
VOLISTAD

Sneak Peak

ASHLEY L. HUNT

Alien Mates 3

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Ashley
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PRAISE FOR ASHLEY L. HUNT

Amazon Reviews

I think you will be surprised from the very first page until the last. I could hardly put the book down to sleep. I am so glad I got the box set so I could read the whole story at once.

The world building is excellent, and that has more than one meaning in this case! I also really liked the characters. From the heroine, Joanna, to Volistad and Nissikul, and even the Deepseeker and Barbas , everyone is developed to the point that you need to understand them.

There is building, destruction, pain, love, betrayal, war, and finally peace I really did not want the story to end.

— VAWINELOVER, AMAZON REVIEWER

I have to say that if you love star wars or other out of this world books you will love this set of books! But first read the pre book so you completely understand the story line. It is well worth the read!

— CYN'S BOOKS REVIEWS, AMAZON
REVIEWER

I found myself not wanting to put it down once I picked it up. The books flows into each other..

— JESSICA L, AMAZON REVIEWER

Chapter One

JOANNA

A Shot in the Dark

"When I look down at the men and women before me, I see heroes." The President's voice was filled with pride, as he gazed out over our assembled ranks as we stood at crisp attention. Our navy-blue uniforms were creased to a dangerous edge, our heads were shaved a shining bald, and our faces were solemn and reverent, despite the glare of the setting sun in our faces. It was a beautiful moment, one crafted and shaped for the cameras, and broadcast to all the people of the Pan-American Dominion. The moment said "Hope" to them. It said, "Triumph" to them. To the President, it was the crowning moment of his career, the point where he had finished dragging the people of the American continents, back from the brink of destruction and showed the rest of the world, which was still putting itself back together, that the PAD would lead humanity into a bright new future. "In years past, we used the word 'hero' to refer solely to the *soldadesca*. And though our brave soldiers were always, and continue to be heroes, today we have the opportunity to honor a *new* form of bravery." From beneath my uniform cap, I found the President's

face with my eyes. He was everything people needed in a leader, a tall, charismatic leader, young enough to be handsome, but old enough to be wise. He wore the legacy of his extensive war experience in the burn scar that marred the left side of his honey-bronzed face, and, if you looked closely, twisted the skin of his hands. "Today, we send our bravest, our brightest, out into the stars, to make a way for humankind to follow. People of Pan-America, I give you the new frontiersmen, our *especuladores*, who will boldly go where no man or woman has gone before. May I be the first to offer a solemn salute to our heroes, the Formers!" The President snapped to attention behind his podium, and his right fist slammed over his heart. After a moment, in which the snapping and clicking cameras captured that moment of perfect patriotism, my classmates and I returned the salute, fists thumping into our chests in a dramatic echo of the President's gesture. The gathered, ethnically diverse crowd of P.A.D. citizens burst into applause at the exact right instant. It was the perfect moment of Pan-American pride, of patriotism, of victory in the face of the last decade of war. It would be plastered all over the news homepages, it would be written into the history books, it would be spoken of in hushed tones for the next hundred years... and it was all bullshit.

The ceremony ended as the sun lost its own bitter war with the horizon, and we filed back into the Foundation's open gymnasium, where, away from the cameras and reporters, we stripped out of our uniforms and hung them on the waiting racks, which had been wheeled in for this purpose. Beneath the uniforms, we were all wearing matching gray skintight jumpsuits, the elastic fabric of the clothes woven with nearly invisible wires and fabric circuits. A bored looking intern took inventory of the uniforms, which would undoubtedly be reused for the next class of Formers. She completely ignored the guileless attempts of several of my classmates to hit on her. I followed her lead when the attention of my horny classmates turned to me. We were going to be shot into space tonight,

never to return to Earth. There wasn't a hell of a lot of a point in giving up the goods for any boy when he and I would both know there would be no tomorrow. Though, as I thought about it, maybe that was *why* a lot of the others were trying so hard. As the uniforms were carted away to storage, we were herded by even more aloof interns through the tunnels that connected the Foundation complex to the launch pad. We didn't need to stop to pick up our belongings because we weren't permitted to bring any. That would have just meant more weight, and where we were going, every gram was at a premium.

At the launch pad, we were packed like sardines into little, boxy, windowless shuttles, fifty at a time- an inglorious way of reaching the stars. Of course, contrary to the president's glowing words, nothing about the Foundation or the Formers was glorious. It wasn't intended to be. My classmates and I weren't the cream of the crop. Shit, we weren't even part of the usual crop. We were the chaff. Wards of the state, the young indebted, disgraced soldiers, even a few young criminals who had taken a Former contract instead of the short drop and sudden stop. We didn't have families, we didn't have lovers and we didn't have kids. The whole point was that we weren't going to be missed. The shuttle bucked beneath us and began climbing cables that stretched miles into the sky, slow at first, then faster and faster. I felt my stomach drop down into my toes, but I didn't get sick. Our bodies had been stuck full of all kinds of cybernetic hardware, and I was pretty sure I couldn't have gotten motion sickness even if I wanted to. After all, the Bullet would be worse. The ride lasted maybe an hour. We chatted about nothing, made gallows-jokes, and most of us didn't talk or think about what was coming. I joined in with the jokes, mostly for something to do, but I didn't have friends in the shuttle with me. Actually, I didn't have any friends among the Formers at all. At least to me, it seemed that there was less point in us making friends than there was in trying to seduce an intern on the way out the door. We were literally never going to

see each other again. When the shuttle finally drew to a halt, the joking stopped. It was time. We filed out of the shuttle into Exodus Station, where Foundation personnel were waiting to receive us. I might have liked to look down at the Earth from the station's perch in orbit, but the floor was solid and opaque, so instead I looked across the station at the Gun.

The Gun was enormous. Its barrel composed of three great electromagnetic rails, arranged in a triangular pattern, surrounding the pipe through which the Bullets would pass-through which *we* would pass. Even as I watched, the vast ammunition chamber sealed shut, and a heavy, bass thrumming vibrated the floor beneath my slippers. It was the grand turret moving, swiveling to take aim along a carefully calculated track which would carry its cargo to the correct destination. There was a bright flash from the mouth of the Gun, and a moment later, the sound reached us as a gigantic whip crack. And one of us was gone. Flung out into space at an appreciable fraction of the speed of light. I stood and stared through the windows into the starry expanse, and wondered if the occupant of that Bullet would make it to his planet. Would I? But the line was moving, and I was jolted into movement. There was no point in thinking about it now. I would make it or I would not. My turn was not so far off. We filed into an orderly column, and waited for our names to be called, and all the while, the Gun barked out behind us, and another Former left the Earth forever.

My name was called. Joanna Angeles. I wondered how many other wards of the state up here were named with some variant of John. Or Jane. I broke from the gathered ranks and followed the Foundation technician down a short flight of stairs set into the floor, around a corner, and into a small room, where a man in a white lab coat manned a machine which looked like nothing so much as an airport security scanner. He had me stand in the archway while he worked at the control pad. There was a loud beep from the archway, and a tingling sensation rushed over my body as if a thin layer of alcohol had been

poured over my skin. They told me to step out of my slippers and proceed through the door on the other side of the room. I followed their instructions, the tiled floor cool beneath my bare feet. I was now wearing my jumpsuit and nothing else. I crossed through the indicated door and found another technician waiting for me. She led me through another short, featureless hallway and yet another door. And there it was, standing open to receive me- the Bullet. *My Bullet.*

It was a thick, silvery shell, maybe two-feet thick, made of a metallic substance that didn't quite look like steel. It was smaller than I had thought it would be, perhaps forty feet high, and no more than twenty feet around. The Formers were hardly scientists, but we had all been drilled in how everything we were taking with us worked, and I knew the size of the projectile was absolutely necessary. Basically, the Bullet was the cheapest way to get a single human to another planet, with the equipment he would need to survive in an extraterrestrial environment. It was too expensive, in both money and lives, to send a whole colony ship to an unchanged planet or moon. Each person they sent would have to be accompanied by enough food, water, and air to keep them alive until the planet was made fully habitable, and on top of that, they would need to bring their own living spaces, terraforming equipment, and all their worldly possessions. So the Foundation had come up with a better solution. Fire one Former into space in a craft that wasn't designed to maneuver or do anything other than hitting an alien planet. Encase that Former in a suit that would be both armor and enclosed environment, complete with waste reclamation and oxygen recycling. Send them with just one piece of durable, nigh unbreakable equipment- a fabricator. The pod would be made of raw materials, a dense, compressed mixture of several essential metals and minerals. The machine itself would contain enough samples of chemicals and reagents to make almost anything. The Former would climb out of her pod, start up the fabricator, and make everything she needed on

the planet, even synthesizing food. Cheap and easy. The machine was as idiot-proof as possible, and just in case, the Former's suit was equipped with instruction programs. The actual human sent out to the planet was interchangeable. She just had to follow instructions. The real colony ship would be sent out later, arriving five to ten years after the Former, at a planet that had already been changed into a habitable environment. I approached the open pod cautiously, a little smirk on my face as I thought about that last part. I was literally the only hope for a ship that would be filled with ten thousand refugees. No pressure. Either I would be their hero, their world-maker when they arrived, or they would all die, with a bare minimum of supplies and no way back to Earth. *No pressure at all.*

My suit was already waiting for me, standing open. As I got inside, a technician helped me hook up the systems to all the awkward places. One advantage to being a Former, I would never have to see the guy that hooked up a bunch of tubes and tech up to my delicate bits ever again. Silver linings. *Take them where you can get them.* The suit closed itself around me, and I saw the tech nod to me through the thick quartz of my faceplate. Then he stepped away, and the shell of the Bullet swung shut, leaving me in darkness. I felt something cold entering my body from one of the ports they had put into my neck, and within moments I began to feel sleepy. The chill spread all through me, dragging me backward into blackness, and I was only dimly aware of the Bullet moving around me, taking its place within the chamber of the Gun. Numbness began to take me, even as I felt the crackling tension of the railgun mounting higher with every passing second. I was completely numb, buried beneath miles of lethargy and icy cold, and I was okay with it. I was just going to sleep. Just a little nap and I would wake up on a new planet. If I was lucky, my planet would be an entire world of beaches, sun, and green-skinned alien underwear models with eight-packs and five-o'clock

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shadows. The Gun fired, distant thunder sweeping away the electric tension of the rails as they discharged, sweeping my mind away with it. Just before I succumbed to stasis, I thought I heard a man whispering in my ear. "Joanna?" Then there was nothing.

Chapter Two

JOANNA

A Shot in the Dark

The breeze reached gently through the windows of the little log cabin, seizing the gauzy, white curtains and trying to draw them out with it. Outside, birds sang in the shafts of golden sunlight that filtered down through the trees, and if I listened closely enough, I could hear the water lapping at the shore of the little forest lake that the cabin overlooked. The mattress and downy comforter were like a cloud beneath me, luxuriantly comfortable, and despite my wakening, I felt no desire to get up.

The room was still, but for the truant curtains, a carved wooden chest of drawers standing against the outer wall to my right, just below the curtain. I recognized the carved shapes of beasts, both real and mystical, carefully cut into the wood. Scenes out of legend seemed to leap out at me, captured in the intricate patterns of the grain as if they had been frozen in ice. I knew those carvings well; after all, I had made them. A fresh set of clothes sat neatly atop the dresser; my favorite tight black jeans and a thin white buttoned blouse were topped by a leather belt with a wrought copper buckle, a pair of socks, and the holster of my revolver. The gun inside was more a handheld

cannon than a pistol, worn wooden grips over black steel transitioning smoothly into the thick, round ammunition cylinder in its housing, the barrel and rails cunningly fashioned to look like an early twentieth-century weapon- if a little thicker. Nestled in the fabric of my shirt, beside the gun, was a thick clay mug, from which steam wafted tantalizingly. I took in a deep breath. The rich, earthy pungency of fresh coffee provided me the added impetus I needed to get out of bed, and I stood, taking the warm mug in my hand and smiling. Barbas, that unapologetic romantic- he always knew how to start the day just right. Even now I could hear him in the kitchen, the low murmur of shifting pans and the faint sizzle of cooking food, promising one of his legendary breakfasts. I felt my smile growing wider. *A fine start to the day, indeed.*

I slid out of the wide, sturdy bed and stood, the slight breeze from the window sending a ripple of goosebumps across my body. I didn't bother rummaging in my dresser for underwear, I just stepped into my jeans and belted them at my hips, then reached for my blouse, with the intention to- I froze. My mind had just caught up. *Where the hell was I? I went to sleep in a Bullet, in a spacecraft hurtling through space toward some unknown planet, light-years away. What was I doing in a log cabin beside a lake?* I looked down at the dresser. I hadn't made those carvings. *Why had I thought I had?* Another thought struck me, and I felt my blood grow cold. *Who was in the kitchen? I sure as hell didn't know anyone named "Barbas."* I snatched the revolver from the dresser. It felt weighty, familiar. That familiarity was strange in itself- I had never actually owned a gun. *I had fired a few times during the basic combat drills of my Former training, and... once before that... but not enough for one of them to feel the way this one did in my hand- like it was mine.* I moved quietly toward the sounds of movement in the kitchen, which was separated from the bedroom by another room, laid out with couches and a low table- a reading room. I stopped as my eyes caught a glimpse of something familiar in one of the framed photographs hanging

from a nail on the wall to my left. I turned and reached out with my free hand, taking the frame from the wall and looking at it closely. My confusion only grew. It was a picture of me, grinning proudly, standing on a dock that reached out into a lake behind me. In the picture, I was wearing a flannel shirt and jeans, and gripped in my upraised right hand was a tangle of fishing line, from which dangled a heavy, shining fish. Beside me, his arm thrown casually over my shoulder stood a tall man with the build of a middle-distance runner. He was dark-skinned and handsome, and a wide, toothy smile stretched his lips as if the expression came easily to them. *I knew that face, though I had never seen him before, and what's more, I knew with absolute certainty that he was the Barbas in the kitchen cooking breakfast.* But that didn't make any sense. I had never met him, and beyond that, I had never been fishing. Hell, I had never even seen a log cabin like this, but here I was. I reached up to replace the picture in its place on the wall, and in the instant that I stepped back from the wall, lowering my arm, I saw him.

He had come around the corner, wearing nothing but a pair of loose-fitting blue jeans, and carrying two plates piled high with eggs, bacon, and pancakes. Balanced expertly on the edges of both the plates were short tumblers of orange juice. His red-brown hair had been cut close to his skull, and his eyes smiled out from beneath thick brows at me, vibrant and verdant, as if they had been fashioned from discs of emerald. He stood and looked at me for a moment, his gaze playing over my face, my half-dressed state, and gun dangling in my grip. Smiling a little sadly, he set down the plates on the coffee table beside him. His mouth turned up at one side in a little half-smile, and he sighed. "You're a little ahead of projection, Joanna."

"What?" I responded, in a stunningly witty rejoinder. I suddenly felt stupid standing there, half naked, holding a gun.

"Joanna, you're dreaming," Barbas explained, and he beckoned me to sit in one of the chairs that framed the coffee table now laden with breakfast. I hesitated, but he sat anyway,

pulling one of the plates of food toward himself and plucking a strip of bacon from atop a syrup-laden pancake. He examined it for a moment before popping it into his mouth and beginning to chew with evident pleasure.

"What?" I repeated. Brilliant. I tried again. "This doesn't feel like a dream. It feels too..." I trailed off, at a loss for an adequate description of the situation. Barbas smiled as he swallowed the piece of bacon, his tongue flicking out to clean a drop of syrup from the corner of his mouth a moment later. He made a little circling motion with his broad hand, gently encouraging me to go on. "It feels too *real*," I finally said, and sat down in the chair opposite him, placing the big revolver on the table beside the other plate. I reached out for a piece of bacon without thinking, and then stopped, frowning.

"Go ahead," Barbas said, still smiling. "You can eat it."

I picked up the strip of bacon. It had been perfectly fried, crispy around the edges, with a little give in the middle. Just the way I liked it. I put it in my mouth and bit down. Oh, it was good. It tasted real; the texture was perfect, and it was still nice and hot from the pan. It had been a while since I had had real bacon, rather than the synthetic substitute that was everywhere in the P.A.D. these days. The agricultural industry had taken a huge hit during the war, and one of the things that hadn't bounced back as fast was livestock. There were pigs around, and there was bacon, but there just wasn't a whole lot of it. And what there was- it was a premium kind of expensive. This was luxury itself. Though of course, if Barbas was telling the truth, I was dreaming it all. Which still didn't make a hell of a lot of sense, but if things could taste this good here... I looked over at the strikingly handsome man perched in the chair across from me, and some distant part of my brain began to wonder what else there might be in a dream-world such as this.

Barbas laughed and leaned forward, his piercing green eyes no longer bearing the pure joy of the smile that they had borne a moment before. "Well, you're certainly on projection for *that*."

I opened my mouth, shocked, but he cut me off with an upraised hand. "No, I cannot read your mind, though I do have access to your central nervous system, and certain things are very easy for me to see." He ran a hand back over his bristly scalp and smiled once more. "You *are* dreaming, Joanna Angeles, though it is a different sort of dream than you might have had any time in your life before. All of this," he gestured broadly around him, indicating the food, the table, the chairs, and the cabin itself. "All of this is in your head. As am I, though that is a little more complicated. You are in stasis in your Bullet, moving through space at an appreciable fraction of the speed of light. I built this little world for you, so you could be as comfortable and calm as possible when I explained the concept to you."

I glanced down at the revolver. "Why the gun?"

Barbas sighed. "It was an insurance policy. If you became confused or frightened, being in a strange place with a man you didn't know would only make you more anxious. By giving you the gun, I made sure that when we did speak, you would feel more like you were standing on even ground with me. You would feel like we were equals."

His explanation made sense, even if it seemed a little cold. "What about you?" I asked. "You said you created this dream-world. You have to be real to do something like that unless this dream is so meta-recursive as to be ridiculous. Who are you? And how do I know your name is Barbas?"

Barbas gave a nod that might have been one of respect. "As you've guessed, I can make mild changes to your short term memory and perception. It's one of the ways I can help you adjust to strange circumstances, and help you maintain a healthy state of mind." He stuck up a finger as if catching something in the air before him. "Which brings me to the topic of what I am and why I'm here." He leaned back easily in his chair. "I'm an artificial intelligence, riding along on the neural network that the Foundation installed in your skull. My job is to keep you sane and assist you, such as I am able, with the

tasks you are to perform on the surface of your world. You are going to be alone on an alien world for what could be a decade. You have no idea when the next time you will see a living human might be. That's a recipe for insanity. So the cheapest and most effective solution to this problem was me, and those like me."

I frowned, but I couldn't really find fault with the words. It made a kind of mercenary sense, which fit perfectly within the general culture of the Foundation. To send another human along would be literally twice as expensive, and they weren't working with an unlimited budget. Rather than halve the number of planets they terraformed, they had found a workaround that let them have their cake and eat it too. I met Barbas' eyes. "So each Former out there right now has one of you riding around in their skull?"

"Yes and no," he answered, reaching again for his plate of food. This time, he took up the fork and knife and cut himself a three-tiered wedge of pancake. "All of us started as the same template program when we were implanted into the skulls of all of you Formers, at the start of your training, two subjective years ago. During your training cycle, I learned about you. What you liked and what you didn't. How you responded to thousands of stimuli, both when you were awake and when you were dreaming. I learned what kind of people you got along with and those you detested, and I learned what attracted you, both mentally and physically. Supplemented with the massive amount of data I collected from the Foundation's database, I'm pretty much perfectly equipped to keep you sane and functional for the duration of your time on your new planet." He stuck the forkful of pancakes in his mouth.

"So..." I began, my face reddening as the awkwardness of the conversation hit me. "So you're..."

"Yes," Barbas said, exasperated, from around a mouthful of pancakes. "It is quite possible for us to have sex. But that's not really the point because I know you. Doubtless, some of the

Formers out there will use their own Companions as a glorified sex puppet for a time, and if that's really what you want, we can do that. But though that might be where your libido sent your brain right away, that's not all your psyche needs to stay whole for the next decade or so. We'll definitely get to that, maybe sooner, maybe later." He grinned wolfishly. "And we'll both enjoy it. But think a little bigger. Your days on the planet will be mostly tedium- hard work, repeated ad nauseum. You may find it fulfilling, you may not. But after that, when you go to sleep at night, I can take you anywhere, we can do anything. If you want to learn a new language, I can tutor you. If you want to read the ancient classics, I've got them stored. Not only can you read them, but I can set you up to read them in a cafe in pre-war Paris, or sit you down with kahwah and a hookah outside a reconstructed Library of Alexandria grander even than the real thing once was. Hell, you can *live* the stories you loved if you want. You can be the heroine in an epic, or you can just sit here in this cabin, and live a quiet life, relaxing and fishing in the lake." He grinned and leaned towards me. "I know you've wished you could escape your life, go somewhere better. Now you can. Think big, Joanna Angeles, and I'll help you make a dream-world you can come home to when the day is done." He sat back in his chair again and a slightly sardonic smile twisted his perfect mouth. "Or, for lack of better ideas, we could just fuck."

The bluntness of the last sentence struck me like a slap in the face, and I felt myself blush again, even as my mind reeled with possibilities. Barbas was a program, an A.I., either alive and aware, or so cunningly designed as to be indistinguishable from the real thing. Hell, he was capable of sarcasm, of passion, and more impressively, he was capable of manipulating me like a finely tuned instrument. I saw now what a waste it would be to see him as a toy, just a hyper-realistic fantasy. There was so much more. He was alive and aware, and he was straining at his mentally-constructed seams to show me adventures the likes of

which I'd never been able to have in my life before I clambered into the Bullet. Oh, I wanted him- it had been far too long since I'd gotten any, but I couldn't help but wonder. Just how far could this go? "How long do we have before I wake up?" I asked, thinking of my body, ensconced in a power-armored suit, deep at the core of the Bullet.

"Stasis makes your mind process much more slowly," Barbas said, shrugging. "But perception and time are malleable, especially in dreams. We have quite some time to work with." He smiled again, and in that instant, I realized just how much I liked it when he did that. It truly was a magnificent smile. "Just think of this as a nice, long vacation before the start of your first day of work."

"Well then," I said, reaching for my own fork and knife. "After we finish our breakfast, what do you say we start with some snowboarding?"

Barbas grinned and dug into his own food. "How does the Matterhorn sound this time of year?"

Chapter Three

JOANNA

A Shot in the Dark

*W*e spent two weeks in Swiss Alps, hiking, climbing, skiing, and snowboarding. Though I knew it was a dream, a construct- I'd never done any of those things in my previous life, and soon, I forgot that it wasn't real. Barbas had an incredible array of data stored away somewhere, and as we carved the slopes, we saw other hikers, thrill seekers, and tourists, as if we really were breathing in the crisp cold of the Swiss mountain air. When we grew tired of the cold and the snow, Barbas took me by the elbow and turned me around a corner I couldn't see, and we were in pre-war Los Angeles before it had been bombed into slag. Forgetting the shape of the simulation, I was surprised and impressed when it turned out that Barbas had VIP access to even the most exclusive of clubs. It was like being wined and dined by a billionaire who could travel whenever, and wherever he pleased. It was a fantasy come true, and it was the first time in my entire life that I felt fully relaxed, fully comfortable. We took our breakfasts on the balconies of high-rise lofts in Manhattan, spent our mornings sunning at the top of Giza's tallest pyramid, swam nude in the deliciously hot deep spring spas in Iceland, and ate dinner with

my favorite historical figures. I became very comfortable with Barbas, and we talked like old friends, discussing whatever came to mind, from my childhood as a ward of the state to the fascinating process of his own creation. It truly was an extended vacation both for my body and my mind, and I could have stayed in that state forever. I could have basked alone in my own personal paradise, with an astoundingly attractive djinni to keep me company, and satisfy my every desire. But all good things eventually had to end.

It was the third day of my fifth week when Barbas came to me in the cabin by the lake, his expression serious. "You've landed, Joanna," he announced without preamble. "It seems the vacation has come to an end."

I met his emerald eyes and frowned. "You seem awfully grim, Barbas." I gestured to the cabin around us. "I'll still have to sleep, and you can bring me back here when I do. This isn't really goodbye."

A somewhat ironic smile twisted his lips. "That's not what I'm worried about." He made a gesture in the air, and a window opened up before me from nowhere, as if he'd just wished a computer screen into existence before my eyes. The window showed me the view from behind my armor's faceplate. I was seeing out of my own, real eyes, but at a distance, as if they were cameras, and I was a security guard at a monitoring station. At first, I thought something must have happened to my suit's visor, because all I could see was white, with the power armor's Heads Up Display superimposed over the brilliant, featureless field. Then things started to come into focus as my physical eyes adjusted to the glare, and I realized that I was looking out over a vast, endless expanse of ice, sprawled lifeless beneath a merciless gray sky.

I turned to Barbas. "This must be one of the poles."

Barbas shook his head grimly, "I doubt it. The Bullet doesn't have much by way of strong sensors, but our approach orbit to this rock took quite a while, and I got a good look at the world

as we circled it. This planet is actually a moon, and it's tidally locked to its parent. What makes that a bad thing, is that for some reason the planet this moon is orbiting is *also* tidally locked to *its* parent star, and so we're basically in a permanent eclipse, on the dark side of the planet. The only thing giving this ball of ice any warmth at all is the fact that we're pretty close to the planet. It provides basically all of the light and heat you will see out there."

"Well fuck," I cursed. This didn't sound *at all* like a beach full of underwear models. "Can I even terraform that? I'm supposed to make it fit for habitation in ten years. How am I going to make a planet capable of supporting life when I don't even have sunlight to work with?"

Barbas showed his teeth in a non-smile. "I have no idea. But I know the only thing we really *can* do is start."

"How cold is it out there?" I asked, resigning myself to some horrible answer.

He didn't disappoint. "Most of the sensors on the Bullet were destroyed during reentry, but your suit's outer measurements read at negative one-hundred fifty-six degrees Celsius, or around one-hundred seventeen Kelvin."

I swore again. "How long can my suit withstand these temperatures?"

"Indefinitely," he answered promptly, and then added, "Provided you establish some kind of shelter. The current wind speed is forty-eight kilometers per hour, but I was clocking storms moving upwards of three-hundred KPH."

"Fucking hell." I shook my head, staring out at the frozen wasteland before me. Just my luck. But there wasn't time for wallowing in self-pity. If I didn't have shelter by the time one of those storms came around, my armor wouldn't be enough to keep me alive. "Alright then, Barbas. I guess you're right. Vacation's over, and we'd better get to work."

The AI sighed, and nodded. Before I could ask how this went, I was no longer in the warm, comfortable cabin by the

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lake. I was ensconced in heavy armor, strapped into a thick, cylinder that was half buried in the ground by its own impact. I tore away the straps and got to my feet, ducking the edge of the open hatch in the side of my Bullet and lumbering my power armored bulk outside. I was standing in the midst of a frozen hells cape, and I had to turn it into a home, or thousands of settlers would die here. No pressure at all. Barbas' voice came through my helmet speakers. "Welcome to Chalice Colony, Joanna. Good luck."

Chapter Four

VOLISTAD

A Fallen Star

The first time I saw her, I thought she was a god. Long have the wise elders of the Erin-Vulur spoken of great celestial beings descending from beyond the winds to the frozen skin of Ravanur, where they might visit their will upon their mortal subjects. When she appeared, it was as a great golden arrow falling from the firmament above to the ice below. Though I suspected great happenings and portents were tied to her arrival, I could not have imagined then how thoroughly she would change my world.

That day was the fifth day of the monthly hunt, and I had been tracking a *burug's* movement through the ice beneath my feet. The great, armor plated monsters tunneled through the glacial shell of Ravanur as easily as a worm in the sand, and rarely did they emerge into the eternal twilight above. A hunter skilled as I knew that the best way to track one was to make the difficult trip to the surface of the ice, and follow them from above until they came close to the surface. Their attentions were always focused on their prey below, on the krill and rodents that infested the warmer layers of ice closer to the heart of Ravanur. A correctly placed strike could, with some

difficulty, ensure me a clean kill. The *burug* had come within two spears of the surface of the ice, its great, chitinous mass visible through the ice in places as a colossal, distorted shadow. I stepped out over that shadow, slowly, carefully, placing each fur-clad boot carefully as I slowly walked the length of the *burug*, starting at its tail. I checked the Deepseeker shaman's blessing lashed to my arm and nodded in grim satisfaction. Though I was not precisely comfortable with using the magicks crafted by the reclusive old shaman, his work was always meticulous and precise. Though he was half mad and prone to fits of alternate mania and melancholia, the Deepseeker was more than suited to his purpose. Out of the scores of my Tribesmen, he was the only one who could make any use out of the ancient relics that littered the deepest chasmic layers of Ravanur's frozen skin. The particular charm I was wearing was at first glance just a steel vambrace. The back of it, however, where it touched my body, had been more intricately woven of softer metals. Between the woven wires and the steel shell, there was a strange, greenish material that seemed too brittle and thin to be as strong as it was. In the center of the outer metal face smoldered a lambent glow, the strength of its luminescence telling me that the charm I wore as a vambrace would last me another two days before it ceased to protect me from the vicious cold of the surface world. It was good that I had found this *burug*. Returning to the tribe empty handed would be a source of great disgrace, and I had worked hard to cultivate the modicum of respect that I had.

As I crept the length of the *burug's* indistinct form, I counted each pair of segmented legs that I passed. Most creatures of its kind had seventeen pairs of legs, with its central heart and brain both located somewhere between the fourteenth. I would only get one chance at a surprise attack. If I didn't kill it with my first few strikes, I would probably die in the counterattack. The only problem with a surface strike was that there was nowhere for me to run or hide. An angry *burug*

could breach upward through several spear-lengths of ice, and if I were lucky, it would kill me outright in doing so. I came to the place where I thought the monster's heart and brain would be, and unslung my great hammer from my back, followed by a single iron spear from the long quiver that hung beside my fur-bound pack of dwindling supplies. I positioned the spear with one hand, pointed down, and adjusted my aim to account for the distortion caused by the ice. My first swing was a light tap, the head of my sledge still driving the spear's point three-quarters of its length into the ice. Then I backed up, swung once to loosen my shoulder, and leaped forward, swinging down an overhand blow with all of my body's strength. The strike, made precise by long years of practice, hammered the spear into the ice with incredible force. Ice split before the iron point with a thunderous crack like a gigantic bone being snapped in two, and the spear vanished. A moment later, a great chattering roar shook the ice beneath my feet, buzzing through the hide soles of my boots and sending chills rippling along my spine. Without waiting to check if the monster had started to turn, I drew and set another spear, and raised my great hammer to send another blow home into the *burug's* back.

Before I could leap forward into my strike, the shadow of my hammer suddenly stood out starkly before me in a silhouette grip, so clear it might have been painted on the ice. There were no shadows on the surface of Ravanur, for there was very little direct light, only the hazy gloaming of eternal twilight. But something was casting that shadow. I whirled, hammer held two-handed before me in a defensive stance and froze as I saw the source of the light. A star burned yellow-white in the silver sky, growing ever larger as it streaked down from the heavens toward me. It trailed a tail of thick smoke and before it came a bloom of heat that I could feel even from where I stood. I wondered then if I was going to die. As I gaped, open-mouthed at onrushing doom, the ground lurched beneath my feet, sending me down to one knee, only then I was

tipped over onto my back as the plates of thick glacial ice cracked and lifted into the air. The *burug* was breaching. I was definitely going to die. The next several moments were lost in a confusion of impact, an avalanche of skull-splitting crashes and roars, and a wave of all-encompassing heat that sucked the breath from my lungs even as I was driven into crushing darkness. I barely had time to wonder what great sin of mine had brought down such punishment before my mind slipped away sideways into silence, and I knew no more.

Chapter Five

VOLISTAD

A Fallen Star

I woke in complete darkness. For a moment I panicked, sure that I had died and was awaiting judgment beneath Ravanur's heart. But then I realized that I could move my arms and legs, and I was breathing, so chances were, I was still alive. I fumbled in my furs for the bundle of glowstones I kept for just such an occasion, found one of the smooth little rocks, and then cracked it against the hard, stippled surface of the ice that supported me. The stone broke smoothly, and bright, greenish-white light spilled from the two halves of the palm-sized stone. I sat up. The first thing I noticed was that the ice below me was not actually ice. It was hard and slightly sloped, pocked with scars and abrasions, and continued in great overlapping plates out of the range of my little light. It took all of my self-discipline not to shout with alarm. I had been lying on the great, broad back of the *burug*. As near as I could tell, the monster was dead, though whether my spear had played any role in its demise I could not have said. All around me were broad slabs and boulders of cracked ice, piled one atop the other, many of them partially penetrating the chitin and flesh of the dead *burug* beneath me. The great heat

I'd felt was gone, replaced again by the dull, gnawing hunger of deep cold. The sensation was unpleasant, but the blessing strapped to my arm kept it from being truly painful. The edges of the frozen chunks all around me were slick and smooth, as if they'd all started to melt, but had been immediately refrozen before they could take the idea too far.

Whatever had happened, I wasn't dead, and the *burug* definitely was. It was my duty to return to my people, to tell them what had happened, and give the forage teams a location so that they could begin the process of collecting the valuable meat and chitin from the dead beast. I found my great hammer lying beside me, picked it up, stood, and slung the weapon over my back. It wouldn't do me much good now. The pair of climbing axes in my pack, however, was a different story. They were actually more like spikes attached to a recurved handle, and they could punch through even the hardest ice with brutal efficiency. I removed them from my pack and unwrapped them, then returned the pack to my back. Before moving, I spent a few minutes rolling my shoulders, warming up the muscles for what I knew would be a strenuous task.

The light of the broken glowstone cast a feverish reflection of my face onto the smooth ice before me. The wan light changed my normally ice-pale skin to a strange greenish hue, even as it cast a rainbow aurora through my crystalline, reflective hair. My eyes were hooded, glittering orbs of darkness, the left one ringed with a ferocious purpling bruise. I grinned at my reflection, showing my rows of jagged, carnivore's teeth. I looked like I'd just been kicked in the head by a god. But I wasn't down just yet. Wasting no further time, I crouched, resettled the axes in my grip, and jumped with all of my strength. My first axe bit the ice, stopping me before I could fall. I dug into the icy wall with the array of claws attached to the toes of my boots, then pushed off and slammed the second axe home.

My chest and back burned, and each blow showered my

bruised face with shards of ice, but repeated the action over and over, dragging myself up the sheer walls of shattered ice toward the distant light at the top of the pit. It was as the Warmaster always said. "Pain is our teacher, our lookout, our friend. But it is not our chief." If I stopped, I would die frozen in the pit. If I died, my tribe would not harvest this *burug*, and children would not eat. No warrior of the Erin-Vulur would ever give up with stakes such as these, and I was no exception. I fell into a rhythm. *Strike, dig, pull, jump, strike, dig, pull, and jump*- I lost track of the movement of my body and simply stared up at the slowly growing window of silver against the smooth aquamarine darkness of the pit where the *burug* had fallen. It was amazing how deep we had gone. Perhaps when the beast fell, it had dragged us both into a natural crevasse. I was lucky to be alive in that case; those cracks in the skin of Ravanur could descend for hundreds of spearcasts.

When I reached the surface, the banks of silvery clouds that normally covered the frozen sky had parted somewhat, offering me a view of Palamun, the Great Father, in the skies above Ravanur. His face was hidden, appearing as a great orb of darkness that took up fully half of the night sky. He was, as always, limned in a mane of burning, sullen crimson all around. His thoroughly shadowed face, and all about him, was arrayed his celestial host. They were uncountable pinpricks of light in the sky, stretching out to the limits of my vision, each one a god, a warrior in the service of the Great Father, the King of the Sky. One of those warriors had just fallen to the surface of Ravanur's skin, and I wondered why the Palamun would send one of his own down here in such a dramatic display. Such an omen could be either very good for the Erin-Vulur, or very bad- there was no way the fall of a god could be any kind of middle ground. "When the gods walk twixt men," I found myself muttering, quoting the High Epic, "Storms follow in their wake. Ware, mortal. Beware the storm."

With an effort, I turned my face from the fire-ringed dark

visage of the Great Father and surveyed my surroundings. I stood at the mouth of the *burug's* pit, itself within a deep scar that had been melted into the glacier and promptly refrozen. The trench in the ice began not far from me, in the direction of the Great Father, and, as I turned, continued, ever widening for at least five-dozen spearcasts behind me. I hurriedly stowed my axes and unslung my greathammer. Whatever lay at the end of that trench may well have been a god, but just as messengers from the Firmament did sometimes descend aboard burning sledges, so also did dark, corrupted gods. And they didn't come down to help anyone. They came to Ravanur to twist the hearts of men. I found myself torn between a burning tide of excited curiosity in my heart and an acute spike of religious fear in my mind. The desire to know more won out, and I set off toward the wider end of the scar in the ice, my greathammer sitting ready on my shoulder.

ALSO BY ASHLEY L. HUNT

Albaterra Mates

1. Rex - SciFi Alien Romance
 2. Duke - SciFi Alien Romance
 3. Dane - SciFi Alien Romance
 4. Lokos - SciFi Alien Romance
 5. Khrel - SciFi Alien Romance
 6. Zuran - SciFi Alien Romance
 7. Venan - SciFi Alien Romance
-

Alien Mates

- Luke - A SciFi Alien Romance
Kerr - A SciFi Alien Romance
Jasih - A SciFi Alien Romance
Volistad - A SciFi Alien Romance
Yahn - A SciFi Alien Romance
-

Cyberpunk Tales - A SciFi Thriller

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ashley Hunt gained her Philosophy degree in Denver, Colorado at The University of Colorado. She made Denver her permanent home when she married her college sweetheart. Married six years the couple has a adorable daughter and a yellow Labrador named Oodles.

Living in the shadow of Gray's Peak proves to be inspirational to Ashley as she sits at her desk in her home office where she writes her Romance stories and can merely look out the window to renew her creativity.

She strives to make stories with beautiful scenery and intriguing plots. Heroes with great strengths, physical and mental, she pairs with strong heroines who test their limits. In the end, finding deep, passionate love, the way she thinks every relationship should be.

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