

Alien Redemption Chapter 1

Rachel's vision was filled with Dr. Conyod's pleasing image as he leaned close. He was a complicated man, and the number of expressions his face held at once bore that out: confidence, pleading, hopefulness, patience, and determination.

His words, spoken in English, were accented but pronounced perfectly. "You can do it, Ray-Ray. Say 'hello.'"

She was desperate to say that simple yet impossible word. If she could get past the clot of terror in her throat, enough to squeak out that damnable *hello*, his blue-purple, cat-slitted eyes would light up. She'd be rewarded with a rare smile that transformed his rugged, chiseled features from attractive to heart-stopping. The tension in his jaw would ease. He might even laugh; a great prize for accomplishing the long-awaited goal.

She had it bad for her psychologist. What had started as a comical schoolgirl crush on the alien Kalquorian had erupted into love. Rachel Hicks was in her early thirties, too old to swoon over her heroes, too battered by experience to believe in fairytale romance. Yet hearing his step as he entered her hospital room quickened her pulse. As unrequited love went, this was grade-A passion.

It tore at Rachel that she couldn't give Conyod what they both wanted. And not because she'd fallen for the man coaxing her to speak. Being unable to talk when a physical disability no longer existed was a source of shame. In the past, she'd been a strong, confident woman. A force to be reckoned with. Hell, she'd dared to take on Earth's fanatical regime.

Okay, maybe not the whole regime, but she'd fought her way into a women's prison with the group she'd led. They'd been determined to force Earth's general population to witness the atrocities that went on there. To get them off their frightened, complacent asses and rise up against a government that employed torture and execution to keep its citizens in line.

To the idealistic twenty-somethings she'd led, it was a revolution that couldn't fail. But Rachel had only been a courier in real life, with no military training. She hadn't even been a Girl Scout. Though her group had taken over the prison and held it for almost a whole day, in the end, she'd been the only protestor left alive.

The broadcasts they'd sent out during their brief occupation had shown vids of infected but untreated wounds, of endless scars, of bent limbs that resulted from badly healed breaks, and of bodies stacked like cordwood in the morgue. Most horrific, they'd shown the endless lines of mass graves.

Those vids had never gone out. All transmissions and communications had been blocked by a government well versed in utter control. The revolution Rachel had dreamed about since she was a child failed to come to pass.

The whole thing had been pointless.

Even if she'd known her strike against the prison would fail, Rachel might have gone for it anyway. To her warrior soul, raising a fist against an insurmountable obstacle was better than slinking through life a beaten dog. In hindsight, she would have changed just one thing. She wouldn't have chanced so many others' lives. Like her Marcus.

She swallowed hard, fighting against the lump clogging her throat so she could give Conyod the stupid word that wouldn't come. Her fists twisted in her lap, wrinkling the soft white hospital gown that shimmered against her mahogany skin. None of her remaining scars showed when she wore the simple, sleeveless sheath. Almost all the marks of her torture were gone, thanks to the

brilliant surgeons who'd erased them. It was too bad Conyod couldn't wield a scalpel that would excise the scars from her soul as easily.

Rachel looked into his grape-hued eyes, trying to soak in the strength he projected. His wavy, black hair tumbled forward as he leaned in, close enough that she could have stolen a kiss.

She wanted it. But it would hardly be proper, and Conyod would be horrified if she dared. There was no doubt he had oceans of compassion, but sympathy and a drive to heal the wounded didn't translate into lust for a broken-down Earther who couldn't even say "hello."

He tossed back his waist-length waves with a quick jerk of his head. "Relax, Ray-Ray. The more tense you are, the harder it is."

His hands moved to her shoulders. Rachel wallowed in their warmth as he kneaded the stiff muscles. Heaven and earth, she loved it when he touched her. She concentrated on the sensation. She drew a couple of deep breaths.

The word was there, flashing neon-bright in her skull. It traveled down, moving towards her lips. Coming close, almost there. Then it ran into the knotted tightness that refused to budge. It was *right there*, and she couldn't get it out! Tears of frustration spilled down her cheeks.

Conyod stopped rubbing her shoulders. He cupped her heart-shaped face. "Hush, sweet girl. It was a good try. Take a moment and breathe."

He wore infinite patience and kindness as a second skin. No disgust. No disappointment. Rachel smiled a trembling apology for yet another failure.

He smiled back, and her breath caught. Damn the man, he was just too handsome when he did that. As he sat back in the big seating cushion opposite hers to make notes on his handheld computer, Rachel had the opportunity to look him over. She grabbed every opportunity offered when it came to eyeballing Imdiko Conyod's delightful topography.

The alien was remarkably similar to her own species. Kalquorians resembled large, muscled Earthers, with a few differences. There were those catlike eyes. A longer torso. Fangs that imparted intoxicant to their bitten victims.

Rachel darted a glance at Conyod's crotch. Kalquorian men had two penises, the larger of the pair in front. She'd once had the delightful opportunity to experience a man so endowed. The Kalquorian who'd rescued her from the bowels of the prison she'd been incarcerated in had been pure deliciousness despite his inexperience with women. She couldn't help but wonder how the older, more knowledgeable Conyod would feel inside her.

Conyod's skin was the brown shade she associated with Earthers of Middle Eastern descent. His hair was so black, the waves had blue highlights. His loose-fitting tunic and trousers couldn't hide a muscled physique she visualized wallowing all over.

Rachel's pussy was wet, and she forced herself to look away. She'd heard Kalquorians possessed a keen sense of smell, better than an Earth bloodhound. She'd hate to humiliate herself by alerting Conyod how he aroused her.

She made herself look around her room. It was small, but comfortable. Her thick sleeping mat filled a corner, the softest surface she'd ever slept upon. She tidied it every day though the orderlies were happy to do it for her. The room was softly lit, but she knew the illumination was bright enough for Conyod. Kalquorians could see in the dark. Rachel envied the aliens that ability. She often woke in the middle of the night, certain she was still in the prison's bowels, alone and frightened. Stubborn pride kept her from sleeping with the lights on. She'd spent many a sweat-soaked night peering blindly about until a night nurse, keeping watch on monitor vids, came to sedate her.

Restful cream-colored walls and dark blue carpeting kept her room from looking too institutional despite the spartan decor. Her only furnishings beside the sleeping mat and Conyod's Kalquorian-sized seating cushion consisted of a low table to eat her meals at and another seat cushion, on which she sat during their appointments. Two screens provided vids of lovely outdoor scenes, offering the illusion Rachel was looking out of windows. She had the option to view landscapes of any number of worlds. She kept the settings on random, and the view changed about ten times a day. At the moment, a vid showed her Joshada's rolling hills. The other depicted a Kalquorian mountain range, which Conyod had commented on when he'd entered the room.

"That reminds me of my childhood home." As complex as ever, his expression had registered both sorrow and pleasure.

She'd wished she could ask why Conyod had such mixed feelings about his past. She often wondered how a psychologist dedicated to healing others' pain found no relief from his own conflicts. He wore sadness like a cloak.

He broke into her musings. "What do you want most, Ray-Ray?"

Ray-Ray swallowed hard, the lump in her throat having nothing to do with the blockade against her speech. What did she want? She'd love to give him an earful on that.

Conyod nodded in encouragement. "If it's something I can get, I will. All you have to do to claim your prize is say a word. Any word."

Love. When I look at you, that's what my heart screams. It might be just infatuation, but damn it, it feels real.

He leaned close, his gaze avid. "You want something. Tell me." He nodded at her handheld computer sitting on the floor next to her cushion. She used it to communicate with the staff since her stubborn throat refused to open up.

She didn't want to type. She needed to talk. Fear of what she might say, the secrets she might tell, kept it bottled up. On Earth, she'd been beaten and tortured for information. She'd screamed as hideous pain was inflicted on her, but no words had gotten loose. *I'll never, ever tell you anything* had been her internal mantra for those terrible months. Now she couldn't speak at all.

She ached to make Conyod proud. He'd said she could say any word. Perhaps a word her now-dead torturers wouldn't understand?

Rachel thought of a new word, saw its brightness in her mind. Watched it travel down, down, closer to her lips, approaching where the blockage always appeared just in time to keep her silent. Closer still, the passage still open, almost there...

"Retig."

It was little more than a breath, with a grating undertone. It had been years since she'd spoken, and her surgically repaired vocal cords were weak. But she'd spoken. Damn the bastards who'd shut her up, she'd *talked*.

Conyod's jaw dropped. He blinked. Pure, unadulterated delight suffused his face. His smile was the broadest Rachel had seen from him. Her heart thumped painfully as he transformed with unguarded happiness.

He laughed hard, the deep, rolling sound filling the room. Rachel had always hoped to hear Conyod laugh. It was a beautiful sound. He reached for her as if to gather her in an embrace. He remembered himself and settled for clapping.

She wished he'd hugged her instead.

She'd said hello in Kalquorian. She'd done it.

“Excellent, Ray-Ray! I saw on the reports you were studying my language, but I failed to consider having you speak it instead of your own. Well done!”

Rachel ducked her head, embarrassed to be praised for uttering one word, no matter how huge a breakthrough it was.

“It’s safe to speak Kalquorian because so few Earthers understand, isn’t it?”

She nodded. As always, he’d understood the root of the issue. The man’s intuition made him an excellent psychologist, at least in her opinion.

Conyod’s steady gaze enveloped her in warmth. “I’m so proud of you. Now...I believe I owe you a reward?”

Rachel deserved a reward all right. She suddenly decided she would claim it rather than ask.

In a single, smooth motion, as if she’d never suffered a dozen badly broken bones, Rachel shifted from a cross-legged sitting position, rising onto her knees. She grabbed her startled therapist’s face between both hands, bent forward, and closed her lips over his.

His lips were as soft as she’d imagined. In his shock, Conyod’s mouth opened to gasp, and Rachel took advantage of the opportunity. She flicked her tongue inside, tasting him.

She’d forgotten how raspy Kalquorians’ tongues were, a raw silk texture. Conyod tasted of sweet spice, and she uttered a weak groan.

His arms, as strong as she’d dreamed, wrapped around her. He pulled her against his broad chest. She rubbed against him as desire, denied as his patient, overwhelmed her.

Conyod growled, and his tongue invaded. Rachel’s insides melted to pool into her panties; hot, wet need. She climbed onto Conyod to rub her sex against his with wanton desperation.

He gasped and pulled his lips from hers while simultaneously pushing her away. She whimpered and strained against his hands. Her heart thudded.

Conyod shook his head. “Rachel, this isn’t appropriate. I’m your doctor.”

Rachel detected a scent she’d smelled before and glanced at his groin. The crotch of his pants was tight against an obvious erection. Her gaze met his again, and she arched an eyebrow.

He reddened. “I don’t deny I enjoy this. But it’s wrong for me to act on the attraction. I can’t take advantage of my patient.”

Rachel blew out a frustrated breath. She appreciated the awkward position she was putting him in. Still, he looked so damned good and felt twice as wonderful.

She put the distance he needed between them. Smiling ruefully, she settled on her seating cushion and picked up her handheld to type.

Let’s see what you think of this, my gorgeous, ethical doctor, she thought as she wrote.

You and Dr. Govi said my fear of speech was the only thing keeping me here. That once I spoke, I could be released. Should I fire you as my psychologist so we can explore this?

No doubt Conyod already had a woman. Maybe his clan had a Matara, a lifelong female mate. She’d never asked because she hated to hear he was unattainable. Now that she’d spoken, the clock was ticking on her relationship as his patient. It was better to learn the truth about how unavailable he was.

Even if he is without a mate, he couldn’t desire me. Broken, scarred, and ugly Rachel Hicks is no prize.

She was willing to settle for a single glorious round of lovemaking. With the memory of being in Conyod’s arms to sustain her, she’d at least have that to treasure for the rest of her life.

She handed him her handheld, noting how it trembled in his grip. He read it and gave her his patented Rachel-you’re-being-naughty-and-you’re-not-getting-away-with-it frown. He could be so paternal.

“There’s more to being cured than saying a single word,” he chastised.

She took the handheld from him. She would go for broke and offer Conyod the chance to end her desires. To deny her the love she ached for him to return. Once he did that, she could plan for a productive, Conyod-less life, empty as it would be.

She typed, *I’m a grown woman who knows my own mind. I’ve been intimate with men, one of whom was Kalquorian. I want you. If you feel nothing for me beyond your professional compassion, tell me now.*

Conyod read the message, and his eyebrows shot up. Rachel was surprising him nonstop today. If she weren’t so certain the session would end with her heart broken, she’d enjoy it.

Instead of telling her there was nothing between them, Conyod said, “I wasn’t aware you’d had sex with any of us. Were you coerced? We aren’t allowed—”

For heaven’s sake. Rachel leaned forward and put her hand to his mouth to shut him up. His breath was warm on her palm, and the thought of how his mouth had felt on hers made her insides clench.

He watched and waited. She typed another message.

I was very much the seducer, my rescuer’s first woman. You asked what reward I’d request in exchange for a word. I will tell you exactly.

She watched him read it. When he looked up at her questioning, she opened her mouth.

It isn’t English. The words are Kalquorian. Say them.

“Imdiko Conyod.” A strengthless croak that came from her straining throat.

He heard it nonetheless, and his large, beautiful eyes shut with feeling. She couldn’t tell if he was disgusted with her answer or enthralled because he’d cured her inability to speak.

Handheld again, because she knew so few Kalquorian words. *If I’m only a patient to you, say so. It will hurt, but I can take it. I’ve lived through worse.*

He read it. Then Conyod lifted his gaze to hers. She braced herself.

“You’re more than a patient.”

The entire world stopped in that instant. *I didn’t hear that right. My wishful thinking made me hear something I wanted to. He cares for me only as far as doing his job.*

His shoulders lifted, as if a huge weight had been released. “I’ve been attracted to you from the moment you got here. The second I saw your beautiful face and the strength beyond the hurt—and now, hearing you speak my name—”

Conyod stopped, as if overcome. His hands covered his expression, but not before Rachel saw the despair, hope, and longing.

He sat that way for a few seconds. She let him. She had no clue what to say or what to do, so she waited. All the while, her thoughts yammered, *he wants me! He wants me!*

Conyod emerged from behind his hands and gave her the most heartrending smile she’d ever seen. “You’re the only good I’ve known in forever.”

Okay. A hopeful start.

“Ray-Ray, things are complicated with my clan. This...I need to think about this.”

He’d said *clan*. No mention of a Matara. Hope flickered.

It was obvious Conyod wasn’t going to let himself be overcome by desire, but Rachel could live with that. She would settle for a token of affection.

I’m sorry if I came on strong, but I have intense feelings for you. It’s improper, but I really, really need you hold me.

As soon as he’d finished reading that, she added, “*Krewet?*” Please?

Conyod's demeanor was that of a lost and frightened child alone in the woods. He took a deep breath and held his arms out to her.

Rachel went to him, sitting in the cradle of his crossed legs. His arms curled around her, surrounding her in warmth and protection. Rachel burrowed against his chest and sighed. His cheek pressed against her short cap of curls and rubbed back and forth against the softness.

Rachel sighed again. She almost felt safe. It was a wonderful sensation.

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Dramok Erybet fumed, though he maintained a neutral countenance as he walked down the well-lit hall of the hospital's Matara psychiatric wing. Damn Conyod. Of all the times for his Imdiko to work late, he had to pick this evening. Which led to another thought: was Conyod being difficult on purpose? Getting back at Erybet for his silence, a silence he was under orders to keep?

The clan's Nobek strode at Erybet's side, his soft-soled feet making no sound. It was a marked contrast to Erybet's angry stomping.

Sletran's features were as stoic as his Dramok's. Sletran rarely appeared any other way these days. Even when the Nobek had been caught hacking his hair off with a knife, driving Conyod into near hysterics, he'd displayed nothing more than indifference.

Erybet had no doubt that the Nobek's impromptu haircut was a sign of a growing self-destructiveness. Sletran's chilling lack of emotion kept anyone from knowing when he'd act in self-inflicted harm or when he'd disappearance for hours on end.

Counter to Erybet's fine, almost pretty features, Sletran's face was made of broad planes and strongly cut bones, which were balanced by shockingly sensual lips. The Nobek was handsome in a brutal fashion, much as a man-eating zibger was majestic. With his hair growing out again, nearly chin-length, he was a striking man. However strained his emotional state might have been, Sletran had a presence that left the Mataras staring. Well-muscled without being ponderous, he would impress the Earther woman they were meeting for dinner.

If he would emerge from his funk long enough to try. And if Conyod didn't fuck everything up by making them late for their date.

It was their third attempt to attract a female mate. A third hope for Erybet to claim a woman to devote themselves to, to protect and care for. A chance to fix his broken clan.

He understood Sletran's difficulties. The Nobek was in shock from the war. No, not the war, he reminded himself, though the fighting had been terrible while they were in the thick of it. It was what came after, when Earth had fallen. When all that was left to do was clean up the aftermath. That was when hell had descended upon them.

Sletran had plenty of reasons to shake apart.

Conyod, however, was simply being stubborn. He refused to see that with his clanmates bound to secrecy by their superiors, the answer was a new start. A fresh start a Matara could bring. He dragged his feet when it came to wooing the rare females, even as the clan's opportunities slipped away.

It was pure chance for a clan to come up on the lottery, the system that allowed them the opportunity to add a childbearer to their group. Few Earther women from the nearly annihilated race were willing to choose Kalquorians over their own kind. It took a lot of luck to get to impress one. The lottery allowed a chosen clan five chances to do so before the opportunity passed them by.

If his Imdiko would just cooperate!

Sobbing distracted Erybet from his angry thoughts. An orderly escorting a crying woman came down the hall, heading in their direction. The medic had an arm around the Matara's thin, shaking shoulders. He whispered to her as they walked, his tone soothing. Her gaze was locked on Erybet and Sletran, however, and she resisted coming closer to them.

Erybet had clenched his fists at his sides, displaying his irritation. He released the tension in his body and slowed his progress, approaching the pair carefully. He offered his gentlest smile to the young blonde, whose black-hollowed eyes gave her a skull's visage.

He rarely visited Conyod at work. Seeing the damaged Mataras from Earth, those who'd endured so much trauma that they couldn't join the lottery or be sent to the scattered Earther colonies, was hard. Looking into the fragile creatures' haunted stares hurt him deep in his gut.

Better than seeing them ripped apart physically. Like at New Bethlehem after you gave the order...

Erybet's mind skittered from the memory.

The young woman was trying to hide behind the orderly. He continued to whisper to her, but she wanted to be nowhere near the unfamiliar Kalquorians. The orderly smiled at Erybet and Sletran, shrugging. "It's all right, Matara. No one wants to hurt you."

Erybet glanced at Sletran. His Nobek had emerged from his emotionless state, his expression stricken. Erybet hoped it was because seeing a crying woman was so awful, and not because Sletran was remembering New Bethlehem too.

Afraid to look at his clanmate for too long lest Sletran take the attention wrong, Erybet halted before the orderly and his patient. Sletran stayed by his side. They bowed to the frightened Matara.

Taking his cue from the orderly's whispering, Erybet quietly spoke. "Good evening, Matara. Please accept my apologies if our appearance frightens you. I hope you have a pleasant night."

For a wonder, Sletran also spoke, his voice soothing with its deep tones. "I also apologize for having upset you, Matara. We'll be on our way and distress you no more."

She stopped crying, her eyes wide and wondering as she stared at them. The orderly chuckled. "See? There's no one to be afraid of here."

He nodded to Erybet and Sletran, ushering the woman past. She cast nervous but calmer glances at them over her shoulder as she went.

Erybet and Sletran continued on. The Dramok had wanted to ask if the orderly had seen Conyod, but the woman's fear had kept him from doing so. Fortunately, he saw another orderly escorting a hover cart down the hall, stopping at each patient's room to access the shut doors and drop off a meal.

They drew abreast of the broad-shouldered Imdiko. Erybet spoke quietly, unsure if sound carried from the hall to the patients' rooms. "Excuse me, but I'm searching for Dr. Conyod. He's not in his office, and I need to find him."

The orderly jerked his head in the direction from which they'd come. "He's probably in Matara Rachel's room. He usually checks in with her one last time before leaving for the night. Room seven-eight-six."

"Thank you. Come on, Sletran. Let's round up our Imdiko and try to salvage this night."

As they headed back, Erybet resumed seething at his unthinking clanmate. *For making us late to dinner with a potential lifebringer, this Matara Rachel had better be in bad shape.*

Immediate horror followed the thought. He hated for any female to suffering. The Earther women had endured enough from all that had happened to them. Most had been on Earth when

the nuclear blasts had rendered the planet uninhabitable. Before that, they'd been second class citizens among their own kind, forced into subservience due to a religion that saw them as inherently sinful.

Women on the colonies hadn't fared any better, had they? Erybet's stomach curled in on itself as he remembered body parts scattered around a blackened blast site.

He'd returned to Kalquor, but Erybet would never escape New Bethlehem.

A headache pulsed behind Erybet's eyes as he and Slettran neared the room where Conyod might be hiding, once more avoiding them as long as he possibly could.

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Rachel had managed to lure Conyod from cuddling to kissing. Knowing he had feelings for her, she was eager to press her advantage.

With her encouragement, there was nothing tentative about the doctor's embrace. He held her close, his lips firm and demanding as he tasted her. His tongue stroked hers, and she moaned in his mouth. His delicious kisses scrambled her senses. She was wrong to coerce him into breaking the rules, but damn it, she needed this. She grew needier by the second.

Rachel ground against Conyod. He uttered a sound in his throat, an animalistic growl. Despite their intelligence, the Kalquorians possessed a primal core. That suited Ray-Ray fine. The threat of feral reaction excited her.

As she readied to make her next move, a knock sounded at the door. Conyod gasped. He laughed shakily.

"Your dinner has arrived."

He stood, setting her on her feet. Rachel fought not to pout like a three-year-old.

Conyod went to the door, his features flushed. "Enter," he commanded, and it slid open. His jaw dropped in shock. "My Dramok, my Nobek. What are you doing here?"

A low, angry voice answered. "Funny, that's what I planned to ask you. We have an appointment in five minutes, an important one. Why didn't you come home?"

Conyod shot a glance at Rachel and swallowed. He appeared miserable. A bit sick, perhaps. "I—I fell behind on my rounds. My father Vel stopped by for a visit today, so I'm playing catch-up."

Rachel had to see the clanmates who upset Conyod. She stepped to his side and stared at the pair outside her room.

They couldn't have been more dissimilar physically. The taller and more muscular fellow shouldn't have been handsome with that heavy brow, wide forehead, and strong jaw. Each individual feature was too rough and unrefined for attractiveness, except for his lips. Those were plump, sensual things that invited Rachel to kiss and nibble. Somehow the entire package worked for him. He was striking.

He wore his hair shorter than any Kalquorian male she'd seen. As he gazed at her, his set expression shifted to something dark. Was it pain? Anger? Probably both. Rachel had seen that look on her mirror. Suddenly she knew something else: he'd cut off his hair in a self-destructive rage, as she had done to hers over and over. She'd finally quit attacking her curls after all cutting implements had been removed from her room, but her hair was kept shorn close to her skull at her insistence. She told herself it was because the style suited her and shied from any other reasons.

Staring at this man, she knew better. For whatever reason, he'd wanted to punish himself. Just as she had. Just as she sometimes still did.

After a moment, Rachel forced her attention to the second man. Though not quite as tall as his companion, he had at least six inches on Conyod. His features were more delicate than his clanmates'. He was dangerously near to pretty, but somehow exuded blatant masculinity despite the graceful contours. His sculpted jaw was strong, his cheekbones well-formed, his nose as straight as an arrow. His mouth's grim set was the sole negative note on a gorgeous face framed by long, wavy hair. His build was the slenderest of the three, but there was no denying the aura of command that surrounded him. He must be Conyod's Dramok, Rachel decided.

The two men bowed, their gazes never leaving her. The pretty Kalquorian spoke, his voice that which had addressed Conyod. The irate tone had disappeared. "Hello, Matara."

They straightened. The other man wore the hint of a smile. "No wonder you spend so many hours at work, Conyod."

His voice was deliciously deep, and Rachel shivered. A fantasy of hearing him order her to disrobe and spread her legs for him made her lick her lips. Good heavens, she was horny.

Conyod's angst faded at the Nobek's statement. "Matara Rachel, these are my clanmates. Dramok Erybet and Nobek Sletran."

The men bowed again. *Rise, my subjects.* Rachel couldn't help but smile.

"*Retig,*" she rasped. The magic word that had gotten her in Conyod's arms. Her favorite word in the universe.

Erybet gave her a surprised but delighted smile. "You speak Kalquorian?"

Rachel showed him how little by holding her hand up and indicating with a bare inch between her thumb and index finger. That elicited chuckles from the group, including Sletran. Erybet and Conyod started and looked at him with surprise.

Conyod wiped the wide-eyed expression from his face. He asked her, "May I explain your history?"

She nodded her assent.

With pride for her accomplishment, Conyod told the others, "Just minutes ago, Rachel had had a major breakthrough. Her vocal cords were badly damaged when she was brought to Kalquor, which surgery corrected. However, the trauma she endured being interrogated and tortured on Earth left her psychologically incapable of speaking. She's found a way around that by learning to say a few words in Kalquorian."

Erybet's brows drew together. "A fascinating solution to what I'm sure has been a great obstacle. I'm very sorry to hear of your trials, Matara."

His statement rang with sincerity, his gaze caring and concerned. Rachel warmed under his compassionate regard.

Sletran thrilled her with that deep voice again. "You were incarcerated? Conyod said tortured?"

Rachel nodded and typed on her handheld, which she'd thankfully brought with her. *I attempted to lead an insurrection against the worst women's prison in the North American bloc. It went as badly as it can be imagined.*

With Erybet peering at the handheld over Sletran's shoulder, they read her response. Though Sletran couldn't possibly be impressed with her cataclysmic failure, his tone was approving. "Very brave of you."

"Indeed." Erybet considered her and seemed about to say something else when something on his belt beeped. He scowled at no one in particular. "My apologies, Matara Rachel. I'm eager

to hear your entire story, but we have an appointment. Hopefully, Conyod will tell us the rest, with your permission.”

Rachel nodded.

Conyod remained in place as his clanmates stepped into the corridor and waited for him. With obvious reluctance, he explained, “We’re meeting a Matara tonight. Our clan was picked for the honor by the lottery.”

Rachel’s heart dropped. *Great, Conyod. It would have been nice if you’d mentioned that before I wallowed all over you.*

He stared intently at her, as if trying to communicate something. Rachel thought she understood. He didn’t want another woman. He wanted her. At least, that was her hope.

His clanmates had better options than a broken-down, scarred, and mute female. Their two votes would leave her out in the cold. Or did clanning a Matara require a unanimous decision?

She’d have a lot of questions for Conyod at their next session. For now, she had to let him go to his...oh, she hated to think it...*date*. She managed a tight smile and nodded.

With rapid-fire typing, she told them all, *I hope you have a pleasant evening. Good luck to your clan.*

Erybet smiled and answered for them. “Thank you, Matara.” His tone turned sharp. “Conyod?”

“Good night, Rachel. I’m excited to discover if there’ll be further developments tomorrow.” With a last pained glance at her, he followed his clanmates out.

The dinner cart arrived at her room at that moment. Rachel gave the orderly a wan smile as she accepted her platter and walked inside with a meal she had no appetite for. She sat down at her small table and ate anyway. Refusing to eat wouldn’t sit well with the psychiatric staff.

Rachel chewed slowly, not tasting the ronka meat and gusasp she normally enjoyed. *Conyod wants me.*

The words weren’t the celebration they should have been. Rachel knew better than to fool herself. She and Conyod were probably done before they’d begun, what with two others in the equation. Plus, they were interviewing potential Matara clanmates. Healthy, whole women.

She liked to think she wasn’t petty. Perhaps they’d meet a good match for all three of them. Someone who would make a wonderful mate for Conyod, maybe erase that sad undercurrent from his soul. She should be cheering them on.

Though she knew it was childish, Rachel couldn’t help but wish the men would accidentally dump a bowl of soup on their date’s lap instead.