

Alien Seas

PLANET 3459-3 SR7

Clear magenta skies. Bright white sun. Palm trees rustling in a breeze. A tropical paradise thought Natica Galos. At least, it would be if not for the ground-rending quakes and rivers of molten rock.

She motioned at the steaming fissure that cut across her path. “Looks like another dead end.”

Her partner, Davrileo Mas, consulted his sonic resonator. “We’ll have to split up. See if the fault narrows. If it does, we can use our jet packs to get to the other side.”

“Great. I’ve always wanted to fly above flowing lava with a combustible device upon my back.”

He turned toward her. His facemask reflected the orange-tinged steam rising from the rift, hiding his ever-present scowl. As he often said, he didn’t much care for her brand of sarcasm, and she didn’t care that he didn’t care. But he was the team leader of this excursion, so she shrugged and followed the fissure’s edge.

“Keep your com open,” Davrileo called after her.

She waved to show she understood. She didn’t like Davrileo Mas, and the prospect of spending a three-day mission with him frayed her nerves.

They’d arrived on the planet the previous night, traveling via an Impellic ring, a programmable wormhole. Interstellar probes reported a wealth of minerals on this world. As Colonial Scouts, Natica and Davrileo were dispatched to determine whether colonists

could survive the planet's violent upheavals.

Already Natica had endured showers of acid rain and blizzards of volcanic ash. She marveled that such an environment could spawn a rain forest—but no one needed to convince her of a planet's will to live. A previous assignment took her to a fungus world that rose against her team in the form of indestructible mold monsters. The memory still brought a shudder.

With a grimace, she forced the image away. *Think happy thoughts. Fungus World is behind you. Time to move on.*

She kept to the edge of the lava flow as closely as she dared. Heat seeped through her skinsuit, and a vague sulfurous smell sifted through the filters of her mask. She heard a screech and looked up at a large bird circling overhead. It looked like a pterodactyl.

Wouldn't surprise her.

Bushes with large purple flowers leaned over the bank. Their wilted petals and blackened leaves confirmed her guess that the fissure was a recent addition to the landscape. As she jogged past, clouds of yellow butterflies rose then resettled among the branches. Natica walked backward to watch them.

Within her mask, she heard erratic panting. Davrileo was breathing into the open com. Perhaps his path took an uphill turn. She smiled and pictured a tortuous track up a sheer cliff. With obstacles.

A low-pitched rumble broke into her thoughts. She frowned and looked around. With a sudden lurch, a quake hurled her to her knees. Trees snapped and toppled. Behind her, the purple bushes she'd passed slid over the crumbling bank.

Natica yelped and scrambled to her feet. She'd go over next if she didn't move. But the ground heaved again, and her boots skidded. She sprawled back, her head hitting with a thud.

A tree fell into the rift. Lava splashed. A creature rose from the molten rock. It stood over five meters tall. Sheeting magma exposed a body of soot and stone. Rocks bulged from its torso like muscles. Natica gasped, and it turned.

At first, its face was a mere lump of rock. Then features emerged.

It was the face of the man she'd helped climb a barrier of logs—an injured man who slipped from her grasp and slid into a burning pit.

The man on Fungus World.

“But you can’t be.” Panic edged up her throat. “You’re dead. I saw you die.”

The magma creature stepped onto the bank. Flaming footprints dotted the grass. The quake ended—yet the ground trembled with its steps.

Natica skittered back. She had to get to her feet. She had to run. But she could only stare at the burning face.

He wanted retribution. It was her fault he died. She killed him. She let him go.

Hands fell upon her, and she fought them, batting them away before realizing Davrileo Mas knelt beside her. His voice echoed through the com. She couldn’t understand his words.

The magma creature advanced, looming over them. Davrileo aimed his stat-gun. The beam struck the thing mid-chest. It paused, dripping fire. He shot again.

It exploded. Chunks of rock flew through the air. The creature’s face landed before Natica. Its mouth gaped. Fire consumed its eyes.

Natica screamed. It felt as if the sound were tearing her inside out. Vaguely, she was aware of a wrenching sensation, of moving very fast, and then falling forward onto the Chamber floor.

Someone yelled, “Get her mask off.”

She felt her body turn, felt her facemask pop. Cold air bit her skin.

“Natica! Stop screaming!”

But her mind still held the burning face before her. She couldn’t let go.

“Get her to the infirmary.”



Impani stared at Natica across the cafeteria table. “You’re overworked?”

Natica sighed. “That’s what the doctor called it. Stress and fatigue due to the job.”

Impani sipped a hot cup of chai and cocked her head. Natica looked awful—dark circles, trembling hands. “But that was your first assignment in over a week. How can you be overworked?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m losing my mind.” She rubbed her eyes then lowered her voice. “I swear that lava monster had a face.”

“Davrileo says it was made of silicon, not lava.”

“Whatever.”

“He’s telling everyone it was no threat and that the reason he had to ring back early was you.”

“It’s the injured man I let die on Fungus World. He’s in all my dreams. I can’t sleep anymore. I think I see him everywhere. Glimpses from the corner of my eye.”

“Stop it.” Impani leaned forward. “This isn’t you. You’ve always been the stable one.”

“But I—”

“It’s been ages since we left the fungus planet. You can’t keep blaming yourself for something you didn’t mean to happen. If you keep this up, it could jeopardize your job.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You never watched anyone die because of you.”

Impani swallowed her answer. Once, she watched a hundred people die in an abandoned shopping mall. Members of a street gang she infiltrated. She led authorities to them not realizing they planned to wipe out everyone with flamethrowers. How long did it take her to accept that mistake?

“I have to go.” Natica gathered her uneaten breakfast onto a tray. “I’m meeting Anselmi. We ring out in an hour.”

“Another mission? What about being overworked?”

“I insisted. Have to prove myself. You know.”

Impani nodded. “At least, this time, you’ll be with a friend. Anselmi will watch out for you.”

Natica offered a fleeting smile, picked up the tray, and left.

Impani slouched in her chair. Her thoughts returned to the shopping mall massacre, dragging up images so real she felt she were living it all again. She saw people running, shadows in smoke, and the pounding flash of gunfire. She heard screams, children crying. Smelled the horrible reek of fuel.

It was known in the media as The Slaughter of the Headsmen Gang. She didn’t dwell on it so much anymore, pushed it to the back of her mind. But she never forgave herself. She always thought she should be punished somehow.

If she were to go home, there would be retribution. The surviving gang members knew what she had done, and although legally she was cleared of any wrongdoing, she was certain they would kill her.

She picked up her cup. It was cold. She pushed it away in disgust, then gazed across

the busy cafeteria.

From several tables away, a boy stared at her. Impani lifted her chin and stared back. She was used to male attention, often used it to her advantage. However, this boy's stare was more appraising than most. He looked younger than her—fifteen or maybe just turned sixteen. He was bald, as were all Scouts.

She hadn't seen him before. Must be a new recruit. She should walk over and introduce herself—that usually embarrassed them enough to keep their stares to themselves. Yet, there was something odd about this boy.

Something about his eyes.