



Her Alien Harmony

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Are you looking for a quick escape to another world with a little steam and a lot of plot? Check out each standalone, interconnected book in the Alien Quickies series. Each story can be read in under two hours!

Drayvens quest for inspiration leads him to Earth, where he encounters Gerri, a human artist searching for her place in the world. Their fateful meeting at a state park sparks a connection neither can deny.

As Drayven watches Gerri paint, he feels an irresistible pull, realizing shes his destined mate. However, he hides his true identity to avoid scaring her away.

When Gerri invites Drayven to join her in creating a mural, his disguise falters, revealing his alien form. Though terrified and hurt, Gerris heart softens as she sees the truth in his eyes and the beauty in his actions. Drayven admits he needs this human to help design a generational starship that will allow his people to return home.

Will they create a living masterpiece with their love or doom themselves to their past?

Total Pages (Source): 10

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:49 am

“ Watch yourself before you fall into the lava, idiot,” said Garen, yanking on the collar of my shirt.

I froze with one foot hanging in the air fifty rugars— about forty Earth feet—above a magma lake. The liquid fire below bubbled and popped. Its scorching sulfuric scent tainted the thin oxygen with an acrid stench.

“What is wrong with you, Drayven? Is Baraxen working you too hard on the Perseverance ?” Amusement tinged Garen’s words.

“Rorian’s beard, that was close.” With a relieved breath, I backed from the cliff of death and wiped my brow and horns, giving my friend a nod. “Something like that.”

That godsdamned ship is seriously going to be the death of me. Being the chief Volderen engineer of the ship that would eventually take our people home, every design diagram had to be examined and approved by me. Now that Baraxen and Voren had returned with the human savior named Lilly, a renewed fervor for completing the vessel had spread through the colony.

“Well,” he said, turning to glance at the dark tunnel leading upward to the harsh surface of Mars. He jerked a thumb upward, where the beginnings of Perseverance’s frame a few floors above. “She may not be pretty, but she’ll do her job.”

“No, she is not pretty .” My tone came out harsher than I’d intended. “But she will nurture and protect future generations of Volderen families long enough to return to Voldera.”

Garen raised his eyebrows, and his violet skin flushed even darker. “I meant no offense, Drayven.”

Sighing, I patted his shoulder and deflated. “I know. It is just...” I lifted an arm and ran a finger along the tip of my horn, collecting my thoughts. “How she looks should not matter, but a ship needs to be more than just functional. It should not only protect its people but sustain the mind and prepare us for what the future holds. Traveling amongst the stars for decades on end will get boring and uninspiring.”

Garen chuckled. “You mean inspiration as in battle? I don’t think that will be a problem. We were bred for war.”

“No. I mean inspiration such as creativity, art, things that take one’s breath away with a glance, that ignite a yearning in the soul.”

He quirked an eyebrow, his sharp teeth peeking behind a bewildered smile. “I will never understand you. When most Volderens were holding a sword or blaster in their sixth year, you were concerned with the beauty of the weapons and how they were designed.”

“What is so wrong with that? Why can function not have beauty? We lost something in our heritage when we left Voldera all those eons ago. In our ongoing quest to save ourselves, we have forgotten how to create, to inspire, to truly live.” I tapped the band around my wrist bearing an ugly strip of metal—my lifecord—which allowed me to communicate with my crew and other useful functions. “Like these. They heal, connect us to the fleet, translate all the languages of Earth, and even change our appearances, yet they look similar to a manacle forged by a human blacksmith from medieval times. Why do we not make their function beautiful and meaningful?”

Garen shook his head and turned, heading up the slope and toward a recessed hallway branching into the underground hub of living quarters. “Maybe you should take some

time off and visit Earth, find some of that beauty you love so much.” A quiet chuckle rumbled in his chest.

Is he mocking me because I have never visited the planet, or out of his distaste for all things human?

It didn't matter. I had been made fun of before. He was not wrong. I had enjoyed taking things apart to learn their purpose and marvel at their intricacies, always wondering how creators were inspired to make them in the first place.

“Maybe I will,” I yelled at his retreating back.

He raised his hand but did not turn. “Sure you will, Drayven Sure you will.”

With determination, I stalked to the lift, which would take me upward near the surface where small, personal ships called Sparrows slept in hangars.

He is right. It is time I finally left this rusty ball of red rock. Next month would mark my fortieth Earth year, and it was high time I took a vacation. After all, a few days of respite would not be much of a setback with Perseverance . My team and I had been working on it for the past five years, and now that the frame had been fabricated, the intricate details of the inside would be hashed out with the other engineers, which would take another five years if we were lucky.

A flutter of excitement flowed through my veins as I arrived at the lift. I pressed my fingers against the lock to confirm my identity and rank. I am going to do this. I am really going to do this.

With a quiet hiss, the metal door slid upward into the ceiling, and I stepped inside. A slight sensation of traveling upward passed within two seconds, and the door opened. I followed a bright blue pathway of lights leading into the hangar, where forty or so

Sparrows waited for anyone with clearance to fire them up.

“Captain Drayven?” Ryllian, the lone lieutenant on duty, held a data pad in one hand and stared at me, his green eyes wide. “Can I help you?”

I smiled. “Yes, you can. I need a ship readied for a two- or three-day trip to Earth.”

“Oh, okay. I did not see you on the roster for today.” He swiped a finger across the data pad’s screen. “Unless I missed it, which is always possible.”

“This is a private mission for information on the generational ship design.” A droplet of sweat formed on my forehead.

Why am I worried? It is not like Baraxen would deny me a Sparrow. The military fleet does not use them for defense. They are mainly for civilians.

“Uh, maybe I should just double check that you’re authorized—”

“Lieutenant,” I barked, seeing my spontaneous quest about to shatter into a dream. How Garen will laugh and tell me he’d known I did not have the guts to visit the planet . “Are you questioning an order from Major Baraxen?”

Ryllian straightened, his eyes staring straight ahead, years of training activated with just the tone of my voice. “N-no sir. Not at all, sir.”

“Good.” I felt bad pulling rank, but if I had to wait to get clearance from Baraxen, that would take at least another ten minutes and honestly? I was afraid I would change my mind. Humans fascinated and terrified me. They were capable of such beauty...yet such destruction. “I am taking a Sparrow and will be back in seventy-two hours. You can notify Major Baraxen once I leave. Understood?”

The younger Volderen nodded.

I sprinted to the closest Sparrow, its number marked in our language as 42 , then peered at Ryllian. “Is this one green to go?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Thank you.” I bid him goodbye with a quick touch of my fingers to my chest, a silent gesture to convey strength and kinship.

He responded with the same gesture, gave a half bow, then turned his attention to the hangar bay controls that would deactivate the force shield protecting the bay.

I boarded the vessel, which prompted the AI to activate interior lights and start-up protocols. Behind me, the ramp lifted upward, creating an airtight seal.

Walking past the tiny sleeping nook and two passenger seats, I settled into the pilot’s chair and issued commands in my native tongue to start calculating a flight path.

With a quick tap on the lifecord, I adjusted it to project an image of a male human with short, black hair, an average physique, and a bland face. Though I did not plan on interacting with humans, I would keep my true identity safe and land outside of a small city and keep the Sparrow stealthed. If I knew what I was looking for, that would help.

A map of Earth filled the view screen. I squinted, my vision traveling over the land masses. So many cultures and people, how could I choose?

“Computer, put me in a park near a compact city.” I had always enjoyed reading and watching the history of humans, so why not immerse myself in their culture? Between my lifecord’s information and what I had learned from others, I would be

able to navigate their world effortlessly.

The computer chose a little town in Texas called Barkley, and I approved my course.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:49 am

I sat next to the campfire, enjoying the mild temperature. April nights in central Texas didn't require extra heat, but my canvas did. Smoke spiraled upward, filling the air with the scent of burning oakwood.

Glancing above, I smiled at the simple, warm LED bulbs strung across the site. Between their glow and the fire, even at night, I could see well enough to make the images of the world come to life with a few strokes of my brushes.

"Hmm." I tapped the thin, wooden end of a fan brush against my chin. "What's missing?" With a sigh, I leaned into my camping chair and watched the stars twinkle against a black blanket of sky. The trees, with their slim, sharp needles and triangular tops, seemed to point to the heavens.

I gave my painting another critical eye. It's missing something, but what? It matched my view above almost exactly, but it still felt unfocused. Maybe something in the foreground? Gray smoke winding through the air?

The fire crackled, sending a spray of embers bursting high, then falling onto the rocky ground. "I need to give it up. I've got a long day of painting tomorrow." With one last sigh, I stood and stretched, then placed my brush into a cup of water to soak overnight. The fire would burn itself out while I crashed on the twin mattress in the bed of my truck. My life might not have been glamorous with an ancient Ford truck as my home, but it beat living on the streets.

Been there, done that, bought the t-shirt.

One day, I'd have enough saved to buy a place of my own. One day. But until then,

I'd keep moving and taking whatever jobs came my way. Freedom—my number one motivator—would always trump the bindings of staying in one place for too long.

Snap.

The noise, possibly the cracking of a stick, came from the far side of camp near the tree line.

I stilled, cocking my head to listen. The song of the crickets disappeared, but a radio blasting at another camp didn't. The hackles on my neck stiffened, and a shiver ran across my skin.

Maybe it's nothing, or an animal. Get moving, Gerri.

Obeying my inner voice, I grabbed the small cylinder of Mace from my front jeans pocket, keeping my attention on the trees with their dark, secret spaces between the trunks.

Another snapping, shuffling sound, closer this time.

Not an animal, unless it's a bear. Did this part of Texas even have bears? I'm supposed to make a lot of noise to scare them away. That's what I'd read in one of the many state park brochures I'd collected over the years.

I slapped my denim-clad leg with my free hand. "Who's there?" My voice shook, but I held my ground, carefully unlocking the tiny canister's tab with my thumb, just in case.

Someone cleared their throat, the sound distinctly male.

"Don't come any closer. I'm armed." I held my hand toward the dark trees, the metal

cylinder pointed toward the general area of the noise.

Not a bear, but a man. A gun would be super useful here, Gerri. Why don't you have one?

I'd never gathered the courage to own a gun. My stepfather had tormented me with his silver pistol when I was ten. 'I could pull this trigger, blast your fucking brains all over the wall, and your mother would never know.' Cold metal had kissed my temple as he'd threatened me, and I'd always squeezed my eyes shut, never knowing if that would be the day I'd die. The mere thought of touching a gun drenched me in cold sweat.

Get it together. Now's not the time to relive the past.

"Hello." A tall person stepped from between two tree trunks, their shoulders wide.

Definitely a guy.

"Get back," I shouted, my thumb ready to unleash pepper hell on anyone and anything.

Though I could only see his silhouette, it was enough to show him holding up his hands. "I do not wish to be harmed." Shining eyes peeked from the dark.

"Stay there or I'll shoot."

"I will not hurt you." He had an odd way of speaking, putting inflections on letters that weren't normally emphasized.

"What're you doing over there, creeping up on me like that?" I wanted to run to the cab of my truck and lock myself inside, but that would mean turning my back.

He took a step forward, clearing the trees, then stopped. “Your creation.” He pointed to my painting. “It is beautiful.”

I narrowed my gaze. “How in the hell can you see it all the way over there?” How long has he been spying on me? A chill crept across my skin.

“I see it with my eyes, just like you.” He nodded once. “May I come closer?”

“No.” True panic began fluttering its wings inside my chest. “Go back to your own camp and leave me alone.” I wasn't sure if he was a psycho or just overly friendly, but I had no desire to find out. I'd been alone since Roger, my stepdad, kicked me out nineteen years ago and I liked it that way. No one to answer to, no one to love, no one to hurt.

He frowned. With those two steps he'd made, I could see his face a little better. He sported a buzz cut. Could he be in the military?

No, there's something strange about the way he moves, like water dancing over rocks.

“I apologize. It is not my intention to scare you. I am not familiar with your ways.” He held out his hands. “I will leave.” Nodding, he swiveled around and walked back to the clump of trees separating each camp.

There'd been a flash of something in his eyes. Disappointment? Shame? Sadness? My intuition told me he was lost—or disoriented, at least.

Don't do it. You don't know him from Adam. You're an unarmed woman who doesn't even own a cell phone. The chances of someone hearing your screams are fifty-fifty.

But my intuition had never failed me, not since that night all those years ago. It had kept me alive in my teen years as I'd survived on the streets, under the underpasses, and the wooded lots outside the city. There had been times where others had shown me how to keep warm, what dumpsters held the best food scraps, how to protect myself when I slept. What if this stranger needed help? Could I refuse?

I cleared my throat. "What campsite you staying at?" I lowered the mace and stepped closer to the light. Unfortunately, due to it being night and my clumsy ass, I tripped over a rotten piece of wood I'd collected for the firepit. Reflexes made my hands stretch outward as I fell toward the yellow and orange blaze with its merry glow.

I didn't even have time to yell. A flash of my soon-to-be melted face and clawed hands raced through my brain. I don't want to burn. The heat intensified as I fell in slow motion. I squeezed my eyelids shut, dreading the ensuing agony.

Instead of being scoured in burning flames, though, strong arms wrapped around my torso and yanked me to my feet. "Are you okay?" His breath smelled of iron and mint—a strange combination, but not unpleasant.

I clawed at his shirt; my eyes bouncing from his muscled chest to the burning logs, not quite believing I hadn't been seared.

He grabbed my wrists and gently pushed me away, his gaze scouring me from head to toe. "Did I hurt you?"

"What? No. No, not at all." I jerked my hands from his grip. "Thank you. If you hadn't—"

"Stop." He waved a hand in dismissal. "I could argue the fact that had I not stumbled into your home, you would not have been startled and therefore would not have tripped."

I laughed. Not because what he said was funny, but because I felt such relief at being saved. Normally, people—especially those I'd never seen before—made me extremely wary. But this guy? He'd kept me from burning, or at least from smashing my brains on a rock or breaking my wrist.

"I'm Gerri. Gerri Johnson." I offered my hand.

With a tilt of his head, he presented his hand but didn't reach toward mine. "I am Drayven Narax."

We stood that way for a few seconds, our fingertips only inches apart.

"You're supposed to shake my hand." I smiled. Maybe the endorphin release at being saved caused giddiness to settle in my belly. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"Not exactly." He clasped my hand in his, his fingers against my palm and shook it, as if giving me an up and down high five.

What the hell... I shifted my hand and angled it so the tender skin between our thumbs met. "This is a handshake. You know, the thing we do in greeting. I dunno what the hell that was."

Even in the semi-dark, his neck flushed a violent red.

"That is not a greeting." He pulled his arm away and stuck his hands into the back pockets of his cargo pants. "Where I come from, we touch the tips of our fingers together, signifying we are one in that moment."

"That sounds weird and sweet." I tried not to stare, but I was enthralled. He spoke strangely and seemed clueless when it came to handshakes. "Where are you from? I can't place your accent."

“My accent?” He touched a thick bracelet on his wrist. “I was not aware I had an accent.”

“It’s faint, but it’s there.” I opened the tailgate to my truck, then dug around in the cooler next to my mattress. “Wanna beer?”

“A beer?”

“Yeah, a beer. Yes or no?”

“Y-yes.”

Pulling out two cans of Bud from their icy, watery bath, I shut the lid and turned.

He seemed so lost, so out of place. Like me. No home, no family, just odd jobs to get me from one day to the next.

But I didn’t know his situation, not truly. Momma had always said my imagination had no limits. As usual, when I thought of her, a heavy sadness fell around my shoulders. Why did she leave me with Roger? Had I not shown her enough love? Did I make her leave? I knew these questions should’ve been stupid, especially at my age, yet the always lingered.

With a deep, focused breath, I shrugged the depression away. Now’s not the time to rehash the past. I tossed a can to Drayven. “Catch.”

His hand shot up so fast I blinked twice to make sure I wasn’t hallucinating. Nope. He’s quick as a cat. I’m lucky for that, I suppose, otherwise I’d be on my way to the hospital.

“So, where ya staying?” I rolled an old tree stump closer to him and pointed, then sat

in my chair and popped the top of my can. The yeasty taste slid down my throat. “Ah, that’s good.”

His eyes watched my mouth as I took another swig, then his attention followed my throat. When he caught me watching him, he jerked his gaze to my face. “I am not staying here, just visiting.” With a quick glance at the old stump, he sat, his spine erect. Tilting the can to the side, he read the label. “I have never tried al-co-hol .”

The puzzlement on his face made me chuckle. “I don’t drink it often, but every now and again, I enjoy one after a long day of work.”

He pulled at the tab, and my attention flickered to his long, slender fingers. “So, Gerri Johnson, what is your occupation?” The can fizzed briefly, then he held it to his lips and chugged the entire thing in one gulp.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “I mostly paint.” He’s going to get one hell of a rush when the alcohol hits his bloodstream.

He licked his lips and grimaced. “Beer is not good.”

“There are people who would argue that.” I grinned. “And I have to admit it was an acquired taste for me.”

“So, your occupation is painting.” He pointed to my unfinished canvas. “Like that?”

“I wish.” I see-sawed the can back and forth in my grasp, enjoying the cold, wet condensation collecting on the outside of the aluminum. “I don’t really like to be in one place for too long, so I stay at parks and look for small painting jobs in the area. It’s easy to find work most of the time.”

“What happened to your home?”

I shrugged. “My stepdad was a prick and kicked me out at seventeen, even though the house was in my mom’s name.” I craned my head toward my camper. “But you know what? It wasn’t really a home even then. My truck is all the home I want. Everything worked out for the best.” At least, that’s what I always tell myself.

A line formed between his brows. “I think I can understand how you feel. I have never even seen my home.”

“What? That makes no sense. How can you have a home you’ve never seen?” Drayven was definitely an oddball, but I felt comfortable around him. Normally, I couldn’t stand to be near people. In a matter of minutes, he’d piqued my interest with his strange accent and even stranger comments.

“Perhaps I misspoke.” He set the empty can on the dirt and propped an elbow on his thigh, setting his chin into his hand to stare at the fire. “I do have a place to live, but it is not my home. We have finally accomplished our goal after many, many years. Now, we are turning our attention to the journey back to whence we came.” His face tipped up to the stars. “And I must ensure we get there in one piece with sound minds. We are pragmatic and serious, which is great for the short term, but the voyage promises to be long and dull. I came here to find inspiration for my design, to breathe life into a sterile environment, to bring beauty to bleakness.”

He talks like a scientist or a doctor.

“You said your people? Are you a refugee?” Sometimes a city would be designated as a haven for refugees from other countries. Though he doesn’t really come across like he’s from a different country. I didn’t add this thought, though, because I didn’t wish to dive any deeper into what he’d said. A tiny niggling festered at the back of my mind, that he was something other than human, and I shut down the thought.

Overactive imagination, just as Momma had always proclaimed.

My words must've broken him from his reverie, because he swiveled his attention to me and grinned. Though his face was handsome, something in his smile seemed tight, strained. "I doubt you would have heard of my people. We keep to ourselves."

"Fair enough. Well," I stood. "Thank you for not letting me fall into the fire. I've got an early day tomorrow, so..."

"Oh, yes." He rose to his six foot and a half height. "Thank you for the beer. It was...interesting."

I gave a genuine laugh. "You're welcome. If you're still here tomorrow, swing by for dinner. I make some mean grilled hotdogs." Wait. What did I just do? Why did I invite him to join me for dinner? That's the beer talking, you idiot. I immediately poured the rest out of the can onto the thirsty ground.

"That would be wonderful. Can you teach me how to paint?"

My mouth opened and closed in the manner of a fish gulping for air.

"I am sorry. Brax always says I am his most impulsive engineer."

Engineer? I put a hand on my hip and gave my new acquaintance a closer look. His jeans, though faded, didn't have a smudge of dirt and his button-down shirt hung straight, no creases or signs of distress from spending a day in the woods.

So, not a doctor, but an engineer. It explained why he spoke with such intelligence. Good for him. I hadn't even finished high school.

He pursed his lips. "Perhaps another day, then. Goodbye, Gerri Johnson. It truly has been a pleasure to meet such an interesting, beautiful woman."

An urge to apologize for my silence, to tell him of course I'd love to teach him art, rose within, but then I squashed it down. Maybe it's better this way. I'd been on my own for years. No sense in screwing it up now. And if I was lucky, he'd forget about the dinner invitation I'd so blatantly given out.

"Goodnight, Drayven." Without another glance his way, I pivoted and kicked dirt over the flames, helping the fire to die down before I went to sleep.

I felt his eyes on my back for another thirty seconds or so, then the sound of crunching rocks under his feet until they faded into the distance.

A little part inside of me regretted my sudden coldness. It's what I'm good at—driving people away. The fewer people in my life means the fewer chances of being hurt.

With a heavy heart, I pulled out my traveling backpack, retrieved my toothbrush, and started my wind-down process before sleeping.

It's better this way. Really.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:49 am

I nstead of transporting to my ship, I walked through the trees. Even though the gravity of Earth was stronger than Mars, I enjoyed the extra pull on my muscles. According to the old-timers, Voldera could have been the sister to Earth in almost every way. This reminder should have kept me focused on the reason I had gone on this lone adventure, but Gerri Johnson had not been what I had expected of humans.

Most Volderens who had been to Earth were not impressed with humanity, citing arrogance, selfishness, and laziness. But Gerri?

I had sensed none of that in her. Maybe standoffish, but I could understand. I read their social media chatter about human men and bears, and if the females felt safer with wild animals, it completely explained her hesitation.

Now back at the Sparrow, I ascended the ramp and made my way to the cockpit. A message light blinked on the console and I frowned. I bet I know who that's from.

Seating myself in the chair, I tapped the screen. The message started with a recording of Baraxen. "I did not give you authorization to visit Earth. You are putting yourself in grave danger. If the US military gets their hands on another one of our ships..." He took a long breath and closed his bright eyes. "You know the consequences. I expect more from you, Drayven. We need you on Mars working on the Perseverence . The countdown clock is ticking. The sooner we can leave, the better. It's not only humans we should be worried about. We have detected strange signals over the past few days that are not from Earth. You have sixteen hours to get your ass back. Do not make me send Voren. You know how he is. Out."

The monitor went dark.

I reached up and rubbed one of my horns, the unblemished surface against my fingertip a self-soothing gesture. Even though I looked human thanks to the lifecord, I could still feel my true body.

Sixteen hours. Okay, I can live with that. I glanced at the time on the device, which was synced to Earth time. As long as I get into orbit by two tomorrow afternoon, I should be safe from Brax's grumpy brother, Voren.

And he has a point. I am risking myself and this ship every moment I stay.

These thoughts did not deter me, though. My people's return hinged on something I needed from Earth, something I instinctively knew Gerri Johnson possessed.

An image of her rose in my mind. Her hair, dark with tight curls, had caught the firelight when she had turned her head, reminding me of some of the early paintings I had seen in our database of what humans called fairies. Do not forget about those lips, either. Plump and full, my thoughts jumbled when she spoke because I could not stop imagining how she would taste.

My dick throbbed and pushed against my pants. When her voice reached my ears, a profound sense of calm had washed over me and something in my head rang, like the distant gong of a bell. I had discovered my destined partner.

Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do about it. Even if she did find me attractive, it did not matter. She had not seen Drayven Naxar the Volderen. Gerri had seen Drayven the human. Our first meeting had been based on a lie, and I did not know how that could be mended.

Stop thinking about it. Take a few hours to rest, then look at it again in the morning.

Nodding, I rose and moved to the small area beside the cockpit, equipped with an

area for overnight stays, and laid down, even though I was not sure I could sleep after such an unusual, exciting meeting.

I shut my eyelids.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The high-pitched squawk of my lifecords alarm pierced through the lovely dream I had been having, which involved me on top of Gerri Johnson and kissing her neck.

“Godsdamn it. Shut up. I am awake,” I said in Volderen.

The lifecord’s alarm turned off.

I glanced through the viewscreen to a glorious sight.

Slanting rays from the sunrise pierced through the gaps between the pine trees, creating beautiful orange and yellow glows. A light scattering of clouds reflected the pink and orange glow of the light, and flocks of birds flew over the treetops.

“So much color in this world.” As much as I longed to explore the park and the city, a deeper urge pulled at me.

Gerri.

I primed the engines of the Sparrow and verified stealth mode was still active, and lifted the ship into the air, pivoting and flying near Gerri’s camp.

Because Volderen crafts were completely undetectable, not even wind stirred the tops of the trees as I hovered in the air.

She sat in the same chair from last night, lifting a spoon to her mouth, obviously eating breakfast from a tiny container. Standing, she walked the container to the trash, set the spoon in a metal bin filled with water, and got into the vehicle that served as her home.

Her way of life mystified me. Volderens cherished a home, however small, but this woman lived without constraint. The idea of having no ties—no oaths—tempted me for a moment. How wonderful to live freely on a planet, to only worry about the small things in life, not an entire civilization and its future, to answer to no one but myself.

Yet, I am oath bound to my people. We have not survived four thousand years to become marooned on another planet, even if it is wondrous.

Our ancestors had watched humans become civilized, sometimes even influencing their progress, yet it was not out of benevolence. Our lineage faced extinction without the key to unlocking our DNA anomalies. We had that now thanks to Voren and Lilly, and we were sworn to complete the mission at whatever cost; Voldera's salvation and future rested on our shoulders... my shoulders.

Her truck backed out of its spot, then rumbled through the park and out the gates. Ten minutes later, she reached the outskirts of a little city, which my readout confirmed was Barkley. She pulled into a slanted parking spot in front of a building with a For Sale sign in the window.

I contacted the interface, directing my ship to land in a nearby field.

Once I confirmed stealth mode and my projected image remained that of a human male, I left and strode toward the road she had traversed. The walk, though only about ten minutes, invigorated me.

This air. It is clean, with no smell of filtration or iron dust.

Why had I not visited Earth sooner? My life had been consumed with learning from my elders and designing and maintaining our fleet. No wonder I yearned for beauty and inspiration. The outer husk of a Volderen must be supported from the inside, and that starts with the heart and mind.

As I came upon the building I had seen from the air, I slowed.

Gerri, standing a few steps up on a ladder with an apron filled with paintbrushes tied around her waist, gracefully moved her hand across the red bricks, creating an outline of a flower.

Honk-honk-honk!

I jumped, turning to face the loud noise.

An enormous truck— and eighteen-wheeler if I remember my Earth lessons correctly —swerved into the other lane of traffic to avoid hitting me.

“Get off the road, you stupid jackass,” yelled a heavily bearded man through his open window.

Realizing my blunder, I hastily dashed to the parking area, my heart beating double time.

“Drayven? What...what are you doing here?” Gerri’s firm, sultry voice pulled me out of my shock. “Were you standing in the middle of the road?”

Oh Gods. This is not how I planned to reintroduce myself.

I swiveled and met her gaze, unable to form a coherent thought. Her eyes, a rich mahogany, lasered me with intense focus.

“Uh.” I reached upward and touched a horn. “I-I decided to visit this city called Barkley.”

“At seven o’clock in the morning?” She tucked the paintbrush she held behind her ear. “You aren’t following me, are you?” Her gaze narrowed and her mouth tightened.

Lying had never been my strength. “No. Well, perhaps.” How do I get out of this?

She descended the two rungs of the ladder to the ground, pivoted toward me, and put her hands on her hips. Her stare changed from curious to guarded. “Why?”

I extended my hand. “Please. I am not what you would call a caper. I just needed to see you again.”

“It’s called being a creeper .” Her lips flattened to the point of invisibility. “And that’s just not good enough. Saying you wanted to see me again after last night, when it was you who stumbled on my camp, is giving me major stalker vibes.” She scanned the area behind me. “I’m about this close—” She held her fingers near each other. “—to screaming my damn head off.”

“I do not wish you any harm, Gerri. Honestly, I am perplexed myself. There is something here, in my chest, telling me I need you, and perhaps you need me.” My cheeks burned. I had never spoken this openly about my feelings to anyone. “Now, I understand coming here was a mistake.” Sighing, I turned and started walking back toward the field, mentally scolding myself for not being more discreet, for even going on this wild chase instead of staying on Mars, overseeing the next phase of the multigenerational ship.

She cleared her throat. “Drayven, do you still want to learn how to paint?”

I froze. “Yes.”

“Then get over here before I change my mind.”

Without another word, I reversed my course and trotted back, afraid she would change her mind.

She pointed to the area where she’d been painting. “Stand there and we’ll start the trees. The new owner wants this mural to reflect the wilderness of the area, so I’ll start you on straight lines and we’ll go from there.”

I moved to the front of the blank wall.

She bent, popped the top off a can much larger than last night’s beer, and poured brown paint into a red plastic cup, then handed it to me. “As tall as you are, you won’t need the ladder. Dip the brush like this.” She pushed a brush into her own cup, then turned and touched the wall. “Use a light touch at the top, this will keep the tips pointy, then steadily apply more pressure as you drag it straight down, forming the thicker part of the trunk.”

My mind reeled at how quickly the situation had changed. Maybe she senses it, too, that we are meant to be together. Realizing I still stood in shock, I mimicked her movements, then touched the brush to bricks. Paint dribbled down, so I chased it with the bristles.

Once I reached the foundation, I stood and gave my tree a quick view.

It is horrible. Where her line started thin and broadened to the ground, mine looked like a squiggly snake.

She snickered. “Well, it’s a start. Here. Let me show you what I mean.” Stepping next to me, she grasped my fingers. “Let’s try another one, but without so much force.”

This close, she smelled wonderful, yet I did not have a name for it. Though I was aware of many things about humans from reading their books and internet, I had never smelled their world, except for the things others brought from scouting missions. Her fingers on my wrist caused tiny shocks of pleasure to course through my nerves.

With firm pressure, she pulled my wrist downward. “This is the amount of force you should use, and don’t pause. It’s just one continuous line straight down. Most pine trunks are relatively straight.”

“Mm-hmm.” Words failed me. I wanted her to continue touching me. I wanted to paint a thousand tress with her fingers on my wrist. I wanted to show my true self to her, to hear her voice in my ear for the rest of my life.

She motioned me to bend down with her.

When we both squatted, she glanced over her shoulder at me. “You can blend the drips horizontally to make them part of the ground.”

I nodded, smearing the runaway paint with my brush.

“You know, I have no idea why I’m giving you lessons, but for some reason, you inspire trust.” Her lips quirked into a smile.

“Do you believe in fate?” My words were soft.

She frowned, then stood, putting her brush inside a cup of water sitting near the ladder and wiping her hands onto her apron. “Fate, destiny, free will. I don’t know

what I believe in, but I believe everything happens for a reason.”

I mimicked her movements with my brush then faced her. “What if I said we are...soulmates. Would you think I am crazy?”

Gerri shrugged. “I’ve heard crazier stuff. Besides, who am I to judge? Most people think I’m crazy for being alone and not owning a house.”

So, she did not balk at the soulmate question. Interesting.

“It is rare in my culture, but when one’s mate is found, the bond is undeniable. It pulls at a person’s very being, driving them to do anything for that person.”

“I’m not really that kind of woman, Drayven.” She gave an apologetic smile. “I’m a one-and-done, leave-them-before-the-morning kind of gal.”

Slowly, giving her time to anticipate my movement, I lifted a finger toward her face.

She did not pull back.

Gently, I placed my hand against her cheek. “Who are you running from?”

Under my touch, I could sense her muscles shifting, stiffening. She knocked my arm away. “I’m not running from anyone .” Her tone lowered. “Not anymore.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but something hit the pavement with a metallic ping.

She and I both followed the sound.

“Godsdamn it all,” I whispered. The ugly lifecord lay on the asphalt, its dark metal absorbing the sun’s rays.

Pure dread settled into the pit of my stomach.

Gerri let out a gasp, her attention moving up my body to land on my face.

Inside, I yearned to run away, knowing my human projection no longer showed. Instead of a man, she saw a purple-skinned Volderen with black horns jutting on either side of his forehead, sharp white teeth, and a forked tongue.

“What in the fuck are you?” She stumbled backward, the whites of her eyes so pale against her skin.

“Wait, please wait.” The scent of acrid fear poured from her body. “Do not leave. I am still Drayven. This is my true form. That bracelet is what we call a lifecord. It does many things, including allowing us to visit your planet incognito.” Unbridled panic overwhelmed me. If she goes to the human police, if anyone drives by and sees me, XVU will descend on this town in a heartbeat. The Xeno Vigilance Unit, a secret branch of the Air Force, had been after my kind for decades, ever since one of our craft crashed in Roswell in 1947 and they could not extract or understand our technology.

“Stay away from me. Jesus Christ.” Her voice shook, but she managed to stand. Sweat beaded on her brow.

Despite my desire to touch her, to calm her, I did not step forward. I did not want to make a terrible situation worse.

“Gerri, I am sorry for...this.” I extended my hands, nodding down to my body. “I came here looking for inspiration, and instead I found you.”

She pressed her back against the brick wall, splaying her hands against the surface. Every muscle in her body seemed tense, ready for flight. For a moment, she closed

her eyes and shook her head, as if I were a nightmare she could not escape.

“I never intended to cause you pain. I will not bother you any longer.” With an aching pang in my heart, I turned to the wooded area on the other side of the road.

“You lied to me. You let me believe you’re someone you’re not,” she whispered.

I froze. The morning sun glimmered over the trees lining the field; the golden rays bathing my body in warmth. “If I had revealed myself when we first met, would you have accepted the truth of what I am?”

A few birds called from the branches. In the air, my nose detected green plants, like the ones in the hydroponics lab on Mars. The sounds and smells of life on this planet threatened to overload my senses. I had come to Earth looking for beauty, and I had found it, but at what cost?

Gerri’s breathing leveled, but she remained still.

I gave her another few seconds to answer my question, yet only her silence answered.

“Goodbye, Gerri Johnson. You are the first human I have ever met on Earth, and I intend to remember you until my dying breath. For your safety, you should not mention me to anyone, especially the police or military. I would not see you harmed.”

More silence.

What did I expect? That she would accept me as I am and rush into my arms? No. I am no better than a monster according to her people, even though they are the ones who do monstrous things.

Only birdsong twittered from the trees.

I have lost her.

Unable to bear her silence any longer, I dashed toward my stealthed Sparrow. My mission had been to visit Earth for new ideas, and somehow, I'd gotten distracted. I would do what I had set out to do and return to my kin. Hopefully, with a clearer idea of how to create a better ship experience for our journey home.

And a way to forget about the woman who captured my heart.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:49 am

I sensed there was something off about him the moment we met.

His enormous form walked away, and his long, black hair flowed in the wind. Tight muscles bulged under a dark blue uniform, similar to the flight suits I'd seen worn by the Air Force.

As he strode farther away, my anxiety eased. Glancing around, I needed to ensure he hadn't been spotted.

No other vehicles appeared in the distance, and the other shops remained shuttered and dark. The little town of Barkley still slept. Thank goodness.

Sliding by back down the wall, I landed on my butt and stared toward the field, at the last spot Drayven had been before I'd glanced away. Only dry brush and tall grass stood there now.

Good. I'm glad he's gone. I should've been more worried about my sanity, how easily I'd accepted his alien form, but what irritated me the most wasn't rational. He'd lied to me, made me think he'd been human. What if he'd decided to do—I don't know—alien things to me?

Stop being stupid. You know, deep down, he's one of the good guys, and that's why you so readily invited him to stay.

I hated that voice of reason, so I slammed the lid on her. What I should do is go to the cops.

Or find the nearest shrink.

That thought made me pause. Had I spent so much time alone as a nomad that I'd lost touch with reality and made him up? If so, why is that idea even less reassuring?

My attention wandered to the ground where we'd stood only moments before.

A dark gray band of metal, around two inches wide, slept on the bumpy asphalt. What did he call it? His lifecord? It seemed so unassuming, like a blank piece of metal someone would buy from a hobby store to decorate or engrave.

So, I'm not crazy or dreaming. He really is an alien. He'd said he came from Mars. How had the government never found them?

Maybe the government knows but keep us in the dark. It wouldn't be the first time. His warning about reporting him rang in my ears. Could it have been just a ruse to keep me quiet, or would it truly put me in danger? Besides, who would believe me?

They'd believe me if that lifecord thing is real.

I didn't want to turn him in for many reasons, but mainly because I wanted to forget everything and pretend it never happened, that I'd never met such an intriguing being.

Pushing myself to a standing position, I gathered my painting supplies. The mural would not be finished today. My thoughts were too scattered. The only thing I needed at the moment was to go back to my tent and figure out my next move.

Drayven knew where I lived, but I felt no threat from that knowledge. Though he'd lied about his true appearance, I didn't fault him for that. How many times had I hid myself to blend in with others, especially as a teen and living on the streets, to ensure I wasn't singled out...or worse.

With a deep breath, I shouldered my pack of supplies and carried the ladder to my truck, shoving it in the back, next to my bed, and gave the unfinished mural a last look.

The lines of the tree trunks seemed stark and cold without their branches and leaves. I closed my eyes and remembered the soft touch of Drayven's hand against mine, how I'd longed to kiss his lips.

But they weren't really his lips, were they? Just a clever disguise.

I opened my eyes and frowned. A glint of light on the ground caught my eye. The bracelet still lay where it had fallen.

On impulse, I bent and picked it up, turning it over to inspect the inside, where four markings had been etched, the writing something between hieroglyphs and Roman numerals. The metal felt cool and smooth, like polished glass.

I can't leave it out here for someone to find. If he's telling the truth, then someone finding this thing could be dangerous for his people if it got into the wrong hands.

"I'll just hang onto it while I consider things." Stuffing it into a side pocket of my backpack, I closed the tailgate, hopped into the driver's seat, and started the engine. I'd go back to the park and try to forget I'd ever met an alien named Drayven Naxar.

After a warm shower at the nearby campground facilities, I ate a peanut butter sandwich, then tied my hammock between two tall pines and climbed inside and laid down.

The fresh air, sprinkled with the scent of grilled meat and spring flowers, eased my nerves. Though I tried to banish this morning's events from my memory, it was no use. Drayven's face—his real face, kept invading my thoughts. Now that I'd had a

few hours to process the events in the last two days, the fear I'd initially felt changed into curiosity. And annoyance.

How could I be both fascinated and irritated with Drayven?

Does it matter? He's gone and he'll never come back because I shunned him like so many have shunned me. Why hadn't I even tried to give him a chance, to learn from him? But I knew why.

Every person I'd ever known and loved had left me or let me down. My anger really wasn't directed at him, but at myself for not being able to trust anyone, to let them in, for always running away.

He's gone, probably back on Mars or wherever, and I'll never have a chance to tell him what I think, what I feel deep in the marrow of my bones. I'd never kept a lover for long. As soon as they became clingy or tried to change my way of life, I always left.

But Drayven didn't seem disgusted or intimidated by my free spirit. He'd accepted me exactly as I'd been. Flawed, quirky, and human. Why couldn't I have done the same?

We just met, yet it feels like I've known him forever.

Regret tinged my thoughts. Closing my eyelids, my body swinging gently with the breeze, I recalled Drayven's pink tongue, split at the end, as it swiped against his sharp teeth, how his purple skin flushed with heat, how his horns—the color of onyx—emphasized the lightness of his eyes. With his true form in my mind, I faded into sleepy darkness.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:49 am

I must make the most of this trip before I return and forget I ever met a human named Gerri.

With a tap of my finger on the viewscreen, I selected the opposite end of Barkley and zoomed in on a large building, clearly defined on the map as a botanical garden and ordered the computer to take me there.

Several messages scrolled across the console panel: three from Baraxen and two from his brother. I glanced at the communication readouts. There were still plenty of Earth hours left before my return to Mars, so I would salvage what I could of this trip.

For several hours, I stealthed above the city, scanning the university, the medical facility, the weatherworn church, and the city park. Nothing in the data screamed for my attention or felt very inspiring. Maybe I should just accept I am an engineer gifted with a knack for creating ships to get from point A to point B—nothing more. Getting my people to Voldera in one piece should be my focus. Let someone else worry about their mental well-being.

“The mind cannot survive without the heart, though.”

Gerri’s brown eyes and slow smile flashed in my thoughts, and I imagined her touch on my skin again as we painted, her soft breath in my ear.

“Get out of my head,” I growled. But similar to a pleasing song, I could not turn off my thoughts. She had become a harmony of emotions to my lonely heart, a breath of clean air for my lungs, a sweet song caressing my ears.

I must concentrate.

Forcing my mind to the present, I reached for the lifecord around my wrist to ensure its mode remained in projection so I could blend in with humanity.

Only the smooth skin around my wrist met the ends of my fingers. My heart stopped, and I cursed.

I never retrieved it when I left. Besides the lifesaving medicinals loaded into its core, lifecords also contained highly evolved Volderen technology. In the wrong hands, such as the United States government, it could prove deadly to my race.

My skin prickled with panic, but I forced the sensation down. I needed calm, not chaos.

The first order of business would be to track the bracelet with the Sparrow's scanning system, which detected Volderen technology across vast distances.

Although I had lost the bracelet on the other side of town, no more than half a rugar away, it did not mean the device still lay on the ground. Out in the open, anyone could grab it and accidentally trigger a pre-programmed routine. Knowing how dedicated and persistent the military's Xeno Vigilance Unit could be, one bleep from the lifecord would send XVU to that person's doorstep almost instantly.

How could I have been so ignorant? But I knew why.

Gerri Johnson.

Another horrible idea took shape. What if Gerri had taken it after I left? What if she, at this very moment, slapped it around her wrist and activated its self-destruct feature with a few taps of her finger?

Panic burst from its invisible box inside my chest and my heart pounded. “Why did we make them self-contained? A simple deactivation code from the spacecraft could render it useless.” I understood the reason, though. Keeping one’s lifecord independent of any other systems and networks ensured it could not be hacked, denying humans from gaining access to Volderen intelligence, including the Mars base and the sister facility located right under their noses.

Reversing the engines, with a tight voice, I instructed the computer to backtrack my course.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:49 am

I awoke to late afternoon fading into dusk.

Sheesh, I haven't slept that well in ages.

Stretching my arms, I yawned, then swung my legs out of the hammock and touched the soil. My stomach rumbled, so I stalked to the ice cooler and grabbed the last of my deli ham, then sat at the picnic table and assembled a sandwich with two slices of bread, swiss cheese, and mayo.

The LED lights strung above the camp flickered on, and I glanced at the sky, savoring a bit of tonight's easy dinner.

What would it be like to live amongst the stars?

An owl hooted from a pine tree. Farther away, laughing and shouting floated through the air. No doubt a family enjoying their vacation.

Maybe in another life, that could've been me with a loving family, instead of a mom who ran off and left me with her asshole husband.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You came out stronger.

I nodded, knowing my inner voice spoke truthfully. "But being strong doesn't mean I can't yearn for something different." Sighing, I grabbed the empty paper plate, stuffing it into the trash bin, then ran cold water from the camp plumbing into a miniature plastic bin I used for washing utensils.

Glancing at my folded easel, I knew just the thing to get me out of my funk. My painting.

I gave the scene a critical eye, squinting through the dusky light.

The starry sky still dominated the picture as the my gaze drifted to the top, but the area in the middle of the foreground still seemed lacking.

“What should I put here?” I stepped back a couple of steps and gnawed on the thin end of my dry paintbrush. “A flower?” It would keep with the nature theme, yet a flower didn’t feel right.

An image of Drayven popped into my mind’s eye. His skin, an intense purple, had felt soft and firm against mine.

He’s what I’m missing.

This thought unsettled me because deep inside, I knew I wasn't simply talking about the painting. Instead of being repulsed by his appearance, the initial shock had turned to curiosity, and something deeper. Knowing the truth of him, the truth in general, felt as if a wall in my soul had cracked. I’d always kept myself apart from everyone else.

Why?

Because people scare me. Every human being I’d ever loved had hurt or abandoned me, but Drayven was no human. He represented hope and the possibility of love if I’d only been brave enough to try.

With my palette in one hand, and the brush in my other, my heart took over and knew exactly what it wanted to say with a few strokes of the bristles. Maybe I’d blown it by shunning Drayven, but at least I’d have this to remind me there’s hope out there even

in the most unlikely places with the most unlikely people.

The sadness in my heart lifted bit by bit, and I smiled, knowing in my bones this painting represented more than loss. It promised beauty, love, and acceptance.

It promised change.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:49 am

As I did the evening before, I landed the Sparrow and kept it in stealth mode.

I could have waited until the deepest part of night, when Gerri would be sleeping, to retrieve the lifecord, but I had no intention of hiding any longer. A desperate part of me needed to see her, and it was not just because I had found my mate, though I could not place my finger on it exactly.

I quietly strode through the forest, avoiding other humans, then stopped at the tree line to her camp, frozen with an emotion I could not define.

Though her back was to me and the sun had lowered, I could see well enough due to my Volderen eyesight. The beautiful painting stood proudly on the easel. She flicked her wrist delicately while writing in the bottom corner.

My eyes wandered to the center of the canvas. Embarrassment flooded my cheeks, yet a touch of pride and wonder ignited within me.

“You finished it,” I said, forgetting I had only meant to observe.

She froze, then lowered the brush to a small cup standing on the lip of the easel. “Drayven?” Her voice, a silky whisper, made my heart skip.

Nothing for it now. I must face her, get the lifecord, and leave her be. “I know...I know I lied, that I scared you, and—”

“No.” She shook her head. “You have no reason to apologize. I’m the one who’s sorry.” She pivoted in my direction and wrapped her arms around herself, biting her

bottom lip. Taking a deep, slow breath, she met my gaze. “I didn’t mean what I said.” Two steps closer. “Maybe I’m crazy, and if so, I don’t care, but I was afraid you’d left for good. I’ve been kicking myself in the ass for pushing you away instead of opening up and learning more.”

I stood straighter.

“There’s a part of me that wants to believe I’m crazy, yet I have to acknowledge the facts.” She slipped her hand behind her back and pulled something from her jeans. “This tells me you are real, that the things you mentioned about humans, aliens, and the military must be true, too.” The lifecord dangled from her fingers. “I think...” Her lips twisted in a frown. “I think I’ve gotten so used to living alone I’ve forgotten how it feels to care about something other than myself. If you can stay, even just for a little while, I’d love to learn more about your people and planet. Maybe I can do something to help.”

Gently, I strode forward, leaving a bit of space between our bodies, giving her time to adjust to my closeness. “Sweet Gerri, I would like nothing more.” How I longed to wrap her in my arms.

Her frown disappeared and in its place beamed a wide smile. “Here. Take my hand.”

I grasped her small fingers with mine, unable to speak through the lump rising in my throat. She resembled a goddess at that moment, and I ached to worship her as she deserved.

“I figured out what was missing from my painting.” She led me to the easel. “It needed you.” As she turned to me, the stars shone in her eyes.

A deep urge to trace her cheekbones, to run my mouth across her neck, shook me to my very bones. I bent forward, my lips hovering over hers, silently asking permission

for the next move.

Her eyelids closed. She tilted her chin upward in response.

Claiming her offered mouth, I felt the world— no, the entire universe —shift. She tasted of inspiration, of life, of possibility. Deepening the kiss, sliding my tongue farther into her mouth, I licked every recess. I craved her in every way possible.

“Gerri,” I whispered, willing myself to pull back. “I would like to show you my home and my life’s work. I want you to help me find what is missing.”

She blinked twice. “O-okay.” Her irises cleared and she turned her head, her attention settling on the painting. “Your home. You mean, like, up there?” She raised her eyebrows and looked up.

“Yes.” I took her hand. “I wish to be fully open, if you are willing. There has been a growing restlessness within me, a dissatisfaction with the vessel design, and on impulse, I thought perhaps humans could help inspire me with their creativity. You would be among the few humans who have ever visited our Mars base. I would have you as my honored guest.” Although I secretly wished for more.

With a slow nod, she backed away. “I’m crazy for even agreeing to this, but yes. I’ll go. Let me clean the camp and lock my truck. Do you know how long we’ll be gone?”

Forever, I thought, biting my tongue to keep my mouth shut. “The journey is but a matter of an hour or so. I can return you here whenever you’re ready.” Though, that depends on Voren and Baraxen’s orders, and how angry they will be at this decision.

Oh well, that would be a matter for another day. Being the chief engineer of the Perseverance did have a few advantages, though I tried not to use rank to achieve my

goals except as a last resort. Gerri is changing me. Or perhaps my visit to Earth had begun to open my eyes to the splendor of life, not just survival. Either way, I welcomed it.

After a couple of minutes to secure her things in a purple backpack, Gerri gave the area one last look, then swiveled to me. "I'm ready." I held out my hand, and she took it. "Will I need any kind of mask or clothing for Mars?"

"No. My Sparrow will protect you from the atmosphere, and the underground colony has its own atmosphere. It will take a little bit of an adjustment period for the lower gravity, but that is it."

She smiled. "I'm terrified and excited, Drayven. I'm awake, right, and you're real?"

With a gentle squeeze of her hand, I push through the trees, holding the limbs from her face. "I am real, and you are not sleeping." This close, her smell swirled around me, and her pheromones flew straight to my tongue every time I spoke, awakening the mating call of my people. A burst of desire shot through my body and straight to my sexual organs.

This is going to be the longest hour of my life. I must control myself.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:49 am

Beneath my shoes, the floor of Drayven's ship pulsed. A million different emotions swam through my nerves, but excitement and fear screamed the loudest.

Here I am, a weak human, and not just any human, a female leaving the planet with a gigantic alien man with horns on his head and a forked tongue.

I couldn't decide if I should laugh or cry.

His fingers moved deftly over a holographic control panel. His dark, flowing locks brushed against his shirt. If I hadn't been about to shit my pants, I would've enjoyed feeling its silky texture. Instead, my fingers gripped the x-shaped harness across my chest, and I debated telling him I had second thoughts.

But if I do that, I'll just go back to being Gerri, the woman who's too afraid to let someone in, the woman who's scared of staying in one place too long.

Didn't jumping into a ship with a man I hardly knew fit that pattern well, though?

The difference between moving from park to park is I'm not escaping anyone—I'm planning for a possible future.

"It will be okay, sweet Gerri. Volderens have not had a ship accident in many decades."

I guess my face betrayed my emotions. "Sorry. I'm sure you're right, it's just I've never been to space, much less another planet."

He smiled, then swiped a series of symbols and letters. “Then I am honored you agreed to allow me to be your first.”

A nervous laugh slipped out of my mouth.

“Did I say something funny?”

The sensation of gliding upward made all thought fly out of my brain. “Oh my God,” I breathed, knowing my jaw hung open like a fly catcher. The dark screen came to life, and we soared straight upward through clouds that looked like fog.

Within ten seconds, the curve of the Earth hung below. For a moment, I forgot to breathe. “It’s so...so...so...” Tears welled up at the beauty of my planet.

“Beautiful?”

I nodded, still unable to speak.

Drayven settled in his chair, gave the display a quick glance, then swiveled to face me. “It is beautiful, but it is not the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.”

“How can it not be?” Tearing my eyes from the diminishing planet— we must be traveling at a crazy rate of speed—I gave him my full attention. “I get it. You’re some kind of advanced race and you probably see this kind of stuff all the time, but it makes me feel so small yet so privileged.”

Drayven leaned forward, the muscles of his thighs bulging through his pants with the movement. “It is true, yet there are also different kinds of beauty. There is the beauty of a perfect design and the flawlessness of certain metals, but these are cold beauties, meant only for form and function. I speak of the wonders of the heart, of people, of love.” He took my hands and wrapped them in one of his large palms. “ You embody

this for me.”

I shifted my legs, crossing my knees and pulling my hands from his grasp. “You don’t really know me, though.”

“Perhaps, but I feel like I have known you always. Do you not feel your soul crying out to mine?”

His words stopped my blood.

He feels it, too? I’d spent so many years alone, running from place to place, that I’d been afraid the subtle pull to him was my imagination.

“Volderens, if they’re lucky, always have at least one mate. You are mine.”

True panic replaced the hesitation. “What?” Mate? I had no chance of being anyone’s mate. I’d seen what happened to people who were supposed to be mates, like my mom and stepdad. They’d hated each other, and he’d driven her to walk out and never return.

“Gerri, it is okay. Just because we are mates does not mean we do not have a choice. I believe in free will, not destiny.” His eyes narrowed as he studied my face. “I can see this upsets you.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and inhaled, forcing my thoughts to calm. Not everyone’s like Roger. My stepdad had abused me, but when he threw me out as a teen, it had actually been a blessing in disguise. I’d learned to fend for myself, and took control of my life.

Drayven, so far, had been nothing but kind. He might’ve lied about who he really was, but I understood why.

“I’m okay.” I opened my vision. A perfect red sphere, what I assumed to be mars, glowed in the distance. “Being your mate doesn’t upset me. Well, not much. I think I’m just a bit overwhelmed with everything that’s happened over the past couple of days.”

“Ah. That makes sense. Experiencing another culture has a way of doing that.”

I laughed, releasing the pent-up nerves with the motion. “That’s an understatement.” Pointing to the screen, I looked at Drayven. “Tell me more about your home. I truly want to understand you and your people.”

He tapped the holo screen, then faced me. “We have forty minutes until landing, so where should I begin?” He tapped one of his long, slender fingers against his chin, and I found myself noticing a tiny dimple at the corners of his mouth.

Who knew an alien could be so handsome?

“To understand why we’re here, you must learn where we were. Several thousands of years ago, our ancestors discovered a mutation in our DNA. If we could not find a compatible humanoid correction, our race would eventually die. So, a massive survey was performed to find potential planets with life, and each report was narrowed down to three, including Earth. Generational ships were built and launched. Abzu , our original ship destined for Earth, which translates to Atlantis in human language, arrived and studied early Sumerian culture while scanning DNA. A major malfunction caused the ship to crash to the bottom of the ocean. We eventually salvaged what we could, used our smaller transport and warships to establish a Mars base in the hopes we’d eventually find the person who could save us.”

“And did you?” His story fascinated me. I couldn’t imagine leaving Earth and spending my entire life searching for a cure in a strange new world, which is what it sounded like the Volderens were doing.

"Yes, thank the Gods. Just recently. Her name is Lilly, and she is Voren's mate. Now that we have found the savior, our focus has been intensified on finishing Perseverance, which will bring us home and save our species."

"And that's the ship you've been working on?"

"Yes. Her basic frame is ready, yet I have stagnated on the interior. We will have everything to sustain life, yet I feel it still lacks something vital."

"And that's why you came to my world, looking for inspiration."

"Exactly." He smiled, giving me a glimpse of his intriguing, forked tongue. "When I came upon you, I knew the Gods had led me to exactly what I needed."

"I'm just a human—a homeless one at that—with no education and very little money. It seems to me your gods might've gotten it wrong." Telling the truth hurt, but I refused to have Drayven think of me as some sort of muse. I'm far from it.

"What is a home? A place to put things, to weather a storm, a physical representation of safety?" His irises swirled with some emotion I couldn't place. "If that is the case, then I truly have no home either, yet my spirit is with those I love, no matter where I go. To learn does not mean one needs a piece of paper as proof of education. Formal or through experience, knowledge is knowledge. Money, on the other hand, may feed the stomach but it will never feed the soul."

"I thought you claimed your people weren't very creative. What you just said is deep and emotional for a scientific mind." Hidden inside this enormous purple alien lay the heart of a poet. "You're a painter of words, Drayven."

With a shrug, he gave me a wry smile. "Well, perhaps my heart has finally awakened."

My gaze tracked across his proud nose, those sharp cheekbones, the smooth violet skin. There is something alluring about him. For the first time in my thirty-six years, I could picture myself settling down—staying instead of running. “Do you...do you think you could use someone who knows how to paint?”

He tilted his head backward and released a hearty laugh. “You would be a most welcome addition to my crew.” He reached out and swiped a strand of hair from my temple. “If you so choose.”

“Let’s give it a trial run.” I lifted a hand to press his chin between my thumb and index finger. “And maybe you can elaborate on how Volderens take a mate.”

His pupils widened until his gaze became a black pool of desire. With both hands, he grasped my shoulders and leaned against his harness, pulling me closer and pressing his lips against mine.

When his tongue licked the corner of my mouth, I sighed.

He deepened the kiss, gliding the tips of his tongue inside my cheek and across my teeth with sharp little flicks.

“Drayven.” My thighs clenched, and I groaned, imagining his tongue caressing my neck on its way down my body. “What else can you do with that tongue?”

“Many, many things. When we land, I will escort you to my quarters and demonstrate all the ways Volderens please their mates. I promise you will never look at a human male the same way.”

My skin broke out with gooseflesh, and I grinned. “Are Volderen males built the same as...” I didn’t know how else to ask it without being blunt. So, instead, I leaned back and lowered my gaze to his crotch.

Oh, my. I think the bulge answers that question.

“Yes, but more. There are some of us with doubled sexual organs, so we provide our mates with extra pleasure.”

“Um, why don’t we start with just one?” The thought of him having two dicks alarmed me, but I couldn’t deny my curiosity.

“Whatever you say, life mate. My body is yours to claim.”

Yep. I can definitely get used to this life.

“How much time do we have?”

“More than enough,” he said, unbuckling his harness and sliding a hand down the inside of my pants, pressing the ends of his fingers against my bared skin.

I moaned, digging my fingernails into his upper arms.

He stroked me steadily, the pressure building, my muscles tensing. “Sweet Gerri. Your smell is divine. I will taste you.” The pressure of his fingers left as he slid his hand out.

“Wh-what? Why’d you stop?” Panting, I tried to focus but my body cried for release.

“One moment.” He released my harness, went to his knees and placed both of his giant hands on my hips, sliding down my pants.

The cool air against my naked skin felt delicious and sinful.

“Now, for that taste.” His smile turned predatory and he licked his forked tongue

along his lips, and then dived between my thighs.

The soft, warm tips of his tongue continued the trek of his fingers, and within a few minutes, I was lost in the sensation of pleasure washing over my body like supernovas bursting apart.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:49 am

Though I sat in a seat farther back from the viewscreen, I pushed against the restraint on my chest, eager to watch our descent to a planet I'd always heard about, but never imagined I'd see with my own eyes, much less set foot on its surface.

"Will there be fire against the hull?" I had no choice but to remember the space programs and movies I'd seen as a kid where the ships entering other planets were always at risk of burning up on re-entry.

"Fire?" Drayven tapped two circles on his holographic screen, then gave me a quick stare before turning back to the console.

My God he's a beautiful man. I'd been afraid of awkwardness between us after he'd gotten me off, but Volderens didn't seem to view sex the way some humans did. He'd explained the pleasurable act of procreation as a part of their nature, no different from sleeping or eating.

"Fire from entering the air. Isn't there a lot of friction or something?"

"Ah. We Volderens have advanced our ships to receive very little friction when entering atmospheres. We use antigravity generators along with the design of the craft and other...modified techniques that humans will probably not discover for another three hundred years."

"Oh. Well, that's kind of a letdown. Are you saying Volderens are three centuries farther along than Earth?"

"At the risk of sounding pretentious, my people are several millennia ahead of

humans. Perhaps you will see the wonders of my planet one day.”

As he moved his arms to tap and drag his fingers across the projector, I sat back in my seat. “One planet at a time for now, big guy.”

We glided through the air, the blackness of space giving way to the curved red line of Mars. I hadn’t felt the speed as we left Earth and traveled, but arrowing toward the red planet, I felt a tiny pull. The viewscreen filled with the planet, a mixture of black mountains, dark craters, and crimson soil between the valleys.

Draven steered the Sparrow down toward a cone-shaped mountain. Smoke or mist poured from its top.

“Uh, is that a volcano?”

“Yes. That is what your people call Olympus Mons, the largest volcano in this solar system.”

The mountain loomed larger on the viewscreen.

“Why are we heading right for it?” My fingers clenched tightly to the seat strap against my chest, and a thin sheen of sweat popped on my upper lip.

“Because that is where I live.”

“Oh, Jesus. Christ.”

“We are not the only alien species in this part of the galaxy; therefore it is best to keep ourselves hidden as much as possible.”

“There are more of you?” I felt a bit faint. I mean, I’m still trying to wrap my head

around finding out my species is not the only sentient beings on the space block. Now he tells me there are even more aliens out there?

“These aliens are not like us, and they are not as peaceful, either. What we call them translates to Quantorians in your language. Pray to your God they never take an interest in Earth.”

“Why?”

“Because they are hybrid artificial life forms who do not share the sanctity of nature. If they see no purpose for a race or determine they are a threat to Quantorian survival, they will destroy it.”

“That’s...that’s horrible.” My shock turned to uneasiness. Would these Quantorians see humans as little bugs to squish?

“Yes, it is horrible. My kind have lived alongside humanity for the past four thousand years. Humans have evolved at an alarming rate over the past few centuries. Let us hope the Quantorians have not taken notice.”

“How have Volderens lived with us for so long and yet we didn’t know it?”

He lifted his hand, showing the lifecord I’d given back.

“Oh, yeah. Forgot about the way you can change your appearance. It makes sense now.”

“But there have been some, like your military, who know of our existence, yet they are determined to destroy what they do not understand. Perhaps the people of Earth are more like Quantorians after all, snuffing out those they see as rivals.”

“Not all of us have such closed minds. Look at me. I’ve known you for two days and now I’m about to meet your family.”

He smiled, then leaned close. “I hope I can interest you into staying for a while. My people are strong, yet we do not prey on the weak. We believe everyone, even the Quantorians, have a purpose in this universe. If you like what you see, perhaps you will decide to help me—I mean us.” His cheeks flashed a darker violet.

“One thing at a time.” My heart swelled. Could I have a future here? A home? The idea didn’t feel as frightening as usual.

“Agreed. One step in front of the other.” Drayven turned back to the screen. “Do you see that tunnel ahead?”

“The one smack dab in the side of the volcano?” I gripped the armrests of the chair. Surely he’s not going to fly straight into it.

“Yes. Our base is deep underground. Once we land, I will show you everything.”

“And I don’t need a spacesuit?” The idea of nothing between me and Mars made my stomach flip.

“No. We have equipment that recycles the gasses here, converting it into a breathable atmosphere, similar to Voldera and Earth. The temperature is also set to 19 degrees Celsius, which is around 66 degrees Fahrenheit.”

“Sounds perfect.” It really did, but I couldn’t concentrate on what he said because the mouth of the cave loomed ahead. My breathing accelerated as the sparrow bulleted through the air. Below, the rocky, iron-colored ground of Mars became a blur.

Please God don’t let us die. Unable to help myself, I grabbed Drayven’s arm and

squeezed.

“All will be fine, Gerri. It looks smaller than it is.”

A nervous chuckle escaped my lips. “Not something most guys would say.”

His eyebrows drew together in confusion. “What—”

“Never mind.” I gripped him tighter. “Why do I feel like puking?”

“The sensation will pass.” He used his left hand and tapped a green, blinking light. “Sparrow 42 requesting a landing bay.”

A soft ding, then a resonant, male voice answered in a language that sounded like a mix of Russian and Arabic. The man growled. Though I didn't understand what Drayven said in response, the overall feeling of the conversation felt strained.

After a minute more of talking, Drayven tapped the circle, turning it white.

“That was Voren. He and his brother, Major Baraxen, did not exactly give me permission to visit Earth, though they never explicitly told me to stay.”

“Uh oh. So, we're in trouble?” I couldn't get the mental image of angry, purple Volderens scowling at me, the puny human from Earth.

What in the hell was I thinking? That they'd just accept me and invite me to live in their home? The deep urge to run away surfaced. Trapped, I'm trapped. The craft's cabin closed in on me. My lungs couldn't get enough air.

“Calm, Gerri. Calm. Things will work out in the end. They are angry at me, not you. I daresay your presence will actually be a balm, judging by the way Voren treats

Lilly.” His fingers stroked tiny circles along my forearm.

His words and the soothing gesture calmed the nerves writhing in my stomach like a ball of snakes. “How did you know what I was feeling?”

A grin tipped the corner of his mouth.

Outside, the dark tunnel lit up in a soft blue and the ship decelerated. On either side, large bays appeared down the line.

“You are my mate. Your soul calls to mine, and I answer. In time, if you decide to give me a chance, you will become attuned to the invisible matter binding mates together.”

“I have so many questions.”

He tapped a line on the holographic console and the vessel slowed to a crawl, turned into a large hangar, and stopped. “And I will answer them all. But first—” He pushed the release latch on his harness, then reached over and released mine. “—I must answer Baraxen and Voren. Come. I shall explain myself then give you a tour. Afterwards, you may choose a guestroom or stay in my apartment. Whichever would be most comfortable for you.”

Even though sweat soaked the palms of my hands, I stood and followed Drayven on shaky legs.

The only way to stop running is to start walking.

A new life on a new planet didn’t sound so bad to me, especially when I had no real life on Earth. I’d always loved my freedom, and so far, the Volderens seemed peaceful, intelligent, and concerned about the sanctity of life.

It's enough to start with, to give them a chance, to give myself a chance.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:49 am

Brax stood at the bottom of the ramp as it reached the earth. His brother Voren—too much muscle and not enough brains on some days—stood to his side with his arms crossed, a scowl twisting his lips downward.

I had not thought my little trip would cause such a stir. It seemed I had been mistaken.

“You idiot,” Voren roared, lunging for me.

“Brother, stop.” Baraxen grabbed his sibling by the shoulder and yanked him backward. “This is not the time nor the place.” Brax gave a pointed glance upward toward flight control, located in an alcove recessed thirty rugars above to watch the hangars and visually direct traffic if comms failed.

A petite woman watched through the glass, giving Voren a small wave.

His shoulders relaxed and he pushed Brax’s hand away.

“I am confused as to why you are angry with me. No one told me Earth had been restricted.” Though they had been talking about it.

“You’re right, Drayven. We hadn’t made it official before you left. Our concern had been for your safety, and the progress of the Perseverance . We cannot afford to lose you or worse—have you captured by the humans.” Brax’s attention shifted to behind me, and his eyes widened. “Oh no. What have you done?”

Gerri stopped next to me and seemed to shrink inward.

I put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her tight. “I went to find inspiration for the generational ship and found my life mate instead.”

“Truly?” Brax stepped closer. “How strange that within the span of a few weeks, two Volderens have discovered their life mates are human.”

“This is Gerri Johnson.” Relief washed over me, knowing Brax understood why I needed this particular human. No, not just need her, but want her, desire her, love her. How could I love someone I had just met? I did not know, but I would not deny the emotion that filled my chest with warmth.

“Welcome, Gerri. It is an honor to meet a life mate. I know things must seem strange right now, but Voren’s life mate is also a human. Perhaps you would like to meet her?”

Gerri nodded. “I have to admit, I’m feeling really overwhelmed right now, standing on another planet talking to aliens.”

Voren rolled his eyes and sighed. “I hope you are not as troublesome as Lilly when she first came aboard.”

“Vor, you have to admit there’s a reason she tried to escape. We did abduct her.”

“It was for her own good. Besides, she does not seem to mind so much now.”

Gerri’s eyes rounded and she pushed herself closer to me.

I wanted to punch Voren.

Brax directed his stare to Gerri. “Most of us do not go around kidnapping humans. Lilly was a special case. She not only is saving our race, but it was imperative to get to her before the U.S. military. What they had planned would not have been pleasant,

to say the least.”

“Oh,” Gerri said, glancing upward to where Lilly stood and watched. “She’s not a prisoner then?”

A dark laugh flew from Brax’s lips. “Not at all. Voren is more her prisoner now.”

Voren’s eyes flashed and his jaw tightened. “I only allow it to a certain degree. If she gets too dominant, I spank her into submission.”

Brax laughed even harder, shaking his head.

“And I believe that is our cue to leave,” I said, reaching for Gerri’s hand and carefully pulling her down the ramp. “Let me get Gerri settled and rested, then I will give you my report. I have several changes that need to be made on the Perseverance , but perhaps you will agree they will add significant enhancements to the journey.”

“Very well, Drayven. Go. Rest up, take care of your mate, and when you’re ready, we shall regroup and get back to work. Our timeline must be tightened. A scout picked up a Quantorian transmission near Tau Ceti.”

His words sent an invisible cold rod down my spine, and I froze near the lift that would take us to the control level, where Lilly waited for Voren. “Let us hope they are not on their way to this solar system.”

“It is concerning, yet not alarming, not yet.” Voren’s deep voice held a note of assurance. “We will be finished with the ship and long gone before they arrive, if they are even heading this way.”

“That would be a good thing.”

“What if they show up after you leave? What about the people on Earth?” asked

Gerri, her quiet voice firm.

“I do not know.” With tenderness, I led her onto the lift and commanded it to arrive at my apartment. “We will take one day at a time. That is all we can do.”

A line formed between her brows and she breathed deeply. “You’re right. There’s no sense in worrying about something that may never happen.”

“Now, can I entice you into my bedroom to carry on what we started?”

“Not until you feed me tacos and tell me I’m pretty.”

“I do not understand. Of course you are pretty, but Volderens do not usually eat tacos, though now I am intrigued.”

Her laugh filled my soul. “It’s just something people say on Earth. You don’t really have to—”

“Oh, you will get a taco, then I will worship you so there is no doubt in your mind that I do not think you are beautiful.”

She reached up on her tiptoes and placed a hand against my cheek. “Thank you for your kindness and understanding. I’m curious to know everything about your culture and your people.”

“We will start tomorrow. If you agree, I would like help with designing the community spaces of the Perseverance. I think the central dome should have a park like the one where we met. Our replicators can form most of the materials we would need, but it is lacking when it comes to aesthetics.”

“Oh, that sounds fun.”

“It will be. Imagine painting but with your mind.”

“I was sold at the mention of painting,” she teased.

As the lift ascended, I bent down and kissed her lips. She wrapped her hands around my neck and whispered, “Take me home, Drayven.”

I happily obliged. “Wherever you are, my home will always be with you. Thank you for giving me another chance, Gerri. I promise you will never regret it.”

She stroked my cheek. “Thank you for bringing hope and love into my life.”

I crushed her body into mine. Hope and love—what a perfect harmony.

Here’s a sneak preview of the first chapter of the next book in the Alien Quickies series, *Her Alien Ancient*, available at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0DLJ7Y5RJ>

Chapter 1

“Professor Janeway, we have something...odd...over at site four.” Kurt, one of my third-year anthropology majors, stared down while I brushed dirt remnants from a broken, ancient knife blade made from seashells. His eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Is that so?” Oh, to recapture those days when every find promised intrigue. After a couple of decades, though, the newness had worn off.

I imagined what he deemed a breakthrough discovery was nothing more than another common relic from the native Calusa tribe who inhabited this area of Florida for thousands of years.

“I...I don’t know what to make of it. It’s like nothing we’ve seen before. The lines are perfect, and it’s covered with a gold-like metal.”

“Well,” I said, standing up and wiping dirt from my trousers. “Let’s go see this hidden treasure.” I gave a smile of encouragement. The novelty of a discovery might’ve waned for me over the years, but I still remembered the initial spark of wonder, and even I still experienced it on occasion as we recovered rare finds to see an unexpected look into an ancient culture.

A hundred feet or so farther across the wet ground, we climbed a gentle slope until the soil met rocky embankment. Three second-year students huddled around the recess of site four, where’d they’d been diligently and carefully digging and brushing.

As I arrived, they pulled away from the chest high mound, giving me a tantalizing view of their find. Though only a corner peeked through the sediment, it was enough to tell me Kurt had every reason to be excited.

Blood beat a steady rhythm in my ears, probably like the ancient shell weapons of the Calusa as they engaged in battle with the Europeans and their native foes.

Ting-ting-ting-ting.

“What do you think, Professor J?”

Clearing my throat and forcing my nerves to relax, I grabbed a brush from my apron and gently leaned forward, brushing away a bit more sediment to reveal the entire end of the box. Strange hieroglyphs flowed and danced across the surface. “Perhaps it’s a trinket they traded for with the Spaniards,” I said, though deep down that didn’t feel true.

“But this writing doesn’t match any indigenous tribes in the entire state.” Elizabeth, one of the second years, pointed toward the artifact. “This doesn’t make sense. The first two symbols look like a combination of Greek and Egyptian, yet not quite right.”

Nodding, I straightened. “Possibly, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Document

everything, and once it's free, we'll know more about it."

Four weeks later, I sat at my desk on the campus of the University of Florida and stared at the cloth-covered cube. Testing had confirmed the runes were in a language as yet undiscovered. Instead of gold, the metal covering its surface was something unknown, the composition undeterminable. As the anthropology department head, I'd managed to keep our discovery under wraps, but it would only be a matter of time before a tech, student, or fellow faculty member leaked the information. Deep in my heart I knew the discovery should be shared with the world, but I couldn't let it go. Not yet. I couldn't explain the connection I felt every time I looked at the cube.

I need more time to study it—that's why I feel so possessive.. This potentially groundbreaking discovery could refute everything we thought we knew about the ancient cultures of native Floridians.

Why did that make me nervous, though? Every anthropologist and archeologist dreamed of finding a lost society or relic that had never been seen before.

It's because it leads to answers about the past. But this? I tugged a corner of cloth from the cube. This feels more like a doomsday device, and I feel like a moth drawn to the flame.

"Stop being an idiot," I told myself, hating the shakiness of my words. I'd not touched the relic because something held me back. But now? I hated the uneasiness stirring in my bones.

Touch it. Prove it's just an object, not a supernatural trinket.

Normally, I'd never been superstitious. I'd studied many cultures who believed in the supernatural, the spirit world, and deities, but not me. Not until my students had found what everyone had been referring to as the Calusa Reliquary .

“It’s not cursed or blessed. I’m sure the rest of the tests will confirm it’s a jewelry box or some other possession owned by a noblewoman, possibly traded for during a missionary visit, or even with the Spaniard traders hundreds of years ago. That’s all.” Talking to myself calmed my nerves. Thank goodness I dismissed my last class a couple of hours ago. The last thing I need is for them to think Professor J has lost her mind.

Taking a deep breath, I glided my fingertip over the reliquary’s surface, which was surprisingly smooth and warm. I lifted the box and set it on my palm. Though it was no bigger than an old cigar box, its weight measured over ten pounds.

“Why are you so heavy?” No one had been able to find an opening and every scan we’d tried couldn’t penetrate to see inside. I turned it around, felt every corner, and even gave it a light shake, knowing this had all been done before but compelled to try anyhow.

Nothing.

I held it in front of my face and peered at the strange writing. “Who made you? Huh?” My breath fogged the golden metallic side. A strange vibration shook the cube.

Out of reflex or fear, I lost my grip on it and tried to catch the heavy object as it seemed to tumble in slow motion. “What the—”

With a thud, it fell onto my desk. A searing, blinding white light pulsed from within, the metal becoming translucent. Cedar filled the room, like a breeze from a thick forest with a scattering of cinnamon.

The vibrations strengthened, shaking the wooden floorboards underneath my feet. A terrible rattling filled my ears, the sensation unbearable.

Whatever it is, it's not natural, maybe not even man-made. If I want to live, I need to get the hell out of here.

I turned to run, but the pulsing light disappeared as quickly as it had started. A blanket of shadow swallowed the room. The rattling wood ceased, and the silence of the darkness deafened my ears, pushing into my brain until I became one with the night, with the thing inside the box that had yearned to be found, to be seen, to be remembered.

I became the reliquary. It became me. I gave in under its demanding pressure.