

BARBARIAN MINE by Ruby Dixon

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Excerpt

Harlow

I need two poles for a travois. Two. No problem. There's got to be trees in the distance, and I'm strong and whole.

Okay. I can do this. I can.

Aehako's instructions ring through my mind, over and over. We need to make a travois and take Haeden back to the healer. My heart races wildly in my chest as I sprint through the snow, looking for the thin, pink, wispy trees of this planet. Kira's gone, and both aliens are wounded. They need my help, and I can't let them down. I don't know why they don't go back to the alien ship and get healed. They don't trust it, and I guess I understand that. I'm used to technology, and it still freaks me out to think of the cold, emotionless voice of the computer.

Also, I know what it's like to fear the doctor.

My feet sink into the snow with each step, and my leather boots quickly become sodden. There's no time to fix them or reinforce the insides with warm dvisti fur. Time is of the essence. I trudge forward over a drift-covered hill, and when I see the pink, wispy eyelashes of trees in the distance, I pick up the pace.

Almost there.

I have Haeden's knife, since he's too wounded to use it. The bone handle is smooth in my hand, though it's a little too big for my human-sized palm to grip comfortably. Everything here on Not-Hoth is sa-khui sized. I'm a decent height for a girl, but the average person on this planet seems to be seven feet tall, and the snows are deep, the caves huge. Really, everything feels just a wee bit too big. It's like I've been transported to a Goldilocks house, except instead of just right, everything's too large.

It's just one more thing I must adjust to in an endless stream of new and frightening things.

Weeks ago, I went to sleep in my own bed, and the biggest concern on my mind was when I'd start my chemo. Then, a few weird dreams later, I woke up, shivering and weak, pulled from a tube and told I'd been abducted by aliens.

Which would have been hard to believe except that I'd come from Houston, Texas, and my air

conditioner had gone out, so I'd spent the evening sweating and praying the repairman would come by soon. When I'd woken up? It had been so cold my bare feet had stuck to the metal floors, and strange blue aliens occasionally entered to chat with the humans.

It's hard to call someone a liar when they're seven feet tall, blue, and horned. After seeing that, I had to believe. And even though sometimes I want to pinch myself until I wake up, I have to accept the fact that I'm now living on a snow planet with no chance of getting home, and I'm infected with an alien parasite that allows me to endure the harsh conditions of Not-Hoth. Not exactly how I'd visualized my future at all.

But . . . at least I have a future.

According to the ship's medical computers, I'm cancer-free now. I don't know if it's wrong, or if it's Not-Hoth's atmosphere or the new "cootie" (as some of the girls call it) living in my chest.

All I know is that the inoperable brain tumor isn't showing up in scans. And for the first time in the last year, I have hope.

But first . . . a travois.

When I get to the trees, I move to the closest one and touch the bark with my fingertips. It feels spongy and damp despite the chill in the air, and not sturdy enough to support a massive, muscled alien. I have no idea if this will work, but I'll give it a shot. I owe the sa-khui my life, and so I'm going to do my best to help Haeden and Aehako.

Kneeling down, I begin to hack at the base of the first tree. The knife sinks in with a squishing noise, and sap squirts out onto the snow. Ugh. I wrinkle my nose and keep cutting, determined. Kira's gone, and they're wounded, so I'm the only one that can help.

The snow crunches nearby.

I stand upright, surprised. It almost sounded like a footstep. "Hello?" I turn around and look. "Aehako?"

No one's there. The snowy landscape is barren, nothing but rolling drifts as far as the eye can see.

I must be imagining things. I'm not alone out here in the wild. There're creatures everywhere, or so the hunters tell me. It could be one of the porcupine-looking things. Or maybe it's a rabbit. Or . . . whatever the rabbit equivalent on this planet is.

I can't be a silly chicken and freak out at every little sound, though. I turn back to the tree and continue hacking at it.

I hear the crunch of snow again, and a moment later, a heavy thudding. My blood feels like it's surging in my ears, and I press a hand to my head, wincing.

No, wait. That's not thudding or drumming. My heart is calm. Is it . . . purring?

Something slams into the back of my head, and I pitch forward into darkness.

Even there, the strange purring follows me.