counts for you from the other wing." Nobek Wadas interrupted his thoughts.

Osopa blinked, realizing he'd somehow moved his gaze from the captain and weapons commander to the woman with the copper hair. How long had he been looking at her, musing over the fascinating dots of darker color that scattered across her nose and cheeks? He directed his attention to the security officers gathering around him with their reports.

He noted everything down. One hundred seventy-seven females. Several in the other wing were elderly, beyond childbearing age. Quite a few were underage in the hallway in which he stood. There were still a sizable number in their prime, however. Lifebringers. Real lifebringers, unlike the females of his own kind. Earthers weren't victims of the rampant infertility destroying Kalquor.

His gaze had drifted to the redhead again. He impatiently focused on his work, assigning the security team to take the prisoners to areas where they could be safely held: rooms identified as the chapel, the infirmary, and the dining hall. He also assigned guard duty, giving himself a shift in the dining room.

It would be bedlam when the captives awoke and found themselves prisoners of war. On the moon of Europa, near Earth, they must have thought themselves safe from Kalquor.

*I didn't sign up for terrorizing women and children.* He'd take guard duty anyway and face their fear and hatred. Weapons Subcommander Osopa, second in charge of security on board the spyship captained by Dramok Tranis, was a stalwart fighter. He wouldn't slink to the ship and hide from the shame of taking females prisoner. After a stellar career that had seen him rise in the ranks earlier than most, he refused to take the easy path.

Nor was he the kind of man to act like a lovelorn fool. Why was he staring at that woman again? He was mesmerized by the fiery hair, the milky skin with its scattering of dots, the well-shaped lips that pouted outward, as if she waited for a kiss. The voluminous gown she wore had settled over her, revealing a slight body, its angles somewhat severe in contrast to the curvier prisoners. She might be the type of person who stayed on the move, seldom to lie about in indulgence. Someone like himself.

Enough. He needed to remove himself from her presence. He would go to the other wing and get his thoughts in order. He had a job to do.

Commander Lidon and the captain were moving on to the other wing. Osopa followed his superiors, glancing at the beauty with the hair of fire before she fell out of sight. A strange ache throbbed in his chest.

Captain Tranis spoke to him. "Report."

Osopa did so, providing the information that there were nearly a hundred and twenty females available for clans. Despite his earlier misgivings, excitement filled him.

One hundred twenty to add to the nearly two thousand Earther Mataras already on Kalquor. It wasn't a lot to save a species, but it was a start.

They entered the other wing. Women lined up alongside each wall, two rows of them. So many in a single space. It boggled the mind.

And wrenched at the heart. When they discovered their fate, that they would be taken from the lives they'd known—

*They'll be treated well. Doted on by the three men in their future clans, wanting for nothing for the rest of their lives.* Clans were centered around their life-bearing Mataras. What brought fear now would offer joy later. They'd be fine.

*Keep telling yourself that. Especially when you try to sleep later.*

"Let the seven male-completed clans of our ship choose their Mataras in order of seniority."

Osopa started at Captain Tranis's statement to his clanmates. Fortunately, Commander Lidon and Dr. Degorsk were too intent on their clan leader to notice.

*My clan gets a Matara? A lifebringer to love?* Osopa's thoughts immediately went to the pale redhead.

Commander Lidon wasn't a man to exude delight, but his satisfaction was palpable. "They'll be pleased with that, Captain. What are your orders as far as the rest are concerned?"

Tranis turned to Degorsk. "You're the lead on that, Doctor."

"The protocols from the empire's psychiatric board recommends positive sexual immersion to fight the effects of lifelong repression. Apparently, most Earther women regard themselves as evil, unworthy of passionate regard."

"Really?" Osopa was too shocked to remain quiet. Lifebringers who couldn't recognize their value? How was that possible?

"Really. They've been taught to loathe their own bodies. When appropriate enemy females are captured, we're to awaken their sexual cravings and prove how desirable we find them. They'll return our regard and admiration, or so I've been told."

"That shouldn't be too difficult," Osopa muttered. "They're beautiful." Again, his thoughts flashed to the redhead.

*My clan could select her.*

Pick a mate based on her appearance? Hardly a basis for a lifelong commitment. Especially since he'd met spoiled, gorgeous women on Kalquor. Females were in short supply, but the stunning ones were often courted by the vid-show industry. His Dramok father had been a vid star and had dealt with his share of self-absorbed divas. It was no wonder Osopa's mother had come from the fine art community. She'd been lovely before the shuttle accident had left her scarred, but she'd been modest and undemanding.

Beauties who'd been fawned over until they believed they deserved whatever they desired were usually more trouble than they were worth. Osopa needed to forget the redhead. Someone else. Someone less than breathtaking.

Perhaps the first female he'd seen, the girl who'd raised the alarm that an invasion was in progress. Pretty enough, but a far curvier, indolent-appearing young woman, dressed from top to toe in white. A woman of ice, instead of the slender woman of fire.

She'd been nowhere to be seen in the other corridor. He searched the unconscious faces surrounding him.

Commander Lidon walked with him as his clanmates drifted away, also inspecting the females lying in the hall. "Did you suspect when you woke this morning that we'd be choosing mates?"

"No, Commander. Who could have imagined such an event?"

Captain Tranis called to him. "Where's the girl we saw outside?"

"We haven't found her." Osopa flushed to have considered the ice woman, whom his superior was apparently intent on. "I looked for her myself."

Lidon smirked before moving off to join his clanmates. "My apologies, Osopa, but your clan will have to choose someone else. It seems my Dramok and Imdiko have made their selection."

Osopa tried to deny the image of the fire woman drifting through his mind. It didn't have to be her when there were over a hundred Mataras to select from. There were only seven clans serving on the spyship, so there was an embarrassment of options.

*We're third in rank, thanks to me being weapons subcommander. The captain's clan has chosen. We'll have to wait for Clan Simdow to make their selection.*

Two members of Clan Simdow had assisted with the invasion. Had they noticed the redhead?

He'd sent Nobek Miv and his Imdiko Vodef to transfer Mataras to the various assigned areas. Dramok Simdow, the first officer, was on board the spyship. He wouldn't be able to come down to the moon as long as Captain Tranis was on site. It might be a while before Osopa and his clanmates could make their choice.

Their choice of a female mate.

Realization hit him like a physical blow. A lifebringer for his clan. For him, Subcommander Osopa, at the mere age of twenty-nine, a warrior just beginning to rise in rank. His clanmates had even less status. There were clans on Kalquor with great prestige and money who had yet to claim a Matara. And here he was, with the opportunity most only dreamed of.

Osopa discovered he was moving, returning to the corridor where his fire woman slept. Reaching the other wing, drawing close to discover she was even more beautiful than he'd initially thought.

Could her personality match her physical perfection? Did he dare to hope?

He stood over her, drinking in her sweet features. Those dark lashes against white skin. Slender oval of a face. Long red hair, spread beneath like a fan. Pretty, pouting lips.

Doubt crept in again. Not about the person she might be, but the people he and his clanmates were.

*We're so young. We don't dare refuse such a miraculous opportunity, but shouldn't we?*

Osopa's clan leader Tukui was a Dramok with potential. Smart, capable, charming to a fault—the spyship's navigator was destined to be the leader Osopa would be proud of. The Nobek had no doubt of that whatsoever. Unfortunately, that was yet to occur. In the present, Tukui's impulsive actions sometimes bordered on childishness. He had a lot of growing up to do.

Their third, Imdiko Yorso, still hadn't given up the ego gratification of being flirted with by former rivals. Particularly when it came to that sniveling jerk, Dramok Zevs. Zevs couldn't be

bothered that Yorso had been clanned for over a year now. Osopa wasn't worried his Imdiko would do anything untoward, but it rankled that he enjoyed all that attention from others.

Yorso was as handsome as the fire woman was beautiful, a magnet for attention. Plenty of their crewmates were already jealous of Tukai and Osopa for managing to clan him. How much worse would it be if they added a Matara? Especially someone as stunning as this.

Osopa wasn't without his faults either. There were those who'd accused him of running from duty to family. Of being untouched by the emotions of others.

*Cold. Unfeeling.* His sister's voice dripped derision in his memories.

Osopa gazed into that slumbering face. No, his clan couldn't claim her. They had no business claiming any lifebringer. None at all.

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Dramok Tukai kept his head down at his computer station, trying to look busier than he was. With the spyship locked in orbit, there wasn't a lot for the navigator to do, however. All the action was on the small moon of Europa.

Even so, he performed an instrument calibration he wasn't required to run and checked his unchanging readings. With Captain Tranis on the main holo-vid, his bearded face taking up the middle third of the circular bow of the bridge, Tukai didn't want to attract attention for the wrong reasons. He'd done more than his share of that in his short career on the spyship.

He listened to the conversation between the captain and First Officer Simdow, a Dramok barely older than Tukai. Ever since hearing there were fertile women on the moon, every man on the spyship was eager for information. Like everyone else stuck on the vessel, Tukai wished he had been among those who'd gone to the colony to hunt for General Hamilton. And maybe encounter females.

*Lucky Osopa. My Nobek had better be ready with details when he gets back.* If Tukai's taciturn clanmate dared to show up with no more than generalizations, he'd—

Tukai's head snapped up, cutting his train of thought clean off. Had Captain Tranis just said the three-man clans on board would get their choice of Matara?

The holo-vid was set up so that those on either end could look each other in the eye. The captain's gaze flickered to Tukai, and he visibly winced before saying, "Of course, if a clan doesn't feel they can shoulder the responsibility—the *heavy* responsibility of caring for a Matara—they need not claim one."

Tukai's mind raced along with his heart, disregarding the obvious suggestion that Captain Tranis spoke for his benefit. A Matara? For his young, low-ranked clan?

It took all his self-control to keep a delighted grin from spreading wide. He somehow managed to maintain a composed expression. Of course he could handle caring for a Matara. Even he, as impetuous as he tended to be, was capable of doting and loving and telling a woman how wonderful she was. His fathers had made it seem easy.

*Don't be dumb. Women are just as complicated as men. Compliments and presents aren't the whole of making them happy. Such trivialities weren't enough for Osopa or Yorso. Especially not Yorso.*

True. But Tukai had won them as clanmates despite a few significant bumps in their relationships. Among the many Dramoks they could have joined, they'd chosen him. It proved that though he was impetuous to the point of occasional recklessness, he was a decent guy for the

most part. And improving all the time. Even Captain Tranis had commented on his progress at his last review.

Besides, depending on how the war shook out in the next few weeks, this might be his one and only chance to add a lifebringer to his clan. How could he refuse it?

“Simdow, when you pass the news to the crew, tell prospective clans to consider this opportunity with the greatest gravity. To consider all the changes having a lifebringer will make to every facet of their existence.” Tranis’s gaze again flicked to Tukai as the first officer acknowledged the command.

Tukai was relieved when they signed off. The view of Europa, flanked by floating readouts on either side, took the place of the captain’s face. The Earther transport they’d followed and captured orbited alongside them.

Spoils of war: a well-armed ship, an enemy general and his secrets, and female clanmates. It was no wonder he felt giddy.

Simdow turned from his helm podium to face him. The first officer’s eyes sparkled. “You got all that, Navigator?”

Tukai could finally let a smile stretch his lips. “You’ll get second pick of Mataras, after the captain’s clan.”

“Thanks to Osopa’s rank, you’ll choose third.” Simdow was grinning too. He shook his head in wonderment. “What a mission.”

“It’s a great day to be us.”

“No kidding.” Still wearing a dazed but happy expression, Simdow turned back to his console.

Tukai wondered if Osopa had already located likely candidates for his clan’s Matara. What he wouldn’t do to be there at the colony himself at that moment!

It was against protocol, but Tukai couldn’t help himself. Making sure no one was looking in his direction, he slid his personal com from its pouch on his belt. Tapping quickly, he sent a message to Osopa.

*I realize you have a lot going on, but text-com as soon as possible, my Nobek.*

\* \* \* \*

A year after giving up numerous suitors at his beck and call, Imdiko Yorso remained assured he wouldn’t have traded Tukai and Osopa for any other Dramok or Nobek. Yet he struggled with certain aspects of clanned life. Such as having to wait for others, even if those others were his adored clanmates. It was difficult to be patient, particularly on such a momentous day.

Osopa couldn’t help being absent. He was on Europa, a small moon with a tiny colony. It would have been overlooked by the spyship, except the enemy general it was following had made a surprise stop there. If not for that, the shocking treasure on Europa would have gone undiscovered.

Mataras. Over a hundred of appropriate age. Yorso shivered, enthralled with the news. More excited by the rumors that had followed.

Where the hell was Tukai? His regular shift was over. Had he been called to stay at his station? If so, why hadn’t he informed Yorso?

Yorso perched on the sleeping mat that took up almost all but tight walking space between the walls of the clan’s quarters. He stared at Tukai’s paintings that hung on the gray wall before him, drumming his fingers on his knee. Impatience gnawed at him.

*I should be on the moon. Surely a cultural liaison's place in such a situation would be in the presence of that many Earthers?*

Captain Tranis hadn't agreed. "Stay near your computer library so you can quickly answer questions from myself and Dr. Degorsk. No need for you to come to the colony at this time." They'd kept him busy, fielding nonstop questions about Earther beliefs and norms.

Norms? Yorso snorted at the idea when it came to Earth. The planet was a hodgepodge of traditions and languages and customs. The planet's totalitarian government, as repressive as it was, hadn't managed to mold its diverse people into a homogenous whole. That's what made them fun to study.

All Yorso had learned of humans had been done from afar. That had been enough to set his teeth on edge while Tranis and Degorsk flooded his com with questions. He was a mere shuttle ride from studying the species up close, and he hadn't been allowed to do so.

Now he was stuck waiting for Tukai to show up from his shift, to confirm or refute the rumor that three-man clans were being allowed to pick Mataras from the captives. The gossip had been rampant as he'd made his way from his small office to his quarters, and crewmembers had stopped him every few steps to ask for the truth. His assertion he'd heard no such information had been met with disappointment, smug smiles, and outright disbelief.

Even Dramok Zevs, who never failed to turn on the charm when he saw Yorso, had burst out with, "I thought you knew you could trust me with such information. Clanning has certainly changed you, Yorso," before stalking off.

Captain Tranis had hinted at no such thing. No surprise there. That information would have been given to Yorso's clan leader, Tukai. Osopa also might be unaware if the rumors were true. Yorso was forced to wait and stew.

Fortunately, Tukai was no more than ten minutes later than usual. His handsome features, exuberant by nature, were avid with excitement. His wide-spaced eyes, purple like all Kalquorians, were shining as he walked into their quarters. While his smile came easily, he didn't usually show his teeth the way he did at that moment.

Yorso jumped to his feet. "Is it true we're getting a Matara?"

"Yes!" Tukai grabbed him by the shoulders and would have no doubt swung him around if there'd been room to do so.

The next few moments were filled with shouting and hugging in celebration. They could have been small children given a pet kestarsh. Osopa wouldn't have given into such nonsense, but Osopa wasn't there.

Why shouldn't there be excitement at such incredible fortune? Even if it did make them appear childish?

They calmed enough for Tukai to pull out his personal com. "Our Nobek has been stingy with information. He barely dropped me two lines today, and only to say he had to concentrate on his job."

"Considering his position and the fact he works directly with that hardass Commander Lidon, you can't blame him."

"I know, I know. It's frustrating is all."

"Patience, my dear Dramok," Yorso reminded him, as if he hadn't been on edge only minutes ago.

"He should be off guard duty pretty soon. Com, contact Osopa."

"Osopa here."

"How long until you're available?" Tukai wasn't yelling, but it was close.



“Hello to you too, my Dramok. My relief is here. I’m in the middle of updating everyone on how to handle things in my absence.” Osopa might have been discussing weather conditions, he was so controlled. Typical Osopa, to shield his feelings at such a momentous occasion.

“We’re coming down to the moon to have a look at potential lucky ladies.”

If Osopa had been composed before, he was downright cold now. “Tukui, that’s not the appropriate attitude. The women aren’t happy to see us. We’re invaders, after all.”

Tukui’s smile dimmed only a hair. “Well, no, of course they’re upset. We’ll be sensitive.”

Yorso crowded him to add, “Obviously. Stop being gloomy, my Nobek.”

His tone forbidding, Osopa said, “If you’d spent the last hours dealing with weeping females and screaming children, you wouldn’t be in the best mood either.”

The vision of such cooled Yorso’s high spirits in an instant. Concern replaced elation. “Oh. But now that they know we won’t hurt them, they’re doing better, right?”

“They’re terrified. All the pretty words in the universe aren’t going to change that.”

Yorso gripped Tukui’s arm. “Maybe we should wait to meet them until they understand Kalquorians aren’t so bad?”

Tukui had deflated as well. However, his optimism had always been a stubborn characteristic, and it hadn’t fled despite Osopa’s warning. “They’re surrounded by Nobeks, my Imdiko. Our warriors aren’t the most comforting presence a scared female could ask for. No offense, Osopa.”

“None taken,” the clan protector sighed. “We’re at a loss as to how to soothe their fear of us. That’s without a doubt the realm of Imdikos. Especially given what they expect we’ll do to them.”

Yorso considered his research as his disquiet grew. “They’ve been told some pretty awful things about Kalquorians. Maybe an Earther Matara isn’t such a good fit for us.”

“If not an Earther, then who?” Tukui asked. “Do you think the handful of our own women who are left would look twice at us? By the time we’ve achieved sufficient rank, they’ll all be clanned anyway.”

He had a point. “Who knows how many Earthers will opt for clanning with us once the war is over? The Royal Council has already agreed there’ll be no more forced unions, even if we win.”

Though they had been his words, Yorso’s gut clenched as *forced unions* bounced around his brain. He didn’t like the connotation at all. But many of the Earthers on Kalquor had come willingly. Surely some of those on Europa would see the worth of three men who would conform to a Matara’s every need?

“It’s not the best situation, but we can’t turn down this chance for a female clanmate. It may be the only opportunity we get.” The way Tukui doggedly argued for it made Yorso think he was trying to convince himself as much as them.

Osopa’s tone had a note of defeat. “I can’t dispute that.”

“That settles it. If we find a promising candidate, we can show her what a fantastic future she’s in for.”

Tukui was recovering his confidence, which fed Yorso’s. They were a good clan despite their youth and lack of rank. They had plenty to offer a potential lifemate, their future bright.

Once a person got behind Osopa’s stoic exterior, it was easy to realize he was a caring man as well as an excellent protector. He couldn’t help but be a success; his rise within the fleet ranks was on par with that of Captain Tranis. Tukui could be brash, but he was also a fun, easygoing

clan leader. As for Yorso himself, he was the quintessential Imdiko—willing to fawn over a woman to her heart's content.

“Just be aware, it'll take work to win any of these Mataras.” Osopa continued to caution them. It gave Yorso another momentary pang of indecision.

“Did any in particular catch your fancy, my Nobek?”

Osopa hesitated, an uncommon occurrence for the no-nonsense warrior. Just as Yorso was about to ask if they'd lost the connection, Osopa spoke. “There's one. She's—let me send you the file I requested from Imdiko Vadeb.”

A holo vid popped up in the air over Tukai's com. Yorso gaped at the still photo of a stunning redhead with hazel eyes. The picture was part of a formal record, but Yorso couldn't read the particulars despite his excellent grasp of English. He was too mesmerized by the fresh-faced beauty with the spatter of spots over her nose and cheeks.

*Freckles. They call those freckles.*

“Beautiful,” he murmured.

His voice choked, Tukai stumbled over the name at the top of the record. “Val-eeen-tie-na No-vak?”

“More likely pronounced ‘Valentina Novak’.” Yorso couldn't do more than whisper. He could be the clanmate to this goddess?

“I overheard someone call her Tina.” The gruff quality to Osopa's already deep voice was a subtle but definite sign of her effect on him. “The picture does her no justice. She's far more gorgeous.”

“Is that possible?”

Osopa's chuckle was cut short. He hated to display emotion when on duty. Too unprofessional, both for his breed and his rank. “Examine the rest of the file on your way down. I've included other profiles for you to view as well, so it doesn't have to be her. The captain's and first officer's clans have chosen their Mataras, so we have our pick.”

Tukai drew a ragged breath as he paged through the file, scanning the information. “We'll check, but this Tina—she's spectacular. There's quite a long list of commendations for her caring and helpful behavior since coming to the moon too. I can't imagine we'll find a better candidate for our clan.”

“Catch the next shuttle. I'm impatient to get away from all these upset faces staring at me.”

“We're on our way.” Tukai clicked the com off and started for the door. Typical Tukai, ready to run to the next project without a second thought.

“Tukai?”

The Dramok halted and turned. He blinked in surprise that Yorso hadn't followed. “Yes?”

“Earther culture...well, I doubt the women are upset just because we invaded. They've been told we want to make them sex slaves. They're expecting the worst.” *Forced unions.* Yorso's stomach churned.

For a moment, the Dramok's brows drew together, and he wavered with indecision. Worry pinched his handsome features.

It cleared. “She'll figure out quickly that we'd never harm a Matara, my Imdiko. The sooner we show Tina—if she's who we decide on—that she's the center of the clan, she'll adore us. Especially you, with your ridiculously pretty self. I'm still having to warn Zevs off, the stubborn jerk.”

*He's not thinking this through. He's being impetuous again.* On the heels of that came the reminder that this could be their only chance to have a lifebringer.

And Tina was beautiful. How could they say no?

“We’re a good clan. We can make a Matara happy.” Yorso spoke again, this time with conviction. “We *will* make her happy.”

Tukui grinned and slung his arm around Yorso’s shoulders. “Yes, we will.”

They hurried to the shuttle bay.