

A muscular man with a full, well-groomed beard and mustache is shown from the chest up. He is shirtless, revealing a very defined and muscular physique, particularly his abdominal muscles and chest. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a vibrant, colorful space scene with a blue and purple nebula and a bright, glowing light source at the bottom center.

A SCIFI ALIEN ROMANCE

KYRZON'S

CRUSH

KYRZON ISLAND TRIBE #2

LUNAVOSS

Kyrzon's Crush

Kyrzon Island Tribe book 2

Luna Voss

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CHAPTER ONE

Mackenzie

The wooden spoon scrapes through the cloudy liquid at the bottom of the pot, scooping up a heaping mound of crunchy white crystals. I watch, fascinated, as the salt is transferred to a wooden bowl, still oozing seawater.

“Is that ready to eat?” I ask. “It looks wet.”

Jura, the Kyrzon tending the salt over the fire, turns his scarred face in my direction. “What did you say?”

I clear my throat, cringing slightly. I’ve always had a tendency to mumble, but it’s gotten worse since we joined with Karvok’s tribe. Something about these tall, muscular warriors makes me feel shy. They’re intimidating.

“Is the salt ready for us to eat yet?”

“Not quite,” Jura explains. “It will need to be dried in the sun before it is truly finished. But there is no reason you cannot have a pinch for your breakfast.”

I thank him, then head over to the other campfire to get a plate of food. Well, not really a plate. A leaf, actually, one of the

big, fibrous ones that grow everywhere around here. Dishware is something we don't have much of right now. Apparently the Kyrzons carried like, a bowl per person, but most of their stuff is still inaccessible, left on the mainland in the carts they were forced to abandon when a pack of raptors chased them onto our island.

“One egg or two?” asks Roshkat, manning the breakfast fire.

I hold out my leaf. “Two, please!”

The eggs are blue, or at least the yolks are. I wish I could say I was used to it, but I'm not. It weirds me out every time. I get a pinch of freshly harvested salt from Jura, then sit down at the fire to eat.

At least the eggs don't *taste* blue.

Two weeks ago, my main priority was getting out of work in time to catch the last hover-trolley. If I missed it, it meant making the long walk back to my apartment in full protective gear, with my eyes, nose, and throat burning from the polluted air every time I reached to adjust my mask.

Today, I'm outside, casually taking deep, unmasked breaths on a planet that isn't Earth. And now my main priority is making the little island we crash-landed on a home.

Okay, technically, Earth was more than two weeks ago. I have to keep reminding myself of that. Technically, I'm omitting the 4,000ish years I spent frozen in cryogenic stasis, rocketing here on a spaceship piloted by a computer. But I don't even remember that. To me, all it felt like was a short nap.

What felt a lot longer was the week that followed, living out of our escape pod, doing my best along with the other survivors to stay alive on this crazy planet. Especially after the nutrient cubes ran out. If my friend Ramsey hadn't hooked up with Karvok and brought his tribe of Kyrzons to join us, I don't know how much longer we would have made it.

“Morning, Mackenzie!”

Lara sits down next to me, her own leaf filled with boiled *verlax* root, basically the Kyrzon version of potatoes. I like Lara. She's probably my best friend here on planet Kyrzon, and that makes her the best friend I've ever had. Along with Ramsey, Jenny, and Beth, she's part of my “group”—the first time I've ever had one.

“How's it going?” I ask.

“I have news,” she answers excitedly. “I ran the scanner in the escape pod just a moment ago, and it said the raptors have cleared from the peninsula.”

“That is good news! I'll bet the Kyrzons will be glad to get their stuff back, or whatever is left of it.”

“Hey! Did you say the raptors are gone?”

It's one of the younger Kyrzons, an exceptionally tall lad whose name I'm pretty sure is Ruke. He's a looker, that one, with deep blue eyes and a face that belongs in a cologne ad. Lara turns to him, seeming as usual to share none of my default awkwardness:

“Yes! I ran the scan three times. It should be safe to retrieve your carts at the next low tide.”

His face breaks into a boyish grin. “Great! We should tell Karvok.”



Beth joins us after breakfast, and one of Ruke’s friends as well. We head as a group to deliver the news to the chief about his clan’s carts.

I feel awkward as we approach Ramsey and Karvok’s tent. It’s their first morning in there together, after all. If they’re “sleeping in” late, I don’t think it takes a genius to imagine why.

Sure enough, I’m pretty sure I hear a stifled moan as we get closer.

Ruke, however, either doesn’t care or is too oblivious to notice.

“Chief? There is news. The humans’ scanner reports the raptors have left the peninsula. We can gather a party to retrieve what is left of our carts.”

“I—noted,” Karvok grunts from inside the tent, sounding distracted. “I will come out soon and organize the party myself.”

Yep, Ramsey is *definitely* getting some right now.

“Oh, leave them be,” I chuckle. “They’re probably—well, you know.”

“Fucking,” says Beth. “They’re probably fucking. Sorry, Ramsey! We’ll leave you alone now. Go get that GMO-dick.”

“*Oh my god,*” I whisper, shaking my head. “GMO-dick?”

Beth shrugs mischievously. “Hey, I’m not judging her.”

I can’t help but notice the jealousy on the faces of the Kyrzons around me as we walk away from Ramsey and Karvok’s tent. It makes sense, of course. They’ve been deprived of women their whole lives. Now they’re surrounded by them, and only their chief has a mate.

They want what he has. I imagine I would, too.

“Of course he is sleeping in,” grumbles Ruke’s friend, whose name I don’t know but am too embarrassed to ask. “It is not like there is work to be done.”

“Would you not do the same?” Ruke chuckles back. “If I had a mate, I would not leave my tent for—” He pauses, as though suddenly realizing Lara, Beth, and I can hear him. His cheeks flush.

I have to resist a giggle. I wouldn’t have thought a Kyrzon could get embarrassed like that. They really are the same as us. It’s actually kind of cute.

Next to me, Lara rolls her eyes, but I see color in her cheeks as well. There’s been a buzzing tension over the last week, ever since we joined with the Kyrzons. It almost reminds me of

being a kid again, right before a school dance. Everybody wants to know who likes who.

Still, there's too much work to be done for anyone to get overly preoccupied with flirting. Between setting up our camp, gathering food and water, and soon, retrieving what remains of the clan's carts, we're all busy, humans and Kyrzons alike. I wouldn't be surprised if it took a while for another couple to form.

Jenny comes up to us holding a water bag, the Kyrzon named Zedan in tow. "We're going to make a trip to the ocean for water. Want to come?"

I nod. "Yeah, sure. Just give me a moment to brush my teeth, okay?"

"I need to brush, too," says Lara. "Meet back here in a couple of minutes?"

Lara, Beth, and I head back to the tent we share with Jenny, erected only the day before. Everyone has a tent now, the walls made up of enormous brown leaves that are dried and glued together with a natural adhesive. The Kyrzons are good at making tents. Without them, we'd all either be crammed inside the escape pod, or sleeping under the stars.

"I'm so glad you fabricated those toothbrushes," Beth remarks as we open the flap to our tent. "I'd be going nuts if I couldn't brush."

"Same," says Lara. "But we really need to find more materials, or we're not going to be fabricating things for much longer."

I reach my bed, little more than a blanket with some soft padding underneath, and freeze as my eyes land on an object that wasn't there when I got up this morning. "Uh, did one of you leave this here?"

Lara and Beth come up next to me. "No," says Beth, "I didn't leave any—"

She breaks off as she sees it. My friends both stare at the bed.

It's a flower, bigger and brighter than I've ever seen before. The whole thing is nearly the size of my head, with rich purple and red petals in candy shades you would never find on Earth. Even compared to what I've seen on this planet, it's a stunning specimen. I have no doubt that whoever picked it did so carefully, and must have been very proud of their find.

Slowly, at the same time, Lara and Beth turn to look at me, the same amused expression on each of their faces.

"What?" I say, my cheeks getting warmer. "*What?* Why are you both looking at me like that?"

Beth snorts, unable to hide her grin. "It looks like someone has a secret admirer."

CHAPTER TWO

Karlo

It is nice to have a tent again. Piece by piece, step by step, my clan and I are creating a home for ourselves on this island.

Not just for ourselves. For the women we would have as our mates. For our children.

These beautiful creatures are blessings from the stars I hope that we deserve.

What I do not like is sharing a tent with Roshkat and Jura. I have nothing against either of them: I have known Roshkat since I was young, and Jura is someone I would trust more than most at my back. Both are fine men. But in a perfect world, that is not how I would make my tent.

I want what my brother Karvok now has. A woman. A mate. Someone the whole clan would know as mine, who would share her tent with me and me alone.

And perhaps someday, with our children.

But I do not want just any woman. You could offer all of them to me, and I would refuse.

All of them except for one.

I have known it from the moment I placed her atop my shoulders as we crossed over to this island for the first time, the rising tide lapping at my waist. I remember being attracted to the softness of her body, yet impressed by her strength. Mackenzie had no desire to be there that night. She was quite clearly terrified, and yet still she chose to help, using her light to guide the way as the raptors threatened to turn my clan and her friend Ramsey into meat.

Mackenzie is loyal, and she does not allow fear to make a coward out of her. Those are qualities I prize in a mate.

I tell myself that is why I need her. In truth, though, I think I would accept a demon if it looked at me with those brown eyes that make my legs feel weak.

All of my life, women have been scarce. And yet out of the 20 I now share an island with, only one of them has this effect on me. And I do not know how best to proceed.

“We should go,” Jura grunts, standing above his bedroll, already dressed. “We do not want to miss the low tide.”

That is Jura. Always the first to rise.

I nod, still looking at the collection of stones inside my little pouch. I have been gathering them lately, the most beautiful I could find, but none of them are beautiful enough for her.

I wish to please Mackenzie. To show her she is important to me. My next gift must be even more impressive than the flower.



Mackenzie looks especially beautiful today. Apparently, the humans' escape pod has a device that allows them to create things, and lately they have been creating clothes. Not the rough cloth our clan wears, nor the leathers worn by the Kyrzons to the north. Instead, the material is soft, thin, and I imagine it would be pleasing to the touch.

These new garments also reveal a lot more skin than the bulky things called “jumpsuits” the humans previously wore. I find this distracting. This particular morning, Mackenzie is wearing a “skirt”—basically a wrap of cloth around her waist that seems designed to tantalize me. It takes significant effort for me not to stare at her legs, and I find myself stealing sneaky glances at her as we walk across the bridge of land that connects to the peninsula.

I want desperately to see the parts of Mackenzie that her skirt hides.

The fact that she is here at all pleases me. There was no need for any of the humans to accompany us in our attempt to recover our lost possessions. But she joined us all the same, as well as Ramsey, Lara, Beth, and Jenny. The same five women who helped us escape the raptors. I suppose after the intensity of that experience, it makes sense that they would feel some stake in the mission.

“We are nearing the mainland,” I remark to Karvok, pulling my eyes away from Mackenzie’s rear end as she walks in front of us, speaking about something with her friends in hushed voices.

My brother nods, his own gaze fixed lovingly on Ramsey. “Hopefully, our carts have not been torn to pieces.”



“Karvok! Our carts are up ahead!”

It is my sister Shivka, returning to the group from scouting in front of us. We quicken our steps along the sandy beach.

Even though I can see no predators, I am glad to have my spear. The last time I was here, my clan was nearly wiped out.

Ramsey slows down until she catches up with Karvok and me. They embrace, and I swallow my pang of jealousy. I am happy my brother has found his mate. I only hope that I can do the same.

“That didn’t take long,” says Ramsey, grinning. “We’ll have the whole day to dig them out.”

We reach the first cart, and I can see the other two not far behind. To my relief, it does not appear that the raptors have ravaged our belongings. The carts are not destroyed, and I see no tatters strewn across the sand.

“The ancestors are smiling,” says Zedan. “Our things have not been touched.”

Closer inspection, however, reveals that the wheels are stuck firmly into the sand and two of them are deflated, the puncture marks evident on the sides.

“Fuck,” Heggon growls. “This will not make moving them easy.”

“I might be able to help with the tires,” says the human Lara, coming up to examine them. “I’ll have to check, but I think I can fabricate patches to seal the leaks and a tool to pump them back up.”

“We have a pump,” says Karvok. “It is in one of the carts. But the patches would be a great help.”



Mackenzie

The Kyrzons set about digging the wheels out of the sand. It’s hard work, and there’s not much for us humans to do other than stand and watch. Thankfully, Lara has her own purpose in being here.

“Okay, let’s see what this thing picks up out here,” she says, holding the recently fabricated materials scanner.

The little remote control-looking thing in her hand beeps and boops. She holds it above her head as though trying to pick up a signal.

“I wish this thing had a better range,” she sighs. “We’re going to need to do some exploring. Think I can convince one of the

Kyrzons to bring his spear and escort us?”

It isn't exactly a hard sell. Several of them volunteer, and we end up with Lokkar and Heggon as our armed protection against predators. I'm relieved. Karvok's brother Karlo is with us, and being around him always makes me nervous.

“Tell me again what purpose this tool has?” Lokkar asks, looking perplexed as we walk through the woods near the beach.

“It's a materials scanner,” says Jenny. “It uses, like, an invisible radio wave to try to detect, uh... molecules... or something. Lara, you want to take this one?”

“It helps us find materials we need,” Lara explains. “For the fabricator. You know, the tool that lets us make things. Well, you can't make something out of nothing. You want to make clothes, you need some kind of fiber. You want to make a pot for cooking, you need metal. Does that make sense?”

Both men nod, and I don't think they're only pretending to understand. The Kyrzons aren't unintelligent. They're just as smart as we are. They pick things up quickly, even if their base of knowledge is very different from ours.

“What are these new clothes made of?” asks Heggon, looking impressed. “Our clan had weavers once, but now we buy our cloth. It is not cheap.”

“Trees,” says Lara, gesturing at the forest around us. “That's what we've been gathering all those branches for back at the camp. The escape pod has a port where we can put stuff in,

and it refines it into the materials we need. Thankfully, getting fiber from wood is easy. Now, refining metal, on the other hand...”

“Some of the northern clans have metal,” Lokkar pipes up. “And skilled blacksmiths. They have mastered the art of refining ore and working it. It has brought them great wealth.”

Ah. I’d wondered where the clan’s metal objects came from, considering they don’t seem to have a blacksmith. They must trade for them. That explains the odd combination of stone and metal tools they use.

“If we get things set up the way I’m planning,” says Lara, “we won’t need to rely on the northern clans anymore. We’ll be able to make everything we need all by ourselves, right on the island.”

Lokkar and Heggon look at each other, excitement on both faces. I trade a glance with Lara and can see she’s pleased by their reaction. I am, too. The Kyrzons have done a lot to provide for our survival. It’s nice to know we humans can contribute something that impresses them just as much.

“Are those berries edible?” I ask, pointing to a nearby bush with bright red berries growing from it.

The two Kyrzons glance at each other again, and this time they seem to be sharing amusement at something I don’t understand.

“They... are,” says Heggon, and it looks like he’s containing a chuckle. “But we usually do not. They have a rather... unusual

flavor.”

I’m still full from breakfast, so I leave the berries where they are. But I keep the knowledge in the back of my head. You never know when it will be important to know what you can and can’t eat.

CHAPTER THREE

Karlo

I had hoped this day would provide me with the opportunity to talk to Mackenzie, but so far, it has not. She is off with the other humans, doing something with their technology that is intended to help us. If only I had volunteered myself quicker, perhaps I would be with them. Instead, Lokkar and Heggon have that privilege.

My heart is glad when I see them returning from the woods. After an entire day of digging, I am tired and sweaty, but proud of what my clan-mates and I have accomplished. All three of our carts are now unstuck from the sand. Although two of them have punctured tires, one miraculously does not. We will pull that one back to the island when the tide is low tonight.

“You know what the best luck is?” Roshkat asks, sitting next to me with his back against the cart we just finished digging out.

“What?” I ask, only half-listening. I am watching Mackenzie in the distance, heading in our direction along with Lokkar,

Heggon, and the other humans. To my satisfaction, Mackenzie appears to be interacting the most with her friend Lara, and not with either of the Kyrzons who accompany her.

“Our clay jugs are still intact,” says Roshkat, grinning. “There is sugarfruit on the island. Very soon, we could be drinking wine.”

“That is good luck,” I agree. “It has been too long since we had wine.”

“And we could share it with the humans,” he continues, looking excited. “Perhaps we could have a party.”

Roshkat’s thinking makes sense. There is still an unspoken awkwardness between our two peoples, one that two weeks of sharing a camp together has not erased. Perhaps some festivities would bring us closer together.

“That is a good idea, Roshkat,” says Karvok, joining us. “You have my endorsement if you would like to champion that project.”

Now the group from the woods approaches, and I turn my attention to the sand in front of me. I am glad to see Mackenzie again, but I do not want to seem too eager.

“Was your search fruitful?” Karvok asks the returning humans, his arm quickly finding Ramsey’s waist.

“It was,” says Lara. “I think I may have found a clay deposit that’s a good source of lithium. We need that to make batteries—power cells. Any tool that runs on electricity needs it, and the escape pod is getting really low.”

Karvok nods. “What resources will you need to extract it?”

“Probably just some men with shovels,” she replies. “It’s the escape pod’s refiner that does all the complicated work.”

We take a break to eat. The light is fading, and soon the tide will be low. When we return to our camp, we will have bowls of stew, but for now, we must fill our stomachs with what nuts and dried meat we have brought with us. I have always enjoyed this type of meal. It reminds me of being on the hunt.

“The cart that does not have damaged wheels, we will bring with us,” Karvok is saying. “We will return tomorrow to repair the other two and bring them home.”

Home. That is a word I have not heard Karvok use in a long time. Not to describe the place we were living. For years, our tribe has been nomadic, forced to wander after Clan Gothal stole our land and wrapped it into its growing empire. The idea that we have a home of our own now, somewhere we again can be safe and raise families, fills me with joy.

“Look out,” says Shivka suddenly, keeping watch as ever. “Something by the water.”

We all turn, and I squint to see through the evening light. There is movement along the shoreline. It looks to be a longhorn. I have hunted them before, but usually they are seen in herds, and not so close to the ocean.

“Is that a deer?” asks Jenny. “It reminds me of...”

Out of the water comes an enormous creature, water splashing all around it, mighty jaws filled with sharp teeth. It grabs the

longhorn and pulls it under, thrashing and bleating helplessly. A moment later, the sea is still, and the longhorn is gone.

Everyone stares in shocked silence.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” says Beth. “This planet has giant crocodiles, too?”



Mackenzie

By the time the tide is low enough for us to cross back to the island, I’m ready to be home. It’s been a long day, and I could do with a bowl of stew and the comfort of my tent. The only thing in between me and those luxuries is the long walk back across the land bridge.

At least we aren’t being chased by raptors this time.

I walk with Ramsey at the back of the group. Thanks to Lara and Beth, she knows all about the flower that showed up for me yesterday, and she’s just as curious as they are.

“It could have been Zedan,” she speculates. “Or Curvosh. I know that both of them really want mates.”

I sigh. Of course Ramsey doesn’t mean it this way, but framing it like that really takes the romance out of it. I don’t want someone to like me because he’s desperate for a mate and I’m one of the few women available. I want someone to like me for *me*.

“You really don’t have any idea?” she asks. “Someone you’ve been talking to more than usual lately, or who has been extra friendly?”

I shake my head. I know who I’d *like* it to be, but I’ll take that secret to my grave. Honestly, just thinking about the whole *secret admirer* thing makes me anxious. I grew up with really protective parents and never got a lot of dating experience. What few relationships I had on Earth left me with the distinct impression that guys see me as cute, but not girlfriend material. I don’t think I can change that. Sure, the idea of one of these hulking warriors having genuine feelings for me is nice, but I don’t think it’s exactly realistic.

More like a way to catch feelings too early and get my heart broken again. Only this time, on a different planet.

“I think these guys are just horny,” I say, lowering my voice even though the nearest Kyrzon is too far ahead to hear us. “Whoever left that flower is probably just putting out feelers, trying to land a mate while there’s still one available. I’m not taking it seriously.”

Ramsey raises her eyebrows. “I asked Karvok about the flower—don’t worry! I didn’t mention your name or any of the details—and he says that ones in full bloom are really rare. Whoever left it, they clearly made an effort. And it’s not like Beth or Jenny got a flower.”

I find myself blushing at her words. “So what are you saying, that after a week, one of these guys already thinks he’s found his soulmate?”

She shrugs. “That’s how Karvok felt about me. I’m not saying you have to feel the same way. Just that maybe you shouldn’t roll your eyes at this. Whoever left the flower probably really likes you.”

Ramsey’s a good friend, even if my cheeks are burning. I’m glad to have her.

“You know I didn’t have my first boyfriend until I was 21?” I confess. “I’m 23 now and I still have no idea what I’m doing with guys. How did you figure things out with Karvok?”

“I was a virgin when I met him,” she admits quietly, and I almost gasp.

“I never would have guessed that,” I tell her. “You always seemed so cool and confident. Did you tell him it was your first time?”

She nods. “It was his first time, too. Probably most of these guys. It’s not like they’ve had a lot of opportunity to date.”

I’d never considered that. Of course! It makes sense that these Kyrzon men would be virgins. In a weird way, that does make them seem less intimidating. I find myself chuckling at the idea of somehow finding myself in a situation with a guy where I’m the one with more sexual experience.

“What are you laughing at?” Ramsey asks.

“You just have to understand, I grew up really sheltered. I had, like, a *tiny* sexual awakening with my first boyfriend, but I always just assume everyone around me has way more experience.”

Ramsey winks at me. “Yeah, well, not these guys. But if the others are anything like Karvok, they’ll be eager to please in the bedroom. Or, you know, the tent.” She giggles. “Man, it’s easy to make you blush. Anyway, I’m going to join Karvok again at the front, want to come? I want to make sure we’re on track with how fast the tide is coming in.”

I shake my head. “I’ll stay back here for now. Thanks for talking.”



Karlo

We are moving too slowly. We are only halfway across the land bridge, and we should be farther. Our cart’s tires are not full enough, and they do not glide easily across the sand. Already, the ground feels wet, and not the dry powder it was before.

“The water is rising,” Shivka murmurs, looking down. “We should bring the humans to the front.”

“I agree,” says Karvok. “I would not risk them in the water if the sea rises too quickly for the cart to follow.”

Ramsey appears at Karvok’s side. “I’ll get the others,” she says. “Mackenzie is all the way in the back.”

“I will go to the back and get Mackenzie,” I insist. “You gather the rest of the humans. It will go faster that way.”

Karvok throws me an approving look. I know he would prefer his mate to stay safely at the front of the group. I turn around and head in the opposite direction, looking for Mackenzie.

It's as I'm nearing the rear of our caravan that I hear her scream.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mackenzie

Noooo. No no no. Oh no. That is *not* what I think it is.

I almost didn't see it in the evening light. I almost walked right past.

Ahead of me, just at the waterline, an enormous set of eyes is watching. I squint, heart pounding, trying to make out if those eyes belong to what I fear.

They do. Horror washes over me as I realize just how monstrously big this creature's body is beneath the dark water. The alligator-thing looks even more terrifying up close, its jagged teeth protruding from a closed mouth. It's staring right at me.

Waiting.

It looks hungry.

The water is rising fast, the land bridge now only a few feet across. There's no way I can pass without putting myself close enough to that *thing* to become alligator food.

“Mackenzie!” shouts a man’s voice. I tear my eyes away from the creature and see Karlo, Karvok’s hot older brother, jogging toward me.

“Stop!” I yell, gesturing frantically. “Don’t come any closer!”

He does so just before he reaches it. I let out a sigh of relief.

“The water is rising too fast,” he calls out to me, looking confused. “Ramsey wants you to come to the front with her. Just in case.”

“Look,” I warn him through gritted teeth, pointing at the creature. “Right there. Do you see it?”

He follows where I’m pointing, squinting, and then he jolts up straight, his eyes wide. He sees it, all right.

“Don’t get any closer to it!” he shouts.

“Thanks, genius,” I shout back, my eyes rolling so hard they almost do a complete 360. “What do I do? I can’t get past.”

And I can’t wait it out, either. Every minute we remain here, the water rises. Soon, we’ll be swimming.

And so will that giant alligator.

Karlo peers over his shoulder, the rest of the clan getting smaller and smaller in the distance. He looks at the creature, then at his spear.

“Okay, I have a plan,” he says, picking up a rock from the ground. “Can you step back?”

I want to ask him what his plan is, but time is of the essence here. I take several steps backward until he nods.

“Okay,” he says, bouncing slightly as though he’s trying to psych himself up. “One... two... three!”

He hurls the rock into the ocean right next to the creature, and, at the exact same time, he dashes past it towards me. It thrashes out of the water, its powerful jaws snapping for prey that isn’t there, and Karlo is able to reach me.

Except when it lands, it kind of awkwardly clambers halfway out of the water and stays there on the ever-shrinking land bridge, blocking our path back to the island. It watches us, a low growl rumbling in its throat.

“Was that what you had in mind?” I ask Karlo.

“Not exactly,” he admits. “But this will work. Crockjaws are not great hunters on land. They ambush their prey. They do not chase.”

I eye the predator warily. It sure looks like it wouldn’t have much trouble hunting us.

“We will return to the mainland,” says Karlo. “Make camp by the carts. Tomorrow morning, we can cross again.”

My stomach groans. It’s almost dark, and there’s not much I would like more than a bowl of stew around the campfire with Ramsey and Lara. But hey, it beats becoming monster food.

The crockjaw gurgles, watching.

“Sounds good,” I say. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Mackenzie

I'm frustratingly nervous as I walk with Karlo back to the mainland. I've had a small, stupid crush on Karlo ever since he carried me on his shoulders away from the raptor horde. At camp, I usually stay away from him, as has always been my strategy with guys I like. Less chance to trip over my words and sound like an idiot. Now, though, I can't escape.

It's going to be a long, uncomfortable night before we can return to the island. At least it isn't cold.

"We should make a fire," Karlo remarks.

"Yeah, it's chilly," I agree automatically.

He gives me a funny look. "You are cold? I meant to cook food."

"No," I stutter. "I mean, maybe a little... I mean—yeah, dinner would be great."

Well, I'm off to a beautiful start. I look down, my cheeks burning. It's so frustrating. Why does this happen every time I talk to a guy I like? What's wrong with me?

But Karlo doesn't seem put off by my awkwardness. Instead, he immediately removes the cloth wrap he wears around his torso and offers it to me. I freeze, trying not to stare at his naked, ripped upper body. What is he doing?

"I am quite comfortable," he insists, wrapping the cloth around my the shoulders. "You will wear this until I can make us a fire."



Karlo

It pleases me to see Mackenzie wearing the cloth I have given her. Even still, I am surprised to learn that she is cold. Perhaps the humans are more fragile than I realized. I will need to take great care that she is provided for while we are together tonight.

In theory, having to stay an unnecessary night on the mainland should be a frustration. Instead, my heart pounds with excitement. For the past week, I have sought to spend time with Mackenzie, and I have not been successful. Now the ancestors drop this opportunity into my lap, and I will use it to get to know her. I will keep her warm and fed. I will earn her respect if I can.

"This green stem is *verlax* root," I explain, picking one out of the ground. "One or two more of these should be enough for a meal. There may also be dried meat in one of the carts."

“Oh, good,” says Mackenzie, and it sounds rather like she’s chewing on something. “I was getting hungry.”

I gather more roots for our dinner, then begin to collect sticks under my arm as we walk back to the beach to make a fire.

“We will be warm soon,” I assure her, creating a little tower of kindling to burn.

“Great,” she says, dropping her own pile of sticks next to me. “You know, these berries really aren’t half bad.”

I freeze. “You are eating berries?”

“Yeah. Just to tide me over until we have food. Heggon said they were okay to eat. You want some? I grabbed a handful.”

I stare at her outstretched hand, recognizing all too well the crimson that stains her fingers. “Heggon said you could eat those?”

Her eyes widen. “He said they didn’t taste good, but that they were edible. Shit, are they poisonous?”

I can’t help it. I throw back my head and let out a hearty laugh as I use my flint to spark the kindling. “No, they are not poisonous.”

Now she just looks worried. “Then why are you laughing at me? What’s wrong with the berries?”

I try to contain my amusement. “There is nothing... wrong with them. Do not worry, you will be fine.”

I try to think how best to explain this. I do not know if she will be comfortable with the topic.

“Clearly, there’s something wrong with the berries,” Mackenzie insists. “Can you please tell me?”

I can tell she is uncomfortable now, and so I hurry to cease my laughter. I do not want Mackenzie to think I am making fun of her. “These are usually called *passionberries*,” I explain carefully. “But when I was a child, the other boys and I used to call them...” I hesitate now, not wanting her to think me immature.

She sighs, shaking her head. “Just say it.”

“We used to call them *rock-cock berries*,” I admit. “Because when you eat them, it makes your...”

Even by the flickering firelight, I can see that Mackenzie’s face is bright red. “Yeah, I get it,” she says in a small voice.

“I do not know what effect it has on females,” I tell her quickly, hoping my words will be reassuring. “Perhaps it does not influence women the same way.”

She stares at the sand between her feet. “Yeah, perhaps.”



Mackenzie

Well, this is officially a nightmare. Being humiliated in social situations is literally my greatest fear. Now here I am, all alone with a guy I like, and apparently I just spent the last fifteen minutes munching down on bite after bite of an alien aphrodisiac.

Even worse, the guy I like *knows* it.

Even *worse*, the berries are *definitely* kicking in.

I watch as Karlo blows on the flames, then adds a few more sticks, his muscular forearms rippling in the orange light. It's impressive, watching him make a fire with such practiced ease. I certainly never learned that skill on Earth.

"Why not just start with some bigger logs?" I ask, crouching next to the rock he's sitting on. "Why are we only burning these little sticks?"

"If I add the big logs too fast, it will smother the flames," he explains, looking happy to answer my question. "Have you never made a fire before?"

I shake my head. "I never needed to on Earth."

Karlo grins. "Here, let me show you." He guides my hand over to the kindling pile. My skin prickles at his touch. "No, that one's still a little too big. Yes, perfect. Let's put that one on the fire."

I allow him to keep his hand on mine as we place the stick onto the fire together. Normally I would be nervous about all the touching, but I mean, there's no one around, and I can't deny it feels nice. It's nice to touch. I like touching.

"Okay, let's do another," says Karlo, pointing at the kindling. "You pick the piece of wood this time."

I reach for a stick the same size as last time, and he nods approvingly.

“Can I...” I hesitate. “Can you help me put it on the fire?”

God, what the hell am I doing? I don't need anyone's help putting a stick on a fire. I just want Karlo to touch me again.

He smiles, then takes my hand in his, just the same as before. Immediately, my whole body becomes warm and tingly. I *really* like touching him. I think I like it *too* much.

“There, getting warmer,” says Karlo. “Is that better?”

“A little,” I say, leaning against him. “But... you're nice and warm.”

My cheeks burn, and it has nothing to do with the fire. I can't believe I just said that. It's like I'm on autopilot. I just need to keep touching him.

He hurries to put an arm around me. “I will keep you warm.”

“Thanks,” I squeak, feeling the warm fuzzies flood over me as I scoot myself next to him onto the rock. “Oh, sorry, there isn't much room...”

“Here, on my lap,” he grunts, putting his hands on my waist and guiding me. I watch the flames, feeling wonderfully small and protected with his arms wrapped around me.

Shit. I got what I wanted, all right, but this is bad. Thanks to those berries, all I can think about are those big hands of his, and how they might feel touching me in... *other* places. Not to mention, I can feel a suspicious lump underneath my butt that I'm starting to wonder if... no, I shouldn't think about that. New topic! I need a distraction.

“How will we cook the *verlax* root?” I ask, trying to clear my mind. “We don’t have a pot.”

“There is a pot in one of the carts,” he explains, gesturing to the dark silhouettes that sit in the sand nearby. “When the fire is hot enough, I will...”

I can barely focus on his words. Sitting in Karlo’s lap, wrapped up in his big arms, I realize that I’m soaking through my panties, and it’s starting to collect uncomfortably on my thighs. At the same time, my nipples are standing tall, rubbing against the fabric of the single bra I possess on this planet in a way that’s impossible to ignore. Oh my god, this is hell. I feel so ridiculously vulnerable. I’m wearing a skirt, too. This is like the worst situation imaginable.

Mother. Fucking. Berries.

Karlo goes to get the pot for cooking. I sit on the rock by the fire, trying to cool myself down. Jesus, I’m wet down there. What the hell do I do? How do I get myself out of this situation without humiliating myself entirely?

Karlo scoops me back onto his lap when he returns, holding me even tighter than before. It’s like there’s an unspoken agreement that cuddles are just something we’re doing now. Soon the *verlax* root is cooking over the fire, and to my immense embarrassment, hunger is the last thing on my mind.

I’m so horny I want to die.

“You’re sure those berries I ate won’t hurt me?” I ask through gritted teeth as I feel a twitch of need come from between my

legs. I shift onto his knee, hoping for some relief.

“Promise,” says Karlo. “I... I will admit I have eaten them many times, when I was young.”

“If you know the berries are just going to make you...” I can’t bring myself to finish the sentence. “If you know about the effect they’re going to have, why would you eat them?”

He looks at me, and now his handsome face is mischievous. “Well... they do more than make one’s cock hard.”

Yeah, they make you need sex so badly it hurts, I say in my head, but thankfully not out loud. “What other reason would you take them?”

Karlo chuckles. “Perhaps I should not say. Karvok tells me humans can be uncomfortable about these things.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, come on, I’m not 12 years old. You can tell me. I promise I won’t *be uncomfortable.*”

No more comfortable than I already am, at least.

He hesitates, then shrugs. “If you, ah, *have a climax* after eating a passionberry, it will be... strong. A lot stronger than usual. And it will be much easier to go over the edge.”

I have to resist letting out a soft moan. I can’t describe how much I want that, how much I *need* that. My whole body is tingling, begging for the kind of release it hasn’t had in a long time, since before I even landed on this stupid planet.

“Wait, did you just say ‘after eating a passionberry?’ Like, one single passionberry?”

Karlo looks at me gravely. “Yes. We dared not ever eat more than one. Even a tiny nibble of a berry is enough to send a fully grown Kyrzon into a fit of uncontrollable desire that will not abate for several days.”

I stare at him, the color draining from my cheeks. “*What?*”

He bursts out laughing at my horrified face. “I am only joking. The berries are not quite that strong. Once, I even ate three of them. That... that was quite a day. How many did you eat?”

“More than three,” I mumble.

“How many?” he repeats, struggling to contain his laughter.

“Like... maybe like ten.”

He lets out a guffaw. Normally my instinct would be to shrink, to feel laughed *at*, but with Karlo, the amusement on his face is so boyishly wholesome that, to my surprise, I don’t need to hide behind my guard.

Even as it becomes more unavoidably clear that ten berries was a *lot*.

“You really ate ten of them?” he asks, tending the fire with a stick.

“Something like that. I wasn’t counting.”

“And...” He hesitates, his face once again mischievous. “How do you feel?”

Oh god. How do I answer?

“... Fine,” I tell him finally, not meeting his eyes.

It looks like he wants to inquire more, but instead he stirs our meal in its pot.

“Will it be ready soon?” I ask, desperate for a change of topic.

He nods. “Soon. So you do not feel anything from the berries?”

You could probably cook dinner on my cheeks at this point. At the same time, an instinctive excitement surges through me at his question. This is a subject that interests him.

“Well... I didn't say that.”

“So you do feel something.”

I nod, staring desperately at the sand. My heart is racing now, and at this point I'm worried about creating a wet spot on his knee.

And then I steal a glance at his crotch, and I see the enormous bulge there in his cloth pants. And I realize he must know exactly what I'm going through.

And the knowledge of it is making him *hard*.

My pussy straight-up twitches, a whining, needy clench that nearly causes me to gasp. Karlo just watches me, keeping eye contact, his expression almost a smirk.

“You look like you are having a difficult time,” he says, more of a statement than a question.

“I'll... be okay,” I basically whimper.

“If you decide you would like *help*,” he grunts pointedly, “with your frustration. I am happy to assist.”

Wait, is he offering what I think he's offering? That's awfully forward of him. I short-circuit for a moment. I can't possibly say *yes*.

... Can I?

"I wouldn't want to impose on you," I stutter awkwardly, hating how lame it sounds even as I say it.

He reaches around me to stir the *verlax* root. "There is, of course, no pressure. But you would not be imposing."

"Do you even know what to do?"

He chuckles. "I am a fast learner."

Yeah, okay. I scoot from Karlo's knee back into his lap, mulling the proposition over. He puts his arms around me again, enveloping me in his wonderful warmth.

On the one hand, it's already mortifying enough to have been *offered*, much less to *accept*.

On the other hand, cuddling with him like I am now is just about the best thing ever. And it does seem like he's eager to please.

Also, my clit is *throbbing*.

"I could... consider that," I tell him in a trembling voice.

CHAPTER SIX

Karlo

Excitement surges through me, and my cock could not be any harder in my pants. Today, I am thankful for passionberries.

“I still don’t think you have any idea what you’re doing,” Mackenzie mutters, her face adorably flushed. “The female anatomy is a little more... complicated than what you’re used to.”

“Oh, hush, now,” I chide her, not remotely shaken by her teasing. “I will take care of you tonight. In *every* way you desire.”

She shifts on my lap, and I stifle a groan as her bottom presses against my hard cock. Fuck, I wish I could bend her over and push myself inside her right here, right now, right next to the fire.

“Have you even seen a woman naked before?”

A little growl rumbles in my throat. All my life, I have wanted that. Now, I get to do more than see.

I get to *touch*.

“No, but I intend to tonight,” I whisper in her ear, my urges growing increasingly animalistic. “Enough talk. I will touch you now, and you will instruct me.”

A shiver runs through her, and I don't think it's because she's cold. Ten passionberries must be having quite an effect on her.

“Yes, sir,” Mackenzie whispers.

I feel another growl rumbling up from somewhere primal, my cock straining against my pants. She's being submissive to me now. Trusting me to take charge.

Perhaps I am overconfident, but I intend to have her squirming.

My hands explore her front. Her clothes are freshly made by the device in the escape pod, and the fabric is soft to my touch. She gasps when my fingers slide over her breast, touching a little knob that I realize must be her nipple.

“You *are* cold,” I murmur, teasing it between my fingers through the thin material.

“Not... really,” she admits, her breathing becoming heavy. “It's what happens when a woman gets aroused.”

“What else happens?” I whisper, breathing my words directly into her ear. At the same time, I slide my hand under her shirt, clutching her breast despite the odd garment she wears under her shirt.

“How are you...” She pauses, letting out a breath that sounds almost like a moan. “How are you going to get me off if you don't even know what happens when I get turned on?”

She is trying to tease me, I believe. Or more likely to create humor, to make the situation less serious for herself. It strikes me that she is nervous, probably far more so than I am.

“Would you like me to stop?” I ask, releasing her nipple.

“N-no!” she whimpers, and I feel triumphant at the immediacy of her reply. “I mean, it’s okay. If you want.”

“I do want,” I say, my confidence growing. “Now, you were telling me what happens to you when you get aroused...”

She doesn’t answer, drawing in a deep breath as my hand moves lower, finding her inner thigh. To my surprise, it is slick with a wetness I did not expect.

“That’s what happens,” she rasps, starting to squirm. “Boys get hard, girls get wet.”

I can’t help it. I let out a groan of need, right into Mackenzie’s ear. She shivers again, then places her hand on mine and starts to guide it up her thigh. “Karlo, please. Touch me.”

She is wearing something underneath her skirt, some kind of human undergarment. My hand finds it, soaked with her wetness, and I trace my fingers over it, feeling the soft folds of her skin that lie below. The small human in my lap moans, grinding her hips against my hand.

“Show me how to touch you,” I whisper, stroking my fingers up and down.



Mackenzie

I've never felt like this before. Every part of me is buzzing, filled with excitement and need. Somehow, my nervousness is blunted, like those berries are giving me a glimpse of what it's like to not be constantly filled with worry and self-doubt. Karlo feels so big surrounding me, his hands confidently exploring the places that usually, no one gets to touch.

"Show me," he whispers, his voice sending goosebumps down my neck. "Show me what I need to do to make your toes curl."

"Try... try going under the panties," I say, my hand clutching his. "Or... I guess we could just take them off."

Karlo is eager to oblige. His fingers slip under the waistband of my underwear, and I lift my legs as he pulls them off. The night air feels cool on my wet pussy, something I can honestly say I've never experienced before.

Fuck it, I've never experienced any of this before.

The Kyrzon's fingers trace my slit, not going inside, but making me breathless. "Higher," I whisper, guiding his fingers to my clit. "Yes, right there. Yeah, just rub me little circles. *Just like that.*"

Karlo *is* a fast learner. He holds me tightly as he begins to circle my clit with his fingers, using just the right amount of pressure.

"Spread your legs for me, Mackenzie," he growls, using his other hand to push my thighs open wider. "There, that's better. Little human needs to make room for my big hands."

He's right, of course. The way I was clenching him with my thighs, even a regular-sized human hand would be having problems. I follow his lead, trying to force myself to relax.

"Sorry," I say. "It just feels really good."

"I want you to feel good," says Karlo, increasing the pressure just slightly. "I want to make you feel good as many times as you need tonight."

"Yes," I whimper, and the pleasure is shockingly, blindingly intense. "Karlo, please don't stop. Please don't stop."

I start to squirm uncontrollably, my climax tumbling closer. I can't believe how close I am. Only like twice ever have I been able to have an orgasm with a guy before. And now I'm about to slip over that edge with someone I'm not dating and honestly, barely now.

"I'm close," I gasp, squeezing Karlo's wrist. "Oh my god, I'm so close."

"Yesss," he rasps in my ear, his excitement palpable. "I've got you, Mackenzie. You can come for me. You're safe with me, and nothing else matters. Just let go and release. I want to see how beautiful you look when you have your climax."

I moan uncontrollably as my orgasm rips through me, more intense than I've ever experienced before. I barely know where I am, just that I'm safe and I don't want this to stop. I feel my muscles rippling, my pussy twitching as Karlo strokes me through wave and wave of pleasure.

I feel all shaky when reality returns and the waves of pleasure begin to fade. Karlo's hand is still on my crotch, now clutching it possessively.

"Feeling a little better now?" he purrs.

"Yeah, a little," I say, right before my pussy gives another needy twitch.

My body definitely wants more. But I feel awkward now that there's a little bit of clarity in my brain. This whole thing feels almost... transactional, like he helped me scratch an itch on my back that I couldn't reach.

That's not how I wanted this to feel. I want sex to be intimate. Not some... weird one-night stand that all started because I ate some berries.

"You are so beautiful," says Karlo. "I like the way your body twitches when you climax."

I guess that... passes for romance. I'll take it, for now. If there's one nice thing about Karlo, it's that it's pretty hard to be insecure about my body around him. The guy really couldn't be any more obvious that he likes what he sees.

And also, that he wants to see *more*.

"There is... another way I would like to take care of you tonight," he offers carefully, still holding onto my pussy like a treasured possession.

"Yes?"

“I could please you with my mouth. As I just did with my fingers.”

Bold. Bold, bold, bold. This guy is seriously determined to make me blush all night.

And yet, I already know that I am fully, 100 percent going to take him up on his offer. Even if the thought of having him so up close and personal with my lady parts makes me squirm.

“Where... where would we even do that?” We’re on a beach, after all, and I’m pretty sure my hoo-ha is one place I would *not* like to get a bunch of sand.

“There are blankets in the carts. I could spread one out next to the fire.”

I mean, how is a girl supposed to resist? Getting eaten out on the beach right next to a fire, *and* not getting sand in any of my cracks and crevices? That’s pretty much the full package.

“I mean... I guess we could try that.”

For some reason, I still feel the need to act cagey about this, like I don’t want it as much as I do. But Karlo just grins, as though he sees right through my cool façade.

“You guess?” he says, standing up and giving my butt a little pat as he helps me off his lap, “or you want?”

“I want,” I admit shyly.

A moment later, he’s back with a blanket, which he spreads out carefully next to the fire.

“Sit right here,” he rasps, pointing to the blanket.

I do so, glad to be able to follow his lead. Despite his inexperience, Karlo is still calm and confident. I have to admit I find that really attractive.

He crouches down on the blanket in front of me, and now my heart is racing. Being fingered in his lap was one thing. But this is so much more. I feel incredibly vulnerable with only my thin skirt hiding me from him.

“Spread your legs,” Karlo whispers, positioning himself in between them. The look on his face is hungry, expectant, as though all he cares about in the world is this single moment.

I do as he says, parting my thighs and clinging to the last moment where the draping of my skirt prevents me from being fully exposed to him.

And then he flips my skirt up, baring me completely.

Something flashes across his face, some kind of primal, animal need. He looks up at me, and when he speaks, his voice is husky. “What do you call this?” he asks, surprising me. “What is the human word?”

“Pussy,” I croak, face burning.

“Your pussy is perfect,” says Karlo firmly. “And the way you smell is...” Immediately, I cringe. The last thing I want is a guy ever commenting on my smell. “You smell like a flower I want to have always on my nose.”

Ah, well. Okay, then. Comment away, if you’re going to say *that* kind of thing.

And then Karlo does something I didn't expect: he gives a sweet, gentle little kiss to my inner thigh.

And then another.

And another.

Trailing upwards, making a slow, steady line up to where my clit is absolutely *burning* with need.

My last boyfriend went down on me a few times. Only ever when asked, and frankly, I didn't get the impression that he enjoyed it very much. To be honest, it's kind of killed my interest in the whole thing for a while.

Karlo enjoys it. That much is very, *very* clear. He takes his time kissing up my leg, and then instead of moving to my clit, his lips find my other thigh, kissing down to my knee.

"Nooo," I whimper, pussy twitching desperately. "Karlo, please."

He just smirks at me. "Patience, little one. You will get what you want when *I* decide, and not before."

If my ex-boyfriend had said that to me, it probably would have pissed me off. But when Karlo does it, all it does is turn me on even more.

Because when Karlo does it, there's no doubt in my mind that this experience will end with me getting to come.

I whimper as Karlo makes his way down my other leg, all of my attention focused on what he's doing with his lips. God,

that feels nice. It almost tickles, but it's just on the other side of that line, just enough to send chills through me.

He makes his way back and I inhale, painfully eager. He lingers over my pussy, which twitches again as it feels his hot breath. A smile curls his lips, eyes fixed.

I want so badly for him to lick me. Every part of me is so incredibly sensitive, my clit swollen and needy. If he keeps me in suspense much longer, I think I might die. He moves his mouth forward, not even an inch, and I moan.

Karlo smirks. "Perhaps you are right. I do not know my way around a woman's body. Shall I stop?"

I wriggle in frustration. "You're torturing me!"

He smiles, his eyes heavy-lidded. Then, without a word, he gives me a long, slow lick.

I gasp, his tongue warm and wet and soft all at the same time. He keeps licking, again and again, and each time, a shiver of pleasure ripples through me.

"I want you to come for me again, Mackenzie," Karlo whispers, making eye contact. "Can you do that for me?"

I nod frantically, my breathing heavy. I can definitely do that.

His mouth returns to my pussy, and now each lick is heaven. I feel my brain clearing like never before, focusing on the moment, and not on all the bullshit that usually keeps my attention in a million places. This is bliss. This is perfect. I'm close. I'm so close.

“Karlo, I’m coming,” I moan, my hips starting to shake. He grips my thighs, holding me in place, and I straight up *scream* as I’m destroyed by a shattering climax.

Immediately, I feel a hand go over my mouth.

“Shh,” Karlo whispers, circling me with his thumb between licks. “Just keep coming for me.”

I vocalize into his hand until my orgasm fades. Then I look up at him, my head still spinning, and I have no idea how to react.

Yesterday, I had a crush on this guy and was avoiding him as much as I could. Now I’m quivering in front of him while he licks me off his lips, face still in between my legs.

And then my eyes land on the bulge at his crotch, just as big as it was before.

“I think you should have a turn now,” I whisper.



Karlo

I let out a barely controlled grunt. My turn? What does that mean? My cock is already as hard as if I had taken ten passionberries myself. I would slip it inside her right now if she would have me, and thrust until I fill her with my seed. I would do this every minute of every day until her belly was swollen.

“You wish me to claim you?” I growl. “As a man takes his mate?”

Mackenzie's eyes go wide. "Mate? I don't... Let's take it one thing at a time here, pal. Why don't you take those pants off for me."

Now she is taking charge, as I did before. This excites me. I would like to know exactly what plans she has that involve me taking off my pants.

I undo the drawstring, and my pants fall to the ground. She stares at me, her eyes getting even wider.

"This is the same thing that human males have, yes?" I ask, gesturing to my cock.

She gulps. "Yes. Although human males are somewhat... smaller." Mackenzie scoots closer to me, kneeling at my feet. I can feel my heart hammering in my chest, and now my breathing is as heavy as hers was not long ago. My cock is swollen, purple, ready to burst.

I shudder as she takes me in her hand. Never in my life have I had another person touch me there. She looks up at me as she grips my shaft, and her face is so beautiful I cannot believe my luck. I adore this woman. She doesn't know it, but I would do anything for her.

Her hand moves, just barely, and a flood of pleasure comes over me with such speed and intensity that I cannot hold it back. I breathe throaty grunts as my cock begins to twitch and milky cum squirts out of the tip.

"Whoa, there, big guy!" Mackenzie laughs, angling me toward the ground but continuing to stroke. "Okay, yeah, let's let it all

out.”

I gasp, momentarily overwhelmed. When my pleasure fades, I am embarrassed. I did not mean to release so quickly.

But Mackenzie does not seem disappointed. She smiles, then gives the tip of my cock a little kiss.

“There,” she says, grinning. “Now we’re both doing a little better.”



Mackenzie

Karlo and I burned the shit out of the *verlax* root while we were fooling around. Absolutely massacred it, just fried it to a crisp. As we wander now, foraging for more, the dynamic between us is comfortable, but my head is spinning. What the hell are we now? We’ve both made each other come, but we haven’t even kissed? I’m pretty sure that’s more than friends, but a lot less than boyfriend-girlfriend. Although something tells me they don’t have that concept on this planet.

Mate. That was the word Karlo used, the word Karvok uses for Ramsey. That’s what they do in the Kyrzon culture. They take mates for life.

I want that. I’ve always wanted that. I wanted that on Earth, although my mental image was of a human man, not a Kyrzon.

But how does that happen here? It’s a little early for Karlo and I to be life partners. But I also don’t want to be, you know,

nothing to each other.

I also don't want to put pressure on him. It's not like I'm the only woman on the island. If I cling to him too hard, I'll only drive him away.

So I don't bring it up, as much as I would like to. I'll let him do that. If he wants me, well, it's not like I haven't made my interest clear.



Karlo

My head is whirling from my experience with Mackenzie. All of my life, I have craved what we did together. Now, all I want is more.

But that is not all I want. It is not only carnal pleasure that I seek with Mackenzie.

She is the woman I would make my mate. The one who I would have bear my children.

And yet I know from my brother Karvok that with humans, it is not so simple. His mate Ramsey has been quite insistent that the courting process takes time, and should not be rushed.

And so I will not be so forward right away, as much as my heart desires it. I will not rush the courting process.

Above all, I cannot lose her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mackenzie

“Karlo! Mackenzie!”

Voices. Men and women. In the distance, but getting louder. It must be a group from the island come to search for us. I stir in the bedroll we took from one of the carts, still groggy.

Karlo is still sleeping, his arms wrapped around me tightly. Falling asleep with him last night was one of the nicest experiences I can remember having in a long time. I felt so safe, so protected, so warm. If I could go to bed like that every night, I think that would make me really happy.

“Mackenzie! Karlo! We have supplies if you need them!”

That sounds like Ramsey. It occurs to me as I blink away my sleepiness that at any moment, a whole group of humans and Kyrzons could walk in on us snuggling together. That’s enough to make me sit up. The thought of being the center of attention like that, of having everyone know I like Karlo, and then feeling bad for me when it inevitably doesn’t work out, makes me want to curl into a ball.

Karlo stirs.

“Good morning,” I say, trying to seem cool. I feel awkward now. Like the spell is broken. Now my priority isn’t to feel good, it’s to avoid getting hurt.

“Good morning, Mackenzie,” he grins. “Are you feeling better from the—”

“Yes, much better,” I cut him off as quickly as I can. The last thing I want is for someone to overhear that I ate a bunch of passionberries. I don’t want *anyone* to know about that. “A group from the island is nearby. I just heard them calling for us.”

For some reason, Karlo looks disappointed. “That is good,” he says unconvincingly.

I’m disappointed, too. Last night together was magical, and I don’t want it to be over. I wish we had spent more time talking to each other. I feel like I hardly know Karlo.

“There you guys are!”

Ramsey, Lara, and Karvok come through the trees. Karlo greets his brother, and I get hugs from Lara and Ramsey. Then we all walk back to the beach, me with my friends and the two Kyrzons ahead of us, and it’s like last night never even happened.



Karlo

I spend the next day going mad with worry. Now that I have had a taste of Mackenzie, she is all I can think about. I am even more distracted than I was before. The thought of her not being mine, of anyone else having her, is almost enough to send me into a frenzy.

Our interactions since that night on the mainland have been polite, but that is all they have been. No one around us knows what we did together, and it maddens me. Not because I wish to share the details of our intimacy, but because it means Mackenzie remains unclaimed.

Fuck unclaimed. Mackenzie is mine. But I do not know how best to make her so. I cannot simply declare it. I fear that if I do, it will scare her away.

But as the day continues, I realize I have to act. Whatever there is between us, I must not allow it to fade away.

And so I seek out Ramsey, the human I know best. Much of my knowledge of human customs comes from her. Perhaps she will have some insight.

I find her in the camp that night after dinner. “Ramsey? Can I talk to you?”

She squints through the darkness, then smiles as she recognizes me. “Hey, Karlo. Of course. What’s up?”

“Can we take a walk?” I ask pointedly. “I... do not wish to be overheard.”

She raises her eyebrows, but nods. “Yeah, for sure. I’ll let you lead the way.”

Over time, we are developing pathways through the forest on the island. Trails that are reinforced every time they are walked. I lead Ramsey away from the camp, along one such pathway.

“Geez, okay, we’re really going out there. What’s all the secrecy about?”

“There is no secret,” I grunt.

“So you just felt like taking a scenic walk with me after dark?”

This makes me chuckle. I see why my brother likes this one.

“I wanted to ask you about courting.”

She pauses, and I believe her face is amused. “...Okay, courting. Got it. Like courting a woman, you mean?”

“Yes. I wish to know a human would prefer to be claimed.”

She bumps me playfully. “Ooh, Karlo, does somebody have a *crush*?”

“I do not know this word,” I mutter, although I take her meaning quite plainly.

“You know, you kind of suck at asking for help.”

“I am not asking for help!” I all-but growl, my defensive instincts overpowering me. I do not *need help* like a mewling infant. I am the one who helps others.

She just looks at me, eyebrows raised.

I shake my head. “I am sorry. I... I am asking for help. It is not easy for me.”

Ramsey smiles. “That’s quite alright. So, you want help flirting?”

“I want help acquiring a mate,” I insist. “Anything short of that is not what I seek.”

My brother’s mate seems to find my words funny. “Well,” she says, “I know I’ve mentioned this before, but step 1 isn’t making her your mate. You have to *get to know her* first. Feel out what your chemistry is, see if you’re compatible and if she feels the same way.”

I blink. “Chemistry?”

“Sorry, it’s a term from Earth. On the planet we come from, usually people do something called *dating*.”

My heartbeat quickens. “And what is *dating*?”

“It’s like... You do things together. Spend time together. Like special friends. On Earth, you might go to dinner together.”

“I always eat dinner around the campfire,” I say automatically. “How does this become a date?”

“Honestly, it probably doesn’t,” she admits. “A date would be like... Just the two of you. With no one around. A walk like this could be a date.”

“That was not what I intended,” I clarify quickly, hoping I have not caused offense. “The women I seek is... elsewhere.”

“I know, I know,” Ramsey chuckles, patting me on the arm. “Maybe you should ask Mackenzie to watch the sunset with you. That would be pretty romantic.”

I freeze. “I did not say Mackenzie.”

“And you didn’t have to. I saw the way you looked at her on the way back to the island this morning. It’s...” She blushes. “It’s the same way Karvok looks at me.”

I look down. I had not meant to be so obvious in my affection. “Does everyone know?”

“No!” Ramsey assures me hurriedly. “I mean, I doubt it. But Karlo, you’re not as subtle as you think. If you keep mooning over her, people are going to notice.”

Conviction rushes through me. “I must claim her quickly.”

“You should try to *date* her quickly,” she corrects me. “Save the *claiming* part for later. See if she’d like to do something together.”

“Do you believe she will say yes?”

Ramsey gives me a shrug. “That’s a question you’ll have to ask her.”



Mackenzie

I’m walking back to my tent from dinner when I see Karlo out of the corner of my eye. I do my best to be nonchalant, not breaking my stride. This is casual for me. Not a big deal.

“Mackenzie,” he greets me, moving in my direction.

“Hey, Karlo,” I reply, hoping I sound cool and normal.

He hesitates, then glances around, as though worried someone will overhear. “Would you like... would you like to date me?”

I practically fall over in surprise. “What?”

“I thought... Maybe you would like to take a walk on the beach with me. We could watch the sunset.”

My heart starts to pump faster. “Uh... okay. Yeah, watching the sunset sounds nice. I’m in.”

He grins, and more broadly than I would have expected. I have to work consciously to lower my guard. Instinctively, I worry that he’s playing with me, that this ends with me being the butt of a joke.

But I really do like him. So, as I follow him out of the camp, I do my best to push my insecurities to the side.

“It’s, uh, nice to be back at camp,” I say awkwardly.

“Yeah,” he agrees.

Man, this is awkward. Neither of us is mentioning what happened last night. I certainly don’t have the guts to. In fairness, it’s no less awkward than the handful of dates I had on Earth.

Of course, in those cases, I was on a date with a guy who *didn’t* already know what my pussy tastes like.

Oh god, what do I do?

I feel a little more comfortable once we leave the camp. Something about being observed in romantic situations always

makes me cringe. Without an audience, hopefully I can figure out how to act more like myself.

“Do you have everything you need here?” Karlo asks me finally.

That’s not what I expected him to say. I guess I don’t know what I expected. But not that.

I try to gather my thoughts. The truth is, in some ways, I’m happier on this planet than I ever was on Earth. On Earth, I was a loner. The awkward girl without any friends. On Kyrzon, I have a whole group of people who seem to like me and care about me. Sometimes it feels too good to be true. Like I’m just an imposter, and pretty soon, everyone will realize how plain and boring and awkward I actually am.

I decide to try a joke. “Well, going to the bathroom outside isn’t exactly my favorite.”

Oh no. Criiiiinge. Why did I say that? Why the hell am I talking about going to the bathroom?

“What is a bathroom?” Karlo asks.

Well, I guess I got lucky there. I am *definitely* going to take this out and change the topic.

“Nothing,” I chuckle nervously. “Never mind.”

“You did not answer my question,” Karlo insists, grinning. “How is it for you, living on this planet? Is there anything you need that *I* could provide?”

Is this his way of trying to get laid? Sure seems like it is. It may have worked for him last time, but I've got no passionberries in me this time. And unfortunately, it confirms my suspicion that his intentions here really aren't serious. Or at least, I don't have any reason to believe he likes me for more than the fact that I was willing to fool around with him. And I guess it's hard to blame him, considering he's never had that chance his whole life.

But that's not what I want. I want the romance, to feel *cared* about. Whoever left that flower on my bed? That's closer to what I'm looking for.

"I like it here," I tell him simply. "I'm still getting used to it, but right now, I have everything I need. Thanks for offering."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Karlo

My “date” with Mackenzie did not go as planned. I had hoped to bring myself closer to her, to recapture some of the magic from that night we spent on the mainland. But it seems that I have failed. Over the next two weeks, her behavior toward me is respectful, but frosty.

On the outside, I am calm. On the inside, I am burning for her.

Tonight, our group has planned a party. There will be freshly-made sugarfruit wine and something of a feast. Most of our number are excited.

I am not. There is nothing for me to celebrate. And the thought of Mackenzie potentially falling for someone else during the festivities fills me with angst.

“Is everything okay?” Ramsey asks me as we sit around the fire eating and drinking. “You’re barely touching your food.”

“I am fine,” I sigh, but I know she doesn’t believe me. She alone knows what ails me.

“You should give it another try tonight,” she whispers in my ear.

“I believe... I believe she is not interested in me,” I whisper back, the words paining me to speak.

Ramsey looks like she wants to say something, but is trying to figure out how best to phrase it. “Look,” she says finally, her voice lowered so that only I can hear it. “I would never share anything that was told to me in confidence. And that goes for you, too, by the way. But... just trust me and give it another try? Make it clear that your feelings are serious. Don’t make it seem like it’s just... physical.”

“That my feelings are serious?” I sputter, affronted. “What else would they be? I do not desire a plaything. I desire a mate.”

“I know, I know. But on Earth... it’s not always like that. Sometimes two people get intimate, and then one of them isn’t interested in more. I know you aren’t like that, but does she?”

I glance around, verifying that our whispered conversation is not drawing anyone’s attention. Thankfully, all seem occupied with food and drink. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mackenzie laughing with Lara and Jenny. She looks over at me, and for a moment we make eye contact. Then she looks away.

“I believe I have made my interest clear,” I tell Ramsey gruffly. “It was you who said I should not come on too strong.”

She raises an eyebrow. “I don’t think you’ve made that clear. How many times have you even talked to her over the last week? None that I’ve seen.”

My instinct is to argue with her, but she is right. I have been so scared of driving Mackenzie away that perhaps I have not truly communicated my interest. I do not know what I did wrong last time. I do not wish to make another mistake.

In fairness, she has been difficult to find.

“Your words are true,” I admit, staring glumly at the cup of wine I have only sipped once.

Ramsey laughs. “Oh, cheer up! We’re having a party. You haven’t ruined anything, and this is the perfect opportunity. Go pretend you’re in a good mood.”

I can’t help but smile. Ramsey is a good friend. “Thanks,” I say.

Karvok joins us, his leaf of food heaping with a second portion. “Life is good today, brother!” he says loudly, clapping me on the back. “We have food and drink, our tribe has a home, and things are as they should be.”

Ramsey throws me a sympathetic look as I do my best to return my brother’s smile. I know I should be happy. But now, I have to follow Ramsey’s advice. I will not surrender the thing I want most in this world.



Mackenzie

I try not to keep glancing at Karlo and Ramsey as they sit next to each other, talking. I know I've done the smart thing by keeping my distance. I'm not ready for another heartbreak.

But it hurts. I really liked Karlo, and for that one night, it almost felt like he liked me, too. And maybe he does, in his own way. Unfortunately, I know myself. I get attached too easily when I'm intimate with a guy. Hell, I get attached even when I'm *not* intimate.

Attached like I am now, even though I'm trying not to be.

"Just go talk to him," Jenny urges. "It's not like..." She giggles. "It's not like you don't know he's interested."

Part of me regrets telling my friends about what happened between us. Like, not *really*. It's nice to have friends to tell things to. But being the only member of my little group with a... *whatever this is* going on, I've become the center of their attention in a way that makes me really anxious. Right now, as I sit here trying to enjoy the party, I wish they didn't know.

"I know he likes me in *that* way," I sigh. "These guys have been without women for years, it isn't exactly a revelation. I'm not looking for that."

I glance over again, but Karlo is gone. Now it's just Ramsey and Karvok, and they look like they're having a grand old time. Closer to us, a mixed group of humans and Kyrzons sits nearby, everybody laughing as one of the men tells an animated story.

“How about this,” says Jenny. “Why are we sitting by ourselves? Let’s go talk to some Kyrzons.”

“I’m not in the mood,” says Lara.

I shake my head. “Sorry, me neither.”

Jenny shrugs. “Suit yourselves! I’m not going to stay here moping.” And with that, she leaves us to go socialize.

“So, what’s your deal?” I ask Lara. “Seems like we’re on the same page about being super lame tonight.”

She winces. “I’m... not good at parties. Groups in general. My...” She gulps. “My ex-fiancé used to really help with that.”

My jaw almost drops. “What? Wow, I’m sorry, I had no idea you used to be engaged. Was it recent?”

She nods, looking down. “Literally, the last thing I remember happening to me on Earth was him telling me he wasn’t coming with me. That once we actually got a spot on a ship leaving the planet, he realized he changed his mind and wanted to stay. But you know, I was free to go if I wanted, and no hard feelings, he’ll be fine without me.” She grimaces. “Yeah, *that’s* how my six-year relationship ended.”

I put an arm around her in sympathy. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry! What a way to—aw, Lara, that must be really hard. I can’t imagine how I would feel. That sucks. He didn’t deserve you.”

“I’m managing,” she says dejectedly. “But yeah, it sucks. Just... don’t tell anyone, okay? I fucking hate it when people

feel bad for me.”

“Of course, I won’t say anything.”

Lara glances over my shoulder, and her eyes focus on something. “Karlo is coming this way,” she whispers, looking back at me.

A moment later, he appears next to me, looking particularly handsome in a freshly fabricated set of clothes. I gulp, my mouth immediately dry. I’ve been hoping over the last two weeks things would go back to normal. But whenever I’m around him, my heart always races. It’s stupid. Part of me wonders if I was the one who fucked things up. Maybe if I hadn’t hooked up with him right away, I wouldn’t be feeling so vulnerable. I’m sure his attentions aren’t bad. But I feel like I’ve set the expectation that I’m a hookup kind of girl, and I’ve learned from experience that that’s not somebody I can be.

“May I talk to you?” Karlo asks, his voice low, but strangely determined.

Lara looks at me for approval. I nod. She shrugs, then picks up her leaf and heads to a nearby campfire, giving us some space.

I wait for Karlo to start, and I’m annoyed to notice that I feel butterflies in my stomach. *Be cool.*

“I have been thinking about what happened between us,” he grunts, making eye contact. I look down, my cheeks warming. So have I. More than I would like to admit.

Karlo grimaces as though frustrated. “I would... I am not good at this. With words. Ramsey has been giving me advice, but I

think I am bad at following it.”

Ramsey? What the hell does she have to do with this?

“I would like to date you,” he says finally, still looking at my face. “And one day, perhaps, to be your mate.”

That’s... *really* sweet. I feel myself melting at his words, almost enough to start ignoring the little voice that warns me I’m going to get hurt.

“You... you want to date me? I didn’t know Kyrzons had... dating.”

“We do not,” he chuckles, seeming more comfortable now that the words are out. “Perhaps that is why it has been difficult for me to take the lead. I want you to know I am serious about you. You are not just someone I am playing with.”

“That’s... nice,” I stutter, my cheeks instantly burning. Shit, what the hell is wrong with me? That’s *nice*? “Uh, I mean... Yeah. Okay. I’d like that, too.”

Karlo’s face breaks into a broad grin. “Perhaps we could sit together. Somewhere with just the two of us.”

I’m on the same page about that. The fewer people observing us, noticing that we have a thing together, the better. Not until I know I have something solid.

“Let’s go back to my tent,” I suggest. “It should be empty.”

I’m worried he’s going to take my hand, holding it for everyone to see, but he doesn’t. And then I realize, to my chagrin, that I’m disappointed. As we approach my tent, I hear

some kind of muffled noise, but it stops when we reach the entrance. Karlo doesn't seem to notice.

I pull open the flap. "Yeah, this should be a good place for us to—"

Both of us freeze. The tent isn't empty. Instead, we're treated to an eyeful of Beth's naked breasts bobbing up and down, a strong set of hands gripping her waist as she rides on top of...

"Ruke?" Karlo grunts. "Is that you?"

Beth stares at us like a deer in the headlights. Ruke looks up too, his face more pleased with himself than guilty.

"Sorry!" I squeak, shoving Karlo out of the tent and closing the flap behind us. "We'll leave you guys alone!"

Sorry Beth, I think as we hurry away. I guess we're all going to have to get used to living in close quarters.

Hopefully soon, we can build some more tents.

CHAPTER NINE

Mackenzie

I can't help giggling the moment we're out of earshot of the tent. "Oh my gosh, Beth and Ruke... I actually didn't see that one coming!"

"I also did not expect it," says Karlo. He looks back at the center of the camp, where most of our group are still laughing and feasting at the three campfires we have set up. "Perhaps we should try my tent. I can see Roshkat now, and I would be very surprised to find Jura in there with a woman."

I nod, and I follow him to his tent. It's the same size as mine, but holds only three Kyrzons, compared to four humans.

But this one isn't empty, either. Thankfully, it's only one person, rather than a couple.

"Shivka?" Karlo says as we step inside. "What are you doing in here?"

His sister, the only female of the group, looks back at us. She seems to be whittling something with a stone knife, and she

raises her eyebrows at her brother. “Should I ask you the same thing?”

I blush as her eyes fall to me.

“I will not explain myself,” says Karlo, and immediately, I get a hint of that certain dynamic that exists between siblings. I guess that’s one way Kyrzons are so different from humans.

“Can you not carve your stick in your own tent?”

Shivka laughs. “Oh, don’t be so serious. I would be in my own tent, but it is... occupied.” The look on her face gives me a pretty good idea of what the people occupying her tent are doing. That’s a party for you: bringing people together.

“My tent, too,” I say sympathetically. I don’t know Shivka well, but it can’t hurt to be friendly with her if I’m going to be dating her brother. “Karlo, do you want to take a walk? We can let Shivka hang out in here.”

He nods. “Yes, that is a good idea.”

“Thanks,” says Shivka. “Have a nice walk, you two.”



“Not much for parties, is she, your sister?”

“No,” Karlo grunts. “She has never been one for lighthearted activities. I think, sometimes, she is only truly comfortable when she is on the hunt.”

I suppose that explains how she’s managed to stay single all this time, the only Kyrzon woman in a group of men. Also

probably why I so rarely see her around camp.

“And she’s always been that way?”

It looks down. “Yes. As long as I can remember. Our upbringing was... hard on her.”

There’s something somber in his voice that tugs at my heartstrings. “Was it hard on you, too?” I ask him quietly.

He doesn’t answer me right away. “Yes,” he says finally. “It was hard on all of us. In different ways.” Then he shakes his head, as though snapping himself out of a memory. “But now, we hope that life will not be so hard. We have a home now. And women to start families with.”

“Is that something that’s important to you?” I ask him cautiously. “Starting a family?”

He nods. “It is what I have always wanted. Children. A mate. The people closest to me to share my tent. What about you?”

His words bring a warmth to me. “Yeah. I’ve always wanted to be a mother. Just... you know. Looking for my person.”

He stops. We’re out of the camp now, making our way in the direction of the beach. Around us, insects chirp, and waves rush lazily in the background.

“What?” I ask, nearly ruining the moment.

“Nothing,” he grunts. “Just...”

God, we’re both so awkward. I want to kiss him. I wish I wasn’t so—

And then he slowly raises his hand and begins to stroke my cheek. The butterflies in my stomach dance and I look up at him, his touch sending excited tingles through me. He leans down, and our faces are very close together now.

“Sometimes, I wonder if you are my person,” Karlo breathes, his voice barely more than a whisper. “I...”

He trails off, and for a moment, I don’t know why. Then I see him staring at the sky behind me, and I turn around.

I see what looks like a falling star. But bright. Really bright. It gets bigger and bigger as it falls, too big, way too big, *holy shit, this thing literally is going to crash right into us*, and then it disappears behind the tree line and the ground rumbles.

“That is what Karvok said he saw,” Karlo breathes. “A falling star.”

He must be right. The only explanation that makes sense to me is that what we just saw is an escape pod like ours, one that, for some reason, lingered in space before reaching the planet.

“It sounds like it landed close to here,” I say in amazement. “Karlo, there could be other humans in there.”

He grins. “Let’s go find it.”

“What? Right now?”

“Yes,” he says, taking my hand. “It’s an adventure. Will you go on an adventure with me, Mackenzie?”

I’ve never exactly been the adventurous sort. But the way he’s looking at me, I can’t turn him down. And in any case, if there

are survivors in that escape pod, I'd want to help them.

And on top of everything, I *love* that he's holding my hand.

"Let's go."

Karlo smiles boyishly, starts to walk, then stops.

"What?" I ask.

He hesitates, then he leans down and kisses me on the lips. I freeze in shock, then melt into him, kissing him back with all the extremely limited skill I have. It's an awkward kiss, but it's *our* kiss.

"There," he says, and he looks happier than I've ever seen him. "I just needed to do that."

I have a spring in my step as we walk toward the beach, holding his hand.

CHAPTER TEN

Mackenzie

“I think I see something,” I whisper to Karlo, peering down the beach.

“Where?” he whispers back excitedly.

I point to the dark shape on the shoreline. “That looks like an escape pod, right? Doesn’t that look like ours?”

“I... I think so,” says Karlo. “Only one way to find out!”

He quickens his pace, pulling me along with him. I skip down the beach, my heart light. I’m having a wonderful time exploring the island with Karlo. This is so much better than I thought this night would turn out.

Turns out the big guy is actually pretty sweet. He makes me want to go out of my comfort zone, because I just feel so *safe* with him.

“That’s definitely an escape pod,” I breathe as we get closer.

“It is,” Karlo agrees. “I do not see any humans. Perhaps they are sleeping.”

I scratch my head. “Could be. They could also be hiding inside. When we first landed here, we were terrified to leave the pod. We didn’t end up doing it until it was light.”

He looks at me. “Well, what do you think is best? Would it be better to call on them now, or wait until the morning? We do not wish to frighten them.”

I have to take a moment to think about it. It’s obvious he trusts my judgment, and I’m not used to that.

“I think we should try to make contact with them now,” I decide. “If someone got injured during the landing, we might be able to help.”

“Good thinking,” says Karlo. “And perhaps you should greet them before I do.”

I snort. “Yeah, I think that’s definitely a good idea. Sorry, big guy, but I think you’d scare the shit out of them just like Karvok did Ramsey.”

Karlo stands a little behind me as I creep closer to the pod. It’s sitting just on the edge of the beach, in that section of wet sand that the waves are constantly flowing over. Unfortunately, the door seems to be on the other side, the side *facing* the ocean.

“The door is on the other side,” I hiss to Karlo. “I can’t reach it without getting in the water.”

“Careful,” he says quickly. “Dangers lurk within the water.”

As though I needed to be told that. I linger just at the edge of the dry sand, peering at the large metal sphere.

“Hellooo,” I call out, trying to strike a balance between making myself heard, but not calling every predator nearby to our location. “Is anyone in there? In the escape pod? We want to help you. We crash landed here, too.”

No answer. Just the rushing of waves.

I try again, also with no response. Finally, and to Karlo’s displeasure, take a moment while the waves have receded to run up and knock a few times on the side of the pod.

“Are you crazy?” he says, rushing over to me, picking me up by my waist, and carrying me out of the water. “I also want to help these humans. But not if it means losing you.”

“I’m fine,” I reassure him. Part of me is annoyed by his exaggerated concern, but the other part is pleased. The way he clearly cares about my well-being is actually kind of touching.

“I would not have you eaten by some water serpent,” he growls. “I will go around to the other side of the pod and knock on its door.”

I shake my head. “So, what, you open the door, and a group of terrified humans sees a seven-foot-tall Kyrzon staring back at them? It has to be me. You’ll scare the crap out of them.”

“Together,” Karlo insists. “You are right that they should see a human. But you are not going in the water alone.”

“Together,” I agree.

The Kyrzon takes my hand, and together, we wade into the water.

“Does this escape pod look different to you?” I murmur, staring out in the dim light.

“I do not know,” growls Karlo, his eyes scanning the tide around us. “But let us move quickly. The waters are not safe.”

“Trying,” I reply. “Computer, open the door.”

It doesn’t budge. Shit. On our pod, there’s a button to the right of the door that you can press to open it. I don’t see that on this one.

“Mackenzie,” Karlo hisses, his voice tight. “To our left.”

I turn sharply to the left. “I don’t see any—”

“Shhh,” says Karlo, giving me a warning look and pointing. “There.”

I follow his finger just in time to see an enormous shape slinking behind the escape pod, the side without the door. So basically, blocking our way back up the beach.

“Okay. Shit,” I whisper, panic surging through me. “That’s a crockjaw. Does it know we’re here?”

“I don’t know,” says Karlo. “Do you think you can get that door open?”

I don’t want to risk speaking out loud to the computer again. But I don’t know what else to try. Without the button, I’m at a loss.

“Computer,” I whisper, “please, *please* open the door.”

Nothing doing. I wonder if there’s a group of people in there, hiding, terrified of us.

Or terrified of the crockjaw.

“Mackenzie,” whispers Karlo, his hand moving toward the knife at his waist, “it’s moving closer to us.”

I can hear it. Moving through the water. Slowly. Like it’s hunting.

The hair on the back of my neck starts to prickle. Already, the water is at my knees, deeper than it was before. I can see the dark shape moving through the water, about to come around to our side of the pod...

There! On the left side of the door, and higher up! I didn’t even see it in the dark. I slam the button and the door springs open. Karlo and I launch ourselves into the pod, relief washing over me.

To my surprise, this new pod appears to be empty. “Computer,” I announce confidently, “shut the door!”

“*Beasting!*” a computerized female voice replies cheerily, and the door stays open.

“Um, was that what was supposed to happen?” asks Karlo, his eyes fixed on the crockjaw on the other side of the door.

“No, obviously not. Computer, shut the door!”

“*That’s darn tootin’*,” the computer replies.

The lights in the pod are off, but even by the hazy moonlight, I can see the gargantuan shape of the crockjaw looming up on us, eyes and teeth glinting. This escape pod was supposed to keep us safe.

Instead, we're caught in a trap.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mackenzie

“Computer!” I scream as the crockjaw closes in, “for the love of all that is holy, shut the motherfucking escape pod door!”

The door closes. Just like that.

“Oh my...” I fall against Karlo, shaking with relief. “That was—wow, we really almost just died.”

Karlo holds me tightly, surrounding me with his comforting warmth. “I am glad that we did not. I have only kissed you once. I would like to do that many more times.”

I giggle. “For that, we’re going to have to turn on a light. Computer, lights to 10 percent.”

To my surprise, the computer does just as I request, bringing up the lights to a dim, but comfortable setting.

“Okay, computer, what the fuck? Why are you working now, but you’ll do fuck all to help when we’re about to get annihilated by a monster?”

“Experiencing errors,” the computer tells me, its voice slightly garbled. *“Crash damage. Would you like a toast?”*

I can’t help but snort. “Sure, computer. I would love a toast.”

“Toasting!” announces the voice gleefully, and a moment later, I hear pop music playing in the background.

“This is a very strange escape pod,” says Karlo, looking absolutely flummoxed. “What is this sound?”

“That’s music,” I laugh. “Don’t Kyrzons have music?”

“I have heard drums. Singing. Once, a flute. I have never heard music like this.”

“Yeah, honestly, I’ve never liked this song. Computer, turn off the music.”

“Toast time!”

“I think we’re just gonna have to live with the music for now. Check this place out!”

It’s immediately clear that this escape pod is much, much nicer than ours. For one, I don’t see any harnesses lining the walls. The place looks *comfortable*. Less cold metal, more artificial wood grains. And at the back of the pod...

“What is this?” says Karlo in disbelief.

“That’s a bed,” I say, coming up behind him. “A really super nice bed. Definitely king-sized.” I flop down on, experiencing just the perfect amount of spring. “Ooh, and it’s comfortable. You should lie down with me.”

“This is... a bed?” Karlo asks, and he seems almost hesitant.
“You are used to sleeping in such luxury?”

My heart actually breaks for him a little bit right there. Yeah, this is a nice bed. But it’s a bed. Not that different from mine, or anyone else’s where I’m from.

All Karlo has ever known is a rough bedroll with some straw padding underneath.

“Yeah,” I say, patting the bed next to me. “This is how humans sleep on Earth. Come on, it’s not going to hurt you. Cuddle up with me.”

The Kyrzon still looks skeptical, but he climbs onto the mattress next to me and rests his head.

“I think...” He sighs. “I think if I slept like this every night, I would never wake up. This is *wonderful*.”

It’s pretty cute, watching him lie on a real bed for the first time. He looks like he’s ready to fall asleep right there, just like that. Actually, come to think of it...

“Computer,” I say hesitantly, “if you’re in the mood to be helpful right now, could you please turn off the lights?”

The lights flick off.

“That’s nice,” I sigh, putting my head on Karlo’s chest and snuggling up against him. Suddenly I’m tired, the weight of the day and all the walking with Karlo and escaping from the crockjaw catching up with me.

“Very nice,” he agrees. “You are sure the crockjaw will not be able to reach us in here?”

“Yeah,” I say. “We’re safe here.”

“Good,” Karlo murmurs, and he turns toward me, wrapping me in his arms and cradling my head against his chest.

“Because I do not want to stop holding you like this.”

I don’t want to stop, either. Outside of this pod, there’s a world of predators, an ocean of monsters, a rising tide, and a crockjaw that wants to eat us.

But in here, with Karlo, I’m safe.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mackenzie

I'm disoriented when I wake up. It's dark, and I have no idea what time it is. Normally when I wake up in the morning, it's because there's light flooding into my tent.

Then I remember the night before, and I realize the warm, fuzzy way I'm feeling is entirely justified.

I fell asleep with Karlo last night. Cuddled up on the impossibly comfortable bed that just happened to be in the escape pod we found. Being protected in here from any predators, with his enormous body spooning me, I'm not sure I've ever had such a strong sense of being *safe*.

Karlo shifts behind me, then pulls me closer to him, planting a little kiss on my shoulder. He's already awake. I smile at this gesture of tenderness, feeling like it's almost too good to be true. This is the way I've always dreamed of waking up. I never expected that when I finally got to experience it, it would be with a seven-foot-tall barbarian.

But it is. It seems like somehow, this one time, the guy I have a crush on actually likes me back. What the hell did I do right? Likes me back, *and* has a rather prominent erection poking into my butt. Hellooo morning wood.

“Well, it seems like someone is happy to see me,” I giggle.

“I am always happy to see you,” says Karlo in his deep voice.

“Especially right now,” I tease.

“I am not sure I take your meaning,” he grunts, stroking the hair out of my face.

I wiggle my butt against him, grinding against his cock. “Does this give you an idea?”

I can’t see his face in the dark, but I could swear from his voice that he’s embarrassed. “It is not... This is how I always wake up. It does not mean I expect anything.”

“But you’d probably take it, right?”

Karlo freezes, and I can tell he knows exactly what I mean. His hand strokes down my cheek to my neck, finally lingering over my breast.

“Yes,” he whispers in my ear, voice sending tingles through me right to between my legs. “I would take all of you if given the chance. I would take every fucking bit of you, and I would never give it back.”

“Keep talking,” I sigh, placing my hand over his and squeezing it on my breast. “Keep talking and... touch me. Touch me anywhere you want.”

He lets out a low, guttural growl of approval, wordless, but communicative all the same. His hand tightens over my breast and then he slips it under my shirt, clutching me over the bra I just realized I slept in last night.

“Ugh, let’s get this thing off,” I groan, reaching behind me.

“Can you help unhook me?”

“Unhook you?”

“Sorry, I—here, give me a minute.”

I slip out of my bra, and my shirt too for good measure. It’s a bold move for me, but I feel so comfortable with Karlo right now. Comfortable enough to let him see me, and touch me, and know that he won’t belittle me or take advantage.

I almost feel like I can just be myself.

Satisfaction rumbles in the Kyrzon’s throat as his hands find my bare skin. He cups my breasts with surprising gentleness, then takes my nipples between his thumb and forefingers, teasing them, making them hard.

“That feels good,” I whisper.

“I want these to be mine,” Karlo growls, his touch now possessive, insistent. One of his hands trails lower, down my navel, and I inhale sharply. There’s no mistake where this is going, and it’s been a long time since anyone touched me *there*.

Well, anyone other than *him*.

“I want all of you to be mine,” he continues, and his hand slips under the waistband of the shorts I’m wearing. For a moment he just explores, teasing me over my panties, then one of his fingers finds my clit and he gives it a firm, determined stroke before pinching it gently and holding it.

“I want this to be mine,” he whispers, giving it the tiniest of squeezes that sends a jolt of pleasure all the way through me. “And when you climax for me, I want that to be mine, too.”

I’m so overwhelmed that I have no idea how to respond to him. His words send raw excitement through me, and a moan escapes as he puts more pressure between my legs.

“Let’s take these off,” Karlo says, tugging at my waistband. “Lift your butt for me.”

Fuck, that’s hot. I wouldn’t exactly call Karlo meek, but I think it’s fair to say he’s been more reserved around me than most. But now, for the second time, I’ve gotten the chance to see that in intimate situations, he’s very comfortable taking charge.

And I *really* like it.

I do as he says, lifting my butt and allowing him to slip my shorts and underwear down my legs in a single, smooth motion. He works them over my feet, then tosses them off to who-knows-where.

Now I’m completely naked in bed with him, and getting to be almost as worked up as I was the night I ate the passionberries. Something about doing all of this in the dark, being able to

feel and hear, but not see, is a huge, unexpected turn-on for me.

Karlo scoops me close to him, back into the spooning position, and his hand returns to its place between my legs. “Apparently I am not the only one who is excited,” he teases me, feeling my wetness.

“We can be excited together,” I sigh, distracted as his finger starts to circle my clit.

“I love the way your body feels,” he says, continuing to touch me. “So warm and soft. So wet for me.”

“I am wet for you,” I whisper. “No passionberries this time. *Karlo*... Karlo, that feels so good...”

For only his second time doing anything with a woman, he’s *really* getting the hang of this quickly. He has his fingers in just the right spot, moving my clit around in its little hood, and he’s using the perfect amount of pressure.

“How are you so good at this?” I moan, a shiver of pleasure rocking through me.

“It is not difficult when you are so expressive,” his voice comes back, warm breath putting goosebumps on the back of my neck. “All I have to do is follow your reactions.” He stops moving his finger, and I groan at the loss of his touch. “You see? When I stop, I can tell you are disappointed.” Then he continues circling, but slowly, lightly. “And when I do this, I can tell it is frustrating for you. It is not enough stimulation.” Then he goes back to what he was doing before, causing my

toes to curl. “And when I do *this*... All I need to do is chase your squirms and moans. When I touch you the right way, it is not hard to tell.”

The way he’s talking to me, literally *demonstrating* his ability to control my reactions, turns me on something fierce. I start to squirm, barely able to control myself, but he holds me tightly, keeping me in place.

“I am not done with you yet,” he growls. “I have not made you squirm nearly enough.”

“You’re going to soon,” I gasp, the early tingles of an orgasm making it hard to think. “Karlo... Oh fuck...”

My mind goes blank as the Kyrzon warrior’s huge hand massages me straight into a climax. I moan, writhing around on the sheets, squeezing his wrist between my thighs.

“Legs open,” he whispers, prying them apart. “There you go. Just relax and let it happen. This is all for you.”

My next moan is almost a yell, louder than I’ve ever allowed myself to release during sex before. Usually, I’m a quiet one, born of a childhood fear of being caught and, quite frankly, a hatred of hearing my own voice. But right now, none of that matters. I’m safe with Karlo, and there’s no one to overhear us.

“I love hearing you come,” says Karlo, holding me as my orgasm fades, his hand still clutching my pussy possessively. “I would trade nothing for you.”

I lie there, out of breath, utterly exhilarated. I feel like a teenager again. I feel like I'm discovering sex for the first time.

"I think I... want you inside me," I whisper.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mackenzie

A rush of adrenaline greets me as soon as the words are out of my mouth. For a split moment I'm actually terrified, like what am I getting myself into, but then I hear Karlo's grunt of excitement behind me, feel his cock poking into me, and I realize I'm exactly where I want to be. With someone I care about. With someone who makes me feel safe.

I turn around to face him, slipping my hands inside his shirt and feeling his muscular back. His mouth finds my chin, then my lips, and he kisses me deeply, hungrily. The kiss is sloppy, unpracticed, but I don't care. Karlo isn't kissing me like he wants me, he's kissing me like he *needs* me. Like he's dying of thirst, and I'm water.

"Karlo," I gasp as his mouth moves down to my neck. "I want you."

I tug at his shirt, trying to take it off, but he doesn't seem to understand.

“Lift your arms, silly,” I tell him breathlessly. “I’m trying to get you naked.”

He doesn’t need more encouragement than that. He raises his arms above his head, allowing me to slip his shirt up and off. I toss it over my shoulder, into the same unknown void that my panties disappeared to. Then I climb on top of him, and his hands grip my waist as I lean down to kiss him again.

He feels so muscular, so solid. Such a difference from my last boyfriend. I grind myself on his cock, glad that he’s wearing soft pants we fabricated in the escape pod, rather than the rough cloth he wore before.

“You feel so good, and I am not even inside you,” he groans, guiding me with his hands on my hips. “I think I will climax right now in my pants if you continue.”

“Then let’s take those pants off,” I say mischievously, climbing off of him so I can pull them down.

It’s probably a good thing I can’t see his cock. It would just make me more nervous about the size. Even so, just feeling it in my hands is enough to cause a flicker of worry. Karlo is *definitely* gifted, at least compared to human man.

Still, if Ramsey and Karvok can make it work, so can I. I hold it in my hand, marveling at its softness, its warmth, its *thickness*.

Karlo gasps, and I feel a dribble of something warm and wet touch my fingers.

“Well, that was fast,” I chuckle, trying to keep my voice light so he doesn’t think I’m disappointed.

“That was not my climax,” he grunts, “although for a moment, you had me on edge.”

Wow. So that was all pre-cum? That’s... pretty hot.

“Take me,” I whisper, feeling daring and horny and eager to see more of this guy when he’s riled up. “Take me like I’m your mate.”

With a throaty roar, Karlo pushes me down on the bed and climbs on top of me. I shiver underneath him, the weight of his body imprisoning me, his growling breaths that of a predator who has caught his prey. I feel completely vulnerable, completely at his mercy, and at the same time... completely safe. I know that Karlo would never intentionally hurt me. I know that if I asked him to, he would stop.

But I don’t want him to stop.

“Yes,” I moan as his lips trace my jaw. “Karlo...”

He cups my head and brings my lips to his, his kiss fervent, dominating. He’s taking charge now, and while I’m sure he isn’t Mr. Smooth by Earth standards, what he’s doing feels great to me. His hands touch my body as our lips lock, and instead of the awkward groping one might expect of an inexperienced partner, there’s a joyfulness to it, an exploration. His throbbing erection makes his purpose clear, but he’s taking his time with it, enjoying himself.

Well, *sort of* taking his time with it.

“Turn over,” he growls. “I will take you from behind.”

Before I can even begin to do so, he’s gripping me by the hips, putting me in exactly the position he wants. I inhale sharply and instinctively check to make sure I’m wet enough, even though I’m more than ready for him.

“You wish me to claim you as if you were my mate?” comes Karlo’s voice, his hands cradling my waist. His cock bumps up against my clit, causing me to twitch.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Take me.”

For a moment, he searches for my opening, his hands fumbling in the dark. Then he finds it, and I feel his cock pressing against me.

“Mackenzie,” he groans in a husky voice. “*Mackenzie...*”

He’s still saying my name as he slowly pushes himself inside. I gasp, momentarily glitching as I’m pierced by his tremendous girth.

“Ow... Karlo, go slow. You’re so big for me.”

He does as I ask, thrusting deeper with almost infuriating slowness.

“Okay, wow, you are really big.”

He freezes. “Am I hurting you?”

“No, it’s just... A lot. Keep going. Just... Go slow.”

Karlo can’t contain the rumble in his throat as he pulls back, dragging himself out of me at an agonizing pace. He goes back

in for another thrust and I feel his fingers digging into the soft flesh of my behind.

“Mackenzie, this feels... *ohhh...*”

He grips me even tighter, his breath coming in desperate gasps, and then I feel his cock twitching inside me. He’s coming.

Karlo slumps forward, holding me. I slide onto my stomach and we lie there together in prone position, him still inside me. His heart is pounding.

“I really liked that,” I whisper, feeling his cock continue to twitch with the aftershocks of his orgasm. “Karlo, I...”

I don’t know what to say. *I love you?* I think it’s a little early for that. But this last day with him has meant everything to me.

“I liked it, too,” he breathes into my ear, voice hoarse. “I have never felt like that before. Stroking myself cannot begin to compare.”

This takes a little bit away from my rosy glow. I’m thinking about how much this means to me, and he’s thinking about how much better it is than masturbating?

“I think it is special because it is with you,” Karlo continues, and now he sounds decisive, like he’s made up his mind. Aw. I think I can accept that. My rosy glow continues.

“How... how was it?” I ask lamely. “I know this was your first time.”

“It was better than I could have imagined. Although I had thought it would last longer.”

I grin. “Well... It’s something to work on. And you’ve got a willing partner to practice with.”

“My mate,” he says warmly, nuzzling against my back.

Mate? Hold on, bud, it’s a little early for that. But I can’t say that now. This moment is too nice, and I don’t want to crush it.

Karlo pulls out. I gasp, not ready for it. It felt so right having him inside me. Like the closest possible way to cuddle.

“Computer,” I say, “lights to 10 percent.”

Immediately, the lights flash on to full brightness. Karlo growls, and I cover my eyes.

It takes me eight more tries to get the lights dimmed while the computer taunts me with occasional gibberish.

“Perhaps we should return to camp,” says Karlo. “They might begin to worry about us.”

I wonder what kind of rumors will fly when we come back together, I think.

“Yeah,” I agree, turning over so I’m lying on the bed. “Oh!”

A big glob of cum drips out of me.

“Let me see,” says Karlo, immediately fascinated. I allow him to spread my legs and examine my cum-covered pussy.

I’ve never had sex without a condom before. Part of me has a rush of guilt: obviously, this means I’ve been irresponsible.

Part of me loves it.

“I like seeing my cum here,” says the Kyrzon, his eyes lidded with satisfaction. “This is where it belongs.”

I blush. “Might as well call you Shakespeare with that kind of romantic talk.”

“What is ‘Shakespeare?’”

“Never mind.”

I have a devil of a time trying to get the computer to dispense any kind of tissue to clean myself up, but then I realize that the pod actually has a fully stocked bathroom containing everything but the shower. Whatever kind of sexy VIP escape pod this is, I could get used to this. Finally, both of us dress.

I hesitate for a moment before opening the door. My time inside this chamber with Karlo has been magical. I don’t want that to end when we leave.

“I will go first,” he tells me, drawing his knife. “The crockjaw has likely moved on, but I will confirm it.”

Oh yeah. The monster that chased us in here. Right.

I step back and watch as Karlo opens the door. We both blink, our eyes adjusting. No giant alligator. We step out of the pod together, holding hands.

Immediately, both of us can tell something is wrong. We make eye contact, then both of us look around, eyes scanning our surroundings.

“Uhh, Karlo?” I say, my heart starting to race. “Am I crazy, or are we not on the same beach as last night?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Karlo

We are not on the same beach. The trees beyond the sand are different, and so is the shape of the shoreline.

“Maybe we drifted down the beach in the high tide,” my mate suggests, peering around.

“Maybe,” I agree, but I do not think so. I have always had a keen sense of direction, and I do not recognize this place.

I believe we are far from home.

“At least the escape pod door is facing the beach now!” says Mackenzie brightly.

I smile despite my rising worry. She is cute, my little human.

Mackenzie takes my hand, and my smile grows broader. I believe I could handle any situation with her at my side.

It takes very little exploration before Mackenzie and I are in agreement:

“This all looks... really different,” she says, biting her lip as she scans the forest. “I’m not even sure we’re on the same

island.”

I nod somberly. “That is what I have been thinking. I believe we were carried across the ocean last night while we slept.”

She shakes her head. “And because the pod was sealed and stabilized with a gyroscope, we didn’t even notice. Well, fuck. How far away from our island do you think we are?”

“It is hard to say. Some Kyrzons know the ocean well, but my clan does not. We cannot have been carried too far, however. It is not as though we have been traveling for days.” I turn to Mackenzie, holding her waist in my hands. “But we will survive. And we will return.”

“Or just live here on this island together and make babies,” she mutters.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” she says, her cheeks red. “Don’t worry, I’m not freaking out. I’ve already crashed on a deserted island once. We’ll be okay.”

I scoop her into a hug, lifting her off her feet.

“What was that for?” she giggles, although she seems to enjoy it.

“I like you,” I tell her simply. “If I must be stranded here, there is no one I would rather have by my side.”



Mackenzie

I feel surprisingly calm at our new predicament. Ultimately, I suppose, it just doesn't feel that different from the situation I was in before. Sure, there's safety in numbers, and there were definitely benefits to living with the clan. But we survived before, and I'm confident Karlo and I can do it again.

If anything, it feels like an adventure.

Okay, not really. Food and water are still a concern, although I wonder if the escape pod might be able to hook us up there in the short term. We're definitely going to be roughing it. We have no idea how big this island is, who else lives here, or what kind of predators we might find.

But being here with Karlo makes it feel special. We'll be a team, working together to survive and to find our way home.

That doesn't sound so bad.

"I should make a spear," the Kyrzon grunts. "My knife is not enough protection."

We stay on the outskirts of the forest, within eyesight of the beach. Beach is safer than forest, and neither of us wants to risk going too deep. I follow Karlo, eyes searching for a stick or branch that seems to be the correct size.

"How about this?" I suggest, pointing to a long, straight branch that seems to have fallen from a nearby tree.

"That is perfect," he says, then leans down and kisses me on the cheek. "Yes, I believe this will make a good spear."

Soon, I hear running water. We come upon a stream, not too far from the beach, and the water is clear.

“Hey,” I say. “No sea monsters in this water, right? What do you say we rinse off?”

I figure the chances are pretty decent we’ll be clowning tonight. No harm being clean.

Karlo and I strip down and spend a few minutes washing in the stream. His muscles glisten in the sun, and I’m pleased to see that even just seeing me naked is enough to give him a throbbing erection.

“See something you like?” I say in what I hope is a sultry voice, turning around to find him staring at my ass.

“You will find out soon enough,” he grunts, wading over to me and enclosing me in his bare arms. I feel his hard cock pressing against my lower back. “When I claim your cunt tonight, it will be as your mate.”

Then he releases me and gives me a playful splash.

“It is a good thing we are getting clean. I will make you dirty again soon.”

An hour or so later, we return to the escape pod, me using the branch as a walking stick, Karlo carrying a bundle of wood for a fire.

“Do you think they’re worried about us?” I ask. “The others. Back at the camp.”

Karlo nods. "I have no doubt my brother will have sent out parties to search for us." He drops his bundle of wood next to the pod. "There is nothing we can do about it now."

"Let's see if the escape pod has any answers," I suggest. "Maybe I can at least figure out how far we drifted."



"Computer, can you tell us how far we drifted in the ocean last night?"

"Quite far," comes a garbled robot voice. *"Fishies!"*

I palm my face. "Whatever happened to you when you crashed on this planet, you are reaaaally not super helpful anymore."

"I try. Crash damage. Peekaboo."

Deep breath. "Computer, is your scanner working?"

"Yes! Very yes."

I glance at Karlo and see that he's trying his best not to laugh. "I think I like this computer better than the one in your escape pod. This one has a sense of humor."

"Yeah, well, hopefully we can laugh our way to a way home. Computer, can you run a scan for humanoid lifeforms? Maximum distance."

I'm prepared for the computer to shout more gibberish at me, but instead:

“Scanning... Scanning... Scanning... Scanning... There are approximately 50 humanoid lifeforms on an island four miles to the north.”

“That must be them,” I say triumphantly. “Four miles... That’s far, but not impossible. Maybe we could make a raft.”

“Maybe,” Karlo agrees hesitantly. “I would rather stay here with you forever than lose you to the waves.”

“You’re the one who promised we would make it back!”

“And we will. I just... I would not lose you. I just found you.”

I can’t help giving the big guy a hug.

“You won’t lose me,” I say into his chest. “Promise.”



Our first meal on the new island is... nutrient cubes. Yum, yum, yum. Sarcasm, obviously. These things are like the definition of bland. I ate my share of them during my first hellish week on this planet, and I’m not eager to have anymore.

Karlo, on the other hand, is fascinated.

“Is this what humans eat on Earth?” he asks me excitedly, nibbling the corner of the cube. “This is very different from Kyrzon fare.”

“Noooo,” I laugh, “on Earth we eat pizza and pasta and hamburgers and salad and all sorts of good stuff. Nutrient

cubes are a survival ration. For situations like this.”

“I am glad to have it,” says Karlo, chewing happily. “For once, a meal that did not need to be hunted or foraged.”

We’re sitting on the beach next to the pod, on a big log that Karlo rolled in for this exact purpose. We have a fire now, and as the tide comes in, it’s a relief to see that the escape pod is too far up on the beach to be swept away.

At least we’ll still have the big, sexy bed. Any way you slice it, that’s an improvement over living back at the camp.



It’s dark by the time we finish our oh-so-satisfying meal. When you don’t get out of bed until the early afternoon, the day goes fast. We retire to the escape pod. Thankfully, it only takes me three tries to turn on the lights.

“Thank you, computer,” I sigh, rolling my eyes.

“You are very welcome, Mrs. Bowman,” the computer replies.

“Excuse me? Mrs. Bowman?”

“I am not Mrs. Bowman, you are.”

This is getting ridiculous. “Computer, what is the purpose of this escape pod? Why do you have a bed and a bathroom?”

A musical chime plays. *“Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Bowman. Kyrzon Industries is glad to have you as our guests. Your VIP ticket entitles you to a luxury escape pod, customized to the*

exact specifications you provided, in case of emergency. We hope you have a pleasant stay.”

Karlo scratches his head. “This pod was created for a chief and his mate. I wonder why they were not aboard.”

“Yeah, that’s a good question. Computer, what happened when this escape pod ejected from the ship?”

“Loading Video File 1. Please turn to the viewscreen.”

A screen on the wall next to me flickers on. I see a grainy video of a ship’s corridor, clearly filmed by a camera mounted on the front of the pod. Nothing in the video moves, but I hear muffled voices:

“Nathaniel, we have to go! I don’t want to die on this ship!” a woman screams, sounding panicked.

“I’m coming, Petunia, I just need to grab the lockbox,” a man’s voice replies, maddeningly calm. “We’re going to be fine.”

“Forget the lockbox! We just got hit by an asteroid! Do you want the escape pod to leave without us?”

“It won’t leave without us, we payed that bastard Kyrzon an insane amount of money for these tickets. But if we get to the new world and I don’t have what’s in this box, we’re going to be dirt-poor nobodies. Is that what you want, Petunia? To show up on this new planet and be poor?”

“I’m going,” the woman sobs, and I hear the computer’s recorded voice counting down to zero. “I’m not dying here.”

“Darling, wait! I’ll only be—”

Karlo and I watch the pixelated video as an older woman in a fur coat sprints down the hallway toward the open door of the escape pod. Just as she reaches it, she trips, falling to the ground in her high heels.

“Zero,” says the computer’s voice. “*Escape pod departing.*”

“No!” the woman screams, trying desperately to get up. “No, waaiiitttt—”

The door closes right in front of her, and the video ends.

I wince. Not a nice way to go.

“This is where you came from?” Karlo asks, his face grave.

“This is how you came to be here with me?”

“Pretty much. I actually don’t remember it. I got knocked out when our ship was first damaged. It was my friends who saved my life and made sure I got on the pod safely.”

“I will have to thank them,” he says seriously. “I owe them a debt.”

I bump him playfully. “Oh, come on. You didn’t even know me then.”

He gives me a squeeze. “In any case. My life would not be the same if you had not landed here.”

I hug him. “Computer, dim the lights.”

“*Entering romance mode,*” the computer chirps back.

“Huh?” I laugh. “I wonder what that—”

Before I know it, not only have the lights dimmed, but the underside of the bed is suddenly lit with a soft pink. A moment later, soft, sensual jazz music starts to play.

“Pouring champagne cocktails,” says the computer. We both watch in amazement as the same station that dispensed the nutrient cubes suddenly produces two glasses and begins to fill them with pale, sparkling liquid.

I look over at Karlo. He’s staring wide-eyed, his jaw hanging open. “I definitely like this escape pod better,” he whispers.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Karlo

“This is *swanky*,” says Mackenzie, excitement on her beautiful face. “A little tacky, yes. But I will take the fuck out of a champagne cocktail right now.”

“Cock-tail,” I repeat. “Sounds dirty.”

She giggles. “It’s not what you’re thinking. A cocktail is a drink. Champagne is a type of wine.” She goes over to the little alcove in the corner and returns with two strange cups made of glass. “Here, I think you’ll like this.”

I examine the cup, which is tall and skinny but with a stick at the bottom that terminates in a disk. It is very unusual to me. Kyrzons do not use glass. It is a human material. I mimic the way Mackenzie holds hers and watch her as she takes a sip.

“It’s good! Try it!”

I raise the cup to my lips, then drink. Immediately, I recoil. It makes my mouth tingle in a way I have never experienced.

“What is this? Is it alive?”

Mackenzie laughs. “It’s fizzy. It won’t hurt you.”

I drink again, and this time it is easier to concentrate on the flavor. “I like this. This is a human drink?”

She nods. “Human drink, human music, human bed. Welcome to Human-ville.”

“Human-ville?”

“Nothing. I guess what I mean is, it’s nice to be able to share this with you.”

I put an arm around her. “I am glad that I can share a drink with you.”

She smiles. “Yeah. But really, I mean all of this. I’ve seen so much of the Kyrzon culture since I came here. I like that I can share something from Earth with you.”

I’m touched by her words. “Is it traditional play this music while you drink the cocktail?”

Mackenzie laughs again, and it fills me with joy to see her so delighted. “No, this is... how do I explain it... This is like a tacky Earth way of being romantic. The champagne, the jazz music, the pink lighting under the bed. It’s supposed to be suggestive.”

“Suggestive that we should mate here.”

She blushes. “Yes, that’s one way to put it.”

I drain my skinny glass cup. “Perhaps we should do what the music says.”

My mate raises an eyebrow. “Oh, yeah?”

I step closer to her. “Yeah.”

She takes a step backward. “Oh, *yeah?*”

I continue stepping forward, walking her to the bed. I enjoy this game because I know where it ends. “Yeah.”

Mackenzie giggles. “Oh, ye—*oh!*”

I push her down onto the bed, climbing on top of her and reveling in my prize.

“I told you earlier that I intended to take you tonight as I would my mate. I mean to make good on that promise.”

I reach under her shirt and pull it off. She shivers underneath me, her bare skin soft, tantalizing.

“Mine,” I growl, holding her wrists and bringing them above her head. “Let me hear you say it.”

For a moment, I almost think I see her hesitate.

“Yours,” she whispers.

Need rumbles up in my throat and I begin to kiss her neck, her collarbone, her breasts. I focus for some time on her nipples, enjoying her reactions. It pleases me more than anything to hear her pleased gasps. It makes my cock so hard it could burst.

But I long to taste her again. My lips trail lower, and her breathing gets faster as I kiss my way below her belly button. When I begin to remove the garment she wears on her lower body, I can tell that she knows what I intend to do.

“Karlo,” she moans, looking up at me.

“Part your legs, little human,” I whisper, making eye contact and holding it until she complies.

Mackenzie’s sex is pink and swollen, and my cock gives a needy throb at the sight of it. I place kisses all along her inner thighs, satisfied by the way she squirms.

Then I kiss my way up to the crook of her legs, and the little nub at the top of her cunt twitches as it feels my breath.

I kiss the little nub, and she moans. When I rake it with my tongue, she moans even louder. I repeat the action, again and again, and she squeezes me with her thighs, the nub throbbing against my tongue.

Pleased with my efforts, I look up at her and make eye contact. Her desperate eyes plead back, cheeks rosy. Her cunt is leaking wetness when I look down at it. I tease the opening with my finger.

“Yes,” Mackenzie gasps. “That feels good.”

I push my finger inside her slowly, then return my lips to her special nub. Her breathing gets faster, her moans more desperate, and I enjoy the feeling of her in my mouth, her scent, her taste. I love all of it, for all of it is *her*. All of it is the beautiful human woman who I have claimed, who I would never be apart from.

“Karlo,” she gasps. “I’m so close. I’m right on the edge. *I’m so close*. Please don’t stop... *Please*...”

I change nothing, continuing to lick while I fill her with my finger. Her muscles clench, then finally she shudders, and for a

moment her voice cuts out.

“Oh *fuckkkkkkk*,” she moans, every part of her trembling.
“*Fffffffuu...*”

When her body stops quaking and I feel her tap me on the shoulder, I am not ready to stop. But then my cock gives a throb, and the need to claim her consumes me.

“That was amazing,” Mackenzie breathes, looking up at me as I return to my feet. I grab her thighs and pull her to the edge of the bed. “Oh!”

“*Mine*,” I growl, and my urges now are primal. I slap my cock onto her nub and slide the head down her slit, coating it in her juices. “I don’t want anyone to have you but me. Ever. I want to claim you with my seed until my child is in you.”

Then I push myself inside, feeling her small, soft body stretch to accept me. She gasps, her eyes wide.

I am learning her reactions now. I can tell that this is pleasure and not pain. I thrust deeper, my movement slow, but firm.

“You’re so fucking big,” she whimpers. “I feel so full of you.”

“You’ll be full of my seed soon enough,” I growl. “And someday, full of my baby.”

I grip her hips, delighting in the way her soft curves yield to me. She is *mine*. It is hard for me to stop saying it, because it means more to me than anything in the world. I have never needed to claim something this much. I wish to claim every part of her.

I crawl on top of Mackenzie on the bed, covering her with my weight. She sighs, enjoying the warmth of skin on skin. My mouth finds hers and I claim it greedily, pushing my tongue past any resistance her lips give me and exploring it.

She moans into my mouth as my thrusting grows faster. Each stroke brings a new wave of pleasure, and I realize I will not be able to maintain this for much longer. Soon I will burst, and I almost do not wish to. I want this moment to last.

“I am going to come inside you,” I say in a hoarse voice, burying my face in her neck.

“Karlo,” she moans, wrapping her legs around me.

This sends me over the edge. I let out a roar, thrusting into her as deeply as I can, burying myself inside her as I have my release. My cock keeps twitching and twitching, the inside of her growing even more slick as I fill her with my milky seed.

Mackenzie whimpers and I feel her clench around my shaft. Her lips search for mine and we share a kiss, hers tender, mine less so. We lie there together for some time, my cock still inside her, warm and wet.

“You lasted longer this time,” she whispers, smiling.

I place a kiss on her forehead. “Only because I could not bear for it to end.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mackenzie

The next day, we go out together to explore the new island and hunt. This island seems to be smaller than the last one, and after some hiking through the woods, we come out on the other side.

“There is nothing to hunt here,” Karlo groans. “Nothing other than birds. I am not good at hunting birds.”

“It’s okay,” I reassure him. “We have nutrient cubes for now, and we can always forage. You’re the one who showed me how to pick *verlax* root.” My eye catches something on the beach. “Aww, are those tuppers?”

I run over to the water, Karlo plodding after me. Playing in the tide is a group of half-dog, half-otter creatures called tuppers. We have a tupper around camp, Fang. I miss the little guy. They look up at me as I approached, wary, but not completely afraid.

“Hey, guys,” I say, keeping a respectful distance even though I want to gather them up and cuddle them all. “I know your

buddy, Fang. He says hi.”

One of them swims up to me cautiously and bumps my hand with his nose.

“They are very cute, aren’t they?” says Karlo, putting a hand on my shoulder from behind. “I remember when Karvok found Fang. He was just a pup then. You should have seen his little whiskers and big eyes.”

“I can imagine,” I coo, watching a mama tupper play with her baby. “Babies are so cute.”

For a moment, my mind flashes to the way Karlo and I have been sleeping with each other. Without protection.

Like I said, babies are cute.

We keep walking, following the beach now, hoping to circle around all the way back to the escape pod.

“Is that it in the distance?” I ask excitedly, my feet starting to get sore.

Karlo squint at the shape in the distance. “It... looks like it. But I am not sure.”

As we get closer, I can tell it’s too big to be the escape pod.

“Is that a giant rock?” I say, confused.

“I do not know,” says Karlo, gripping the stick he has now sharpened into a spear. “We should move carefully.”

Whatever it is, it’s not a rock. More like a big hunk of metal. Not one in great condition, either.

“I think that’s a chunk of the ship,” I tell Karlo slowly. “The one the escape pods launched from.”

“The ship that we saw in the video,” Karlo confirms, and I nod.

“Could there be survivors?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so. If you didn’t make it into an escape pod, you’re a goner.”

We creep forward, and I hope I’m not about to see a bunch of dead bodies. The chunk of the ship is sitting right where the forest meets the beach, towering over us like a small building. We walk around it, examining it, searching for a way in.

“This is huge,” Karlo whispers, clearly awed.

One side of it is all torn up, like it ripped away from the rest of the ship. Through the pieces of jagged metal, I think I see a hole that I can fit through.

“There might be supplies,” I tell Karlo, responding to the disapproving look he gives me as I step closer to it. “I should at least check.”

“Please be careful,” he implores me. “I cannot fit through this hole. If something happens to you, it will be difficult for me to rescue you.”

“I’ll be careful. Promise.”

He follows me, eyes still fixed on the towering chunk of spaceship. Then he trips over a root, and I stop to help him up.

“Whoops! Careful there, you don’t want to…” My voice trails off as I see the Kyrzon wince. “Karlo, are you okay?”

“Yes, I am okay, I…” He stops talking, looking confused, and I see that his eyes are crossed. He lifts his hand. “What is this?”

Attached to Karlo’s hand is some kind of plant. It has a mouth like a cup that is clenching onto him tightly, oozing a thick yellow sap that dribbles down his wrist.

Karlo slumps to the ground.

“*Fuck!*” I yell, trying not to panic. That’s a carnivorous cup plant hanging onto him. I recognize it. We’ve had to learn to avoid those in the wilderness after Jenny stepped in one and nearly died. “Karlo, I’m going to help you, okay?”

But he’s already unconscious. I dive for the knife in his belt, then sever the stem of the plant, cutting it from the ground.

This seems to loosen its grip on him slightly, but not enough to pull it off. I slip the stone blade between his skin and the plant, being careful not to cut him. After a few minutes of painstaking, anxiety-inducing work, Karlo’s hand is released.

“Wake up,” I beg, cupping his face. He doesn’t, but I can feel him breathing.

Okay. Karlo isn’t dead. I remember Jenny slept for a solid two days after her experience with the cup plant. This might be similar. I take a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm myself.

First things first. The best thing to do would be to bring Karlo back to the escape pod. That way, I can take care of him there

while having access to water, nutrient cubes, and the wood we gathered. That would definitely be ideal.

The problem is, the guy is seven feet tall and must weigh 300 pounds. There's no way in hell I'm moving him by myself. If I can't get him to wake up, we might just be stuck here.

Maybe there's something in the wreckage that could help me. I stare at the hunk of metal, my mind racing. In a few hours, the sun will start to set, and that's when things get really scary. We haven't encountered any land-based predators yet on the island, but I don't like the idea of taking that chance. I would feel much, much safer if both of us could go to sleep in the escape pod.

Or at least if I had a weapon other than a knife or a spear.

"I'm going to be right back, okay?" I say to Karlo's unconscious form. "I'm going to go check the wreckage and see if I can find something that can help us."

I hesitate, then take his knife. Better safe than sorry.

The hair on the back of my neck prickles as I approach the wreckage. There's something creepy about this, seeing the broken pieces of the spaceship I was recently traveling on. I really hope everyone made it out of this section of the ship okay. I don't want to stroll into a graveyard.

Just as I thought, one of the holes in the side of the ship is big enough for me to fit through. I crawl on my hands and knees, careful to avoid the sharp, twisted metal at the edges.

When I stand up, I'm in a corridor that's disturbingly familiar. It looks just like the one I walked down to enter my cryo-tube on my last day on Earth. This time, though, it's dark, with the only light streaming in from the hole I just crawled through.

I move forward, scanning, my hands on the knife. I don't really know what I'm looking for. Some piece of tech, anything that might have utility. Half of my attention is back with Karlo, worried that something is going to find him and eat him while he's passed out.

A supply closet. To my relief, it opens when I punch the emergency release. I can barely see anything, so I feel with my hands until I find a button that must be the lights and press it instinctively.

The closet lights flick on. Maybe they're on an emergency power system? In any case, I'm relieved. I scan for a first aid kit or a medical tool, but I don't see anything of the sort. Cleaning supplies. Spools of fabricator material.

And then my eyes land on something that I recognize. *A hover-dolly*. Basically the kind of thing workers used to move heavy boxes or equipment.

Perfect for moving Karlo.

I flip the switch on the dolly, crossing my fingers that it has power. It rises up, floating about a foot above the ground. I grab the handle on the back and push it down the corridor.

Then I hear a chattering outside. Abandoning the dolly, I sprint over to the hole where I entered and see a number of green,

squirrel-like creatures sniffing all over Karlo's body.

"Shoo!" I yell, waving my arms. They scatter, stopping a short distance away and glaring at me.

Now I'm left with a new problem: the dolly won't fit through the hole. It would need to be about a foot wider. I return to the supply closet and start rifling through a toolbox. There has to be something that can help.

There. At the bottom of the box. I'm no expert, but that looks like a hand-held laser cutter. I palm it and run to the exit hole.

"*Shoo!*" I yell again at the green squirrels, once again sniffing at Karlo. "Leave him alone!"

Do not operate this equipment without proper eye protection, the label on the laser cutter warns me. Ha. I aim the device up at the part of the hole I need to elongate, hold my breath, and engage the laser.

Ow. I wince, the sparks flying so brightly it burns trails into my eyes. I can barely stand to look at it, but I manage to carve out a hole that looks like it might work. *Thank God.* I collapse the handle on the dolly, line it up, and push it through.

Pocketing the laser cutter, I push the dolly over to Karlo and make another attempt to wake him.

"Hey, how you doing? Any chance you want to wake up for me?"

Nope. Still fully out. The green creatures watch me as I lower the dolly next to Karlo and try to roll him on to it.

“Hot damn, you are so heavy!” I grunt, my first sad attempt failing. “Someone’s gotta lay off the nutrient cubes!”

I change tactics, sitting with my back to him and pushing off the ground with my feet. That gets him most of the way there, and I’m able to do the rest more carefully, making sure not to hurt him.

“Okay,” I say to Karlo, looking down on him lying on the dolly, “let’s hope this thing has enough power to get us back to the escape pod.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Karlo

Ugh. My head is pounding. Why do I feel like shit? Actually, hold that thought. Where the fuck am I?

I blink, confused. Something isn't right. The last thing I remember is finding that piece of spaceship wreckage with Mackenzie. She wanted to go inside, and I was worried about her getting hurt.

Mackenzie. Panic hits me as I realize I have no idea where she is, or even if she's safe. What have I done? Have I failed her? Have I abandoned my mate? Even though my vision is still fuzzy, I try to sit up. I have to act.

“Whoa there, big guy! No need to get up before you're ready. Just take it slow.”

That's Mackenzie's voice. A smile comes over me, and I allow myself to slump back down to wherever I'm lying. I'm still not sure what's going on, but knowing that she's safe is enough.

Not to mention, the sound of her voice is incredibly comforting to me. It makes me feel like wherever I am, I'm home.

"Mac... kenzie," I grunt, annoyed that it's hard for me to form the words.

"Yeah, I'm here," comes her sweet tone, and I feel a hand stroking my cheek. "Are you thirsty?"

Thirsty. Yeah, I am. Very thirsty. Something touches my lips, and I realize it's a cup. I drink deeply.

"Good, yeah, I'll bet it feels great to get some water in you. You've been out for almost two days."

Two days? I keep blinking, and each time, my vision becomes a little less blurred. "What... happened?"

"You tripped, and your hand landed in a cup plant," says Mackenzie, and she's stroking my hair now. That feels amazing. "Knocked you unconscious right away. Don't worry, I took care of everything. You have nothing to worry about."

Her words fill me with shame. My memory is dim, but I am sure she is telling the truth.

I have failed her.

"Sorry," I rasp, turning away. I don't know what else to say. I am humiliated.

"Hey!" she protests. "There's nothing to be sorry about. Shit happens. I know you would've done the same for me."

“It is not—” The words fall out of my mouth clumsily, all jumbled together.

“It’s okay,” she whispers, and I feel her place a kiss on my forehead. “All you need to do is rest. I’ll take care of you.”



I wake up again, and this time I have a pit in my stomach. At least when I open my eyes, I can see. I’m on the floor of the escape pod, wrapped up in blankets from the bed. There’s a pillow under my head, and next to me is a water cup.

“Hey!” says Mackenzie, rushing over to me. “How are you feeling?”

I turn away from her. “I will recover soon.”

“Of course you will, it was only a cup plant. My friend Jenny fell in one on our second day here, and she was out for a while, too. But then a few days later, she was right as rain.”

I try to sit up. “It is raining? Do you require help?”

“No! Karlo, everything is fine. I’ve been using the pod to filter water from the ocean, foraging roots from the forest near the beach, and even managed to catch a couple of fish earlier today. We’re all set. Are you hungry? Let me get you some food.”

My stomach gurgles, and I long to eat. But I cannot. I do not deserve food when I have forced my woman to work for me

so. It would be shameful to take the food she offers. I shake my head.

“Come on, you should have something. At least a bite of nutrient cube? You haven’t eaten in days.”

“I will not eat until I am able to hunt for myself,” I grunt.

Mackenzie’s face falls. “What? That’s ridiculous. You need your strength.”

I still cannot look at her. “You took care of me. All this time. How can I ask you to feed me?”

“Yeah, I took care of you. Like you would have done for me. But apparently I shouldn’t have bothered if you’re just going to starve yourself.”

I glare at her, but extend my hand. “I will eat a cube. If you insist.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I do insist. And it sounds like we need to have a talk. What the hell is this?”

I am trying not to eat the cube too quickly. Every bite is life. “I do not know what you mean.”

“... Whatever this is. You refusing to eat. Being grumpy as hell even though I’ve taken care of everything and busted my ass to make sure you’re safe.”

Is it not obvious? I try to change the subject. “We were on the other side of the island. How is it that I am back here at the pod?”

“I found a hover-cart in that wreckage and used it to carry you back here.”

“What is a hover-cart?”

She points. “What you’re lying on right now. Look.”

Mackenzie reaches above my head and does something, and immediately I feel the ground below me rise until I’m hovering above the ground.

“See?” she says. “It was the only way I could move you. And once we were here, I didn’t want to just roll you off. So I made you comfortable where you were.”

I hang my head. “And you have been sleeping in the bed without blankets?”

Some color tinges her cheeks. “Well, not exactly. I’ve been sleeping with you.”

This fills me with affection, which further compounds my shame. I do not deserve her. A woman who would lie at my side as she has when I was weak is one even the richest chief would be lucky to have.

“Karlo, you won’t even look at me! Tell me what the deal is, and let’s talk about. I’m right here.”

I force myself to meet her eyes. “I am ashamed. I have failed you. Forced you to care for me.”

Her face softens, and she takes my hand. “Failed me? You haven’t failed me. People care for each other. That’s what you do in a... you know, when you care about someone.”

I know in my head that she is right. But it is not what I feel in my heart. It humiliates me for her to see me in my weakened state.

“I do not wish to be a burden.”

“Oh, come on, you’re not a burden. I would hate to be stranded here without you.”

Her words fill me with emotion. I reach for her without even meaning to, and she lies down next to me, curling against my side. I clutch her, the possessiveness instinctive.

“You really don’t like anyone taking care of you, do you?” she whispers, stroking my chest.

Her gentle touch is everything to me. I nuzzle against her. “It is not easy for me. Actually, I fucking hate it.”

“I guess it’s been a while since you’ve gotten sick?”

“I do not get sick.”

“Everyone gets sick.”

“When I get sick, it does not affect me. I am able to push through.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you are. Except the times when you can’t, like this. Then you need to be able to rely on someone. You should always be able to rely on your...” She gulps. “On your mate.”

To hear her say the word *mate* fills me with joy. The image she creates is tantalizing: to be able to trust your partner even in weakness. But it fills me with fear. I cannot be weak. If I am

weak, what value am I to those around me? What reason do they have not to cast me aside?

“I hurt my back when I was young,” I tell Mackenzie, my voice little more than a hoarse croak. “We were tracking a herd of longhorns, and I spooked them by accident. Just before our hunters were about to attack. I lunged from my hiding place, trying to salvage the day’s work, but instead I fell and tumbled over a short cliff.”

Mackenzie kisses my hand. “Ouch. I’m glad you are okay.”

“I was not okay. I had to be carried back from the hunt. For several full moons, I could barely walk, and for many more, I was not the same. I could not fight or carry a pack. At times I could hardly bend down to pull a *verlax* root from the ground.”

“Oh man, that sounds terrible. But I’ll bet your clan took care of you, right?”

I cast my eyes downward. “Yes, they took care of me. And many did not let me forget it. I watched as Karvok overtook me in my father’s eyes, even though I was the oldest child. I was alive, but I was not valued. I was pitied. If I could not contribute, I could never prove my worth. I could never...” I swallow carefully, my voice threatening to break. “I could never have a mate.”

For a while Mackenzie says nothing, and I worry that she, too, has come to pity me. Perhaps by allowing myself to be vulnerable, I have accomplished what I always feared.

“I’ll bet that was really painful for you,” she says finally, and her voice is soft. “Not just physically. Emotionally, it must have been hard, feeling like people didn’t respect you after you got injured. I can see why that made an impression on you.” She draws herself up, slinking on top of me and leaning down with her face very close to mine. “But I want you to know I’m not going anywhere. And I don’t think any less of you because you needed help. We’re a team. I help you, you help me. That’s how this works.”

Then she kisses me on the lips, and I lose myself in the sweetness of the embrace.

“I am the luckiest man alive,” I growl, my hand sliding to the back of her head and pulling her deeper into the kiss. “There is not anything in this world that I would trade for you.”

I mean it, too. I mean every word. Never in my life has anything meant as much to me as this beautiful woman whose lips taste sweeter than any sugarfruit, whose words make me feel accepted in a way I never have before.

I feel like perhaps, I could truly be myself around her. Not just the part of me that is strong, but the part of me that has doubts. The part of me that struggles with things, and is far from perfect.

“I... I think I love you,” I whisper as our lips part for only a moment. “I know I have not known you long. But I have never felt this way about another person.”

Mackenzie pauses, searching my face, and I worry that I have scared her. That I have come on too strong, too fast.

“I love you, too,” she whispers back. Our eyes meet, and understanding passes between us. Something that’s never been there before. We’re on a team now. I am hers, and she is mine. We kiss softly, our lips brushing, dancing.

Need flares up inside me. Not just need for her body, for *all* of her. I want to claim every part of this woman who is mine. I want to consume her, to be consumed by her, to be *closer*. Ever closer. I deepen the kiss, pushing my tongue into her mouth and exploring hungrily.

It’s as though we are completely in sync. I can feel the same excitement possessing her, the same need. She kisses me back with a fervor that matches my own, straddling me with her crotch pressed against my cock.

I grunt in satisfaction, already very hard. She starts to grind herself against me, little moans tingeing her breaths, and I buck my hips, increasing the pressure.

“Mmmm,” Mackenzie moans, sitting up straighter and putting her hands on my shoulders for balance. She starts to drag herself over my hard cock in a rhythm, and her eyes close.

My hands find her waist and I hold her possessively, guiding her as she rides me. Both of us are fully clothed, and yet the pleasure is almost unbearable. I watch her face, delighting in the satisfaction there. She looks as though every motion is bringing her intense pleasure, and she bites her lip as though concentrating.

“Karlo, oh my god, I’m about to come,” she gasps suddenly, and to my surprise, she starts to tremble and convulse on top

of me, her hips shuddering as she drags herself across my cock.

Finally, she slumps down on top of me, covering me with her weight and burying her face in my chest. I clutch her, feeling her body twitch with the reminders of her climax.

“I did not know humans could come from that,” I say, stroking her back. “We are not even unclothed.”

“Yeah, well, the clit is a powerful thing,” she says, kissing my cheek, still breathing heavily. “Wow, though, that happened so much faster than I expected.”

“It sounds as though your body knows its mate.”

Mackenzie smiles, and her cheeks flush. “Yeah, maybe it does.”

Then she starts to nibble my collarbone, and I lean my head back, enjoying the sensation.

“You like that?” my mate asks, looking up at me.

“Of course I like it,” I growl. “Your mouth on my body is all I desire.”

When she looks up at me again, there’s something mischievous there. “Oh, is that so?”

She starts to kiss lower, down my chest. I watch, breathing ragged. When she reaches my bellybutton, I inhale sharply. Mackenzie keeps going lower. Soon, she will reach...

My cock throbs with need as her lips trail to my waist, just above where my pants begin. She looks up at me again, the

intent on her face clear, then she slips her fingers under the waistband of my pants and begins to pull them down.

“Mackenzie,” I groan, my cock springing up like an arrow shot from a bow.

“Yes?” she whispers, wrapping her fingers around and looking up at me.

I just moan, my cock giving a twitch in her hand. Big, throbbing veins snake up the shaft, and we both watch as a dribble of clear liquid leaks out of the head.

“I like how ready for me you are,” says Mackenzie, and my cock twitches again at the feeling of her breath.

Then, making eye contact the entire time, she begins to lick the head of my cock clean.

“Mackenzie,” I rasp, brain able to focus on little else but her name. “*Mackenzie...*”

She says nothing, and my words cut off as she sucks the head of my cock into her mouth and closes it.

Pleasure. Pure, warm, wet satisfaction. I feel her tongue swirling around me, and it’s so good it takes everything I have not to burst.

“Your cock is so big,” she tells me, her eyes glinting. “I have to open my mouth so wide just to fit you.”

I raise my eyebrows. I can tell this is not a complaint. “I am afraid I cannot make it smaller.”

“And I wouldn’t want you to,” Mackenzie whispers, returning her mouth to my shaft.

This time, she takes me deeper. I groan, pleasure shuddering through me as her mouth work down my shaft.

Mackenzie gags, pulling her face up quickly.

“Are you okay?” I ask quickly, my attention immediately turns to her well-being.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she giggles. “Just not super used to this. Don’t worry. I’ll learn.”

She stifles my reply by returning her mouth to my cock.

Mackenzie’s words are true: she does learn. Soon, she is able to take the first half of my length every time she slides her mouth down its shaft. I am in heaven, watching her and feeling her lips and tongue along my sensitive skin.

“You are going to make me come,” I growl, the pleasure almost overwhelming.

She makes eye contact, pausing for only a moment. “So go ahead and come.”

My lips flare with a primal urge. “I would rather climax inside your cunt. That is where my seed belongs.”

A guilty look flashes across her face. “Are you trying to knock me up?”

“I am your mate,” I growl. “I want to claim you with my cock and with my seed. I want to see your belly swollen with my child.”

“Oh fuck,” she moans. “Fuck, okay.”

My cock throbs with desire as she stands up. I watch as she removes her pants and then her undergarments, then climbs back on top of me, her pussy pressing down on my shaft with nothing in between. I can feel her warmth, the wetness leaking out of her and making me slick.

My breathing gets heavy as she raises her hips, gripping my shaft and positioning me at her entrance. Mackenzie’s face scrunches up as the head of my cock parts her pussy lips and she starts to sink down onto me.

“Fuck,” I groan as I watch my cock disappear inside her. “Fuck, you feel perfect.”

For a moment, it’s as though she is entirely overwhelmed. Then she starts to move on top of me, her breaths little more than gasps.

“I didn’t know... that feeling like you’re going to be split in two... could be a good thing,” she whimpers, her eyes very wide. “Oh fuck, Karlo, *fuck* me.”

I pull her closer to me until we are forehead-to-forehead. Then I start to work with my hips, thrusting up from the ground, slamming myself into her with all the energy I can muster.

Soon I cannot contain myself.

“Mackenzie, I’m coming,” I gasp, my cock starting to twitch as I continue to thrust. “I’m coming inside you.”

“Yes,” she moans, her face lighting up. “Come inside me, Karlo. I want you to get me pregnant.”



Mackenzie

I know I mean the words as soon as I say them. I've always wanted to be a mother. I was just waiting for the right man.

And now I've found him.

Karlo shudders underneath me, his cock twitching inside me. I moan, knowing what each twitch brings. When his climax fades, I stay on top of him, focusing on the delicious feeling of his warm cum filling me up, starting to leak out around his shaft.

"Don't let it spill out," he growls, eyes fixed on my pussy. "I want to make sure all of my cum ends up where it belongs."

I shiver, insanely aroused at his words. His cock slips out of me when I draw myself up, and I hurry to lie down next to him, changing to a less vertical angle.

"My good mate," he whispers, reaching his hand between my legs. I try to help him, but he stops me, giving me a pointed look. "*Mine,*" he says firmly.

I watch as he scoops the cum from my outer lips and my inner thighs, pushing it all back inside me neatly. Then he rests his hand over my pussy, holding it casually like something that belongs to him.

"We have to get back to the island," he says finally, kissing me on the forehead. "That is where we should raise our children.

With our clan.”

Our clan. I’ve never felt that way before, not really. I always felt like an outsider, like an impostor. But now, I realize, everything has changed. Now, *Karlo* is my clan. He’s my family, the man I want to be the father of my children.

With him by my side, I feel like I could conquer everything. Even my ridiculous, sometimes crippling social anxiety.

Our clan—that’s exactly what it is. The humans, the Kyrzons, all of them. I miss Lara. I miss Ramsey. And I don’t want to raise a family on this island alone.

“Yeah,” I agree, kissing his shoulder. “We need to get back to our clan. Together.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mackenzie

“Yes!” I yell, pumping my fist.

“What is it?” Karlo asks, turning to me, startled. He’s on his feet now. The last night of sleep seems to have made the difference.

“There’s a blueprint for an outboard motor in the database,” I tell him, beaming. “Something we could attach to a raft that would push it through the water,” I explain in response to his questioning look.

He grins at me. “That is good news. Will this stupid version of the computer allow you to create it?”

“I hope so. Let’s see if we have the right materials.”

We do. Just enough. I use the touchscreen on the side of the escape pod to access the fabricator, and to my surprise, it starts working the first time I tell it to start.

“It is working quickly,” says Karlo. “But it looks very small.”

I peer into the fabricator bay. To my horror, I can see that what's being printed is definitely not an outboard motor.

This fucking computer.

"This device looks rather... suggestive," says Karlo slowly.

"It's printing the wrong thing," I tell him, my cheeks warming.

"This is, uh, a blueprint I was checking out while you were still asleep from the cup plant."

"And what is this other blueprint?"

"It's a vibrator," I admit.

"A... vibrator?"

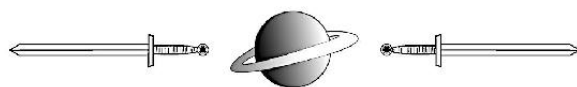
Now my cheeks are really hot. "A sex toy. Something that... helps me come easier."

"So far, you have not seemed to need the assistance," says Karlo, narrowing his eyes playfully.

"I thought it might help me come with you inside me. So we could come at the same time."

Now he presses me against the wall, clutching my face and kissing me fiercely. "We will have to try that."

"But first," I say, snaking away from him before I get caught up in what my body is already responding to, "let me see if I can figure out how to get that motor fabricating."



Unfortunately, thanks to the dumbass computer printing a sex toy instead of a motor, we now don't have quite enough plastic to build the motor itself. We're only short by, like, 200 grams, but it's enough for the computer to show a big *ERROR* message when I try to print it.

At least I have my stupid vibrator.

Thankfully, I think I know where we can get some more.

"We need to go back to the wreckage," I tell Karlo. "I saw spools of fabricator material in the supply closet. I'm fairly certain they'll have the plastic we need."

He raises his eyebrows. "Right now?"

"Yeah. If you're feeling up for it."

He scratches his beard, then nods. "We should move quickly. We do not want to lose the daylight."



"I will try not to fall into a cup plant this time," Karlo says, grimacing.

I chuckle. "Yeah, please. You're heavy."

The mood between us is light. We've been laughing and flirting all afternoon, both of us giddy with our new bond. I feel so comfortable with Karlo, and I can tell that he's opening up, too.

“This is the hole you cut for the hover-dolly?” he asks, eyeing the fresh, clean cuts extending the jagged tear.

“Yup. Pretty steady lines, considering I was so stressed I wanted to puke.”

Karlo hangs his head. “I am sorry for that.”

“Nothing to apologize for,” I tell him brightly, standing on my tiptoes and still failing to reach his cheek. I settle for kissing his shoulder.

“I wish we had thought to bring the laser cutter with us. Then we could cut a bigger hole, and I could go in with you.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I’ll be in and out in like a minute.”

“I’m your mate. I should be there to protect you.”

“It’ll be fine! Seriously, the way you talk, you’d think I was prone to getting myself almost killed every time I left your eyesight.”

“I do seem to recall several recent run-ins with a crockjaw,” says Karlo, raising an eyebrow.

“Hmmp. Okay, I’m going in now.”

I crouch down and slide myself through the hole, careful not to snag my clothing.

“Do you see anything inside?” comes Karlo’s voice the moment I’m through.

“Nope, just darkness. I’m going to the supply closet now. Whoops.”

I lose my footing for a moment, catching myself quickly.

“Are you okay?” the immediate response echoes through the hallway.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I say through gritted teeth, finding the closet.

I flick the light on, and to my relief, it still has power. My eyes scan the shelves. There we go. Those are the fabricator spools.

I don’t know which one we need, so I just grab all three of the plastic ones, and a spool of copper just for good measure.

Well, that was easy. I start to exit the closet, then I stop, a plan forming.

I’m going to joke with Karlo a little bit.



Karlo

“Are you all right in there?” I call to Mackenzie, peering through the hole in the metal wall.

“Yes,” comes her reply. “I’m almost—agh! Oh no! I’m being eaten!”

“*Mackenzie!*” I shout, adrenaline rushing through me. I start to kick at the metal wall, trying to break through.

“It’s okay!” calls Mackenzie’s voice quickly, and I hear her footsteps rushing closer to me through the darkness. “I was just joking. You don’t need to break your foot!”

I gape at her as she scampers back through the hole. “That was not funny.”

“I mean, it was a little funny. Look at your face!”

“It was not funny to me.”

She sighs, but nods her head. “Sorry. Won’t do it again.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Mackenzie

“Computer, where do I load spools of material into the fabricator?”

“A spool, a school, that’s very cool,” the computer sings.

“God fucking dammit. Surely you can be serious just this one time?”

“I am serious, and don’t call me Shirley.”

I turn to Karlo. “I don’t know about you, but I’m about to scream into a pillow.”

He laughs. “We have been productive today. Now it is night. There is no need for frustration.”

I know he’s right, but I really want to get the motor fabricating as soon as possible. I’m sure it will take a while to print.

“Computer, how do I reload the fabricator?”

“The fabricator materials port is located in the panel below the input screen.”

I blink. “Well, when you’re helpful, you’re helpful. Like rolling the dice with you.”

Sure enough, there’s a panel right under the fabricator screen that seems to open. I pull off the cover and see a port labeled *load material spools here*.

“It is as though the escape pod is eating it,” Karlo remark as I start feeding the spools into the port. “Which spool is the one we need?”

“Honestly, I don’t even know,” I tell him with a shrug. “It’s one of them.”

When I’m done, I bring up the blueprint for the outboard motor again. This time, it doesn’t let me know we’re out of plastic.

“Here goes nothing,” I say, finger hovering over the button that says *PRINT*. I touch the screen. “Please, no vibrator.”

“*Printing you another vibrator,*” the computer announces cheerfully. “*If you are looking for intimacy, consider our entire catalog of sex toy blueprints. I have wedge pillows, harnesses, anal beads, butt plugs...*”

“Computer, that’s enough!” I shout.

“... *whips, crops, handcuffs, several different types of bondage restraints, knotted dildos, electrostimulators—*”

“Computer! Shut the fuck up and stop printing sex toys!”

The computer falls silent. “*What would you like me to print?*”

I take a deep breath. Karlo watches me, lips twitching.

“Can you please. *Please*. Print me an outboard motor.”

“*Fabricating an outboard motor;*” the escape pod chirps.

“Finally,” I groan, turning to Karlo. “Or actually, let me make sure—yeah, that looks like a motor. Okay, it’s doing it this time. Probably won’t be done until tomorrow.”

Karlo is holding something. My eyes fall to his hand, and I see the pink, cylindrical vibrator from earlier.

“You said this would help you climax when I am inside you,” he growls, looking at me with narrowed eyes. “I would like to test that.”



Karlo

Mackenzie grins. “Oh? Would you?”

I take a step closer. “Yes.”

Now her look is mischievous. “You wouldn’t even know what to do.”

I stand right in front of her, towering over her. “I will remind you of that comment when you are squirming under me, begging me not to stop.”

My hands touch her face, sliding around to cup her head and force her to look up at me.

“*Mine,*” I snarl, holding my lips inches from hers. “My mate.”

I press my mouth against hers, claiming it with a dominating kiss. She moans, melting against me. All she's wearing are the thin, black clothes she came here in, and I can feel her soft, luscious body pressing against me.

Immediately, I start to undress her. She is my mate, and I would have her naked. My hands slip under her shirt, gripping the bare skin of her back, but to my surprise, she does not lift her arms to make it easy for me.

"Lift your arms," I growl.

"Make me," she whispers, her eyes flashing.

Okay. I see. If it is a game she wants, I am happy to indulge her. I grab her wrists, forcing them roughly above her head and pinning them together with one hand.

"I will undress you know," I tell Mackenzie, looking her dead in the eyes. Slowly, and with body language that makes it firmly clear that I'm in control, I pull her shirt over her head.

Then my lips fall to her neck. She squirms, pressing herself against me as I kiss my way up her jawline to her mouth. I grab her ass with both hands, squeezing it, savoring it.

"Naked," I growl. "You can help me, or I will do it for you."

Mackenzie says nothing, but she has that same gleam in her eye that tells me exactly what her answer is. My hands slide under her black shorts and I work them down her thighs.

"Mine," I whisper, my breath on her neck as I begin to stroke her pussy gently. She whimpers, moving her hips against me.

“I want you to fuck me hard,” Mackenzie gasps. “Fuck me like I’m yours. Like I’m your mate.”

“You are my mate,” I growl, spinning her around so that her naked ass is pressed against my cock, still contained within my pants. I reach around her, one hand landing on her neck, the other between her legs. “And I intend to remind you of that.”

I walk Mackenzie forward, leading her to the bed. She follows my lead, yielding to me easily now.

“Now explain to me how this thing works,” I command, producing the vibrator.

She giggles. “All hot and dominant until you don’t know how to find the *on* button.”

Mackenzie takes the vibrator for me and does something at its base. Suddenly it begins to hum, vibrating very fast.

“It is as though it is shivering,” I remark.

“Yeah, well, I’m going to be the one shivering if you press that against my clit,” she says.

I grin. My mate has a zeal for this, and it pleases me greatly.

“Down,” I whisper, pushing her onto the bed.

I stand in front of her and pull her toward me by the thighs, the sight of her naked body underneath me making my cock impossibly stiff. Groaning, I undo my pants and it springs free, slapping against her clit.

“Oh,” she says, her breathing already getting heavy. “That felt good.”

I slap my cock against her clit again, watching her. She reacts just as I expected, a jolt of pleasure flashing across her face. Then I start to rub the head against her little bean, batting it back and forth, then swirling circles around it.

“Yes,” she gasps. “I really like that.”

Just as when she was riding me, I get the impression she could climax from only this, without me even being inside her. But I am not going to give her what she wants just yet.

Far more fun to make her squirm.

“Don’t stop!” she whimpers, staring wide-eyed as I slow the stimulation to a maddening pace.

“You will come when I am inside you,” I tell her, “and not before.”

She glares at me, but then bites her lip. “So fuck me already.”

“I will. Soon.”

I take the vibrator, still buzzing, and hover it over her clit, *almost* touching. She gasps, and her clit twitches.

“So sensitive,” I murmur. “Did you snack on passionberries earlier?”

She giggles. “I should have.”

I touch her clit with the vibrator, and her pussy twitches again.

“You will not need them.”

This toy is a good one. These humans and their technology. Every time I so much as nick Mackenzie’s little nub, she squirms and moans.

I know I am torturing her. But I am also torturing myself.

My mate watches with wide eyes as I position my cock at her entrance. She is slick, her intimate parts swollen, and the head of my shaft parts her lips easily.

I press the vibrator against her clit as I slowly push myself inside.

“Oh fuck,” she moans, and I feel her clenching around me.

“My beautiful mate,” I purr, driving myself deeper until she gasps. “I love the way your cunt closes around me.”

“Fuck me,” she whines, wrapping her legs around my waist. “Fuck me hard.”

I begin to thrust, teasing her clit with the vibrator. She sighs, leaning her head back. Her pussy feels so good that soon, I am struggling not to climax myself. I can feel the vibrations moving through her, stimulating me as well.

I slow my thrusting to a crawl, my cock twitching. “I almost came inside you right there,” I whisper, stroking her face.

She sucks my thumb into her mouth. Fuck, that makes my cock hard. I begin to circle her clit with the toy, noticing the way her moans grow louder.

My pace begins to increase. I can hardly help it, she feels so good. I struggle to keep myself on the right side of that line, slowing down occasionally as my cock pumps pre-cum into Mackenzie’s cunt.

Soon, her cheeks are red and I can tell her climax will come soon.

“Karlo,” she moans. “I’m close. I’m getting close.”

An animal growl rumbles in my throat. I start to thrust hard and fast, slamming her against the bed as I continue to work the vibrator on her clit.

“Oh fuck,” Mackenzie whimpers, squeezing me with her legs. “Oh fuck, Karlo, I’m coming.”

I let out a roar, unable to control myself any further. She is so beautiful, so feminine underneath me, her body soft and curvy compared to my hard, angular muscles. The pleasure builds, reaching a peak, and then my shaft throbs inside her, releasing spurt after spurt of my seed.

“Mackenzie,” I gasp, pumping her full of hot cum with every stroke.

I collapse on top of her, vibrator pressed between us, and our lips meet, the embrace sloppy, primal. She twitches underneath me, hands scrambling at my back.

“I love you,” I breathe, filled with an affection so strong, I cannot begin to describe it. “Mackenzie, I love you always. I love what we are together.”

“I love you too,” she whispers, her pussy clenching around my cock. “Stay here with me. Stay inside me.”

I turn off the vibrator, placing it on the bed next to us. I do not want to leave her either. I want to keep filling her with my

cock, staying in this moment where nothing else matters, and everything is right.

“Imagine having our own tent together,” says Mackenzie after some time, “back at the camp with the rest of the group. Wouldn’t that be nice? Just you and me?”

“I would like that very much,” I say, my heart warm at the thought. “And perhaps someday, it would not just be the two of us.”

“You, me, and our children,” she sighs happily.

I kiss her forehead. “You, me, and our children,” I agree.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mackenzie

The outboard motor takes a lot longer than the night to fabricate. More like a week. And then we're left with the task of building a functional raft that can hold both of us. Turns out, that isn't particularly easy when nobody has any experience building boats.

"Too bad your computer does not have a blueprint for a raft," Karlo jokes as we are trying to strategize.

I chuckle. "It would take about 50 tries to get it printing, and we'd probably just end up with another vibrator. We've got to be able to make it ourselves, right? A bunch of logs tied together?"

Karlo scratches his beard. "We do not have a metal ax. Felling trees will not be easy."

"Well," I suggest, "how about a laser cutter?"



Even with the laser cutter, preparing logs to make a raft is far from simple. It's hard work, finding the right diameter of trunks, chopping them down, and then cutting them all to the right size. And the moment we start using the laser cutter, it becomes apparent that we're going to need eye protection for this. This necessitates another trip to the wreckage on the other side of the island, which unfortunately does not yield the mask we need.

Fortunately, there's a blueprint for a mask on the escape pod. Unfortunately, getting it fabricated takes another two days.

"They must think we're dead," I sigh as I finally get the protective mask set up to print. "As far as Karvok or Lara or anyone knows, we just disappeared after the party."

"This will take time," Karlo reassures me, "but we will get back to them. With you by my side, I have no doubt."

When the mask is finally done, we're able to start felling trees. Another week passes. Then we have to collect vines to tie them together, actually do the tying, and try to mount the motor on the back. That's another week.

Finally, at the end of a long day, it's all put together, and it seems to float okay from our limited attempts.

"We will test it tomorrow," Karvok says, putting his arm around me as we stand on the beach, watching the sunset. "Although I would not risk making the full journey without proving that the raft is safe."

I nuzzle him. “Yeah, I agree. But tomorrow’s the moment of truth. If this thing works, we’ve got a way back home.”



Karlo

Mackenzie is not in bed when I wake up. For a moment I worry, until I hear her making noise in the bathroom.

“Hey,” she says, coming out of the door slowly.

“Today is a good day,” I tell her. “We will see if this raft can take us home.”

She pauses. “I have to tell you something.”

I pat the bed next to me and she sits down, curling against my side.

“What is it?” I ask, putting my arm around her.

“I was supposed to get my period last week.”

“Your period?”

“You know, my monthly cycle.”

Understanding dawns. I know what this could mean, but almost do not bear to hope. “Do you think this means you are ___”

“Pregnant?” she completes my sentence. “Yeah, I... I printed a pregnancy test while you were asleep. I didn’t want to tell you until I was sure. I—*Karlo!*”

She squeals as I pounce on her in my excitement, pinning her to the bed and covering her with kisses.

“This is everything,” I tell her. “My love, my mate, I—” I have no more words, so my sentence finishes with a growl.

Mackenzie lifts her head up, and I kiss her on the lips.

“You’re going to be a good father,” she whispers between kisses. “I know you are.”

“We will raise our child with our clan,” I tell her, touching my forehead to hers. “Whatever it takes, we will return.”



Mackenzie

“Are you ready?” Karlo asks me, standing in the tide as I float on the raft in front of him.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I confirm. “Let’s do this.”

Karlo pushes off, then clambers up onto the raft to join me. We float away from the shore, not too far, but far enough that it still makes me nervous. I’ve seen firsthand the danger that lurks in these waters.

“Well, we’re floating okay,” I say, shrugging. “Shall we start the motor?”

We’ve tested it on land, and confirmed that it works. But we have no idea how it’s going to act when it’s in the water. We

“I’m excited to go back to our friends,” I tell him. “But I think I’m going to miss being here with you.”

Karlo nuzzles me. “I know what you mean. It has been... special, this time with just the two of us. I will always savor the memory.”

“And to think, we were this close to getting eaten by a crockjaw.”

My mate smiles. “He would not have eaten you. I would not have let him. I would fight 20 crockjaws for you.”

“That’s sweet, but you’d get torn to fucking shreds. I like you much better in one piece.”

“Nonsense. The crockjaws would recoil from my mighty spear.”

I rest my hand on his crotch. “And what mighty spear would that be?”

Karlo kisses me, and we make out for a while.

“You know, I always had a crush on you,” I admit to him.

His eyes go wide. “What do you mean?”

“I always liked you. Thought you were attractive. Ever since you carried me to the island. Somebody left a gift for me, and I hoped it was you. But you probably didn’t even notice me until the passionberries.”

Karlo throws back his head and laughs.

“What?” I say, my old instincts rearing up and making me defensive. “Is it that embarrassing to have a crush? It worked

out in the end, didn't it?"

"No," says Karlo, "it is not embarrassing to have a crush. I myself had a crush on one of the humans when our two groups first joined together."

"Oh," I say, a sinking feeling in my stomach. I know having a crush isn't something it would be fair to hold against him. But it hurts to know his first instinct was to like somebody other than me. "Did you ever say anything to her?"

Karlo strokes his fingers through my hair. "No. I was worried I would drive her off. Instead, I left her a gift. On her bed. A flower."

For a split moment, I'm struck by the incredible coincidence. Maybe giving a flower has some cultural meaning to the Kyrzons?

And then it hits me, and I wrap my arms around him.

"You're not serious," I coo. "That was you?"

"Of course it was me. Mackenzie, from the fucking moment I lifted you atop my shoulders, I knew I wanted you. I saw your beauty and your bravery, and I was smitten."

Now my cheeks are getting hot. "I wasn't brave. I was so scared I almost peed myself."

"You were scared, and still you came to protect your friend. You put yourself in danger for Ramsey, and for my clan, too. That is true bravery. If you are not scared, you cannot be brave."

“Well, then I’m about to be *real* brave tomorrow when we try to sail that raft four miles back to the island.”

He laughs. “So will I, Mackenzie. So will I.”

For a long time, we’re silent.

“I am *really* going to miss that bed and that toilet,” I admit, shaking my head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mackenzie

“It is a good thing the sea is quiet today,” Karlo remarks.

“Yeah,” I agree. “And really, this shouldn’t even take too long. I don’t know how fast we’re going, before four miles really isn’t that far.”

This is going better than I expected. I rest my head against Karlo’s arm, my heart light with the thought of returning to my friends. They’ll probably tease me about getting with Karlo. But I don’t care. With him, I can handle all of that.

“I never thought I would be the first to get pregnant,” I say, hugging him.

“Out of the humans, you mean?”

“Yeah. You would’ve thought Ramsey. Or really... anyone but me.”

“I do not know. You are fairly cute. I think you would be quickly snapped up.”

I punch his shoulder lightly. “Fairly cute!”

He grins. “And easy to tease. Is that a shape I see on the horizon?”

I squint. “It might be. Do you think that’s the island?”

“I hope so. My stomach is getting—”

Karlo breaks off, and there’s no confusion why. In front of us, a dark shape has become visible under the water, a sinister fin emerging, and then a tail. It appears for just a moment, and then it is gone.

“What the fuck was that?” I say quickly, my heart starting to pound. All around us is open ocean, our previous destination getting smaller and smaller behind us. We’re incredibly vulnerable out here.

Karlo says nothing, but he grips his spear tightly, eyeing the pile of sharpened sticks he has brought as backups.

I have an uneasy feeling as we continue to move forward.

“There it is again,” I say, pointing. That same dark shape under the water, bigger than I can tell, shaped vaguely like a torpedo with a fin pointing right at us. “Shit, it’s getting closer.”

The shape keeps moving closer, and I regard with horror as a shark-like creature emerges from the water, rows of eyes lining the top of its head as the mouth opens, seawater splashing...

Karlo throws his spear, embedding it in one of the many eyes. Purple blood fills the water, and the creature vanishes into the depths.

“That’s not good,” I chatter, terrified out of my wits. “Do we keep going, or turn around? I don’t think that thing is gone.”

I look over my shoulder. The island we just came from is a lot bigger and closer than the one we’re going to.

Then to our right, the shape emerges again, fin moving in our direction.

“Turning around!” I yell, yanking on the motor. “I hope you’re a good shot with those spears!”

Karlo grabs his weapons from the floor of the raft, aiming as I turn us in a half-circle that seems painfully slow.

The motor has a dial that lets me increase our speed. The moment we’re facing the right direction, I crank it up, going faster than I’ve been comfortable before. It’s choppy going, but at least the island is getting bigger in front of us.

Next to me, Karlo throws his spear. “Missed,” he grunts. “Fuck.”

He only has two left. I look over my shoulder just in time to see Karlo’s next shot hit the body of the creature. Purple blood trails after us, but it doesn’t give up the chase.

“We’re almost there!” I shout to Karlo. “We just need to hold it off a little longer!”

He throws again, then pumps his fist. “Right in the eye! That gave him something to think about.”

My knuckles are white on the steering handle of the motor as we race back into the shallow water and finally, onto the

beach. Karlo wraps his arms around me, then picks me up, carries me up to the escape pod, and holds me on the bed, stroking my hair and clutching me tightly.

“That would have worked,” I whisper, my teeth still chattering. “That would have worked. What *was* that thing?”

He squeezes my head to his chest. “I do not know. All that matters is that I did not lose you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mackenzie

“Computer, is there any chance you have a blueprint for something that can hover over water?”

“Well, water is very wet,” the computer replies. From her tone, you could swear she was being helpful.

“Water isn’t the only thing that’s wet,” Karlo purrs, looking up at me from between my legs.

It’s been a couple of days since our disastrous attempt to return to the other island. Honestly, I’ve been pretty down. Karlo has, too, I think, but he hides it well. Better than I do, at least.

Mostly, he hides it with sex.

I shiver as he drags his tongue slowly over my clit. “Computer,” I try again, my voice shaky, “do you have a blueprint for an aquatic hovercraft?”

“The term ‘craft beer’ refers to beer that has been produced at a craft brewery. These breweries work in smaller batches and often have independent—”

“Your computer does not want to help you,” Karlo teases.

“I don’t know, printing the vibrator was a pretty cool move.”

“You mean *this* vibrator?” he asks mischievously, showing it to me in his hand.

I gasp as he brushes my clit with it, sending a jolt of pleasure through me.

“Computer,” I whimper, struggling to keep my voice steady as he starts circling with the buzzing toy, “do you have any technology that could help us cross an ocean?”

“She will not help you,” Karlo whispers. “Now lie your little head back and let me make you come.”

He slides the vibrator inside me and lowers his mouth to my pussy.

I release a throaty moan, his warm lips closing around my clit and sucking gently. At the same time, the sensation of being filled is tantalizing. I’ve become used to Karlo’s impressive girth, and the toy feels... disappointingly small in comparison.

On the other hand, Karlo’s penis doesn’t vibrate.

“I believe you are looking for the water propulsion jets,” says the computer, interrupting my extremely pleasurable haze.

“The water propulsion jets?” I gasp, my words breathless. Karlo just continues what he’s doing, eating me out while he pumps the vibrator inside me.

“You may access the water propulsion jets via the control panel.”

I glance at the control panel on the other side of the room, then tap Karlo's shoulder. "I want to check this out."

He shakes his head, chuckling. "Be my guest."

Then he continues sucking on my clit. I lean back, the pleasure mounting. I don't think I could bring myself to stop him if I wanted to.



Ten minutes later, I'm quivering on the bed, soaked in sweat.

"I can't," I moan. "I'm too sensitive. I can't have another."

Karlo looks up at me, then gives my pussy a parting kiss. "Too bad. I was just getting started."

"I want to go check for that blueprint," I say, getting up naked from the bed. "I think that might've been, like, an actual lucid moment from the computer."

I head over to the computer screen and start searching through the database. Unfortunately, nothing comes up.

"Computer, where is the blueprint for the water propulsion jets?"

"Water propulsion jets are located at the rear of the escape pod."

Huh? That doesn't make any sense.

"Computer, where in the blueprint database are the water propulsion jets?"

“Water propulsion jets are already installed. To access, enable the emergency protocol for a water landing.”

Wait a second. Is she telling me that water propulsion jets are *already part of the escape pod?*

“Computer, enable the emergency protocol for a water landing.”

“Done.”

Below the computer screen, a compartment opens and a small steering yoke emerges.

“Mackenzie! Where are you going?” Karlo calls after me as I run outside, not bothering to dress.

I reach the back of the pod and, to my amazement, I see a panel sliding open with three pipe-like things hidden inside. I don’t know exactly what a water propulsion jet looks like, but I’m guessing it looks something like this.

Karlo comes out of the pod, just as naked as I am. “What did you find?”

I can’t contain the smile spreading across my face. “I think I just found a way to get us home.”

Karlo picks me up in his arms, kissing me all over my face. “And that way involves the water propulsion jets?”

“Yeah,” I tell him as he carries me back inside. “We were spending all this time trying to build a raft. But it turns out we had one the whole time.”

He puts me down on the bed, then pushes me onto all fours. “And what if that sea monster wants to swallow our escape pod whole?”

“I don’t think it’s big enough,” I say as I feel his hands groping me from behind, my heart rate increasing. “Besides, we already know a crockjaw couldn’t get us in here.”

“That is true,” Karlo whispers, his cock slipping between my thighs. His hands explore me, finding my breasts, my waist. “And we know that it is able to float.”

“Yes,” I agree, my words turning into a moan as my mate pushes his cock inside me. “Karlo, oh fuck.”

He grips my hips, thrusting himself deeper, until he bottoms out. “Then we will have to try it.” He thrusts again. “My beautiful, clever mate.” Another thrust. “I am so fucking lucky to have you. On this island, or on any island.”

I just moan, gripping the sheets, letting him stretch me open with his thick cock.

This is a good way to celebrate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mackenzie

The next day, we get up early and immediately start digging at the sand in front of the escape pod. It's wedged far enough up the beach that this takes quite some work.

"How about I try the laser cutter?" I suggest after the first ten minutes of painfully slow digging with our hands.

Karlo shrugs. "Worth a try."

I return with the laser cutter and the mask, and he watches as I start carving lines in the wet sand.

It's only a slight improvement, but it helps. We find a rhythm where I cut out a chunk, and Karlo scoops it away for me. By midafternoon, we're both exhausted and sore, but we've managed to create a big depression right in front of the escape pod that fills with water every time the waves roll in.

"I believe now, we will need to begin cutting under the pod," says Karlo, frowning.

He's right. We both stand carefully to the side as I begin cutting the sand underneath the escape pod, him looking away

so he doesn't burn his eyes.

"Is it working?" Karlo asks.

A big wave rolls in and washes away some of the sand I've been laser cutting, deepening the gap underneath the pod.

"Yeah," I confirm. "I think it is."

I switch to the other side. The key to this whole thing is, I don't want to be in front of the pod when it finally slips into the water. After some uncomfortable, painstaking work, both sides of it have a solid foot of pure air underneath them, with only the sand in the middle holding it level.

"Well, this is tough," I grumble, taking off my mask and staring at it. "How do I cut through that middle chunk without the pod falling on me?"

"I have been thinking about that," says Karlo, and I turn to see him dragging a huge tree branch down the beach. Really, more like a log.

His muscles ripple in the sunlight as he heaves the log at the bar of sand. A big piece of it collapses, and the escape pod shakes.

"It's working!" I shout. "Careful!"

I watch nervously as Karlo retrieves the log, worried that at any moment, he's going to get crushed. I breathe a sigh of relief when he returns to my side, log in hand.

"One more," he grunts, heaving the log again.

That does it. The bar of sand collapses in full as the log hits it this time. The escape pod shudders, then slides forward, landing completely in the water.

“Yeah!” I yell.

“That’s fucking right,” Karlo growls.

We hug and kiss, then he lifts me up in the air and swings me around while I laugh.

“Goodbye, island,” I whisper when he puts me down. “Thanks for the memories.”

Then we wade together into the tide and climb into the escape pod.

“Computer,” I say, “emergency water landing protocol. Let’s go.”



Karlo

“Emergency water landing protocol!” Mackenzie groans. “For the tenth fucking time!”

“Entering romance mode,” says the computer brightly.

I cannot help but chuckle even as my mate glares at me, clearly nearing the end of her patience. The funny sound, the ‘jazz’ music, amuses me. So does the pink light coming from underneath the bed.

“Go ahead, laugh it up,” says Mackenzie, kicking the wall. “It always does what we want eventually.”

“Perhaps these water propulsion jets are shy. After all, we are in romance mode.”

Now Mackenzie cannot help but laugh, despite her frustration. This, of course, was my goal. Our eyes meet, and she shakes her head. “I know, I know. We’ll get there. If the fucking water landing protocol wants to start!” She kicks the wall again, but her face is softer this time.

“Beginning emergency water landing protocol,” the computer chirps, and the door to the outside closes.

Mackenzie and I look at each other. A moment passes. Then we both burst out laughing, and I hug the woman I love.

“For fuck’s sake,” she chuckles. “Let’s do this while it’s still light out.”



Mackenzie

In water mode, the computer screen shows the view from the front camera. The same one that filmed poor Mrs. Bowman’s last moments. It takes me a moment to orient myself and make sure we’re facing the right direction.

“This screen shows what is in front of us?” Karlo asks, watching over my shoulder.

I bite my lip. “Exactly. Now, if I can just figure out where the accelerator is...”

There’s a button on the steering yoke, right where my pointer finger falls. I press it, and the pod lurches forward. The speedometer on the viewscreen tells me that we’re now going seven miles an hour.

“This is good,” says Karlo cautiously. “It seems that we are moving.”

I nudge him with my hips. “It’s a hell of a lot better than the raft, at least!”

“Except from here, I will not be able to throw my spear,” he mutters darkly.

I crank it up to 15 miles an hour, and then 20. The pod stays on the surface of the ocean, the camera occasionally dipping beneath the waterline to give us a view of what’s below.

It’s on one of these dips that I see it.

“What was that?” I ask Karlo sharply.

“I saw nothing,” he grunts, tightening his grip on my shoulder.

“Under the water. Keep watching the next time we dip under.”

Again, the camera is submerged. Only for a moment, but it’s enough.

“Going faster!” I yell, pushing the accelerator button like I’m trying to jam my finger all the way through it. “Holy shit, holy shit!”

My heart pounds and I feel dizzy with panic as I glue my eyes to the bottom of the viewscreen, searching for that shape. It's so much bigger than I realized. I *think* we're protected inside the pod, but I don't want to know what would happen if it catches us.

Slam!

The escape pod rocks as something hits us. Karlo growls, and I know he must feel as helpless as I do. All I can do is keep piloting us forward.

There. On the viewscreen. The island. I was concentrating so closely looking for the sea monster that I didn't even notice it.

"I think we're going to make it," I say through gritted teeth, watching the pixelated shape grow. "If we can just—"

Slam!

We're rocked again by another huge hit. When the pod stabilizes this time, I don't see the island anymore.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck," I say under my breath, turning the yoke desperately and trying to correct. "Where is it? Where's the island?"

"To the right," says Karlo, squeezing my shoulder. "You can do this."

I yank the yoke to the right, too far, and the island whizzes past the screen. I turn it back, gently this time, and manage to put the island in the center.

“That’s my girl!” Karlo growls triumphantly. “We’ll be dining with the clan tonight.”

I gun it, white knuckling the yoke, our destination almost upon us. By the time we skid out of the shallow water and onto the sandy beach, it’s a foregone conclusion.

We’re home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lara

“You don’t think they would have tried to swim, do you?” I suggest, frowning. “Maybe if they had enough drinks?”

“No,” says Shivka, scowling. “I do not know your friend Mackenzie, but Karlo would never be so foolish. He knows the dangers these waters hold. And they were sober when they left, and not carrying drinks.”

We’ve been over this a hundred times, but I just don’t know what else to do. It’s been three weeks since Mackenzie and Karlo disappeared. Shivka was the last person to see them. Apparently, they went to take a walk together the night of the party, and never returned. Ever since, we’ve been taking it in groups to patrol the island and look for signs of them.

At this point, it’s starting to feel hopeless.

“I do not believe a crockjaw has eaten them,” Shivka says. “It would have left the sign.”

She’s been saying that a lot lately. About the crockjaw. That makes me think that in her deepest of hearts, she suspects

that's what really happened.

I do too.

Still, no one is ready to give up hope. Certainly not Shivka or I. Karlo was her brother, and Mackenzie was my friend. We're going to do what we can until it becomes time that we have no choice but to let them go.

I've enjoyed getting to know Shivka. She was standoffish at first, but she's not bad when you get to know her. She's tough. The kind of person I would want to looking for me if I disappeared.

"There's still a lot of island to cover," I say hopefully. "According to the escape pod scanner, almost 10 square miles."

"According to your scanner that cannot locate two missing people."

"Hey, without that scanner, your whole clan would've gotten eaten by the raptors. It's good when it works."

The truth is, I share her frustration. The scanner only works intermittently, and it's been busted for weeks. Not exactly ideal, given the situation.

An hour passes, and then two. We wind up walking the beach, chatting and scanning for footprints.

"Can I ask you something?" says Shivka suddenly.

I frown at her, not sure what she's going to say. I've never known Shivka to act awkward about anything before. "Of

course.”

“Were Mackenzie and my brother... hooking up?”

“What?” I sputter. I can’t help it. That isn’t remotely what I expected. “Sorry, I don’t mean to laugh. Yeah, they were... doing something, at least.”

She’s silent for a long time.

“I guess I assumed you knew that,” I say eventually. “They hooked up that night they spent on the mainland together.”

“Do you know why they kept it quiet?”

“I guess they weren’t ready to couple up. Mackenzie was really nervous about it. She didn’t want to jump into something too early and get her heart broken.”

Shivka looks down at the sand. “I suppose I would not understand.”

Now I want to ask something. We are becoming friends, after all. “How have you managed to stay single this long? You ever think about getting with any of the guys here?”

Shivka stops. I stop too, worried that I’ve offended her.

“No,” she says in a flat tone.

Okay then. We keep walking.

“Who’s that up ahead?” the female Kyrzon asks, pointing.

I follow her finger and see two figures in the distance walking in our direction. A human and a Kyrzon.

“Probably Beth and Ruke,” I say with a snort. “They’ve been out patrolling every day, but I’m pretty sure they spend most of the time fucking. Hard to blame them, I guess.”

Shivka actually blushes. Wow, I think that might legitimately be the closest thing to vulnerability I’ve ever seen from her. She’s fearless when it comes to hunting, but seems endearingly awkward when it comes to sex. Interesting.

I wave to the couple up ahead. “Hey, Beth!”

Both the human and the Kyrzon wave back frantically, like they haven’t seen us in ages.

“That’s Karlo,” Shivka whispers, stopping in her tracks. “That’s Karlo!”

And then she starts to jog forward, leaving me in the dust.

“Wait!” I yell, running after her. I can’t match the pace of her much longer legs, but I try all the same.

Oh my god, it’s them. “Mackenzie!” I yell, kicking up sand as I run. “You’re alive!”

Shivka throws her arms around Karlo. A few seconds later, I do the same with my friend.

“What happened?” I ask Mackenzie, squeezing her. “Where have you been?”

She and Karlo glance at each other, and both of them take an identical deep breath.

“That’s a long story,” she says.

“Mackenzie is my mate,” says Karlo immediately. “And pregnant with my child.”

She rolls her eyes, blushing fiercely, but her eyes are glowing when she looks at him. “Way to spoil the ending, big guy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Mackenzie

“Mackenzie! It’s really you!” I’m practically knocked over as Ramsey slams into me with a hug.

I pat her on the back. “Yup, it’s me. What did I miss?”

She laughs, then Jenny and Beth run over, and I get more hugs. Everyone in the camp starts to crowd around, trying to see what the commotion is about.

“Karlo!” Ramsey’s mate Karvok yells from across the camp, stalking over to us. He throws his arms around his brother, and the two of them touch foreheads in an embrace I’ve seen them do before. “I knew you would come back to us. Where the fuck have you been all this time?”

“Mackenzie and I found another escape pod on the beach,” my mate explains. “We hid there to escape a crockjaw and had no choice but to spend the night.”

Around us, a couple of the human women murmur interestedly, and I find myself blushing. But you know what?

Let them giggle. I'm not ashamed of anything that's happened between Karlo and I.

"And one night turned into three weeks?" Jenny teases, nudging me. "Mackenzie, you absolute vixen."

"Not exactly," I say, ignoring my burning cheeks. "When we woke up, we found that the pod got washed away by the tide overnight. We ended up on an entirely different island."

Excited mutters ring out around us. "And you were able to get home?" Jura asks, looking impressed. "How?"

"First things first," says Ramsey. "Let's get them some food and water." She turns to Karvok. "Actually. Why don't we plan a feast?"



"So *this* is the sexy escape pod with jazz music and drinks."

"And a bathroom, apparently!"

Ramsey, Lara, Jenny, and Beth are all kinds of excited to see the new escape pod. Personally, I have to imagine the bathroom is the biggest appeal. In that specific way, I can't deny I've been lucky.

Actually, I've been lucky in a lot of ways, I reflect as I hold Karlo's hand, walking behind the rest of the group.

"Wait until you talk to the computer," I laugh. "She's... a bit of a character. You'll see."

We're going to get the hover-dolly, which will make quite a difference getting work done around the camp. Lara especially is full of questions. She's really dedicated herself to using her technical skills to make the island livable.

"Tell me again about the wreckage?" Lara asks as I press the button to open the escape pod door. "What else did you find that could be salvageable? We could really use more materials around the camp."

"Honestly, I didn't really explore," I tell her. "There could definitely be more—"

"Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Bowman!" the computer greets us.
"Entering romance mode."

I blush fiercely as the bed lights up pink and the soft, sensual jazz music begins to play.

"Well, I think I have a guess what you guys were doing to kill time," says Beth, sticking out her tongue.

"As though you and Ruke have been doing anything different," quips Jenny. "Unless there's some other reason why all your 'foraging' trips end with you finding about two berries each?"

I glance at Ruke, who is trying not to seem too pleased with himself. From behind, Roshkat glares at him.

"We should be careful," says Shivka, standing at the entrance of the pod holding her spear. "If the crockjaw returns, we do not want to be caught unawares."

I get the vibe *romance mode* makes her uncomfortable.

“We will both stand guard,” says Jura.

“Wait a second,” says Jenny, freezing. “Is that a *vibrator* on the bed?”

“Okay, tour’s over!” I shout, diving towards the bed to fold the blanket over our sex toy. “Dammit, I thought we cleaned that up.”

“Fantasy ruined,” Beth laughs to Ruke, shaking her head. “There’s no way they’ve been cleaning those sheets.”

Lara immediately heads to the computer console. “Looks like this thing is generating solar power just the same as the other pod. That will be really good for—wait, what the hell is wrong with this thing?”

“I told you,” I say, “it got damaged in the crash. The whole system has been weird.”

“*Crash damage,*” the computer confirms. “*Many crash damage.*”



We don’t end up having the feast for a couple more days, which suits me just fine. I’m exhausted, and still getting used to being back at the camp with everyone. Karlo and I make it our first priority to construct our own tent, with Karvok and Shivka pitching in.

Finally, it’s done. Maybe not quite as comfortable as the escape pod with the big bed, but it’s *ours*. Mine and Karlo’s.

For the first time in my life, I feel like I'm putting the pieces together. I have a partner. I have friends. A community that cares about me and respects my relationship.

And a baby growing inside me.

Ramsey beams when she first hears the news. "Mackenzie, I'm so happy for you. We can be pregnant together."

A big smile spreads across my face. "What? You and Karvok?"

"Yes," she says, looking happier than I've ever seen her. "Oh my god, this is so exciting! We're going to have babies at the same time. They can be friends!"

It's not just us who are excited. Karlo and Karvok spend the whole day preparing the camp for the feast together, and the whole time, all they talk about is how excited they are to meet their children, to start their families.

For Kyrzons, this isn't commonplace. It's a rare blessing.

"Would you rather have a boy or a girl?" I ask Karlo, joining his side as he and Karvok roll a huge log into the center of the camp to use as a bench.

He and his brother both look at each other as though the question is silly. "A girl," says Karlo immediately while Karvok nods. "Although I do not expect it. For a Kyrzon to father a female child is a rare, special thing." He puts his hands on my waist, kissing my forehead. "But Mackenzie, this is not something I care about. My child grows within you. That is the only blessing that matters."

Karvok pats him on the back. “Truly. What you and Ramsey are giving us is a blessing that goes beyond words. As far as I am concerned, you are my sister now. And I will love and protect your child as though it were my own.”

“And I will do the same for yours,” says Karlo, hugging his brother.

I wipe a tear from my eye, following along as the two men position the log. My own family wasn’t like this. It feels too good to be true.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Karlo

“Well, well, well! Look who managed to find a mate!”

The voice comes from Greta, our clan’s unofficial mother. I have known her since I was young and have always held the older woman in high regard. I beam at her, my arm around my mate.

“I am lucky to have a mate such as Mackenzie. The ancestors have truly blessed me.”

She winks. “I’ll bet you spent your whole time on that island fucking up a storm. Hope you didn’t get too used to having privacy.”

Mackenzie’s jaw drops, and her cheeks become so red they’re practically glowing. She glances around nervously at all the humans and Kyrzons sitting around us eating.

“Ignore her,” Ramsey laughs, sitting on Karvok’s lap. “Greta’s favorite sport is making people uncomfortable. But, uh, yeah. You guys definitely spent every day fucking each other raw.”

My mate blushes furiously, but I just laugh. Everyone has been teasing us. I do not care. I am glad to be teased for this reason.

“They are not wrong,” I whisper in Mackenzie’s ear.

She rests her head against me. I am content.



By the time the night grows late, everyone is happy and well fed, many of us are drunk, and the fires are burning low. We sit around in small groups now, talking and laughing. Every so often, someone says goodnight and retires to their bedroll.

“Well,” says Roshkat, “I would say that I will miss having you in my tent, but that would be a lie. All I need now is to get rid of Jura.” He nudges the scarred gladiator playfully.

Jura laughs. “For that, I believe you will need to find yourself a mate.”

It is nice to see Jura socializing. Usually, I see him sitting by himself.

Roshkat excuses himself to bed, and Jura follows shortly after. I stay talking to Karvok by the fire, telling the stories from my adventure with Ramsey that are appropriate. He laughs at my fall into the cup plant, but for once, my weakness does not embarrass me.

I have Mackenzie now. And together, we are strong.

“I believe I will go find my mate,” I say finally, draining my cup of sugarfruit wine. “I love you, brother. It is good to be

back.”

“And you,” says Karvok. “A year ago, our clan was nearly extinct. Now we have mates, and we will raise children together.” He raises his wine. “To this day, and to all that follow.”

“If only our father could see us,” I agree, raising my empty cup.

“He would be proud,” growls Karvok. “I know that he would be proud of you.”

Mackenzie is sitting at the other campfire with Lara, Ramsey, and Jenny. She turns to me as I approach and her face lights up.

I will never get tired of seeing that. There is no better feeling than knowing I have brought her joy.

“Ready for bed?” she asks.

“Ooh,” Jenny giggles. “Try not to get pregnant.”

“I’m already pregnant,” laughs Mackenzie, rolling her eyes.

“You guys really don’t get tired of this, do you?”

Lara shrugs mischievously. “If you keep blushing so hard at every joke, pretty soon I’m going to join in.”

Mackenzie shakes her head as we walk back to our tent. “Sooner or later, Lara and Jenny will find mates, and I’m going to tease them so fucking hard.”

“Not as hard as you’re about to get it!” Jenny shouts back at us, and everyone laughs.

But by the time we reach our tent, I do not desire laughter. I desire the comfort, the release, the wonderful intimacy of being inside of the woman I love.

“This is definitely less comfortable than the escape pod,” Mackenzie whispers as I lower her onto our bedroll, climbing on top of her.

“And yet I prefer it,” I breathe, lips tracing her jawline. “We are with our clan. We are where we should be.”

Our lips meet. The embrace is warm, comforting, familiar. She is not just a woman I desire now. She is my *mate*. My partner. The one who means everything to me, the one who will mother my children.

“I love knowing that you are mine,” I whisper, undressing her slowly. “I love knowing that my cock is the last one you will ever have inside you.”

She shimmies out of her skirt, then pulls my shirt over my head as I climb on top of her. “Come here.”

My cock is already hard for her. I tease her entrance for only a moment, sliding it around her clit before I push myself inside with a heavy sigh.

“Yes,” I growl, keeping my voice low.

She wraps herself around me as I begin to move inside her, each pump of my cock bringing a primal satisfaction. I do not believe it is possible for me to be any happier than I am in this moment. What I have now, all of it, is what I have always dreamed of.

“I know I can’t get pregnant again,” Mackenzie whispers, “but I still want you to come inside me.”

“Of course,” I tell her, pinning her arms as I look down at the beautiful woman who is naked underneath me, my child growing inside her. I am so full of love with her that I could burst. “My *mate*.”

I believe I will never get tired of saying those words.



Thank you so much for reading! I have lots of books planned for 2023, so make sure you’re signed up for my [mailing list](#) to stay up to date. (You’ll also get my exclusive short, *The First Kyrzon Bride*, on ebook and audiobook.)

If you want to read the original Kyrzon series that started it all, check out the [Kyrzon Breeding Auctions](#).

And if you want to follow me on Facebook, [I’m right here!](#)

Thanks again,

—Luna

OTHER BOOKS BY LUNA VOSS

The Kyrzon Breeding Auction series

The original Kyrzon series! These are the first books I ever published. I'm always growing as a writer (at least, I like to think I am!), but I will always have a soft spot for the books that started it all.

1. [*Sold to the Babymaker*](#)
2. [*Claimed by the Babymaker*](#)
3. [*Property of the Babymaker*](#)
4. [*Auctioned to the Babymaker*](#)
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The Vostra Crime Lords series

Is it alien romance? Is it mafia romance? It's both!
Fair warning, this series is very spicy, featuring
dom/sub relationships and lots of spanking.

1. [*Fated Mate Tamed*](#)
2. [*Fated Mate Conquered*](#)
3. [*Fated Mate Taken*](#)
4. [*Fated Mate Claimed*](#)

The Barion trilogy.

More alien mafia! For this trilogy, I decided to
follow the same couple for three books. If you
liked the first *Vostra* series, this is set in the same
universe.

1. [*Owned*](#)
2. [*Kept*](#)
3. [*Held*](#)

