

Chapter One

“I repeat this is Agent Alinna Gaerrii, Unit Nine. *Tel sho ahoi*. I am in a crash situation.” Alinna called out the codes in Inarrii and in Standard English in case she was picked up by the human military base she was about to crash land on. They shouldn’t be aware of her presence, but under the circumstances, if they *did* hear her, at least they would likely assume they were getting a garbled report of the now burning airjet on the ground. Thankfully, the local dialect had been ingrained in her consciousness after six months of intense monitoring and translation of their communications.

She was going down. Her small observation pod hurtled toward the ground at an ever-increasing rate. Caught in the downdraft of an out-of-control human airjet, her tiny spy craft seemed as doomed as the vehicle that had crashed to the ground in front of her moments ago. Shuddering sensations raced up Alinna’s arms and along her scalp. Her *L’inar* nerve lines forced her skin up into narrow bands and ridges along her neck and hairline in an instinctual reaction as her concern turned quickly into fear.

Her pod was not meant for this kind of action. A tiny craft rigged to avoid human detection, it was only meant for short-term surveillance. There was barely enough room on board for her long body to lie flat against the monitoring equipment. Her mission was simple—park her ship on the moon and use her pod to observe human behavior—to watch, but not interact. *But I am going to*

interact; they're going to have to peel my Inarrii skin right off their shiny new Starforce facilities. Sweat beaded on her forehead as Alinna fought again to regain control, wrenching the hand controls up and back until they pressed against her chest.

Warning lights flashed. Her altitude was dropping erratically. “No shit,” she said aloud. Six months of listening to the humans’ fondness for verbal vulgarity was rubbing off. She’d been observing a heated argument on the ground when the human airjet took her by surprise, veering suddenly off its scheduled course and into the airspace above the woods surrounding the new military base. Swerving right into her path, its engine had disrupted the ultrasonic pulse waves that kept her pod safely aloft. In seconds, the airjet had crashed to the ground and erupted in flames while she watched, unable to do anything other than struggle for control over her own vehicle. The airjet had broken into three jagged pieces; there was little likelihood anyone survived.

The automated emergency beacon started to flash as Alinna gave up trying to recover and instead braced for impact. The tips of treetops snapped hard against the outer shell of her pod, twisting the small craft into a spin. Alinna held on, her heart pounding. Her curving *L'inar* nerve lines were tight and burning in alarm. The fall took forever, the last of the ultrasonic waves battering the tiny ship against the tall spikes of Earth vegetation. Then, with one sudden stomach-wrenching drop, the craft hit the ground.

Alinna lay stunned inside her pod. For a moment, she ignored the screaming monitors around her. *I'm alive.* Then the sharp scent of ozone caught her attention. The warnings flashing and beeping around her suddenly had

meaning again. She scrambled to unfasten her harness and wiggle her way to the escape hatch at the front of the craft. She snarled in frustration when the latch release refused to operate. Time to get out—now. Urgency flooded endorphins through her body, lending her a full measure of Inarrii strength.

Alinna slammed the hatch completely open as a shudder rippled through the ship. She could smell smoke. Security measures dictated she would need to hide the craft while on alien soil, but she wondered if there would be anything left to hide. She dragged her body through the narrow hatch, grabbing her emergency pouch on the way out. *This was so much easier in the escape simulations.* Disembarking was simple when she was in the weightless docking bay of her larger vessel—secreted now in a crater on the darker side of the Earth's moon.

Alinna scrambled to her knees on the thick carpet of vegetation outside her ship. She staggered as she rose to her feet and moved away from the small craft. Taking refuge under the sagging bows of a huge tree, she stared at her ruined vessel. The human airjet had destroyed the ultrasonic wave pattern keeping her aloft, but she could have recovered if she'd been a little higher. But in the business of surveillance, being close was a necessary risk. It was the landing that had wrecked it, the landing and being bounced and smashed against the trees. The branches of the massive vegiforms around her had slowed her enough to save her life, but the pod was done.

A soft breeze brought the acrid stench of smoke. The human airjet was burning nearby and would surely have military attention at any moment. She needed to get rid of the pod and hide. She tapped the skin at the base of her left ear, initiating her internal command unit. Without

much hope, she requested total silent mode for the pod. Before her, a shimmer of light flickered over the craft as it attempted to initiate the power field to make it once again invisible to the naked eye or casual scan. Nothing happened. She grimaced. *Not surprising, after the beating the vessel took on the way down.*

“*Kahemnit dal,*” she whispered. “Shit.” The human curse sounded more satisfying, and certainly more graphic. An errant breeze flipped a lock of her shoulder-length brown hair into her eyes. She blew it away from her face with a huff of annoyance. *I have no choice. I have to destroy the ship. “Tel sho ahoi, sho amnetii.”* Alinna used her internal command unit to access her damaged craft’s communication system to signal her people, hidden far away on the secret Jupiter Moon Base. With luck, they would hear her, although she might never know what they thought of her decision. They could not respond to her; any incoming communication held a much higher risk of detection.

“I am initiating *sho amnetii gohan yi.*” She began the short self-destruct sequence, pursing her lips and hoping it would work. If the ship was too damaged for its last service, she would have to find some way to destroy or hide it herself. That might not be possible, having crash landed on the outskirts of the heavily guarded human Starforce base. She scanned the woods. She was going to need a more secure hiding spot, and soon. If she was discovered by the humans, the mission would be a total loss, spelling disaster for her career and serious trouble for the eventual first contact between the Inarrii and Humans.

Alinna stepped away from the shelter of the tree and shivered as the cool breeze brushed against her legs. She

felt wet. Confused, she looked down at her legs and was shocked at the sight of a long rip in the heavy material of her blue flight suit. Blood ran freely from a deep gash in her calf. As if the sight of the injury suddenly made it a reality, pain swept through her body. She staggered. A soft moan slipped from her lips as she realized how badly she was injured. Pain blossomed in her head as well, making her wonder if she'd also suffered a concussion during her abrupt drop to Earth. Before her, waves of heat rose from her tiny spy pod. At least the self-destruct appeared to be working.

She staggered away from the craft, trying to get out of range as it used its own components to create a chemical reaction to reduce it to a tiny puddle of melted plastics. After perhaps a few dozen steps, she fell to her knees. She flicked on her internal comp's smart mode, since the realization she was about to be unconscious was inescapable. Maybe it could think of a way out of this. At the very least it would continue to gather information. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the lumbering flight of another human aircraft headed straight toward the crash site, and her.

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Major David Brown cursed softly under his breath. What he didn't need right now was another delay. Not for any reason. He had two weeks until the newest Starforce mission team would be assembled, and he planned to be on it as team leader. Instead he was sitting with his Starforce pilots in the back of a heli-jet on their way to a crash. He grabbed the handle above his seat as turbulence interrupted his thought—high winds taking their toll on

the impromptu rescue team's combination heli-jet. He shook his head. Their orders were to find and investigate a military airjet that had sent out distress signals and apparently gone down over the base.

The team assembly would have to wait. Lives were at stake, and the base was undermanned. Recent transfers and the opening of a newer, larger base had moved out so much staff that he and the other pilots currently residing on the base had been forced to take up security positions for this unforeseen disaster.

David frowned. The assembly would wait anyway. According to the latest scuttle, the entire team had to be evaluated by yet another psychologist. He, in particular, was about to be closely scrutinized, tested yet again for fitness of duty for long-term space travel and command.

"Base to unit seven-oh-seven." The message came across an open channel.

David tapped the compad on the side of his helmet. "Unit seven-oh-seven here."

"We have communication for Major Brown."

"This is Major Brown," David replied steadily despite the sensation of several pairs of eyes now focused on him.

"Major Brown, we have received satellite confirmation that airjet four-two-nine is down and burning on sector Alpha-Charlie-seven-niner."

"Understood."

"We have also been informed the roster was clear except for the two male air force pilots and one Dr. Janet MacPherson, a civilian assigned to your team."

David blinked. *Damn.* Muttering began in the back of the heli-jet. News traveled faster in the ranks than laser fire. There was no sense trying to keep rumors silent—

pressure to do so only made the rumors fly faster. “Copy. Unit seven-oh-seven out.”

So the psychtech was on board. He mulled that fact over along with the reality that few people ever survived an airjet crash. While he regretted the loss of any life, a thought lurked like a shadow in his mind. *If she’s dead, they’ll postpone the mission...or more likely, they’ll pull an officer in from another team to replace me and get the job done.* Either thought left him cold.

“ETA two minutes, Major Brown.”

David could already feel the deceleration of the heli-jet. Small and maneuverable, the vehicle covered the huge base in minutes and could land in a space smaller than his quarters. He held up a closed fist to his team, five of the best pilots in Starforce. They wouldn’t normally risk the skills these men and women had in a rescue mission, even in the understaffed status of the base, but the base was undermanned on purpose. As well as the recent opening of a new larger base taking some of the staff, operations here were intended to be top secret, and the fewer people involved, the better. Besides, his pilots were getting antsy waiting for the mission to be assigned. A little action was a good thing.

“Lee, Yancy, you two are on left flank. Olens, Huff and Branscombe, you go to the right. Look for the airjet comp unit.”

“What about survivors?” First Lieutenant Angie Lee called out.

“There aren’t likely to be any, but see if you can ID any bodies.”

“Savvy,” she agreed.

The heli-jet touched down, its landing a gentle bump. The team filed out while David waited near the pilot. He

slapped a hand to the pilot's shoulder. "Round us up in ten minutes."

"Understood, Major."

David stepped out of the heli-jet and into hell. The light breeze blew smoke directly into his face. The airjet lay broken into three pieces like a discarded toy before him, and the tail end was burning. He clamped his lips shut against the noxious smell of charred plasmetal alloy. *There's no way anyone lived through this.* The grim thought barely passed through his mind when he heard shouts from his team on the left flank of the crash site. He jogged steadily toward the group, his eyes quickly focusing on his team and on Lieutenant Lee's kneeling position over what had to be a crash victim.

David leapt over a few tree roots and neatly avoided thick pine branches broken off by the fallen airjet. The scene struck him as surreal. In a world with little vegetation left, they were all invaders in this pocket of wilderness. At a better time, he might have enjoyed the scent of pine, the cool of the shaded woods. In moments, he too stood over the body of a woman, her features slack and the left leg of her blue jumper ripped and coated in blood.

He shook his head and grimaced. "Dr. MacPherson."

"She's alive, Major!" Lieutenant Lee was already hauling out her emergency medkit.

"What?" Adrenalin flooded his body. He'd been ready to accept the psychtech's loss, but the situation had changed. She needed his help, now. "Lieutenant Yancy, get that autolift from the heli-jet." He tapped his helmet's compad. "Unit seven-oh-seven to base—we have a survivor and need immediate medical attention."

David switched his attention back to the injured

woman. Her light brown hair spread around her on the ground. Lee was working fast, applying a compress to the woman's leg until they could get her to the medtechs. The psychtech moaned, tilting her head to one side and exposing a series of intricate rust-colored tattoos running from her scalp down the length of her neck. David frowned. They looked like the tattoos popular a few years ago with underground groups wanting to align with their cultural backgrounds, usually tree-hugging low techs. *What kind of military psychologist wears cultural tats?*

He tapped his compad. "Branscombe, how's it look over there?"

"No sign of comp or vics."

A soft moan brought David's attention back to the injured doctor. Her eyelids fluttered, revealing unusually bright green eyes. "*Gohan yi...*" she murmured before passing out again. Lieutenant Lee looked up at him, a question in her eyes, but David shrugged. Hard to say what the woman was trying to get out at this point. But she'd live, and they could question her later.

"Major," Captain Sue Branscombe called over the compad and through the air simultaneously. Her team had worked its way to the other side of the wreck and now stood several yards away, near another set of giant pine trees. She waved to him, indicating he should come to their location, and he signaled that he would in a moment. Lieutenant Tom Yancy arrived with the autolift, walking beside it as it glided above the air on an ultrasonic wave. Its low vibrating hum played counterpoint to the staccato sound of the burning airjet. David caught one edge of the lift and steadied it as Yancy signaled it for descent, then helped him slide the doctor's unconscious body onto the flat surface.

“Get her back to the medlab and stay with her. Have the heli-jet come back for us.” David kept his eyes on the woman’s face. She remained unconscious, her smooth skin pale and unlined. Without the bright green of her eyes and her unusual tattoos, she could be anyone, or no one, but this was the woman who would make or break his space career.

Lieutenant Yancy grunted an agreement and began to walk the autolift back to the heli-jet, carefully stepping over the uneven ground as he guided the unit. David watched them for a moment and then moved toward his second team. He glanced down at the ground and caught sight of the wet reflection of light on tiny droplets of blood splattered over fallen leaves. Dr. MacPherson must have come from this direction, as well. He tracked the drops as he walked, noting the amount of blood seemed to be greater as he reached his pilots.

“Major, check this out,” Branscombe called to him, her strident voice ringing with impatience.

“Is it the airjet comp?”

“Nope. We don’t know what the hell it is.”

On that cryptic note, David moved a little faster. The blood trail also expanded, as if Dr. MacPherson had paused for a few minutes here. David stepped to one side, careful not to disturb a small pool of blood. Branscombe and the other two pilots stood staring at the ground. The scent of pine hung heavy in the air. David stepped over another broken pine branch and glanced up at the tree canopy as a small shower of pine needles rained down on him. At least a dozen other branches were twisted and broken in the trees above.

The smell of burning plastics overrode the aroma of pine once again, and David flicked his gaze back to the

ground near his team's feet. A puddle of melted plastic lay in a long oval shape, some of it clearly being absorbed into the soft bed of needles and soil. He'd never seen anything like it.

"Is it part of the airjet?" David squatted down to get a little closer to the material.

"If it is, I can't imagine what it was or why it would just...melt like this."

David frowned. He knew the personnel on board the airjet, but what about cargo? Had the aircraft contained something dangerous? News on the upcoming mission was tight, and there'd been little explanation as to why a group of interplanetary settlers needed a full flight team for defense. Perhaps what lay on the ground was a hint of why the mission was so secretive. "Any of you got a sample kit on you?"

"I do." Second Lieutenant Sven Olens, the biggest bruiser David had ever met, pulled a small kit from his backpack.

"Take a sample of whatever the hell this is, and of some of the soil around here too. Branscombe, you got record mode?"

"On for the duration, Major."

She would have filmed their search and the discovery here. "Any sign of the airjet comp or the rest of the crew?"

"No, but a lot of the wreckage is too burned to ID much of anything."

"The flames are nearly out. When they called us in, they didn't expect a long burn or call for firefighters. No one expected to find much of anything. I think the comp is still on board, and further survivors highly unlikely. Do we all agree?"

“Agreed.” Branscombe spoke for the rest. At thirty-nine, she was the oldest pilot applying for the Starforce defense mission, but she was also the best, and his second in command.

“Good. File out and search again for the comp or bodies, but after that I think we’ll hand the rest of the search over to the clean-up crew. Nothing we can do here now.”

“I can’t believe that anyone lived through it.” Lieutenant George Huff shook his head. “It’s amazing, savvy?”

“Damn right.” David looked down at the puddle of Dr. MacPherson’s blood. *She’d survived. And she saw what happened here. Perhaps the psychtech knows more about this mission than I do.*