

ALIEN WORLDS

Impani leaned against the tree trunk. She wished she were invisible. A twig snapped, and she bit her lip hard.

Nearby, the beast gave a low growl.

Quaking with dread, she peered around the tree. She saw a bristly black snout and jagged brown tusks. The beast's single eye turned slowly in its socket. It stared straight at her.

With a yelp, Impani took off. She raced through leaves of red and orange feeling as if she ran through fire. Her boots thumped and scarred the hard-packed clay. Her facemask jolted with each step.

She couldn't keep this up. She was fast, but the beast had endurance—and he had it in for her. She shouldn't have entered its lair. That was one of the first rules she learned as a cadet. But the cub was so cute.

Suddenly, her feet flew out from under her. She slid on her butt down a steep slope and landed in a mud puddle. A flock of winged geckos took flight.

The beast detoured around the shallow pool. Couldn't bear to get its fur wet. Maybe she still had a chance.

Spurred by hope, Impani angled back to where she'd forded the stream, leaving her partner, Davrileo Mas, digging up his rocks. If she could reach water, the creature might lose interest. She bounded over gullies and fallen branches. The creature thrashed behind her. It growled as if to tell her it still had her in sight.

Impani stumbled over the uneven ground. Her breath hitched, and she clutched her

side. Thorns reached for her, but her skinsuit slipped through as if she were made of glass. Ahead, she heard the babble of a stream. She forced her burning legs to move faster, arms pumping, teeth bared, and burst from the crimson trees into bright yellow sunlight.

Crashing over the rocky bank, she splashed into the stream. Moisture dotted her mask. She ran until the water was over her knees then risked a glance toward the shore.

The beast paced the bank. Its massive, inward-turned paws raked the rocks. A thick collar of fur stood straight out. Impani gnawed her lip. *Go away. Go back to your baby.* She sighed as the animal lowered its ruff and turned to leave.

An arc of blue-white energy streaked overhead, striking the beast as it lumbered away. With a roar, it reared onto two feet and spun toward the bank.

"No." Impani looked around.

Davrileo pointed his stat-gun and fired again. The blast hit the beast mid-chest. The creature flew back then slammed the ground. Its heavy legs twitched and slashed the air. Impani saw the white of its exposed ribcage, the black, scorched flesh.

"No!" she yelled.

Davrileo shot again. The beast shuddered and fell silent. Impani looked at her partner. She wanted to throttle him, wanted to smash his grinning face.

"What do you think you're doing?" she shouted as she waded across the stream. "It had a cub. It was protecting its young."

"It would have killed you," Davrileo shouted back.

She moved as if to tear at her non-existent hair. "It was *leaving*."

"A little gratitude might be nice," he said. "What were you doing over there anyway? We're supposed to be partners."

"We're explorers." She looked at the red and black mass that was once a living creature and thought of the cub alone in its lair. "We aren't here to butcher the locals."

"Well, let's get back to exploring those rocks. This world is a geological haven. I can't wait to give my report."

Disgust seeped into her anger. In a low voice, she said, "If you've cost me my chance."

She stopped as a familiar tug grasped the pit of her stomach. Alarms wailed in the back of her mind.

They were being recalled. The training session was over.

She usually felt disappointed; she could never learn enough about these distant, alien worlds. But this time she wanted to leave the planet. She wanted to get back to the academy.

Looking up, she imagined a circle of swirling black energy, although she knew the Impellic ring was imperceptible. She had invented this image of it to calm her fears about traveling through space without a spaceship.

Darkness gathered. Tendrils reached down and pulled her from the world on which she stood. The rocky bank, the sound of water receded. The void enveloped her—deep and empty yet somehow giving the impression of extreme velocity.

Blinding light speared the black. Impani winced. She felt a cylinder materialize at her back, a platform beneath her feet. Her vision wavered then focused upon a mirrored room.

The Impellic Chamber.

Its many reflections showed Davrileo Mas on the other side of the cylinder. Impani removed her mask and slid off the hood of her skinsuit.

“Welcome home, cadets,” a voice said through a speaker. “Shower down and report to debriefing.”



Impani rushed to Debrief. She found Davrileo and their supervisor, Ms. Kline, huddled together, speaking in quiet tones.

She felt a twist of apprehension. “Sorry I’m late, ma’am.”

“Sit down, Impani.” Ms. Kline smiled. “Davrileo was telling me about the mineral deposits the two of you found.”

Her eyes flicked to Davrileo’s face. “Actually, *he* located the deposits. He carried the resonator this trip out.”

“It appears that he also secured most of the samples.”

“I took samples, too.” Impani sat at the table. “I took specimens of trees and moss. And I got a tuft of animal fur.”

“I see.”

“A planet is more than a lump of minerals.”

“True,” Kline said. “But when the Board sends colonists to a planet, it’s for a specific

reason. And often that reason is mining rights. As a Colonial Scout, it will be up to you to assess a world within given parameters.”

“But as cadets, we’re not *given* parameters. I wanted to bring back as much information as we could.”

“You certainly did that.” She scrolled down her slate. “You ranked higher than any other team we sent to that world. However, none of them resorted to killing an inhabitant. Tell me about the animal you discovered.”

Impani hesitated. “It was two meters tall. Bristly fur. Ran both upright and on all fours. It had one eye, and its head swiveled.”

“Extraordinary,” Kline said. “This is the first report we’ve had of a Cyclops creature. A shame it had to be destroyed.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She glowered. Any points she’d made for finding the beast were now lost.

Davrileo cleared his throat and sat straighter. “My partner was in imminent danger.”

“And as partners, you work together, watch out for one another?” Kline looked back and forth at each of them. “I ask because of a discrepancy in sensor readings. Impani, you show an increase in body temperature, adrenalin—”

“I was running from the beast.”

“For twenty minutes?”

Impani pursed her lips. Had she strayed that deeply into the woods?

“Yet, Davrileo’s readings are peaceful.” Kline consulted the slate. “Almost as if the two of you were in separate places.”

“Impani wandered away,” Davrileo said.

“I wasn’t wandering. I was exploring.”

“Might have gotten us both killed.”

“That’s absurd,” Impani cried. “You shot that poor thing in the back.”

“He was coming at you,” Davrileo shouted. “If I hadn’t shown up—”

“Thank you, Davrileo,” Kline said quietly. “You are dismissed.”

Davrileo glared at Impani, pushed back his chair, and strode from the room.

Beneath the table, Impani clenched her fists. Heat radiated from her face. She concentrated on gathering her anger into a ball and squeezing it.

Kline said, “Impani, you’re at the top of your class. You aced all your studies, and you

grasped Impellic theory and logic faster than any sixteen-year-old I ever met. But this is the second report of you leaving your partner.”

“I just think you can see more of a planet if you don’t keep your nose stuck to an instrument screen.”

“Scouting is a dangerous business. That’s why Scouts are dispatched in pairs. We’d send you in groups if we could, but Impellic Theory states a ring can transport only two. Otherwise, the ring may become unstable and—”

“I *know*.”

“The point is that you have to work with others. Haven’t you wondered why we split the equipment between you? It’s so you’ll work together.”

She groaned. “He shot that creature in the back.”

Kline sighed. “All right. You can go.”

“No, please. At least, take my specimens into consideration.”

“Get some rest, Impani. You’re on stage first thing tomorrow morning.”