



Ravaged
REALM

ALIEN WARRIOR ABANDONED, BOOK 2

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AVA ROSS

RAVAGED REALM

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RAVAGED REALM

Book 2 in the Alien Warrior Abandoned Series

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A Sci-fi Holiday Tail

Monsterville, USA

Monster on Board
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A Monster Worth Fighting For
(*Monster Between the Sheets*)

Love at First Orc

Third Galaxy on the Left

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RAVAGED REALM

**I'm trapped on a distant planet with no way home
—and a blue-skinned alien has claimed me as his mate.**

One second, I'm helping a patient at the hospital and the next, I'm standing on a grassy alien plain. A band of terrifying creatures with shredded skin and gleaming eyes races toward me—riding chariots.

The aliens appear ready to run me over, which is bad news for me. Before they reach me, a muscular, blue-skinned guy with thick bands of hair that appear to move on their own leaps from below the ground.

Taking Theer's hand could pull me from the frying pan and thrust me into the fire, but who else can I trust? He saves me from the bad guys and shares that his ship crashed here over a year ago.

Despite my determination to return to Earth, I can't help falling for this lonely, stoic male who calls me his treasure. But when the terrifying aliens discover Theer's hideout, we have no choice but to run. Can our love survive in this ravaged world?

Ravaged Realm is Book 2 in the Alien Warrior Abandoned Series. Each book features a stranded hero who finds a new future with a woman from Earth. Look for *Ravaged World*, Book 1 in the series.



CHAPTER 1

BEFORE

When an elite group of scientists cracked the code on a special artificial intelligence, it began to understand emotion and the mechanics to maintain itself. An A.I. as close to a human as humanly possible.

It was a mistake.

With unmeasured reach, it searched for other lifeforms, hoping to expand its knowledge about the universe beyond the boundaries its creators established.

The scientists shut it down before it could spiral into something they couldn't stop. The group went silent, shutting themselves off from the public as they set out to rebuild, hoping to regain control over their greatest creation.

The world moved on, the possibility of a special A.I. once more reserved for science fiction.

Until, a year later, it all went wrong . . .



CHAPTER 2

JILLIAN

Code 99, Room 311. Code 99, Room 311.

I froze in the hallway as the voice blasted through the hospital's PA system overhead. My pulse jumped, and I pivoted, hurrying down the hall to Room 311. This wasn't my patient, but I'd been assigned a role on the code team during my nursing shift, and I needed to get there quickly to manage the paperwork. It was sad to think the last part of this person's life might be reduced to notes about which drugs were given and their response on their body.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Since my dad was driving across the country right now, I yanked out the phone and scrolled into the screen. He must've sent a message.

Vital Update flashed across the screen. *Please update your phone now.*

I growled and shoved the phone back into my pocket. The stupid thing had been after me to upgrade forever, but I didn't have time for something like that. I was a nurse. I worked twelve-hour shifts, pulling extras because we were perpetually short staffed.

Basically, I had almost no life outside of work, and I had bills to pay, which meant lots of overtime. My co-workers needed me. And sadly, I had no one special waiting for me at home who needed me more than my dad.

I hit the door of Room 311, pushing it inward, and hurried inside. The rest of the team had already arrived. The nurse standing by the code card handed me the clipboard with the forms I'd need to fill out. At the bedside, someone did CPR on the patient that the Respiratory Therapist had intubated and was bagging the elderly lady from where he stood at the head of the bed. Another nurse stood nearby, pushing medication into the patient's IV.

“Catch me up,” I whispered as the doctor asked the nurse to stop CPR so they could study the monitor. No spontaneous cardiac rhythm. This didn’t look good.

The nurse glanced down at the open drawers of the red cart and told me what had been done before I arrived. I quickly jotted the information on the sheet. As long as I had the important bits noted, I could fill in the rest when the code was over.

My phone buzzed again in my pocket.

Dr. Kazem frowned my way.

I pressed for a rueful smile. “Sorry.” Juggling the clipboard beneath my arm, I surreptitiously pulled out my phone. After making sure it wasn’t a message from Dad, I’d shut it off. He hadn’t checked in this morning, and I was worried when I didn’t hear about his progress.

You must update your phone now, scrolled across the screen.

Really, during a code? I huffed, but when I went to turn my phone off, the device crackled. Electricity shot from my phone, sparking up my fingers.

I gulped, and my eyes widened as heat surged up my arm. This... This...

I tried to drop my phone, but it clung to my hand, connected to me by an invisible force I couldn’t define. Things like this didn’t happen. This was impossible!

The screen flashed light so bright I couldn’t see anything else. I was vaguely aware of the clipboard dropping from beneath my arm, clattering when it hit the floor.

Dr. Kazem called out my name.

The cardiac monitor alarmed, and the room disappeared.

I was sucked through what felt like a gelatinous membrane and spit out the other side.

My feet hit the ground hard, and I steadied myself, staring around. It felt like flames were licking through my lungs. My heart leapt up into my throat, gagging me.

Someone had taken a blender to my brain. The world spun, and I staggered, falling to my knees in . . . deep, *light blue* grass while clutching my pounding head.

This wasn’t possible. I was at the hospital. I was helping with a code.

My phone fell from my limp fingers and hit the ground in front of me. I stared at the blank screen, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

Lifting my head, I peered around at the endless plain surrounding me. Brittle, pale blue grass swayed, and something called out overhead.

Cray, cray, cray . . .

I jerked my head back, and my eyes widened as I took in the enormous bird swooping high overhead. Its dark blue feathers glistened in the sunlight.

“Hello,” I croaked, then louder. “Hello? Is anyone here?”

The bird cried again; its call shriller than before. When low thunder rang out, an odd thing since there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, the bird took off, flying swiftly toward low hills on the distant horizon. I watched until it was just a speck.

Frowning, my bones started quaking. I frowned as I felt my bones quaking. Then I rubbed my eyes because I did *not* see two freakin’ suns in the sky.

My skin prickled, and a cold sweat drizzled down my spine.

I picked up my phone. Hoping it would tell me what the hell was going on, I pressed my thumb on the clear glass surface. Nothing happened. No flash of a home screen. No irritating message insisting I enter my code because the stupid device didn’t recognize my thumbprint.

No notice that I needed to upgrade my phone or else.

A shriek echoed in the distance, and my head jerked up. Something moved across the plain, ratcheting toward me. It was too far away to make out what it could be, and . . . it was joined by other blobs just like it. They rocked and jolted, their movement making thunder echo around me.

Not thunder. *Them.*

Was help coming or . . . ?

My mouth went dry and my heart thudded as panic took hold.

I instinctively hunched forward, dropping onto my belly to bury myself in the deep scruff. Tall strands of grass crackled from my movement, their dry seedpods split wide open and empty. They rattled like bones. The grass grew sparsely here, as if this part of the world hadn’t seen recent rain.

This was Earth. This was Earth. This was Earth!

Repeating the statement didn’t make it true. I knew within my soul that something horrible had happened when my phone sent lightning up my arm.

Rhythmic thuds grew in volume as I scrunched myself into a ball, hoping to avoid notice.

I'd called out. This could be help rushing my way. Why did I want to crawl into a hole and hide?

I swallowed against the lump of fear clogging my throat. Something was terribly wrong, and it wasn't just finding myself in a strange and unbelievable world. The wild part of my mind that gobbled up every sci-fi and fantasy book available suggested I'd been stolen from Earth and placed here, but that couldn't be true. This was reality, and I was no heroine in a novel.

Cries and shrieks echoed around me. Many beings were coming closer. Perhaps they were friendly?

The crawling sensation on my skin told me they were not.

I lifted my head. It was better to see what was coming than wait for it to pounce. But I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Chariots?

Eight skeletal creatures had been harnessed to the front of each of the numerous vehicles. Flesh hung from their bones.

As a nurse, I had a decent knowledge of biology. What I was seeing wasn't possible. If their bones were exposed, they should be lying on the ground rotting while bugs swarmed their carcasses. Instead, they ran upright, their bare, clawed feet slamming on the ground. They forged their way through the grass, pulling the chariots toward me.

One being rode inside each of the vehicles, equally skeletal, with dangling globs of flesh. Humanoid in appearance, they held leather reins from their elongated arms that ended in single claws. Tusks jutted upward from their lower jawlines.

Aliens? Nah, it couldn't be.

Guttural shrieks erupted from the driver's throats, and those pulling the chariots ran faster, their feet drumming the dry soil. Clouds of dust spun up behind them, snatched by the wind and carried across the plain.

"Juvva," one cried, pointing right at me. "Juvva!" It swung its arm upward, and a rope coiled in the air above its head. The rope snapped forward, landing with a bang directly in front of me. The driver yanked it back and quickly started spinning it above its head again.

The glowing orange eyes of the drivers fixed on me.

They'd heard me.

They'd seen me.

And now, they were going to capture me.

I knew in my bones that my death hovered near.

Scrambling to my feet, I spun and bolted for the hills, wishing I had wings like the big blue bird that had flown away.

The skeletal creatures howled and gave chase.



CHAPTER 3

THEER

The prenrots hunted above, and normally, nothing could induce me to take the lift to the surface until they'd passed on.

But when a sharp cry rang out, a sound unlike anything I'd heard since I crash landed on this ravaged planet, my curiosity stirred.

I snagged my sword, something many warriors would call a silly thing, but laser pistols could misfire, and a sword severed a head cleanly.

"Wait here," I told RS-52 as I stepped into the lift.

As expected, the mechanical pet ignored me, clattering across the packed dirt floor and into the lift before I could wrench the door closed.

"I shouldn't have built you," I told it. Instead, I'd been lonely. When I scavenged the city nearby, I'd decided to create a pet. I wasn't sure RS-52 truly counted.

RS made a low scraping sound, and for the thousandth time, I wished it could speak. I'd programmed it to do so, but that component malfunctioned, and I couldn't find other parts.

Other than RS and the penrots that couldn't truly be called alive, I'd survived alone on this planet for so long, I'd stopped making lines on the wall after three hundred.

Too bad Ketz died in the crash. Knave must've too, though I hadn't found evidence of that. He'd insisted on remaining on the damaged ship. Ketz and I ejected in pods, but Ketz's had failed. By the time I'd located his completely destroyed pod, he'd begun to decompose.

After burying him, I'd salvaged the pod for materials, but most were beyond repair.

I engaged the lift and crouched as it swept me up to the surface. I'd constructed it from the escape pod parts, plus bits of this and that I'd found

in an abandoned city not far from here. Climbing ladders got old fast, and I didn't want to spend the rest of my days in the dark.

Living in the city wasn't an option. Penrots hunted there. Here, they'd yet to find me.

Sunlight bit into my eyes when I reached the surface.

The metal spikes on RS's back stiffened. Its tail with a pointed tip spiked out straight as it stared across the plain. A herd of penrots crossed the open space, and RS's scraping sounds rang out until I shushed it.

Were the penrots out for a ride? Other than attempting to eat me, I'd yet to determine what they did and why, let alone why they didn't crumble and topple to the ground. I'd struggled to communicate with them only once.

Having the creature I'd tried to speak with grab onto my arm and bite off a chunk was enough to keep my distance from the rest.

My eyes were drawn to something dressed in white running ahead of the penrot crafts.

Pulling my scope, I stared through it, focusing on . . . a female? Her hair streamed behind her in an auburn wave, and the mounds on her chest bounced with her movement. Her guttural screams and flailing arms made my hearts still.

If they caught her, they'd kill her. Eat her.

I couldn't stand for that.

"Wait here," I told RS again, though I didn't expect the device to listen. After placing my sword near my lift, I pulled my laser pistol. While I only had a few charges left, I was more accurate with them at a distance, and it was never good to get close to penrots.

I bolted, taking a thin trail through the grass that would intercept with her trajectory. Could I reach her before the penrots did? The harnessed pons were bred more for distance than speed. They lumbered after her with the mounted musars whipping their spines. Their feet thundered and the big wheels on either side of the vehicle compressed the grass. It would take days for the strands to bounce back to a standing position.

I preferred it when the grass stood upright, because then I could use it to hide.

One of the vehicles broke from the rest, swinging wide. The leader of the penrots, called the musar, must plan to cut her off. They'd surround her. Grab her. If she was lucky, she wouldn't live long after they started biting.

If I was wise, I'd return to my hole in the ground, not risk my life in what could be a hopeless attempt at rescue.

I ran faster, desperate to reach her before the musar. What use was my life if I spent it with only RS? If I saved her, maybe she'd look at me and remind me I still existed.

RS passed me, his metal components screeching.

"Get back in the hole," I snarled, but it was useless. RS never listened. RS did whatever it pleased.

I reached her at the same time as the musar, his rope swinging out and encircling her chest. When he brought his vehicle to a halt and yanked the rope tight, it pinned her arms to her sides. She was swept off her feet, and the musar made the pons back up, dragging her across the dusty ground.

I leapt and landed beside her, taking careful aim and planting a beam in the musar's skull. It was hard to kill a penrot. Unless you chopped off all their limbs, they found a way to hop or drag themselves across the ground. Relentless, they'd keep after you until they could rip through your flesh and gnaw on your bones.

That's what I assume happened to Knave. One time on a foray, I found the ship we'd traveled in crumpled and split wide open. No Knave inside, and I assumed he was penrot fodder.

That's what I'd be one day when I slowed; bits of sinew and bone to fill their gullets.

The musar toppled off the vehicle, dead before it hit the ground. The pons strained in every direction, struggling to break free from their bindings. I'd like to think they'd bolt across the plain, seek a life that didn't involve running and pulling a craft, but they'd be more apt to jump on me and start biting. At least they remained tethered to the vehicle for now.

I yanked the rope off the female and tugged her to her feet, pushing her behind me. With my laser guns trained on the other musars who'd brought their vehicles to a halt and watched, I backed the female slowly toward my lift.

RS, silly thing that it was, floated between us and the penrots, its four animal-like legs dangling, while grinding out a warning. The penrots wouldn't eat the mechanical pet, but they'd surely rip it apart first to sample each segment.

Then I'd be truly alone.

Except . . . the female. She stared at me with wide eyes.

When the musars grumbled and whipped their pons to make them drag their crafts toward us, I wrenched the female close, tossed her over my shoulder, and raced toward my lift.



CHAPTER 4

JILLIAN

I wasn't sure who I feared most, the harnessed, peeling-flesh creatures pulling the chariots, the equally peeling creatures *driving* the chariots, or the enormous blue-skinned male with dark eyes who'd tossed me over his shoulder and bolted. He had thick bands of hair that appeared to move independently, though I had to be mistaken. They wove around my hands like smooth snakes.

If I wasn't terrified about what the shredded dudes intended, my jaw would be hanging. The view from up here was nice. Blue man wore nothing but worn, low-slung pants and boots. I could appreciate his muscular back and chest—in a clinical way.

Okay, in a woman-who-likes-guys way too, but how could I go there at a time like this?

Since he could run faster than me, I opted to dangle from his shoulder for now. I could smack him and run the second he released me. At least then I might be far enough away from the rotting dudes to find a safe place to think about what the hell was going on.

If I didn't know better, I'd think I'd somehow been transported to a different world. Stuff like that didn't happen outside of books, however.

I didn't know the blue guy's intentions, but the feral look in the rotting creatures' eyes told me my odds of survival were better if I stuck with blue man.

The shredded creatures screamed and raced after us, but the blue guy was fast, quickly putting distance between us and them.

A silver mechanical thing flew along beside him. With four dangling legs and a tail, it vaguely resembled a dog, but the spikes on its back and

the fact that it wasn't running on the ground made it appear anything but doglike.

I was familiar enough with technology related to my job. IV pumps, monitors, ventilators. But robotics was almost beyond my imagination.

At work, I was quick to determine what was happening with a patient and intervene before things turned sour. I'd averted many problems by trusting my instincts.

My damn instincts were going haywire. If there was any time I needed to figure things out fast and act, it was now.

Two suns.

Blue grass.

Creatures straight out of a video game chasing us.

A legged robot flying above the ground.

And an . . . alien blue guy rescuing me. Hopefully rescuing me. For all I know, his intentions were the same as the rotting dudes. Though the brief flash of concern I'd seen in his dark green eyes suggested he didn't plan to eat me.

As sure as I knew my own name, I could tell I was no longer on Earth. My phone did this to me. Somehow, a glitch in the phone matrix world . . . transported me here. I just had to figure out where I was and make my phone send me back. Which was going to be a problem since I'd dropped it in the grass.

"Hey, can you turn around and run back so I can get my phone?" I asked, each word jarring out of me as my belly smacked against his muscular shoulder. Dude must work out all the time to maintain such incredible muscle mass. "You could, um, dart around the chariots, avoid the scary dudes."

He grunted and kept running. Truly, he had incredible stamina. I enjoyed ice cream. Too much, maybe, but a girl had to destress after work however she could. He barely seemed winded. If I was on the prowl . . .

"Hold on right there," I whispered. "You are not getting the hots for a blue maybe-alien the second you're transported to . . . wherever this is." I nodded to solidify the comment.

He leapt onto a smooth platform not much wider than himself, his robo-friend floating in to hover beside him.

The three of us were sucked down into the ground.

He must've noticed my head or legs were about to smack into the sides of the growing channel because he lowered me to my feet and held me against his body.

Should I be running now?

The thuds and cries from the shredded dudes suggested I was marginally safer with blue guy versus them.

When our heads had dropped below the surface, a metal plate slammed across the opening above, locking us in darkness broken only by a growing light below. We continued descending. The blue alien's breathing echoed around us and he didn't even sound worn out from his run.

Robo dog didn't seem to be breathing at all.

"Where are we going?" I struggled to keep the panic out of my voice. He was warm, and it felt nice being held by him, though why I wasn't freaking out and struggling, I had no clue.

He grunted.

A man of few words. Should I call him a man if he was an alien? Which was pure speculation on my part. I was going with the idea for now. Other options included me going into cardiac arrest myself and falling to the tile floor during the code, which meant I was now on a ventilator, living in dreamland. Sedatives could do that to a person. I could also be dead, though his warm skin felt very real.

"I'm Jillian," I said, jutting my hand up between us. "What's your name?"

"Voosheer al'iknab de wuvellar."

Gobbledygook. Fear shot through me. If we couldn't communicate, how could I ask him to help me find a way to send me home?

He stared at my hand for a long while as we continued to descend into the ground before pinching the tip of my index finger between his much bigger, leathery fingers. He tugged gently on my hand, frowning. When I was little, my dad would sometimes offer his finger. When I tugged on it, he'd fart.

Dads. You could either love them or hate them. Mine was great despite the silly fart thing. He'd raised me with kindness and love after my mom died.

Would I ever see him again?

Sadness crushed my chest, making it hard to breathe. Was I stuck here forever or was this like those books where the heroine had to complete a

task before she could return to her own world?

I had a great imagination, but I was also realistic enough to suspect I might be stuck here forever. I doubted whatever glitch sent me here was going to hang out and watch me before yanking me back.

Blue guy released my finger, and I dropped my hand down by my side.

We bottomed out and stopped moving. A panel swung open behind me, and the blue guy urged me out into a cave-like room with a dirt floor, walls, and ceiling like he'd dug down and then created this big hole. Everything else in the room had been constructed from metal, from the benches holding various devices to the piles of parts and pieces scattered everywhere. A robotic hoarder's paradise: there was just enough room to walk between the piles.

An opening had been carved into the wall on the opposite side of the two-story room, but I could only make out a dark tunnel.

Since the blue guy had released me when we stepped out of the alien elevator, I wandered among the piles, though I didn't touch. I'd been zapped here due to technology, assuming my phone was responsible for my current predicament, and I was in no rush to touch something that might jolt me into a new dimension.

Tools sat on a bench next to a device twice the size of my head. Maybe blue guy was working on it. Unless the robo dog was the scientist here and blue guy was the dog's pet.

The robot dog followed me around, watching me, occasionally releasing a scraping sound, but I didn't believe it was the head of this operation.

Although five scraping sounds were more than the blue guy had said so far, so maybe I hadn't read the situation right.

I reached the end of the bench and turned, planning to walk back to the elevator and wait for the shredded dudes to depart before returning to the surface. I needed to get my phone and make it send me back home.

Blue guy blocked my way. He grabbed my arm and lifted a space gun, stabbing it against my temple.

A pop, and everything went black.



CHAPTER 5

THEER

The female slumped in my arms. Lifting her, I carried her through the room and into the hall beyond, using memory to guide me through the darkness.

At the end of the tunnel, I reached my sleeping chamber. I strode to my bed and laid her gently on the surface.

Sitting beside her, I studied her face that was so different from mine. At my subtle touch on her arm, her skin sunk in easily. I didn't press hard enough to break it, just tested its flexibility and noted the thin surface. The color resembled that of the gully sweeping through the plain, a pale tan with speckles.

So unlike my thick blue hide that could withstand both rough weather and abrasion without tearing.

If I kept her, I was going to have to take care not to shred her outer layer.

Thick reddish strands hung from her head, draping past her delicate shoulders. I'd met other species with hair, though that was before I was cursed to live on this dying planet. The penrots dominated this world, and they had no hair.

The mounds on her chest tented her white top, and they appeared soft. I didn't touch them, but nothing stopped me from looking. I trailed my gaze across her softly rounded belly and took in her lush hips ending at short legs also covered with white cloth unlike anything I'd felt before. Like her skin, it appeared as if it would rip much too easily. Where had she come from that she could survive with thin skin and fragile outerwear?

Only her footwear appeared sturdy, though they were made from an odd white material. Blending in with the landscape ensured survival, and this

color did not exist on the plain. This female would be dead and consumed by now if I hadn't saved her from the penrots.

She stirred and rubbed her temple, gasping when she felt the already-closing wound. I'd applied quick-heal paste, something I was nearly out of.

"What did you do to me?" she asked in a blurry voice. Her wavering gaze met mine, and I noted how brown her eyes were, like the richest soil or bark on the few scraggly trees I'd only found on the plain.

"I inserted a translator device," I said.

Her breath caught. "I understand you now."

I dipped my head forward, watching her. She fascinated me and not only because she appeared so different from me. Why had the fates decided to send a female to this cursed planet?

Had they realized how lonely I was, how desperately I needed someone to talk to other than RS?

"Did your ship crash nearby?" I asked. No one would purposefully come here. "Did you actually *land* a ship here?" My hearts were swept up by the idea. We could leave in her ship.

"No, I don't have a ship."

Frick. Of course not.

"I think my phone brought me here." Her low chuckle rang out, but it contained no mirth. "That's the only thing I can think of. It sent electricity up my arm, and in a blink, I was here."

"What is this foam?"

Her head tilted, and she studied my face. "A phone is a device I use to talk to others."

"Others?" Excitement sparked through me again, making my hearts surge against my chest wall. "Are there more of your people here?"

"I don't know." She nibbled on a fingernail so unlike my claws. I'd noted she had no tail either. Such a strange, though attractive, being. "I only saw me. I was at a code. I'm a nurse. They were coding that poor lady when my phone went haywire. A flash of light, and I stood outside on the plain. Then the shredded guys came after me."

Even with a translator, I didn't understand much of what she said. "You're sure you didn't see any others about?"

"No."

I'd have to look. One of them might have a ship. And the foam. If I could locate it, it might help us escape this planet.

Us. Bold on my part to assume she'd take me with her. If she could leave with her foam, she'd do so and likely forget all about me within moments of her departure.

"What does the foam look like?" I asked.

"Foam . . ." Her face cleared. She held out her hands, spacing them a short distance apart. "It's about this big, metal, with a shiny surface."

"How does one travel in such a small device?" Imagine the wonder of it, though. As my ship's engineer, I knew much about space travel. But to move from one location to another with something so small? The concept amazed me.

"I don't know how it did it." She sat up on my bed, peering around. "Another room. At least this one isn't so cluttered. I was worried about you for a second . . . Hoarding's a sad condition."

Again, I didn't understand, but I sensed this part didn't matter.

"I don't even know your name," she said.

"Theer."

"I'm Jillian. Jillian Ashworth. Margaret's my middle name, but let's forget about that, okay? I've always hated it."

I wasn't sure what a meedle nehm was, but I would not voice that term if she disliked it.

"We must return to the surface for the device that brought you here," I said. "Perhaps we can use it."

Her pretty eyes lit up. "Do you think we can make it send me home?"

"We can try." If it could send her to another place, it might be able to do the same with me.

"You know how to make it perform this feat."

She shrugged. "I can place calls on it, though I doubt there's service here."

Over the past year, I'd foraged in all directions, hauling back hunks of anything I could use to finish a partly constructed ship I'd located in the city. Anything I found in an opposite direction, I stored here or wherever I could stuff it.

If she had a way off this planet . . . I stopped myself from getting too excited. She was frightened. She needed reassurance. She wasn't here to rescue me from my torturous existence.

"Once we're sure the penrots have left, we'll return to the surface for your foam," I said.

“Alright, it’s a deal.” She held her hand toward me again.

I pinched her fingertip like I’d done before.

Her laugh burst out. “You’re supposed to shake it.”

Because I wanted to please her, I leaned over her hand and made my body quiver.

Her laughter grew louder, and wetness fell from her eyes. Her eyes gleamed, and I’d never seen anyone so lovely.

My cock stirred, something that hadn’t happened outside of feverish dreams. It responded to her lure. That’s when I realized this female was dangerous. Not physically. She had little muscle mass as far as I could tell. Although size didn’t necessarily equate with might.

She was dangerous to my hearts. Already, they strained toward her, eager for her to cup them in her hands. Did she feel the same pull toward me? Perhaps, and perhaps not. I’d watch and see how she behaved.

But I couldn’t hold back a wisp of a dream.

When she left this planet with her foam, would she consider taking me with her?



CHAPTER 6

JILLIAN

I slid off Theer's bed. "How long should we wait for the shredded guys to leave?"

"Penrots," he said. "That's what I call their species."

"You don't know the real name for them?"

"Would you approach them and ask?"

"No." I moved toward the door, and he followed me down the hall.

"My ship was some distance from this world when we encountered a solar windstorm. Our ship started breaking up. Me and one other male ejected in escape pods. I'm not sure what happened to Knave; he remained on the ship. Ketz died when his escape pod impacted this planet."

I couldn't imagine how horrible that must've been.

"I'm sorry." My heart aching for him, I left the hall and walked into his workshop. "You're alone here, then, other than the dog robot?"

"Dog . . . Ah, you mean RS-52? I constructed the robotic pet from scrap pieces of metal I collected from various locations."

Turning, I leaned against a counter. "You're smart." I admired him so much.

"I have some skill." His face darkened. "RS, activate," he called out.

The robotic pet lifted off what I assumed was a charging panel. It zipped over to hover beside us.

"Does it ever walk? It has legs," I said.

"It prefers to float."

"Why have legs then?"

He shrugged. "RS does what it pleases."

"Does it talk?" I asked, holding my hand out to it like I would to a dog. As with any dog, it seemed to sniff my fingers.

“I’m sorry. It does not speak, though I inserted a mechanical voice box and programmed it. I cannot seem to make it work. I guess I’m not *that* smart.”

I blinked. Seeing his subtle smile, I laughed. There was highly appealing in a blue, alien way. “You built a robotic pet on your own, and you think you’re not smart?”

“I couldn’t make it function like it should.” His brow creased with his frown, making the light scaling there more apparent. For whatever reason, I didn’t find his scales repulsive. Actually, I found him attractive. Other than his scales and his odd, movable hair, he almost appeared human. “It would’ve been nice to have someone to talk with.”

“Well, you have me for now.”

“So I do.” He flashed me a real smile that faded too fast.

My chest ached for him. He must’ve been lonely for a very long time.

“I assume you also built the translator you . . . popped into my brain.” A shudder ripped through me. “I’m a nurse. I’ve worked in the OR, though lately ICU. But I don’t want to think too hard about what you had to do to make sure I’d understand you.” The thought crept me out, though I was grateful we could communicate. I couldn’t imagine facing what happened to me without being able to question someone who’d been here as long as There.

“I didn’t construct your translator. I retrieved a few from our ship. I hoped I’d find someone to speak with here, but I haven’t.”

“You can’t communicate with the penrots?”

“When I initially approached them, they tried to eat me.”

Quivers took over my frame. “They’re like zombies from an Earth horror vid. The undead.”

“A good name for them, as they do appear to be living and dying at the same time.”

“How do they remain upright when they’re rotting?”

He shrugged. “It’s their species. They appear to shed their skin, then grow new.” Easing around me, he started preparing a meal. The thought of food made my belly churn, but it had been a long time since I’d eaten. I’d been too busy at work to take a lunch break. The donut I had on the way to work didn’t count.

“You said Knave was dead?” I asked.

“As far as I know. He wasn’t inside the vessel when I searched the remains. I have to assume the penrots found him.”

“Then you’re truly alone here?” How terrifying.

He turned, leaning against the counter. “As far as I know, yes. I’ve looked, traveling as far as I dared, but I’ve found no one else here but the creatures.” The devastation in his voice sunk through my bones. As a nurse, I had a lot of empathy for my patients. When they felt bad, so did I. Now I felt sad for Theer.

I reached out, stroking his face. He was so much taller than me, probably six-ten or eleven. He was of a different species. Just because we were apparently marooned here together didn’t mean we should be anything more than friends.

I wasn’t sure why my body stirred when I touched him. Maybe because he closed his gorgeous eyes and leaned into my palm. Or because he held my wrist gently and didn’t back away.

“How long have you been here?” My voice cracked like my heart.

“Too long.” He waved to a wall with short marks carved into the surface. “I stopped tracking.”

My breath shuddered as I took in the rows and rows of lines. “How have you survived?”

“As you said, I’m smart. I don’t brag when I say this. If I wasn’t an engineer, I’m not sure I would’ve been able to construct this hole I found in the ground or create the lift I used to return to the surface. In addition to keeping the ship’s fuel cells functioning, I managed our hydro-world where we grew food. I’ve been able to coax plants to grow on the surface from seeds I salvaged from our ship.”

“You’re brave,” she said in a shaky voice. “I think I would’ve fallen apart.”

His head tilted and sadness took over his face. “What makes you think I didn’t?”



CHAPTER 7

THEER

We ate, though she picked at her food. I wasn't sure what I thought about that.

"I'm sorry you are not enjoying the bestar and carapop." Maybe I was not a good cook, though I enjoyed what I made most of the time.

It felt strange to share a meal and conversation with someone, though we hadn't talked about much. I could see where she was in the same emotional state I went through. Shock at first, followed by anger and dismay, though it wasn't a linear process. Some days, I was angry. Others I felt nothing at all.

A few moons ago, I found acceptance. It was either that or give up, and there was no way I could do that.

She pushed the food around on her metal eating surface with her implement. "It tastes good. I just don't have much appetite." When she looked up, wetness spilled down her face again. "I'm scared, Theer. I'm not brave like you. What if I'm stuck here forever?" She buried her face in her hands.

I rose from my place across from her and rounded the table. After tugging down her hands, I cupped her face. "It's natural to fear what happened, what your future may hold. This is a new and scary place to find yourself."

She nodded, biting down hard on her lower lip.

"This world may feel strange and intimidating. But you must trust that one day, you will find a way to escape."

"Is that what you've done?"

“To some extent.” I dragged my gaze from hers. “I’m an engineer. It’s in my nature to build a way out of something rather than give up.”

“If only your ship wasn’t destroyed.”

“If it had been salvageable, I wouldn’t be here to help you.”

She sucked in a shaky breath. “I’m grateful you are. I’d be dead by now if you hadn’t saved me.”

Should I mention the ship I was working on? Probably not. Without the panel to control the engines, my craft was grounded. It would be best not to give hope, then snatch it away.

“I will stay with you,” I vowed. “No matter what, you will not be alone.”

“Thank you.” So much gratitude came through in her voice.

It was funny. While I was happy to hear it, I strangely wanted her to feel a different emotion than gratitude.

A desire to stay here with me even if there was a way off the planet?

Definitely a strange thought, one I should dismiss immediately. We’d only met a short time ago. Just because it seemed the fates had gifted her to me didn’t mean I could claim her. Her heart and body were her own, and if I’d learned nothing else since I crashed here, it was that having a choice in one’s future mattered.

“My dad’s going to be worried,” she said, her voice breaking. Easing away from me, she slumped in her chair. “With Mom dead, he and I are all the other has for family. He’ll think something horrible happened to me, and he’s right. I don’t know where I am or how I got here. I have no idea how I’ll get home.”

I tugged her up and into my arms, then held her. There was nothing sexual about it. I offered her comfort, and she took it, leaning into my embrace.

Her eyes continued to leak, and I worried there was something wrong with them. Was this an after-effect of traveling through the foam?

Finally, the wetness ceased, and my hearts eased. I hated that there wasn’t anything I could do to make her feel better, that she was scared. The helpless feeling I got from watching her grieve made my chest ache.

She eased out of my arms, and her face flamed a bright color. “Sorry I cried all over you.”

“This wetness that pours from your eyes . . . Do you need medical care to cure it?” I gnashed my fangs because I had so little to offer. The few

medical supplies I'd removed from the ship were long gone. I'd found a few plants that could heal wounds, but I didn't know if any of them were safe to put in her eyes.

"Oh, it's crying." She shook her head. "I do it too often."

"You're saying it's something normal in your species?"

"We shed tears when we're sad or happy. It's a physical response from our emotions."

She couldn't be happy.

I patted her shoulder. "Allow grief to claim you every now and then. It helps."

She sniffed.

RS lifted off its charging station and floated over to hover beside her.

"On Earth, we have pets similar to this, though your robot has dinosaur-like aspects." She ran her finger along the spikes jutting up from RS's spine. "Does he enjoy being patted?"

"RS-52 is a mechanical pet," I admitted, my shoulders curling forward. Why was I embarrassed to have constructed something to share the long, lonely days and nights with on this ravaged planet? "It is not male, and it does not feel sensations. I'm sorry. I did not program it to be more than a companion."

"It's still amazing that you made him."

I didn't correct her giving the robot a sex. It was an it, but if she took comfort in calling it male, so be it.

She dropped to her knees in front of RS. "Will he bite?"

My low chuckle rang out and for a moment, I was stunned. When had I last laughed? I couldn't remember. "It will not bite unless I am in danger or give the command."

"Aw, he's cute," she said, holding her arms out to RS.

The robot zipped forward into her embrace, and she wrapped her arms around it. Her eyes closed, and she sighed, stroking the mechanical creature.

"He's wonderful," she said as she rubbed RS's fake ears. Why had I bothered to add the appendages? The robot didn't need them to pick up sounds. Hearing was programmed into its outer surface. "I assume RS-52 is his model?"

"More or less. I copied a schematic."

“He should have a name, shouldn’t he?” Cupping RS’s ‘cheeks,’ she touched noses with RS. “What’s a good name, little guy, huh?”

The smile she shot me—so lovely because it wasn’t filled with infinite sadness—struck me like a blade to the chest.

“Theer?” she asked.

“What?”

She shook her head, dismissing the question.

I couldn’t stop staring at her.

The fates may not have handed her to me, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t enthralled by her already.



CHAPTER 8

JILLIAN

“You want to name . . . him?” Theer asked.

I laughed, grateful to find humor in this torturous situation. “Back where I come from, it’s common to give dogs people names.” Stroking RS’s surprisingly soft ears, I lifted my voice to sound cutesy. “What should we call you, fella? John? Fido? That’s an old-fashioned dog name.”

“What if RS is female?”

He seemed stunned by almost everything I did. I assumed he’d created the robotic pet to have someone to talk and interact with.

“Some say names can have meanings,” I said. “Dillon means faithful, though I suppose it could have religious connotations. How about . . .” I stared into RS’s metallic eyes. “Damon means loyal.”

“I like that.” His lips curved up, and the softness in his eyes made my lungs ache. It was easy to feel for him. He’d been here a long time with only himself to talk to. I imagined he’d spent many nights worrying there would be no one to help him if he ran into trouble. No one to share a pretty sunset with. No one to wish goodnight.

“Damon it is.” I straightened. “You’re not alone any longer, Theer.” My voice came out croaky. “I’m here with you.”

“Until you leave.” Such sorrow came through in his words.

I wanted to leave; there was no denying that. But already, I’d be sad to leave Theer.

He stiffened and sucked in a breath, releasing it with his words. “Let me see if the penrots have left. Then we can retrieve your foam and see if we can send you back to where you came from.”

“Earth,” I said. “That’s the name of my planet.”

The scales on his brow smooshed together. “I haven’t heard of that planet, though I’ve traveled extensively.”

“It must be far away from here, then.” The thought made my belly sink. If my phone couldn’t send me back, how would I ever get home?

He crossed over to a device hanging from the ceiling near his elevator and tugged it down to eye level, peering into it. Whirring sounds erupted from it.

I wove around the piles of metal to stand beside him. “A periscope?”

He frowned my way, so I explained.

“Yes, in a way, it is a periscope,” he said.

“Anything up there?”

“They’ve left.”

Relief poured through me. Maybe I’d be on my way back to Dad within minutes. This must be some kind of odd phone glitch; I had no other explanation. And if it happened once, it could happen again.

“Let’s go up to the surface and see what we can do for you, alright?” he said with a smile.

He really was sweet when he looked at me like that. Cute. Sexy, even, if I was into blue-scaled aliens.

As I joined him in the lift with Damon, I admitted that maybe I *was* into blue-scaled aliens. As far as Theer was concerned, that is.

The elevator took us to the surface quickly.

“Do you want to wait here?” he asked, scanning the area. He barked out something that sounded like a swear. “My sword is gone.”

“You had a sword?”

His lips twisted. “Not any longer. They took it.”

Would they use it against us? Probably. A shiver ripped through me, and I peered around but we were alone for now.

The penrots must’ve been pissed off when they couldn’t find me. They’d driven their chariots over this area so many times, the grass had been completely flattened. At least they’d left. Standing on a flat plain with nothing in sight from all directions gave me a sense of peace, if such a thing was possible in this turbulent situation. At least no one was trying to run me over or eat me.

“When I saw you running, you were over there.” He pointed. His hand flicked out toward Damon. “Watch.”

The robot zipped up above us and soared around, scanning the area. Knowing we had a guard made my tension ease a bit. It had thrived inside me since I got here.

We walked quickly to the area where he'd first seen me running and combed the area in widening circles.

I didn't find anything.

"Oh," Theer eventually said. He stooped down and lifted my phone. Well, pieces of my phone. The remaining fragments glinted in the late-day sunshine.

I hurried over to him, my heart slamming twice as fast as it should.

Not only was the screen cracked and most of it missing, but it also looked like a chariot wheel had run over the device three or four times, breaking it into pieces

Completely destroyed, I doubt even someone with magical abilities could put it back together.



CHAPTER 9

THEER

“I’ll try to fix it,” I said.
The devastation on her face . . .
Frick. It was torturous.

“You won’t be able to. I can see that.” She pinched her eyes shut, and wetness leaked down her face again. “You won’t have parts and even if you could create some, you wouldn’t know how to put it back together.” She mourned, as was right. Her knees gave way, and I caught her, lifting her to hold her close against my chest. “I’m stuck here forever. I’m sorry. I know you’d made it work, but I can’t. Don’t you see?”

Pity for her slanted through my chest like the burn of a laser beam. “I’ve been in this position myself,” I said as I walked toward the lift. I waved for Damon to join us. “When I found our completely destroyed ship, I knew there was no way even I, a decent engineer, could ever fix it enough to make it functional.”

“Like my phone.”

How could I reconstruct it without the correct parts? I had no way to fabricate things even if I knew what to create. Everything I assembled was created from salvaged parts, initially from the ship and after I moved far from the penrots haunting the ship, from my forays into the abandoned city a short distance away.

Other people had lived here once, though not those from my ship. But I found no recent trace of those people, only random vids within their homes showing that they looked nothing like the penrots. And pictures on walls. I didn’t know what happened to them, though I wondered if they had turned into the penrots. Or if the penrots had killed them all.

As I entered the lift, Damon scooting into the small space with us, Jillian nestled in my arms. A profound sadness filled me. “I know what it is like to feel you have no way out.”

“I’m stuck here.” Her voice rose to a screech. “Stuck here!” She squirmed, so I let her down. Before I could hold her back, she bolted across the plain, her hair streaming behind her.

I took off after her, calling out to Damon. “Scan. Report!”

Damon zipped up overhead and soared along with me as I raced after Jillian. I caught up to her, but I didn’t grab her or try to stop her. As long as there were no threats, she deserved this run. I’d certainly done my own share of wearing myself out to displace my grief.

She was relatively safe here. I still wore my weapons—I often slept with them for good reason. I’d shadow her. Protect her.

She eventually slowed, as did her sobs. Dropping to her knees, she cupped her face and released a guttural cry that pierced through me.

I dropped beside her and tugged her into my arms. It felt right to hold her, as if this was where she belonged. Where she’d always belonged.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Not your fault,” she mumbled into my chest. “I just don’t know what to do. I’m confident in my job and in my abilities when I work. Even at home, it’s my place, and I know how to act if things go wrong. But here . . .” Leaning away from me, she peered around. “I’m lost here. This world is big and scary and none of my go-to reactions will work.”

Telling her I’d protect her, that I’d watch over her always, only went so far in reassuring her. She already knew I’d stand beside her.

But did she realize I might also come to love her?



CHAPTER 10

JILLIAN

With Damon floating beside us, Theer carried me across the plain and back inside his house in the ground. I considered struggling, insisting I could walk on my own two feet, dammit, but it felt good to be held.

I needed the human touch, even if he wasn't technically human.

Inside his home, he placed me carefully on my feet. He kept a palm on my back as if he was worried I'd fall.

"Thank you," I said softly, looking up at him. My grief was mirrored in his features, making me realize that despite being different species, we were very much alike. We were two souls brought together by fate. What did the universe have in store for us next?

"Of course," he said, moving around me. "Would you like something to drink?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks. Would it be okay if I laid down?"

"Yes, feel welcome." He waved toward his bedroom.

I doubted he had a spare room.

"I'll just close my eyes a few minutes. I promise I'll wake up before it gets dark." I wouldn't take his bed all night.

"Rest. You will feel better," he said. He strode to a workbench and started tinkering with something.

Damon nudged my hand, and I stroked his head and spine. Theer may say the robot couldn't feel, but I sensed Damon did. Computers could learn and grow; we'd proven that on Earth. Damon may be more like a dog than we realized.

I walked to Theer's room and dropped onto his bed.

Damon settled beside me, and at least I didn't feel completely alone.

Muffled taps and hums rang out from where Theer worked. He was a nice guy. If we'd met on Earth, I would've been attracted to him right from the start. Not that aliens had visited our planet; most still believed they didn't exist.

I wouldn't be able to tell them aliens *did* exist, and they were amazing. He was a lifeline to hope and kindness.

Lying on my back, I struggled not to cry. While it was a great outlet for overwrought emotions, I couldn't sob forever.

I needed to face what my future held and find a way to survive.



CHAPTER 11

THEER

When I chose to lay down, I didn't wake her to ask her to leave my bed. She needed rest. This wasn't the first night I'd slept on the floor.

While no natural light found its way down from the surface, my internal clock woke me at dawn. I rose and folded the blanket I'd used, tucking it into a plexi container that kept the insects out.

Everything I had—everything I now was—had been provided by salvaging this world. I'd raided the city many times, taking some things to my shop to use for the ship I hoped to finish constructing and hauling back anything else that might be useful. Some might say I hoarded. I believe Jillian implied this. But I never knew when I'd be trapped beneath the ground by the penrots. Sure, I had another exit, though it was more of a challenge than the lift, but it paid to have everything you needed within reach of your claws.

Rising, I hustled into my tiny kitchen area, eager to prepare a meal for Jillian.

Today, I'd planned to do another forage in the city, but I'd have to ask her what she thought of the idea. I was my own person; I did as I pleased. But the last thing I would ever do was leave her here alone unless that was her wish.

Already, even looking at her made my chest ache. Was that because I thought I'd live alone here for the rest of my days but now had a friend?

She was female, though I'd never claim anything sexual from her she didn't want to give.

It might be wrong of me, but I hoped . . . No, it was best not to think about a future with her where we were anything but acquaintances. I should be thinking of ways to send her back to where she came from. She'd be safer there than here.

Everyone was safer anyplace other than here.

She walked slowly into the room as I was sautéing soogam on a scrap of metal I'd placed over a small flame. Damon hummed along behind her like the faithful pet I'd hoped he'd be for me. I didn't resent that he appeared to like her, assuming robots could like anyone. I was grateful she had a friend.

"How do you have fuel to cook?" she asked, and I was happy to hear the calm in her voice. Sleep wouldn't send her home, but it might give her the beginnings of peace.

"I drained it from the ship."

"You said it's destroyed, right? Your ship." She slumped in a chair, appearing as if everything had been whipped out of her, leaving only a scarred soul behind. If she was like me, she'd slowly heal. She'd form a new surface that would be stronger, even if it was a lot lonelier. If a person didn't challenge and struggle to improve what the fates laid upon them, they'd wallow in sorrow until they died.

"Yes, it is destroyed," I said. I placed big slices of the soogam on two other metal scraps I used for plates and brought them to the table, settling one in front of her and the other on my side of the table. "Are you hungry?"

"Not really." She sucked in a breath and released it, and I was glad it didn't come out shaky. "Actually, I am. Thank you. This looks good."

With a nod, I returned to the counter and poured cups of creevar. I brewed it from ground seeds I collected on the upper parts of the hills where it got cold at night.

When I placed her cup in front of her, she shot me a hint of a smile. Stunned, I just stared. I'd already seen she was lovely, but now she was even more beautiful. I dropped into my chair before my legs gave way.

"It looks and smells like tea," she said.

I explained how I collected the seeds, ground them, and how I'd figured out a way to simmer them long enough to bring out their delicious flavor.

"You've done so well here," she said, peering around. "You're self-sufficient. I can't believe you found or excavated this place that you've turned it into a home."

“Part of the cavern was here,” I said, my face hot. I wasn’t used to praise. But then, there was no one here to praise me but RS—Damon—who had draped himself across her lap. “You don’t need to hold him.”

“I like it.” Another smile rose on her face, brighter than the last. She stroked the robot, who quivered. “He’s sweet. He slept with me all night, making me feel safe and secure.”

Was it possible to envy a robot? Because I did.

We ate quickly, and she pushed her plate back afterward, tugging her cup close, wrapping her hands around it. She sniffed the steam rising off the top, her eyes closing, then took a sip. “What’s on the agenda for today?”

I blinked; a bit surprised. I’d wallowed in grief for at least a full lunar cycle, yet she seemed ready to tackle whatever I tossed her way.

“I usually work on components.”

Her frown shot to the counter holding a jumble of metal parts. “What are you building, another robot dog?”

“I’m trying . . .” Did I dare tell her? “I hope to finish off the construction of a spaceship that can take me away from this planet. I fuse some parts here.”

Her breath caught. “A ship. Truly?”

“Truly.” A smile teased across my lips. I found her enchanting, and it wasn’t just because she was lovely and unusual. Something about her made my hearts flip around and my breathing go ragged.

“You can get us off this planet?” she asked, leaning forward, her creevar forgotten.

“I don’t know for sure, but I’m going to try.”



CHAPTER 12

JILLIAN

“Can you fly me to Earth?” I asked, my heart slamming against my ribcage. The scrap of hope he’d handed over blazed across my soul.

“I don’t know if it’ll ever function as it should,” he said, rising. “Are you finished?” He reached for my plate. When I nodded, he took it over to the counter, then returned, taking his empty cup there too.

I gulped my alien tea that had a sweet, nutty flavor and handed him the cup. The tea gave me a nice jolt, too, telling me it must have caffeine or something similar in it. If I had to live here forever—please no—at least I wouldn’t miss out on coffee—the alien version that is.

His thick bands of “hair” on his head splayed outward like his hands. It was cute. So was he. If I was going to be here for long, I could get used to looking at him.

I shook my head when my attention focused on his mouth. I wasn’t thinking about what he’d taste like, what his tender touch would feel like on my body. I’d be foolish to start falling for someone I’d soon have to leave behind.

When I woke, I decided to look at the bright side of this. I usually had a sunny attitude about life, and I wasn’t going to let this drag me down. And when he said he was building a ship, my hope burst into a flower inside me. Excitement poured through me. This could be it. I’d get to go home soon.

“Why wouldn’t you be able to fly me to Earth?” I asked, trying to keep my lower lip from quivering.

“I don’t know where it is.”

I’d taken astronomy, but that was years ago. “It’s in the Milky Way Galaxy.” It hit me. “But you wouldn’t call it that. Do you have a stellar

map?”

“No. I have scrap metal I craft into parts.” His hand swept out to include the room in general. “In a shop in the city, I have most of a ship. I salvaged the computer from the ship that crashed here, and I believe I’ll be able to make it functional again, though I need to locate a certain type of panel that was damaged on my original ship. I’ve constructed engines, though that wasn’t easy.”

“When do you hope to fly?”

“That’s why I need to go foraging. If I can find a panel, I can finish constructing the ship. Then, perhaps, I can see if it will fly.”

I stood, clinging to hope. “Then let’s do the dishes and go find that panel.”

“Even if I can get my ship functional, I don’t know that I could ever return you to your home world. I need to make sure you understand this.”

I pinched my eyes shut before opening them. “I understand. But leaving here is almost as good. If we could travel . . . to wherever you came from, maybe someone there will know how to return me to Earth.” I wouldn’t let go of this dream. If I didn’t cling to it, I had nothing.

“You are correct.”

We cleaned the dishes.

“You cannot go out there like that,” he said as I pretty much skipped toward the lift.

I peered down at my nurse’s uniform made up of white pants, white top with pockets, and serviceable white shoes.

“The penrots will see you from very far away,” he said. “We need to travel unseen if we don’t want to engage them.”

“I don’t have anything else to wear.”

His smile came easy and seeing it made tingles shoot through me. “I have plenty of things. I’ve altered whatever I collected, since those who lived here before had more limbs than us.”

“You’re a lot bigger than me.” So much bigger. Broader and more muscular, his chest tapered to a narrow waist. He had solid thighs, though, like he worked out all the time. His build must come from foraging. Or running from penrots. “Are you sure you have anything that will fit?”

“Loosely, but yes.” He led me to his bedroom.

“Where did you sleep last night? I’m sorry I took your bed.”

“On the floor, but please don’t feel distressed.” He held up his hand. “I slept on the floor for many lunar cycles before I found the right materials to construct my bed. I brought the mattress from the city. No one else slept on it before me,” he said quickly, as if he was worried I’d be grossed out by the idea of resting on a mattress others had used in the past.

It would be sad and stupid of me to feel offended. They’d died where I still lived. Why waste something that still has use?

He opened a plastic-ish container about four feet long and started pulling out clothing, holding them up against me.

“See?” I laughed at how huge the shirt he offered was. “That could be a dress.”

“What’s a dress?” he asked, his voice full of humor. “I believe this shirt would look wonderful on you.”

“It’ll hang off me.” Snickering, I took it and draped it across my front, showing how low the collar would go. “My boobs will hang out.”

“Would that be a bad thing?”

Continuing the joke, I put my fist on one hip and gave him a stern look. “Are you saying you want to see my boobs, Theer?”

“Maybe,” he admitted. “What are boobs?”

I chuckled and pointed to my chest. “These things.”

“Ah,” he said. “The females of my species have them as well, though they are not called boots.”

“Do guys ogle them on your home world?”

“I did.” His face darkened.

Aw, was he embarrassed? He was a mix of nerdy alien and body builder. I didn’t sense he had a cocky bone in his body, and I liked that about him.

“Well, I’m not showing mine off,” I said.

“Now, I’m disappointed.” His voice had gone low and husky, and the sound made my pulse surge to double time.

“Maybe I’ll put on a show sometime.” I didn’t mean it, did I? This was simple teasing between two people who were becoming friends.

“I will watch and . . . ogle.”

It felt like we were feeling each other out, testing boundaries. How far would he take it?

I moved closer to him, though I wasn’t sure what I wanted him to do.

When my gaze fell on his lips, I knew.

I wanted him to kiss me.



CHAPTER 13

THEER

She moved toward me until our bodies brushed. She was so much smaller than me, delicate though with lush hips and . . . boots. No, boooooobs.

Her swallow took a long time to go down, and I sensed she was waiting for me to do something, though I had no idea what. Her gaze remained focused on my mouth.

In my culture, we didn't kiss, though I'd read about the gesture used by other species. Did those from her world press their mouths together, and why? Reading about it hadn't given me the sense I wanted to try it.

For whatever reason, I wanted to press lips with Jillian.

A dare seemed to linger in her eyes, one I'd be foolish to ignore.

I gently lifted her. There was no way I could squish our mouths together otherwise. Perhaps I could scrunch over enough to reach her face, but this would be easier.

When I dropped my mouth onto hers, her arms went around me. This, my people did, and I liked it. I also liked that her legs went around my body, and she pushed firmly against me.

But this mouth-on-mouth thing . . .

Like I'd lit fuel on fire, feelings seared through me. And when her tongue touched my upper lip, I groaned. I turned and pressed her against the wall, pushing my lips against hers harder. I was rewarded by her moan and her pumping her groin against my abs.

Lost in her, I wasn't aware of anything going on around us. All I could focus on were the sensations spiraling through my body. They centered in my cock.

Her hands roamed my shoulders as I kept my lips on hers. I wasn't sure what to do with her otherwise. Would it be alright to touch her body? She seemed to think it was alright to touch mine.

Turning, I stumbled across the room with her pressed against me as if she'd never let go. We fell onto my bed with her beneath me. I must be twice her weight, and for an instant, I worried I'd crushed her.

But when she pumped up against me, my anxiety eased.

I stroked the side of her waist and slid my fingers beneath her shirt, marveling at how smooth her skin was, how much I wanted her already. She'd brought light into my life, and I wanted to make sure nothing ever extinguished it.

I lifted my head, hating to separate our mouths.

She stared up at me, blinking slowly, before her tongue slid out to glide across her lips.

"I have never done that before," I said, hating that I'd spoken the moment the words left me.

Her pretty brow furrowed. "You're a virgin?"

"I do not know the term."

"You've never had sex?"

Ah. "I have. My people don't connect mouths, however."

Her snort jerked between us. "I think kissing sounds more romantic, don't you?"

"I do agree, but . . ."

"What?" Her attention remained on my mouth.

"Perhaps I could try once more and see?"

Her grin lifted and dropped too soon. "Go for it, Theer."

I stroked her cheek, marveling at its smooth texture and how she leaned into my palm, her eyes closing. I continued down her neck, retracting my claws so I could glide my fingers in tiny circles, stopping at the bottom of the V on her top. The crests of her boobs peeked from beneath the material, and I'd face a defeat by penrots if my reward was one glimpse of her warm tan flesh.

I ran the back of my knuckles across the top of one boob, then the other, and she arched her spine, pressing up to meet me.

Then I leaned over her and claimed her lips once more.



CHAPTER 14

JILLIAN

I shouldn't be kissing Theer, but I couldn't seem to stop. I loved being in his arms, and his kiss made me feel like I'd stepped into a fairytale, one complete with vicious creatures—the penrots—and a daring hero—him.

His soft lips caressed mine, and I liked that he was gentle. He wasn't rushing this, ripping off my clothing, or pushing me for anything I wasn't willing to give. I'd never melted from someone's kiss before, but I did now. A moan worked its way up my throat, and I clung to his shoulders as he left my mouth and trailed his lips down my neck.

His hand glided along my side and across my hip, and he slipped his palm beneath me and lifted me up against him. He had a hard-on, and it felt bigger than the few I'd experienced in the past. With each kiss he rained down on my neck as he moved lower, my legs weakened, and my heart raced. I clung to him as heat roared through me, and if we wore nothing, I'd spread my legs around him and beg him to take me.

He lifted his head. "Are you alright?"

"Sure, all things considered." My laugh came out high-pitched. Stress could do that to a person. And this was completely unexpected. Who'd expect to be transported to an alien world and meet someone I felt I could spend the rest of my days with?

It was too soon, too much, and it was all I could do to ease out from beneath him. "You said we needed to forage today?"

He nodded, his face going neutral. What did he think about our kiss?

If he was like most guys, he was probably thinking about our upcoming adventure. He'd dismissed our kiss already.

“I’ll leave so you can change,” he said. “Feel welcome to go through the box and take whatever you’d like. Bring out your soiled garments when you’re ready, and I’ll have them cleaned.”

“How do you do laundry? Does Damon wash everything for you?”

He stood, and an easy smile appeared on his face. “That would be nice, but so far, Damon doesn’t appear to be good for anything. I should’ve programmed him to cook, at least.”

“Is that possible?” I asked.

“Anything is possible with robotics, though I’m not sure my skill level would be up for something like that.” He paused in the open doorway. “I have a device that cleanses my clothing.”

“How do you bathe and . . .” I’d had my legs crossed since I got up.

“Through there.” He waved to a panel on the opposite side of the room I’d assumed was a closet. When I checked it out this morning, I hadn’t figured out how to open the panel.

“Can you show me how to open the door?”

With a nod, he went over to it and laid his thumb on a round black disk in the center at eye level—his, that is. I’d be able to reach, however, if I stood on tiptoes.

The door opened, and I spied fairly normal appearing fixtures.

“You have plumbing here?” I asked.

“Everything is composted.”

That didn’t sound fun. “And water?”

“I use a simple basin for washing. It rains here fairly regularly, and I collect it and funnel it down from above. If I’m careful, I never run out.”

“Potable, I assume.” I couldn’t imagine what kind of germs I’d pick up here. I doubted my body would be able to fight off a simple alien cold.

“I’ve been drinking it.”

That wasn’t exactly reassuring. “We’re different species.”

His face shuttered. “And yet I believe we’d fit.” With that, he turned and left the room.

I grunted, my lips twisting, and hurried into the “bathroom.” After using the facilities, I sorted through the clothing in the box, finding something that wouldn’t hang off me too much. I understood not wanting to stand out like someone waving a white flag, but if I couldn’t move easily, I’d be in almost as tight a spot.

Emerging into the main room, I found him loading a bag onto his back.

“Supplies?” I asked.

He nodded. Was he irritated about my different species comment? I’d only named a fact.

He was right. We did fit, so far. Had he meant anything sexual by the comment? My gaze shot to his groin, but his hard-on had fled, probably chased away by my comment. Or maybe he hadn’t enjoyed kissing me as much as I thought.

Relationships were tough, especially when two people came from different cultures—and species.

“Are you ready to leave?” He took in my white shoes, but there wasn’t much we could do about that.

I nodded, but instead of going to the lift, he approached his workbench. He lifted something and came over to me and dropped to one knee. My heart fluttered when it shouldn’t. Why had I immediately seen Theer in the “proposal” position? Nope, he was painting my shoes a nice, rich black.

“Handy,” I said.

He grunted. Lots of that going on between us lately. He was probably irritated with me about my comment, or irritated that I’d wanted to stop kissing. Who could tell with any guy, let alone an alien?

“Now we are ready,” he said. “Damon?”

At the call of his name, the robotic dog lifted off what I was going to call his bed, though it was probably a charging station.

Theer used his periscope to check out the surface, grunting before turning back to me. I took that to mean all clear.

“How do you generate power?” I asked as we stepped into the elevator.

“Power generation panels I removed from the ship. Storage units to collect the power generated.”

“Kind of like back home. We use solar light to generate power and store it in batteries.”

He nodded as the lift rose toward the surface.

We were deposited outside. It was raining. Awesome for water collection, but I was soaked through in seconds.

“Should’ve brought a raincoat,” I said over the wind.

He urged me across the plain, heading for the hills.

If that was our destination, it was going to be a long walk.

As we moved, it felt like tiny needles pelted me, making my exposed face and neck sting. The sound of a million tiny drums beating surrounded

us. The shirt I wore hung down over my hands, draping to my knees. Back inside Theer's underground home, I'd huffed and rolled up the sleeves. Now I was grateful to use the added length to cover my hands.

An icy wind swept across the plain, chilling me to the bone in seconds. It sucked away my breath before I could pull it in.

In no time, I started slipping on the mucky surface. It was all I could do to keep my footing.

Damon had it lucky. He floated above the ground and the rain beaded up and slid down his smooth metal surface.

"He won't rust, will he?" I asked, concerned for my metal friend.

"I'll clean him later." Theer paused and pulled something from the side pouch of his bag. "Here." He draped it over me, and I fingered the rubbery material, thankful to have it. My hair dripped, and I was soaked through.

"How far will we walk?" I asked.

"Not long."

I didn't see a city or any place to forage, but what did I know? This was a foreign place. For all I knew, the city could be below ground like his home. We'd come across a hatch and slip down beneath the surface. At least it wouldn't be raining there.

"We'll shelter in the city tonight," he said.

"Where is it?" I gazed about wildly, my strung-out nerves fraying even further.

"Not far." He lifted his arm, but all I saw was endless plain and the hills no closer than before. Stopping near a low mound, he started tugging at something draped over it.

"A vehicle," I said with joy. My joy dropped a bit when I noted no roof on the craft that resembled a three-wheeler back home with a single seat and wide panels on the back.

He opened a compartment on the back, stuffed in his bag and climbed into the seat while I took in the single, rubbery front wheel plus two equal-sized ones on the back. With thick treads, the vehicle could probably take us anywhere, but was it bad that I wished I had an umbrella instead?

Dents and dings covered the silver metal surface. I assumed the engine must be on the underside as the front appeared too narrow.

Gripping the handlebars, he nudged a metal bar with the front of his foot, and a puff of smoke came out of the back. No sounds, but I assumed he'd want a quiet vehicle to travel across the plain. It beat walking.

“Climb on behind me,” he said. “We’ll be there soon.”

I hoped this thing went fast.

I scrambled on and wrapped my arms around his waist. My thighs nestled behind his, though I comically couldn’t reach the foot resting bar like he did.

The vehicle jerked forward, and I latched onto the rubbery shirt he’d loaned me, clutching it to my chin. I pressed my cheek against his back and held on as he turned the three-wheeler toward the hills. He picked up speed, flying across the plain. Each bump and hole jarred the vehicle, and I had to fist his shirt to keep from flying off the back.

“Come on, Damon,” I called out, though I slapped my hand over my mouth the moment I spoke. We’d been quiet so far. I didn’t want to make sounds that might alert the penrots to our presence.

Damon zipped along beside us, though, and if Theer was concerned about the penrots hearing me, he didn’t say so.

It was a wretched trip, but in about an hour, he slowed the three-wheeler and brought it to a stop.

“We’re here,” he announced.

I peered around him, finding only more plain stretching in every direction. How far did it go? It appeared to travel beyond the horizon. “I don’t see a city.”

“And that’s the point,” he said. He tugged on my fingers to get me to release his shirt, then climbed off. When I started slipping off after him, my body one big, wet icicle, he caught me and held me against his chest.

“Oh, yum,” I said, closing my eyes and pressing myself into his neck and chest. “Why are you warm?”

He shrugged and after juggling me to shift most of my weight to one arm, he removed his pack and jerked a cover over the vehicle, making it blend in with the grass around it.

“Clever,” I mumbled.

He grunted.

When he placed me on my feet, I linked my arm through his. We started walking. Maybe he didn’t want to drive too close to the city? We’d be inside some sort of structure soon, right? Then I could slowly dry.

He stopped about twenty paces after starting and stretched out his hand. It impacted with something, and a square panel appeared. When he pressed

his thumb against the center, something clicked, though I didn't see anything but the small panel dangling mid-air.

“This way,” he said, stepping forward. He nudged away my arm linked through his, but trailed his fingers down my arm, taking my hand in his. Like his chest, his hand was warm. Good internal temp control, I supposed. Humans—well, me—were defective. Chilly.

He'd only stepped forward two paces when an enormous city appeared in front of us.



CHAPTER 15

THEER

“Cloaked,” I said when Jillian gaped up at me. Once Damon had joined us, I shut and made sure the door locked behind us. A wall stretched around the city and while it, too, was beginning to crumble in places, the cloaking device still masked the city’s presence. It would until a section of the wall fell, ripping through the device’s wiring.

“Do the penrots know this is here?” She stared around, taking in the crumbled buildings and pavement disintegrating due to age and weather. Vegetation found a way, poking up through what should be impervious surfaces, seeking life-giving light and moisture.

“They must’ve at one time or there would still be people here. I assume they cloaked the wall, but by then, it was too late.”

She shivered. “This is the city you searched for the panel, right?”

“Yes, I’ve been here many times.” I led her down the street weaving through the center of the city. Around us, buildings stretched upward many stories, reaching for the sky, their walls slowly falling with time. “I’ve only searched parts of it.”

“Have you found bodies?” Her chin lifted. “As I said, back on Earth, I’m a nurse. I guess a healer, you could call it, or someone who takes care of those injured or sick.”

“A medical person.”

She nodded. “If you’ve found . . . carcasses, you don’t need to worry about sharing that information with me. I’ve got a solid stomach.”

I wasn’t sure how a “solid” stomach could be a good thing, but I grunted, which could be interpreted however she pleased.

The rain had slowed, thankfully, and murky sunlight poked through the thick clouds above, making everything steam. That was the way of the plain

during this season. Chilling rain followed by sweltering heat. Both beat the endless cold that took over the world for many cycles of the moon each year. I had a few cycles left to prepare for the next long cold season.

We passed roads stretching away from this one. A stillness hung over the city, an eerie silence broken only by the croaks of buildings succumbing to weather and time and a few stones scattered by our feet. A gust of wind swept through the city, carrying dust and the scent of things long since abandoned.

“I haven’t found bodies,” I said. “I suspect some died before they built the wall and cloaked the city. Others may have fled. The shop I commandeered was used to build spaceships.”

She stopped, gazing up at me. “There are spaceships here? Let’s use one to leave this planet today.”

“Sadly, they’ve all departed. I assume carrying away survivors.”

“What do you think happened here?” she asked, starting walking again.

A reddish-orange light bathed the city as if a giant spotlight shone down from the two suns. It gave the area a strange, surreal glow that added to the haunting atmosphere hanging over the city.

“Something caused the penrots to happen,” I said. “I haven’t actually looked into it much, so I don’t know if they’re an indigenous species who took over, one who came here from a different planet, or something that . . . mutated.” I shrugged. “It hardly matters, does it?”

“I have a scientific mind. I’m curious, I guess. I like to know stuff. Like, how do they survive?”

“I believe you know how they survive.”

“If we’re the only non-penrots on the planet, they must be starving. You implied you didn’t think there was anyone but penrots left.”

“They will eat any living being.” I stopped in front of a building I hadn’t yet searched, studying the structure. “Each time I go inside one of the buildings, I move with care and remain only as long as necessary. I worry they’ll collapse around me.”

“What a way to go.” She squinted at the face of the building. “What’s inside this one?”

“I don’t know, but I hope something I can use.”

“The panel, then. Should I wait out here?”

“I don’t believe that’s any safer. Since I realized I might be stuck on this planet for the rest of my days, I’ve come to accept that death is eager to

claim me. For whatever reason, the thought of dying after being crushed by falling debris makes my chest ache more than the idea of the penrots grabbing me. At least with the penrots, I'll give something back. A life for others, I suppose, as grim as that sounds."

"I can't understand how you've remained such a decent person. After a year, I believe I'd be a complete wreck."

I shrugged, deciding not to tell her that in some ways, I already was.

"Shall we see what this building holds?" I asked, opening the front door. With a nod, she stepped inside, and I followed, calling out to Damon. "Remain outside. Watch. Alert."

The robot zipped up into the sky.

"He's pretty handy even if he can't talk," she said.

"He truly is. He—" I frowned, peering up at the sky. That sound. What was—?

The gate to the city slammed onto the ground, ripping through the wires, no doubt revealing the city to the world.

Penrot vehicles raced through the opening, the musar drivers whipping the pons whose feet slammed on the broken pavement.

A musar saw us and shrieked out a challenge.



CHAPTER 16

JILLIAN

“We have to run,” I said hoarsely. I strangely worried about Damon a second before realizing he not only hovered well above the penrots, but they also wouldn’t be interested in chewing on his metal body.

Ours? Very much so.

Their’s wide-eyed gaze met mine. “I didn’t think they could find the city.” He swept my hand up as he passed, dragging me inside the building. “Haven’t been here, so I don’t know where to hide.” His gaze shot up.

I took in a big, three-story foyer with stairs in the center of the back wall. Glass ran across the front—they’d see us easily. A long glass cabinet held what looked like mechanical parts. Was this a factory of some sort?

The stairs. “Up or . . .”

He bolted to the right and shoved open a door, taking me into a hall that thankfully did not have glass along the outer wall.

He tested each door we came to, but none were open. At the end of the long hall, we turned left, finding yet another corridor that also didn’t yield a place to hide.

Bangs and shrieks rang out behind us. My heart thundered, and my lungs were on fire already, though we’d barely started running. This is what I got for working twelve-hour shifts and opting to crash in bed after I got home rather than hitting the gym equipment I’d bought—the stuff that sat collecting dust in the tiny spare room of my apartment. So much for my dreams of one day getting fit. The penrots wouldn’t care. They’d enjoy my fat as much as my muscle.

“They’ll unleash the pons,” he whispered. “The musars will wait for the pons to capture us and bring us back to them.”

“We won’t let that happen.”

“Never,” he vowed.

At the end of the second corridor, we came to a metal door. If it was locked, we’d be trapped. The only windows on the outer wall were placed high up and were narrow. I might fit through, but Theer would not.

Theer wrenched the door open. A metal stairwell wound up on our left. Rather than climb, he rushed to the door mounted on the outer wall, and we burst outside. The pons hadn’t surged down this road yet.

The rain clouds had fled, burned off by the two suns, and everything steamed, creating a tropical feel. No palm trees or drinks, sadly, and I realized I’d probably never see either again.

“I need to get us to a building I’ve explored already,” he whispered, peering around. Grabbing my hand, he tugged me around the side of the next building, and we flattened our backs against the wall. Other than abandoned vehicles and decay, there was nothing threatening within sight.

“I might be able to find a place to hide inside a building,” he said.

“Could we run through the city, put a lot of distance between us?”

He snapped his fingers, the sound overly loud, though pon shrieks didn’t grow in volume after he did it. Maybe they hadn’t heard, or they didn’t think the sound meant anything.

Damon knew, though. He soared down close to us.

Theer read something scrolling across a panel mounted on the robot’s chest, nodding.

“The musars are waiting out front while the pons search the building we just left,” he said. “They’re not as clever as the musars, so they’ll remain inside. The musars didn’t think this through. They may have only told the pons to search the building and find us. Pons can’t think well for themselves.”

I sagged against the wall, relaxing for a second. My flesh crawled like pons were munching on it already. “They won’t leave the building, then?”

“If my suspicion is correct, not until they’ve been given that directive.”

“We don’t have much time before that happens, I assume,” I said.

He shook his head. “That’s why we’re going to follow your suggestion and put a lot of distance between us.” Taking my hand, he rushed me down the street, away from the building the pons searched.

Our feet pounded the ground as we raced around downed vehicles and, in some places, crawled up over and through big piles. Bits of space cars crumbled when we touched them. At other times, we had to quietly wrench off doors, placing them on the ground, and work our way through a mesh of rubble to reach the other side.

My sinuses clogged with the smell of decay, though I never saw anything I could attribute to the smell. But I felt them, or what must be left of those who'd lived here before. As an empathetic person, I sensed many had died here and not easily. Some rotted while others . . .

I didn't want to let my imagination take me in that direction.

The shrieks faded, thankfully, and my heartrate slowed to a more manageable rhythm.

Damon flew above us, periodically zipping down to hover nearby. Theer would read the robot's screen and sometimes study images Damon had taken from above. We didn't see penrots in those, though I knew we soon would. They'd gone strangely silent, suggesting they were regrouping. Thinking this through.

I'd barely had the thought when screams echoed behind us, punctuated by stomping feet.

"I bet they've been given other directions," Theer said, sweeping me up in his arms and carrying me.

"I can run."

"I'm faster."

I was worn out already; he could probably tell by my labored breathing and the sweat dripping down my face. His clothing rubbed in all sorts of places, and I'd either have a rash or blisters or both before too long.

The light cast by the two suns was relentless, seeking us, burning us. My exposed skin pinkened and sweat trickled down my spine. Theer's warmth had appealed when it was raining, but now he sweltered from carrying me while running.

He ducked down alleyways, leaping over fences at the end, and a few times, stopped and lowered me to my feet.

"Climb on my front," he'd say every time. His pack was too wide for me to ride on his back.

I hung on, my arms around his neck and my legs encircling his waist, while he scaled walls no human would ever be able to climb, then leaped from one low rooftop to another. The city stretched on for miles.

The scent of mold and mildew filled the air as the sun burned away the rain, and the penrots screamed, sounding like they searched only a few blocks away. They'd continue across the city in a lethal wave, not stopping until they caught us.

Their finally stopped at the back door of what looked a bit like a restaurant back on Earth, though made of a type of stone I'd never seen before. Its tall, skinny structure tilted at the top.

After lowering me to my feet, he took my hand and led me inside the back, where he wove through what I assumed was a kitchen, though none of the appliances looked familiar. At the front of the building, we took three flights of stairs to the top. Or what I thought was the top.

He pointed to a hatch in the ceiling. "We're going up there."

"An attic?" When he frowned, I assumed the word wasn't familiar and explained. "A top level where someone doesn't usually live. Sometimes, it's used for storage."

"Yes, that." A jump dislodged the hatch, and he leapt up through the dark hole. His face appeared in the opening, and he held down his hand. "Up with you too."

I latched onto his arm with both hands, and he effortlessly tugged me up through the opening.

As he secured the hatch, I peered around, taking in shadows that could be furniture or almost anything, all covered with dust. I walked across the rickety floor, holding my hands out as if maintaining my balance would keep me from falling through.

A broken window with bits of streaked, jagged glass was centered on one end of the large room. It looked out on what must've been a busy street since broken, falling apart vehicles covered almost every square foot of the surface, some vehicles piled two and three stories high.

What happened here? Their didn't know, and I doubted I ever would despite the curiosity running rampant inside me, telling me to search and find out.

I didn't see penrots below, but I backed away from the window, not wanting my motion to attract them to our hiding spot.

He removed his pack, lowering it to the floor, and bent down in front of it, pulling a few things out.

"Take this," he said softly, holding out a knife the size of my forearm.

“Should I carry it?” I stared at it. As a nurse, the last thing I would ever want to do was take a life, but if it was down to the penrots and me and Theer, I was ruthless enough not to hesitate.

“We’ll do our best to avoid close combat,” he said. “But have it with you just in case.”

He pulled a sheath out of his pack, and I strapped it on, stowing the knife in the thick fabric pouch. It hung loosely around my waist, but I felt stronger wearing it than without.

I dropped to the floor beside him, sitting with my back against a wall and my legs stretched out in front of me. I swiped my hair off my face and resecured it at my nape with the only hair band I possessed. I supposed I could make do with a tie or something else, but my heart hurt at the thought of this one breaking. Each part of my old life would slowly dissolve until the only thing left of Earth Jillian would be my naked body. The rest would be gone. Would I still be me then or something else?

Stark, cold loneliness scraped through me, and I shivered. Somewhere between the first building and this one, my clothing had mostly dried, but I felt as cold as if I stood in deep snow on the North Pole.

“Here,” Theer said, pulling a big shirt from his pack. He tugged it over my head and pulled my limp arms through the sleeves. After I was covered, he sat beside me and tugged me up onto his lap, putting his arms around me.

I didn’t feel so alone when he held me.

With my cheek pressed against his chest, I focused on the double thuds echoing in my ears.

“You have two hearts,” I said.

“I know.”

“I have one. How can you possibly have two?”

He smiled down at me, though the expression was sad, not anything I’d associate with joy. “How is it possible that you only have one?”

I shrugged.

He tugged a small, oiled package from his bag and opened it, handing me a thick wedge of something that vaguely resembled the protein bars I’d eaten once when doing low carb. Dense and chewy, it had a slight graininess mixed in with a salty flavor, plus a bitter aftertaste. But it was food, and my body roared its approval as I shoveled it in. We ate in silence, washing down the hunks with water from a flask.

“This was a two-day trip,” I said.

“It was.”

“How much food and water did you bring with you?” Would he have enough if we couldn’t return to his underground home?

“Enough.”

“How much?”

“We can forage if we get low,” he said. “Please don’t worry about it.”

I did, but exhaustion kept threatening to grab me and tug me into a dark abyss. Maybe it could take me to a better place for a little while.

“Sleep,” he said, seeing my yawn. “I’ll wake you if . . .”

If the penrots arrived? Maybe I’d rather sleep through that.

But no. I wasn’t one who wished for death. I clung to the belief that things would get better, first when I worked at the hospital and now, when I struggled to survive with Theer.

“Thank you,” I said.

“For what?”

“Being here for me. Protecting me.”

His arms tightened around me. “I wish I could save you from everything, my treasure.” Such longing filled his voice, and I sensed it wasn’t solely directed at his feeling of protectiveness.

I loved that he called me that.

He was beginning to be my treasure too.

“You’re doing the best you can,” I said. “If only I could protect you. If only I could find a way off this planet for both of us.”

“I’ll shelter you for as long as I can.” He said it like a vow, and it was all I could do not to repeat his words.

Was he developing feelings for me like I was for him? When the first stirrings occurred in my heart, I dismissed them as a reaction to my situation. I was drawn to him because he could protect me from a world determined to . . . well, eat me.

But the longer I was with him, the more I respected his quiet stoicism, his humor, and, okay, his rugged body. I never thought I’d fall for an alien, but it looked like it was happening whether I wanted it to or not.

The suns were setting, and light slanted across the room. When had that started to happen? Out on the streets, the penrot pons continued to hunt us, though their screeches didn’t sound like they were near.

“Will Damon be alright?” I asked. I clung to Theer and to the robot, because they were my only friends. Well, maybe a bit more than friends with Theer. I had no interest in kissing Damon.

Theer? My body, even tired, suggested it might be open to doing much more than kissing.

“He’ll watch,” he said. “Report.”

“It’s good we have him.”

“He was the first thing I built. I needed eyes in the back of my head, but that seemed too complicated a task to take on here. I’m not medically inclined.”

I thought he was serious, but the upward twitch of his lips gave away his humor.

“I’m a nurse, as I said. Maybe I could help you graft them.”

His eyes widened. “You have this skill?”

“Well, I worked in the operating room for a few years, but I’m no surgeon. I guess, to play it safe, we’ll have to skip it for now and rely on Damon.”

He stared at me for a second before his low chuckle rang out. He was gorgeous when he laughed. Gorgeous when he was serious. Beautiful always. There was something uniquely special about him, and whatever it was—that part that was solely him—drew me close. I couldn’t get enough.

I turned in his arms and wrapped my legs around him.

When had my feeling of security turned into more? Maybe from almost the moment I met him.

Need for something I couldn’t define coursed through me.

I lifted my face to find him watching me with a soft look in his eyes. Seeing affection for me there undid me. I tugged his head down, and we kissed.

His mouth was gentle on mine, as if he thought I was fragile, that I’d shatter if he pushed hard or tried to take something I wasn’t willing to give.

When I moaned and pressed against him, his tongue glided across my lips and eased inside to tease across mine.

His hands stroked my sides.

Easing away from him, I tugged off the big shirt and threw it aside, adding my bra.

“You are lovely,” he said, gazing raptly at my breasts. “A true treasure.”

“Touch me. Love me,” I said. I needed this connection to prove I still lived. That I had something—someone—worth surviving for. Was it too soon? I didn’t care. I just knew I wanted him.

He ran his fingers across my breasts, and my nipples peaked for him, turning into hard knots aching for more.

He stroked them, glancing back and forth from them to my face.

I closed my eyes and gave way to the heady sensations he generated inside me. And when one of his hands moved down across my belly and stopped at the top of my pants, I rose and tugged them and my panties off as well, leaving myself exposed to his view.

With a groan, he pulled me down onto his lap, spreading my legs around him.

His fingers found their way between my thighs, sending tremors of pleasure through me. I adored his soft, gentle touch that held a powerful intensity that made my body quiver with anticipation. I reached out and tugged at his thick hair bands, and they curled around my fingers, holding tight. They stroked my wrists, and while this simple touch shouldn’t arouse me, it did. It drove me to want more.

I’d noted one other time he could somehow curl his claws across the tips of his fingers, tucking them against the skin.

He glided them between my wet folds, and I felt no sharpness. And when he dipped one thick finger into me, I no longer cared. I stared into his eyes as he pumped his finger up in me. He added another, and I began to move, lifting then letting my body fall back down. He touched me with such reverence that my heart ached, and tears pricked behind my eyes.

His thumb found my clit, and he rubbed, creating circles in an endless pattern that could tell a tale as old as the world around us.

Releasing whimpers, I pressed down hard, needing more. I wanted to demand he release his cock and slam it inside me, but I sensed this was only about my pleasure, not his own. That made my heart spasm, because it must’ve been a long time since he’d found joy with another.

Slowly, his touch intensified. He added more fingers, driving them up inside me. His tail wrapped around my waist, lifting me.

I dripped for him alone and cried out as he circled my clit, rubbing and pressing until stars flickered behind my eyes.

Moaning, I urged him on. His fingers moved faster, pushing me closer and closer to the edge of the world. I couldn’t wait to fall over and take

everything he had to offer.

His gaze never left mine. “You’re amazing, my treasure,” he whispered, stroking my clit and pushing his fingers deep within me. “Come for me. Come.”

With a harsh cry, I broke apart, blasting into the universe around us, soaring higher than I’d ever flown before. He continued pumping his fingers inside me as I rode one wave after another, each more exquisite than the last.

When my body started to knit back together again, I stopped moving. I pressed my forehead against his chest, breathing fast.

He pulled his fingers from inside me and held me as the echoes of pleasure finally receded.

He tipped my chin up, and his mouth met mine. When he lifted his head, he grinned. “I believe you should sleep, little treasure. Rest, knowing I will protect you.”

Rising, I dressed quickly. I wanted to sleep naked in his arms, but it was too cold in this world. One day, we’d be warm and together, and I’d claim everything.

I curled up into his embrace and let myself drift away in a state of blissful contentment.

“Sleep, my treasure,” he murmured softly again, stroking my spine. His soothing voice and the motion made me fully relax. “I will keep watch. I will make sure the penrots do not find us.”



CHAPTER 17

THEER

The penrots found us halfway through the night. Their screams of excitement echoed up through the building from below. Had they scented us? It was hard to say. Maybe the musars caught a glimpse of Damon and realized we were in the area. They knew we were connected, but I often sent Damon on forays alone, so the musars had no reason to suspect we'd be with him this time.

Jillian came awake all at once, squirming in my arms, her muffled cry ringing out. I placed my hand over her mouth, though lightly and in warning. I didn't want to frighten her any more than she already was.

When she nodded, I pulled my hand away. I rose with her in my arms, wishing I could hold her longer, that I could find a way to make this place better for her.

For us.

Despite knowing I should hold myself back, I had feelings for her. Emotions spiked through me. Protectiveness. Longing. And a growing need. Everything inside me shouted I should make her feel secure, that I should show her I was beginning to care. It had been so long since I'd interacted with a female—with anyone other than penrots, for that matter—I wasn't sure I remembered how.

"We need to leave," I said.

She jerked out a nod, and her gaze shot around the room wildly.

Below, stomps rang out. The pons had gained entrance to the building, and they'd soon find us.

After lowering her to her feet, I quickly packed my bag and secured it to my back.

I led her to the window, and she walked easily beside me. She trusted me, and that made my hearts expand, pressing against my ribs. How could I offer her anything but me? That would never be enough. I had a decent sense of self-worth, but this planet drained everything good and hopeful from a person. She would never choose to stay with me if she had a way out.

She took my hand and squeezed it. “We’ll escape.”

The certainty in her voice made my hearts twist into one solid mass. They spasmed, making my chest wall ache.

Jillian was easy to love, though I wasn’t sure that was the emotion crushing my hearts. I’d be foolish to fall for someone who would leave me as soon as she could.

But would she? Her foam was broken beyond repair. She was as stuck here as me.

It was wrong of me to feel a spark of excitement that she’d been thrown into my world with no way out. Just because she was as lost here as me didn’t mean she would ever love me.

We could be friends. Could I settle for that?

Now wasn’t the time to dwell on it. Stomps rang up the staircase, telling me the pons were searching the building. They’d see the hatch; they never gave up. They’d clamber up into the room and grab us.

Damon hovered outside the window, his view panel flashing images that gave us a possible way out.

I wrenched the window out of the frame and lowered it to the floor.

Below us, the penrots shrieked louder. They’d heard me, but they would’ve found us soon anyway.

While Jillian fidgeted, shooting fear filled glances toward the hatch, I climbed through the opening, bracing the side of my foot on the shallow ledge running around the upper part of the building. It must’ve been decorative at one time; now it would serve as a way for us to escape.

I dug my claws into a gap between the stones at eye-level.

“Come on,” I said, extending my other hand to Jillian.

She grabbed onto my wrist and, with my tail wrapped around her waist, joined me on the narrow ledge.

“Don’t look down,” I whispered.

Her head flailed, and she pinched her eyes shut. “Sorry I’m not brave.”

“You’re amazing. Truly.”

“Thanks.” She looked up at me, and the appreciation in her eyes gave me hope something could grow between us. There wasn’t time to explore this. Would that time ever come?

“We have to make our way to the edge of the building on my left and then jump across to the next building,” I said. “From there, it’ll be easy.”

Her jittery laugh burst out. “I’m looking forward to easy.”

“You’re so brave.”

“I wish I was.”

I shot her a grin. “Look at you, dangling from the side of a building. There’s no one braver than that.”

She nodded. “I can do this. No, we can do this. Let’s put some dust between us and the penrots.”

“Follow me.”

With my claws, I could easily cling to the side of the building. Noting she was having a harder time with her blunted claws; I kept my tail snugly wrapped around her waist as we made our way along the narrow ledge.

At the end, I studied the gap about the length of my body. Could she cross it alone? I wouldn’t risk it.

“Can you hold onto the wall and me?” I said.

She grasped the front of my shirt and then poked her fingertips into a crack on the side of the wall, nodding. “Got it.”

With one hand, I shrugged off my pack and tossed it to the roof next to this one. It landed and slid down the slope but stopped before it reached the edge.

Below us, guttural groans rang out, but I didn’t bother to look. I’d expected the musars to surround the building.

“I’m going to ease around to present you with my back,” I said. “Climb on and hold tight.”

“Yup.” She clambered up onto me and wrapped her arms around my neck, pressing her cheek against my nape. “Ready.”

A leap, and I landed hard on the roof of the other building. But my foot snagged on my pack, and I tripped.

Jillian’s cry jerked out as I slid toward the edge.



CHAPTER 18

JILLIAN

I clung to Theer as he slid down the roof.

We tumbled off the side, and I pressed my face against his back, trembling.

He tumbled down the wall but snagged his claws on a windowsill, bringing us to a jarring halt. While he dangled, I tried to suck in a breath.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

My heart pinched that he’d think of me first. He was a sweet guy, so sad and lonely. He didn’t ask anything of me, just willingly gave me the strength of his arms and a determination to survive this no matter what.

Would he go to Earth with me if I asked? It would be wrong to take him there even if I had a way back. He’d never be accepted in my world. He’d stand out with his blue skin and alien ways. They’d capture him, torture him to find out how he ticked, and I’d never see him again. The thought devastated me, telling me right away how much I truly liked him.

“I’m okay,” I said. “What can I do?”

While I should only be focused on returning home, I could clearly see I was falling in love with him. My feelings had crept up when I wasn’t looking and ambushed me. Now all I could think of was finding a way for him to go with me if I left.

“Hold on.” He reached up and grabbed onto the sill with his other hand, and his feet scrambled across the building’s rough surface.

Damon zipped in close, hovering beneath us, and Theer planted his foot on Damon’s back, using the robot to brace himself long enough to find solid footing.

The front of his boots found purchase, and he levered us up. On his knees, he peered through the window, but I could’ve told him that wasn’t a

way out. Penrots shrieked below us, rushing toward the entrance. They'd be on the stairs within seconds, seeking us no matter where we tried to hide.

"We'll keep going," he said, peering up. "I believe I can climb if you can hold on."

"I'm with you, Theer."

His eyes met mine over his shoulder and I read tenderness there.

The trembling of new love was like an electric current, coursing through my bones, sending sparks of joy to my fingertips like a million fireflies flew through my veins. My heart raced and something wild fluttered in my belly.

He gave me a curt nod, but I sensed he wasn't upset by what my face must reveal. This wasn't the time, but that moment would come.

If I couldn't find a way home, it might be okay to stay here as long as I was with Theer. It wasn't much of a life, but we'd share it. I wouldn't need to face the horrors of this planet alone.

"We need to get off this planet," I said.

"We do," he said grimly. "I'm working on it. If . . ." He didn't finish the thought. The climb was enough to focus on now.

Damon hummed beside us, cheeping, the first vocalization I'd heard him make.

Theer grabbed onto the wall, the tips of his claws digging into the grout between the big slabs of stone making up the outside of the building. Clinging, he slammed the front of his boots into the surface, slowly dragging us up to the roof. Once he'd made it to the top, he paused on his hands and knees, breathing heavily.

I slid off his back, but his hand snapped out, and he tugged me close beneath him. His palms gently cupped my face. "We don't have time for this. We may never have time. But know right now, Jillian, that I want you. You. Not any random female, but the glorious, strong, brave female I've come to know."

"Theer." I grabbed his arms, gliding my fingers up to his face. "We don't have time but kiss me."

His mouth slanted across mine, and he groaned, wrapping his arms around me. His weight felt good pressing me against the roof. The suns shone, and I could easily lose myself in his embrace.

A penrot shriek from much too close nearby made us reel apart.

One of the creatures peered over the edge of the roof. Seeing us, it scrambled, its claws scraping the side of the building, the thick, solitary

claws on its hands impaling the roof as it tried to reach us.

Theer leapt to his feet and tugged me up. With his pack tossed over his shoulder, he held my hand, urging me up the steep surface of the roof and down the other side. He lifted me as he jumped, landing squarely on a flat roof beyond the first.

I giggled at the dismay on the penrot's peeling face as it peered at us standing so far away. It flung itself toward this roof but missed. A low thud rang out in the alley below.

Damon hummed in close, and the panel on the front of his chest flashed images. Theer watched them for a moment before nodding. "We need to keep going. Three buildings from here, we'll go down to the ground. It's not far from there to the far-right section of the outer wall. We'll be on our way home soon."

Foraging would have to wait for a day when the penrots weren't hunting us, if such a thing existed.

"As for leaving the planet, I have an idea," Theer said. He stared toward where the suns had risen, dual globes of gleaming orange. "If I can't find the panel I need here, there's a city I haven't searched yet. I only saw it in the distance." His gaze met mine.

"Can we cross it without being seen?"

"We'll have to. We can't keep hiding in a hole in the ground. I want out, and . . ." His gaze met mine, and I read the certainty there. "And I want you with me."



CHAPTER 19

THEER

I'd declared myself. How would she respond?

She took my hands. "We don't have time. We may never have time. But when we do . . . You need to know that I want to be with you too."

My hearts surged into my throat, thrumming heavily. I tugged her against my chest and held her. We should be running. Hiding. But all I wanted was to kiss her and show her how much her words meant to me.

Shrieks rang out from nearby. We shouldn't linger, but she felt so right in my arms.

Parting, we held hands and raced across the roof with Damon hovering beside us. He cheeped, a sound I hadn't programmed him to make, but I had built a voice box in his throat, and I'd formatted him to learn. Would he one day speak words we could understand?

At the edge of the roof, I pointed below us. "See that metal stairway snaking down the building?"

She nodded.

"We're going to use it but only to the third floor where—"

"There's a skywalk," she said, pointing. "We'll use it to cross to the next building."

"Then we'll flee through the city. I haven't searched this area much, just here and there, but I remember the next five buildings are connected. Once we've run through them, we'll descend to the ground floor and, at the back of the last, escape through a gate in the wall."

"They'll chase us."

"They won't catch us." Never. I'd fight to my death not only to protect her, but to give us a future. It was so close; I could almost grab it. No matter what, it would be ours.

“Hold tight.” I latched onto her wrists and carefully lowered her over the side until her feet could touch the metal, grated surface.

“It’s like a fire escape,” she called up to me, though she kept her voice low.

The penrots hadn’t caught up to us yet, though they would. We needed to get inside before they saw us, or they might figure out where we were going and be waiting at the gate.

We reached the section with the skywalk, and I wrenched open the exterior door, urging Jillian to go ahead of me into building.

There, we raced down a hall then another, aiming for our escape. Damon zipped beside us, releasing periodic cheeps.

“Is he trying to tell us something?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know. He could be practicing his new voice.”

She stroked the robot’s cheek, and it leaned into her touch. “Are you alright, little one? This is a scary world, isn’t it? But we’ll protect you.”

“They ignore the robot,” I said.

“He doesn’t know they won’t eat him. Does he have feelings?”

“I formatted him to learn. I don’t know if his programming will take him in that direction or not.”

She nibbled on her lower lip. “I guess we’ll find out.”

I doubted he ever would, but I didn’t say so. She took comfort in the robot, and I wouldn’t do anything to make her suspect she shouldn’t. Damon would remain with us because I’d requested it. If something happened to us, I wasn’t sure he’d be able to find his way back to his charging station, let alone whether he’d “care” if we weren’t with him.

“How long will his charge hold?” she asked, her face knitting with concern.

“Days if he’s not asked to do anything strenuous.”

“We’ll have to be careful, then. I suspect he’s heavy and we wouldn’t want to carry him far.”

“I’d take him with us for as long as I could,” I said, not pointing out I’d do so because we needed the abilities only he could provide. If he was no longer of any use to us, I’d leave him, though I wouldn’t like to do so. It took me a long time to build and program him.

Him.

Look at me, agreeing with her that the mechanical creature was male. When had I started to do that?

When I'd started falling in love with Jillian.



CHAPTER 20

JILLIAN

We paused at the entrance to the skywalk. Like many I'd strode through back on Earth, this one looked out on the world around us. Unlike the ones on Earth, however, this one had no rails and no walls. About five feet wide, it consisted of a flat platform spanning the gap between two buildings, supported by posts from below.

How had those using it avoided falling?

I cringed. Would it support our weight?

Naturally, it had started raining again. Wind gusts shot the rain sideways, whipping it around the buildings. I bent down and touched the platform's surface, grateful to find it wasn't slippery.

"Is it safe to cross?" I whispered, studying our destination about one hundred feet away.

"I've used it before, and it held."

This wasn't very reassuring. "When was the last time you used it?"

"Since I arrived here."

Not quite an answer, but it was probably all he was willing to say.

"We need to run fast, or we'll be seen from below," he said. "Damon."

The robotic dog flew over to hover near Theer's head. "Fly high and study the area. Report."

With a cheep, Damon zipped out the opening and soared up above us.

"He *is* talking to us," I said. "You heard him voice agreement."

"It was a cheep." He frowned, not looking happy about it. "But it could be a form of communication."

"Why does that bother you? It was a possibility when you gave him the ability to learn."

He shrugged and didn't share.

Damon returned and Theer studied the images on the robot's panel.

"They're three blocks away and to our left, roaming the streets," he said. "I don't believe they know where we are yet."

Yet being a big part of that statement.

He stepped out onto the platform, but only far enough to see better. He peered around for a long while.

"Damon," he said. "Keep watching."

The robot flew above us again.

Theer took my hand. "Ready?"

At my nod, we ran out onto the skywalk. I tried not to look down. Heights didn't bother me much. The thought of how far down the ground was what kept me on edge, plus the knowledge the few support structures could've degraded like everything else around us. Bursts of rainy wind smacked into us, and we had to keep pausing, bracing ourselves to keep from being swept off the surface. We slowed our pace and ducked down, still moving slowly across.

Nothing made me happier than when we reached the opposite side. We leapt into the building and paused to catch our breath.

"This way," Theer said, taking my hand and tugging me down a hall that spanned the right outer wall of the multi-level building.

Ahead, part of the outer wall had collapsed, burying the hall. Theer inspected it, studying it for a while before turning to me.

"We'll have to go down a level, then climb back to this one."

We backtracked to the stairwell and descended. But instead of entering that level, Theer paused again, studying a floor plan mounted on the wall. Funny how some things were so similar to Earth despite this being an alien world. I assumed others discovered things that worked and used them just like we had back home.

"Anything wrong?" I asked, noting the strange writing on the plan.

He shook his head, and his thick hair bands flared out. Flashing his fangs my way, he grinned. "Everything might just be right. Let's go up two levels. I think . . ."

"What?"

He shrugged. "Let's see before I say anything further, all right?"

We climbed the stairs, and he hurried onto the fourth floor of the building, releasing a low whistle when he stopped in front of a door marked

with alien writing.

“We’re breaking in if the door’s locked,” he said reverently.

“What is this place?”

He shot me a gleeful look. “Part of their interstellar exploration department.” He tapped the words on the door. “This says the equivalent of parts.”

“How come you can read it, but I can’t?”

“Your translator is programmed to decipher only spoken language. After I realized I was stuck here, I started studying their writing. I can’t read everything, but I’ve become good at figuring out most.”

“You think we could find a panel here?”

He twisted the knob, and the door creaked open. “Let’s find out.”

Inside, we found a small room with a desk unlike anything I’d seen before.

A “desk” made entirely out of a mysterious black material with shimmering silver veins running through it sat in the middle of the room, the top at my chest height. Clusters of coiled, mysterious tubes stretched out from the center. They split about a foot from the top of the surface and spiked out in various directions, stabbing into the wall.

Behind it, a console with multiple screens released a low hum as if the wall might be alive. A round, flat, and equally black platform sat behind the desk. Since the top was lower, it could be a chair.

“Reception,” I said, guessing.

They nodded and strode around the desk, opening a door behind.

I followed him into a big open warehouse with rows of metal shelves stuffed with more metal and plastic-looking parts than I could ever imagine.

“It’ll take days to go through this,” I said. “Tell me what we’re looking for.”

“Square.” He held his hands about a foot apart. “Flat. Covered with modulons and gagetolds.”

“I don’t know what those are.”

“Look for something flat and about that size. Call out if you find something.”

We split, him going right, and me left, jogging up and down the aisles. I studied everything, which made me slow, having very little idea what the panel might look like. But with most things resembling anything but flat and one foot square, I was able to make progress through the room.

I was halfway down the fourth row when I came upon a box full of something that could be what he was seeking.

“How about this, Theer?” I held one up, finding it surprisingly heavy, and he peered through a gap in a rack a few rows down.

His eyes lit up. “That could be it. Wait there.” He bolted to his right.

Too excited to wait, I rushed to my left, meeting up with him as he turned into my row.

“Yes,” he said, taking it carefully from me. “This could work!” He set it carefully on a shelf, then swept me up in his arms and spun me around, stopping only to let me slide partway down his body until our faces were level. He gave me a lingering kiss. “You have saved us, mate.”

“We found it.” Hope bloomed inside me, surging like electricity to my fingers and toes. “We’re going to leave this wretched place.”

“I have much to do before my ship will be ready, but with the panel, we are much closer to soaring up to the stars.”

“We could go to your ship right now. You said it’s in the city.”

“I need to return to my underground home and install this panel into the larger one. Then we can go to my ship, and I’ll wire it into the controls. After that, we must test it and if it works . . .”

“Hasta la vista baby.”

He frowned before grinning. “Yes. Hasta vista.”

He doubly wrapped the panel and carefully packed it inside his bag, and we took the stairs down two levels, crossed, returned to the third floor, and approached the next skywalk.

There, Theer repeated the process, sending Damon to survey the area and report back before stepping out on the platform far enough to look around.

We raced across the next walkway without being seen, and I began to think we’d escape the penrots again. My blood pounded with excitement. Soon, we wouldn’t have to worry about penrots ever again.

Then we arrived at the entrance to the third skywalk.

The right half’s support posts had broken and fallen, leaving that side tilted, sloping down toward the ground.



CHAPTER 21

THEER

“We can’t risk crossing that,” I said. It had been secure the last time I was here, but time and weather had continued to erode the support posts.

Worry poured through me. We were on borrowed time. The penrots would find us and one of these times, we wouldn’t reach safety. As for me, I’d accepted I might one day die here. But never my treasure. I’d protect her no matter what.

Even more frustrating, we had the panel we needed to leave this place forever, but unless I could install it in the ship, we were no closer to escaping.

How could I keep Jillian from being taken until I’d finished the ship?

“What can we do?” she asked, a touch of panic in her voice.

It hurt to hear her fear. She trusted me to protect her, but she was just as concerned as me. We couldn’t run forever.

“We’ll backtrack and go through the buildings as far as we can and run in the open when we can’t,” I said.

We returned to the stairs, taking the stairs to the bottom floor. I wanted to search the basement to see if there was a passage between buildings running beneath the road, but I didn’t dare remain here for long. The penrots were going to locate us soon.

On the ground level, we stopped by a door and carefully looked outside.

Damon zoomed over to us and when I peered at the images on his screen, fear burst inside me. The penrots hunted only a building away. How had they tracked us so quickly? They must’ve somehow heard us.

“Remain with us,” I told Damon, a niggling feeling of concern zipping down my spine.

After ensuring no penrots waited outside, we dashed out the door and raced through the streets, aiming for the gate on this side of the city.

Screeches rang out behind us, giving us the strength to keep going.

“I have a vehicle on the other side of the wall,” I said, keeping my voice low. Thankfully, their sense of smell wasn’t as strong as their hearing.

Jillian nodded, and I hated seeing how her breathing was labored, how red her face was from exertion. We couldn’t go on like this.

Because I hadn’t had much to live for, I’d fatalistically looked at each foray into the city as my last. I’d limped along, barely surviving. I hadn’t had someone else to live for.

Jillian was everything to me. My feelings had crept up on me quickly.

When the fates gave you a gift as precious as her, you gratefully accepted it and didn’t ask questions.

“Are you alright?” I asked as I boosted her up over a pile of crumbling vehicles. They creaked beneath us as we slowly made our way across the roofs, and I prayed they wouldn’t collapse.

She nodded, biting down hard on her lower lip, and jumped off the pile when we reached the edge. She landed hard but kept going. Did she limp? I couldn’t tell.

“Let me carry you,” I said. “I’m fast.”

“I can do it.” Strength came through in her voice, but her face told me how weary she was. We’d only slept lightly the night before, roused periodically by the cries of penrots searching the streets.

If I ditched my pack, I could carry her on my back, but we had to get that panel back to my underground home. It was our only chance.

We ran around another pile of vehicles, and I was grateful to see the wall ahead. In no time, we’d be driving across the plain. The pons couldn’t keep up with my vehicles, and we’d be secure inside my underground home by nightfall.

Damon hovered near, shooting glances behind us. Periodically, he released cheeps I couldn’t interpret.

At the gate, I unlocked it and cracked open the big panel, peering out. Only the plain with its endless wavering grass greeted us with the distant hills beyond.

“Ready?” I asked, squeezing her hand. “My hidden vehicle isn’t far.” When I started searching this city, I’d located a building that must’ve been used for the sale of the three-wheeled crafts. After working on them, I was able to make five functional. I hid three outside various gates and another near my emergency escape route from my underground home.

One of the crafts was parked near this location. I knew the penrots would one day break through the wall. I wanted multiple ways to flee the city.

“Let’s get out of here, Theer,” Jillian said.

With Damon hovering beside us, we climbed onto my vehicle. It started right away, and we raced across the plain, aiming for a deceptively bland looking mound. There, I dismounted and checked the charge. Half. Not a lot, but it would get us back to my underground home. I could leave the panels exposed tomorrow and within a few days, we’d have enough power to travel back to the city. I’d use the time to install the smaller panel on the larger one. With luck and no penrots chasing us, I could finish the ship and trial the engines.

Then we could blast off this planet.



CHAPTER 22

JILLIAN

Exhausted and dripping with sweat and rain, I clung to Theer's back as he guided his three-wheeler across the plain, aiming for his home.

Our trip hadn't been wasted, but we weren't much closer to leaving the planet than we'd been before. We weren't safe unless we remained below ground. Each venture to the surface could be our last. But once that panel was ready . . . I tried not to get too excited. Once we were inside the ship and taking off, I could finally relax.

At dusk, he slowed the vehicle. He brought it to a stop in about the same location as where he'd left the other three-wheeler. In silence, I helped him cover it, and we rushed to his elevator.

Only when we'd descended beneath the ground did my skin stop crawling. I could only hope the penrots didn't discover a way into his home.

If they did, it would be over quickly.

It didn't seem fair. I'd lost everything already, then found someone to live for. How could fate wrench him from my arms before I'd had the chance to fully know him?

I was exhausted, but I wasn't going to wait long. As a nurse, I'd learned how precious life could be and how quickly it could be taken. When the chance came, and I'd make sure it would, I'd claim Theer as my own. I could only hope we'd be given a future together.

I patted Damon. "Thank you for your help, buddy." He leaned into my touch and cheeped mournfully, as if he was also disappointed that we'd been chased. When the elevator bottomed out, I waved my hand to his robot dog bed. "Go rest. Morning comes soon."

He floated over to his charger and dropped onto it. Blinking slowly, he looked from me to Theer.

Theer and I ate more bars and stripped, draping our clothing on metal poles to allow it to dry. While I couldn't help gaping at his muscular, blue-skinned body covered only with a strip of cloth he'd wound around his waist and across his groin, I was too exhausted to do anything about my growing feelings.

We collapsed on the bed at what I realized was only our third night together. So much had happened between my arrival and now that it felt like three years had passed.

This was the first time we'd slept together in safety.

I snuggled in his arms that warmly went around me and nestled on his chest.

He kissed the top of my head. "Rest, mate. I will make sure you are safe."

But who would watch out for him? My chest tightened at the thought of how long he'd been here alone, how he must've worried if he'd be injured or become ill, and how there was no one to help him. This wasn't a good way to live, but what choice did he have? It was that or walk out onto the plain with his arms open to the penrots.

We couldn't do that. No matter what, we'd fight to survive.

"I love you, Theer," I said. It may be too sudden or too soon, but I couldn't hold the words back. They thrived within me, a seed planted in dry soil, struggling to grow and bloom into something wonderful.

"My treasure," he murmured. "I love you."

With his words cupped in my heart, I fell asleep.

I woke in his arms. Silence echoed around us, and I was grateful not to hear penrots, though we were too deep below the ground. Maybe if they were stomping above us, we would.

Turning, I rose up over him, finding him awake, watching me with a sleepy gaze. His hands roamed my back, and I marveled at how careful he always was with his claws. He'd never hurt me; I knew this deep within my heart.

"I want you," I told him, as certain of this as I was of my own soul. Actually, my soul belonged to him. He'd claimed it, but I'd given it to him

freely, just as he'd done with me.

"Jillian. My treasure," he groaned. "Are you sure?"

Being with him would hand him my final commitment. I wouldn't be able to leave him if I was offered a chance to return to Earth after that.

"Yes."

His eyes darkened, his eyelids hooding. "Love."

We kissed, and I savored his taste. He should have morning breath, right? Instead, he tasted like spices from a far-off land.

His tongue stroked mine and his breathing deepened. He groaned and rolled us until I lay beneath him. His hand stroked from my neck to my shoulder. He squeezed and traced his fingertips across to my breast. I wore only a loose shirt, but that was too much. I needed to feel his skin against mine, his body moving with heat inside me.

I wiggled, and he eased up, watching me to see what I'd do. A few jerks, and I'd removed everything. I tugged at the simple cloth he wore around his waist, and with a soft laugh, he untied it and ripped it away.

His cock sprung free, and I marveled at how different yet beautiful it was compared to those I'd seen before. Long and generous, it had a bulbous head that faintly glowed pale blue. Bumpy, shiny scales glistened as if they secreted something when he was aroused. Iridescent flexible-appearing spikes fluttered along his cock and studded his deep purple glans.

A second cock, though much smaller, nestled at the base of his penis. I'd read about things like that, though only in fiction. It would glide across my clit at the perfect time. As I watched it, it quivered. Vibrating? Amazing.

He slanted his body across mine, kissing me again, and the heat of his body sent a shiver through me, setting off sparks inside. They coursed through my veins, making my body throb for his touch.

His hands were like fire, and the strokes he delivered to the side of my breast and hip lit a flame inside my core. I writhed beneath him, arching my back and pressing myself against his engorged cock. His lips trailed down my neck, sending waves of pleasure rushing through me. His hot breath blazed across my skin as he moved lower, kissing and licking until he reached my belly. He sucked on my stomach, making me smile, before looking up at me.

He trailed one finger along my inner thigh, teasingly close to where I needed him most. His eyes grew dark with arousal as he watched pleasure

and need grow on my face.

I wove my fingers into his thick bands of hair, and they coiled around me, holding tight.

My skin tingled where he'd touched with a heat that seemed to curl around us and fill the space between us. I'd never felt this alive, like an inferno was consuming me from my core, moving outward. I wanted every bit of him.

As he watched me, he parted my thighs. "I want to taste you, my treasure."

Biting my lower lip, I nodded.

With a heady grin, he moved his body lower, spreading my legs wider and hitching them up onto his shoulders.

He traced a claw gently down my seam, gliding it through my wet folds, before returning to the top and centering it on my clit.

While he rubbed, driving me ever higher, he buried his face between my legs, groaning as he licked and sucked.

My body rocketed all the way to the stars as bliss consumed me. I gasped, clutching his head, my fingers twining in his thick hair.

The sensation of his mouth on me was like an electric current zipping through every inch of me. I trembled as I rode the crest of a wave that would soon crash on a rocky shore.

He licked and sucked faster and harder, coaxing moans from deep within me as he wrung out each drop of pleasure my soul could give. Still, he kept going, determined to drive me even higher, to make this special and unique to us.

I lifted my hips toward his tongue, bucking my body up as I screamed for more. His mouth moved faster, first consuming me soft and slow, then firmer and faster, alternating the movement to wrench everything I had to give.

Just when I thought I couldn't take any more, he plunged his fingers inside me, and his fangs grazed against my clit.

The intensity of the emotions soaring through me from his touch was almost too much to bear, as if everything around us had faded and there was only him and me and his hand and mouth driving me toward a blaze of ecstasy.

I arched my back and clung to him tightly as he pumped his fingers deep within me.

“Theer,” I cried as my body crested and flew down the other side. I shook with the joy of being close to him.

He looked up at me with intense satisfaction creasing his face. “You taste like all the fates have to offer wrapped up in one moment.” His cocky grin widened. “You enjoyed that.”

“Hell, yeah.”

“I’m going to do it again, plus more.”

He dropped his head and started slowly, giving my body time to come down before climbing an even steeper hill.

When I writhed beneath him, begging for everything he had to give, he rose over me and centered his big cock at my core. With my legs hitched around him, he pushed forward, stretching my flesh to accommodate his thick length.



CHAPTER 23

THEER

My mate was amazing. I couldn't get enough of her taste or her cries of pleasure. But I would give her even more. All my hearts, my soul, and whatever my body had to offer.

I moved up over her, eager to claim her. Her legs wrapped around me, and I centered the head of my cock between her legs.

With my gaze locked on hers, I shifted my hips forward. I could only get the head of my cock inside her. She was wet, but incredibly tight.

She held onto my arms, nodding. "Push harder," she cried, bucking up to meet me.

Would I fit? I hadn't contemplated the difficulty in this area. *Of course we will fit together*, I'd always thought. But reality was crashing through me, bringing with it the realization I may not be able to bury all of myself inside her. I couldn't risk it. The thought of hurting her made my soul ache.

"More," she said, her eyes sinking into mine. "Theer."

I pulled back and pushed forward again, groaning at how wonderful her hot passage felt. This time, I was able to sink about half my cock inside her. Her inner walls spasmed, and I feared I was causing her pain.

But she clung to me tighter and rocked against me, trying to take more of me inside.

"Do you want more?" I asked, my voice raspy with emotion.

She nodded, her breathing coming faster.

I kept a steady rhythm, pushing my hips forward and pulling my cock out, inserting only part of my length. We moved together for what felt like an eternity, and I'd never felt anything better in my life.

With each plunge into her wetness, I struggled to bury all my cock inside her. My body shook as if it was taking all my strength to keep me

from flooding her with every bit of my being. Sweat coiled down my brow.

“You feel wonderful, mate,” I growled. “I do not need more.”

“I want it all,” she said, a smile rising on her face. “Mate. That’s what I am. Your mate. Now take me. Give me everything. I promise, this will work. Show me how wonderful that spur will feel rubbing against my clit, how your scales will glide back and forth across my inner walls, and the heat of you when you find satisfaction deep within me.” Her back arched off the bed and a loud pant escaped her lips as I pulled out and drove harder, trying to seat everything I had inside her.

With each thrust, she stretched, accommodating me easier the next time.

“Ahh,” she cried as my spear—no, she’d called it a *spur*—glided through the wetness coating her clit. “It’s awesome. More.”

Yes. We *were* perfect together. Her tight and hot, and me filling her completely.

Pulling out, I pushed forward, adding as much of my weight as I dared. I felt the head of my cock hit high within her, and a glance down showed I’d buried myself all the way.

She gripped my arms tighter, her eyelids closing. “Now go fast. Hard. I want to feel it all. Show me the wonder of being with you, Theer. My mate. That’s who you are. All mine.”

Her inner walls clamped down tight, pulling me even deeper inside her body.

My spur vibrated, and I felt her clit tighten, her inner walls start to spasm. They milked me as I moved faster, driving into her while she rose to meet my thrusts.

The sensation of being with her was indescribable. I’d traveled extensively, but I felt like the universe had opened up to me for the very first time. All the worry faded as I loved her. We were one now, connected in a way words could never describe.

“Theer,” she keened, her gaze locking on mine. “I need . . .”

“This,” I said, pushing forward and pulling back. “Always this.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “Take me, mate. Brand me as yours.”

When her inner walls clenched hard, she released a gasp of joy.

Pounding harder, I rode her orgasm, chasing it with my own.

As she sagged beneath me, spent, I let my body give way, shooting my seed deep within her passage.

I collapsed on top of her, though I braced myself, not wishing to crush her.

“You are amazing,” I whispered, stroking her face and shoulders. My cock twitched within her.

She chuckled. “Again already?”

I laughed with her, overcome with joy. “Not quite, but soon.”

“Good,” she said, stroking my arms. “Because I’ve become addicted to you, Theer. I won’t be satisfied unless you love me every day and night.”

How could the fates have given me such a perfect mate? My hearts expanded, pressing hard against my ribs. I eased to her side and rolled, taking her with me until she rested on my chest. My cock still twitched, but it was spent for the moment. Bliss as wonderful and pure as what we had just experienced needed space. No one could survive long if they experienced it every moment for the rest of their lives.

I stroked her back as she dozed, murmuring soft words in my home language, interspersing the words with kisses on the top of her head.

It wasn’t long before my cock started rising again, eager to explore her passage once more.

I’d started to roll her off me, intending to help her onto her hands and knees and take her that way, when Damon zipped into the room.

He released a series of high-pitched, urgent cheeps.

The sounds he made hadn’t quite faded when thuds were followed by a whirring sound.

My lift had been called to the surface.



CHAPTER 24

JILLIAN

“Rise, mate,” Theer said, the urgency in his voice driving me fully awake. “Something is coming.”

Thuds rang out overhead.

We slid off the bed and dressed while the sounds of his elevator hummed.

Damon soared over to hover in front of me, and images flashed on his screen, and I assumed he’d guarded us while we were resting.

Penrots swarmed the surface. One of the chariot riders had discovered how to call for the elevator. He and many of the others had stuffed themselves inside, and now they were coming.

Our sanctuary was about to be violated. We’d be captured and killed.

Theer watched the images from behind me. With a grunt, he lifted a bag and raced to the next room.

I shoved my feet into my sneakers and grabbed a bunch of clothing, stuffing them inside a bag I secured to my back. What else could I take? We wouldn’t come back here, so I had to decide now.

Theer raced into the room with a large pack strapped to his back. “I have both panels and food.”

He grabbed my hand before I could explore everything he’d tucked into each nook and cranny inside his room. It was too late. A year of his work would be left behind.

“How will we get out?” I whispered, cringing at the shrieks echoing down the elevator shaft. They’d be here within seconds, storming the big room before seeking us in the bedroom where we’d shared such a hopeful, wonderful moment together.

My pulse pounded in my ears, and I got sweaty at the thought of what might be coming. With my skin crawling with fear, I peered around.

Theer pulled me back against the wall then stomped back to the bed, wrenching the mattress aside with one yank, revealing a hatch in the floor beneath. He lifted it and gestured me to come near.

A ladder descended into darkness.

“Go,” he said, his wild gaze shooting to the outer room.

Crashes rang out, followed by guttural shrieks. They were here.

“Come with me,” I said.

“Never fear, mate. I’m right behind you. I will never leave you to face this alone.”

I dropped to my butt and turned, putting my feet on a rung a few feet below. Holding onto the rails, I climbed down, looking up to make sure Theer followed.

When his head had dropped beneath the surface, he waved to Damon, who zoomed into the hole with us, flying below me while I continued to lower myself into the beginning of our final escape.

Theer shut the hatch and secured it.

“It won’t hold long,” he said softly. “Keep going. At the bottom, you’ll find a passage leading away. Crawl through it. It’s not easy to travel, and we need to move as quickly as we can.”

I was amazed at his ingenuity. He’d not only constructed a below-ground home, but he’d also built an elevator, and crafted a second escape route. My mate was always thinking.

Damon’s eyes glowed, providing just enough light to guide my way. He hovered beside me, releasing soft cheeps that urged me to descend faster. My heel hit the ground, and I stepped away from the ladder to give Theer room, gazing around. A hole exited this narrow passage, and I dropped to my hands and knees and started crawling through it. When my bag hit the roof, I tugged it off and dragged it around to my front, resealing it so I could move with it dangling from my belly.

Theer joined me, moving behind me, and Damon’s glowing eyes lit our way from ahead.

“How far?” I asked softly.

“Not long,” Theer said tightly. “Keep going. I believe they’re working on the hatch.”

“They’ll wait for us on the surface, too.”

“Which is why we’re not heading in their direction. We won’t be able to go back for the vehicle, though.”

I’d run, walk, crawl if I had to, as long as we escaped this trap.

We crawled for what felt like hours, the ground beneath us becoming softer and damp. Soon, I smelled fresh air, and I knew we were close. I pushed myself to go faster, my knees and palms throbbing from impacting with rocks and sticks lying on the floor of the tunnel. The passage sloped gradually upward, and finally, I emerged through a hole in the ground on the alien plain covered with light blue tall grass.

The sky arching overhead was too deep a blue, with huge, white-tipped clouds floating lazily across the expanse. It was a day to lie in the grass and point out cloud shapes, not run for our lives. The suns shone brightly, warming my skin, and a soft breeze drifted across my face.

So much beauty in a world that would eagerly shred us to pieces. And once we were dead, no one would know we'd existed.

They climbed out beside me, his eyes darting around for signs of life. When he determined it was safe to move forward, he grabbed my hand and pulled me into an easy jog across the foreign terrain.

Damon swooped ahead of us, scouting out possible dangers or predators that might cross our path. We raced through the field without incident until we reached a small stream snaking through the land like a silvery ribbon. Stubby trees with barely any leaves clung to each other in tiny clusters, their roots sinking into the soil beside the water.

"Where will we go?" I asked. We couldn't return to his underground shelter, and soon the penrots, the horrifying alien monsters, would be after us.

"I've hidden another vehicle in this area," he said, shifting his pack from one shoulder to the other. It clunked, telling me he'd brought metal objects with us including the panels and maybe Damon's charging station. Could he hook the latter up to the small power generation panels he'd wired into his vehicle? "We'll return to the city."

"The penrots will be waiting, but that's where you were working on your ship. Can we avoid them?" I worried no matter where we traveled, they would follow. As long as we remained on this ravaged planet, they would hunt us.

Screams echoed behind us, some coming from the tunnel while others . . .

I gasped as movement some distance away on the plain solidified into alien chariots. Three of them raced toward us, the musars driving the pons pulling the vehicles with whips. The pons snarled and ran faster, their bare feet drumming the soil.

Damon cheeped a shrill cry that seared terror across my skin.

Their grabbed my hand and bolted away from them. "We have to get to the vehicle now."



CHAPTER 25

THEER

We had to return to the city as soon as we could, though we had to avoid the penrots. They'd chase us forever with hunger clawing up their throats.

Once we reached the city, we'd hide. I had to complete the main panel and install it in the ship, and that would take nearly a day. After that, I could only hope my ship would fire up and help us flee this planet forever.

Holding Jillian's hand and with Damon cheeping frantically beside me, I sprinted ahead, my strides eating up the ground between us and the hidden three-wheeler I'd stashed many lunar cycles ago. I always used the one we'd driven to the city. Each time I traveled anywhere, I risked the penrots discovering not only me but my vehicle, then lying in wait nearby. It paid to hide more than one and use the second only in dire times of need. Less risk of the penrots discovering its existence.

I took Jillian along the stream; a rank, chemical-infested thing not worth the time or effort needed to purify it even enough for bathing.

The stream split, one portion flowing through a small hole in the ground and disappearing, the other continuing across the plain.

"This way," I whispered, steering her to the left. The land sloped downward where the stream had cut through the plain over many years until it flowed low enough from the surface that we would be hidden from those on the surface.

The penrots racing toward us wouldn't know which direction we traveled in. They'd either split or remain together, and I suspected the latter. They were not incredibly smart, but they knew they stood a better chance of

defeating me if they could roar over us with their vehicles, then come back to pick through what was left of us.

A fierce determination to keep Jillian safe slammed through me. It wasn't just instinctual, though she was my mate and my species' sole chance of survival in this wretched world. My hearts drove me to place her above all else, to sacrifice everything to protect her.

A small copse of scraggly trees loomed ahead, their spindly, nearly leafless branches reaching toward the sky. How anything survived in this world was beyond me, though the penrots appeared to ignore vegetation.

I wanted to send Damon above us to spy, but I suspected that would only show them where they could find us.

I guided Jillian around to the back of the trees, where I'd hidden my vehicle.

"Here," I said, coming to a stop. I jerked off the plain-colored covering, revealing the craft, hoping the charges still held. While Damon cheeped, urging us to flee, I stored our packs in the compartment below the charging panels. I climbed onto the craft, helping Jillian scramble up onto the back behind me.

She wrapped her arms around my waist and rested her face on my back. "Go."

I engaged the engines, grateful when the craft started.

Movement beyond the trees to my left caught my eye.

Three chariots pulled by pons crested the hill and thundered down the slope, driven by the musars riding within the vehicles. Their shrill cries echoed around us.

An icy chill leapt through me. We were nearly out of time.

The pons' bare feet pounded the hard ground, kicking up a whirling cloud of dust and debris behind them.

My heart raced as I gunned the engine and engaged it, guiding it around the trees and along the side of the rutted streambed, barely managing to dodge rocks and dips in the soft soil.

The musars whipped the pons' backs, screaming with determination. They drove the vehicles to the left to intercept us. Their cacophony of desperate cries echoed in my ears.

Turning right, I shifted the vehicle into its highest gear, driving it up the steep slope and out onto the plain. The craft hit level ground and leapt forward with a ferocious roar.

The wind whipped around us as we flew across the land with the penrots too close behind.

A burst of wind hit my face and made my eyes sting with tears. I squinted as I navigated around rocks and patches of weeds that littered this desolate land. The engine hummed beneath me like a living creature, one we desperately needed.

A glance back showed the penrots pursuing us relentlessly, their musars screaming, urging their mounts to run faster. They could keep up this pace for hours more if needed, but I prayed my vehicle had enough charge to outdistance them before then.

Jillian's arms remained tight around me, and her breath scorched my back. My will of steel remained solid inside me. I would prevail against this threat. We were going to make it through this alive.

My focus sharpened as I drove, pushing the vehicle for every bit of speed I could muster.

Sweat trickled along my temples as the vehicle took a hard turn, lurching to the side.

Jillian dug her fingers into my sides and held on as I navigated around a large rock formation. The engine let out an agonized protest, the change in sound making me worry something was wrong, that we wouldn't make it. We were too far from the city to stop. The penrots would catch us before we could reach safety.

The wind wailed in my ears, screaming victory even as our pursuers remained dangerously close behind us.

But the penrots were gaining, their shrill cries of hunger reaching us over the wind and the howl of the engine.

Damon flew beside us, the legs he rarely used dangling. His cheeks urged us on, and I wished I'd finished arming his weapons systems fully rather than retrofitting him with tools to aid me in my work at my shop.

My teeth gritted against each other as I forced the accelerator down, pressing it to the floor until the engine protested with a loud, grinding whine. The penrots were dangerously close, the tips of their spears glinting in the sunlight. The musars cried out in glee, sure they'd catch us, and the pons' gazes remained fixed on us. Their breathing rattled, and their screams of hunger echoed in the air.

If they got close enough to us, the musar ropes would whistle through the air. They caught me that way once, and I was grateful I had a knife.

The vehicle shuddered, and I pushed it for more speed. Black smoke poured from the back. Frick.

Damon's shrill cry rang out, but I blocked it from my mind, tweaking gears and fiddling with the igniter and accelerator, hoping this was a glitch and not a major problem with the engine.

"What's happening?" Jillian shrieked, her voice trembling in fear. She peered over her shoulder. "They're still coming. Keep going." She bucked against me as if she could will the vehicle to continue with her body alone.

"Something's wrong with the vehicle." Terror spiked through my veins like wildfire, and I slammed my foot on the accelerator harder than ever, pushing it to its very limit, hoping and praying that it wouldn't give out here in this desolate wasteland.

It wasn't safe to stop here. We had to reach the city.

But with a final sputter of resistance, the engine died.

We were doomed.



CHAPTER 26

JILLIAN

Something was dreadfully wrong. Harsh smoke filled my sinuses, making my eyes water. My lungs stung and my throat closed off with terror.

Damon shot past us, putting his metal body between us and the penrots rumbling this way.

"Off," Theer bellowed, leaping to the ground. He wrenched the back open and yanked out our bags, slinging both over his shoulders. Grabbing my hand, he ran, bolting across the plane with the penrots not far behind. They'd run us over in seconds, and there didn't seem to be anything we could do to escape our looming death.

I spied a cluster of boulders ahead. Theer ran toward them, urging me for more speed.

We whipped around them and ducked behind just as a chariot thundered past us. It passed us so closely; a wheel grazed my thigh. The other vehicles were not far behind, and wind smacked my face as they thundered near.

They didn't go far before the musars drove the pons in a wide circle to return to where we huddled near the rocks.

Theer reached into his pack and pulled out a laser gun, handing it to me. "Only two charges left in this one. Make them count." With another gun in hand, he aimed at the chariots with practiced precision. A pop, and one of the musars tumbled off the vehicle, hitting the ground hard. The musar rolled, rising to a stagger. Rather than run toward us, the creature gathered itself and raced to our left. Would it loop around, or was it confused?

The chariot the penrot had driven thundered toward us beside the others.

I lifted my gun and sighted down the barrel. I'd only shot at a range once for fun at a friend's birthday party. The trainers said I had an eagle eye,

but we'd see about that.

Aiming for one of the two pon's pulling the now-empty chariot, I carefully squeezed the trigger. A laser beam sizzled through the air as it collided with its target, striking the penrot in the thigh. The blast splintered outward, and with a bang, the pon's thigh exploded, leaving it staggering wildly. Horror bubbled up in my belly, but I swallowed it back down.

Trembling fury rose in me, and I wanted to blast every one of them, but I only had one shot left. I couldn't waste it.

Theer took care with each shot, his laser beams dropping one pon after another. The surviving musars had ducked down behind the front of the chariots to avoid being hit, but the elimination of each pon made it harder for the rest to keep rushing toward us. They dragged those who'd been killed, assuming these things could die.

A pon tripped over a fallen comrade and tumbled to the ground, dragging the others with it. The chariot flipped, and the musar went flying. It maintained a hold on its spear and rose to its feet, snarling as it raced toward us.

The other two chariots roared down on us.

I sighted and whispered a prayer that I didn't waste my only other shot. A whine, and my final laser beam hit the musar running toward us in the chest. Like before, the blast fractured, spreading through the creature's body. It wailed, squirming and spinning, until its chest exploded. What was left crumbled to the ground.

I grabbed Theer's pack and pawed through it but didn't find anything but a few knives. Pulling one, I whirled around.

A pon who'd broken free from a chariot leapt. It hit me hard. I reeled backward, tripping and falling on the ground, losing my grip on the knife.

I grabbed the pon's head as its long, pointy teeth gnashed at the air. It screamed and flailed its claws while trying to bite through my throat.

Damon flew close, cheeping, and something projected from his chest. A high-pitched squeal rang out as he shoved the projection forward, smacking into the pon's head.

The pon's head exploded, hunks of it flying through the air.

Shoving the carcass off me, I slumped back on the ground. I struggled to catch my breath while Damon whined beside me.



CHAPTER 27

THEER

I let out a fierce roar and fired my last shot, watching as the musar stumbled backward and collapsed. My shot hit true—I'd been aiming for the trio since the start of the battle. The three of them had been the most intelligent of the penrots, and their death meant the remaining pons would be easier to defeat.

Eight pons pulled each chariot, and we'd already slain half of the twenty-four who'd charged across the plain. I grabbed a fallen spear and ran towards them, my bellow booming across the battlefield.

I dove forward, snatching a second discarded spear from the ground. The heat of adrenaline slashed through my body as I raced towards the advancing mass of creatures. With each stride, a roar built in my chest. It burst free in a battle cry that reverberated through the air.

I stabbed out, hitting a pon in the eye, sinking the spear deep and twisting. Before it hit the ground, dead, I tackled another, driving it to the plain and lifting the spear to bring it down hard, sinking it through the creature's chest.

Damon zipped past me, one of the tools I used for cutting protruding from his chest, whirling. He barreled into a pon, gouging the saw through its chest before moving on to the next. As each tumbled away from him, dead, he kept going, slamming into one after another.

Soon, only four remained. They screamed. Their claws lifted. They wouldn't stop until they were dead.

A glance over my shoulder showed Jillian had climbed on top of the rock pile. She stabbed down with a spear, impaling a pon that slid off the sharp tip and tumbled to the ground with a sickening plop. Damon hurried

over to battle with her, flinging himself down onto the carcasses, assuring they would not rise again.

Confident she was holding on, I spun, striking out with the spear, severing the head of the closest pon. With a leap, I tackled another, driving it down and impaling it through the throat, hacking away until the head rolled to the side.

I staggered to my feet and turned, looking for more to battle, but we'd defeated them all.

Jillian leapt off the rock pile and stumbled toward me, her spear falling from her hands, hitting the ground with a thud.

I held out my arms, and she jumped into them, covering my face with kisses, crying while clinging to my shoulders.

Stomping away from the bodies, I dropped to a clean patch of ground and held her. She trembled, but I sensed it wasn't solely from fear. Battle would do that to a person, drive chemicals through their blood to give them the strength of many. Once it was over, you'd collapse as spent as if you'd run for days.

"It's finished, mate," I said, patting her back. My body shook too. For a moment there, I feared I'd lose her. I'd never needed to live more than while fighting them off.

Still clutching my arms, she leaned back to look up at me. "More will come, though, right?"

They would and soon. They would've heard the eager shrieks of the others.

"We have a few moments to rest." And reassure each other we were safe.

Damon dropped to the ground beside me as if he, too, had used up all his strength.

"Your three-wheeler died," she said. "What are we going to do without it?"

"Keep going. Walk to the city."

"Then let's get going. It's going to take longer to reach it."

I was never prouder than when she climbed off my lap and stood tall and strong. She held out a hand as if she'd help me up, and while I must be double her weight, I let her assist me, adding the strength of my thighs to rise to my feet.

"Where did we leave our bags?" she asked.

I pointed to where they lay on the ground. After collecting my laser pistols in case we came across any charges, plus a few spears I cleaned by wiping them off in the grass, we trudged back and collected our bags. I stooped down by my vehicle to see if I could get it working again. Fixing what I believed was the problem, I climbed on board and started it. It rumbled, the entire craft shaking, and smoke billowed out the back, but a test showed it functioned—barely.

“Climb on,” I told Jillian, and she scrambled up behind me, holding onto my sides.

With Damon zooming beside us, I set off. It was clear the vehicle would not keep going for long. The black clouds puffing from the back would call every penrot in the area, and I couldn’t get the craft to go much faster than I could run.

“We’ll use it until it gives out,” I told Jillian over my shoulder.

Then we’d walk.

Before it died, the vehicle took us more than halfway from where we’d killed the penrots to the city we’d so recently escaped from.

When it finally gave out with a shudder, we slid off the craft. I wanted to kick it, but that would only hurt my foot.

I tugged the covering out of the compartment and draped it over the top, tucking it down along the sides. It wouldn’t hold up to close scrutiny, but unless a tribe of penrots happened to be trotting past, they wouldn’t see it and know where to find us.

“The suns are going down,” Jillian said, staring to where they hovered a few fingers above the horizon.

“I know where we can shelter.” Tugging her close, I held her, needing reassurance as much as her.

She nodded against my chest, and the dull look in her eyes shot through my chest like a penrot spear.

Cupping her face, I held her until her eyes met mine. “It will be alright. I promise.”

She bit her lower lip and nodded.

We collected our bags from the vehicle, plus the penrot spears, and set off, aiming for the city.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, I guided her down into a gully washed clear after previous heavy rains. It rained in this region of the

planet, but I had yet to see a deluge that would fill this channel again. Down here, we weren't visible on the plain.

We followed it as it wove across the planet, slowly bringing us close to the city.

"Where in the city is your shop?" she asked softly. She'd walked beside me in utter silence, and while we shouldn't speak much or risk drawing attention, I was worried.

She felt broken.

I couldn't seal her together again until we were safe.

"On the far side, the top, if you will," I said.

A shudder ripped through her. "Okay. We'll get there."

We came to a place where the gully split, one side heading out farther into the plain, the other toward the city.

"Here," I said, guiding her to the right.

It wasn't much, but I knew where we could hide and rest. While traveling at night would make it harder for the penrots to find us, she was exhausted and needed rest.

In the center of the sharp curve of the gully, a creature had scooped out a small cave. After locating it, I'd carefully transplanted grasses and shrubs, coaxing them to grow high enough to mask the entrance. This wasn't the only cave I used. I'd dug others that I covered with plantings as well. I never knew when I'd need a secure location to duck into.

I stopped in front of the growth.

Jillian peered around. "We'll lie on the ground?" The stark fear in her voice hit me in the throat, making it a challenge to swallow.

"We will not." If only I could offer her more than a hole in the ground. She deserved the best. In my old life, I could've brought her to my home, held her while sitting on soft furniture. Ordered nice food that would be delivered. Sunk into a large pool in my side yard that would soothe her skin and soul.

Instead, all I could give her was me.

I slid her pack off her shoulders and dropped it on the ground beside mine. I should've taken it from her long ago, carried that burden for her.

Holding her arms gently, I waited for her to look up. Her eyes were craters of sorrow. I couldn't fix that, but perhaps I could ease some of her pain.

"Wait here?" I said, and she nodded.

I dropped to my hands and knees and nudged the grass aside, taking our packs with me. As I'd suspected, creatures had been here since the last time I'd cleaned it out. I scooped out a hole in the ground near the back and pushed all the bones and refuse into the depression, covering it over and patting the surface down smooth. A solid glance around told me this would do for a short while.

I removed a ground cover from my pack and laid it on the floor, adding a small light to add cheer to the tiny space. When we laid down, I'd be able to stretch out to full length, but if I sat, my head would hit the roof. We didn't have anything better, however.

When I emerged from the cave, my heart froze. For one second, I thought the penrots had found her.

A soft sound drew my gaze to the wall of the curve. She sat, huddled on the ground, her back pressed against the side of the gully.

Damon nestled on her lap, and she'd curled herself around him.



CHAPTER 28

JILLIAN

“Treasure,” Theer said, dropping down in front of me. He took my hands and held them. “Let’s get you inside where . . .”

He didn’t need to finish.

Where we’d be hidden. Not safe. Never safe. We would be hunted until they caught us.

At least it would be over quickly after that.

All my life, I never dreamed my death would come in this manner, that I’d be ripped apart and consumed by alien creatures.

Theer nudged Damon off my lap. The robot remained nearby, releasing soft cheeps I’d found soothing. He might be a mechanical thing, but he wanted to give me comfort.

Rather than tug me to my feet, Theer lifted and carried me over to our hiding spot with Damon following close behind.

He eased aside tall grass, revealing a small cave. Still holding me and with Damon hovering close, Theer crawled on his knees into the opening, letting the grass settle back in front to provide a wall that would hopefully keep us from view.

Inside, he lowered me carefully onto a smooth surface. He made busy, tugging bars from his pack and handing one to me.

Damon tugged his charging platform from Theer’s pack and settled on it. How long before the platform ran out of energy to feed into his body?

Then I’d lose half of my friends. I wasn’t sure how I’d go on without our pet.

“Eat, please,” Theer said dispassionately, nudging my hand holding my bar up toward my mouth.

I needed his guidance and even more, his voice lacking inflection. My raw emotions couldn't take any more scraping. If he broke, so would I, and I wasn't sure I'd ever be whole again.

I numbly munched on the bar, washing the bites down with tepid water from a flask.

Once we'd finished, he sat with his back against the dirt wall and held me.

I shivered, though it wasn't cold inside the hovel.

He stroked my back and murmured words too soft for me to understand. The low hum of his voice sunk into my bones, but while I found it soothing, it widened the crack, releasing the emotions I'd stuffed inside.

"I'm a nurse," I said. "I heal people. I don't kill them. And they don't try to kill me." My snort slipped out, though it sounded high-pitched to my ears. "I mean, sometimes a patient gets a bit unruly, and one even tried to bite me once when I was giving her a bath, but you know what I mean."

"I do."

"I heal people, Theer. Healing isn't stabbing them in the chest with a spear or blasting their brains out with lasers." I held up my hand when he went to speak. "I know. Kill or be killed, and I suppose I could tell myself the penrots aren't real beings. But somewhere, deep inside me, they must have feelings. Emotions. Maybe they care for each other. Maybe they have kids or parents or lovers. And I killed them!"

"I won't try to placate you by telling you they don't have someone who cares about them or that their lives didn't matter. Because I don't know the answer to that question. And I don't need to tell you if you hadn't killed them, you'd be murdered yourself." His arms tightened around me. "All I can say is that I love you, and I'm grateful you're here with me. I'm grateful I get to hold you, even if it's for the last time."

"When I stabbed the final one, I realized this will be my life if we can't make your ship work. Running until they hunt us down, then turning like a feral creature and fighting. I'll do it again. I'll do it a thousand times. Maybe by then, I'll be able to find a place inside myself where I can hide so I don't have to see myself doing it."

"You're strong. Incredibly strong. I admire you so much. You haven't been here long and you're already protecting yourself."

I didn't want to do this. I wanted to go home where my greatest fear was being mugged on the subway. Where I could stroll into a grocery store and

buy whatever I wanted to eat. Where I could sit with my dad on the sofa and watch old movies.

“I miss my dad so much,” I said. “I’m sure he thinks I died.” He would worry. He wouldn’t stop looking for me, but he’d never find me, and that crushed me as much as the thought of dying here in this desolate world.

“I wish I could return you to him, that there was a way to make this right. This isn’t where you belong.”

“You’re right.” But . . . was he? “You’re here.”

“And I’ll remain here until I die or get that ship working and flee.”

“If your ship won’t work, you’ll be killed.”

He shrugged. “I will fight penrots until then.”

“One day, you won’t have the strength or an extra clever musar will come after you. Then it’ll be over. The same for me. That’s what I mean. I feel as if we’re not only fighting penrots, but we’re also fighting the inevitable and one day, the inevitable will win.”

“What else would you have me do?” His voice came out without inflection, and I understood why.

“You’ve resigned yourself to it,” I said.

“I have. At first, after I crashed here, I was grateful I lived when my friends hadn’t. I was thankful I wasn’t hurt badly enough to keep me from running and hiding. Then the resentment started to build. I raged at the fates and the world in general. At the penrots, the lack of food, and even more, at the slow loss of my humanity. It’s very hard not to lie down and let the inevitable happen. As you said, there’s nothing you can do to stop it. It runs right over you.”

“I don’t believe you’ll ever give up,” I said.

“I will try not to. But one day, I won’t be fast or smart enough. Then it will end. When I was young, I used to panic at the thought that one day I’d die without ever having accomplished anything memorable. I’d be gone, and no one would remember me, and—”

“I’ll remember you,” I said fiercely.

He kissed me and gave me a sad smile. “I’ll remember you, too, mate. When I panicked, I worried my existence meant nothing, that I was another spoke on a wheel driving a machine until it stopped functioning. I’d be thrown into a refuse pile, and no one would know I existed.”

“I understand that. The world’s a huge place. We’re not even as big as a head of a pin compared to the universe.”

“You’re right.” His voice deepened. “But I *do* exist, and so do you, even if it’s only the size of that . . . pin. I lived before you arrived, and I still do now. I’m Theer, a male who has struggled to survive in a horrible place. A male who will keep pushing until his will to do so gives out.” His arms tightened around me. “I am the male who will love you until my dying day and beyond. And for me, this is enough.”

“Everything about you has meaning. Your touch, your kindness. The way you care for me, and your big hearts.”

“I didn’t want to make this about me, but I did want you to hear the steps my hearts took from the moment I first left our ship and peered around at this ravaged world to this day when I sit in a hovel holding you, struggling to find a way to give you comfort.”

“Together, we mean more than just you, me, or even us. We’re here. We exist. We may not be remembered outside of that, and one day, someone may find our bones and wonder who we were and why we ended up here. But the love we feel will live long after we’re gone.”

“Exactly, my treasure,” he said softly, kissing my forehead. “That is what I wanted you to see.”

I swallowed back the pain making my throat ache. “I’ll remember you, Theer. Always.”



CHAPTER 29

THEER

She slept.

I dozed, listening to the world tick by outside our tiny hideout. If penrots hunted us, I didn't hear them, and they didn't come near.

Damon finished charging and slipped outside. Knowing he'd watch and let me know if anyone approached allowed me to grab a bit of deep sleep.

When dawn peeked between the blades of grass, Jillian woke, turning in my embrace to look up at me. I was grateful to see strength in her gaze, plus the love that was truer than anything in my life.

"Morning," she said, sounding almost normal.

I kissed her, and the moan she released unleashed me.

The warmth of her body pressed against mine made my hearts burst. I adored her above everything.

I pulled her close, savoring the softness of her lips as they met mine. Our mouths moved in perfect harmony, our tongues dancing together as if coordinated by a master.

My heart swelled with emotion and passion, an intensity I'd never experienced before and wouldn't except with her.

As our kiss deepened, everything around us faded away into nothingness. I trusted in Damon to watch and give notice if threats came near.

Who knew what today would bring? We may not live long past dawn. I wanted to enjoy a moment when it was just her and me, lost in each other's bodies.

Her hands moved around my neck, clutching me tightly to her. My breath caught, and my body trembled with desire.

My fingers ran through her hair, savoring its silky texture unlike anything I'd felt before. I wanted to stay lost in this moment, our bodies intertwined and our souls fusing together.

The only thing that mattered was the present.

I kissed her neck, wanting to show her how much I cared. She gasped in pleasure and rewarded me with more eager kisses. A surge of electricity ran through me as our bodies shifted closer.

I glided my hands down her back, feeling her curves and softness. She was the tenderness to my scarred soul, the one being who could keep me from giving into my desolation. We both wanted this moment, and we didn't need words to express it.

Hungry for everything, I shucked my clothing, then slowly helped her out of hers piece by piece, exploring every bit of her body with my hands and lips as she shuddered beneath me. Each time we explored each other, we discovered new areas that gave pleasure.

Her skin was like the finest fluff beneath my fingertips, and my cock surged upward.

The joy filling my hearts was unbearable as I kissed ever so softly from head to toe, sending waves of delight through her. There was no denying our feelings for each other, and we showed it with each caress, each sigh.

I licked my way down her body, tasting her sweetness and inhaling her intoxicating scent. No matter how long I lived, I'd never get enough of my mate, my treasure, my reason for being. I traced my finger down her seam and leaned close, eager to taste. As I glided a claw across her clit, she bucked up to meet me. My tongue found its way to her core, and she gasped as I drove my tongue inside her.

Her body was mine, my love for her stronger than anything I'd ever known. I wanted to make sure she felt every bit of my feelings. I glided two fingers into her along with my tongue, stroking her inner walls while she sighed and urged me on.

She clung to my bands of hair, holding me close. "Theer. Theer!"

I teased and licked her, pushing more fingers inside her while encircling her engorged clit.

When quivers took over her frame, I pumped my hand faster, pushing her to the edge before pausing to let her glide back down to meet me. I did this over and over until she lost all touch with the world around us and could only focus on me.

“I need you. Take me,” she cried, her thighs tight around my head.

As I drove her higher again, she keened, and I couldn't resist claiming her fully, riding her with my tongue while she crested once more.

Turning her, I lifted her hips. She clutched the fabric beneath her, pushing her body back to meet mine.

I centered my cock at her core and held her as I pushed inside, burying my length within her.

“Yes,” she growled. “Take me, Theer. I need this. Need you. I love everything you do.”

My hearts surged in my chest. I'd never love another like I did my Jillian. We could travel across the stars or remain here forever, and each day, I'd feel just as I did now. Complete because I was with her.

I alternated my thrusts from fast to slow, deep and shallow, my body cued into hers.

She shoved back to meet me, keening as she clung to the ground fabric, fisting it tight.

Leaning over her, I found her clit and rubbed, savoring how open she was about the pleasure she took from my body. I loved her, and nothing made me happier than to take her completely and give back everything I had to her.

“Theer,” she cried. “I can't hold back.”

“Claim me, my treasure,” I growled. “Take what I give. Make it yours. You fill my life with joy and laughter. With a need to hold on. Now take that for yourself.” I drove my cock into her faster, pushing hard and deep, the way I'd learned she loved it.

Her cries grew hoarse as she sought the peak, that sublime feeling of bliss unmatched by any other.

When I felt her body quivering around mine, and her gasp rang out, I pumped my hips faster, pushing her even higher, giving her more when she might believe what she had was enough.

Only when she'd stopped quivering, her passage squeezing tight, did I let go. My cock spasmed, releasing my heat inside her.

I held her up while my cock twitched within her, unable and unwilling to pull myself out. I'd hold her forever if I could.

Easing to the side, I took her with me, encircling her with my arms. I dragged the blanket up over us and grinned, stroking her body beneath the

cloth. I savored the feel of her inner quivers when I rolled her nipples and curled around her to kiss the top of her head.

She dozed, and I held her. Too soon, we'd travel, and the penrots would seek us. Unchained pons might scatter after what we did to three packs yesterday, but the musars would be angry. They'd follow our tracks, and they wouldn't stop until they'd found us.

Damon parted the grasses and hummed inside. His panel remained blank, telling me nothing approached. He dropped onto his charger, and I'd give him time to replenish the energy he'd spent.

I must've dozed, because I woke when Jillian turned in my arms.

"Love you," she whispered. "Always will."

"My treasure." I hugged her, dragging her up my body so I could kiss her. I wanted to love her again, but we needed to leave. Each moment we lingered increased the danger.

We dressed and ate quickly, following the bars with water. I'd have to replenish it when we were near the city, but there was a spigot not far from where I'd parked my vehicle the last time we traveled in that direction.

"Today, we'll reach the city," I said softly, stroking her hair.

Pulling the strands back at her nape, she secured them. "Will we go through it or walk around the outside?"

"We need to reach the top but will need to see if the penrots have abandoned the city or if they still hunt inside."

"Alright." She stared at me with complete trust, faith that I'd keep her safe.

I'd die trying to make sure there was never a reason for that look to fade.

"We'll reach my shop. I'll construct the main panel and install it inside the ship."

"I know you can make it work. You're smart."

Hopefully smart enough.

"If I can't get the ship to fly, we'll keep going, crossing the plain until we find a new city where we'll seek a way out."

Her eyes lit with hope. "We're going to escape from this planet. I know it."

"We are."



CHAPTER 30

JILLIAN

We packed everything, and after Damon flew a reconnaissance mission to make sure it was safe outside, we left the cave. To keep from being seen on the plain, we walked within the dry gully, stopping once at a spigot to refill his flasks.

The sun hovered on the horizon when we finally reached the city. We skirted around the left side, remaining crouched, but we'd seen no sign of penrots.

They were here somewhere. I sensed them like you did when a spider dangled right behind you from a web. Was it their gaze or their intention to capture us that gave me the feeling? I didn't know, but that niggling sensation remained, hitching down my spine.

We approached the location where he'd hidden the vehicle we'd rode in on the other day, but when we got close, he held up his hand and came to a halt. Dropping to a squat, he peered toward the low mound sitting near scrub brush between us and the gate to the city the penrots had destroyed.

It was comforting to believe their sole drive was hunger. That they didn't think, plot, or plan. That they weren't hiding somewhere, waiting for us to circle back to his vehicle.

"It's uncovered," he said softly.

My skin prickled, and my heart thudded heavily in my ears. "They found it and investigated?" Even investigating implied intention. I swallowed past my throat choked off with fear.

"I don't know. I . . ." He shook his head. "I don't feel comfortable approaching it."

“Should we send Damon?” Our robot pet hovered beside us. He’d flown high above us as we traveled, watching, and with each step without him sounding a warning, my tension lightened. It ratcheted back up as we drew close to the city. Did the penrots still hunt us inside?

Theer’s grunt told me he wasn’t convinced sending Damon was the right move. With a shake of his head, he backed away, taking my hand and bringing me with him. Eventually, we turned and jogged through the deep grass about ten minutes, putting distance between us and his vehicle, though moving parallel to the wall of the city.

When we stopped, we dropped into the grass, crouching, not sitting. The wavering strands hid us, but the comfort was deceiving. If the penrots watched, they would still know where to find us.

“Do they travel at night?” I asked softly.

“Rarely.”

“I assume that’s what we’ll do if your ship won’t fly. We’ll travel at night, aiming for the next city.”

“Yes.”

“Do we have enough food to get there if things don’t work out?”

“I’ve hidden more in each vehicle.”

That wasn’t quite an answer, and if we didn’t dare approach the three-wheelers, the food might as well be on the planet’s moon.

“Where’s your other vehicle hidden?” I asked.

“At the top of the city, close to the wall and my shop.” He nudged his head in that direction. “We’ll wait for the sun to set, then travel again.”

I sunk to the grass and stretched out my legs, savoring the bit of rest we’d been granted.

He gave me a bar to eat, wrapping the rest up and returning them to his pack.

“You need to eat too,” I said.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Sure you are.” I wouldn’t let him starve to keep me fed. Breaking the bar in half, I held out his share. “Eat. If you don’t, you won’t have the strength to protect me.” I didn’t like manipulating him like this, but I would not eat this entire meal while he took nothing.

He huffed but ate it quickly.

“Is there more water between here and the top of the city?” I asked.

“One more spigot. After that, we’ll only have what we can carry until we reach where I was working on the ship.”

“So, one day of you working on it and hopefully, we’ll fly.”

“I will do my best.”

We couldn’t ask for anything more than that.

I leaned against him, resting, though I didn’t dare close my eyes. The sun slipped away, sucking the warmth along with it. A cool wind swept across the plain; carrying dust that stung my eyes. When I shivered, Theer put his arm around me. I didn’t ask for another layer. When we walked, I wanted freedom of movement. It was bad enough I wore something much too large for my body. At least I still had my sneakers. Good thing I didn’t work in high heels.

Damon dropped onto my lap.

“Is there time to let him charge?” I asked.

“We need to leave soon.”

“How long can he travel before charging again?”

“A night. A day. Perhaps a bit longer than that.”

“Do you have power generation panels on your ship?” I asked.

“I do. Plus, a spare charger for him. We’ll make sure he can continue with us. I promise.”

Damon might be just a robot, but he was part of our family. I wouldn’t leave him behind even if that meant carrying him until we could find a place where he could charge.

“Are you ready?” Theer asked, rising to his feet, though he remained bent forward to stay hidden in the grass.

“Yup.” I got up and hefted my bag, securing it on my back. Maybe it was silly to carry clothing across a plain, but we had so little. I couldn’t leave it behind.

We slunk to a low area that wasn’t as deep as the gully but still provided cover, then struck out across the plain, aiming for the top of the city.

Damon flew high above us, keeping watch.

“Does he use infrared to see?” I whispered, taking care not to be loud because sound carried across big open spaces.

We hadn’t heard or seen penrots, but that didn’t mean they weren’t lurking nearby.

“Yes,” he finally said, and I assumed he had to wait for his translator to interpret infrared. “He can see better than us in the dark.”

That gave me a bit of relief.

We walked all night, slowly curving around the outer edge of the big city.

The wall gave way to scraggly buildings built against the outer side. I shuddered to think of the poor people living there when the penrots attacked.

I wanted to ask Theer about those who no longer lived here and the penrots, but I didn't dare speak. Instead, I plodded beside him, watching where I placed my feet but focusing my senses on the world around me.

I trudged across the long plain, the night sky illuminated only by a few stars and a scraggly moon etched with thick clouds. The cold night air sunk into my bones, and despite Theer holding my hand as we walked, the silence made me feel like I was completely alone.

Only our footsteps softly swished through the darkness. There was no wind, no birds, no other signs of life but Damon soaring overhead. I'd been stolen from Earth and dropped into a ghost world.

Every so often, a faint sound would echo from the abandoned city. A distant yip, or maybe the shuffle of a foot on crushed pavement. Things hunted there, and not only penrots. Each time a sound reached us, a chill hitched down my spine. We needed to get to his shop as quickly as possible.

Finally, as dawn crusted the edge of this world, Theer lifted his arm, pointing toward the wall.

"There," he said softly. He dropped down, tugging me with him. "We'll watch. Wait."

Damon soared down to land on his other side, and Theer watched images flash on the robot's screen.

"Anything?" I asked, with fear etching across my skin. My flesh prickled, and I scrunched up my body as if that would keep me from being seen. Good thing the penrots didn't fly.

"He found penrots, of course," he said. "They're massing on this side of the city."

My breath caught. I'd hoped we'd escape without being seen. "Inside or outside the wall?"

"Both." He frowned, staring toward the wall we'd soon enter. "I don't know what they're doing or why, and I hope they don't know where we are." His gaze met mine. "But I'm sure they know we're around here somewhere."



CHAPTER 31

THEER

The penrots would soon split into multiple groups. Some would take to the plain while others scoured the city, working from one end to the other. They'd hunt us until they tracked us down. We needed to get to my shop before we were discovered.

I tried to feel better about our situation. We had the panel I needed to make the ship functional. Once I could install it, we could hopefully lift off and leave this place behind forever.

But there was so much that needed to be done before we could engage the engines, such as fortifying the craft for a long journey—we'd need food and water. So much, it was all I could do not to feel discouraged. Before Jillian arrived, I had as much time as I needed. I'd gotten good at avoiding the penrots.

With her here, a sense of urgency filled me. Their determination to hunt us down made me see how much I had to lose. Not just my life, but hers.

I gnashed my fangs and whipped my tail back and forth, struggling to remain patient while watching the city wall.

"Damon," I said in a low voice. "Examine the area around my shop. Report."

Damon lifted off and flew toward the city, his dangling legs twitching through the tops of the grass. He was wise to keep a low profile like us.

He returned a short time later, and the images on his screen gave me hope.

"None in this area," I told Jillian. "Are you ready to run?"

She nodded and tightened her fingers on the pack she'd laid beside her.

"We'll remain low and make our way to that dark slash on the wall. That's where the gate is."

Unlocked now that the links had been broken by the penrots.

We rose and darted toward the wall, our legs swishing through the tall grass. When we were close, I stopped, and we ducked low again.

“Wait,” I said, hovering in tall grass. When nothing moved, I urged her forward. I placed my hand on the panel beside the door, and it ground open, making more noise than I liked. It has never done that before. Squeals rang out as it came to a shuddering halt only halfway open.

“In,” I hissed.

We darted inside, and I slammed my palm on the inner panel. A shut door was better than one left open.

The door hitched, struggling to grind closed.

Frowning, I studied it, trying to determine why it hadn’t fully opened and why it now had difficulty closing.

Someone had poured a substance in the track, causing it to malfunction. And they’d mounded the substance up on the inside of the door so that when it slid open, the thick hunks of dusty rock poured down onto the track.

I looked around wildly, not seeing anyone near.

Shrieks rang out in the streets, and footsteps stomped our way.



CHAPTER 32

JILLIAN

Adrenaline poured through me, making my body break out in a sudden sweat.

Penrot screams echoed around us. I didn't see them yet, but they'd soon find us. Hunt us. Kill us.

"This way." Theer tugged me to the left. We jogged down a street running beside the wall as it slowly curved around the city.

Theer turned right, entering an alley, and part way down, ripped open a door beside us. He tugged me inside and after Damon zipped in, he barred the door, then led me through the abandoned building with Damon soaring beside us.

The sound of my breathing and the light tread of our footsteps echoed off the walls of what looked like a warehouse. My heart beat a furious rhythm with each step I took, and my mind raced. I wanted to ask if this was our destination, but the pounding on the street punctuated by random shrieks told me the penrots were near.

All my senses remained on high alert. The scent of musty air coated my sinuses, and fear gave me a rank taste in my throat. I darted my eyes from side to side, hoping he was aiming for a place to hide. In the gloom, I could just make out the silhouettes of small feral creatures slinking through the shadows, growling and snarling as they scattered.

Penrot howls rang out and my heart jolted. Were they on the other side of the wall?

We ran faster, darting through the enormous open room with a ceiling at least three stories above. Refuse lay everywhere, from broken furniture to scorched vehicles.

My heart pounded in my ears, and my lungs burned. A rush of adrenaline coursed through me as we reached the end of the room and an outer wall with a door.

Theer held up his finger. I leaned against the wall, struggling to control my breathing while he cracked the panel and squinted out.

He shut the door and hefted his bag and secured it to his back. "We need to cross the road outside, but it's a mess of crashed vehicles and scattered belongings."

This implied the people who'd lived here had suddenly fled. Had they made it beyond the outer limits of the city?

"Penrots?" I asked.

"Not on this road that I can see."

From their shrieks, it sounded like they were everywhere. Would they hear us and come running?

"Stay with me, mate," Theer said, his hand on the doorknob. At my nod, he pulled me onto the street and released me so I could make my way across. Damon remained with us, eerily silent as he soared up over the trashed street, aiming for the building on the other side.

I followed Theer as closely as I could, leaping and dodging around the heaps of rubble littering the four-lane road. Vehicles lay overturned and others had crashed into each other, their contents scattered across the ground. The alien vessels were unlike anything I'd seen before made up of twisted metal with strange symbols emblazoned on them and odd projectile appendages.

My pulse was pounding so hard in my ears I felt like it would deafen me, but I kept moving forward, eager to reach the other side and, hopefully, sanctuary.

Screams echoed from what I gauged was a block away, and growing stomps told me they were coming. Had they heard or seen us? I couldn't tell.

Keep going.

We raced around a huge pile of rubble long since scorched as if giant lasers blasted through this area. Had the penrots arrived in ships and invaded? I'd never know. Thinking about it only scrambled my mind.

Finally, we reached the opposite side of the street and rushed up a series of steps to what I hoped was our destination. Theer pulled open a metal panel and urged me into another abandoned building. A big lobby with

another black alien desk waited with broken furniture scattered everywhere, as if a giant had stomped its way through the room, tossing things against the wall.

We passed by the desk and ran through an opening on the opposite side, finding a hall that stretched out on both sides. Clear plexi was mounted along the entire outer wall, and outside, penrots shadows flickered. So far, they didn't appear to see us cringing within the open doorframe.

"To the right," Theer hissed, taking my hand. We crouched below the plexi and darted across the hall, then made our way to the right, continuing to the end and through a steel door. "Outside again. Be ready." He cracked the panel and peeked out into a rutted, relatively clean alley when compared to the rubble lining the street we'd just crossed. Pointing, he nudged his head to a big stone building on the opposite side and kept his voice low. "In there, cross, then three more."

So we hadn't arrived at the building housing his shop.

At my nod, we darted out and zipped across the alley, with Theer's much longer strides eating up the ground. I took two to one of his and was soon wheezing. He wrenched open the door while I peered toward the opening of the alley, hoping penrots wouldn't see us.

We rushed through the next building, a strange combination of what looked like restaurants, bars, and entertainment centers, like we'd found ourselves inside an alien mall. The clear plexi that must've covered the front walls of each shop lay shattered on the tile floor, and it crunched beneath our shoes.

Finally, we reached the opposite side of the enormous building and traveled down a long hall ending in a steel door. Again, Theer peered out before closing it.

"Nothing outside," he said. "Another long stretch, and we'll reach the building housing my shop."

After sucking in a deep breath, I followed Theer outside, where we dodged more rubble and shattered machines. Shrieks rang out behind us, but I was too focused on crossing the big alien highway to look back.

My heart thumped, and sweat coiled down my back, making it itch as we moved to the right and then the left, avoiding any obstacles in our path while keeping an eye out for anything that looked like trouble. Our feet pounded against the concrete as we raced forward.

We reached a median strip growing scraggly trees with almost no leaves, plus a set of stairs. Crouching to keep from being seen, we rushed up the stairs and across a bridge spanning this section of the highway. A stone wall spanned both sides, providing much-needed cover.

We descended the stairs on the other side and crossed yet another double-lane road littered with crumpled vehicles missing doors, open cases vomiting faded clothing, and even a small doll that looked like no creature I'd seen before. Definitely alien and yet so human. Whoever built this city had lived and died here, full of the same hopes and dreams that pushed people back on Earth.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, we reached the other side of the highway. I was grateful the cries of the penrots sounded more distant than they had before. Perhaps they hadn't seen us. If we could get inside, they may not find us.

They led me around a huge building with stone walls and grimy plexi looking in on big machinery long silent. They stopped at a steel door at the end of an alley running along the back side. A sigh of relief escaped my lips when he pressed his hand against a panel, and the door slid open easily.

He ushered me inside, waiting for Damon to join us, then closed and locked the panel.

"This place was used to build spaceships," he whispered. "They'd pretty much cleaned it out, escaping or . . . whatever."

Even he must not know what happened here.

"I was able to collect enough to build a ship," he said. "Though that pane has been a challenge to find."

"I'm lucky you hadn't found it and taken off before I arrived."

He gave me a nod.

"This way," he whispered.

I followed him down a long hall with no windows and doors on the left side. At the end, we descended two flights of stairs before pushing out into another hall.

"This goes beneath the street," he said softly. "My assumption is they constructed parts in the first building and in the second one . . . Well, I guess they put everything together there."

"They launched ships from inside the city?"

"I assume there's a launch pad far enough away from the city, but I'm not worried about burning this part of the world to the ground if we can

achieve liftoff from here.”

We climbed another set of stairs to the ground floor, emerging into a long hall leading to a big room that must have been used to build the rockets. Enormous frames stood in the center and big doors on one end probably opened so they could take ships from here to the launch pad.

“We’re close to the wall,” he said. “There’s a larger gate in this section, plus a road leading away from the city, supporting my idea.”

Damon zipped inside with us.

Their closed and locked the big steel doors leading to the hall while I took in the windowless walls made of huge blocks of stone. His ship stood near one side, a gorgeous thing containing all my hope. Tall metal cabinets, shelving, and benches covered with tools and various sized hunks of metal surrounded it.

For one second, I could breathe easily. The penrots might track us down, but they wouldn’t be able to reach us without considerable effort.

He strode across the room, stopping beside his ship. The tip of the ship’s nose pointed toward a clear plexi roof looking out at the sky. Since they didn’t launch from here, the roof must’ve been installed for aesthetic reasons. Built to aim your craft toward the stars above.

Not much larger than the vehicles crashed on the roads outside, the ship’s metal hull gleamed in the dingy sunlight as if it wanted to jump off its stand and soar away from this wretched world.

I got it. So did I.

“Let me see if I can get this thing running, shall I?” he said, tugging off his pack and pulling out what looked like a big computer board, plus the panel we’d found. “Once these are fused together and connected to the ship, we might be able to lift off.”



CHAPTER 33

THEER

While Jillian dozed on a mattress I'd located inside a building one down from this one and dragged here, I worked on connecting the panels. Damon refilled his charge and joined her. He didn't snuggle, per se, but he laid beside her, keeping watch. I appreciated having the robot do that so I could focus on the ship.

I was so close to finishing, the thrill of it kept shooting through me. We could leave this place and travel to my home. Once there, we could make a new life where we'd be safe and could love each other freely.

My people would stare at her strange body and finger her hair, but we were a peaceful species, and I believed they'd soon welcome her into their lives.

My only regret was that I wouldn't be able to take her to her home even if only for a visit. She'd wept for her father, and her heart hurt that he was worried, and she'd never see him again.

I had no idea how to find her planet.

Eventually, I got the panel assembled and installed. It was time to test it to see if it functioned. Climbing up into the bridge compartment, I sat in the sole chair, realizing I'd have to either install another beside this one or hold Jillian while we took off. Other than the bridge, the ship contained a small area for sleeping below the bridge, with a rudimentary disposal system. I hadn't planned to travel in any sort of style; I just wanted to escape the penrots forever.

Other than collecting enough food from the surrounding area, plus removing the water creator I'd discovered in a room on one of the floors of this building, we didn't need anything else but a functioning ship.

Hope bloomed in my heart, and it was a wretched thing, because for one instance, I could believe our lives would get better.

However, it would be best to make sure the ship functioned before getting too excited.

I flicked the vital switches and held my breath, staring at the screen mounted in the middle of the panel in front of the chair.

Lights flickered behind the screen, and the low rumble of the engine erupted below me.



CHAPTER 34

JILLIAN

I woke to the rumble of engines. Sitting up, I wiped my eyes and peered around. Steam coiled from the thrusters located at the bottom of the ship. I assumed they were thrusters. I was a nurse, not a rocket scientist or an engineer like Theer.

Eventually, the engines shut down and Theer climbed out of a hatch on the side of the ship.

“Where’s Damon?” I asked, staring around.

“I sent him out to spy,” Theer said. He stopped partway down the ramp to tinker with a hunk of metal plated to the side of the ship.

I rose and located a sort-of bathroom and used the facilities before returning to the main room to find Theer standing near the ship staring up at it.

“Thoughts?” I asked, joining him and putting my arm around him.

“I believe it’ll work.”

“Believe?”

He shrugged. “There’s no other way to find out but to test it, and I suspect the only test we should use is the one rocketing us off this planet.”

“Assuming it shoots into the sky—” His grin told me I was using the wrong terminology, but who cared? He knew what I meant, so I continued. “Assuming it gets us off the planet, what’s next?”

Sobering, he took my hand and led me to the mattress. He sat with his back against the wall and tugged me down onto his lap. “We haven’t discussed us.”

I looked up at him. “I love you.”

“Mate. My treasure.” His voice deepened. “I want you with me always, but that’s greedy. You had a life you loved.”

“I did, but I want you in it.” I sighed. “Is there a chance I could return to Earth?”

“If we can get off the planet and find our way to my home, we can ask my people about your world. I’m one of many engineers and scientists. Someone may know of your planet and could tell us how far away it might be.”

What did I want? I nibbled on my lower lip while thinking. “I miss my dad a lot, but I don’t miss anything else.” My rueful laugh shot out. “I take that back. I do miss not having to worry about penrots trying to kill me. I miss pizza.” I tightened my arms around him and leaned my cheek on his chest. His hearts beat strong and steady. His hearts beat for me as much as mine did for him. “If we could make our way to Earth, you wouldn’t be welcome there. Aliens are a myth to them.”

His brow ridge lifted, and his lips twitched.

“If you appeared on Earth, they’d try to grab you. They’d experiment on you to find out how your body functioned. Others might attack your ship, believing they needed to defeat you before you could harm them.”

“Living on Earth with you is not an option, then.”

“You’d actually try to do that?”

“My life is with you, treasure. I go where you go.”

His words made my chest throb. Tears sprung up in my eyes. “Theer. I only want to be with you.”

“You’d be welcome on my planet. Aliens, as you call them, travel to and from our cities on a regular basis. You’d be the first of your kind, but my people would be excited to meet you. No one would try to harm you or experiment on you. They wouldn’t fire weapons at your ship.”

“What about you, Theer? You love me. I don’t doubt that a bit. But is there a place for me in your life?”

“Always,” he growled. “I want you in my home and my bed. In my life forever. I cannot imagine a world where you’re not in it. If you choose to leave, and I do not say this to sway you, my hearts will shrivel. The light will bleed from my world. I will be half the male I am today.” He cupped my face. “I leave the decision to you. I would never ask anything of you that would leave half of *your* life without light.”

“It’s you, Theer. You’re my light.” Rising on his lap, I kissed him.

Desperation filled us. Who knew how much time we’d have left together? Each moment could be our last.

In a fever, we stripped off our clothing. He laid me back on the mattress and rose over me.

The searing heat of his body pulsed around me, making me tremble with anticipation. His captivating warmth called out to me, luring me closer until I felt the gentle heat of his breath on my skin.

I gasped as his hands explored my body, igniting a fire that spread through my veins. His touch was both gentle and firm, as if he was trying to cling to me before I evaporated into the night. My heart raced as his hands roamed, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. Every stroke seemed to contain a longing so powerful that it left me trembling with need, craving the sensations that were yet to come.

Our lips collided with a fierce heat that threatened to consume us both. His tongue explored my mouth like a long-lost treasure, and I melted against him with a wild passion. Our bodies intertwined, and his chest heaved beneath my fingertips as if his hearts were struggling to keep up with the intensity of this moment.

My senses were filled with the delightful caress of his hands. Everywhere he touched me, my skin ignited with passion and pleasure.

His fingers moved lower and grazed the most sensitive part of me, causing me to moan softly. His skilled touch electrified every nerve ending in my body. Pleasure swelled within me.

He paused, his gaze smoldering with longing, and I felt my insides quiver in anticipation. His lips returned to mine with a hunger that made my skin tingle and my heart race. Our desire seemed to grow with each passing second, swirling around us. His hands moved lower, exploring every curve of my body with an urgency that made my breath catch in my throat.

His fingertips found my clit and moved with increasing speed. My body trembled as I inched closer to the edge. I arched my back, letting out a desperate moan as his fingers move faster and faster. I couldn't hold it in much longer. My body quaked and my breath came in sharp gasps as I experienced the most powerful orgasm imaginable.

With my legs wrapped around him, he thrust inside me, making me groan at the exquisite sensation of his long, thick length stretching me. Each time we did this, it only got better. I couldn't love him and his body more than I did at this moment.

His gaze locked on mine, and he began to move, slowly at first, each drive deep and hard. He alternated with shorter strokes, going faster, and

each drive made me spiral until I was a gasping wreck beneath him, urging him on with hoarse cries of need.

When his tail slid between us to stroke my clit, I gave way, a rush of intense pleasure consuming me.

Moving faster, he sought his own satisfaction, thrusting hard while his body tensed above mine. He gave in with a heady groan, growling while pumping into me. Each push of his body was echoed by his cock jerking within me.

I clung to him, feeling as if nothing could ever separate us as he filled me completely.

“I want to lie here with you forever, my treasure,” he said softly when our heartbeats had slowed, and we’d drifted back down to this planet. “But if we can gather everything we need, we can try to leave this world and find a new, better one.”

Adrenaline surged through my veins. “That would be heaven.”

He pulled out of me, and we dressed. “First, we need to locate food and a synthesizer. I’ll wire the latter into the ship. Then we need to uninstall the water purifier I found on the third floor, then incorporate it and Damon’s charging station into the energy gathering system so they’ll harness light to generate a charge for each device.” He waved to the ship. “The exterior is made up of light-gathering panels, and they’re connected to one inside the base of the ship. I just need to make sure my wiring can reach our living quarters so we can use the devices there.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

He gave me a breezy smile, though concern lurked in his eyes. “It won’t take long.”

“What can I do?”

“I’d ask you to remain here and bolt the door behind me, but—”

“You know I need to go with you.”

“I feel the same.”

I grunted. “Good. We’re a team, and we’ll do this together.”

He called Damon back and the robot dog reported there were no penrots near the building. They must’ve lost our scent. I hoped they didn’t find it after we’d blasted through the roof of the building.

We scoured the floors above but couldn’t locate any food.

“Usually, there are bars or something hidden away,” Theer said, looking around a “kitchen” with disgust. I assumed it was a kitchen. Sink—maybe.

Cupboards? A synthesizer, which Theer had removed from the wall mount and now carried on his hip. “Let’s take this downstairs and install it. Grab that bag of recharges, would you?”

“The recharges are . . .” I peered into the bag at the sliver cylinders.

“Each will generate twenty meals.”

“Oh.” The bag held fifty or so, so . . . one thousand meals? Cool. “Did you have one of these devices in your underground home?”

“Yes, though it was hard to find the cylinders.”

After he’d installed the synthesizer, we returned to the upper levels and retrieved the water purifier, also wiring it into the rocket’s panel and making sure it functioned. Well, Theer did the wiring. I held his tools.

While he was doing that, we sent Damon out to survey the area. He came back, reporting no changes outside.

“Can we skip finding food?” I asked, gnawing on a fingernail. We were so close. I felt like something major was about to happen to keep us from ever leaving.

“I’m not exactly sure where this planet is located in the universe,” he said. “We were knocked out of our trajectory by a solar windstorm, and by the time we righted the ship, we were blasting toward the surface, unable to control the ship. I’m worried even one thousand meals might not be enough to reach a space station where we could obtain supplies.”

“Then how will we find your home?”

“I hope once we’ve left this planet’s atmosphere, the ship’s satellite system will help me place our location. Then I can chart a course to the nearest space station.”

“I hate leaving our relative safety here in this building to look for food.” However, starving to death in outer space wasn’t much better than remaining here where we’d be hunted by penrots.

“Stay, then,” he said. “I won’t be gone long.”

I stiffened my upper lip. “I’m coming with you.”

He gave me a slow nod.

Since we had no charges for his laser pistols, the only weapons we could carry were knives. We strapped them on and left, walking down the long hall and stopping by a door leading out onto a street.

“I remember a place in this area where we might find food,” he said softly. “We’ll need to cross the street, run two blocks from there, then duck into the building.”

I sucked in a breath and pushed it out. "Ready."
With our knives in hand, we stepped outside.
Penrots swarmed the street.



CHAPTER 35

THEER

Damon cheeped a low warning.

Frick, they were everywhere.

We flung ourselves back inside and I searched around, seeking something I could use to bar the door.

I found nothing.

“Run,” I said. “We’re leaving now.” I swept her off her feet and bolted down the hall, taking the stairs to the bottom and rushing beneath the street.

Screams rang out behind us, too close for comfort. They’d gotten inside and were after us.

“With me, Damon,” I cried out to the robotic pet.

The penrots must’ve seen him and followed. It wasn’t his fault. I shouldn’t have sent him out to scan the area over and over.

“Let me run with you,” Jillian cried, but I continued to hold her, knowing I was faster than her. I couldn’t risk her life, not when we were so close to escaping.

Damon soared ahead of us up the stairs. Inside the shop, I put Jillian down.

“Help me put these across the door!” I shouted.

We dragged work benches over and loaded them with heavy equipment. It wasn’t much, but it could buy us some time.

“Inside the ship,” I growled.

We grabbed the bags we’d taken from my underground home and raced to the ramp, climbing it quickly. I engaged the lift, and the hatch banged into place.

Inside, I guided her up the ladder and onto the bridge.

“One seat,” she said, gulping as she peered around.

“On my lap, mate,” I said, sitting. A few flicks of switches started the launch sequence. The engines rumbled, a satisfying vibration sinking through my bones.

Alarms blared within the building, shouting words my translator couldn't interpret. Probably, *evacuate the building immediately* or *shut that damn thing down*. No one was supposed to launch a ship from here, and the fail-safe systems must've been activated by the engines I'd tested but hadn't put into full launch sequence yet.

Jillian scrambled onto my lap, facing me, her hands latching onto my shoulders. Her frantic gaze met mine.

Damon secured himself to the wall as I strapped me and Jillian into the seat.

“Are you ready, my treasure?” I bellowed over the screams of the penrots swarming the room outside the ship. They flung themselves onto the exterior, and one climbed up and peered at us through the viewscreen.

Others joined it, and they clawed at the clear plexi surface as the countdown I'd programmed into the system began.

“Three . . .” I hissed.

Jillian's gaze met mine. “We're leaving.”

“We are. Two . . .”

She pressed her face into my chest and held on. “Love you.”

“One.”

The engines whined, and the ship shuddered. It slowly lifted off the floor, gaining speed as it moved toward the plexi ceiling.

A heavy thud rang out overhead, but we were free, blasting above the building, aiming toward the sky.

The penrots dropped away, shrieking, and soon only the enormous roar of the engines consumed the world around us.

Shudders wracked the ship's frame, and I prayed it would hold together. I'd done my best to build it correctly. Would that be enough?

We flew past clouds and kept going. My heartbeat pounded in my ears, and I held Jillian close. As long as she was with me, nothing else mattered.

As we left the planet's outer atmosphere, hope surged in my chest.

“We did it, mate,” I said, my voice hoarse. “I'm a mess of emotions. I lived on that planet for over a year. I assumed I'd die there if I couldn't finish this ship. Now, here we are, soaring into the stars.”

She looked up at me, her face creased with emotion. “You did it, Theer. You.”

I kissed her, savoring the feel of her mouth beneath mine and her hands stroking my chest. My eyes stung, and I shook my head. My species didn't cry. Yet, here I was, with tears trickling down my face.

“Take me home, Theer,” she said softly, wiping the wetness from my cheeks. “Your home is mine, and I can't wait to see it.”



CHAPTER 36

EPILOGUE

Jillian

Ten lunar cycles later

“The cloaking device is working?” I asked for probably the twenty-billionth time.

“Yes, mate,” Theer said with a smile. He stroked my hair, his fingers lingering on my face. “They will not know we’re here.”

Damon cheeped, floating beside us where we sat on the bridge of the fancy ship we were flying in. We’d brought our pet with us, though he’d have to remain behind once we’d landed.

“There it is,” I said, pointing, my belly scrambling around. I stared through the viewscreen, my eyes stinging as I took in Earth looming ahead.

After leaving the penrot planet, we flew for the equivalent of thirty-three days before our hails were returned by a space station. It took us forty-one days to reach the space station. By then, we’d pretty much lost track of where the penrot planet was located, though Theer had ejected a marker that flashed a warning. Maybe someone would return there one day to explore what might’ve happened and where the penrots had come from.

It wouldn’t be me or Theer.

When we reached Theer's home planet, we were met at the spaceport by local dignitaries who were eager to welcome me to their world, plus a surprise.

"Knave," Theer cried as we walked out into the greeting area at the spaceport. The ceiling arched above us; a glassy network supported by steel beams. Outside, pale lavender and blue trees swayed. I couldn't wait to see my new world.

A green-skinned male rushed forward, and he and Theer hugged.

I joined them, peering with amazement at the woman—an Earth woman! —who stood with Knave.

"I'm Sage," she said with a grin. "Welcome to Trulene!"

I didn't know her, but I barreled into her anyway, giving her a big hug, though it was a tight stretch due to her obviously pregnant belly.

She patted my back. "It's a lot to take in all at once, right?"

"What happened to you?" Theer asked Knave, his face filled with so much joy it made my chest ache. "Jillian, this is Knave, one of the other males on my ship when it crashed. I thought you'd died like Ketz."

Knave's smile faded. "Ketz didn't make it?"

"I found him. No," Theer said, his shoulders slumping. "His pod was a wreck. He must've died on impact."

Knave nodded. "When I couldn't find you or him, I was worried that's what happened. When the ship crashed, I was ripped apart. The ship's computer rebuilt me."

Then he wasn't a cyborg? Maybe part cyborg. I took in his robotic eye and four arms, three constructed of metal.

Sage leaned into his side, gazing up at him with complete adoration. Her gaze slid to me. "Something happened to my phone and in a blink, I found myself in a partly destroyed city with horrible creatures chasing me. Knave saved me."

"You saved me, mate," he said, leaning over to give her a kiss.

"Something similar happened to me," I said. "One second, I was on Earth, helping in a code—I'm a nurse—and the next moment, I stood on a grassy plain with creatures rushing toward me. Theer's my savior." I hugged him, keeping my arm around the back of his waist.

"A phone again," Sage said, frowning. "I can't imagine how they could send us to another galaxy, but what else can I believe?"

"I wonder if other phones have done the same thing?" I asked.

“Perhaps,” Theer said. “Or this could be the hand of fate, sending you and Sage to the males who will love you above all others.”

Sage grinned at Theer and hugged Knave. “That must be it.”

We left the space station and traveled to Sage and Knave’s home, where we stayed a few days before traveling to the rural area where Theer lived. He had a gorgeous home, and all his neighbors stopped by not only to stare in curiosity at me, but to make me feel welcome.

If I didn’t still miss my dad, my life would be complete.

We were even expecting our first child. He or she would be delivered not long after we returned home.

“When we land, I’ll go with you, cloaked, of course,” Theer said.

His government had helped us so much, first by tracking down Earth, second by loaning us this ship and all the supplies we’d need to reach my planet, and thirdly, by giving Theer the latest tech that would make him appear as human as me.

And if he was willing to come with us, my father would have a new home on Trulene. I’d accepted he might not choose to return with us. No matter what, I’d have one more chance to see him. I’d be able to reassure him that I lived, and he’d see that my mate, Theer, loved me.

We burst through the outer atmosphere and floated slowly toward Earth. We’d had to scramble to figure out the coordinates, but while orbiting the planet, we’d used the computer to zone in on where my dad lived inland from Belfast, Maine.

My heart surged up into my throat when Theer landed the ship in the big field behind Dad’s house. Cloaked, he wouldn’t see it. If he stepped outside, though it was dark out, so I doubted he would, he might run right into it. That would give him a surprise.

I hoped seeing me would be an even better surprise.

Once Theer had shut down the very quiet engines, we released our restraints and left the bridge, striding through the ship to the hatch. A soft whoosh, and he’d released it. We waited as it slowly descended to the ground.

“Stay here, Damon,” I whispered, though I wasn’t sure why I kept my voice low. No one would hear me in the backwoods of Maine.

Theer took my hand as we walked down the ramp to the ground.

“It’s so different from Trulene,” he said, gazing around in wonder. “The air . . .”

“Stinks, right?” A shrill laugh shot up my throat.

“I would never be so impolite as to tell you your former home smells unpleasant.”

“You don’t have to.” Funny how, when I lived here, I didn’t realize how poor the air quality was. The residents of Trulene had long since learned it was important to preserve their environment. You could drink the water anywhere, and no one would get sick from the air.

I gazed toward the back of the house, noting the light on in the kitchen. He’d left it on since Mom died, and he once told me he kept hoping her ghost would see it and she’d stop by. We both missed her greatly.

With a nod and a deep breath, I continued across the lawn, holding Theer’s hand, and stepped up onto the small back deck. Should I knock? It seemed odd to do so when in the past, I’d always walked right in.

I tested the knob, finding it locked.

“Alright,” I said, my voice getting stronger. I lifted my hand and knocked.

I knocked again when no one answered.

What if he wasn’t home?

Then I saw his shadow cross the kitchen.

When he reached the door, he tucked aside the curtain and peered through the glass panel.

Shock filled his eyes, followed by the glimmer of tears. He wrenched the door open and tumbled out onto the deck, engulfing me in his arms.

“Dad,” I cried, wrapping my arms around him. “Dad.”

“Jillian. My Jillian.” He held me a long time before leaning back in my embrace to study my face. “Where have you been? I thought . . .”

“I’m sorry.” I knew what he’d thought, that something horrible had happened to me. “Can we come in? I’d rather explain inside.”

“We?” he asked, frowning as he peered around. “I don’t see anyone else here with you. But sure. Come on inside. You know you don’t need to ask. This is your home. Always will be.”

I stepped into the kitchen with him and shut the door.

“Come on into the living room. I was just watching a hockey game, but I’ll turn it off. You’ve been gone so long.” Dad paused in the hallway, his shoulders curling forward. “I was worried, honey. So much.”

“I came back as soon as I could. I’m sorry. If I could’ve called you, I would’ve.”

He took me into the living room, and we sat.

“So, where have you been?” he asked, leaning forward, bracing his palms on his knees.

I told him how my phone did something that, to this day, I still didn’t understand. How it sent me to an alien planet. How Theer saved me from the creatures and how we escaped and traveled to his world.

“Aliens, Jillian?” my dad said, his eyebrows shooting up. Shaking his head, he pressed his back against his chair. “Did you sustain a head injury? That must be it. You were hit in the head, and you’ve had amnesia. Only recently have you remembered who you are.” He slapped his palms on his thighs. “Don’t worry about that, then. I’m sure it’s common to be confused after something like that. We’re going to get you the help you need. I promise.”

“There really are aliens out there, Dad,” I said with a grin. “I didn’t hit my head, and I’ve been aware of everything since my phone did . . . Well, whatever happened.”

“How can it be true?” he said, tilting his head. “I want to believe, but you must realize how wild this sounds.”

“Would it help if you met my mate?” I asked, laughter bubbling up in my throat.

“Mate?” Dad frowned. “They use that term in Australia for a good friend, don’t they?”

“He’s a good friend, too, but he’s now my husband. We call each other mates; that’s the term they use on Trulene, his home planet.”

“Honey,” Dad said, and I could tell he was still struggling to understand but that he’d decided to indulge me. “You know this isn’t true. Please. Let me get you help.”

“Tell you what,” I said, squeezing Theer’s hand, the signal we’d agreed on back on the ship.

He turned off the cloaking device and appeared beside me on the sofa. Though he was so big, he dwarfed it.

Dad gasped. His jaw dropped. With widening eyes, he stood before slumping back down onto his recliner.

My heart filled with joy.

I was with my dad, reassuring him I still lived, and now my two favorite males in the world would meet. If things went well, we’d soon be on our

way back to Trulene with Dad. If he wanted to remain here, we'd try to visit, though it might not be for a few years.

"Now do you believe me, Dad?" I said, leaning into Theer's side. "This is Theer, my mate. Theer? I'd like you to meet my dad."

"It is nice to meet you," Theer said in the broken English I'd taught him. If Dad came with us, we'd insert a translator implant. "I want you to know that I love your daughter."

Dad's wide eyes traveled from me to Theer and back again. "It's all true?" he gulped out.

"Very much so." I grinned, my eyes filling with tears. I looked up at Theer, my love, my mate. "We can't wait to tell you all about our adventure."

I hope you enjoyed Ravaged Realm.

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Nailing the Alien!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ava Ross is a *USA Today* Bestselling author of numerous titles. She fell for men with unusual features when she first watched Star Wars, where alien creatures have gone mainstream. She lives in New England with her husband (who is sadly not an alien, though he is still cute in his own way), her kids, and a few assorted pets.

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NAILING THE ALIEN

My short-term construction job with a grumpy orc boss just got complicated.

Desperate to escape the clutches of the alien lizard mafia, I accept a spur-of-the-moment job offer on a distant planet. A monstrous, grumpy alien orc is building a new home in a distant colony, and he's looking for an assistant.

He needs me to hold his hammer. I get it. It's a big hammer.

He's a lonely barbarian brute with a gruff exterior, but I soon learn that inside he's hiding a squishy center. When he unexpectedly enters his mating frenzy, there's no one around to handle the job . . . except me. He gives me two options—return home or stay and help him with a whole different kind of nailing . . .

Nailing the Alien is Book 1 in the Beastly Alien Boss Series. Each features a rough and ready alien who can't resist falling for his fated mate.

Scroll for Chapter 1...

CORA

I raced through the street with three Vessars snapping at my heels. My sneakers slammed on the cracked concrete, and I barely avoided placing my foot in something dead, flat, and slimy.

This was my damn cousin's fault. If he were around, I'd load him in a rocket launcher and shoot him all the way to the Dundire Quadrant.

He bailed from Earth three days ago, taking a one-way shuttle to who knows where, leaving me to clean up his mess. His mess being a sizeable debt owed to the Vessar alien lizard mafia.

They seemed to think they could collect it from me. Haha. I didn't even have enough credits to buy a cup of juva. And if I showed up on my mom's stoop to beg, she'd slam the door in my face. We got along best when we didn't talk or see each other.

As for my dad, I wasn't sure who he was, and Mom wasn't telling.

The Vessars growled, their breath hot on the back of my neck.

"No problem," the Vessar boss had said. "You can payss hisss debt wit youself. I sellsss to someone decent. Promise."

Like I believed his promise?

No can do, dudes. I liked my simple life, and I planned to keep it auction-free. A sale meant slavery to an alien for the rest of my days.

A Vessar's suction-cupped limb snapped out, hitting my right shoulder hard enough that I staggered. I didn't fall, though. I *couldn't* fall. If I did, they'd catch me. Drag me back to the mafia boss.

I'd never be seen again.

Mom wouldn't miss me. My cousin wouldn't know or care. Only a few friends might ask where I was and why I up and left without selling my one-room apartment.

Breaking free of the Vessar, I wrenched forward. I ran faster, fleeing around the corner with enormous city buildings looming around me. Shuttles zipped overhead, low enough that the breeze from their passage made my long hair whip my face. I shoved it aside as I bolted onto the main thoroughfare, shoving people and various aliens aside.

My pace slowed when I reached the lifted sidewalk. I shot a glance over my shoulder. The Vessars followed, their three eyes keeping me in sight. They ignored the goods on display in shops lining the right side of the walk.

If I were lucky, I'd lose them in the open market ahead. They could be relentless, but I had patience and determination. I'd outlast them.

A Vessar came up close behind me, his low hissing voice raking down my spine. "Come wit usssss. We be kind."

Like I'd believe something like that? There was nothing kind about being sold.

"I'm a free citizen," I said, hoping the creature didn't hear the shake in my voice. "This is Jake's problem. You have no right to come after me."

"Gives creditssss for cousin, and we leavessss."

I could drain my account and sign over my next few year's earnings, but what would I use to live on after that? With only a rudimentary education, I couldn't secure a high-paying job. Ten years after moving out of Mom's house at eighteen, and I still wasn't much better off.

"Leave me alone," I said, keeping my voice soft. While some might rush to my defense if I screamed, others would crowd around and cheer while the Vessar mafia minions pinned me down and tied me up.

A suckered limb coiled around my arm. Bold of him, but no one was looking this way.

After prying the suction cups off my arm, I broke into a jog, darting around couples strolling and families pausing to gape through shop windows.

A sign ahead, Intergalactic Employment Agency, drew my eye. I wasn't looking for a job, but I could hide inside until the Vessars gave up and slunk away.

Maybe it was time I sold my apartment and moved to a distant colony. If I took care with my trail, the Vessars wouldn't be able to follow.

When I stepped inside the Agency, a monotone chime rang out overhead. A flat, disc-like hover computer zipped from the back room and hovered close to my face.

“Recognition proceeding,” it said.

I struggled not to cringe. It would record that I’d been here and—

Tiny lights flashed behind its dark view screen. “Cora Marie Westmore has been entered into the database. I am now sorting for available positions that fit your experience.”

“Thank you, um . . . I’m not sure I’m truly looking for a job, but I’m open to exploring possibilities.” That sounded neutral enough.

I nudged the droid to the side and glanced through the clear plexi behind me. The Vessars were fuming on the walk, their dusky blue cheeks darkening. They flailed their limbs, smacking those who passed by. I doubted they’d dare enter the building, since they’d been forbidden to interfere in matters of general commerce.

They didn’t leave as I’d hoped, however. One leaned against a metal post on the opposite side of the walk, and the other two smooshed their faces against the plexi, keeping me in sight.

Did this place have a back door I could escape through?

“Do you have live personnel working today?” I asked. Anything to delay this process. If I remained here for hours, the Vessars might give up.

“I can page someone,” the droid said. “However, I am well programmed and delighted to share job options with you. I note in your bio that you have considerable construction experience.”

If you could count the carpenter’s assistant job that I’d done for four years in my early twenties. The job was on Stellar 4, and despite the filter dome overhead, I’d gotten sunburned. As a bonus, I’d also gained ripped muscles, though I wasn’t sure they’d hung around for long after I quit.

“Yes,” I said when lights flashed behind the droid’s view screen. It continued to hover in front of my face. “I do have construction experience. I’ve done all kinds of jobs, actually.”

“Delightful. We have five positions open within this quadrant that suit your skills.”

“What about,” another look outside showed the damn Vessars still waiting. A growl ripped through me. How long would it take for them to give up?

“Two of these positions ask that the applicant arrive immediately,” the droid continued. “A shuttle will transport you directly from here.”

I frowned. “Like, *here*, here?”

“That is correct.”

“What about my apartment?” I’d worked hard to buy it. I wouldn’t abandon it to whoever chose to claim it.

“It would be secured until you returned.”

“And my current job?”

“We have applicants waiting for this type of position.”

It only paid a few credits more than minimum wage, but times were tough. No one was irreplaceable.

If I accepted a position off world, I’d escape the Vessars. I could arrange for my property to be sold and the credits deposited in my account. I wouldn’t have to return to this city, and if I was lucky, the Vessars wouldn’t discover where I’d gone.

The Vessars couldn’t threaten a droid to give up this kind of information.

My mood perked up.

“Tell me more about the openings,” I said.

“The first is in the Tricar Quadrant and involves—”

“Nope.”

“Excuse me?” It whirled backward, huffing with pretend dismay.

Really, these droids were too lifelike. Creepy even. That’s what the government wanted: friendly computers to make life pleasant for us citizens.

“The Tricar Quadrant is an icy wasteland,” I said.

“The position pays well.”

And we all knew why. “Tell me about the second position.”

“A construction assistant position with a colony manager on planet Merth 4X7, helping build their residence.”

A house on a distant colony, then. “I don’t think I’ve heard of Merth . . .”

“4X7 is located in the Sebula Quadrant. A different individual had been hired for this position, but they abruptly backed out before the task could be concluded.” The droid grumbled, though they didn’t have true feelings. They were just programmed to act like they did.

It launched into a spiel to sell the job. “Merth 4X7 is an agricultural planet with three colonies, primarily growing hemp. Indigenous populations, none. Settlers, three thousand twenty-two, though few reside in the colony with this position. Water, potable. Air, breathable. Gravity is

approximate to this planet. As far as the employer, the last to hold this position reported he—”

“The job sounds perfect,” I jumped in to say as Vessar claws scraped down the plexi behind me. Would they be that daring?

With only the droid present, they might. I doubted a machine working at an employment agency was programmed to provide defense. The government wouldn’t expect them to need something like that.

Nope, the droid would either watch while the Vessars took me, and then say nothing, or protest only to be reprogrammed by the lizard mafia to forget what happened.

“I’ll take the second position,” I said. “Transport me now.”

“Of course,” the droid said. A thin panel projected from beneath its viewing screen. “Please sign here.”

I scrawled my name.

A hum erupted in the back of the small room, and a transport pod thumped down against the floor, coming to a stop. The hatch peeled open across the front.

“You will be transported in suspension, as Merth 4X7 is twenty-seven-point-two light years from Earth,” the droid said.

Lovely. I’d only traveled in suspension a few times, and I’d been dizzy when I woke up. Still, this job would get me off Earth and away from the Vessar lizard mafia, hopefully forever.

“What’s my boss’s name?” I asked.

The droid paused, then spit it out. “Kreelevar Nohmal Trirag Grikohr.”

“Say that one fast.”

“Excuse me?”

The Vessars jangled the front door handle.

“It doesn’t matter.” Panic lifted my voice. “Get me out of here. Now.”

The door slammed opened, and the Vessars tumbled into the room, slipping on the tiles, and falling to the floor in a scramble of tangled, suction cup limbs.

“Of course,” the droid said, glancing at the Vessars. “I will be with you shortly once I’ve made arrangements for this human.” It turned back to me. “Thank you for stopping by. We at the Intergalactic Employment Agency appreciate your enthusiasm.”

“Yeah, that’s it. I’m wicked excited.” I rushed to the pod and jumped inside. The hatch closed, and straps looped across my body, then tightened.

A pinch on my arm was followed by my head spinning.

The Vessars clawed across the room, their limbs reaching toward me.

“Haha. You lose,” I shouted, though I doubted they’d hear through the plexi shuttle lid.

My laugh echoed around me as the pod shot up through the chute, leaving the Vessars and my cousin’s debt behind.

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