

## Alien Outcast Chapter 1

Between Ob's pain-filled squalls and the alarms blaring, Piper couldn't hear herself think. Things were bad, all right. She had a feeling they would only get worse.

As if to prove her fears, a red light flashed on the stolen shuttle's console, diverting her attention from the star-pocked vid of the space ahead. She shouted over Ob's yells. "Something new. What's that?"

The Tragoom managed to come out of his hunched position in the seat next to her. He usually sat head and shoulders over Piper—he was a mass of rock-hard alien, despite being a runt among his kind. His pained breaths whistled past his tusks as he peered at the panel in front of Piper with tiny, streaming eyes.

The translators on their slave collars were as dispassionate as his voice was strained. "Chasing ship coming faster. Catching up."

A jolt of terror shot through Piper, though she'd suspected as much when Ob's collar had activated minutes before. Her shaking hands wavered over the control panel with its varied buttons and etched Bi'isil characters. "How do I force this thing to exceed safe limits on velocity? We have to go faster!"

Ob's thick finger, which was one of two that made his hand appear to be a cloven hoof, slammed on the console. "Hull buffers recalibrated. Now top speed."

He continued to batter the resilient surface, making up for her poorer piloting skills. Piper winced, expecting craters to appear despite knowing better. The Bi'isils built their vessels to withstand the hard use of the Tragooms they often enslaved.

She'd learned a little about interplanetary travel during her enslavement and a lot about reading the Bi'isil language. She blinked at the star chart that depicted the route Ob had plugged in. "You're changing course to that heading? Isn't that taking us straight into the Kalquorian Empire? Ob, they'll kill you there as fast as the Bi'isils will!"

Ob didn't answer right away. Instead, he grabbed the collar delivering horrific punishment to his nervous system, twisting at it in an instinctive effort to stop the pain. It didn't matter that he knew it was impossible to avoid its effects now that their pursuers were within activation range.

Someone on the ship chasing them had Dr. Wari'det's punishment commands. Most likely, they were trying to activate her collar too, though Ob had damaged it so that it no longer worked.

Was Wari'det on the pursuing craft himself? Was it possible?

*No, he can't be. He's dead. I'm sure of it.*

Despite the torture, Ob wheezed and the translator spoke. "No choice but Kalquorian Empire. They kill me, but you can live. You can tell."

*Damn it, Ob! I didn't pull you away from execution to save my own worthless skin!* Piper studied the star chart in desperation. "You shouldn't have diverted us from flying toward Galactic Council territory. That's where we should be going."

"Too far. Never make it. Kalquorian space only chance."

The vid displaying the stars ahead suddenly rippled, as if it lay beneath water that had just been disturbed. Piper stared harder, thinking stress was playing havoc with her senses, but the view rippled again.

Ob put his pig-snouted nose to the controls, as if he'd snort the buttons. Piper realized he was trying to peer at the hull readouts through his tear-blurred vision. Ob straightened again.

Despite shaking with agony, his hoof-fingers thudded over the controls once more. “Pursuer blasting. Hunter-killer.”

Piper gasped. “They brought out the big guns? For a couple of house slaves?”

“They must know that we know. That you took records. They see where we go. Kalquor will save you for the information, if we reach their system before we die.”

A thud shook the whole ship. “Um, not anticipating that’s happening. We’re hit.”

“Grazed. Hunter-killer not in lethal range. We get to border before they can destroy.”

*But not before they could cripple us, leaving us dead in space and waiting for the final blast.*

She didn’t believe for a single second that Prince Yel’ek’s shuttle, made for luxury and not speed, would beat their pursuer to Kalquorian territory, but she did her best to help the moaning Ob pilot.

*At least death might come quickly, which is more than I deserve. Sorry, Ob. You couldn’t have picked a worse ally than me.*