



Stromm (Rakui Warriors #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I thought I lost him...and I still might.

When Stromm was injured by mercenaries, I nursed him back from the brink of death, refusing to leave his side. I fed him, bathed him, and whispered encouragement when he wanted to give up.

In return, he gave me everything. His trust. His smiles. His heart.

Once he recovers, we're going to become mates and start a family. Except something is trying to tear us apart.

There must be a way to fix what's broken between us. Stromm and I have something special, a relationship worth fighting for. And I won't let anything stand in the way of our happiness.

Because we're stronger together, and danger is coming to our primitive planet. We won't go down without a fight.

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EMILY

I'm lying on top of the furs next to Stromm in his med hut with my legs crossed and arms resting lightly on my abdomen. Rain patters on the thatched roof, and he's settled in. I should head to bed, but it's getting harder to leave him at night.

Not only is my TEASE driving me wild with need, but my overall patience is running thin. I'm ready to take things with the wounded Rakui to the next level. Actually, I'm ready to take things with Stromm to the highest level possible on this alien planet.

I want to become his mate, as the Rakuis say, forevermore.

He takes my left hand and turns it over, exposing my wrist. "The box is blinking again."

The box , as he calls it, is my TEASE, which is short for Terran Enhancement for Adaptation and Survival beyond Earth. It's a microcomputer wrist implant that communicates with the symbiont that Earth Gov injected into my body.

All the college students chosen for A Year of Interstellar Education received a TEASE implant and a symbiont, supposedly to enhance survival and adaptability on alien planets. But the educational program—and Earth Gov's reasons for giving us the implants—were lies.

I turn on my side to face Stromm, and smile. "It only blinks when I'm near you." As

far as I know, mine is the only TEASE message that blinks at all.

He turns on his side, too, the intensity in his dark eyes drawing me in even as his grimace tells me the movement hurts. The external wounds to his abdomen are healed, but not the internal ones.

His shoulder-length black hair is tied back, and his golden, scaled skin shimmers in the dimly lit hut. He's lost weight and muscle mass, but he's still huge compared to me.

"It blinks when your need is greatest," Stromm says, tucking a strand of hair that escaped from my braid back behind my ear. The tender gesture only increases that need, causing me to flush.

"That's just SPECIES SURVIVAL MODE messing with my body's hormones," I remind him. "It'll stop blinking soon."

Once I'm alone and can take care of business.

Earth Gov didn't tell me and my friends about SPECIES SURVIVAL MODE before it was initiated. But we figured out it's designed to rev up our libidos and encourage reproduction with the Rakuis. Sometimes that encouragement involves messing with ovulation to ensure conception, which is as scary and messed up as it sounds. We still don't know why they want us to reproduce with the barbarians, though, or what they have planned once our babies are born.

Stromm rests his hand on the curve of my hip, his thumb tracing little circles. "Your delicious mating scent grows stronger with each passing day. Let me slake your need, Em-uh-lee."

His sexy grin is flirtatious, even though his offer is sincere. And, he really can smell

my TEASE-induced arousal. Super-humanoid smelling ability is a Rakui thing.

The flush spreads from my cheeks down to my chest. We've been having this conversation every night for the last week. And part of me wants to push my leggings down so he can slake away. The part my TEASE is sending into overdrive.

But I don't want our first intimate encounter to be in the small, utilitarian med hut where Stromm has spent the last couple of months recovering from the nearly fatal wounds he sustained while protecting me and my friends from mercenaries. Even though the hut is cozy, and the bed is big enough for two, there's no real privacy here.

By design, the med huts are close together and form a tight arc around Yola's larger hut, which serves as the healer's home and her apothecary. The makeshift hospital is on the edge of the village, close to the North Caves, which are guarded 24/7 because the tribe's Elders, Morkon and Cyana, live there. If Yola calls out for assistance, the guard is close enough to hear her and send help. Calling out during sexy times might bring help, too, which is a problem.

Lack of privacy isn't the only reason to keep my pants on. Stromm and I haven't even kissed yet. Shouldn't we start there before working our way up to other things, like slaking various needs?

"We should wait." I must sound breathy and unconvincing because Stromm slides his hand slowly down my hip and between my thighs, giving me time to stop him if I want. Instead, I push against his fingers with a soft moan.

"Yola will be back to see me when the suns rise," he whispers. "I will ask how much longer it will be before I can return to my duties within the tribe...and claim a mate."

"Did you have someone in mind to claim as your mate?" This time I'm the one who's flirting.

He nods, holding my gaze as his fingers bring me close to orgasm even though I'm fully clothed. I should stop him or pull away.

We've talked about becoming mates in roundabout ways a dozen times or more. Just like I want to wait until he's healed and we have privacy before getting more physical, he wants to wait until he's strong enough to hunt for the tribe and protect his mate before claiming her.

Before claiming me .

Shattering against his hand, I bite my lip to keep from crying out while riding the gentle waves of pleasure. So much for waiting, or kissing first. That he would do this for me without expecting anything in return makes me want him even more.

"Mhm...that was..."

"Only the beginning." He brings his fingers to his face and inhales. Deeply.

Damn.

I need to get out of here before doing something rash. Like setting Stromm's recovery back six weeks by jumping him. "I should go and let you get some sleep."

"You could stay," he counters.

Rolling away, I get to my knees. "If I stay, we might do something we're not ready for, something we'd regret."

"Never regret," he says, shaking his head.

I hold up my wrist and show him my TEASE. "It stopped blinking." The SPECIES

SURVIVAL MODE message is back to steady red.

“And now I know how to make the blinking go away.” Stromm’s satisfied grin makes me laugh.

“I’ll see you in the morning, after Yola is gone.” I get to my feet and head toward the hut entrance. “With breakfast.”

Outside, it’s still raining. But even wet weather can’t wipe the smile from my face. Using a solar-powered flashlight, I walk the short distance to the North Caves, which are also where the unmated Terrans sleep.

I hear the screech of an animal in the distance and immediately freeze. Then, my hand closes around the Rakuium pendant at my chest, and I start walking again.

The familiar weight of the pendant’s stone is reassuring. It almost feels alive in my palm, responding to my touch with a warming sensation. The rare and ancient element from the Rakui homeworld is a powerful energy source with an almost sentient ability to bond with and protect its chosen wearer.

When my friends and I first crashed on this dangerous, primitive planet, I was always on edge. Even with a laser gun strapped around my waist, I was afraid of everything. Now, I know the pendant will keep me safe, just like Jillian’s Rakuium ring kept her safe.

“Hey Chegg,” I say in greeting to the Rakui warrior guarding the entrance to the North Caves.

“Hello, Em-uh-lee. You are returning late. Is Stromm well?”

“Oh, he’s fine,” I reply, grateful that even with two lanterns lighting the entrance, he

probably can't see me blush. "We just lost track of time."

He grins like I've told him we were banging. "That can happen when Rakui males and Terran females spend time alone together."

Everyone knows Stromm and I are a couple. Or, we will be once he's recovered. That doesn't mean we're having sex. Most of the time we just talk...and enjoy each other's company.

I dim the flashlight as I enter the Terran sleeping cave and make my way over to my bedroll. After stripping off my booties and wet clothes so they can dry overnight, I crawl under the warm, heavy fur.

"It's late, Em," my best friend, Reece, mumbles. She's still half-asleep. "How was your night with Stromm?"

"Really good," I whisper. "He's almost well enough for—"

"Fucking?" Reece asks.

"No," I hiss. "To make me his mate. "

"Oh, right." She props herself on her elbow and looks at me. "Is your TEASE blinking again?"

I bite back a smile. "Um, not tonight."

"You dirty, dirty girl." Reece laughs, and I shush her. I don't want to wake the others.

"Yola's going to see him in the morning. I think he might be well enough to go back to his own hut."

“Are you sure this is what you want, Em, and not something SPECIES SURVIVAL MODE is making you think you want? Settling down, popping out barbarian babies, and giving up on the possibility of going home is a big commitment.”

“I’m sure.” Reece doesn’t understand how I feel about Stromm, since she hasn’t hit it off with one of the Rakui males yet. But I could never go back to Earth, even if I hadn’t fallen head over heels for him. “How can you even consider going home now that we know Earth Gov is using us as test subjects in their creepy, reproductive science experiment without our consent?”

“You’re right. Going back to Earth is probably out.” Reece flops back down on her bedroll. “But there are plenty of other planets with breathable air besides this one. Planets with indoor plumbing, food replicators, and spaceports.”

“I don’t mind living on UD-237, even if it is primitive,” I say. “There are worse things than a simple life...raising a family with a man you love.”

“I suppose,” Reece mumbles, already on the verge of falling back to sleep.

But I stay awake for a long time, dreaming about a life with Stromm. Nothing will rob us of our happy ending. Not Reece and her doubts...not even Earth Gov and its secret plans.

STROMM

I awaken before the first light of dawn, eager for this day to begin. While staring into the darkness, the faint smells of herbs and damp earth fill my lungs, mingling with the lingering musk of my own body heat. A cool draft sneaks through the woven slats of the hut, brushing against my bare chest.

Curling my fingers into the furs that cover me, I test the strength of my grip. My claws dig in slightly, catching in the thick, coarse fibers. The muscle tone I have lost is slowly returning, yet an ache lingers beneath the scars on my belly. It is more annoying than worrisome, a deep, dull throb that flares when I take a sharp breath or move too quickly.

What kind of warrior would I be if I could not power through a bit of pain?

I get up from bed to wash. The small basin of water sits where it always does, the surface still and dark. I splash my face, the chill shocking my senses awake, then use a damp cloth to wipe away the sheen of sweat clinging to my skin. I don a fresh loincloth, tying the leather cord with practiced fingers. Then, I sit and wait.

Yola will come soon. She will confirm what I already know in my heart—that I am fit to hunt again, fit to fight again, fit to be Rakui again. So, I can claim Em-uh-lee as my mate.

It is not long before I hear the soft shuffle of footsteps outside. The dim glow of a

torch flickers beyond the entrance flap before Yola steps inside. The scent of medicinal herbs clings to her, familiar and comforting, the expression on her face calm and kind. Always kind.

“You rise early, Stromm,” she observes with a smile, placing the torch in the holder.

“I am ready to return to duty,” I say, hiding a grimace as I stand. My core tightens instinctively against the strain, a stab of discomfort just beneath my ribs.

She watches me, seeing more than I would prefer. “Is that your decision to make?”

A flicker of unease skims along my spine, yet I push it aside. “The wounds have closed, and my strength is returning.”

“I can see that.” She exhales fully through her mouth, the healer’s long-suffering sigh. It is something I have come to know well during this recovery. The sound is one of patience, but also quiet resolve. “Lie down and let me examine you.”

Though frustration grips me, I obey, lowering myself onto the furs.

Yola kneels beside me, her presence steady, grounding. Her hands, warm and sure, press firmly against the pale, raised scars on my abdomen, then move beyond their borders. I force myself to remain still, breathing through my nose, even as her skilled fingers find the deep ache inside.

“You are doing well enough to return to your own hut now,” she finally says.

Satisfaction hums through my chest, steady and certain. “When can I get back to hunting and guard duty? I am anxious to return—”

“Stromm,” she interrupts, her serious tone stopping me cold. “Your injuries were

deep.” Her dark eyes meet mine, steady and unreadable. “Though your flesh has healed on the outside, the damage inside lingers. I suspect it will be lasting.”

I dismiss her concern. “My legs can carry me to a hunt, and I can easily wield a blade against a rogue. I do not see the problem.”

Yola’s lips press into a thin line. “Another wound here,” she pauses to press on the scars again, slow and deliberate, “and you may perish.”

Anger flares inside me, hot and sharp where her hand still rests. “A warrior faces that possibility each time he goes into battle.”

“Your life is not the only one at stake.” Yola sits back on her heels, hands resting calmly in her lap. “A wounded warrior puts his brothers at risk. I advise against future hunting or serving on guard duty, and will let the Elders know my findings.”

Her words sound hollow and wrong. “This is not possible.” I get to my feet, hands clenched into fists. “If I cannot hunt—cannot fight—I am nothing.”

Yola looks up at me, the determination in her eyes unwavering. “You are still Rakui.”

My breath comes faster, heart pounding in my chest. “In name only,” I growl.

Yola does not flinch at my anger. She has seen worse from warriors who have lost more. “Is that how you see Sartok? As a Rakui in name only? He can no longer hunt or fight.”

“Sartok is different,” I argue, my voice edged with frustration. “He smokes the meat and dries the fruit, and helps Rykana prepare meals. His contributions are important to the tribe.”

“Yes, they are.” Yola rises, slow and patient, as if giving me time to process her words. She places a hand on my arm. Her touch is light, yet it might as well be a brand. I yank my arm away.

“You will find new ways to contribute as well,” she says, unshaken. “Ones that are just as important as Sartok’s. The Elders can guide you.”

She does not understand.

I do not want new duties within the tribe. I want the life I had before. The one that makes me worthy of having a mate.

Yola’s eyes soften, yet her voice does not waver. “Anger will not change this outcome, Stromm. Acceptance is what will move you in a new direction.”

Then she is gone, taking the torch and slipping out of the hut before I can demand different findings.

I sit on the furs after she has gone, the rhythm of my breaths ragged as her words echo in my mind.

I advise against future hunting or serving on guard duty.

Exhaling sharply, I drag a hand over my face. What does she expect me to do? I am a warrior . Fighting is not just a duty—it is my purpose . This purpose cannot be fulfilled by a male who is more fragile than a young kit.

Claw-tipped fingers curl into my palms, and I welcome the slight prick of pain. I had a plan . To become stronger and prove my worth...then ask Em-uh-lee to be mine.

How can I claim a mate when I cannot even protect her?

Em-ul-ee deserves a warrior, a male strong enough to stand between her and danger. Once she knows the truth of Yola's findings, she will see me for what I have become, what I am now. Unworthy. This truth swallows me in darkness even as the light of dawn illuminates the thatch hut, and a hollow ache settles in my chest.

After pulling on my boots, I push to my feet. I will not sit in this hut any longer. The healer has declared me well enough to leave. That is what I will do

Despair settles in as I gather my few belongings—a short-blade knife, loincloths that need washing, a pouch of dried rations I have no appetite for. Leaving the med hut should be a moment of triumph shared with my future mate.

“Knock, knock,” Em-uh-lee's voice, cheerful and bright, calls out as she steps inside the hut, carrying a basket in one hand.

Inviting scents of herbal tea, grilled gryzen , and tortuas with ryn cream fill the hut. Warmth flickers to life somewhere deep inside, yet I snuff it out before it takes hold.

Normally, I would greet her smile with one of my own, and speak words of welcome. Yet I stand silent, my expression grim.

Em-uh-lee blinks, confusion creeping over her face. And I watch as her smile falters.

“What's wrong, Stromm?”

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EMILY

Stromm is up and dressed—if you can call wearing boots and a loincloth dressed—and his belongings are stacked neatly on the bed. The sight of them should fill me with relief because it looks like he’s healed enough to leave the med hut.

But the look on his face makes me nervous.

His jaw is set, his dark eyes unreadable as they lock onto mine. The tension in his shoulders is coiled so tight, I wonder if he’ll snap. He doesn’t answer when I ask what’s wrong.

“I brought breakfast,” I say, filling the uneasy silence.

Normally, that would make him smile. He loves food—especially Rykana’s breakfast crepes with ryn cream. But he doesn’t move toward me and the food.

“I am not hungry this day.”

I frown. “Why not?”

“Yola came this morning,” he says, as if that explains why he looks like someone died.

Her visit was expected; we talked about it last night. “She said you’re healed enough

to leave, right?”

He nods, but the motion feels... wrong . Stiff. Hollow.

Something inside me tightens. “What else did she say?”

Stromm looks defeated. Like he hasn’t regained his freedom—he’s lost something instead. “She says I can no longer hunt. No longer fight.”

I blink. The gravity of his words doesn’t sink in at first. They feel like a problem with an obvious solution. “But you’re getting better. Stronger, too. You just need more time—”

“I will never be whole.” His voice cuts off mine, sharp and raw. His hand hovers over the scars on his scaled abdomen, just above his loincloth. “Another injury here, and I will perish.”

The finality in his tone makes my stomach churn. “There must be something more Yola can do.”

“There is nothing,” he says, and when he looks at me again, his eyes look empty. Like he’s already slipped into the void he’s imagining for himself. “I am nothing.”

“That’s not true.” I feel his loss of identity like it’s mine. The ache of it burrows into my chest, making it hard to breathe. “This doesn’t change anything between us.”

“It changes everything ,” he counters.

I know what’s coming before he even says the words.

“I cannot protect you, Em-uh-lee, or provide for you.” His voice is steady,

unshakable. Final. “I cannot claim you as my mate.”

I shake my head. “Don’t say that.”

But I already feel it. The bond between us, the unspoken certainty that we were meant to be something more, is unraveling as we speak.

His gaze softens, but it doesn’t bring comfort. There’s something else there. Resignation. Like he’s already decided .

Panic surges through me, fingers clutching at the pendant around my neck, an automatic gesture.

Rakuium protects.

“Keeping me safe isn’t a problem, Stromm,” I whisper. “I have the Rakuium to protect me.”

The moment the words leave my lips, I know I’ve made a mistake.

His body locks up—jaw clenching, shoulders stiffening, fists clenching. His breathing changes, shallowing out. Then, without a word, he grabs his things from the bed and storms past me, out of the hut.

Way to go, Emily.

“Wait—Stromm,” I call out, dropping the basket and running after him “Let’s talk about this!”

He stops so suddenly that I nearly crash into him. When he pivots toward me, his dark eyes are filled with anger.

“What is there to talk about?” His voice sounds harsh. “I am no longer a worthy male or desirable mate.”

I reach for his hand, clasping his warm, calloused palm. “Your worth isn’t measured by how many kerboo you kill to feed the tribe or your ability to fight. Who you are inside is what truly matters.”

His breathing slows, and his gaze softens. For one brief second, I think I’m getting through to him. Then, abruptly, he pulls away. Like my touch burns him.

“I no longer need a caretaker, Em-uh-lee.” His voice is quieter now, colder. “Your job here is done.”

The words cut deep, straight to the bone. “Taking care of you hasn’t been a job to me.” My voice trembles. “I like spending time with you.”

He steps back, and I feel the distance settle between us like a canyon opening at my feet.

“Give us a chance, Stromm. We can work things out.”

His throat bobs as he swallows hard. “There can never be an us now,” he says, his voice steady. “I must find a new way forward. Alone.”

“You don’t have to do that alone.” I blink back the tears threatening to spill. “Let me help you.”

The silence that follows is unbearable. The weight of it presses down on me like an invisible force.

“You have done enough already.” The words sound firm. Final.

“But I want to help,” I insist, my voice cracking under the strain of his rejection. “I want to...”

Be your mate.

The words lock in my throat. Fear keeps them trapped there.

Stromm exhales slowly, like he’s steadying himself for what he’s about to say next. His voice, when it comes, is flat. Emotionless. “Your help only reminds me of all I have lost. Of what I will never regain.”

He looks past me, as if I’m already gone. Like I’m nothing but a memory...a ghost of something he once wanted.

The finality of it shatters something inside me. I stumble back, my vision blurring as tears break free. “I’m sorry I’ve become such a burden.”

“Em-uh-lee—” His voice catches, rough and unsteady, like he wants to say more.

I wait.

Please, say something. Tell me I’m wrong.

But the words don’t come.

Tears streak down my face as the weight of his silence crushes me.

Then, I turn, and walk away.

My feet shuffle forward blindly, seemingly without direction, my mind numb. I walk along the village perimeter, unseeing, somehow managing to avoid all people, Terran

and Rakui.

The suns rise higher in the sky, but I barely notice. The warmth feels as distant and disconnected as my soul.

Eventually, I stop, and some instinct prompts me to lift my head and look around. I'm startled to realize I'm at the South Caves.

Gia's workshop is here now. But it's also the place where Stromm nearly died protecting me and the others from the mercenaries. I remember that moment like it was yesterday.

As soon as I laid eyes on his injured form, bloody and seemingly lifeless, I felt an inexplicable pull toward him. Even then, I knew we belonged together.

A ragged sob escapes as my knees buckle, and I sink onto the rocky ground...mourning what might have been and allowing my tears to freely flow.

I feel a little better when I'm all cried out, less hopeless and more hopeful. I use the hem of my shirt to dry the remaining tears, then stand and brush the dirt off my leggings.

Removing the Rakuium pendant, I coil the leather rope tightly around my fingers and let it dangle from a clenched fist. The black stone is a symbol of protection I no longer trust.

Stromm and I were fine until the piece of Rakuium chose me during Jade's screwed up version of The Bachelor . It was supposed to keep me safe on this dangerous planet. But the Rakuium seems to be pushing Stromm away, like it's jealous of him or something.

It's like the stone doesn't want us to be together.

The possibility sends a sharp pain through my chest, and resolve washes over me. I refuse to let this sentient rock dictate the course of my heart, of my future.

Stromm and I have something special, a relationship worth fighting for. And I won't let anyone or anything stand in the way of our happiness.

I know what I need to do.

STROMM

Sending Em-uh-lee away was the hardest thing I have ever done.

Harder than losing my family to the sickness that swept through our people, taking too many Rakui lives. Harder than helping to bury those who perished. Harder than waking each day after this great loss, knowing the tribe had been forever changed.

This pain is different. It is something I chose . For both of us.

My steps are heavy as I steer clear of the community fire—and the Rakuis and Terrans gathered there—on the way back to my hut. The scents of wood smoke and cooking food, and the sounds of rousing conversations, do not call to me this day. I am in no mood to face those who will see my release from Yola's care as something to celebrate.

At my hut, I push the entrance flap aside to enter. The air inside is cool and stale, smelling of dampness from the rainy season and old sweat from when I last slept here.

The space used to feel spacious and inviting, with plenty of room for a mate and, gods willing, a newborn kit. It feels different now, though. Too large and empty.

I press a hand against the center of my chest, where an ache that has nothing to do with bodily wounds—and everything to do with the beats of a broken heart—sits

heavy.

Yola was right. I need new ways to contribute. While I cannot hunt or fight, I can still serve the tribe. The Elders will know what I am meant to do now.

With renewed focus, I put my belongings down and step back into the daylight, my steps lighter as I head toward the North Caves. The path is familiar, yet it feels like I am walking it for the first time...as someone I do not recognize.

Xvar stands guard, blocking the entrance by leaning lazily on his spear. Like me and the other Rakui males, he is bare-chested and broad-shouldered, and his golden scales gleam in the morning light. He sees me coming and grins, flashing his sharp teeth.

“Stromm! You look well, my brother.” His voice is too loud, too cheerful for the weight pressing down on my chest. “Your Terran female must be a skilled caretaker.”

I bristle at his words, my jaw clenching.

He notices, his black eyes flickering with mischief. “What has put you in such a mood? Did you and your mate have an argument?”

A growl rumbles deep in my throat. “Em-uh-lee is not my mate.” Saying this out loud tastes bitter.

Xvar’s expression turns curious, thoughtful. “A shame,” he muses, rubbing a clawed thumb along the shaft of his spear. “She is a pleasing female. Soft and caring. If she does not belong to you, perhaps I will claim her for myself.”

A hot bolt of fury ignites in my gut and, before I can stop myself, I step toward Xvar with shoulders squared and muscles coiled for a fight.

I advise against future hunting or serving on guard duty.

Hearing Yola's word in my head makes me growl in frustration. "Stay away from Em-ul-ee."

Xvar raises his hands in surrender and grins. "That is what I thought. I meant no insult. Even if the Terran female is not your mate this day, Stromm, I suspect she will be yours one day soon."

I know his nature is playful and teasing, and his words are said with good intentions. Yet my hands still clench into fists.

Xvar huffs a laugh then steps aside to let me enter the caves. "Go on. Morkon and Cyana are accepting visitors in their main living quarters."

I force my muscles to relax, my fists to unclench, although the urge to fight still lingers as I move past him.

The North Caves are cool and quiet, the steady glow of Rakuium-powered sconces lighting my way to the Elders' quarters. The spaces they occupy are simple rather than lavish, the entrance guard providing the only hint of their standing within the tribe.

Unlike the ceremonial enclave, the Elders' living quarters are an informal space for conversations and counsel. Morkon sits on a wooden bench with a hand-carved back support, his broad frame relaxed yet commanding, while Cyana lounges in a chair made from a hollowed log. She is wrapped in a worn fur, her kind eyes conveying what she already knows: I am no longer whole.

"Come, Stromm. Sit." She motions me forward.

When I am settled, Morkon speaks. “Yola has told us of her findings, and we agree. You will find a new place within the tribe.”

I force a breath through my nose. “I accept this.”

Cyana tilts her head, watching me, waiting. When I offer nothing more, she prompts, “And yet, this acceptance does not bring you peace.”

“How can it?” Impotent anger surges to the surface, shattering my composure. “I am no longer a worthy male.”

“Is this how you truly feel?” Cyana asks.

When I nod, she confers quietly with Morkon, who studies me for a long moment before speaking.

“You seek purpose.”

It is not a question, yet I straighten my spine and answer in the affirmative. “Yes.”

“You will find it with Sartok,” Morkon says dismissively.

The words hit me like a blow to the belly that could claim my life. I came here for wisdom. A path forward. And they send me to Sartok ?

“I cannot have a mate,” I growl, staying seated despite the urge to stand and aggressively confront them. “And now, I am no longer worthy of the Elders’ guidance?”

Cyana does not flinch at my outburst, which borders on disrespectful. She only watches me, calm and unshaken. “That is our guidance, Stromm. Only through doing

will you find a new place within the tribe. Sartok can provide the help you need because he has lived this same experience.”

Rising, I nod in acceptance yet say nothing more. Because what else is there to say? The Elders have washed their hands of me.

I am Sartok’s problem now.

STROMM

The fire Sartok tends crackles and pops, sending plumes of fragrant smoke curling into the air. Strips of kerboo and chunks of fish hang over the fire, far enough from the flame to avoid charring, yet close enough to the smokey heat to become cured. The preserved meat will sustain the tribe later in the rainy season, when hunting becomes increasingly lean.

Sartok is sitting on a short stool with his left leg jutting outward at an odd angle, a life-altering injury from a great white cooba attack. He uses practiced hands to manage his tasks, glancing up when I approach and greeting me with a smile. “Welcome, Stromm. Yola said you might be coming my way this day.”

I pull up another stool and sit beside him, still bristling from my conversation with the Elders. “You were expecting me?”

“Of course.” Sartok leans back, wiping his hands on a piece of soft hide. “I understand what you are going through, since I was a hunter once myself. A warrior, too, yet I have always been more of a peacekeeper than a fighter.”

“How can you truly understand? You were already mated when you were injured,” I point out. “I am alone and no longer a desirable mate.”

“Hmm. I thought your belly was the problem.” Sartok seems confused by my declaration. “Was your cock permanently damaged by the laser weapon as well?”

A muscle ticks in my jaw, and I scowl. I do not appreciate his silly question.

“My cock is just fine.” I remember how it stiffened when I slipped my fingers between Em-uh-lee’s thighs, and how I had to relieve the ache with my fist once she left. “No, it is better than fine. It is in full working order.”

He chuckles, but there is no cruelty in it. “Then you are still a desirable mate.”

This conversation is infuriating...yet I find myself curious. “What good is a working cock if I cannot protect my female...provide for her?”

“Pfft. Females have other sources of protection.” Sartok waves a hand dismissively. “You can still provide a mate with the one thing she would not want to get elsewhere.”

His vague answer irritates me. “And what is that?” I ask, pounding my fists childishly on my knees.

“Pleasure under the furs,” Sartok says, laughing, as if the answer was obvious. “Oh, and putting a kit in her belly.”

“Those are two things,” I say through clenched teeth, seething from anger at his disregard for my concerns.

“You are right,” he says, winking at me before turning to add more wet wood to the smokey fire.

“How does this help me find a new place within the tribe?”

“It does not,” he says, shrugging. “Yet it does help your confidence problem with the female Terran, Em-ul-ee. If you keep her satisfied under the furs, everything else will

fall into place.”

I sigh, weary of this discussion, and no closer to knowing how to move forward. “How do you continue on, Sartok? Unable to hunt or fight, and unable to teach these things to Rytok?”

His lighthearted mood vanishes in an instant. “Do you think it does not pain me to see other Rakuis mentoring my young son in the ways of becoming a warrior?” His raised voice is unlike him, and I am stunned into silence.

Dropping a hand to his mangled leg, Sartok continues. “This limb may be useless, yet I am not. I can keep Rykana warm at night, and teach Rytok to face adversity without fear. To build a strong mind as well as a body. Quit feeling sorry for yourself, Stromm. Anger and self-pity are the only things making you undesirable.”

Could he be right? Is my attitude keeping me from the one thing I want more than my ability to fight again?

Pondering this, I say nothing, my jaw tight.

Sartok jerks his chin toward the racks of drying fruit behind him. “If you need something to do, you could help me with smoking and drying. Rykana works too hard, and another pair of hands would be welcome.”

The idea settles over me like a dark cloud. I could help Sartok. The work is important since it sustains the tribe. Yet, it does not call to me.

Sartok watches me closely, reading my hesitation. “Not appealing?”

I shake my head. “No.”

His grin is back. “Good. I enjoy the quiet when Rykana is off cooking.”

Despite myself, my lips twitch. The first hint of mirth I have felt since Yola’s visit. “What about fishing?” I suggest.

Sartok nods, shifting his weight to stir the fire. “Not much skill needed, since nets are used. Takes plenty of patience, though. Brings in food without putting your guts at risk. It could work.”

I roll the thought around in my mind. It would be a way to contribute, to prove myself useful again.

“Hmm,” I grunt. “I will consider it.”

Sartok slaps a hand on my shoulder, his grip firm. “Good. Now stop brooding, and think about what I said. There are more enjoyable ways of providing for your mate than spearing animals or rogues.”

I snort, shaking my head. “I will think about that after I find a new role within the tribe. Only then will I feel worthy of her.”

“Do not wait too long,” Sartok cautions. “There are other males in the tribe who would enjoy making your Terran caretaker their mate. I would hate to see you lose more than your ability to fight.”

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6

EMILY

It's early, just after suns rise, but I've been awake for hours. Stewing, pacing, and turning the Rakuium pendant over and over in my hands. The damn thing feels wrong—like it's wormed its way between me and Stromm, driving us apart.

I can't wait any longer; I need to get rid of it.

That's why I storm into Jade and Zeleck's hut, the only warning a quick, "Hey, I need your help."

And...I immediately regret my life choices.

Because as soon as I open the flap and step inside, Jade yelps, "What the fuck?"

And Zeleck growls. Not the good kind of growl. The kind that says, if I take another step, I'm dead.

My brain short-circuits, trying to process what's happening.

Jade and Zeleck are naked. And busy.

No.

Getting busy.

I see a tangle of golden limbs and pale skin, and a mess of dark hair on top of the furs instead of underneath. But it's the air inside the hut that finally clicks things into place...air that's thick with the musky scent of sex .

OH. MY. GOD.

I squeal and immediately spin around, slapping both hands over my eyes. "Sorry! So sorry!"

Zeleck mutters something that doesn't translate, his voice grumbly and displeased.

Jade groans. "Uh, Em, could you give us a minute here?"

"Yeah. Sure. Ah, yep." I slip out of the hut quicker than I slipped in, cheeks burning with embarrassment.

I hear the sounds of murmured voices and rustling fabric while resisting the urge to run toward the river and drown myself.

A solid minute passes before Jade's exasperated voice calls out, "You can come in now."

I peek through the flap just to make sure. Jade is standing on one side of the hut wearing her Earth Gov issued shirt and leggings, her hair a wild mess, and her arms crossed over her chest. Zeleck is standing on the other side, wearing nothing but an amused smile and a crooked loincloth that barely covers his junk. Now that the shock of the rude interruption is over, he's taking this better than his mate.

Clearing my throat and lowering my eyes, I skip another apology. "Good morning?"

"If that's a question," Jade says, "it was before you barged in. There better be a good

reason why you're here so fucking early."

There's no way to undo what's been done, so I march forward and thrust the Rakuium pendant out toward her. "Take it back."

Jade blinks, looking from me to Zeleck and then the pendant, like I just offered her a rotten fish. "Why?"

"I don't want it anymore." I shove it toward her again, insistent. "It's ruining my life and the reason Stromm and I broke up. Take it."

"I'm not taking it." Jade keeps her arms crossed, her irritation clear. "Because that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

I stare at her, incredulous. "I doubt that."

She moves away from me to stand next to Zeleck. "The Rakuium chose you," she says firmly. "I can't take it back. And even if I could, I wouldn't. You need the protection."

My heartrate spikes with frustration. "I need Stromm back, Jade."

She throws up her hands, exasperated. "If something happened between you and Stromm, the Rakuium isn't responsible. It's not evil, Emily."

"You don't know that," I snap.

"Actually, my mate, Rakuium can be evil," Zeleck interjects, irritating Jade. "Yet only if the one who is directing its energy is evil."

"Well, Emily is the complete opposite of evil," Jade declares, "so that settles it."

“You should try talking to the stone,” Zeleck suggests. “Perhaps it can shed some light on your trouble with Stromm.”

I shoot him a glare. “I’m not talking to the damn stone about Stromm. It’s the reason we broke up!”

“Emily, that’s not how the Rakuium works.” Jade’s voice is sharp, impatient.

Folding my own arms across my chest to mimic her, I ask, “How do you know that?”

She rolls her eyes. “I just do.”

I let out a harsh laugh. “Maybe it knows Stromm doesn’t feel whole anymore, and is pushing him away so I’ll find someone better .”

Jade uncrosses her arms to put her hands on her hips. “That’s crazy talk.”

“Is it?” My voice rises, raw with emotion. “You’re the one who thinks it’s sentient. How do you know it’s not interfering to protect me?”

Jade opens her mouth, then closes it, her jaw tightening. She doesn’t know. I see it flicker across her face—that tiny sliver of doubt she doesn’t want to admit.

She pinches the bridge of her nose, muttering under her breath. “Listen to me, Emily. You may not know yet why the Rakuium chose you, but one day, that will become clear. Since yours was the largest stone in the batch that Zeleck and I brought back from our quest, I have to believe you’ll need its protection for something big, not a lovers’ quarrel.”

Even if I need it, I don’t want it. I want Stromm. But I can see she isn’t going to budge on this. I feel so frustrated, angry, helpless. Tears sting my eyes.

Jade sighs. “Look, I’m not taking the stone back and don’t think it’s causing problems between you and Stromm. But maybe we can figure out a way to use its power to mend the relationship.”

“How will we do that?” I ask, sniffing.

“We’ll take it to the Cavern of Memory and have a chat with Zavra.” She glances at Zeleck with googly love eyes, and he pulls her into his arms. “Later.”

Zavra is the artificial intelligence that powers the computer from the Rakui's ancestral ship. She knows all about the Rakui's history and lost technology.

“Um, later it is,” I agree.

“Stromm is a warrior who has lost his ability to fight,” Zeleck says, as if I don’t already know it. “That is the more likely reason for the trouble between you.”

“Maybe.” I’d ask how he knows Stromm’s fighting days are over, but news travels fast in the village. “I said the wrong thing at the wrong time, and that pushed him away.”

Zeleck looks at me, his expression sad. “Give him time.”

“There must be something I can do to help.” I let out a frustrated breath, rubbing my fingers against the stone. It feels warm, as if it’s pulsing with life just beneath the surface. I loop the leather rope back around my neck. “Got any ideas?”

Zeleck’s lips twitch, the ghost of a smile playing at the edges. “Seek him out. Follow him, if you must. Become a constant reminder of what he is missing.”

“You think she should stalk him?” Jade groans. “That’s a great way to give Stromm

time to figure shit out.”

But Zeleck just grins.

And I start thinking.

STROMM

The community fire burns low, the once-roaring flames now reduced to little more than smoldering embers. Thin wisps of smoke curl lazily into the sky, the scent of charred wood lingering in the cool mid-morning air.

The pit is mostly abandoned, leftover food from breakfast going cold on the nearby flat stones. The hunters have gone. The gatherers are in the foothills. Everyone else is useful.

And I am here. Doing nothing.

I lift a cup of Rakui tea, inhaling the rich, spiced aroma before taking a slow sip. It tastes bitter this day. Or maybe that is just my mood. The bitterness of self-pity and failure.

Losing the ability to fight led me to lose Em-uh-lee as well. She deserves a mate who can stand beside her as a warrior, not watch from the sidelines like a broken male.

And now, I have failed at fishing.

A scowl pulls at my lips as I stare into the dark depths of the tea, willing the murky liquid to offer some kind of answer.

Instead, I hear a voice above me.

“You look like you’re trying to set that cup on fire with your mind.”

Glancing up, I see Gee-uh standing over me, her expression curious. Beside her, Jill-ee-un cradles her round belly, ripe with a growing kit, shifting her weight carefully before lowering herself onto the log beside me.

Jill-ee-un tilts her head, studying me. “Why the glum face?”

“I am a failure,” I grumble.

Gee-uh snorts, flopping onto the log beside me. “If this is a pity party, then count me in.”

I grunt, staring at the tea. Even the Terran females can see how pathetic I have become.

Jill-ee-un arches a skeptical brow. “Why are you a failure? You’re still alive, so the reason can’t be too serious.”

I let out a slow breath, watching the glowing embers shift in the fire. “I failed at wound healing and mate-taking. And now, I have failed at fishing.”

Jill-ee-un pats my knee, her touch oddly comforting. “We heard about the no-more-hunting-or-fighting mandate from Yola and the Elders.”

“Has everyone heard?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah,” Gee-uh says. “It dominated the dinner talk last night. You were smart for staying away from the community firepit.”

I take another sip of tea, letting the bitterness linger on my tongue. “Em-uh-lee

deserves a male who can protect her, provide for her.”

Gee-uh frowns. “Did she tell you that?”

I tense. “She did not have to.”

Jill-ee-un nods. “So, you made that decision for her.”

“It was the right choice,” I say, scowling.

She rubs her belly absently, her eyes drilling into me. “How’s that choice working out for you?”

I do not answer. There is no need. Not when silence speaks louder than any words.

Gee-uh leans forward with her elbows on her knees. “So, you lost your warrior status, and you lost your potential mate. Where does the fishing failure come in?”

I grumble into the cup.

Jill-ee-un nudges me with her elbow. “Tell us, Stromm.”

I sigh. “Sartok suggested I try fishing instead of hunting. Since it would be dangerous to wield a blade, he thought a net more suitable. So, this morning I went to the river.”

“What happened?” Jill-ee-un asks.

Rubbing a hand down my face, I say, “The net happened.”

Gee-uh blinks. “What the hell does that mean?”

“The net,” I repeat, glaring into the flames. “It swished in the water and collapsed.” I make a vague, frustrated gesture to demonstrate the experience. “The fish did not swim into it.”

Gee-uh bites her lip. “I’ve seen the nets. They’re kind of like the ones used to play lacrosse back on Earth, only the nets here are made from woven vines and they’re attached to sticks. You have to use the net to scoop up the fish. Then what happened?”

“I fell into the river, and got carried downstream.”

Jill-ee-un bursts into full laughter, then shakes her head. “Oh, God, I think I just peed a little bit,” she says, which only makes her laugh harder. “Get off my bladder, Baby Rakui.”

Gee-uh shakes her head, giggling. “Please explain.”

“I was standing in the river, legs spread apart, bracing against the current like Darht showed me, trying to get fish into the net. Then, a large one swam toward me. I lunged for it yet snagged the net on a floating branch. As I untangled it, my feet slipped on the river rocks, and downstream I went.”

The laughter finally dies down, and Jill-ee-un wipes her eyes, still grinning. “Did you get your net free from the branch?”

I sit there and take their ribbing, deserving it. “I did not.”

“Tell us someone saw this.” Gee-uh waves a hand, gasping out words between giggles. “Man, I wish UD-237 had vid capabilities.”

“Everyone saw.” The other fishermen, the females downstream washing leathers,

Ken-zee on her way to the latrine.

Jill-ee-un shakes her head, wiping her eyes. “So fishing is out?”

I lift the tea again, muttering, “I would rather perish from being stabbed.”

“What now?” Gee-uh asks.

I stare into the fire, my mood sour. “I do not know. I would do anything to hunt again, fight again. Yet that does not seem possible.”

“What about gathering?” Jill-ee-un suggests. “The tribe always needs more herbs and spices.”

“And fruit,” Gee-uh adds. “There’s never enough fruit. It could really help.”

I grunt. “Picking leaves and berries is something a half-grown kit can do.”

Jill-ee-un shrugs, unbothered. “The Terrans have been doing it. But you can walk farther and reach higher than any of us. You could work at your own pace, decide how much or how little you want to bring back on any given day.”

Considering this, I say, “It would get me out of the village, and away from all the looks of pity.”

Gee-uh claps. “That’s the spirit.”

“There is just one problem,” I add. “If I am alone and come across a rogue or other predator, I would be—”

“Dead,” the females say together.

I nod, grim. “Exactly.”

Gee-uh suddenly sits up straighter, her eyes brightening with an idea. “Hey, what if I made you custom body armor to protect your torso? It wouldn’t be enough to let you hunt again, but would shield your liver if you had an unexpected fight.”

The idea intrigues me. “What kind of armor?”

Gee-uh rubs her chin, already thinking through the logistics. “I’d have to play around with materials, but I could mix hardened leather with thin, salvaged steel for extra durability. Flexibility might be an issue, because we wouldn’t want it to be too restricting.”

Nodding, my mind races with possibilities.

“Just to be clear, this would be for gathering only.” Gee-uh’s voice stops my thoughts. “Body armor won’t make you invincible.”

I keep my expression neutral, yet deep inside, hope begins to blossom. “I understand.”

“Great. I’ll get started right away.” She jumps up and rushes away.

Jill-ee-un gives me a knowing look. “She said the armor is just for gathering.”

I grunt, wondering if the Terran still beside me can read minds.

“But I might have something that could get you back in the hunting game,” she says. “Eventually. You said you’d do anything, right?”

“Yes.”

“I could teach you how to shoot a gun.”

I dismiss her suggestion. “Rakuis reject modern weapons. Technology is... dishonorable.”

Jill-ee-un arches a brow. “Emily carries a gun. Or she used to before she got the Rakuium pendant. Is she dishonorable?”

The very suggestion spikes my anger. “Em-uh-lee’s honor should never be questioned.”

“I agree,” she says. “Now, let me tell you a story. Let’s say gathering works out for you, and Emily becomes your mate. Eventually, you two have a baby.” Jill-ee-un places my hand on her rounded belly, and I feel her kit move. “You with me so far?”

I nod and she continues. “One day, while picking fruit, you run across a pack of serigs. You’re wearing the body armor Gia made you, and you have a knife, but you know that’s not enough. The pack has you surrounded, so you can’t run. What would be more honorable: shooting the serigs with a modern weapon to avoid certain death...or leaving Emily without a mate, and your child without a father?”

There is no good choice, so I do not answer.

“Your life changed the day you were shot by those mercenaries, Stromm. I am offering you a way to adapt, to thrive on this dangerous planet instead of just surviving.”

The weight of the conversation settles over me. Slowly, I exhale. I do not want to dishonor my tribe, yet wielding a modern weapon could compensate for my inability to fight our enemies using traditional means.

“Perhaps you are right,” I concede.

“Yeah?” Jill-ee-un grins. “You’ll learn how to shoot?”

“I will consider it.”

She squeezes my arm. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

EMILY

I find Charlotte at the latrines, doing the daily maintenance, which is her assigned chore within the tribe. Fresh, pine-scented zimzee branches—earthy and damp—are the only things I smell, so she must be almost done.

While it's doubtful I'll ever get used to taking care of business by squatting over a hole in the ground and wiping with leaves, at least the zimzee does an excellent job of neutralizing the odor.

Charlotte is hanging fresh towels made from animal hide next to the hand-washing bowls. She moves with practiced efficiency, grumbling to herself as she replenishes the supplies. Her white-blond hair is piled high on her head in an intentionally messy bun, while her Earth Gov-issued clothes cling to her curves like a second skin.

A twinge of jealousy stabs between my shoulders. Maybe if I were more attractive, curvy like Charlotte instead of slender and leggy, Stromm wouldn't have had the strength to push me away.

"Hey, Charlotte," I say as I approach, not wanting to startle her.

She doesn't bother looking at me. "What do you want, Emily? I'm busy." Her tone is sharp, almost mean.

I clear my throat. "I need your help."

With a heavy sigh, she turns toward me, squinting at me with suspicion. “With what?”

I hesitate, then blurt out my request before I lose my nerve. “I need a makeover.”

Charlotte stares at me like I told her the half-dozen latrines she just freshened up need another round of maintenance.

“Did you hear me? I said I need a makeover.”

“Finally.” Her satisfied smile says she’s been waiting for someone to make this request ever since we crashed here. “Need help getting your man back?”

“You know Stromm and I broke up?”

“It’s all anyone talked about last night at the community firepit. So, do you?”

“No. Well, sort of. Maybe.” I exhale, then try again. “I need help getting Stromm’s attention.”

“I can see why. That’s...” she says, waving her hand up and down my body, “...totally not cutting it.”

Frowning, I say, “I’m wearing the same shirt, leggings, and booties you are.”

“It’s not what you’re wearing, but how you’re wearing it that counts.” She strikes a sexy pose that emphasizes her assets while grinning like a vengeful goddess. “Although I do have something else in mind for catching the barbarian’s eye.”

She shoves a pile of used towels into my arms. “We need to drop these off at the laundry station, then we can get started.”

I follow her toward the river, then upstream, carrying the soiled towels. Out of the corner of my eye I see Stromm in the river a little further upstream, fishing. Quickly, I look away. It's too hard on my heart to see him just yet.

Once the towels are dropped in the to-be-washed pile, we head to the North Caves. The Terran sleeping quarters are deserted when we arrive; everyone must be out working or doing something useful. I'm relieved there won't be an audience for my makeover.

Charlotte immediately takes charge, directing me toward her bedroll in the far back corner of the cave. Against the stone wall, she has a wooden box filled with leather pouches, wooden bowls, velvety leaves, bits of moss, and a handful of short sticks.

"Sit." She gestures impatiently to her bed, and I plop down, cross-legged.

Kneeling behind me, she releases my ponytail by removing the leather tie and runs her fingers through my hair. "First things first. We need to do something with this brown mop on your head."

"What's wrong with a ponytail?"

Charlotte snorts. "It's practical, I'll give you that, but we're not going for the Nurse Nancy look. We want practical and pretty, something that makes Stromm do a double take when you walk by."

"Um, okay." I have no idea what that means since I've only ever worn my hair two ways: pulled back in a ponytail and hanging straight down. "But my hair is kind of limp, with very little natural texture."

"I have something to help with that," Charlotte says, reaching into her box and pulling out a spray bottle.

“Where did you get that?” I ask, incredulous.

“Found it on a salvage walk. I filled it with water and salt to create beachy waves.”
Charlotte’s smile is smug. “Cool, huh?”

The few times I’ve been to the beach, the salty air gave my hair much-needed body.
“Yeah, sure.”

She dampens sections of my hair with her spray then uses her fingers to scrunch the strands. “Step one is complete: replace the limpness with a little life. Now I’ll twist the locks at the sides away from your face like this for practicality...and secure them together in the back with the tie.”

Charlotte hands me a broken piece of mirror; she must have salvaged that, too. She works in silence for a few minutes while I watch. “There. Now your hair is out of your face, but the length falls over your shoulders and down your back in nice waves. Pretty, see?”

I have to admit it does look pretty. Softer, stylish, more feminine. “I like it!”

“Of course you do.” Charlotte rummages around in the box, pulling several items out.
“On to makeup.”

I watch as she carefully opens several pouches and puts a pinch of this and that in a few bowls. The colors are a mix of earthy reds, deep browns, and soft golds.

“Everything here is natural and Yola-approved for application to the skin.” Charlotte is all business as she uses a velvety leaf to apply some sort of powder to my face. Her version of foundation, if I had to guess.

Next, with a piece of charred wood, she lines the outer corner of my eyes, softening

the edges with her finger. Then, she applies what must be eye shadow to my lids with a puffy piece of moss shoved onto the end of a stick.

After squishing a red berry into a bowl, she dabs a little of the pigment on my lips, then follows that with a swish of something slippery that smells a little gamey.

I wrinkle my nose. “What is that?”

“Kerboo fat,” she responds, and I gag a little. “I’d rather use a fatty fruit that Yola told me about. It sounds similar to coconut, but it only grows high in the mountains. Now that it’s the rainy season and the kerboo are scarce, Kam says a cooba hunting party will head out soon, and they always bring some fruit back.”

Kerboo are kind of like deer; they head for drier ground when the rains come. The great white cooba live in the high ice caves. Near as we can tell, they’re a cross between a polar bear and a woolly mammoth. A good source of meat with thick, useful hides.

“You made all these cosmetics?” I ask, sincerely impressed.

“Of course.” She shrugs. “Living on a primitive planet doesn’t mean I can’t look put together and polished. If the Rakuis can make spears from salvaged steel and spoons from pieces of bone, why can’t I make beauty products?”

Her question is rhetorical, so I don’t bother answering. Charlotte may be obsessed with her looks, but she’s also resourceful. In a very short time, she’s figured out how to adapt here.

“Look at yourself,” she says, tapping the broken mirror. “With a little enhancement, you’ve gone from practically invisible to almost stunning.”

“Thanks, I guess.” I’m not sure whether to be grateful or offended...until I look in the mirror, and see a different person looking back. “Wow.”

“I know, right? You have good bone structure and nice eyes, but you don’t highlight them. It’s a crime against humanity, if you ask me.”

That might be pushing it, but the results of my makeover are fantastic. “Thanks, Charlotte. I really appreciate your help. I have no doubt my new look will get Stromm’s attention.”

“Oh, honey,” she says. “We’re not done yet. I have one more trick up my sleeve. Something that will transform you from a well-groomed survivalist into a forest nymph who inspires Rakui wet dreams.”

“Ugh, Charlotte.” I groan. “Do you have to be crude?”

She arches a brow. “The barbarians call our lady parts cunts . And I’m the crude one?”

Damn. She has a point. “Fine. What’s your trick?”

She rummages through a pile of smooth leather next to the box and holds up a patchwork of soft, worn animal hide in the shape of an A-line tank top.

“I made it for myself. But, since I’m incredibly generous and clearly the only one around here with any sense of style, you can have it.”

“And what is it, exactly?” I feel like an idiot, but I’m a little confused.

“The Rakui women would call it a tunic. But it’s actually a mini dress—a Charlotte Original.”

So, not only is she curvy, gorgeous, and resourceful. She's also a budding clothing designer.

Who knew Charlotte was more than a platinum blonde bimbo with a mean streak?

I reach out, running my fingers over the soft leather, examining the careful craftsmanship. "This is really beautiful, Charlotte. Maybe on you it'd be a mini dress, but you're a lot shorter than me."

She drops it in my lap. "Try it on."

I hesitate, glancing at my perfectly comfortable leggings and long-sleeved tee. "I think I'm good with what I'm wearing."

Charlotte glares at me, one hand on her hip. "Clothes have power, Emily. The right outfit can change your entire look. This was hand-stitched by me. The least you can do is try it on."

I sigh, knowing resistance is futile. I peel off my clothes, and she helps me slip the dress over my head without messing up my hair and makeup.

The moment it settles into place, I realize three things at once.

One: The dress is really, really short, reaching high-thigh on me.

Two: The vee neckline is extremely low-cut, revealing both my Rakuium pendant and my sports bra.

Three: Showing this much skin is way out of my comfort zone. Tugging at the hem, then adjusting the neckline does nothing to help that.

“Oh, god,” I say. “I can’t wear this.”

“The hell you can’t.” Charlotte looks at me like a project well-completed. “With your long legs and lean figure, it almost looks as good on you as it does on me. You’ll need to lose the sports bra, of course, but Stromm won’t know what hit him.”

I make a strangled sound and cover my comparatively flatter chest with my arms, mortified. “You’re insane.”

“No, I’m not. The leather will give you all the coverage you need.” She pushes my hands down, and holds up the makeshift mirror. “Own it, Emily. You look amazing. The booties aren’t great, but since I haven’t tried to make shoes yet, they’ll have to do.”

When I peer at myself in the mirror, taking in the hair, the makeup, and the extra-mini mini dress, I grin. “I look so different.”

My gaze lands on the Rakuium pendant, nestled perfectly between my breasts, and my grin fades. Swallowing hard and blinking back tears, I fight the urge to yank it from my neck.

Charlotte notices. Her expression shifts, just slightly. “I swear to God, Emily. If you mess up your makeup by crying, I’ll kick your ass.”

Her words, spoken without her usual nasty bite, make me smile. “Thanks, Charlotte. I really appreciate your help.”

STROMM

Outside the South Caves, I pause before entering. This is where I nearly perished.

My thoughts relive moments from the past: Standing guard while the Terran females hide inside. The pain of being shot with the laser weapon. Feeling my life slip away while Em-ul-lee cries out my name. Knowing I can do nothing to stop her from being carried away.

The memories linger in my body as well as my mind, in the ache beneath my scars, in the way my shoulders tense as I step inside. The walls seem closer now, the space tighter than I remember. A sense of unease moves up my spine, an instinctive alertness warning me that danger could be near.

I exhale forcibly, shaking out my arms, pushing the memories away. There is no reason to be on edge this day. The only people inside the caves are Gee-uh and Lukka. The Terran female, who is good at making things, has set up a workshop inside the abandoned space.

She moves between piles of materials, picking items up and putting them on the table where she is constructing the body armor. Nearby, Lukka inspects a pile of stiffened hides.

“Bring me one of those pieces,” Gee-uh says to him. “A large one.”

Lukka frowns, picking up one of the leather pieces. “They are too rigid.”

“It needs to be tough and durable.” Gee-uh does not stop from her work. “If you have a better idea, feel free to share it.”

Lukka turns the leather over in his large hands, then grudgingly nods. “Fine. This will do.”

I remain silent, watching them work. It appears the construction is coming along well. This should give me satisfaction because wearing the armor will bring me closer to my goals. Yet part of me is angry that I need it at all.

Sartok called it self-pity, and he is right.

Gee-uh spots me watching and waves me over. “Stromm, good. You’re here. I need you to try this on.”

She tries to pick up the armor, a vest-like structure with two metal plates hanging from leather straps, yet it is too heavy. “Give me a hand, Lukka.”

Lukka lifts one side while Gee-uh lifts the other. “The armor is too heavy,” he says. “Stromm will not be able to move well while wearing it.”

“I am getting stronger every day,” I argue. “Let me see how it fits.”

They hoist the heavy vest over my head and place the straps on my shoulders. My knees nearly buckle from the added weight.

Gee-uh looks disappointed. “I hate to say it, but Lukka is right. This design won’t work.”

Lukka grins, happy that the Terran female agrees with him, yet oblivious to the disappointment she and I share.

“Let’s get it off.” I share Gee-uh’s frustration.

We all struggle to remove the armor and get it back on the table.

“Is there any way to make it lighter?” I ask.

“Not really. I can’t hammer the metal any thinner without risking its integrity. And if I make the plates smaller, they won’t give you adequate protection.” She shakes her head, yet I can tell she is already thinking of other possibilities. “We could remake it using just leather. It wouldn’t be true armor then, but it would still give you some protection.” She does not seem excited about this alternate plan.

Hope fades that the armor would return some version of my old self, the feeling settling in my chest like a stone sinking into deep water.

I need another way to protect myself and my future family.

After swallowing the lump that forms in my throat, I force myself to say the words I am thinking. “I must learn how to shoot a laser weapon.”

Silence falls over the cave. Gee-uh looks thoughtful, already accepting this new plan. Lukka, however, stiffens like I just cursed our ancestors’ souls.

His black eyes narrow. “You cannot be serious.”

I hold his gaze, shoulders squared. “I am as serious as the wounds I still carry.”

Scowling, he says, “You would betray the traditions of our people for your own self

purpose?”

I cross my arms over my chest, steadfast in my decision. “I would adapt in order to survive. That is what Jill-ee-un suggested.”

I am offering you a way to adapt, to thrive on this dangerous planet instead of just surviving.

“Our ancestors made the choice to fight with blades and spears.” Lukka’s tone is harsh, which is unlike his usual bite-less arguing. “They shunned the modern weapons that destroyed our homeworld.”

My temper flares. “How many of our ancestors perished at the hands of rogues because their blades were not enough?”

Lukka’s jaw tightens, his stance shifting. “At least they perished with honor. You simply refuse to accept your fate, Stromm.”

The challenge in his tone grates against my raw emotions. “You do not understand, Lukka. Unlike me, you are still whole.”

Conflict shows in Lukka’s expression, his eyes conveying what words do not. Thoughts of my betrayal war with his sympathy for my plight.

“If I want a mate, a family, I must adapt,” I tell him. “There is no other choice.”

My words settle heavily between us, like the discarded armor on the table.

“Jillian’s right,” Gee-uh says, breaking the tension between me and my Rakui brother. “Since the armor won’t work, Stromm needs another mode of protection.” Lukka remains silent for once, letting the Terran speak. “If you plan to carry a gun, I

can make a wide leather holster that will give your abdomen a layer of protection while keeping the weapon within easy reach.”

I consider this. A gun belt that offers protection and function. “It is worth a try.”

Lukka grunts. “If Stromm must carry a modern weapon, this seems like a good solution.”

Gee-uh grins, rubbing her hands together. “Great. Then let’s get to work.” She gestures toward the heavy vest. “Clear the table, Lukka, and grab more of that leather. If you want this done fast, Stromm, we need you to help.”

I nod, ready to work. Like my ancestors’ fighting traditions, the armor has failed me. Yet I have another way forward. And I am willing to take the next steps.

10

EMILY

Adjusting the new dress a final time, and still wishing it were a little longer and exposed less skin, I step out of the North Caves and into the fading evening light.

The hum of voices from the community firepit carries across the village, the scents of wood smoke and roasting meat filling the air.

It's a normal evening for everyone else. For me, it's something different. The big reveal of my makeover, and my main plan for getting Stromm's attention, for getting him to give up on his 'I must do this alone' crap.

Loving someone means never having to go through tough times alone. Why can't he see that as clearly as I do?

Xvar is standing at his usual post near the cave entrance, his arms crossed over his broad chest, his golden scales catching the last rays of light.

His dark eyes rake over me with appreciation, but there's nothing lewd about it, just honest admiration.

"You are looking very nice this night, Em-uh-lee," he says, his signature grin widening, "I almost did not recognize you."

A flush creeps up my neck, but instead of shrinking away, I embrace my inner

Charlotte, placing a hand on my hip and smiling. “Do you like it?”

“What male would not?” Xvar laughs, a rich, deep sound. “Every head will turn your way at the community fire.”

“You think so?” There’s only one male’s head I want to turn my way. But extra attention from other Rakui males might work in my favor.

He winks at me. “I do. Makes me wish I was not on guard duty.”

“Thanks, Xvar,” I say, my smile genuine.

His flirting gives me the confidence I need to walk toward the gathering. He’s the biggest flirt in the tribe, but his appreciation for my new look gives me hope that Stromm will find me irresistible.

When I get close to the gathering, Charlotte rushes toward me.

“There you are. I was afraid you weren’t coming.” Before I can react, she grabs my arm and yanks me forward, her steps brisk and purposeful.

“Wait,” I say, but she waves off my request, practically dragging me toward the firepit.

“Everyone’s waited long enough,” she says, her voice thrumming with excitement. “I worked hard for this moment, and I’m not about to let you screw it up.”

Charlotte making this all about her instead of me should be irritating. Instead, I’m a little relieved.

She squeezes my arm, grinning smugly. “Ready to make jaws drop?”

No. Well, maybe a little. One jaw in particular.

She's not bothered when I don't answer, she just drags me closer to her triumph...or my doom.

The first heads that turn my way are Terran, and I hear snippets of conversation as we approach the group.

"This is the makeover Charlotte's been bragging about?"

"She said it was her greatest work yet."

"Emily looks hot!"

"Charlotte said she made the dress herself."

A nervous giggle bubbles up from my throat, followed by relief. This isn't my reveal at all. It's Charlotte's. And she's already told people what to expect.

Reece whistles and gives me a hug. "You look amazing, Em. Stromm's going to eat his heart out."

"I hope so."

"I wondered why Charlotte wanted all the scrap hide," Taylor, who works in the tannery, says. "I wonder if she'll make me a tunic dress next."

"You'll need to take a number," Charlotte says, her tone haughty. "There's already three requests ahead of yours."

I shrug my apologies, but Taylor just smiles. "I'll take spot four, then."

Kenzie nudges me, her grin wide. “You look fantastic. The hair, the makeup, the dress.” She does a chef’s kiss, then rubs her growing belly. She was the first Terran to mate with a Rakui and will be the first one of us who gives birth.

Charlotte soaks up all the praise and comments like she’s the one being honored, which takes some of the pressure off when male eyes land on me.

“Where did you find makeup?” Miranda asks. She works in the tannery with Taylor. “It looks so natural.”

“It looks natural because the pigments come from nature,” Charlotte explains, then ruins her explanation by adding, “All of you could use a makeup lesson or two. I’d be glad to teach a class sometime.”

Miranda shrugs. “I wouldn’t hate that.”

“Me either,” Taylor says.

Charlotte preens, flipping her hair over one shoulder, clearly loving the attention. “I’ll schedule something for next week. I can teach everyone how to make their own products and how to apply them for maximum effect. Later, we can do a hair-styling class.”

“I can hardly wait,” Reece murmurs under her breath, which makes me laugh. Shortly after crash-landing here, she cut her hair short like Gia’s.

I’m surprised to find myself enjoying the chatter. “I’d like to thank Charlotte for her time and talent. Oh, and dress. As you all know, the last couple of days have been rough. Getting a makeover was just the thing I needed to lift my spirits.”

While the women applaud, my eyes scan the crowd looking for Stromm. I find him

on the other side of the firepit, talking with Jillian and Remmel. Although his attention isn't on them—it's on me and my new look.

His facial expression doesn't transmit admiration or approval. Displeasure bordering on disgust is more like it.

My stomach twists, but I force myself to ignore it, turning my head and pretending I don't see him. If he doesn't like the new me, that's too bad. He's obviously in the minority.

I need to move before I crawl out of my skin. "I'm going to get some food."

"I'll go with you," Reece says.

We slip away from the group and head toward the serving station where Rykana and Lexi are dishing up bowls of g ryzen and tuber stew. The chicken-like soup aroma makes my mouth water.

"Looking good, Emily," Lexi says, handing me a bowl.

"Thanks." I wonder if the stew tastes as good as it smells. "Did you make this?"

Lexi shakes her head. "Rykana did."

Reece and I exchange a relieved look. As the cooking apprentice, Lexi's efforts don't always taste as good as they look—or smell.

"But I made biscuits," Lexi adds, handing one to each of us.

"They are a bit firm," Rykana warns. "Best used for soaking up the broth."

Lexi takes her warning in stride. “I’m still perfecting the recipe.”

Reece laughs. “Good to know. Wouldn’t want to break a tooth.”

Rykana reaches out and touches my arm. “Your tunic is lovely, Em-uh-lee. A bit different than traditional Rakui garments, yet perfect for catching the eye of a special male.”

“Thanks,” I tell her. “Do you think it’ll work?”

She nods, and shifts her gaze behind me. “It already has.”

Before I can take a bite of the stew, a familiar voice rumbles in my ear. “I would like a word with you, Em-uh-lee. In private.”

I freeze, bracing myself.

“You okay, Em?” Reece asks.

“Yeah,” I say, then turn to find Stromm standing behind me, his expression dark and his arms crossed over his broad, bare chest. “Follow me.”

I spin around and walk toward the edge of the group, carrying my biscuit and bowl of stew, sensing Stromm trailing behind me more than seeing him.

When we are far enough away from the group to talk privately, I stop. “What did you want to talk about?”

His dark eyes rake up and down my body, scanning my new look like it personally offends him. “Why is so much of your skin showing?”

A laugh bursts out of me, sharp and disbelieving. “Excuse me?” I say, raising a brow. “I must have missed the rule where you get a say in how I dress.”

He is not amused. “This is not what Terran females wear,” he says, gesturing at my dress. “It is—” He pauses, jaw tightening, struggling to find the right word.

“Lovely?” I offer innocently, taking a bite of stew even though it’s hard to swallow past the lump that’s formed in my throat.

He scowls. “Too revealing.”

“You’re the only one who thinks that,” I reply coolly. “Xvar said I looked nice.”

Stromm’s jaw twitches, his fingers flexing like he wants to punch something. “You do not need the attention of other males.”

“Don’t I?” I tilt my head and purse my lips in what I hope is a sexy pout. “ You broke things off with me, remember? As a single woman with a blinking TEASE, why wouldn’t I be looking for other male attention?”

His eyes flash me a look that’s raw and possessive, and heat pools in my core. “I am the only one who makes the blinking go away,” he growls.

“The only one so far.” I can’t let him win this fight. “The last time we talked, you said I can’t be your mate, that you needed to find your way forward alone. Has that changed?”

Stromm’s nostrils flare and his breath sharpens as he scents my arousal, and I think he might give in.

Then he goes completely still and silent.

“That’s what I thought.” Tears of frustration sting my eyes. “I’ll wait for you to figure things out, Stromm, but not forever.” Turning on my heel, I walk away for the second time.

STROMM

The next morning, Jill-ee-un and Remmel are already at the community firepit when I arrive at suns rise. They are seated on a thick log and eating breakfast. Her round belly is prominent, her posture slightly tilted to accommodate the weight of her growing kit.

The air is dewy and crisp, the Rakui tea I accept from Rykana warm and aromatic. I help myself to a plate of cold gryzen and banan fruit before joining them.

Jill-ee-un grins when she sees me. “Well, well. Look who showed up early for weapons training.”

“I have much to do this day. Might as well start early.”

“My mate tires easily,” Remmel says. “You must learn quickly so she can rest. Zeleck tells me that shooting a gun is not hard.”

“It’s not,” Jill-ee-un confirms as she pops a piece of fruit into her mouth. “Point, aim, fire. Easy.”

“It is making the decision to learn that is hard,” I admit.

Remmel nods, understanding. “You will get used to fighting a different way.”

How could he know this? The answer is: he cannot. “How many lessons will I need?”

Jill-ee-un shrugs. “Just one. But it’ll take some practice to feel comfortable with the weapon. You won’t need my help for that.”

I am not sure I will ever be comfortable wielding something other than a knife or sword.

“We saw you talking to Emily last night,” Jill-ee-un says. “Didn’t look like it went well. What happened?”

“I told her that too much skin was showing, and that she did not need attention from other males.”

Rommel shakes his head. “Terran females do not like being told what to do or what they need. It is no wonder she stomped away from you.”

“That is not why she left,” I say. “She asked me if I changed my mind about being alone for now.”

“What did you say?” Rommel asks.

“Nothing.”

Jill-ee-un smacks my arm, spilling my tea. “So, you acted like a jealous ass. And when she showed you a little vulnerability, you left her hanging?”

“Saying nothing is much worse than saying the wrong thing,” Rommel says. “You should have told Em-uh-lee how you felt.”

“Listen to my experienced mate,” Jill-ee-un says, grinning. “He’s learned all his

lessons the hard way.”

I feel like they are having a conversation that is separate from me and wonder if that is what having a mate is like. “How do I fix things with her?”

“First,” Rimmel says, “you must admit to being wrong.”

Jill-ee-un leans in, whispering loudly, “Admit to being a jealous ass.”

Rimmel nods. “First, you must admit to being a jealous ass. Then, you must tell her how you feel.”

I frown, turning the words over in my mind. Was it jealousy that wanted Em-uh-lee’s skin covered for all eyes except mine? Because I still see her as mine...even though I was the one who pushed her away.

“What if I feel unworthy of being her mate?”

“Tell her that,” Rimmel says. “Then explain what you are doing to regain your worth.”

“But also tell her how you feel about her,” Jill-ee-un adds. “Let her into your heart.”

When I nod, Jill-ee-un claps her hands together. “Now that that’s settled, let’s get this weapons training over with so you can mend things with your future mate.”

Before we can leave, Rykana approaches, her long braid swinging across her back. “I heard you agreed to be a gatherer, Stromm.”

I grunt. “I agreed to try.”

“There are a few things I need in the foothills, higher on the cliff than a Terran female can reach. Will you be going out soon?”

“Later this day. I will come and see you before I leave.”

Rykana nods approvingly. “Good. I will watch for you.”

“See?” Jill-ee-un says when Rykana is gone. “You’re already useful again.”

I scowl, but some of the tension in my chest eases.

Jill-ee-un stands and stretches. “I need to grab one of the laser guns from the weapons cave, but shooting practice needs to be done away from the village.”

“We will go toward the South Caves. I can check on Gee-uh’s progress with my holster while we are there.”

By the time we reach the South Caves, the suns have warmed the air, and Jill-ee-un’s cheeks are pink from exertion.

“Are you well?” I ask.

She pats her belly. “I’m fine. Just a little winded from the extra weight.”

Gee-uh’s voice carries from inside. Then, Lukka’s voice responds to her.

Jill-ee-un glances at me. “Lukka, huh? Gia’s been spending a lot of time with him lately.”

“He likes to help her in the workshop,” I say.

“I’ll bet he does.” Jill-ee-un waggles her brows, a facial expression I do not understand. When we see the two workers bent over a project on the workbench, she murmurs, “Interesting.”

I do not know what is interesting about two people working on a project, yet maybe Jill-ee-un knows something I do not.

Gee-uh looks up and waves. “Perfect timing.” She holds up the wide belt-holster, giving us a satisfied smile. “Check it out.”

I step forward, and she and Lukka work together to fasten it around my waist. The leather is thick yet soft, covering my abdomen without restricting much movement and sitting low on my hips. The adjustable straps ensure a snug fit.

On one side is a sheath for a blade. On the other, a holster for the shooting weapon.

I test the access, gripping the empty space where the weapons will soon sit. “This is very good. Excellent, even.”

Jill-ee-un agrees. “What a great design. You two make a good team.”

Gee-uh shrugs, but there is a slight pinkness to her cheeks.

Lukka grunts, adjusting one of the straps. “This was Gee-uh’s idea. She deserves all the credit.”

“Not all the credit,” Gee-uh argues. “You suggested adding the knife sheath.”

Jill-ee-un laughs. “You both deserve the credit.” She removes the gun from her pack and hands it to me. “See how it fits.”

Turning it over in my hands, I slide it into the spot on the belt. “The fit seems just right.” I draw and re-holster it a few times, pleased by the ease of movement.

My chest swells with quiet pride. I now have a way to protect my belly—and my mate—should danger arise. The knowledge settles over me like a warm fur, giving me the comfort and confidence to take the next steps in my journey.

Learn how to shoot the weapon, so I can ask Em-uh-lee to be mine, forevermore.

12

EMILY

On my walk to the Cavern of Memory, I replay the previous night's encounter with Stromm in my mind. His dislike of my new look. His jealousy when I mentioned Xvar. His silence when I asked him if anything had changed.

He acted like we were still together, like he owned me. Yet he couldn't bring himself to actually claim me as his mate.

I know it's only been a few days, but I'm tired of the back and forth, the are-we-or-aren't-we. Being in limbo is exhausting, and I don't understand why Stromm and I can't find our way back to each other.

If my Rakuium pendant is even partly responsible for this, I need to know. That's why I'm going to the Cavern of Memory. To get help from Zavra.

I greet Kam, the Rakui guard, with a forced smile, getting nothing but a scowl in return. I'm not offended; Kam's a grump to everyone.

"I'm here to talk with Zavra," I say.

Kam nods. "The Terran Elder, Ah-lan-uh, is already inside. You may enter."

Inside the cave, I walk down a short corridor. My fingers brush along the smooth stone walls while Rakuium-powered sconces light my way.

The last time I was here, it was with the other Terrans, standing before the ancient stone altar as, one at a time, we placed our hand on the console and Zavra downloaded the Rakui language into our symbionts with a whoosh of energy.

As I enter the sacred Rakui space, I see Professor Grant—no, Alana—at the computer console, reading through various holographic documents.

Since her cropped brown hair is streaked with gray, the Rakuis think of her as our Elder. I still think of her as one of our professors on the starship Educator .

She turns her head when I enter, and smiles. “Hello, Emily.”

“Hi, Alana.”

Using her first name still feels wrong to me, disrespectful. Before she became a professor on A Year of Interstellar Education , she was an officer in Earth Gov’s military. When we discovered this, my friends and I felt betrayed. Things got even more complicated when we found out that Alana is Jade’s birth mother.

Trusting her isn’t easy. But like Jade, Alana is good with tech. That makes her useful since I could really use her help with Zavra.

“Jade told me you’d be coming,” Alana says. “I thought she’d be with you.”

“It’s early and she’s a newlywed. I didn’t want to bother her.” There’s no way I wanted to risk interrupting her and Zeleck again.

“Let me close these documents so you can connect with Zavra.” Alana uses her hands to close the holograms, then motions for me to step up to the altar. “Do you remember how to it works?”

“I just put my left hand in the stone indent?”

She nods. “Yes. That’s the control panel.”

When I do that, the strange rush of energy surges through my body, and my hand affixes to the control panel.

Welcome, Emily from Earth.

I didn’t expect her to remember my name. I glance at Alana. “What do I do now?”

“Ask Zavra a question.”

I nod. “Uh, Zavra, can you help me with a Rakuium problem?”

That depends. Please explain your problem.

“Okay. I wear a piece of Rakuium around my neck for protection. I feel like it’s interfering with my relationship with one of the Rakui males, Stromm, and is trying to keep us apart. Is that possible?”

One moment, please.

The element, Rakuium, is a powerful and sustainable energy source. This means that it produces energy for those who harness it and recharges by drawing energy into itself from its environment.

Not the information I was looking for, so I try asking another way. “The Rakuis believe Rakuium is sentient. Is that true?”

Rakuium exhibits characteristics that suggest a form of awareness. It reacts to

external stimuli, demonstrates protective instincts, and has been observed transmitting visions and emotions. However, it does not communicate in a way that fits the traditional definition of sentience as understood by Terrans or Rakuis. It is an energy-based entity with a response system that appears to be both reactive and intentional. More data is needed to determine if it possesses independent thought.

Getting closer, but still not there. “Based on your explanation, do you think my Rakuium pendant could be pushing Stromm away as some sort of protection mechanism?”

One moment, please.

The Rakuium pendant you wear has demonstrated unusual activity since its selection of you as its bearer. Historical data suggests that Rakuium possesses a form of reactive intelligence, particularly in matters of protection and preservation. If Stromm’s presence is perceived as a threat—whether physically or emotionally—it is plausible that the Rakuium is influencing his behavior, or yours, to create distance.

This could be an unintended consequence of its protective function. However, Rakuium’s exact parameters for determining a “threat” remain unknown. Further study is required to resolve whether it acts out of instinct, programmed response, or something more deliberate.

If separation is the result of the Rakuium’s influence, then an environmental shift—such as physical removal of the pendant—may alter Stromm’s reactions. Would you like to initiate a controlled test?

Based on Jade and Zeleck’s reactions when I tried to give them back the pendant, I don’t think a controlled test is happening. “Physical removal of the pendant isn’t possible at this time. Do you have any other ideas?”

Acknowledged. No controlled test will be initiated.

Searching for alternative solutions...

If the Rakuium is, as you suspect, at odds with your connection to Stromm, resolution may be reached via unity rather than separation.

“I don’t understand. Can you explain?”

Certainly. For two to become one, one must become two.

What is divided cannot stand, yet what is shared may endure.

Rakuium is not bound by single purpose nor singular ownership. It responds to its bearer’s needs, but if those needs are in conflict, then the source must be redefined. Change the equation, and the outcome may shift.

This is the only additional information I can provide at this time. Interpretation and application remain with you.

With another whoosh of energy, Zavra disconnects and releases my hand from the control panel.

“Great,” I mutter, flexing the hand that was connected to the computer. “A riddle.”

Alana smiles beside me. “The AI does enjoy a little mystery.”

I glare at the console, but Zavra offers nothing more. “What do you think it means?”

Alana taps her chin, thinking. “For two to become one must be referring to you and Stromm.”

I nod in agreement. “Does one must become two mean our relationship is completely broken?”

“I don’t think so.” Alana tilts her head, considering, then suddenly snaps her fingers. “I got it. The ‘one’ isn’t your relationship—it’s your piece of Rakuium.”

One must become two .

Looking down at the pendant hanging from my neck, realization hits like a shockwave, and my hand closes around the stone. “Zavra’s saying I should split my Rakuium into two pieces!”

Alana grins. “So, you can share its protection with Stromm—instead of protecting yourself from him.”

I suck in a quick breath, my heart pounding. If the Rakuium is somehow responding to the confused state of our relationship, maybe this will balance things out. Bring us back together.

Excitement bubbles up from my chest. “I need to find Zeleck. He’ll be able to split the Rakuium and make a second pendant for Stromm.”

Just as I’m about to leave, though, the computer console hums back to life, and Zavra’s voice returns.

Data captured. Message incoming.

I freeze, exchanging a tense glance with Alana.

“It’s about time,” she says, her expression hardening. Gone is the kind, helpful professor. In her place is the former Earth Gov officer who is searching for answers

after being betrayed. “Zavra’s programmed to continually scan for Earth Gov communications, but we haven’t received anything new for a while.”

She steps forward and presses her hand to the control panel.

Welcome, Alana from Earth. Would you like to see the captured data?

“Yes, I would.”

A hologram pops up and, peering over Alana’s shoulder, I read what it says.

Intercepted transmission follows. Encryption partially decoded. Origin: Earth Gov Command. Recipient: Military Vessel [Designation: Unidentified].

---BEGIN TRANSMISSION---

PRIORITY: HIGH

CLASSIFICATION: RESTRICTED

ORIGIN: EARTH GOV CENTRAL COMMAND

PROGRAM CODENAME: BIOMAN

STATUS UPDATE: BIOLOGICAL EVENT CONFIRMED: EARLY
GESTATIONAL DISRUPTION DETECTED

SUBJECT: TERRAN #34

LOCATION: UD-195

ORDERS: PROCEED TO LOCATION IMMEDIATELY; RETRIEVAL OF
SUBJECT AUTHORIZED

EXACT COORDINATES PENDING. EXPECT TRANSMISSION ON SECURE
CHANNEL. SUBJECT EXTRACTION IS PRIMARY OBJECTIVE. MINIMAL
SURFACE EXPOSURE RECOMMENDED

ENGAGEMENT PROTOCOL: NON-LETHAL UNLESS THREAT ASSESSMENT
DICTATES ESCALATION

---END TRANSMISSION---

Signal integrity weak. Scanning for further transmissions.

UD-194? My brain stutters, trying to make sense of the transmission. I stare at Alana.
“That’s...not this planet.”

“No,” she agrees, her brows furrowing. “We’re on UD-237.”

“What does the transmission mean?”

Alana’s jaw tightens. “There are more test subjects on another undeveloped world.
And one of those subjects has gone into early labor.”

“Earth Gov is on the way to retrieve her and her baby,” I whisper.

The roomy cavern suddenly feels claustrophobic, the air too heavy to breathe. We
need to tell the others.

“Let’s find Jade and Zeleck,” Alana says. She rushes out of the Cavern of Memory
with me close behind.

13

EMILY

Alana moves quickly toward the village, her long strides urgent. I match her pace while thinking about Zavra's words.

For two to become one, one must become two.

"We should try their hut first," I suggest when Alana heads toward the community firepit. "Jade and Zeleck spend most mornings there since they became mates."

She changes course, and I follow, saying, "Maybe we should—"

Alana doesn't wait for me to finish speaking, she just lifts their hut flap and disappears inside. I stay outside.

I count the seconds in my head, waiting for the inevitable explosion.

One. Two. Three...

"What the fuck, Alana?" Jade is not happy about being interrupted. Again. "Why does everyone barge into our hut without permission? Is there some kind of new open-door policy we haven't heard about?" There's a pause, then, "Oh, for fuck's sake, Alana, look away if you're going to stand there while we get dressed."

I bite my lip to hold back a laugh. Been there, done that. And the emotional scars are

still fresh.

Standing just outside the hut, which isn't insulated, rustling sounds tell me they're getting dressed now, and I imagine Zeleck is amused by his mate's reaction to her mother popping in unannounced during sex.

Not that Jade treats Alana like her mother. She doesn't. At best, I'd call them friends.

Jade continues her irritated tirade. "First Emily, now you. What's next, a whole damn audience? Maybe Zeleck and I should just head down to the community fire and do it right there in front of everyone. Would that get people to leave us alone?"

"It is fine, my mate," Zeleck says in a soothing voice. "We were done sharing pleasure and were covered by the furs this time. Ah-lan-uh did not see your—"

Jade interrupts him. "Whatever you're about to say, I suggest you don't. It's not helping."

"Are you two decent?" I call out.

"Emily," Jade mutters. "I should have known."

"Come in, Em-uh-lee," Zeleck says. "We are both good, kind people."

"She didn't mean that kind of decent," Jade tells him.

"They're both dressed," Alana says, sounding amused by the newlyweds. I lift the flap and step into the hut just as she adds, "Zavra intercepted a message."

Silence falls over the hut, and Jade's face pales. "What did it say?"

“There’s another undeveloped planet with more test subjects,” I say. “You and Alana should gather the others so they can hear about it, too. We need everyone on the same page. I’ll stay here to talk with Zeleck.”

Jade glares at me, and I shrug. “There’s something I need to ask him.”

Her eyes narrow. “Something more important than the intercepted message?”

“It might be,” I admit. “I don’t know yet.”

That’s enough for her to drop it, although she looks at me funny. “Duty calls,” she tells Zeleck, kissing him goodbye. “I’ll see you later.”

Once they’re gone, I get down to business. “I need your help, Zeleck.”

“With Stromm?”

“In a roundabout way.” I reach for my pendant, tugging it over my head and holding it in my palm. “Can you split the Rakuium into two pieces?”

He steps out of the hut and into the daylight to examine the stone, and I follow. “Possibly. Why do you wish to do this?”

I hesitate, then offer him the only explanation I have. “Zavra gave me a riddle: For two to become one, one must become two. What is divided cannot stand, yet what is shared may endure.”

Zeleck considers this, turning the pendant in his hands. “And you think she is telling you to divide the Rakuium, and share it with Stromm?”

“I do. With his injury, he needs protection now just as much as I do. The largest piece

of Rakuium chose me. Maybe it knew that, one day, it would need to be shared by two people.”

“That is possible.” He watches me, silent, then nods. “I will split it.”

“Thank you,” I say, exhaling in relief.

“Perhaps Stromm would prefer a ring, like the one Rimmel made Jay-duh, rather than a pendant that might get in his way.”

That makes so much sense. “I love that idea. A ring would be understated, yet every bit as protective.”

Zeleck studies the pendant again, his touch almost reverent. “We must go to Gee-uh’s workshop in the South Caves. She has many tools we could use for this project.”

Gia’s workshop is filled with an impressive collection of glass, metal, animal bones, ship parts, salvaged tech parts, and all kinds of tools.

Inside, she and Lukka appear to be hanging out. He’s slouched on a stool, tossing a metal bolt in the air and catching it, while Gia tinkers with something small and mechanical.

Zeleck steps inside like he owns the place. “I need to use your tools,” he announces.

Gia arches a brow. “Would it kill you to say please?”

He ignores her, so I step in before she gets irritated. “It’s for a Rakuium project,” I explain. “Zavra gave me an idea that might help me and Stromm get back together.”

“Ah-lan-uh also received a message about Urth’s wrong doings,” Zeleck says. “Jay-

duh is gathering the Terrans to discuss it.”

Gia straightens. “Does that mean I should head to the North Caves?”

I nod. “Yeah. The message is important.”

“Okay.” She points at her stash of tools. “Help yourself, Zeleck, but don’t break anything. Lukka, are you coming with me or staying here?”

“I will stay.”

With that, she’s gone, leaving me, Zeleck, and Lukka in the workshop.

Zeleck immediately zeroes in on what he needs, picking up various tools and putting them on the work table. I watch as he grips my pendant in one hand and carefully removes the Rakuium stone with a pair of pliers.

It’s odd, but the moment the stone is free from its metal setting, something shifts in my chest, like a part of me just detached. I swallow hard, watching as he sets the stone on the table.

Next, he picks up a hammer and a chisel. With a single, precise strike, the stone splits into two chunks, one with a rounder shape and the other flatter and thinner.

A small shudder runs through me. I rub my chest absentmindedly as Zeleck picks up the rounder piece, places it back in the metal setting, and adjusts the prongs to hold it securely in place. Since he made all the original pendants, tinkering with it goes quickly.

He hands it to me. “This is yours.”

I slip it back over my head, feeling it settle against my skin. It's not exactly the same, but it's close. The energy coming from it doesn't feel broken, exactly, just different. Less intense, maybe.

Zeleck digs through Gia's tools to find what he needs, and commandeers Lukka's stool. Then, he turns his attention to the remaining piece of Rakuium. "Now for Stromm's ring."

That's where the trouble starts. Because carving takes way longer than I expected.

I pace. I sigh. I hover.

Lukka finds a stash of dried fruit and jerky to munch on, his loud chewing making Zeleck grit his teeth. "This is delicate work. I need quiet."

"I stayed because I thought you could teach me something new, or use my help," Lukka says, whining like a bored teen.

"What would help is for you to wait outside until I am finished. Both of you. Out." He gestures toward the exit. "I will bring the ring out when it is done."

Lukka stands and stretches. "I agree. We will go."

"But—" I start to argue, and Zeleck cuts me off.

"Go."

With an indignant huff, I follow Lukka out into the sunshine.

He immediately spreads out on a patch of grass, relaxed and unbothered. "You do not like waiting."

I sit down beside him, pouting. “No, I don’t.” Then, after a few minutes of silence, I ask, “What’s up with you and Gia?”

His expression shifts slightly, but he doesn’t answer right away.

I press. “Are you two...becoming mates?”

Lukka exhales. “No.” Then, after a beat, “Yet, I would like us to be.”

Rolling my eyes, I say, “Really? Because you were into Jenn. And then Jade. And now, suddenly, Gia?” I cross my arms over my chest. “Your interest in women changes with the wind.”

That makes him pause. His brow furrows, his usual carefree attitude changing as he actually considers what I’ve said.

“Gia is different.”

“Different how?”

“She is smart and creative, and does not try to please others. She sees what is broken, and figures out how to make it whole again.” His lips quirk, like he’s amused by something. “She does not treat me like an annoyance. Instead, she asks for my help and shows me how to do things.”

Huh. That’s kind of sweet. “Do you find her attractive...physically?”

He grins. “Very much so. She is tiny—nimble and quick—and when she sweats from working hard, her scent calls to me. Her lips are full and rosy. I would very much like to kiss- zing them.”

He's sincere, but I have to bite back a laugh. "I can see you've put a lot of thought into this."

Lukka nods. "I have. Yet Gee-uh does not seem to need a mate. She is happy to spend all her time here, alone in her workshop."

He's quiet for a while, then asks, "How do I win her heart?"

Honestly, I'm a little stumped. Other than mechanics and engineering, I don't know what makes Gia tick. Before I can think of an answer, Zeleck emerges from the caves.

In his fingers, glinting in the fading light from the suns, is the newly carved Rakuium ring. I hold out my hand, and he places it in my palm.

"The carving is crude, yet it should still work," Zeleck says. "If he agrees to put the ring on, tell him it will conform to his finger and might never come off."

I nod, my conversation with Lukka forgotten.

14

STROMM

I survey my hut, ensuring everything is in place.

Soft furs cover the bed, freshly aired out in the sun. The floor is clear, the usual clutter of belongings tucked away, leaving the space tidy and welcoming.

It is time to make things right with Em-uh-lee. Tonight, I will ask her to be my mate.

Only one thing left to do before seeking her out and asking her to talk: securing the belt holster around my waist, and donning my weapons.

By doing this, I can keep my promise—I can protect her, and she will never be unsafe with me. No more jealous mistakes, no more pushing her away.

With a deep breath in and out, I steady myself. I am ready.

I hear a voice outside my hut. Em-uh-lee's voice.

“Stromm? Are you in there?”

Smiling, I lift the flap to greet her. She looks determined, nervous, beautiful. The gods have blessed me with her presence. A sure sign that the time is now right.

“Em-uh-lee, come in. I was just coming to find you.” I offer her my hand, and she

takes it, stepping inside.

“You were?” She sounds pleased.

“Yes.” I revel in the feel of her soft fingers twining in mine, and a surge of longing courses through me. “I am sorry for being a jealous ass.”

Em-uh-lee laughs. “Are you?” Her voice is light and teasing. “I’m pretty sure you didn’t come up with that phrase by yourself.”

I grin. “It was Jill-ee-un. Yet she was right.”

My mate’s smile warms my heart. “Yes, she was.”

I exhale, and continue with my apology. “When I saw you at the fire last night, you looked different. Still beautiful, yet more than that. I felt...overwhelmed by my emotions. Desire, need, longing.” I swallow hard, my throat tight. “And when I saw how the other males looked at you...I felt anger. Not just at them, at myself.”

Her brows lift slightly, her head nodding for me to continue. She does not interrupt.

“I was angry at the others for desiring what should be mine...angry at myself for what I could not have.”

“You could have had me if you hadn’t pushed me away.” Her posture stiffens, and she pulls her hand from mine. “I didn’t change my look to get the other males’ attention. I did it to get your attention. Imagine how it made me feel when you rejected me again.”

Her words hit hard and true. “I am sorry for that. It was not my intention.”

She places her hand on my chest, over my heart. “You could have had me then, Stromm. And you can have me now if...”

My breathing slows as I wait for her to continue. Her lips part, drawing my attention, and her small, pink tongue darts out to moisten them. My cock, already hard, becomes impossibly rigid.

Without thinking, my hands go to her tiny waist, drawing her close. The time feels right for the kiss- zing the other mated males have talked about. The Terran mating habit that I have never experienced, yet long to try.

More words do not come from her lips, so instinct tells me to claim them. She leans into me as my head lowers...

Then she jerks back, her eyes wide. “Are you carrying a gun ?”

I straighten with pride, my chest swelling, my fingers holding onto her waist with a possessive grip. “I have adapted by learning how to shoot,” I declare.

She stares at me, her emotions flashing too quickly to read. “Adapted to what?”

How can she not see this? “To a new way of protecting myself and my mate.” I have practiced this speech, have chosen my words carefully. I will say them now, before she walks away from me again. “Em-uh-lee, I have loved you from the moment I opened my eyes in the med hut and found you by my side. That is when my heart became yours.”

Her lips part slightly, her eyes searching mine. I hold her steady, my grip strong but tender. “Now that I can protect you, provide for you, I am ready to build our life together. If you will have me, I vow to be the mate you deserve. Forevermore.”

Waiting for her to smile, to laugh, to launch herself into my arms and tell me she will be my mate is the hardest thing I have ever done.

Yet she says nothing, her hand slipping from my chest.

The hut feels too quiet, the air nearly suffocating. She pulls back. Not much—my hands can still clasp her waist. Just enough to put me on edge.

I thought this was what she wanted. What we both wanted. “Say something,” I beg.

Finally, she speaks. “On Earth, becoming mates is called getting married. Couples have a formal ceremony where they pledge to love, honor, and cherish each other for better, for worse, in sickness, and in health.” Her eyes swirl with emotion. “No matter what.”

“I pledge the same.”

She holds her ground, her expression unreadable. “Do you?”

Her challenging tone unnerves me, yet I nod.

“The first time things got hard between us, you turned your back on me. If I pledge myself to you, Stromm, if I agree to become your mate, I need to know you’ll stand by my side. No more pushing me away if things get hard. Because hard times are coming.”

A cold feeling settles in my gut. “Why do you say this? Perhaps our life will be easy once we are together in all ways.” I still, sensing the shift in her posture, her voice, her energy.

“Zavra intercepted another message from Earth Gov. It confirmed what we suspected.

They plan to come here, to take the mothers and their babies.”

I know this is what the Terrans feared...what their Rakui mates feared. To have this confirmed only strengthens my vow. No one will take what is mine.

Em-uh-lee leans closer. “When that fight comes here, can I count on you to do whatever it takes to fight back?”

My throat tightens when I sense this is more than a simple question.

It is a test. A challenge.

15

EMILY

I have to know how committed Stromm is to being mates, how far he'll go when the going gets tough. Protecting me and our future children isn't enough. I need to know he'll keep himself safe, too.

Every muscle in my body is tense, every instinct screaming at me to take the question back, to let him off the hook so we finally get what we both want. What we both need.

But I can't. I won't.

He must accept the Rakuium ring. Not as a mark of failure because he's no longer whole. As an expression of our love.

If he sees it as a crutch, if he lets it define his weakness instead of the strength of our bond, it'll become a wedge between us. I refuse to live that way.

His eyes search mine, and I feel like he's peering into the deepest parts of my soul. "I will do anything to be your mate." His voice is low, rough, unwavering, his fingers holding tight to my waist. "Anything to fight for us."

His declaration gives me hope. I take a deep breath, steadying myself, then hold out my left hand and uncurl my fist. In my palm rests the crudely carved band of Rakuium.

Stromm's brows pull together, his eyes flicking between the ring and my face. "What is this?"

"It's a piece of my Rakuium. I was worried that my pendant was pushing us apart so I went to see Zavra. She said, For two to become one, one must become two. What is divided cannot stand, yet what is shared may endure. It was a riddle."

Confusion flickers on his face. "I do not understand."

"I didn't either, at first. But Alana helped me figure it out. I had Zeleck split my Rakuium into two pieces, one for each of us. For two to become one, one must become two."

He's still confused. "If that is my piece, why does it have a hole in the middle?"

"It has a hole to fit on your finger. Zeleck thought you'd prefer wearing a ring like Jillian rather than a pendant like me."

He touches the ring gingerly, reverently, like he's waiting for it to do something. When he looks up, he smiles. "You would share your Rakuium with me?"

His question surprises me, filling me with hope, and I blink back emotional tears. "Why not? I love you, Stromm."

"And I love you, Em-uh-lee," he confirms. "I would be honored to wear this ring of protection. For me, for you, for us."

Relief crashes over me, and my knees nearly buckle. "If you put it on, it'll conform to your finger and you may never be able to take it off."

He grins. "Then let the Rakuium bind us together, forevermore."

“Give me your left hand.” With stinging eyes and trembling limbs, I slide the ring onto his finger. Although I expect it, I still gasp when the ring conforms to the shape of Stromm’s finger, just like Zeleck said.

“The fit is perfect,” he says, which makes me laugh and cry at the same time.

Then I grab his face, pulling him down to me. “Kiss me like you’ll never let me go.”

Stromm pulls back slightly, a playful glint in his dark eyes. “I have never done this kiss- zing before. Yet I promise to never, ever let you go.”

“Kissing is easy.” I trail my fingers along his jaw. “Just do what feels right, what feels good.”

His hands cup my face with a tenderness I didn’t know he possessed, his thumbs brushing my cheeks. Time seems to slow as he leans in, his breath mingling with mine. The first brush of his lips is feather-light, testing, exploring.

I’ve imagined our first kiss countless times, but nothing has prepared me for the intensity of what I’m feeling. His scent surrounds me, musky and warm, uniquely Stromm. My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling the silky strands free from the leather tie.

My stomach flutters when his tongue traces the curve of my bottom lip, and I wonder how something so slight can promise so much more.

Our first real kiss happens naturally, then deepens like waves rolling onto shore. His tongue slips between my lips, meeting mine in a slow dance that makes me weak all over. His warm hands slide down from my waist, cupping my ass and pressing me firmly against him.

I need more contact, but I'm thwarted by the thickness of his leather holster, the unyielding metal of the laser gun digging into my hip.

Breaking the kiss, I rest my forehead against his chest, catching my breath. "That gun has got to go. I appreciate your willingness to carry one, but right now that holster is seriously cramping my style."

Stromm's fingers fumble with the buckle, his usual warrior's grace deserting him. "These straps will take some practice to master," he mutters, frustrated.

"Let me help." I reach for the straps, but he manages to get them free without me.

He tosses the holster aside with enough force to make the gun clatter against the ground, causing me to cringe. "Careful with that! It might—"

"The safety is on," he murmurs as his mouth reclaims mine.

Then, all that matters is the heat of his skin against my chest, the strength of his arms around me, the way his kisses makes me feel like anything's possible.

Leaning into him more fully, the long, hard ridge of Stromm's cock presses against me, and my body instantly responds. Heat pools between my thighs, my breath catching as every nerve ending sparks with anticipation.

"I can smell your desire, my mate. Your mating scent calls to me." His nose brushes against my neck, inhaling deeply. "Does the box in your wrist blink now?"

A smile tugs at my lips. "I'm sure it does, but I'm too busy to check." My fingers trace the lines of his strong jaw, marveling at how his scales feel soft like suede. "You know what to do to make it stop."

“Mhm.” Stromm's hand slips between my thighs, and he groans, a sound that sends shivers down my spine. “You feel hot and damp, needy.”

“I am,” I whisper, rocking against his hand. “Needy for you.”

With a growl that seems to resonate from deep within his chest, Stromm lifts me into his arms. I wrap my legs around his waist, feeling the solid strength of him bump against my clit.

Oh, God, yes. More of that.

He carries me to his bed, his eyes never leaving mine. The intensity of his gaze makes my head spin as he lowers me onto the furs, his body following mine down, covering me with his warmth. His heart thumps strong and steady against my chest, his cock throbbing.

“I must undress you, Em-uh-lee.” His voice is a low rumble, giving me delicious shivers.

“If you don't, I might die of want.”

He chuckles, a sound that vibrates through me. He starts with my booties, tugging them off my feet. My shirt comes next, his fingers brushing against my skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake. But when he reaches my sports bra, he pauses, brows furrowing in confusion.

“I do not know why you would wear such a covering over your teats,” he says.

“They’re called breasts,” I say with a giggle, sitting up slightly to help him. I pull the bra off over my head, baring myself to his heated gaze.

His eyes darken, pupils blowing wide. He reaches out, testing the weight of my breasts in his palms. His thumbs brush against my nipples, sending jolts of pleasure straight to my core.

“They are sensitive?” he asks.

I nod. “In the very best of ways.”

“Hmm.” He leans down, tasting me, sucking one taut peak into his mouth. When I reward him with a moan, he sucks on the other one, murmuring, “My mate is sweeter than any fruit.”

He trails kisses down my belly. When he reaches the barrier of my leggings, he buries his nose between my legs, inhaling deeply. “I have wanted this for so long,” he says, his voice rough with need.

“Me, too,” I sigh.

Slowly, deliberately, he slides my leggings and panties down my hips, my thighs, over my knees. Every inch of revealed skin feels like a victory step, a testament to his patience and my growing desperation. He's teasing me, taunting me, and I'm loving every second of it.

When I'm finally free of the constraining fabric, I spread my legs, opening myself up completely. A dare. A challenge.

His eyes flare with hunger. “Your cunt is everything I imagined and more,” he murmurs. “It glistens with your need, the scent calling to me, begging me to taste you.”

“Yes.” A moan escapes my lips. “ Yes .”

And then his mouth is on me, his tongue delving into my folds, lapping at the wetness he's coaxed from my body. I come hard and fast, the orgasm ripping through me with an intensity that leaves me gasping. But Stromm doesn't stop. He growls against my flesh, his tongue continuing its dance, finding my clit and licking, sucking, teasing, tasting.

A thick, demanding finger presses against my entrance. My hips buck, eager for more.

He slides his finger deep inside, filling me, stretching me. My body clenches around him, seeking release yet again. His lips clench around my clit, his tongue circling the sensitive nub as his finger thrusts in and out, in and out.

I'm a writhing, moaning mess, reduced to pure sensation. Every thrust of his finger, every lick of his tongue sends me higher, closer to the edge. And when I reach the precipice, I shatter completely.

STROMM

I have never tasted anything as delicious as my mate's juicy cunt. So, I tell her this and more.

My words of approval, whispered like a secret against the soft flesh of her inner thigh, make Em-uh-lee whimper, her breath coming in short gasps, her eyes glazed with desire. This kind of praise seems to make her hotter, wetter. Though I do not know how that is even possible.

Her scent fills the hut air, heady and fragrant. I could spend the entire night between her thighs, feasting on her, if only my cock was less eager to consummate our bond. My length throbs, pressing almost painfully against my loincloth, threatening to spill at the sight of my mate sprawled out before me.

I am not yet ready to take my own pleasure, though. Not until I have wrung more from her body. My tongue finds her nub again, circling it with a slow, deliberate rhythm.

Em-uh-lee's hands fist my hair as she grinds against my mouth, and I can sense her body coiling toward another release. This time, she cries out louder, longer, her back arching off the furs, her juices flooding my tongue.

Two fingers slide into her this time, and I curl them forward, hitting a spot that makes her gasp. Her walls clench around me, slick and hot, as I stroke the spot while licking

her cunt in long, steady strokes, back to front, back to front.

This time when she climaxes, her body convulses with the force of her release.

She pulls away, her knees closing. Her eyes are glazed, her limbs languid. “That was amazing.”

I am glad she is satisfied. My cock aches, desperate for release, and my heart urges me to claim what is mine. “I need to be inside you, Em-uh-lee, to consummate our bond.”

She reaches for me, her lips crashing against mine. “Yes,” she whispers against my mouth. “I need that, too.”

I pull away to undress, her taste still lingering on my tongue. As I kick off my boots and discard my loincloth, her eyes follow my every move, her expression appreciative and hungry. I can see her breath coming faster as she licks her lips, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

When I am bare, she spreads her legs again and beckons me forward. “I want you, Stromm, don’t make me wait.”

“It will be my pleasure, Em-uh-lee.” I notch my cock at her entrance, my chest rumbling with a sound of pure, primal need. “I have never done this before,” I confess.

She smiles, stroking my chest. “I know. The other women have told me that pleasure sharing is widely accepted among the Rakuis, but penetrative sex is saved for mates.”

“You do not mind if this first time is not skillful?”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” she tells me, her eyes landing on my cock. “With equipment like that , I have a feeling skill won’t be necessary. Plus, your tongue doesn’t have the same problem, so I think we’re good to go.”

I groan, grateful that my lack of experience does not bother her.

“You might need to go a little slow at first,” she says. “This isn’t my first time, but it is my first time with a seven-foot-tall Rakui.”

Grinning, I nod, inching my way into her tight sheath, hoping I do not come before I am seated fully. “You must tell me if I hurt you.”

Em-uh-lee nods, her eyes locked onto mine. “I will. I promise.”

Her heat envelops me, her body tensing from the penetration of my cock. I still, giving her body time to accept my intrusion, resting my forehead against hers. “Your sheath is so tight.”

“But slick, too. Give me more, Stromm,” she urges. “I want all of you.”

I thrust my hips forward, seating my length fully inside her. I kiss her, swallowing her cry, using my tongue to distract her while she adjusts to my size.

Soon, her hips rise up to meet mine, soft mewling sounds forming in her throat. “Let me ride you,” she pleads against my lips. “I want to watch you come.”

“I do not understand this riding.”

She grins, a wicked glint in her eyes. “Flip us over. Put me on top.”

Grinning back at her, I wrap my arms around her and roll us over, keeping our bodies

tightly connected, my cock still seated deep inside her. “Like this?”

She nods. “Exactly like this.” She sits up, straddling me, and I think my heart might stop.

The sight of her on top of me, bare and spread wide, is something I will never forget. She rides me, then, her breasts bouncing gently as her sheath swallows my length, again and again.

Emily

“I am the luckiest male in the tribe,” Stromm grunts out as I slide up and down his cock.

I’d laugh if I weren’t so close to coming again.

I rest my hands on his chest, quickening my pace, grinding hard against him. He stares at me like I’m his everything, like taking my own pleasure while giving him his is the best thing in the world. And to him, it might be.

“I cannot last much longer,” he warns, gripping my hips so he can thrust up to meet me.

“You don’t have to,” I pant. “Just. Keep. Doing. That. Yes. YES!”

My body tightens around him, clenching his cock like a fist, yet he still doesn’t come.

What the fuck?

“I do not want this to be over,” he grinds out, as if he read my mind.

But it's time for his big finish.

I sit up, arching my back, hoping my breasts are bobbing seductively on my chest. While he's watching them move this way and that, I reach behind my back and give his balls a squeeze.

That does the trick.

His cock explodes, shooting so much semen inside me that some of it drips right back out and down my thighs. I ride out his release, slowing my movements in time with his breath, milking out every last drop he has to give.

When he's finally spent, I collapse onto his chest, our bodies slick with sweat. He wraps his arms around me, holding me close, and I swear our hearts are beating as one.

"I have finally claimed my mate," he breathes out in wonder. "And we have consummated our bond."

"Did we ever," I say, exhausted and shaky.

"You are mine now, Em-uh-lee," he says, his voice rough with emotion. "Mine to protect, mine to pleasure. Mine to love."

"And you are mine, Stromm. Forevermore."

After a while we get under the furs and snuggle. He's warm, the bed is soft, and soon my eyes want to close. My vibrating TEASE pops them back open. I couldn't be pregnant this fast, could I?

I pull my arm out from under the furs and read what it says.

RAKUIUM SYNCHRONIZATION DETECTED

IMMEDIATE OVULATION: APPROVED

IMPREGNATION: SUCCESSFUL

ANOMOLY DETECTED: TWO OVA FERTILIZED

TERRAN-ALIEN CONCEPTION: COMPLETE

FATHER SPECIES: RAKUI

ESTIMATED GESTATIONAL PERIOD: SIX TERRAN MONTHS

“Is something wrong, my mate?” Stromm asks. “You look distressed, yet the box in your arm is not blinking.”

“Something’s happened,” I say, my voice shaking. “My Rakuium has figured out how to talk with the symbiont in my body. It’s helped me get pregnant. Already.”

“We are going to have a kit?” Stromm asks excitedly.

“More than one,” I tell him. “We’re having twins.

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ONE TERRAN MONTH LATER

Emily

It's mid-morning, and Stromm and I are still under the furs, snuggling after a marathon sex session. I now understand why Jade and Zeleck became late risers after consummating their bond, and why she was so irritated by interruptions.

I haven't had any of the morning sickness some of the other women have experienced. Just fatigue. Oh, and a rush of hormones that give me a raging libido.

Stromm's already primed to go another round, but I think I'm tapped out for now. I swear he's trying to make up for a lifetime of celibacy before the babies arrive.

His hand rests on my rounded abdomen, which rises and falls with my breath. "You are showing early, my mate. I worry how you will fit two kits inside your belly."

I pat his hand. "The babies actually grow in my uterus, and it's designed to grow with them. It'll be okay."

My explanation doesn't ease his worry. "I hope you are right."

Footsteps sound outside the hut, and Jade pokes her head in. "You two decent?" she asks in a sing-song voice, an evil glint in her eyes.

This is payback, which I probably deserve. "We are if, by decent, you mean naked under the furs. What's up?"

She laughs, but her heart isn't in it. "Zavra's intercepted another message."

"Should I head to the weapons cave?" I ask.

"Not this time," she responds. "We're meeting at the community firepit. Bring Stromm because it's all hands on deck." Then she's gone.

The news can't be good, so we get dressed and head to the fire. All the Terrans and most of the Rakuis are gathered around Alana, who is standing on a log bench as she prepares to address the crowd.

"As you know, a few weeks ago, Zavra intercepted a message indicating that we aren't the only group of Earth Gov test subjects. That there's at least one more undeveloped planet, UD-195, in the BIOMAN program."

Stromm has me tucked against his side, and his arm tightens its hold as Alana continues to speak.

"The message indicated that an extraction team was dispatched to retrieve a pregnant Terran woman and her pre-term baby. We didn't know if the extraction was successful...until now."

Murmurs hum through the group. "Quiet," Trauhn barks, his voice unusually sharp. "Let Ah-lan-uh speak." His mate, Kenzie, is halfway through her six-month gestational period, so I understand why he's on edge.

"Although Zavra's retrieval of the communication was delayed due to a weak and interrupted signal, it appears that Earth Gov successfully extracted the Terran woman and her preemie newborn. Both mother and baby were alive, but in distress, and medical aid was rendered."

Alana takes a deep breath, like she's bracing herself for what she's about to say next.

“The extraction team suffered two losses. Assuming UD-195 is a dangerous planet like this one, we have no way of knowing if those losses were from planetary predators or whether the people fought back.”

Jade steps onto the log beside Alana, cradling her slightly rounded belly. “What we do know is that they’re coming for us too, so we need to prepare. Gia, we want you to take the lead on this. We need shields that can stop laser fire. We also need hand grenades and land mines if you can figure out how to make them.”

“On it,” Gia says.

“I will help,” Lukka adds.

“Me, too,” Zeleck growls. “I will die before they take my mate, my kit.”

Jade blows him a kiss. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that, babe.”

“This advance warning allows us to prepare,” Trauhn states, his voice carrying on the breeze. “And we will be ready.”

Alana takes Jade’s hand, and I wonder if this development will bring them closer. “In the meantime, Zavra will continue to scan for communications. Jade and I will do what we can to stabilize and boost her signal. That’s it for now.”

As the crowd thins, Stromm takes me in his arms, holding me tight. He’s as worried as I am about what’s coming. And I’ve never been more grateful that we’re sharing the Rakuium’s protection.