

# THE ALIEN

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**FOUND**

I could tell by the way he looked at me. He was afraid.

I was totally alien to him. And I guess, he was totally alien to me, too.

His skin was so pale. His hair was short and the colour of dirt. His eyes were mostly brown, with a little black circle in the middle and white around the outside. That was weird. But as far as the shape of his body went, he was okay. Well, maybe more than okay. For an alien. I mean, he had two arms, two legs, one head, and a whole lot of muscle under those primitive clothes.

He stood staring at me, his back rigid and his face a mask of forced calm.

I was in a dangerous situation. I was on an unknown and possibly hostile planet with an inoperable ship and had been caught red-handed sleeping in this alien's animals' quarters. And all I could think about was how well-muscled he was. I must've lost my mind after the crash. How could I be attracted to an alien? I mean, I didn't even know if our species were compatible. Agh! Why was I even *thinking* about this?

This was serious. I needed to focus. I couldn't see if he held a weapon in his other hand. I had a laser on my belt that was set to

stun, but I didn't want to use it if I could help it. I needed this alien, as much as I hated to admit it. There were no other dwellings around here for a great distance, and I was cold and hungry. There were rations in the ship, but I couldn't limp back there tonight. I might just pass out on the way.

"Greetings," I put my hands up, palms out. "I am not your enemy." I wondered if he spoke any of the languages I knew. Probably not. I was way out in the rocks here.

His eyes widened and he said something, but I didn't recognise the dialect. Great.

I took a step forward and my head felt fuzzy. "I am peaceful. I need food and warmth." I made a gesture of putting food in my mouth and rubbed my upper arms to show that I was cold.

He responded by showing me the weapon he'd been hiding. Just what I needed. I didn't want to hurt him or scare him off. I just wanted to try to communicate enough to get the things I needed. I moved my hands so that they were slightly raised and away from my body, so he could see that I wasn't going to try anything. "I don't mean you any harm, but I cannot let you hurt me. I'm sorry."

He said something else and pointed the weapon at my chest, which made me look at his chest. It was broad and I could see the muscles bulging a little under the clothing he wore. I cursed under my breath. I was crazy.

I had to try to focus. How could I remove the weapon without freaking him out? This would take some doing.

Maybe if I could work out how it worked, then I could disable it. He wasn't going to show it to me, so I'd have to *feel* for it.

I reached out with my mind, stretching out the invisible tendrils until they reached the weapon. *Huh?*

It was very primitive. Just a simple projectile weapon. Easy to fix. I started by teleporting the powdered substance from all of the projectiles inside it to a place on the ground nearby. I really didn't want the whole thing to explode and blow his hand off.

That would be disastrous. And a damn shame. He would be damaged. And I liked looking at him the way he was.

*Stop it!*

He said something else, but I had to keep my attention on the weapon. I concentrated on the barrel section and focused my mind. I created a bit of heat, but I had to keep it localised so he wouldn't feel the heat in his hand.

After a while, I relaxed. It was done. I'd fused the projectile to the barrel. It wasn't going anywhere. And he wouldn't be able to load any other projectiles into it either. Good.

Now I needed to focus on him. I needed to gain his trust somehow. I slowly reached for my laser and he tensed up, holding his weapon out further from his body. I got the impression that he wasn't very proficient with the weapon and that he didn't really want to use it, but he would if he had to. Fair enough.

"Uh." I nearly lost my balance. My head hurt. Using my mind like that wasn't such a good idea. I thought I'd hit my head in the crash. The dull ache I'd been feeling turned into a full blown headache of migraine proportions.

I gritted my teeth against the pain, pulled the laser pistol out of its holster and held it by the butt with two fingers. I lowered it to the ground and stepped back. Maybe that would help.

*Oh, no.* Bending over like that was *not* a good idea.

He seemed pleased with that. He stepped forward and picked it up. I managed to smile at him.

How could I communicate and make him understand me? My stomach gurgled and growled so loudly. His eyes widened. I felt the heat rush to my cheeks. I didn't realise how hungry I was.

He looked into my eyes and made a hand gesture as if he was eating something. I nodded vigorously, making the same movements. "Yes. I'm very hungry. Can you help?"

I immediately regretted nodding my head like that. My head throbbed even more. This was not good.

I wasn't sure if I could eat the same food as him. The ship's

computer hadn't been able to provide enough information about this planet before it died. I knew that it had a similar atmosphere to home and carbon-based life forms and a few other details, but not really anything about culture and food and more detailed anatomy.

That got me thinking about the alien's anatomy again. I was really messed up. It must be the result of hitting my head so hard.

A pain shot up the side of my head. Yep. I must've hit it a lot harder than I thought. I'd treated my leg injury and not checked out my head. That was a dumb move.

I gingerly touched the right side of my head, toward the back, and found a large lump. The pain spiked and my legs wobbled a bit. When I pulled my hand away and looked at it, my fingers were covered in blood.

I looked up at the alien. He looked concerned. That was weird. He held a weapon on me and he was worried about me. Go figure.

Wait. Something was wrong. I didn't feel right. My head was really fuzzy. The whole room started to tilt and there was blackness clouding the edges of my vision. This was *so* not good.

I had no idea what the alien would do if I fainted... *Oh... no...*  
Blackness washed over me.

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**ALIEN BOY**

**S**omewhere in the blackness, I heard a voice. I felt movement. Why did I feel like I was in a boat? And what were those clunking noises?

At one point, I felt my face leaning against something warm and hard, and I felt comforted by it. I thought I saw someone I knew, looking down at me. The face was familiar, but I couldn't place it. Was it my brother? No. Too pale.

I floated. I saw stars. The vastness of space. I saw some ships approaching mine. The lights came closer and closer. They blended together and swirled and formed patterns in front of my eyes. I laughed. Well, at least I *think* I did.

The swirling stopped and everything was black again. More floating...

A bright light hit my closed eyes, but I couldn't move. I tried to put my hand over my eyes, but I couldn't feel my body. Where was I? What was happening? Why couldn't I move or open my eyes?

Nothing made sense. But then I felt warmth. I felt safe somehow. And that didn't make sense.

I drifted back into blackness.

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I slowly became aware of my body. I felt strange. I wasn't in my own bed. I wasn't in my ship. And I was lying on something soft.

My eyes shot open and I could see a wooden ceiling above me. The room I was in was dimly lit and warm. My eyes travelled around the space, over the little desk with drawers next to me, the dresser with a large mirror and dim lamp, and a chair near the foot of the bed I was in with an alien sitting in it, tense and alert. And then I remembered what happened.

Maybe I should've found the fact that Alien Boy was watching me sleep a bit creepy, but I didn't. Those strange eyes stared at me and despite the weird colours, I liked them.

I moved my arms and legs, expecting to be tied down. I wasn't. That was a relief. The fact that he wasn't pointing that primitive weapon at me again was also a relief, but I suspected that it wasn't far away. Probably within easy reach.

I tried to sit up, but a sharp pain in my head had me groaning and lying back down. The alien jumped up as if he wanted to do something to help me, but stopped himself. I laid there watching the muscles in his arms twitching, warring between caution and helping me. He wore short sleeves, so there was a lot of muscle to look at. I gave myself a mental slap across the face.

What had happened to me? Had I really passed out in front of him? And how did I get into this room? He must've carried me or something. A memory wriggled free from my foggy mind. I remembered movement and leaning my face against something warm. His chest?

I felt around under the blankets that were covering me. I still had my utility belt and it felt like I was still wearing the same clothes as before, but my boots were gone. I willed myself not to panic about that. I had to tell myself not to be so stupid. Of *course* he would've taken them off to put me in the bed.

A shiver ran down my spine. *What else did he do while I was*

*out?* All sorts of horrible scenarios played out in my head and I had to stop them.

I looked back up at him. He was starting to relax a little, but still stood there, halfway to the bed. I opened my mouth to say something, but my stomach growled again. Unbelievable. It was even louder than before. Well, that would only make sense if I was already hungry before my brain decided to shut down on me.

The alien moved over to the dresser and picked up a tray. I couldn't see what was on it until he brought it closer, speaking softly as he approached. Food of some kind.

The smell was intoxicating. My mouth watered and my stomach gurgled. I tried again to sit up, *slowly* this time, and managed to inch my way up and lean against the headboard on the old bed.

He smiled and brought the tray closer, carefully placing it on my lap. I grabbed it to keep it steady and thanked him, knowing he couldn't understand, but hoping he would guess what I was saying. It was the first time I'd seen him smile and it was intoxicating. His teeth were straight and white. Maybe the aliens on this rock weren't as primitive as I'd originally thought.

The food smelled amazing. I hoped that it would taste as good as it smelled and that it wouldn't make me hurl. That was the last thing I needed.

My head went a bit fuzzy again as I picked up a piece of food. It looked like some kind of fruit. I sniffed it. Hmmm. It smelled good. Really good. I took a bite and savoured the taste as the juice burst into my mouth. So much better than ship's rations. I hadn't tasted fresh food for months.

I ate slowly and carefully, even though my stomach was demanding I just shove it all in. I had to take it easy. The drink he'd given me was nice, too. Sweet. There was only one thing on the tray that I didn't like, so I left it behind. Alien Boy didn't seem to mind.

I thanked him again and smiled. He smiled back as he took

the tray away. I kept smiling at his back and couldn't help noticing how well his pants hugged his butt.

*Stop it! Focus! You're still in danger.*

I couldn't keep thinking about his muscled body and I couldn't keep thinking of him as 'the alien'. I needed to stay focused and I needed to know his name. Only one of those things I was certain that I could do.

I put a hand on my chest and said, "Lilliana."

Then I pointed at him. He frowned for a second. "Jarath."

He was a quick learner. Good. "Jarath," I repeated. "Lilliana."

He smiled. "Lilli-ana."

"Yes. I thank you for the food and for helping me. I just wish I could get you to my ship so I can get a translator chip."

The smile faded, and he pointed to my head. Was he asking how my head felt? Then he pointed at his eyes with two of his fingers and pointed to my head again. Maybe he wanted to *look* at my head. That made sense, I guessed.

The question was; do I let him? Another was; could I trust him? He hadn't hurt me so far – well, that I knew of. I felt, well, normal. I didn't feel weird, or sore in any new places. And I had to admit that I wasn't going to be able to see the wound, let alone treat it by myself. I nodded, hoping that he would understand the gesture.

Jarath moved closer to me and I moved the blankets aside and swung my legs down onto the floor so that he could see better. He leaned over cautiously, but stopped. I looked up at his face and saw his brows drawn together in a frown. He probably couldn't see much in all my jet-black hair. He'd need a strong light.

Slowly, I reached down to the left side of my belt and unclipped my mini torch. He jumped back as if I'd punched him and I quickly pressed the button and waved it around to show him that it wasn't a weapon. The look of relief on his face was almost comical.

I handed it to him and pointed at my head. He took the torch,

looked at it for a few moments, then shone it on my head. It hurt when he moved some of my hair out the way, especially since some of it was stuck to my head, but I stayed silent. I wondered how much blood I'd lost.

I also wondered how my leg injury was healing, but since it was a large gash running from my hip to my left knee, I wasn't about to check it with Alien Boy watching.

A piece of straw fell from my hair and fluttered to the floor. There were probably many more of them sticking out of my hair everywhere. I tried to picture me sitting there with my hair matted up with straw and sticks poking out of it. I probably looked more primitive than the alien – than Jarath.

Then he gasped. Did that mean that it was really bad? I really didn't need this. I needed to get out of here. I needed to get back to the ship and the medi kit. I had to try to get him to take me there somehow. But how?

My head started to feel fuzzy. It was like it was reminding me that I wasn't going anywhere right now. I'd have to recover first, then find the ship. My hand automatically went to my belt. Relief flooded me when my fingers found the ship's locator still in its place.

I managed to sit still while Jarath bathed my head and treated the wound. He put some narrow strips across it to keep the sides together, but I suspected that it needed more than that. I assumed that he didn't have anything as advanced as the medical supplies I had stashed in the ship. With the medi kit, I could've shown him how to seal up the cut and apply some skin-grow spray on it. But I'd have to settle for what he had to offer.

Once he'd finished, I had to lie down again. The pain was becoming unbearable and I felt sick. I needed the energy that the food would give me, so I couldn't let myself throw up. And besides, it would be humiliating.

I turned my head to the left as I sunk down onto the pillow. I couldn't let anything touch that lump now that it was pounding

like it had its own heartbeat. Jarath stepped forward and helped me pull the blankets up to my neck. He smiled and I couldn't help smiling back. I noticed a small dimple made an appearance in his left cheek when he smiled. There wasn't much difference between our races when it came to little things like that.

I was doing it again. And he'd caught me staring at him. I had to stop myself from groaning.

My whole head pounded along with the lump. I wished I had some painkillers. There was no point asking Jarath for anything. Even if he could understand me, it would be way too risky to try to take whatever medicine he might have that was made specifically for his species. It could kill me. So I would have to wait until I could get to the ship – which could be days. I groaned and Jarath stepped forward. I tried to tell him I was okay, but he didn't back off.

After a while, he relaxed a bit more. His voice was soft. As he spoke, he put both hands together, palm to palm, and placed them beside his cheek and closed his eyes. He was telling me to go to sleep. Cute. Only, I didn't know if I could sleep with him watching me. Last time I didn't have a choice. Now I was nervous.

Jarath moved back slowly and sat in the chair again. He kept his eyes on me. I couldn't just relax and go to sleep. Not with him staring. And not with me feeling so wide awake and alert.

I suppressed another groan as I realised that I couldn't lie on my right side because of my head wound and I couldn't lie on my left because of my leg wound. I just wanted to scream. I hated sleeping on my back. This wasn't going to work. I couldn't sleep like this.

A few minutes later, a feeling of total exhaustion swept over me. Maybe I *had* a concussion. His face faded from view as I faded into sleep.

## THE VIPER

**T**wo days went by before I felt that I could travel. It had been interesting trying to learn about him and the way he did things. Frustrating didn't even begin to describe how I felt about the language problem, especially when a quick trip to my ship could solve that problem almost instantly.

The lesson on how to use the toilet had been more than funny, with Jarath doing the motions with a red face and me trying to keep a straight face. It wasn't as primitive as I'd feared. At least they used water to flush with. It wasn't too different to what I was used to. Thankfully.

Until I could get to the translator chips, I had to resort to some crude sign language and trying to create little scenes and act out what I wanted to say. I was hopeless. I wouldn't be signing up for a career in mime any time soon.

Now, the most important thing I needed to do was to get Jarath to help me track down the ship.

I grabbed one of the small models of crude flying machines that he kept on a shelf in his living room. It would make my little scene easier to convey. I also grabbed two little bottles from his

kitchen that contained a white powdery substance and a brownish powder that he sprinkled on our food sometimes.

I sat him down at the table and tried my best to play out the crash with the flyer, pretending the white bottle was me. I made it crash on the table, made the bottle stay with the ship for a short time, then made it stagger away. I grabbed the other bottle and tried to act out me bringing him to the ship.

Finally, I pulled the ship's locator from my belt and held it out in front of me. I pretended to walk around looking lost, then slowly brought the locator to the flying machine. I really hoped that he got it.

He seemed to be putting it all together in his head. I pointed at the bottle of white powder and pointed to me. Then I pointed at the brown one and pointed to him. I followed up by making us walk up to the ship again.

I could see the moment that he understood. It clicked in his brain and our eyes locked. He asked me a question, and I could only guess that he was asking me where the ship was. I wasn't really sure. It had been dark and I was injured. And a little out of it, too.

I held up the locator again, hoping that he would understand that it was the key to getting there. I think he got it.

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Walking was hard on the uneven ground. My left leg still hadn't recovered. The pain still radiated from my hip to my knee. I wished that I'd been able to take the medi kit with me that night, but it would have been way too heavy to carry, even if I hadn't been injured. The frustrating thing was, my injuries would be almost non-existent now if I'd been able to keep up treatments.

I sighed. No point in worrying about that now. The beeping sound increased in speed and pitch on the locator. We were heading in the right direction.

I inhaled deeply, loving the smell of the grass and the trees and the damp earth. I was so glad to be out of that house. I knew I had to keep out of sight – there was no blending in with the natives for me – but it had been getting to me.

We had been walking through the woods for about half an hour and it seemed like we were still on his property, but I couldn't be sure. As we followed the signal, the trees thinned out and I was starting to worry about being seen. I pulled the cloak Jarath had given me closer around me and turned toward the left, where the beeping was the fastest. I had to cover up as best I could in case we ran into some local aliens. They would know right away that I wasn't one of them. My hair and skin colour would give me away instantly.

I wondered if they were all as pale as Jarath, and if they looked as good as he did. Were they as well-built, or was he more of a rarity? What did the females look like? Were they all tall, or were there shorter ones? Were any of them as short as I was? If I laid low at Jarath's house until I could be rescued, I'd never know the answers to those questions. But my desire to get home overrode my curiosity. I had to get out of here.

The thought of going home made me feel warm inside, but when I thought of leaving Jarath, it felt like a hole had opened up in my chest. I frowned. Why would I feel like that about a stranger? An alien? It was weird. But he wasn't so much of a stranger anymore. We'd been together for the last two days and although we spoke different languages, we still seemed to be able to communicate enough to get by. Kind of.

Jarath wore a cloak, too, so I wouldn't look so out of place while wearing one. Pity. I couldn't see him clearly. I enjoyed watching him move and flex all those muscles.

I know. I was pitiful. He wasn't even the same species. But he was eye candy. I could keep blaming my head injury, but I liked looking at him, and I liked him. He'd taken care of me and fed me, even though I was an alien on this planet.

The locator started to beep faster and the pitch changed drastically. My heart sped up to match. We were close. Really close. I looked around. I couldn't find anything familiar. Nothing looked the same in the daylight.

I kept following the locator until it took us over an embankment and we could see the mess I'd made when I landed. Trees were torn up by the roots. Some of them had been burned, some of them shattered. The earth was churned up into jagged mounds of dirt, rocks, and grass. Now to find the ship in amongst it all.

We walked around a fallen tree and over a mound of dirt. I turned to the right and the locator went crazy. I slowed down. It was right here.

Jarath kept walking and I grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "Whoah, there, Alien Boy. Take it easy. You're gonna hurt yourself."

He turned toward me with a puzzled look on his face, so I thought I'd help him out. I stepped forward with my arms outstretched until my hands made contact with the hull, then I knocked on it so he would know that there was something solid there. I looked back at him and his eyes were wide and his mouth was hanging open. I guess he hadn't seen a cloaked ship before.

Before he could close his mouth, I hit the button on the locator to de-cloak the Viper 8000. I kept watching Jarath's face. It was amazing to see the excitement and awe in his eyes.

It was only a small ship – just a two-person speeder – but it was a good one. It had seen better days, but it was reliable and it was mine.

My brother, Laith, would *not* be impressed to see what I'd done to it, but it was unavoidable. And it had been my own stupid fault.

I'd travelled too far off-course. My curiosity had gotten the better of me and I just wanted to see the G-Class planet on my radar up close. While I was preparing to join its orbit, a piece of

space junk hit my starboard engine, causing it to burn at full capacity and I couldn't shut it off. To stop myself from going into a death spin, I cranked up the port engine to try to match it and level out. By the time I'd stopped spinning, I'd travelled too far into the atmosphere. I tried to pull up, but I'd used up all of my fuel. I was headed to the planet, so I went into damage control – in other words, I tried to do everything I could to reduce how much damage I would sustain on impact.

I guess I'd done a pretty good job – I was alive. The Viper had nose-dived into the ground and was sitting at an odd angle, but it was in one piece. Well, if you didn't count the pieces of engine and wings scattered around the place.

I pressed my thumb to the lock beside the hatch and it opened upwards, then extended a small set of steps to the ground. I climbed up into the ship, heading straight into the cockpit. I could have cried with relief when I saw that the homing beacon was still active and still sending a strong signal into space. I closed my eyes and held back the tears.

I looked out and waved Jarath over. I wasn't that cruel. I couldn't show him my baby and not let him get in and feel what it was like to sit in the pilot's seat. His face lit up and he and climbed in. Once he was sitting next to me in the cockpit, I watched him as he looked around him. His people had achieved flight – if those flying machines were any indication – but they definitely were *not* equipped for space travel.

A sharp pain shot down the side of my head. *Okay, enough playing around.* I needed the medi kit. I stood up and slipped back between the seats. The kit was behind Jarath's seat on a shelf in the cabin. I wasted no time in opening it up and grabbing the things I'd need. Now for the embarrassing part. I needed to get at my leg. I removed my cloak and put it on my seat in the front. I'd opted to wear some clothes that Jarath had given me, rather than my shipsuit. One reason was to blend in, but the other was because the shipsuit was a one-piece. Even

though there was a huge rip in it where I'd injured myself, I would've had to strip down to my undergarments just to get to my leg.

I pulled my pants down past my knees and grabbed some antiseptic spray. Jarath was trying not to look, but I needed him to know how to do this, so he could treat my head wound. Plus, he'd seen this wound already. I pushed my embarrassment aside and gestured for him to watch. Next, I applied the muscle regeneration spray, followed by some skin-grow. The gash was already sealed, mostly, but the skin-grow would make sure the rest of the skin was sealed and would prevent scarring.

I waited for the sprays to dry, which was only a minute or two, then quickly pulled my pants back up.

Now for my head. The lump was gone, but the wound was healing so slowly. I put each spray bottle on the shelf in front of Jarath and sat back down in the pilot's seat.

There was no need for my trusty little torch. The lights in the cabin were bright enough. I pointed to each one in turn and he sprayed them onto my head. When he'd finished, I thanked him and smiled. Oh, that dimple of his was going to be the death of me...

*Focus!*

Now for the translator chips. They were the next important thing on my list. I just didn't know how I was going to explain them to Jarath. I hadn't tried to tell him about them before because it would have been impossible. How would I even start? I could think of no hand movements. But I had to think of something now. Maybe I could start by injecting one into me first.

I looked around in the medi kit. I found the injector gun first and put it down on the shelf. Then I found the chips. They were in a pack of ten.

I turned to see an alarmed look on Jarath's face. I had to admit that the injector gun did look a bit intimidating. And like a weapon. I smiled at him and tried to tell him that it was okay. I

gave him the thumbs-up sign that we'd worked out meant that something was good. "Good. Yes. Good."

He watched cautiously as I loaded a chip into the gun. I'd never done this to myself before. I'd had it done, but that was a few years ago, and I'd had the chip removed after my missions were over. I remembered that it hurt. A lot.

And after the two days of pain I'd had, more pain was the last thing I wanted. But I *had* to do this.

I braced myself. I had to make this look easy and not too painful while Jarath watched me. I kept telling him that it was alright as I turned it toward my head and placed the tip behind my ear.

Jarath's face was a mask of horror. I kept smiling and before he could pull the thing out of my hand, I pulled the trigger. The pain was horrible. It hurt a lot for something so small, but it would be worth it.

I smiled up at Jarath and he looked like he wanted to kill someone. "It's okay. I wish you could understand me already. I'm okay." I gave him the thumbs-up sign again and reached for a painkiller spray and sprayed it behind my ear. I followed it up with the antiseptic and the skin-grow. It would heal up in no time.

Jarath didn't look convinced. He was saying something to me, which still sounded like gibberish. I had to wait until the chip started to do its thing. It would work things out soon enough.

I showed him how small the injury was and kept reassuring him.

Then it happened. His words changed to something I could understand. "... You do that to yourself? I can't understand you. I thought you were *treating* your injuries, not giving yourself new ones."

I felt my eyes go wide. It was so wonderful to be able to understand him at last! I couldn't help smiling at him and he stopped talking. How could I tell him I understood him?

"I can understand you," I told him. I made my hand in the shape of a talking mouth and put it to his lips. Then I brought it to the spot where the chip was, making my hand talk the whole time, then pointed to my ear. I had no idea how else to tell him.

"What are you trying to tell me? Are you trying to say... that you *understand* me?"

I nodded vigorously and put my thumbs up for added emphasis.

"Really? You can understand?"

I nodded again.

"Because of that thing you stuck in your head?"

I nodded.

"That's amazing!"

I reached for the injector gun and reloaded it. "Your turn."

"You want to do that to me?"

I nodded and put my thumbs up. "Yes." I could see his hesitation, but I think he wanted to be able to understand me as much as I'd wanted to understand him.

He nodded slowly. "Okay."

I approached him slowly and got him to face forwards in the seat. He turned his head and leaned forward so that I could reach. I lined the gun up carefully and pulled the trigger, cringing at the clicking sound.

Jarath swore under his breath. I didn't blame him. There are so many blood vessels and nerve endings in the head that it wouldn't matter where you injected the chip, it would still hurt.

I followed up with the sprays from the medi kit, then kind of flinched. What if they did more harm than good? I cursed myself for being so stupid. I hoped that he'd be okay. There wasn't much I could do about it now. Even if I washed them off, they would've already penetrated the skin.

He looked relieved, so I hoped that he was feeling some pain relief. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

I kept talking to him while we waited for the chip in his head

to adjust itself to enable him to understand me. It would be easier for his chip because it would be communicating with mine and would download the vocabulary that contained every word in my native language.

Then his eyes lit up. "I can understand you! I can't believe it! This is amazing!"

"Yes. It is."

His smile was infectious. "This is just so unbelievable!"

"It is one of the reasons I wanted to come to the ship."

That dimple looked like it was here to stay. "There is so much I've been dying to ask you!"

Well, me too.

We talked for a while and I found out that he lived alone, that we were still on his property, and that the town nearby was called Carnavon. All members of his race were as pale as he was and I *definitely* would *not* pass for a local. He was average height for his race, so I was short when compared to them.

I let him ask me about the Viper and where I was from. I couldn't really explain where exactly in the Universe I was from because of his limited knowledge of any solar systems or galaxies outside of his, but I did the best I could.

I started getting restless. We had to go. I'd left the ship de-cloaked for too long. It was too easy to see, even with its nose in the dirt. I found a bag and shoved all of the sprays I'd need from the medi kit into it, plus a few extra things. I replaced the translator chips and the injector gun and closed up the kit.

After putting my cloak on and my hood up, we climbed out, closed up, cloaked and headed back to Jarath's house.

We talked on the way and I couldn't help feeling elated. Things would be so much easier now. There was no barrier between us and it felt freeing. Like I'd been locked up and gagged and now I'd been let out.

As we approached his house, I couldn't help thinking about my poor ship. There was nothing I could do to fix it. Laith was the

expert, anyway. It would need a new engine at the very least, and there would be nothing on this planet that would be of any use. I was doomed to stay here. I didn't know what I was going to do, though. I couldn't let anyone see me. I looked too different. My skin was too dark. My hair was too dark. My eyes weren't the same. I'd have to hide out in Jarath's house for now. I was lucky that I liked the scenery – *him* being the scenery.

## UNDERSTANDING AT LAST

I looked up at the house. Being stuck in there again would drive me crazy, but things were a whole lot more interesting now with someone to talk to.

*Oh no.*

I started to feel light-headed and it felt like the hood was pressing down on the wound on my head. I'd been okay so far today, but maybe it was too much with all the walking we'd done.

When my foot touched the first step leading to the front verandah, the world tilted sideways and I fell against the railing. Then I started falling forward. Jarath grabbed me around the waist before I face-planted the steps. "Hey, I got ya."

I tried to reply, but nothing came out of my mouth. I felt kind of numb. I needed to lie down.

"Are you okay? Can you walk?"

I nodded. Bad idea. I felt even worse, but started up the steps anyway. Jarath helped me up the steps and toward the front door. My hood slid backwards off my head. "Let's get you inside and out of sight and lying down on something."

I tried to walk into the house, but my legs weren't co-operating. Once we'd stumbled inside, Jarath led me straight to a lounge

chair. He had to pick me up and carry me the last few steps. "Are you okay?" he asked again.

*No.*

As he laid me down and put a cushion under my head, I looked up into his face and blinked to focus. He was genuinely concerned about me. It seemed strange to me that an alien would care when I knew so many people of my own race that wouldn't give a damn. "I... I think I've done too much walking. My head... It's too much."

His features relaxed a bit. "Yeah. You hit your head pretty bad." He smiled. And I couldn't look away from that dimple. "I still can't believe that we can understand each other now."

I watched his mouth form the words. It was disconcerting that the movements weren't in sync with what I was hearing, but I'd get used to it. That was always the weird thing about using translator chips, but it was either that, or not understand him at all. I went back to watching that dimple. I smiled back. "It makes things a lot easier."

*Stop checking him out!*

"Can I get you anything? Do you want a drink? Something to eat?"

I shook my head, and that was a *bad* idea. The room spun. I closed my eyes. I needed to stop doing that. "Um, maybe I should have a drink."

"Done." He strode over to the kitchen and came back with a cup of water for me.

"It seems I'm always needing your help." I sighed.

This wasn't like me. I was always the strong one, always helping others. It was frustrating, but needing his help always meant being closer to Jarath, and I liked that. I liked the way he felt and the way he smelled of cologne and a hint of smoke from the fireplace. Being so close to him made my heart race. I just wished I could get closer to him when I wasn't on the verge of passing out. That way, I could *enjoy* the closeness.

Part of me knew that these thoughts were a bad idea. He was from a different planet. Hell, a different *solar system!* I couldn't be having these thoughts right now. Or ever. I needed to get my head on straight.

My priority was to get off this rock and back home. I needed Laith to fly in and take me away. To rescue me, like he always seems to have to do – every time I get myself into trouble. I seem to be really good at that. This time, though, takes the cake.

I closed my eyes and although I thought I was too wound up to sleep, I drifted off without any trouble.

---

"In your culture, what does a guy do if he is attracted to a female?"

After I'd slept the rest of the day away on the lounge, we sat on the lounges, talking about our planets and their cultures.

"Well, if he *really* likes her, he has to wait until the Seventh Day Parade, strip naked, run through the streets ahead of the parade, and profess his undying love to his intended."

The look of horror on Jarath's face was priceless. "Really?" His voice kind of squeaked.

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing.

"*What?* What's so funny?"

I couldn't answer right away. Once I'd gained some control, I said, "I'm just messin' with ya. That doesn't happen."

He looked so relieved that I let out a chuckle. "You're mean," he told me.

"I know."

Talking to Jarath was so free and easy. It made me drop my guard, the one I'd built around me after losing my mate on an exploration mission in the Rookwell Quadrant. It was a small planet that was mainly made up of jungles and swamps. No one saw the boggy sinkhole until Alwyn stepped into it and was instantly swallowed up to his shoulders. We tried everything we

could think of. Nothing had worked. We couldn't save him without getting stuck ourselves. The last thing he'd said to me was to find someone else and I'd just screamed out "No" at the top of my lungs. I'd screamed until his face went under. Then I'd collapsed and blacked out.

"What? What is it?"

I looked over to Jarath as his words ripped me from my memories. "Oh, sorry. I was just off in another time and another place."

His eyebrows were pulled together. "Wanna talk about it?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but I couldn't bare that wound. Not yet, anyway. Maybe I'd tell him one day. I just shook my head.

*Ouch! I've gotta stop doing that!*

He didn't push me any further, which was a huge relief.

"I'll just check on the oven." He pushed up off the lounge and headed out to the kitchen.

---

After Jarath had cooked us a delicious meal, I asked him to show me his wound from where I'd injected the translator chip. I couldn't help worrying about how I'd carelessly sprayed it without thinking about what might happen to him. He sat next to me on the lounge chair, so that I would be able to see behind his ear, then he leaned closer.

Suddenly, I was fully aware of how close he was and how good he smelled. I took a deep breath and willed my heartbeat back to normal. It wouldn't obey me. I needed to concentrate on what I was doing. *Focus! Be professional. This is a medical thing.*

He pulled his hair aside and I realised that I'd have to touch him to pull his earlobe out of the way so I could see. His skin was warm and as I touched him, he sucked in a breath. I couldn't tell if that was a good thing or not. Was he repulsed by me? Was I too... alien? Or was it just that my hands were too cold?

*Focus!*

I pushed those thoughts aside and inspected the entry point. It looked good. Almost healed. Relief washed over me and I sighed.

"Well? What's the verdict, Doc?"

I almost jumped at the sound of his deep voice. *Huh?* "D-doc?" Great. Now I sounded like a complete idiot.

"Yeah. You know. Doctor."

I grimaced. Of course. "Oh. I see. Yes. It looks good. It's healing well."

Jarath turned to me. "What's wrong?"

*What's wrong? I'm just an idiot who didn't think before she acted.* "I... Um... I used the sprays on you without thinking about whether it would be safe or not. I was worried that it might have some bad effects..." I trailed off, hoping that he would understand what I meant. *And I need to stop staring at you like this...*

"Oh. Okay."

"I'm sorry."

"No. It's okay. I get it. No harm done though."

I wasn't really sure what to say after that. The silence stretched on for a while, then I realised how close we still were and moved back. I could feel my face flush, so I made sure I looked everywhere but at his face.

Jarath cleared his throat. "I've been meaning to ask you, how did it happen? I mean, how did you crash your ship?"

My face felt hotter. I was embarrassed that I'd crashed because I did something stupid, but I thought that I might as well be honest.

I took a deep breath. "It was my fault."

He looked surprised. "How?"

I explained how I flew too close to this rock and paid the price for it.

He listened with a look of awe on his face.

"I treated my leg," I continued, "but didn't realise how bad my

head was, probably because of how *bad* it actually was. The trip here is just a blur. I don't know how I even made it here."

He gave me a lopsided smile. "That must have been—"

We both froze at the sound of something crashing to the ground outside. Jarath went a bit pale. He sprang into action a moment later and grabbed his pistol. The pistol that I'd ruined on the night I got here.

---

**MAE**

**A**s he grabbed a lantern and headed toward the back door, I darted forward.

"Stay here," he whispered.

I cringed inwardly. I couldn't let him face whoever or whatever was out there with a broken weapon. "I have to tell you something first," I whispered.

He frowned. "Now? Can't it wait?"

"No. It can't."

"Okay." His eyebrows inched up higher on his forehead. I could tell that he wanted to rush outside, but thankfully, he stayed to listen.

"Um... The night you found me in the barn, you had that gun..."

"Yes."

"I... umm... made it so you couldn't shoot me with it."

"You *what*? How?"

"I used my mind to remove all the powder and to fuse the projectile to the barrel."

"What? How can you— I've never heard of anyone being able to do anything like that."

"It's something I can do. I had to protect myself."

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed heavily. "I wasn't going to shoot you."

"I didn't know that at the time. You're an alien."

"*You're an alien.*"

He had a point. I sighed. "Well, I guess. Alien to *you*. Alien to *this world...*"

"So now that there's a noise outside and I urgently need the gun, you're telling me this?"

I bit my bottom lip. "I forgot about it until now."

He rolled his eyes and sighed. "Okay. I have another gun."

He stalked over to the room he slept in and came out a few moments later with a longer gun in his hand. "Now wait here."

"But—"

"No. If it's a person, they'll see you..."

Oh. Yeah. Duh. I nodded. He was right. We couldn't risk it.

He placed the lantern on a small table near the back door and crept out silently without it. I guessed that he would come back for it if he needed it.

A few moments later, I heard him start moving. He probably stayed on the other side of the door until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. That's what I would've done.

I waited, frozen to the spot. My heartbeat the only sound. Well, it was pounding so hard that it seemed like I could hear it.

I tried to imagine the yard and the barn, but it was difficult. I'd only been out there once in the dark and once in the day time. And the only other thing I had to go on was from a few peeks out the windows. Was he at the barn now? Could he see well enough? Would he shoot someone if they were spying on us or robbing the place? I didn't think so, but I really didn't know him well enough to make that call.

Every now and then I could hear a faint noise out there. I had to keep reminding myself to breathe. And even then I could only manage shallow breaths. What if something happened to him?

I jumped as an even louder crash split the silence. *Oh my stars! What happened? What should I do? I need to go out there. I need a weapon. I need my pistol.*

I looked around the room frantically as if the pistol would just appear and I could grab it. I realised how stupid that was and stopped myself. *Maybe I could use something else as a weapon...* I quickly darted around the room, but I couldn't find anything suitable.

I imagined recklessly charging out into the night without a weapon or a light. It would be too dangerous. And *really* dumb. I'd probably end up getting shot by Jarath in the darkness.

*No. Don't try to be a hero. Just wait a little longer. Then, But what if he's hurt? What if--?* An image of Alwyn's face as he sunk down into the boggy sludge invaded my mind.

"No!" I shoved the image from my brain. I needed to calm down. I needed to slow my breathing. I had to wait a bit longer. If Jarath didn't come back soon, I'd find my pistol, grab the lantern and venture out.

Just as I was starting to think that I had my breathing kind of under control, the door handle started turning. My heart leapt into my throat and my hand went straight for my pistol, only it wasn't there.

My eyes darted around the room, looking for a weapon again, but before I could remember that there was nothing here I could use, the door opened and Jarath popped his head in. "It's just me."

I was so relieved it was him and that he was unhurt that I rushed forward and hugged him. He tensed, but put his arms around me.

"Hey. It's okay. I'm okay. I think it was an animal. I couldn't find anything or anyone out there."

I could feel his taught muscles under his shirt. *What am I doing?*

I came to my senses and stepped back. "What was that loud bang?"

He gave me a sheepish grin. "I tripped over the end of the plough."

"But why was it so loud?"

"I landed against some empty tins that I use for grain for the chickens. Knocked them all over me." He chuckled.

I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face. And his dimple was back. *Oh, that dimple's gonna ruin me!*

He grabbed the lantern and turned to head back outside. "I don't think there's anything out there, but it's pretty dark, so I'll just double-check."

---

The next morning was clear and bright. I looked out the window and wanted to rush out the door and into the trees. The urge was so strong, I had to hold on to the table where we'd just had breakfast to stop myself. I needed to get out of here. I needed to go to the ship. I needed to check to make sure the homing beacon was still working and there was still a chance Laith was coming for me.

I needed a distraction. I looked at Jarath. At his handsome face. Yes. It *was* handsome. Even though it was so pale and so different from my own kind. I couldn't help it. I was hopeless. And today I couldn't blame it on my head injury.

Jarath must have read something in my eyes. He frowned. "Are you okay?"

I sighed. "Yeah. I just... I'm thankful for your help. But... I can't... I want to go. I need to get home." I ran my fingers through my hair in frustration and sucked in a breath when my fingernail hit the sore on my head. "Damn it!"

Jarath jumped up. "Let me have a look."

I took a deep breath and nodded. He came around to my side of the table and I handed him my torch.

"Thank you," I murmured.

"Not a problem." Pause. "It looks okay."

"Thanks."

He handed me the torch and sat beside me. "I can't imagine how you must be feeling. I can only try to help you."

I looked into his weird eyes. Why was he helping me? How could he just accept me like he had? Was he being truthful, or did he have an agenda? Maybe he'd contacted the authorities and was just keeping me occupied until they arrived...

*Where did that come from?* I had no idea. If he was going to turn me in, he would've done it before now.

My eyes wandered to his lips and then slowly down to his chest. I didn't realise what I was doing until he chuckled. "Are you checking me out?"

My eyes shot to his face and I felt my cheeks flush. That's exactly what I'd been doing. "I... Um. No. I wasn't. I was just... Oh, don't be putting tickets on yourself, Alien Boy!"

"Alien Boy?"

"Yep."

He threw back his head and laughed.

I waited until his laughter had subsided. "Are you done?"

"Yep."

The dimple was there in all its glory. I had no words. He just smiled. *Oh, boy...*

He was suddenly very close to me and I noticed that I had leaned in closer to him. His scent was intoxicating and...

And I couldn't do this. I pulled away. I couldn't give in to my attraction to him. He was an alien. We were too different. And I was leaving this rock as soon as Laith arrived... *If* he arrived...

I stopped myself. *When* he arrived.

There was a noise outside. A low rumbling sound. *Not again!*

This time, Jarath leapt up and ran to the window, but didn't go looking for his gun. The noise was getting louder by the second.

I sprang to my feet, automatically reaching for my laser. I cursed. I needed that thing back.

Jarath, however, didn't look alarmed. I tried to slow my pounding heart as he turned from the window. "What is it?"

He looked into my eyes and could see my fear. "It's okay, Lilliana. It's only a car. A vehicle used for transport." I took a deep breath to try to calm down. "But you'll have to hide." He looked out the window again. "It's Mae. A friend of mine from town."

*Mae? A friend? Male or female?*

Why was I wondering that? Maybe to assess how dangerous they might be. Maybe.

Jarath directed me to the hallway and pulled a cord that hung from the ceiling, which caused a ladder to extend down towards us. "You can hide up here," he told me. "I will not betray you. I will keep you safe."

I nodded and climbed the rungs, watching as he pushed the ladder back up and sealed me in.

Anxiety gnawed at me as I listened to the voices below. I could hear them exchanging pleasantries from my hiding place. Definitely a female's voice. Well, unless there were males of this species with really high-pitched voices.

The fact that it was a female down there piqued my curiosity. What did the females look like? Was she as pale as Jarath? I had to know. Surely it wouldn't hurt to just take a peek. I could be stealthy and silent when I needed to be.

It took a while to work out how the ladder thing worked. I lowered it really slowly and was proud of the fact that I managed to keep it quiet.

I crept down and padded across the floor, following the sound of their voices. They were in the kitchen. I stood to the side of the doorway, wondering how I could get a glimpse of her without being seen. I looked closer at the cupboard that was right near the door. It had a glass front on it and one of the doors was sitting

open. It reflected the image of Jarath and a busty female sitting together at the table. She was, of course, weird-looking to me, just like he was, but I guess she was attractive for a female. Lighter than him. Long pale hair and pale eyes. Curvy figure. Pleasant smile.

"I didn't see you in town on market day." Her voice was sweet and light.

"I didn't need any supplies." That was probably a lie. Her tone had implied that it was unusual for him to not be there.

I felt guilty. Would he run out of supplies because of me? I couldn't let that happen. I'd have to insist that he goes into town. And soon.

Another thought occurred to me. It would look suspicious if he didn't keep to his normal routine. I would talk to him as soon as Alien Girl left.

I had to stifle a chuckle at my own joke.

"I'm worried about you," she continued. "All alone out here. It must be hard to run the farm all by yourself."

I heard a shuffling noise as he shifted his weight in the chair. "It's fine. I manage quite fine by myself. I know your brother needs the work, but I—"

"I wasn't talking about my brother."

Realisation hit me in the gut. I knew exactly what she was talking about. She was looking to be his mate, to live here with him and help with the running of the farm. She placed a hand on his arm.

Heat rose inside me and it took a few moments to recognise what was causing it. I was jealous? Come on. I couldn't be. We weren't even from the same part of the universe!

It was completely logical that he would be attracted to someone of his own species and someone that he knows well. He might even have feelings for her already.

Now that thought caught me off guard. I knew it was stupid, but I couldn't help the way I felt. I quickly retreated to my hiding

spot before I made a noise and ruined everything. Jarath would keep my secret, but I doubt anyone else would.

I waited impatiently for him to return. When he did, he looked relieved to see me still up there. Where else would I be? Well, that was a dumb question, considering I did come out and snoop around.

"She's gone. You can come out now. Sorry it took so long."

"That's okay."

Was it? No. Not really. How many times was this going to happen? Would I eventually have to stay up here permanently? I hoped not. It was dark and dusty and the air was stale.

I climbed down and turned to look at him. "She seemed to like you a lot."

"How could you tell that? How could you even hear what we were saying?"

Whoops. "I..." Might as well just tell him. "I peeked."

"You *what*? Are you *crazy*? Do you know what she would've done if she'd seen you?"

"I was curious. I only looked at her through the reflection of the glass in the kitchen cupboard."

"It doesn't matter. She could have walked to the doorway and seen you." He ran his hand through his hair. "Lilliana. You need to be more careful."

I immediately went on the defensive. I was no child. "I only wanted to see the female of your species. I didn't get caught, so just calm down."

I stomped off to the room I'd been sleeping in and slumped down on the bed. I was no child, but right now I was acting like one.

Jarath followed me. "I just don't want you to be found out, that's all. Do you know what they'd do to you if they caught you? They'd dissect you to see what makes you tick."

My stomach dropped and I looked up at him. He was serious. My people wouldn't be so barbaric, but there was a time in our

history when that's exactly what they did. I kept forgetting how primitive it was here.

I looked down at my feet. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. We just have to be careful, okay?"

I looked back into his eyes. "Okay." I sighed. "You know, she does really like you."

"No. Not really. Not as anything more than just a friend."

"Oh, now that's where you're mistaken, Alien Boy." He raised his eyebrows at the nickname. "She likes you and was hinting at a union."

"No. You've got it all wrong. She was just concerned about me working out here alone. She thinks I can't handle it. A lot of people think I can't. I'm out to prove them wrong. I've been going great."

"But you haven't been out of the house since... since I got here. That couldn't be good for the farm."

He shook his head and slumped his shoulders. "No."

"You need to go into town."

His muscles tensed. "I can't do that."

"You *have* to. You have to get supplies, and you have to act normal, so no one will get suspicious."

He opened his mouth to protest, but he knew I was right. "Okay. But when I do, you'll have to hide up in the attic again. My brother sometimes drops in unannounced, and if I'm not home, he comes in and makes himself at home till I get back."

"Oh. Okay." The thought of going back up there did not sit well with me, but what choice did I have?

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## COSTUMES

Only one day passed before I had to go up into the attic again. I cringed inside at the thought of it.

Another car had arrived, this time with two strangers inside. That couldn't be good.

Did Mae see me after all? Did she tell someone? It didn't seem likely that she would have seen an alien in Jarath's house and not bat an eyelid. I pushed those thoughts away as I climbed the ladder.

There was a knock on the door just as Jarath closed the attic's hatch. I moved silently toward the front of the house in order to hear what was said.

I could hear the door open and then a male alien's voice as he greeted Jarath. He told him that they were from the government and introduced himself and his partner, then asked if Jarath lived alone.

"Yes."

The alien cleared his throat. "I see. What do you do here? On this property."

"I breed horses. Working horses. I also run some cows and chickens."

"I see."

He asked a few more routine questions, then got down to business. "Has there been anyone staying with you or have you seen anyone in the area recently?"

My heart rate accelerated. They knew something.

"No. Why?"

"We have reason to believe that a group of youths have been stirring up trouble on the outlying properties."

"What do you mean?"

I strained to hear them better.

"Well, they have been dressing up in costumes and scaring the public."

*What the? What's that got to do with anything?*

"What kind of costumes?"

"Alien costumes."

*Oh no. Not good. Did someone see me? Did they find the ship?*

Jarath chuckled. "You mean, they're dressed like little green men with big heads and bulging black eyes?"

"Not quite. More like blue body paint with black spots all over, black eyes and long black wigs."

No. I needed to sit down. Wait. I *was* sitting down.

Jarath laughed. "Wow. They sure have an imagination."

The man ignored him. "Have you seen them?"

"No."

My heart pounded in my ears.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm pretty sure. I wouldn't forget an outrageous costume like that."

They exchanged a few more words that I didn't really pay attention to, and then the men left. I felt numb.

It was a long time after the sound of the car's motor had faded before Jarath dared to open the hatch. He looked worried. "They're looking for you," he breathed. "They're trying to make out like it's some local kids dressed up so no one suspects

anything and panics about it, but their description was dead on.”

I tried to calm my breathing as I climbed down, concentrating on one rung at a time. It didn't work. My breathing was shallow and I felt sick. “Yeah, I know. I heard them.”

He sighed loudly. “What are we gonna do?”

“Um, not panic?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “But what if they find you?”

I tried taking a deep breath and let it out slowly. “They won't find me.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I think I'll be outta here very soon. Did you hear what he said? He said a *group* of youths. You know what that means? It wasn't me that was spotted. I think that maybe I'm not the only one here. I think my brother is looking for me.” The irony of using the word 'spotted' wasn't lost on me as I looked down at the black spots of varying sizes on my arms.

I couldn't help the flutter of excitement I felt as I thought about being rescued. But then I felt a pain in my heart when I thought of leaving Jarath. I'd kinda gotten used to having him around.

His face became expressionless. Was he panicking about the other aliens being here, or was it that he didn't want me to leave? Or maybe he was worried about getting caught harbouring an alien. It was hard to tell. He may have wanted his life back. He might just want to be with Alien Girl after all.

I couldn't read him.

I'd come to think of him as a good friend. Maybe more than a friend, but I couldn't go there. I didn't want to say goodbye, but I couldn't stay here. I couldn't keep hiding out in this house. Sooner or later, I'd be found. The government was probably watching the house right now. That meant that I couldn't go back to the Viper. I couldn't even go near a window.

How was I going to tell Laith where I was? If I'd had a

portable homing device, he could be here picking me up right now. We were between missions, so I didn't have those kinds of things with me. That's why I didn't have a translator chip installed in my head. They have to be removed after a certain period of time, usually when the battery needed to be replaced. We'd give our bodies a rest from them for a few weeks and get another one put in for the next mission.

I'd be better prepared next time. What was I talking about? *Next time?* I didn't plan on ever doing this again.

I followed Jarath to the kitchen and he started making us both some tea. Tea would be nice. I needed something to help calm my nerves.

Sitting at the table, I had a view of the back yard area. I started looking further out to the tree line. Laith was out there somewhere. He was looking for me. He was coming for me. The feeling I'd had the day before returned. I wanted to rush out there, calling Laith's name and waving my arms around like a crazy person. I wanted off this rock.

I looked at Jarath's back as he busied himself while waiting for the water to boil and I felt a pang of sadness. I'd miss him, but what else could I do?

What would it be like for him once I was gone? How could he go back to life as usual once he'd discovered that there was life on other planets? Nothing would be the same again. And worst of all – he couldn't tell anyone. Something like that would kill me.

"We have to have a plan." That just came out of nowhere. But we did.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Any ideas?"

I went to run my fingers through my hair and stopped myself before my fingers hit the sore spot. "I'm pretty sure the house is being watched." He nodded. "So we can't go out to the ship or set up some kind of sign for Laith and the others to let them know I'm here."

He nodded again, deep in thought.

"They will have equipment with them that will detect my presence, but it only works at a short distance. He'd have to be outside in the yard, pointing it straight at the house, so maybe he'll try each of the houses under the cover of darkness. We'll have to be ready in case they show up. Starting tonight."

"Okay."

There wasn't much we could do in preparation, and there wasn't anything to pack. I needed my shipsuit. "My shipsuit. Do you still have it?"

A smile crept across his face and the dimple magically appeared. "Yep. I'll get it for you."

Why was he smiling like that? It was only an item of clothing. No big deal.

Once he walked back into the room and handed me the garment, I quickly worked out what the smile was about. He'd sewn up the leg for me. Now it was my turn to smile. "So, you're not just a pretty alien face. You can do useful stuff too."

He laughed out loud at that.

I looked up at him. "Thank you. I appreciate it." I could have kissed him. But that would've been a bad idea. How could I stand to leave him behind if I did that?

He bowed low and added a little flourish of his hand. "I live to serve."

My eyes stung. Oh, I was going to miss him.

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After yet another tasty meal, I put on my shipsuit and waited impatiently for darkness.

Every noise had me on edge. It could mean Laith was out there, but it could also mean that the government people were back. I was a complete mess. I stopped myself from pacing the floor and sat down on the lounge chair.

Jarath sat next to me and took one of my hands in his. "It's

gonna be okay. You need to slow your breathing. Do you want to do something to keep your mind occupied?"

I frowned. *Like what?* My mind went to a few places that I knew it shouldn't, but yeah, it didn't care. It went there anyway.

"I could teach you how to play cards." Could he read something in my eyes? I hoped not. I didn't want to give away what my traitorous brain had been thinking.

I nodded dumbly. Anything to keep from thinking about everything.

It turned out to be a simple, but interesting game. The cards themselves were primitive, but charming. Kings and queens adorned the cards. I liked the jokers and was disappointed when they were cast aside so we could play. Once I got the hang of the game and the rules, I liked it.

"Take the deck with you when you go," he told me.

"The deck?"

"Yeah. The whole pack of cards is called a deck."

"Oh. Okay. Are you sure?"

"Yes. I can buy some more next time I'm in town."

I smiled up at him. "Thank you."

And that's when the front door burst open and Laith came barging in, stunner in hand.

## FOUND AGAIN

I jumped up out of my seat. "Laith!" My first instinct once I registered the weapon was to stand in front of Jarath.

"Lilliana!" His expression went from pleased to puzzled. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure you don't shoot first and ask questions later. He's a friend. He helped me after the crash." I could feel Jarath standing behind me. Could feel the heat from his body.

Laith stepped into the room, followed by two other members of our team, Darx and Kahzidar. My heart leapt. They were really here.

Laith didn't lower his weapon and the others had theirs drawn. "Would I do that?"

"Yeah. Probably. Maybe." I grinned. "I didn't want to take any chances."

He grinned. "We've been looking for you. Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Your medi kit was used. What are your injuries?"

"You found the Viper? Good. I, um, I hit my head and hurt my leg." I turned so he could see the stitching up the leg of my ship-suit. "But I'm okay. The medi kit sorted me out."

He looked skeptical.

"I'm okay." I repeated. "Can you put your weapons away? This is Jarath. He found me the night of the crash and helped me. I was a bit woozy after hitting my head. He hasn't told the authorities about me. I've been staying here waiting for you."

I watched as they lowered their weapons one at a time, but no one put them away. Fair enough. I wouldn't have either.

The tallest of our group took a step forward. "Hey, Wildcat. Ready to get outta here?"

"Hell, yeah! Where's the ship, Darx?"

His smile widened. "Not far away. Hallie is on standby."

My smile widened. "Good. I'm ready when you are."

I noticed that Jarath was now standing beside me. "Hello," he offered. I was impressed.

I looked at the others. "Do you guys have translator chips?"

Kahz answered. He was the science-y one on the team. "Yes. The Viper reported two missing, so we stuck some in. They work on him?" He waved a blue hand at Jarath.

"Yeah. I had a hard time getting him to take me to the Viper before we could communicate. It won't take long for your chips to pick up on their language from mine and his. He's saying hello."

They all acknowledged his greeting.

I looked at Laith. He was getting antsy. He wanted to leave. I could see it in his eyes. We should be moving. We could talk about all this once we were out of here. I agreed.

He met my gaze. "We need to book it." He frowned. "What were you thinking? How did you end up crashing the Viper?"

Now I just felt stupid. "I wanted to have a closer look and got pelted with a piece of space junk. Hit the engine and made it do a full burn. Straight toward the planet. By the time I got straightened out, it was too late to pull out."

"That's it. I know you're against it, but you're getting a subdermal tracker. I'm not going through this again."

Kahz spoke up. "We should all get them."

Laith looked back at him and sighed. "Yeah. We should. But right now, we need to get going."

I looked at Jarath and my heart plummeted to my stomach. I didn't want to say goodbye. "I wish you could come with us – just for the ride. Just for a while... We could show you around the universe."

Laith turned to me. "Are you *crazy*?"

"Yes. You know it. But he's been really good to me. Fed me and kept me hidden whenever someone came to the house. He deserves to have some fun and learn about the world outside of this rock."

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"We can bring him back in a couple of days."

I felt a pang in my gut thinking about that, because I'd still have to say goodbye. I was just delaying the inevitable.

Jarath's frown smoothed itself out. Was he really considering coming with us?

Darx turned toward the front door. "We got company. Someone's out there."

I froze. "Hallie?"

"No. She's got orders to wait till we give her the signal to come get us."

That was not good. I mean, it was good that she was going to get us, but it meant that someone else was outside.

Darx quietly shut the door and crept to the window. He pulled out a night vision scope and peered through the curtains. "Aliens. Lots of 'em. I'd say they know we're here. They're taking up positions around the house."

"Damn! We shoulda booked it! Now we're stuck!" Laith looked at me with a scowl.

"Hey! Don't blame me!"

"You're the one who got yourself stuck here in the first place!"

I opened my mouth to reply, but closed it again. I had to stop

myself from responding. Arguing with my brother wouldn't help. We needed a plan.

I turned to Jarath. "I'm assuming that they've got the house surrounded. Is there another way out of here?"

He gave me a half-smile. "Yes. The previous owner of this house was paranoid that the government were going to take away our rights and invade our farms, so he dug a tunnel."

"Whoah, seriously?"

"Yes. He was delusional."

"Thank the creators of the universe for crazy people! Where does it lead?"

"To the stables. He thought it would be a quiet getaway."

"He had that right."

Darx joined the conversation. "Okay, so how are we gonna do this? We need something to distract them while we split."

"Wait here." Jarath rushed out of the room and came back wheeling some kind of fake person. "My mother has been tailoring some clothes for me using this mannequin. We could put it near the window where the curtain is parted a little bit while we make our way to the basement."

Not much of a distraction, but better than nothing. "That's brilliant," I told him. "Let's do this!"

We all moved away from the window while Jarath pushed the mannequin into position. He stopped to scoop up the deck of cards from the table and put them in his pocket. "Come on. This way."

He led us to a dark room behind the kitchen that had shelves on the walls and a large trapdoor in the middle of the floor. I flicked on my torch as he opened it up and we descended into the darkness. Jarath pulled the trapdoor shut behind us and I shuddered.

I hated the dark. Yeah, I know it's pretty dumb when I spend half my time zooming through the blackness of space, but total

darkness underneath the ground is different. Very different. It's oppressive and smothering. And creepy.

I handed my torch to Jarath. "Lead the way."

He sidestepped everyone and started off down the tunnel. The roof was low and Darx had to hunch forward. The walls were as creepy as I'd imagined with all the tree roots sticking out and cobwebs stretched between them. I guess there's spiders all over the universe.

We seemed to be walking forever when Jarath announced that we'd made it. I looked around all the bodies in the small space and saw a ladder extending upwards. Jarath climbed up and pushed the trapdoor open. We followed him up and were greeted with the smell of what I assumed was the droppings of the horses.

I'd smelled the same odour on the breeze while staying with Jarath and I'd seen the animals grazing in the fields around Jarath's property. They were powerful, majestic creatures. We had similar creatures back home, so I hoped that these were just as easy to ride.

Jarath rushed around in the dark, grabbing riding gear for us. "Do you know how to ride?"

"Yes. We have something similar to your horses on our planet," I told him.

I could see his smile in the darkness. "Good. Let's get going."

He put bridles on five of the horses and gave a quick explanation on how to direct them and we mounted up.

Jarath checked that we were all organised. "Follow me."

He led his horse over to the door to the stables and pushed it open. He mounted swiftly and kicked his mount into a fast walk. I wanted to go faster, to put distance between us and the aliens back at the house, but we needed to be quiet.

Suddenly, it wasn't so quiet anymore. A shout rang out in the night and I could hear others join in. "Over there!"

We'd been found out.

Jarath looked back to us. "Go!"

He kicked his mount and took off at a fast pace and we followed without hesitation. It took me a while to get used to the movement of the horse and even though we were in danger, I couldn't stop the feeling of exhilaration as we flew through the darkness.

I could hear Laith calling Hallie to meet up with us. Could still hear shouting, but it was difficult over the noise of the horses hoofs on the hard ground.

Then I could hear weird popping sounds. *What the? Is that their primitive weapons?*

As soon as I'd finished that thought, Jarath's horse stumbled and fell, throwing him onto the ground and screaming in agony. My heart stopped and started back up again and it took a second or two to remember how to stop the horse and turn it around.

Laith looked back. "Lilliana! What are you doing?"

"Jarath fell. I need to help him."

"But we came here for you! You can't put yourself at risk!"

"I'm not leaving him!"

Laith gave a groan of frustration and I could hear them turning back as I slid off my horse and raced to Jarath's side. *Please be okay. Please be okay.*

He was lying on his back in the darkness. A vision of Alwyn flashed into my head and I gasped. The thought of losing Jarath too nearly killed me.

He moaned and put a hand up to his head. Relief flooded my veins.

"Jarath! Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

He mumbled something and I looked him over quickly. "Can you get up? We have to go!"

He started to move to get up and I helped him to his feet. "My horse..."

I squinted in the darkness and could see the outline of the

poor beast. It wasn't moving and was no longer making any noise.  
"I think he's gone."

Jarath made a choked sound in his throat. "He was one of my best..."

"We have to go. I'm sorry. They're coming." I could hear shouting. I thought I heard something about them taking us alive.

Jarath seemed to come to his senses and he fumbled his way up onto the horse. I jumped up in front of him and took the reins. "Let's go!"

We wasted no more time. "Laith! Where's Hallie?"

"She's close!"

"Tell her to hurry!"

I was leading the group through the trees, but had no idea where we were going.

A minute or two later, I turned to my brother. "Laith?"

He grinned back. "Any second now..."

I felt a small echo of relief, but we weren't out of there yet.

"Okay, stop! Now!" Laith shouted.

We all pulled up on the reins and jumped off the horses.

"Jarath. Get down! Quickly!" I called.

Jarath looked down at me. "What are you doing? They'll catch up to us!"

I smiled at him. "Just trust me. Get down here."

He dismounted and walked over to me.

I stepped away from him. "Don't touch anyone! We need to stay separate or things will end in disaster."

His eyes widened at that in the darkness, but then I felt the familiar tingle of the transporter beam. It consumed me till I could no longer see. Next minute, we were in the transporter room aboard my brother's ship.

Hallie's voice came over the com system loud and clear. "Everyone aboard?"

Laith didn't hesitate. "Yes. Book it!"

I only felt a slight pull as the ship ascended toward the sky and I let out a giggle. We'd done it. We were going home.

I turned to Jarath. "Are you hurt?"

He grimaced, but I didn't think it was from any pain he felt. It was the horse. I knew it. He said he was okay, but showed me his scraped knee and elbow. I guess that could be classed as 'okay'. They were minor injuries.

I smiled. "We can fix that."

Laith walked up to us. "What are we gonna do with him?"

I looked up at him. "*Him*' is standing right here. And we can't take him back now. He'll be in all sorts of trouble." I turned back to Jarath. "We'll try to come back soon so you can get a message to your family so they know you're okay and so someone can look after the farm, but you'll have to stay with us for a while. At least until things calm down. We'll work something out." The smile fell away from my face. "I'm sorry. I've messed up your whole life."

"Are you kidding? I mean, I'll admit I'm worried about the farm, but I'm probably the first of my kind to ever go to space."

I smirked. "You're probably just as crazy as I am."

"The creators help us," Laith moaned.

The door to the transporter room swished open and Hallie strode in. "We've left orbit and we're on autopilot- Whoah! Is this the alien? He's... He's so pale..."

"Yeah. They're all like that. Weird, huh?"

"Yep. But not in a bad way."

Darx strode over. "Are you finished?"

Hallie smirked. "Are you jealous?"

I smiled. Of course he was. He had a thing for Hallie.

"No. Not at all."

While I listened to their banter, I looked over at Jarath. He'd just spotted the monitor that showed the stars outside the ship and the look on his face was priceless. Maybe he'd enjoy his trip to outer space after all.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan McKenzie is the author of the Sci-fi novel, “Tamisan”, and the short stories, “The Alien” and “Seduced by a Vampire”.

She is also the illustrator for a children’s story called “The Lake” by Richard Dabinett.

Susan has completed many art courses and holds a diploma in Information Technology. She taught IT for 15 years at TAFE in Australia and runs a blog to help other authors with computer-related issues.

Because she loves anything book-related, she also formats books for print, converts manuscripts to all popular eBook formats, and offers proofreading services.

Unlike most other authors, she’s not a coffee addict – but chocolate? That’s a different story. When she’s not writing or working, she loves to paint, draw and play the guitar.

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