

## Chapter One

Anneliese Thompson whistled a cheery tune as she headed toward the door, ready to leave Captain Chaos's Military Surplus store. Even anticipating the icy touch of the freeze-your-tits-off temperature, as her late father would have called it, didn't bother her. The calendar said it was early spring, but true to form, upstate New York sneered at the calendar, and snow still blanketed the ground. The North Country would welcome spring when it was darned well ready, and not a second before.

Anneliese adjusted her packages as she neared the door. Her haul in the surplus store had been excellent. She'd snagged half a dozen small pup tents for the local scout den at a bargain price. The rez kids who couldn't afford their own would be properly outfitted for the coming summer campouts.

It had been a decent outing for other reasons too. Joking with the owner, a fellow vet who'd also fought in Afghanistan, had reminded Anneliese that her deployment several years prior hadn't been all bad. Her unit had been like a family, one that shared all the same goals. Losing them, and the work that provided her clear direction, had been a catastrophic one-two punch. Talking to another vet had felt like a connection she'd lost, making her feel she was still part of something worthwhile.

A man on the far end of middle age stood outside the door, only a few steps from Anneliese's path. He wore a heavy down parka, faded blue jeans, and scuffed work boots; the official uniform of frozen and economically depressed Massena, New York. He didn't bother to hold the door open for her despite her arms being full.

She gave him a smile anyway as she shoved past the glass door and headed for her pickup. Her ride was among three in the cracked asphalt lot. It waited at the nearest parking spot, beneath a sky of steel-gray clouds. Anneliese was halfway there when a rough voice spoke from behind her.

"I shoulda known it would be one of you."

Anneliese stopped and pivoted to face the man. He'd followed her toward her car and stood a couple yards away. The surly expression he wore drove the creases deep into his gray-scruffed face.

The iron in her personality jumped to the fore, ready for combat as the joy in her heart departed for more hospitable places. She narrowed her eyes. "I beg your pardon?"

He snorted derisively. "It figures one of you would take a handicap spot."

*One of you.* Anneliese knew full well what he meant. She played it out anyway, giving him more rope to hang his stupid self with. "Do you mean a disabled person? Yeah, I parked there. With my handicapped placard, which you can plainly see hanging from the rearview mirror."

He shoved his wattled neck in the noose, ire robbing him of whatever small amount of sense he might have possessed. "You damned Indians. You think you're so special. Sovereign bullshit, pay no taxes, get everything for free. Including handicapped placards when it's obvious you don't need it." He looked her up and down, telling her he had her number.

Or so he thought. "You know, asshole, there is so much wrong with what you say, I don't know where to start. Just because I'm having a good day with my busted leg and back doesn't mean they'll stay strong. Those are injuries I got standing up for your sorry ass—and the rest of the United States—because I'm a vet. You ever served? Huh? Or did you sit your ignorant ass here your whole life, squatting on the land of my people, policing parking spots and sucking beer?"

Her voice had gotten louder and louder as she spoke, rising to the point where she ended her statement yelling at the mighty defender of handicap parking spaces. Of which there were three left in the nearly empty lot. He was bitching at her when they and the owner were the only damned people parked there.

She was glad her injuries hadn't flared up that day, though a limp might have kept this particular altercation from happening. Anneliese was having a strong day, an iron day, a day when she felt invincible. If she could goad Mr. Bigot into taking a swing at her, all the better. She felt more than able to righteously kick some ass.

His eyes went big and round. An expression of disbelieving terror filled his face...but not at her anger. He jerked backward, staring up far over her head, up at the sky. She craned her neck to look too.

Her heart stopped when she spied the flying saucer, looking as if it had flown straight out of a comic book. Circular. Flat bottom. Top raised. As if a dish from the china set Anneliese had inherited from her mother had transformed to metal, turned itself upside down, and taken flight.

*It's supposed to be over. They aren't supposed to come back!*

The saucer dropped quickly toward the ground, as if it would crash behind her truck. It wasn't crashing. The saucer was fast. And silent. It had never emitted any sound when it had come to collect Anneliese and drop her off.

Her instinct was to scream in horror, to jump into her old truck and drive as far and as fast as possible. *Not again! Not again!*

Instead she dropped her armful of tents and ran at the guy who moments before had been her sworn enemy. Reflex had clicked in, screaming at her to get the innocent out of harm's way. She shoved him toward the car that didn't belong to the owner of the surplus store. "Get out of here! Go! Now!"

Only when he began to lumber to his sedan, a car that showed as much age and hard use as her truck, did Anneliese run.

*Faster! Go, go, go!*

The saucer continued to approach. It had dropped to the height where it would send down the lower middle panel, ready to summon her into its alien interior. It had done so many times since she'd returned from her last deployment.

*Can't be caught. No lab. No more cutting!*

At the other end of its flight awaited unbelievable torture, a hell Anneliese had fooled herself into hoping she'd escaped for good. She couldn't go back, though she'd never had a choice before.

There was no fighting the little gray aliens who would freeze her in her tracks, who would, at any moment now, float her off her feet and into the saucer's interior.

But there was still the other man. He'd just reached his car, a vehicle old enough that it required a key to open the lock on the door. His creased face was a rictus of fear as he fumbled a large ring of jangling metal from his belt, searching for the right one. He darted a glance at the descending saucer—the *pod*, they call it a *collection pod*, her memory supplied needlessly—and then at her. She'd paused despite the choking fear, delaying to distract the improbable vehicle from targeting the man.

He screamed at her, "Lady, you need to go! Don't wait for me!"

She screamed back, "Get your ass out of here! These fuckers will ruin your life!"

Perhaps he realized she knew something about the coming doom that he did not. The man got his car door open and jumped in without another word. As his engine roared to earsplitting life, Anneliese glanced at the pod again. The sight of the middle platform descending, a circular piece of the bottom of the saucer, rendered her mouth dry in an instant. She started running to her truck. She didn't dare to look at the hovering pod again as she fumbled in her pocket for her own set of keys.

*Get in the truck. Start it. As soon as that other guy is out of the parking lot and headed down the road, I can go too.*

She had the awful feeling it was too late as she rammed her key into the door lock, though the sedan was already halfway across the parking lot, its engine roaring and leaving a long plume of bluish-gray smoke in its wake.

The old guy was clear. She could go, if her body would shift out of slow motion and *move*.

Anneliese yanked the door open, its squeal a violent protest. Then came a string of strange speech, and she jerked to a stop.

Speech. Not any language of Earth.

Even though they came from another planet, the drones had always spoken English to her.

This was the language of the others, the striped people called the Risnarish. And the voice—she was sure she'd heard it before.

She turned to the spot behind her truck, where the round platform had descended from the hovering transportation saucer pod overhead. Where an olive-skinned man with brown stripes stood. He waited, smiling at her.

It was him. The alien who had taken her from the Monsudan hive's labs six months prior.

Anneliese's terror transformed in an instant. She was running again, but toward the naked alien with the silver eyes. "Nex! Nex!" she cried, happily.

A few feet from the man, she stopped short, better sense taking hold. He'd saved her after a few years of being routinely abducted, made a test subject in brutal experiments, yes. Yet she was suddenly unsure what this abrupt arrival could mean. "What are you doing here?"

She started to hear her voice speaking gibberish from a box on the belt Nex wore. It was the only article of clothing on his body.

Nex's strange eyes, with their eight-point starburst pupils, riveted on her. He spoke, a stream of liquid sounds popping with guttural emphasis in spots. They were drowned out by the box translating Nex's words...in English.

"Hello, Anneliese. I am glad to see you again. I am sorry if I scared you and your friend. I guess this was not a good moment to come?"

He could talk to her. Delight warred with her uncertainty at his appearance. Cautious delight won. "Yeah. Broad daylight is not the time to come out of the heavens in a flying saucer. But it is good to see you again." *As long as you're not bringing me bad news.*

She glanced up at the hovering saucer, half expecting to see large-headed Monsudan drones peering through the opening with their inky teardrop eyes.

"It's okay, Anneliese. I came alone."

She dropped her gaze to the stunning creature before her. The pleasure in his expression was real. There was no sign of threat. Just Nex of Risnar, with the wide-eyed gaze of a child on the adventure of his life, the same look he'd worn the other time she'd been with him. Alien or not, Nex was as adorable as a muscled interstellar being could get when he grinned like that.

*He's still an alien.* The firm voice in her head insisted she look at him that way.

The olive skin was olive in truth. The greenish tones couldn't be missed. The brown stripes that covered him from head to toeless feet, reminiscent of a tiger in their patterns, would have been perfect camouflage in a forest.

His pointed ears twitched, much as a cat's would as they picked up different sounds. When Anneliese spoke, they rounded a little, cupping as if to gather every note of her voice. His "hair" was like the mane of a zebra, tufted out from the middle of his head down to between his shoulder blades. It, too, was olive with brown striping.

His smile displayed human-flat teeth in the front, but from the canines back—at least as far as she could tell—the sharper teeth of a carnivore were evident. Overall, however, Nex was quite humanlike. Well, except for a single crucial detail.

*And I kissed the guy the one time we were together. I've been thinking about him ever since. Doesn't it figure I'd have an instant crush on someone who doesn't look equipped for it?*

The firm voice in her head spoke again. *Not the time to think about that. Learn the situation, soldier.*

"Nex, what are you doing here? Is everyone on Risnar okay?"

Via the translator he told her, "All is well. But you are in danger. I must take you to Risnar before the Monsuda kidnap you again."

Dread blasted through her, as cold and bitter as a North Country winter. She couldn't restrain a shiver. "I thought that was over."

He grimaced. "So did we. A few weeks ago, we attacked and claimed another hive near Cas Village. There we discovered a few of those we rescued with you. They had been abducted once more."

"Were the Monsuda coming for all of us?" She scanned the sky, as if talking about the Monsuda would tempt them to home in on her at that very moment.

"From the records we found, yes. They were reclaiming and keeping the Hahz hive victims in stasis, though. Not returning them to Earth between experiments." Nex looked as ill as Anneliese felt.

"*Weh,*" she snarled, using a favorite Mohawk expression of disgust and dismay. The translator asked her to define the word, and she ignored it. "Being free of those monsters was too good to be true. But Nex, this isn't the time or place for you to show up."

Anneliese glanced at the store. Fortunately, Carl “Captain Chaos” hadn’t emerged from the brick building to stare in wide wonder at the saucer and alien who’d come to call. Posters of America’s armed forces and an American flag covered the glass windows that looked out on the parking lot.

He was probably in the stockroom, smoking dope. The fumes that eddied into the main shop space couldn’t be missed. She didn’t fault him for using. A number of the guys who’d come home in recent years relied on cannabis to calm the PTSD that ran rampant through the ranks.

Nex followed her gaze, then squinted up at the gray cloud cover. “I was impatient. It was foolish to come during the day. I saw that from the reaction of the other man. Can you go to Risnar with me now? Or do you wish me to come back later?”

“The ship homes in on me?”

“On the tracking device implanted under your skin, yes.”

That meant the Monsuda could claim Anneliese at any moment. It turned her stomach. The past six months, she’d believed she could finally live without fear, that at last she was safe from the fight she’d never had a chance of winning.

“Give me two hours to get a few things done. It will be full dark here by then.” She frowned at the box on his belt. “Can that thing translate two hours?”

“Yes, it converts the interval. It is wonderful to talk to you and be understood.” He grinned brightly, and the genuine pleasure on his striped face made Anneliese’s heart warm. It made her want to reach over and touch him. Take his hand, tell him that she’d been thinking of him these last six months.

Then what?

Unsure of the answer to that, she just stood there, looking at him. The silence spun long between them, and the voltage of Nex’s happy expression dimmed with the passing seconds. The pointed tips of his ears drooped down. Anneliese shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other.

Fortunately for their growing mutual discomfort, sirens sounded in the distance. Anneliese didn’t know if the police were headed that way. Maybe her bigoted buddy had decided to brave derision and report flying saucers. Perhaps Carl had peeked outside and decided he wasn’t having a pot-induced hallucination.

“Nex, you need to go before anyone else spots you. Find me again in two hours. I’ll make sure to be out of the sight of others.”

“Yes.” He stepped up on the landing circle of ship’s underbelly. It immediately began to rise in the air, heading up to the waiting pod. He grinned down at her and used the single finger and thumb his hand possessed to adjust the translation box’s volume so she could hear it. “Anneliese...I have hoped to see you again. I am so happy.”

Still smiling, Nex disappeared into the saucer. The platform melded seamlessly with the metal hull. Two seconds later, the ship shot like a bullet into the clouds and was gone.

Anneliese reclaimed her scattered tents and piled them and herself into the truck. The whole while, her heart pounded. Nex had returned. She was going to meet with him again. The fantasy of that had recurred over and over since the day she’d returned to Earth. Since the night Nex had flown her through the interstellar portal joining her home to the far-off planet of Risnar, located in some galaxy that maybe no one on her world had ever dreamed of.

A day hadn’t passed in the last six months without Anneliese daydreaming about the striped alien, the alien she’d impetuously kissed goodbye when he’d brought her home. It had been a hell of a kiss.

*For me. Probably not so much for him. Not that it matters.*

“He did kiss me back, though. I’ve replayed that moment a billion times now, and I know that for a fact.”

No doubt the best kiss of her life had been a one-off. The fantasy of alien sex was a fine complement to her vibrator. That was all she needed. No sense in thinking there would...or should...be anything more.

However, Anneliese couldn’t deny the anticipation of spending some time with the Risnarish man. She wasn’t happy that she’d been in danger of being taken by the insect-like Monsuda and kept as a rat in their labs. But happy that she was going to be with Nex again? Tonight? Oh yes. That made her happy indeed.