

Alien Refuge Chapter 1

The snow blower juddered in Iris Jenson's gloved hands. Despite the quaking, it had been efficiently clearing a path from the snow crawler's shed to her home's front door. She was halfway there when it suddenly screeched a horrible ratcheting. It sounded like an iron monster chewing on metal screws, a racket fit to make her ears bleed. Iris immediately shut it off.

As rapidly as she quieted it, she was still too late. Her six-year-old son Thomas was already screaming, his hands clapped to his ears. He bounded through the knee-high snow, running from her. He raced straight for the travel lane in front of their dome-shaped house.

Iris dropped the blower and waded after him. "Thomas, it's okay! The noise is gone!"

He was too panicked to hear. His blue hand-knitted cap came off as he ran, sending his shaggy dark blond hair to bounce about his head. He sobbed as if his heart might break. "It's broken! Hurry! Hurry!"

Under his terrified shrieks, Iris heard another sound that sped her heart up. It was an oncoming shuttle's low hum, heading down the travel lane Thomas blindly galloped for. The vehicle's engine's growing throb warned her it was coming faster than speed laws dictated.

She started running as quickly as the impending snow and her heavy boots would allow. "Thomas! Stop!"

Thomas almost never stopped on command. The horrific sound of the snow blower breaking down had pained and terrified him, sending his senses into overload. All the boy knew was that he had to put as much distance between himself and the hideous noise that had hurt his hypersensitive ears. The deep snow should have slowed him down, but he was a strong boy and he was a fast boy. Unlike Iris' old, worn boots, his had traction soles.

Iris shot a panicked glance down the lane as she fought through the snow to get to her son. The sky over Haven Colony was bright following the storm. The sun glinted off a metal surface racing ever closer. The oncoming shuttle was a cargo hauler, flying close to the ground as colony regulations dictated for a vehicle that size.

The glance told her all she needed to know: she'd never get to Thomas before the hauler was on him. He was in its path, his bulky tan coat offering little contrast against the blinding snow. The speeding shuttle pilot wouldn't see him in time to stop.

She screamed, "Thomas! Danger! Danger! Get out of the lane!"

He knew the word *danger*, but her shout had been a deadly mistake. Iris had drilled the word in his head, to protect him from the lack of impulse control that sent him running into travel lanes. Instead of getting out of the lane, he halted. He looked at her with wide eyes.

The terrible moment hung with perfect clarity. Every detail stood out in that instant: Thomas' wild, flyaway hair, rarely cut because he was too sensitive to cope with the sound of clippers. His almond-shaped brown eyes. A cherubic Rafael-esque round face, so beautiful people often paused and commented. His sturdy little boy's body made thick by layers of thermal pants, jeans, snow pants, shirt, sweater, and coat. A perfect, angelic boy lit in the snow-reflected sun.

Iris screamed as the speeding shuttle bore down on Thomas, who realized something was coming at him. Then a lightning flash of white and darkness swept her child from the travel lane in a blur. The stream of movement halted at the side of the lane, resolving itself into a tall, ebony-haired Kalquorian in a white snowsuit. Thomas dangled from the bend of the alien's arm

while the other raised a battle-grade percussion blaster. The Kalquorian fired on the shuttle. The blaster's *shoo-whup* shivered the air.

The shuttle squalled to a halt, dipping and rocking violently as it did so. It dropped, falling a couple of feet to the ground with an earthshaking *thud*.

Iris' stare was for her son, who goggled at the Kalquorian who held him.

"Thomas. Thomas," she choked, sobbing his name. He was alive. Unhurt. Secure in the man's grip. It was a miracle.

The Kalquorian watched her stagger to them as he holstered his weapon on his belt. Iris' stunned brain registered the man's long black hair, his large purple eyes, the dimple in his curved chin. His handsome features had the fierce set of the warrior Nobek breed. Hugely muscled, he was clad in a form-fitting armored snowsuit that blended with its surroundings. His matching boots reached to just below his knees. He seemed somehow familiar, though he shouldn't have. Iris didn't socialize with the alien race.

She held out her arms. "Please. Let me have him."

The Kalquorian looked at her, then at Thomas who stared at him. The boy plucked at the arm holding him and imperiously demanded in his musical voice, "Here, Mommy. Give Thomas to Mommy."

The alien man's brows drew together. His mouth twisted slightly up. Iris could understand his confusion. Usually, Earther children on Haven ran and hid from Kalquorians. Most were frightened as much by their parents' stories of their former enemies as by their massive size. Any other child in a Kalquorian's grip would have probably been screaming his head off.

But then, Thomas Jenson wasn't like most children.

The Kalquorian set Thomas on his feet and gave him a gentle push in Iris' direction. "Go to your mother, boy."

Iris shivered at the deep, slightly accented voice of quiet thunder, full of command and strength. Thomas seemed just as impressed. He sloshed a single step awkwardly through the snow, gazing over his shoulder at his rescuer.

Iris dismissed the Kalquorian for the moment, darting forward to snatch her child close. "Oh, dear God, Thomas. My baby, are you all right?" She patted over his body, unable to trust he hadn't been smashed by the shuttle.

He blinked at the Kalquorian looming over them, unafraid. The alien stared back, seemingly transfixed by Thomas' blatant curiosity.

There was no sign of injury, and Iris managed a trembling smile for the man who'd snatched him from certain death. "Thank you, sir. Thank you so much for saving him."

Before the Kalquorian could answer, the downed shuttle's hatch slid open. Blaine Middleton, a local that lived a few miles from Iris' tiny homestead, emerged and stormed towards them. His open coat flapped around his gaunt frame. Iris tried hard to ignore the gossip that said Blaine drank most of his calories, but she'd heard plenty despite her good intentions. She could believe the rumors, looking at his bloodshot eyes and unkempt appearance.

The scarecrow man, who made his living transporting goods for other colonists, was shouting before he'd taken half a dozen steps in their direction. "What the hell is wrong with you, Kalquorian? You fouled up my forward vision vid feed, and my navigation is offline! You coulda got me killed!"

The alien pulled a small handheld computer off his belt and spoke commands to it, ignoring the irate man.

Thomas brightened to see the portable computer device. “Thomas’ handheld,” he declared, reaching. “Here, Thomas.”

Iris gripped him and whispered in his ear. “No baby, that’s his handheld. He’s doing work on it. You can’t have it.”

Meanwhile Blaine had drawn near. His fists went to his hips, and he stood spraddle-legged, as if bracing himself to remain upright. He kept yelling at the Kalquorian. “Hey, you damned oversized ape! I’m talking to you!”

The Nobek regarded him coldly. His rolling thunder voice filled the air despite the low tone. “This vehicle is registered to Blaine Middleton. Is that you?”

Blaine glared back. “Yeah. So?”

“This is your third piloting offense in six months. I’m confiscating your shuttle.”

“My offense?” Blaine screeched. “My offense? You’re the dipshit firing percussion blasters at innocent Earthers!”

“You were flying at an excessive speed on a travel lane in a dwelling area clearly designated as having a child with a disability on premises.” The Kalquorian glanced at Iris and Thomas. His gaze lingered a moment, then he marched past Blaine to the shuttle. He boarded it while its owner stared after him in shock.

Blaine spluttered in furious indignation. “Hey! You’ve got no right. That’s my property!” He plowed towards his craft.

The Kalquorian came out before Blaine got there. He typed on his handheld. “The vessel’s warning mechanism that indicates the need for slower operation on this lane has been disabled. I’m assuming that was done by you. That’s another offense. Your pilot’s permit is hereby suspended pending review. I’ve locked out your pass codes that enable you to use this vehicle.” He regarded Blaine. There was no threat on his expression, but it was cold enough to make Iris cringe. She was glad that stare wasn’t directed at her.

The Kalquorian continued, “You may return home, Mr. Middleton. You’ll be contacted later with information on how to file any challenge you wish to make and final judgment on your case.”

Blaine’s mouth hung open. It took at least ten seconds before he found the sense to respond. “How the hell do I get home without my shuttle, you stupid shit?”

Iris’ grip on Thomas tightened. She waited for the alien to crush Blaine.

Instead, the Kalquorian’s brow lifted. “You walk. It’s less than an hour until dark, and your address indicates it will take you about that long to reach your address. I suggest you start now.”

Blaine shook with fury. Iris was afraid he’d say something else to anger the alien titan, or even worse, attack him. However, Blaine had a little self-preservation, at least enough to avoid tangling with a Kalquorian twice his weight. Blaine leveled a black look at Iris instead.

“When are you going to teach your damned kid to be normal, Iris? Or at least put him on a leash! You and your retard son—”

There was that blurring motion again, and the Kalquorian suddenly stood nose-to-nose with Blaine. He growled, “You are in the wrong here. You’ll speak with respect to the woman or I’ll tear your filthy tongue from your mouth.”

Iris gasped and Thomas laughed, no doubt delighted by the alien’s amazing feat of speed. Blaine stumbled back. His gloved hands came up in defensive. When the Kalquorian remained there without increasing his threat, Blaine walked around him, giving him a wide berth.

He still couldn’t resist running his mouth. “You’d better believe I’m talking to Governor Hoover. You can’t threaten me like that!”

The Kalquorian watched as Blaine stomped away. When the belligerent Earther had gotten several yards up the lane, the alien turned his attention to Iris and Thomas. He approached them carefully, as if concerned he might frighten them.

“Go fast!” Thomas encouraged the alien with a big smile.

The man offered his own slight smile at the boy, then dipped a slight bow to Iris. “Your child is unharmed, Matara?”

Iris swallowed to see those cat-slitted eyes trained on her. “I—I think so.” To avoid his intense gaze, she centered her attention on her son. “Thomas, are you hurt?”

“All better,” he said. Since the Kalquorian was apparently disinterested in running fast again, the boy’s attention centered on the inoperable vehicle resting on the lane. “Shuttle broken. Fix shuttle, Mommy.”

Iris buried her face in Thomas’ overlong hair, smelling its sweet shampoo scent. “Don’t worry. Someone will fix the shuttle.”

The Kalquorian gazed at them. Iris straightened to her full height. She only came up to the man’s chest. A throb that felt more akin to anticipation than fear spilled in her stomach. “I’m sorry you had to rescue him. My snow blower broke down and made an awful noise. It scared him. He ran, and I couldn’t catch him.”

All at once, the vision of the shuttle bearing down on Thomas assaulted Iris. She’d almost lost him, had come close to witnessing him die. Horror walloped her, and a sob broke loose.

Thomas looked at her, startled. His little face crumpled, and he wailed. “Don’t cry, Mommy! Don’t cry!”

Iris tried to get herself under control. Thomas couldn’t handle it when she cried, becoming so upset that sometimes he vomited from the stress. But the realization that he’d come within a second of dying—her baby had almost been *killed*—was too much. She shook, hot tears cascading down her frozen cheeks, burning trails that dripped off her chin.

An iron band wrapped around her waist and gently turned her towards her home. Through tears that trebled her vision, Iris saw the Kalquorian pick up Thomas in the crook of his other arm, simultaneously guiding her to her front door.

That voice of gentle thunder accompanied the strong arms holding them. “You both need to go inside and warm up. Come.”

Iris didn’t question the order. It never occurred to her to resist the Kalquorian pushing her and Thomas into their tiny home.

As soon as they crossed the threshold, Thomas wriggled from the Kalquorian’s arm and ran through the den to the kitchen. It was all a single open space, shared with a small dining area. Closed doors led to Iris and Thomas’ bedrooms and the bath facility.

The Kalquorian guided Iris to the main room’s battered lounge, a long sofa-like seating piece. Iris had picked it up in the warehouse when she’d first arrived on Haven a year prior. It had been donated, along with other furnishings, to Earthers displaced by Armageddon. At the time it had appeared brand new, its velvety chocolate brown surface showing no signs of wear. Nothing stayed new in the Jenson household, however. Iris felt the habitual flush of embarrassment over her belongings’ shabby appearances. Thomas was rough on furniture, climbing and bouncing all over it with never-ending energy.

She was focused on Thomas’ close call rather than her surroundings. She would have fallen to the lounge if the Kalquorian hadn’t lowered her onto it instead. Her whole body continued to shake, and her knees were wobbliest of all.

Thomas shoved past his rescuer with a dish towel in his hand. He scrubbed at Iris' cheeks, his lower lip protruding out and tears streaming. "All better. Wipe eyes. Mommy all better."

Iris forced herself to stop crying, though an ocean of terror fought to flood forth. She managed a weak smile. "Yes, sweetie. Thank you. I'm all better. See? Mommy's smiling."

Thomas wiped his own face dry with the towel, then dropped it on the floor. His expression abruptly placid, he walked off. His gaze darted over the room as if seeing it for the first time in his life. He fumbled with his coat's fasteners.

Iris lifted her gaze to the silent Kalquorian who watched her. She couldn't imagine what he thought of them, of the whole situation. She said, "I'm sorry."

His brow rose. "You have nothing to apologize for, Matara." He took his handheld off his belt and consulted it. "You are Ear-is Jenson?"

"Iris," she absently corrected, noticing what her son was doing. "Thomas, please leave your clothes on. We have a guest."

Thomas had dropped his coat and sweater on the floor. He was working to add his shirt to the pile. Ignoring Iris, he let that drift down too. He sat and yanked his boots off.

Iris took a breath. This was Thomas' home, his sanctuary where she let him relax and be himself. She offered the Kalquorian an apologetic smile. "He won't wear anything more than his underwear in the house. Clothes are uncomfortable for him. He's very sensitive to touch."

The alien's face betrayed no emotion as Thomas peeled off socks and snow pants. The boy fumbled with the snaps of his jeans.

His tone as noncommittal as his expression, the Kalquorian asked, "This is the child with the disability?"

Iris nodded. "Autism. It's why the noise of the snow blower made him run from me and put him in the path of that shuttle. Did I thank you for saving him?"

The alien looked at her. He smiled, and Iris forgot to breathe. The man's ferocity lessened until he looked approachable. Warm. Even friendly. And damned handsome.

He dipped a nod. "You did thank me. You are most certainly welcome, Matara Iris."

Thomas had stripped down to his underpants. He ran to the side of the room where his toys were, contained to a single area for a change rather than scattered all over the floor. He picked up a small vehicle, a toy train. Trains were long gone, a form of Earth conveyance that had disappeared before Iris had been born. Thomas loved them, however. He had been obsessed with trains since he'd seen one in a museum.

Thomas set the toy on a track and pushed it around. "Train rolls down the hill. Train rolls down the hill. Train rolls down the hill," he chanted.

The Kalquorian watched the child, seemingly fascinated. Iris rushed to explain, "His intelligence is above average. Speech, social, and sensory issues hold him back, along with a lack of impulse control."

Iris wondered why she was explaining so much to the daunting Kalquorian. He wouldn't care about an Earther child's problems. Why was she concerned with what he thought about Thomas? Her son was wonderful, and those who failed to take the time to get to know and understand him were unimportant. She reminded herself of that when people edged away from Thomas, when they wore those uncomfortable expressions.

The Kalquorian showed no discomfort. Instead, he gave Iris that transforming smile again. "What a fascinating child. May I sit down?" He waved his hand at a scarred chair with a sagging seat.

Iris blinked at him, startled by the request. Why would the alien want to stay for a visit? Unless...oh heavens, did he think she was looking to join a clan?

Not quite sure how to handle the situation, she stammered, "Um, sure. Can I get you anything to drink, uh...?"

"Nobek Jol. I'm head of Kalquorian security here on Haven." He settled on the chair. It creaked alarmingly, but somehow managed to withstand his large frame. "Thank you for the offer, but I require no refreshment, Matara Iris."

Iris' stomach lurched. Nobek Jol was more than the head of Haven's Kalquorian security. He was also clanmate to the colony's Kalquorian governor, Dramok Ospar. "I've heard your name before."

The Earther colony of Haven had been founded on a once-uninhabited planet within the Kalquorian Empire's space. That meant it had two governors, Dramok Ospar and Earther George Hoover.

Most Earther refugees, still hurting from the war with Kalquor and the resulting destruction of Earth, refused to live on Haven. Other colonies held the majority of survivors, many going to the older settlements from when Earth was still a viable planet. A large number had also settled on the colonies the Galactic Council of Planets had established after Armageddon.

The destruction of Earth's major cities and the resulting death of the planet itself had come about through both Earth and Kalquorian actions. The Kalquorians' part in it had been an accident. Horrified and remorseful, the empire had created Haven for the Earthers who wanted a fresh start. They had set up the colony and offered healthcare, land, and homes for any who wished to farm the verdant planet. Haven was different from other colonies in that no one who came to live there was expected to repay their benefactors in any way. One simply applied to Kalquor for a homestead, agreed to abide by the laws of the empire, and got to work.

Iris and Thomas had come to the colony a year before with nothing but a few changes of clothes. It had represented a fresh start. A new life with none of the horrors of the old. Iris had left behind everything without a qualm, though farming on Haven was difficult. She welcomed it.

Freedom from fear was worth every ounce of hard labor that greeted her from the instant she got up in the morning until she collapsed into bed at night. Her life before Armageddon, lived in a fine home with every material comfort she could wish for, had been a nightmare she was grateful to have awakened from.

The heater clicked on, rumbling like an angry beast beneath the floor. Jol frowned before turning his attention to Iris' son.

"Your child is named Thomas?"

"Yes."

"The difficulties he has, they cannot be corrected through medical means?" Jol seemed merely interested. He showed none the usual rabid curiosity masked as sappy concern. It was a nice change.

"His brain works differently from ours. He could take drugs to calm some of his behaviors, but medications make him tired. His thinking becomes sluggish." She added defensively, "I think he's perfect."

Jol kept his gaze on the playing boy. "He's empathetic. Your tears worried him greatly. It's good for someone so young to feel concern for others."

Thomas was locked in his own world, ignoring them. "Train climbs up the hill. Train climbs up the hill," he sing-songed, pushing his toy.

Jol looked at the scattered blocks and building toys. He appeared fascinated by the myriad of trains. Some were rudimentary assemblies, but quite a few were intricate pieces that had been put together from various materials. Thomas' favorite steam engine had the tines of a fork as its cowcatcher. Everything he came across was fair game to be converted into his passion.

The Kalquorian appraised the boy. "How old is he?"

"Six."

Jol's brows shot high. "He built those toy conveyances himself?"

Iris snorted. "Don't look at me. I can barely put together a jigsaw puzzle. Thomas?"

Thomas kept playing, submerged in his own world. Whatever universe had been conjured in his head didn't include Iris, Jol, or anything else. It consisted of his train and the hill it endlessly climbed and descended.

Iris spoke with more firmness to yank the boy into reality. "Thomas? Thomas, look at me."

Her voice broke through. He came out of his fantasy to gaze at her expectantly.

She smiled and motioned to the large man sitting across from her. "Thomas, this is Nobek Jol. Say, 'hello Nobek Jol.'"

Mimicking her tone, Thomas regarded his train. "Hello, Nobek Jol."

"Hello, Thomas. What are you playing with?"

Thomas held up the locomotive made of castoff bits of wood, screws, and metal. "Train. Train rolls down the hill."

"I saw it roll down the hill. Will you let me hold your train?"

When the boy hesitated, Iris urged, "Thomas, give Nobek Jol your train. Let him see it."

She half-expected him to tell her no and return to his play. Instead, he stood and walked over to Jol. When the Kalquorian held out his hand, Thomas placed the train in his grip.

Thomas was tall for his age, strong and sturdy. Yet he was tiny next to the mammoth alien. Momentary panic stabbed Iris' heart. It subsided immediately, washed away by a sudden, instinctual knowledge that there was nothing to fear from Jol.

Iris frowned. She wasn't acquainted with the Kalquorian. She had no reason to trust him. Yet as the boy and alien studied the locomotive, their heads close together, the feeling that Thomas was safe with the Nobek persisted.

Jol turned the locomotive over in his hands, inspecting the homemade toy. It was among Thomas' better constructions, his most recent.

The child pointed at the pieces jutting from the metal tube that made up the main body of the engine. "Funnel," he informed Jol.

"Funnel. What does it do?"

"Smoke." Thomas pointed to a screw that stuck up. "Whistle."

"What does the whistle sound like?"

"Woo-woo!"

Jol chuckled. "Did you build this train, Thomas?"

"Yes. Thomas builds toy trains!" He smiled, pleased with himself.

Jol nodded, returning the smile. "It is a well-built train. You did an excellent job. Thank you for letting me see it."

He handed the engine off. Thomas returned to his little track and started pushing it. "Train rolls down the hill. Train rolls down the hill."

Jol gazed at the boy with open admiration. "He has a brilliant mind for engineering."

Pride swelled in Iris' tone. "He reads, too. I started teaching him letters and sounds when he was three, though he didn't speak until he was four. When he did speak, he could already read his story vids." She bragged, but it wasn't often people appreciated Thomas' abilities.

"You have been blessed, Matara." Jol frowned. "His lack of impulse control worries me. My biggest concern is how he ended up in the middle of the travel lane. That would have ended badly if I hadn't happened by. It was sheer luck I was doing a routine check on the area."

Iris swallowed. The miracle of Jol's rescue brought fresh tears, which she blinked back. "He has no concept of danger. I try to keep him close when we're outside. When he panicked, he got away from me. I can usually catch him, but it only takes once to be too late, doesn't it?"

"You need a boundary shield between your land and the lane."

"I'm only a homesteader, Nobek Jol. Because Thomas requires so much of my time, I farm just enough to keep us fed and clothed. I can't take him to the community fields and work for extra funds because keeping after him doesn't allow me to." Thomas had a bad habit of crashing through and wrecking crops. She'd end up owing Haven's Earther government money rather than earning any.

"I see." Jol glanced at Thomas and pursed his lips. The line between his eyebrows deepened as he stood. "The safety and security of Haven and its colonists ultimately falls on my shoulders. I'll get you a boundary shield."

Iris couldn't afford it, but Thomas came first. She'd find a way. "Do I make payments or work to offset the cost?"

"That won't be required, Matara Iris. Should you leave this property or no longer need the shield for any reason, return it to us. All I care about is Thomas doesn't run into the lane anymore."

He was giving them the shield? For free? Iris gaped. She finally managed to blurt, "Thank you, Nobek Jol."

The Kalquorian glanced at Thomas. "Goodbye, Thomas."

Thomas didn't look up, but he responded without any coaching. "Goodbye. Woo-woo!"

Jol's smile trembled as if restraining laughter. He bowed to Iris. "Good day, Matara."

He left, and Iris stared at the door after it had closed behind him. It took a couple minutes for sense to kick in.

When it did, she realized two things: she'd failed to express enough appreciation to Jol, and she'd worn her coat and hat the entire time he'd been there.

Trying to wrap her mind around the last hour's events, Iris took off her outerwear.