

## Chapter 1

### Ann

Despite the general clutter of her office, Ann Timpson liked where she worked most of the time.

Part of it was the fact that she was the Chief of Security, which came with it some privileges. Privileges, of course, that she wasn't about to take advantage of, even if they were sitting in the right hand drawer of her station...

Also, there was a nice view of the surface of Prospero, which looked like an overgrown jungle of trees that were all the wrong color. Not that Ann knew a thing about what it was really like on Earth That Was--their home planet had been lost centuries ago. But the tree species that Mankind had managed to take with them to the stars before the loss of Earth all followed a familiar format: Brownish trunks with green foliage. There were different types, but Ann always queried her aedee when she needed to know what they were called--which, so far as she could remember, was never--and otherwise appreciated the fact that they produced enough oxygen to let spacestations survive in the cold of space.

Here? Well, Prospero was a unique place, she knew that much. She didn't have a background in xenobiology, so she always had to rely on the experts--Senton Trapp, for example, had a pretty solid grip on what was what here--and, when she wasn't sure, she could live with a shoot-first-ask-questions-eventually-if-ever mentality.

Sighing, Ann palmed her viz-display, letting her aedee communicate with the device and project a three-dimensional hologram of her message queue. Rubbing a hand across her short, peppered hair, she looked out at the sagging branches of the strangely colored trees that sprouted in the distance. The Compound was built in a massive clearing--one of their own designs--and had an immense fence securing the perimeter. She'd been stationed at Prospero for nearly two years, and in all that time, she'd never seen one of the creatures that supposedly lived on the planet. Oh, she'd seen video and holographs of them, but never in real life. They kept away--something about the strange smell is what Trapp had said--and pretty much minded their own business. Which meant that Ann's business involved keeping the Compound as peaceful as possible.

That was its own trick. Humans were a stiff-necked lot, and tempers ran high. There was ample space in the Compound, and though there was a sense of being in an aquarium (she'd seen one of those on the Gateway back before she'd deployed to Prospero), what with the glass tubes that connected the different domes of the Compound, most people felt like they were outside--to a certain degree--yet safe enough. But that didn't keep people from getting a little stir crazy. When that happened, it was up to Ann and her crew to keep things from getting out of hand.

Those were good days. Busting heads, knocking sense into those less interested in hearing sense? Not a problem. Ann had been doing it for a long time before Prospero, and she planned on doing the same thing for a while longer. No, it was the paperwork

that really drained her. She'd rather talk down a belligerent, drunken miner than sift through all the aedee-waste she had waiting for her.

Which explained why she was standing next to her desk, trying hard not to think about the drawer on the right hand side, and staring out toward the distant tree-line. The perpetually purple sky of Prospero gleamed like amethyst as the sun sank toward the eastern horizon. That had taken some getting used to: Every spacestation that Mankind used nowadays had a "northward" and "southward" axis (even if such directions were technically meaningless in space) and rotated from east to west. Like the Gateway--that behemoth sat by an immense star, spinning its way about as though it were Lost Earth. She shook her head. People held onto the past, that was certain. She was one of them, she knew.

Sighing, she turned to the queue of messages that waited for her and sat down. Wiggling one of her fingers, her digital-genetic, or digenetic, interface known as her augmented device interpreted the action as a request to process the information on the viz-player. Relaying the request via the digenetic antennae installed in her body, the aedee released the first message that awaited her. While she could read the message on her hand--or listen to it, if it were an audiocomm--she preferred to use the larger viz-player whenever possible. It strained her eyes less.

The message unfolded before her view, but she found she couldn't focus on the letters. Her thoughts kept drifting to the right-hand drawer.

Standing up, she rolled her right hand in a quick, familiar pattern. The aedee took the command and began to read aloud the message in a sterile, computerized voice. The settings were a touch too quiet, so Ann stroked her temple upwards. Her aedee recognized the gesture and increased the volume.

"Chief Timpson," read the viz-player, filling the small, cluttered office with the voice as Ann looked out at the setting sun. "You will remember that the Portal's final password check will be happening tomorrow at 0900 hours. Please ensure that the envoy is settled and ready for the process. As the Chief of Security, we expect you to take all measures necessary to ensure the safety of the equipment and the envoy. This is not a matter to take lightly. We have sent a similar message to Captain Terrance Rall, with additional details. If you have any follow up questions, let him know. Sincerely, Desert Peaks. End message."

Ann drew in a deep breath. She wasn't a large fan of PAs, but they had their uses. She'd been a private army grunt for a handful of years before deciding the money wasn't worth the sleepless nights. Protecting the Compound, filled with a good ten thousand hard working miners, scientists, and their families? That was more her speed.

With a finger flick, she archived the message and moved onto the next one, letting the viz-player read it, as it had the first one.

"Ann, we have to make a decision. You don't want us to implement the Janus, but I'm telling you, this thing is important! We have to be able to know what's going on in our home. Please call me--message me, I don't care--and let's talk about it. Please. Lyle. End message."

Ann shook her head. She couldn't believe that he was still harping about Janus.

The program allowed the listener to eavesdrop on almost any channel broadcast within the Compound. There were comparable programs in use throughout PA-ruled space, but never with civilians. It made sense that private armies needed to keep track of what their employees were doing--particularly when one considered the cost of training the people and keeping them fit enough to do what they had to--but Ann didn't want to listen in on conversations about how the kids got sick last night, or a sext, or any other bit of trivia. It seemed like a waste of resources. Lyle was persistent, but wrong. It was that simple.

Extending her right index finger at the viz-player, she said, "Lyle, you know what I think. That's all I have to say about it. Chief Timpson." She dropped her finger, the viz-player put up a question mark to ensure she knew she was going to send the message, and she nodded in response. The message disappeared from her queue.

Before she could engage her aedee, a new message showed up, this one marked CRITICAL. Its sender was reflexively read, and Ann felt her stomach seize up.

*Envoy, Charalee Timpson.*

Ann swallowed heavily and, without her knowing it--or without her wanting it (but absolutely wanting it)--the drawer slid open and her hand was wrapped around the packet and it was out and free and all she needed to do was squeeze her hand to tell her aedee that the aerosol should disperse and then she'd be away and it wouldn't matter because she wouldn't be there, she'd be somewhere safe and warm and there her sister couldn't touch her, not even with memories.

She came to herself before the signal could be given.

Blinking, Ann shook her head, dropping the packet back in the drawer. She didn't bother looking at how many empty packets were in there still. Instead, she closed the drawer firmly.

"No. I can read a letter from my sister without it," she said. She took a deep breath, then another. Closing her eyes, Ann strove to seek the calm within herself. When she was younger, her father had taught her yoga, particularly Dhyana meditation. It had never meant as much to her as it had her father, but she still thought of it as a worthwhile practice. Not as useful as a hit of Calm, but...

"No," she said, pushing against the drive in her gut. Calm was fine for when she was off duty or partying (which she did about as often as she saw the alien lifeforms on Prospero), but not because of a message. There were alternatives...

Ann sat in her chair, back straight, eyes closed. She wouldn't succumb. She knew herself well enough. It was just Charalee. Her arrival was anticipated--Ann had known that she was the Desert Peak's envoy for months--but that didn't make it any easier.

Her self-discipline broke and she tore open the drawer. There were only two packets left--the rest were empty. Without pausing to consider what she was doing, she put one in her pocket and held the other up to her nose.

Before she could trigger the aedee's signal, a message popped up on her viz-player. This one, however, wasn't marked CRITICAL. Instead, it was marked the bright orange of an EMERGENCY.

Ann stared at it blankly for a moment, then read the brief words. Without

stopping to think, she dropped the packet of Calm back into the drawer. Snatching her jacket off the hook by the door, she palmed open the lock. The door apertured open and Ann rushed out, heading toward the Lab.

As she ran, she hoped she wasn't too late.

## Chapter 2

### Senton

When Senton Trapp first received word that he had been selected to join Prospero, the first sustainable, planetside, human colony in centuries, he hadn't believed it. The field of xenobiology was a nascent one, and he'd spent most of his time studying what had been found on the few sparse worlds that had something that could be classified as "life". He'd never much cared about bacteriology or other microbiology, preferring the larger, more dramatic stuff himself. As a result, school was rather tedious.

But Prospero was a different thing all together. It had comparable gravity to Earth That Fell, in addition to an atmosphere that, with some time and careful terraforming, could be used for future human use. Being outcasts among the stars, Humanity had lost some of its pride, but there was still a basic expectation that people could breathe in their home. And while Prospero would not become habitable without protection while Senton was alive, he was happy to be a small part of making that possibility an eventual reality.

Which was why he now stared at the loaf-sized creature in front of him with a rapturous smile on his face and an eager anticipation as he waited for Chief of Security Timpson to arrive at the lab. He tapped his fingers anxiously on the lip of the counter, and considered sending a comm to her aedee about speeding things up, then decided against it. He knew she'd received the original summons--his aedee had verified the message seen--but why was she taking so long?

He smacked his head. Of course it took a while to walk from one end of the Compound to the other: The Security Wing was on the easternmost side, and though there were pods that would taxi people from the major areas to others, there wasn't a direct path between him and Timpson's office. He shook his head, disgusted with himself for having forgotten.

Pushing aside his irritation that he had to wait for Timpson at all, he tapped the viz-player on his private console. The three-dimensional image of a naked woman appeared--his home screen--which he brushed away. The viz-player shifted to his workstation, which contained a panoply of different files, each coded according to his own system. He viewed that particular choice as a bit of job security--if anyone wanted his information, they needed him to decode it.

Pulling up the files on the *Dentolura* and arranging them in a grid, he fingered his way through the different images and documents, his aedee guiding the viz-player's display. "You, my beauty," he said to the creature inside the terraglass container, "are something else." He laughed a little and returned his attention to the display. "You're going to unlock secrets. Secrets nobody even knew they were waiting to learn."

Involved in reviewing all that they had observed of the *Dentolura*--or, as he

preferred the nickname, the "luras"--Senton didn't notice the passage of time. Blurred photos, taken by recon-drones, gave a sense of the different species within the genera. He wasn't sure how to classify this one--and it would take some time to create a consensus on where this infant fit into the established species--but he was excited to begin. After reviewing the information, he guessed that it would be a *Dentolura ralli* or, perhaps, a *Dentolura terra*, based upon the forepaws.

He turned his attention to the creature fully now. He imagined the front legs of it could, given some time to grow, expand to the burrowing-friendly of the *terra* species. And that was part of what had him so interested in the *Dentolura*: The genera was expansive, with different species filling a lot of different biological niches, yet all clearly part *Dentolura*. Of course, binomial names were a vestige of the Earth That Fell. Maybe Prospero would provide the inspiration to change the classification system more than cladistics did back in the twenty-first century. Anything was possible.

Glancing over the creature, he noticed something that hadn't been seen before: The body had a mass of nodules, small protuberances that pebbled the skin. Certain areas--near the knobby head's openings that, so far as Senton could see, looked like ears--had larger protuberances of a similar shape. What service they performed, Senton could only guess, but they fascinated him.

The creature fascinated him. As it was an infant, it didn't have the hardened bone carapace over its head that they knew the adults had. The split tail was also something that must happen during pubescence, as this infant didn't have that feature. Its strangely arranged legs splayed more than Senton thought would be normal, though he was going off of video images--live specimens had yet to be captured.

The door to the lab dilated and Ann Timpson arrived, her face clouded.

"Chief!" said Senton, standing up. The fact that she had almost become his sister-in-law tickled the back of his head as he sized her up. She always struck him as a squat, rather unpleasant version of her sister, as if all the same basic features were squashed and smeared. While Charalee was tall, slender, and as attractive as a woman could be who had threatened to shear off his manhood with a scalpel if he called her again, Ann was rounder, shorter, and more muscular. That probably came from Ann training with Pas, he figured, as they could manipulate her digenetics to give her greater upper body strength and additional stamina.

One thing they hadn't changed, though, was her tough demeanor. Senton knew Ann could be friendly and jovial, but when she was on the job, she didn't care that they had some history: He couldn't call her Ann and expect to keep unchastised.

"Senton," said Ann in response, "tell me you didn't do what I think you did."

Senton held up a hand, a flimsy smile crossing his face. "Now, calm down here."

"I'm perfectly calm," said Senton, standing with her feet straight below her shoulders. She wore the same kind of coveralls that everyone in the Compound tended to use, with her favorite jacket pulled over the top. "But I'm also unhappy. You know, Senton, that I don't appreciate surprises."

He looked into her brown eyes, seeing a hint of familiarity written there, but then it was gone. While it wasn't unusual for an eighty-year-old to still be in the prime of life,

were it not for her salt-and-peppered hair, he would've guessed her age at no more than early thirties. Her attitude, though, was entirely cantankerous old woman, so far as Senton could tell.

"Look, this isn't a *surprise* as much as it is a massive discovery! You know how long we've been trying to capture a lura."

"I do."

"And we had this opportunity..."

"How did you come by this 'opportunity' in the first place?" she asked, glowering into the guilty smile that Senton couldn't keep off his face.

"I..." He cleared his throat and bobbed his head as he struggled to figure out what he wanted to say. He hated that she did this to him, made him feel so inadequate. He was a doctor, for the love of Earth! She shouldn't be able to make him feel like a kid simply by setting her jaw in that particular way and shooting daggers from her eyes. "I went out with a fence crew."

Ann's shoulders slumped. "You're kidding me. You're not authorized to get within ten meters of those fences! You don't have the training!"

"But that's the thing, I didn't have to get close. I was out there to *see*, not interact. I wasn't trying to get anything more than a closer look at the foliage. Honest. I wasn't trying to pick anything out." He gestured at the creature. "It just...happened."

Ann's jaw shifted. "Happened? Care to elaborate, Doctor?"

Senton swallowed, his nerves creeping over him. It wasn't because of the almost-familial connection, but more the idea of who Ann was and what she could do if he didn't cooperate. A flare of irritation and rebellion stirred within him, but he smothered it quickly. Better to go with the flow than try to be a dam, he'd always been taught...though he'd had to look up what a *dam* meant, since naturally occurring waterways were as gone as Earth. Part of the reason Prospero was so interesting was because of the fact that it had liquid water on the surface.

"You know Jank?"

"Yes."

"I beat him at a round of poker the other night. Rather than paying the ante, I asked for a favor."

"To go out with him."

"Yeah."

"And?"

"Well, they were repairing the ruined part of the fence--you know, from the storm last night?"

She nodded.

"Right, so I was going along. Only to observe, I swear by my mother's love." When she didn't indicate either way if she believed him, he continued in a rush. "So I went out with him. And on our side of the fence, looking forlorn, when this little lura showed up."

Ann's eyes clicked onto the baby creature.

"It was portentous."

"I don't think I like that idea," said Ann. "I like predictable. I like familiar. I like *secure*. You have brought this creature into our home. We have no idea what it can do--what any of its kind can do. You study them, Doctor. You should know this better than I."

Senton puffed up his chest. "I do. Of course, Chief, I definitely know that there's a risk. But that's the beauty of scientific discovery, isn't it?"

"I don't think so."

He groaned, gesturing at the specimen. "This thing has come across our path, pointing to new ways that evolution can benefit certain characteristics."

"We have plenty of documentation about how evolution works from before Earth Fell, Senton. We don't need to see it played out again."

"But imagine if Earth had taken one small deviation, one small change from what it took! We could be a completely different species. We could have a different physiognomy, a different physiology, a different--"

"We wouldn't exist. Humans are what we are, and the rest of it is, at best, an interesting way of passing time and at worst a gross negligence of wasted potential."

Senton felt a wave of cold anger wash over him. "What I'm doing is important, Ann. You never know when a biological solution will be what you need to solve your problems."

"That may be, Doctor Trapp, but you have brought an alien into my Compound..."

"I'm a xenobiologist! That's my job!"

"...and done so without my express permission," she continued, ignoring his outburst. Senton felt his jaw tighten with frustration.

"So, what, you want me to just...throw it out? Burn it? Dispose of it?"

"I want it gone, Trapp."

He reached out and grabbed her arm. "Ann, look..." He searched her eyes, his expression as imploring and pitiable as he could manage. "Please. I know that you don't hate me."

"Quite the contrary. You took my sister out of my life for a good eight months. That sort of sacrifice deserves a medal, in my estimation."

"Then repay that. Give me a day. Please. Don't let me put it out yet."

Ann took in a deep breath, then seemed to remember something. Her eyes grew distant and, for a moment, Senton thought that she might explain what was on her mind. The expression faded, the harsh demeanor returned.

"Twelve hours."

"Eighteen?"

She paused. "Sixteen. Two hours for every month you dated my sister. That's all."

He smiled, relieved. "Thank you. Thank you, I will put it back just as soon as I'm done."

"See that you do." Ann turned on her heel. "And next time you think about bringing in a specimen from Prospero's surface?"

"Yes?"



"Don't. I dislike getting EMERGENCY-labeled messages. It increases my stress."

"Yes, Chief," he said, trying to salute.

"Also, don't do that again. You wouldn't know how to salute if your life depended on it."

"Thank you!" he shouted after her, but Ann was already through the dilating door.

He looked at the lura, which hadn't moved since he'd put it into the container.  
"Well? Where should we start?"

## Chapter 3

### Korryn

Balancing the tray on one hand, Korryn wiggled her fingers to trigger her aedee's call for the Laboratory doors. She wasn't quite close enough for the short-range receiver to catch the broadcast from her body, which frustrated her--the tray almost tipped as a result. With a curse and a jolt, she managed to steady the food, spilling only a little bit of the soup.

"Not bad," she muttered to herself. Now closer to the door, she did the same finger-dance that dilated the door and eased her way in. Now that she'd arrived at her destination, her aedee's visual display pulled up the order's owner, switching away from the route she'd needed to take from the Cafeteria to arrive at the Laboratory. Walking through the Compound was always as much guess work as it was relying on her aedee. The place was a maze. The only person who knew how to get around, in her opinion, was...

"Seton?" she said. "This is yours?"

The doctor popped his head up from behind a specimen container, his expression confused and distracted. Korryn had always thought that he looked a bit too much like one of those Lost Earth animals. What was it? An...ostracize? No, that didn't make sense. No, an ostrich. That was it. Small face, pinched toward his nose, scrawny neck that stretched too far. He wasn't unattractive, but he wasn't the most handsome man on Prospero. That honor went to Captain Rall, of course, and that basically every woman and even some of the men thought so was the worst-kept secret of the colony. What Seton lacked in looks he made up by being thoughtful, smart, and content to listen. It was a nice change from most of the guys she'd hooked up with throughout her year on Prospero. Still, that didn't mean that she wanted to see him while she was working.

"Oh! Korryn! I didn't think *you'd* be the one to bring me my food."

"Well, the service drones are out of whack--the storm fried some of their systems--and I wasn't doing anything else." She eased some clutter away from the edge of the counter and set the tray down.

"Well, I'm glad to see you." Seton nodded toward the specimen cage. "Here, have you seen this?"

Korryn gave him a wry smile. "I just walked in."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But look at it! Oh, is that soup?"

"Didn't you order it?" asked Korryn as she stepped aside so he could pass.

"I asked for today's special."

"Ah."

She and he switched places, the doctor settling on a stool so he could spoon the lukewarm soup into his mouth, the kitchen worker staring in bafflement at what she

saw before her.

"Is it a..."

"A *Dentolura*, yes."

"That's...amazing," she said, looking carefully at the creature. No longer than her arm, its round body looked like glistening rock poking through the surface of a scummy pond. It was green, brown, and, at a certain angle, iridescent. "Where'd you get it?"

"I picked it up when I went outside the fence," he said, his voice low.

Korrbyn threw a look at him and arched her eyebrow. "You broke the Number One Rule?" She screwed her face into a begrudging grimace. "I'm impressed."

"Really?"

"I never took you for the rebellious type."

He tried to stand, but knocked the tray. Catching it before it tipped, he sat back down and cleared his throat. "You...Do you *like* rebellious types?"

"I like all types, Seton. I told you."

"Yeah, but I think we were talking about ice cream," he said, straightening his shoulders with a twitch.

Korrbyn shrugged. "I suppose you're right. But tell me about this guy. He's kinda cute."

"I don't know if *he* is a he at all, to be honest."

"Why?"

Seton chewed a cracker before answering. "Never seen one before."

"Oh, right." She nodded her head. "I remember. So...do you know *anything* about them?"

"Oh, we know plenty. They're carnivorous--at least, though there's some chance they might be omnivorous." He shrugged. "They're definitely apex predators--there isn't anything we've seen on the planet that can compare in size. At least, not on the land."

"How big?"

Seton slurped some soup and thought about it, his dark face thoughtful.

"Man-sized."

"Not woman-sized?" she asked, smiling.

He made a disdainful face. She laughed. "*Average* man-sized. Two and a half meters from the floor to the hip, I'd guess. The biggest we've seen was about three and a half, almost four meters in length."

She whistled.

"Yeah," said Seton, taking another bite of cracker. "They're mostly nocturnal, which is why it's hard for us to study them. They don't like light so much..."

"Is that why you have this one directly shining on it? To be an ass?"

"No, that's a scanner. It's reading biometric data and relaying it to my encrypted files for later study."

"Sounds fancy."

"Standard operating procedure, actually."

Korrbyn smirked. She knew more than he thought, but it was better to let him think he knew it all. That, she'd found, always made men feel good about themselves.

"What are you hoping to learn by studying it?"

"How evolution on Prospero works. What kind of benefits we could get from, say, the enzymes they naturally create. Determine how they survive and if there's anything that we, as apex predators ourselves, can learn from them."

"Pretty lofty goals," said Korryn, standing and stretching. The creature fascinated her, but not for any of the reasons that Seton had mentioned. It was cute. She could see it being a worthwhile pet, and that idea led to another--accoutrements, accessories, and other paraphernalia--and all the opportunities having a trendy new animal would entail. She'd seen people make a lot of money for less exciting inventions. Who wouldn't like to have an adorable creature to keep them company in the endless black of space? "Can I hold him?"

Seton shook his head so hard that Korryn was surprised she didn't hear his neck pop. "No, no. No, no, no."

"Why not?"

"We don't have any protocols for that. We can't risk contamination."

"You touched him," she said, folding her arms.

"No, I *lured* it into that specimen container. It hasn't come in contact with a human yet." He paused, frowning. "Besides, why would you want to do that?"

She shrugged and explained her idea. It seemed logical enough, but, to her surprise, Seton didn't see it the same way.

"You want to *exploit* it?"

Korryn blinked. "No, I want to *profit* off him."

Laughing in a way that felt like it was more out of disgust than humor, Seton shook his head as he stood and approached the container. "No, this is a *scientific* discovery."

"Sure, but that's why science is useful: We can make money off it."

"Why are you so mercenary?" he asked, dropping down to look at the creature. "I mean, you're not starving, right?"

"No one starves on Prospero," said Korryn.

"So? What's the big deal?"

"It could be big money, that's all," she said, shrugging. His questions irritated her. It was pretty plain: When the colony on Prospero had been announced, a lot of people had wanted in. Living on a planet was a fairy tale, so far as, well, *everyone* was concerned, but more than that, Prospero was planned to be the safest, best option for any permanent colony. It had grown since it was started--proof enough of its value--and Korryn had been as excited as anyone else to have a chance to live there. But it was just that: Living. She worked--everyone ate, but everyone had a job to do, too--and that was about it. Sure, there was recreation and even some extra things that people smuggled in for some credits that would have value off-planet. But it was...boring. They lived, yeah, but they didn't *live*. Korryn wanted something better, more glamorous or exciting or adventurous. She wasn't certain, but she knew she needed money to get there. "You never know when that could be useful. And that *lura* could be worth something, you know?"

Senton looked over his shoulder at her, his expression thoughtful. "I have an idea: Why don't you ask Chief of Security Timpson if you can keep it as a pet?"

Korryn blinked a couple of times, then laughed. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm serious!" He straightened, his face so serious it was almost comical. Korryn had to bite back her laughter.

"Okay...but why?"

"She wants me to get rid of this guy in fifteen hours." He jerked his thumb at the specimen. "I've already spent too much time talking with you--"

Korryn raised her eyebrows, her instinct to take umbrage at the thoughtless comment swallowed by her curiosity about his thinking.

"--and with such little time, I'm better off not arguing. These preliminary scans are almost done, and then the work will begin."

Korryn sighed. "You know, you still haven't explained why I should talk to her. You think I can persuade her to see our point of view?"

"Precisely."

"Does Timpson care about the profit?"

He shrugged. "Ask her. If we can get her to see that there's a strong economic reason that we should be allowed to keep the lura, I think that could help everyone involved."

Korryn sighed, her eyes fixated on the creature. It was strange, because she normally didn't have much affinity for animals--they were abundant enough on the larger spacestations, and she'd been to zoos on the Gateway when she was younger, but the idea of caring for another entity was foreign. Part of the reason that, despite running toward her third decade, she hadn't bothered having any children, using her aedee to keep her incapable of conceiving. If she didn't want to care for her own flesh and blood, why would she want a little blob like this?

And, yet, she did. And if she did, someone else likely would. And be willing to pay money. Maybe a lot for it.

Her eyes drifted to the tray.

Or she could stick around, working for her living space and occasional breaks that were as pointless as the job she did.

"Okay," she said. "I'll go. It can't hurt to ask, right?"

## Chapter 4

### Ann

Slapping her hands on her desk, Ann leveraged herself onto her feet. "Do I have to hurt you?" she spat. "The. Answer. Is. No. We aren't keeping them for pets, we're not holding onto them for prolonged scientific study. We're getting rid of the stupid lupa or whatever the hell he calls it." She pointed at Korryn's surprised face. "Now leave. I have other things to do."

Korryn stood, her slanted eyes sparking. "This is a great opportunity, Chief Timpson. You're wasting a chance to make a lot of money."

"Money isn't what matters here, Korryn," said Ann, her glare sharpening into a glower. "Survival is."

"Survival?" Korryn shook back black strands of hair from her face. Ann was surprised to see that they were about the same height. "That's the reason I came here! So we can do more than *survive*."

Taking a deep breath, Ann straightened. "No."

"But--"

"Out."

Korryn opened her mouth to retort.

"No."

Korryn closed her mouth, threw back her own angry glare, then turned around, her kitchen worker's coveralls swishing with each step. The door to the office dilated to let her through, the contracted with a snap.

Ann sank to her seat. The conversation had been unexpected and unwelcome. Ann had been almost ready to read the message from her sister when Korryn had begged a few minutes' time. Now Ann felt the coursing, nervous energy of having been in a confrontation. Shouting matches were small squirts of adrenaline--nothing compared to stopping a brawl or throwing a punch or firing off her pulse-charges--but they were enough to make her distracted. Her stomach pinched with hunger, but ordering food at this moment, knowing that Korryn worked in the kitchen, was all but asking for the woman to add some spit to the day's soup.

That brought another woe to her mind. Though not technically part of her purview, Ann was on the administration board, and thus knew that the current new crops that had been genetically modified to grow in Prosperian soil had failed. There weren't food shortages on the horizon, necessarily, but the colony was going to have to ask for more support from the outside. That was always a bitter bite to swallow; the whole point of Prospero was to prove that humanity could return to their planets. Prospero was the longest running experiment since...well, since postlapsarian times. That Ann might have to worry about food shortages among over ten thousand inhabitants was not something that she relished.

And the fact that Seton had brought in the xeno made her anxious. Korryn's insipid plan notwithstanding, there was nothing about the animal that Ann approved of. While she didn't disagree with the idea that they could learn a lot by studying it--and Ann was excited for any major discovery--without a greater understanding of the way they worked, she didn't feel it was safe to bring it into her home.

She snorted. Of course, if they didn't bring it into their home, how would they gain a greater understanding? Maybe she'd made the wrong choice...

Her eyes flickered to her viz-panel. Smacking the black box, thus allowing her aedee to interface with it directly, she brought up her queue. Maybe she could get her mind off these problems by looking at something else.

But the unread message from her sister was the only thing that she hadn't already looked at.

Ann reached out to touch the message, then hesitated. The idea of what could be inside was worse than what was really in there, she knew. But, at the same time, she couldn't convince herself that she could jump in. She needed something to help keep her--

The drawer slid open and she plucked out the packet of Calm she'd put back earlier. Without hesitating, she drew it up to her face and squeezed her finger, telling the aedee to activate the packet's deployment mechanism. A puff of cold air frosted her nose and mouth and she inhaled sharply.

Immediately, her nostrils, tongue, throat, and lungs began to burn. The discomfort grew for a few moments, making her squirm as she waited for the effect to come.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Calm.

It varied, each hit did. Sometimes it would come faster than the burning. Sometimes it would creep up on her, like sleep. Other times, she'd feel nothing at all and need another dose for even something resembling peace to settle. This time, it was like walking into an invisible wall of tranquility. Her muscles relaxed, her body slumped into her chair, and her mind started checking off every concern with a nonchalance that only a person high on Calm could affect.

*Worried about the message?* the drug seemed to ask. *Don't bother. It'll be fine.*

She giggled. Why should she care?

*Why should you care?*

But it was her job.

*So do it and move on. Who cares?*

That was the right idea. Sitting up, her face crooked with the smile of Calm across her white-streaked mouth, she pulled up the message.

It was straightforward and mercifully emotionless--which was fine. That didn't bother her at all. It wouldn't have bothered her if it had been malicious and vindictive. Who cared?

All it said was, *Chief Timpson,*

*I am the envoy of Desert Peak, here to help finish the Portal. I will be arriving by 1900 hours.*

Charalee Timpson

and that was it.

See? Who cares?

But even the Calm couldn't push out the memories that came with seeing Charalee's name on her viz-player screen. It couldn't stop Ann from remembering the time that Charalee, older by three years, had hijacked Ann's aedee so that only a rude gesture could get the aedee to activate. Father hadn't been pleased to see Ann flipping her fingers in that way and had grounded from going on her first date.

(Perhaps) aided by the Calm, Ann recalled the time when their parents had a group of friends over. Mother was a consultation specialist that helped negotiate business deals between private armies. It was tricky business and one that required everyone to feel as though Momma was on their side. At age nine, Ann had been cajoled, manipulated, and tricked by Charalee to interrupt the group party. She'd gone running in, wearing only a towel over her privates, shrieking about the heaps of abuse that sometimes happened. To this day, Ann couldn't remember how Charalee had convinced her to do that. It was one of the things that Ann despised about her sister--how much control Charalee had over her.

Only after the debacle had subsided had Ann learned that her behavior had made the parties suspicious of Mother's ability to keep the business deal open. They'd lost out on the largest deals of Mother's career because of Ann's stunt. And, quite expectedly, they blamed Ann more than Charalee--who protested innocence, of course--and Ann had been denied her first aedee upgrade.

But the worst memory, the one that cut the deepest, was when both she and Charalee lived together during their early trainings. Ann was headed toward private armies and needed digenetic modifications. Mother (Father had died by then) said no. Charalee had been in the family's pristine dining room, sitting across the table from Ann and Mother.

"But, Mother!" Ann had said, her face tight with pain at the denial.

"I don't want to hear it," said Mother, her clipped words sounding almost surgical in their pronunciation. "Your father and I never much cared for digenetic options. I birthed you naturally and only allowed an aedee port into your genes because it is the most convenient way to communicate with you. That you wish to change your body through programming is reprehensible. Your soul is far too sacred for that."

"Mother," said Ann, her voice shaking as she tried to rein in her emotions, "you know that I can't be a part of *any* PA if I don't have digenetic modifications."

"You're too special. Your soul is too important, and your body is sufficient to carry your soul forward."

"No! It isn't! That's the whole problem! I'm fast, yes, but not fast *enough*. I'm strong, yes, but not strong *enough*."

"I have always taught you that your body is the protection of your soul," said Mother, straightening up, her single braid spilling over her shoulder in a dark spiral. "It



is where *you* reside. The you that will transfer again and again as you seek reincarnation. I don't want your body to become so twisted and changed that you mutate who you *really* are."

Ann shook her head. "I'm not a neo-Hindu like you, Mother. I don't believe any of that."

"Your belief doesn't change the truth."

"Mother!"

"I will not pay for something that I think will damage your soul."

Ann had turned to Charalee at that moment, her eyes pleading and laced with pain, and made her mistake: "Charalee? Help!"

Charalee had leaned forward--and in the Calm-induced vision of her memories, Ann could see each movement, each detail of the day, from the way that Charalee's choli top rustled as she moved to the angle of light from the distant star their spacestation orbited as it slid through the blinds at the far side of the room--and said very simply, "Mother's right."

Dismay and disbelief warred within her at that moment. Every other conversation she and Charalee had had before then had indicated to Ann that Charalee was on her side. That, when this most crucial of conversations happened, Charalee would use her ability to convince--*manipulate* was a better word, but Ann avoided using that around her sister--their mother that Ann's plan was solid, worthwhile, and important.

Charalee had been Ann's winning blow.

And she'd betrayed her.

"What?" Ann had asked, flabbergasted. "No, Char..."

"I'm glad that she sees things my way," Mother had said, standing up. "I appreciate your honesty, Charalee. Now, I have a meeting I must get to." Mother had walked to the door, leaving her only daughters at the table. "Please. Let's not have this discussion again."

Ann had stared at Charalee with tears brimming in her eyes. "How could you?" she asked at last.

Charalee shrugged, then leaned over and plucked a date from the dish on the center of the otherwise empty table. "I changed my mind."

"Why? You know how important this is to me."

Another shrug. "If you get it done, Mother will be less likely to pay for *my* modifications."

Unable to understand quite what she was saying, Ann shook her head. "What do you mean? You're going into preservation. You don't need anything beyond a basic aedee interface. You're a *librarian*, Charalee. There's nothing digenetics would do to help you!"

Charalee chewed thoughtfully. "No, I think I'm changing my training. I'm twenty-three years old. I have a lot to offer. And Everest Peaks is interested in new hires. They have all these different ideas that seem like they could be fun."

"Everest Peaks?" Ann blinked as her tears dropped from her eyes. "They're the

PA I was interested in."

"Really?" said Charalee in a tone that was only supposed to sound surprised.

"What a coincidence."

"She said no to me. Why would she say yes to you?"

"Because, Baby Sister," said Charalee, leaning forward and shooting her a charming smile. "I get what I want."

Ann had left then, too furious and betrayed to do anything else. That was the first time she'd tried Calm--a necessary acquiescence if she'd wanted to keep her sanity. She'd ended up having to go into debt that only recently she'd paid off--decades serving first Desert Suns, then, after they'd merged a few years back, into the new Desert Peaks Private Army, always doing whatever they asked because she'd signed a contract to get the digenetic changes that would let her work for them. Her time on Prospero was, in a sense, a quasi-retirement. A position she'd chosen for herself, instead of being given her by her PA bosses.

But now, Charalee had breached even that victory.

Her temple warmed, letting her know she'd received a new message. The feeling pressed through her drug-haze, and she was able to draw her attention to the viz-player.

The message, a garish orange, waited for her to read it. Instinctively, she flicked her finger, telling her aedee to open the comm.

Two words from Charalee hovered over the surface of the viz-player, clear and unmistakable: *I'm back.*

## Chapter 5

### Ted

Theodore Culley never really liked Prospero. It was claustrophobic, despite the terraglass that framed the tunnels that ran between the domes that comprised the Compound. Spread out like a net, the layout of the place made no sense to him, and he often found himself relying on his handheld to figure out where he was.

Then again, maybe the reason he didn't much care for Prospero was his religion. Being an Anachronist on one of the most technologically advanced posts in the galaxy meant that he was surrounded by perversity. His religion taught that any use of postlapsarian technology was forbidden, which was why he used a handheld instead of the much more convenient--but also soul-damning--augmented devices that almost every other colonist used. As he walked toward the Laboratory, he noticed (what seemed like) everyone, their fingers twitching, their lips silently moving, their eyes glazed and focused ahead, but unseeing. Typical aedee behavior.

But...if Ted were being honest, he'd never claim to be a very devout Anachronist. His parents had been pretty into it--living in the first spacestation, the Vanguard, even though the place was a dump and rusting and leaking radiation in a handful of places. Those areas he'd never gone to--his family was well enough off to avoid the cheapest slums, and those invariably were the ones closest to the radiation pockets--but it had always struck him, the divide between believer and infidel: Believers' lives were impoverished and often desperate, while infidels were smooth and full.

Maybe that was why he took the job: A bit of rebellion. Brushing past another aedee-addict, Ted thought about his last night at home. His mother had been furious at his plan.

"You're going off to another system somewhere in the Orion Spur and we're supposed to be *happy* about it?"

Ted raised his hands, as if to ward off her verbal blows. "Come on, Mom! It's a good job, with a chance to be a part of something new. You know. Maybe this can become another Earth."

Dad bristled, the red hair that flamed off Ted's head equally as bright on his father's. "Let's not be perverse, Ted." He frowned, his bushy beard folding inward. "There *is* no other Earth. There is only One Earth, the Earth We Had. Don't blaspheme in my house."

His mom, folding her arms and looking up at Dad, took a deep breath. Her faded green eyes flashed in the dim light of their apartment on the Vanguard. "You're throwing your faith away for money."

"Mom," Ted said, his voice flat, "it's not *that* good of a job."

"Really?" she asked. Shaking back a loose curl of black hair, she regarded him suspiciously. "You think you can keep the faith while you're in the middle of infidels?"

Ted rolled his green eyes and wiped at his freckled nose. "Mom. It's a job. If I go *anywhere* but Vanguard, I'll be surrounded by techies. That's reality!"

Dad laid his large hands on Mom's shoulders. She leaned into him, but Ted could see the pain and frustration on her face, the sense of betrayal. "You are a man, Ted. A young one, but a man nonetheless. You're free to do what you wish." He sighed. "Who knows? Maybe this is what you need to see, to understand the truth of Anachronism."

"Dad, I'm not a misbeliever!" Ted's shock and injury weren't feigned. "It's a good job! A chance to get to know people and move into my future." He gestured at the clean if dingy apartment that had comprised almost his entire life. "I'm sorry if *this* isn't enough for me!"

"I work hard," said Dad, "and so does your mother to afford this place."

"I know! And I appreciate it. I'm not rejecting it...I'm just..." He threw his hands up in disgust. "I'm looking for something more."

Mom turned away, her pale face wrinkled with the tears she was trying to hide. Dad shook his head, obviously disapproving but resigned. Ted said goodbye, took his bag of meager belongings, and headed to the docks to travel on his first stargazer, a sleek machine called *The Harbinger*. The trip had been, by turns, exciting and dull--exciting when they'd pulled on lightlines and used the light emitted by stars to send themselves through space at speeds faster than light. Dull when they were between staranchors and the mysterious (and, he admitted to himself, sacrilegious) PRISM engines could only keep them heading in the same direction, if at slower speeds. Drifting between staranchors was always a bore, but the trip--which took nearly a month--had been worthwhile when they'd finally boarded a passenger shuttle and arrived at Prospero.

The novelty of living on a planet had worn off within the first week. The greater gravity of a real planet--apparently 1.3 times what would be normal on Earth and 1.6 times greater than what he was used to on the Vanguard--had taken its toll, and he and a number of fresh colonists had needed that time to get used to it. During that time, Ted had learned that he wasn't needed for his understanding of history--which he'd trained in--but because they needed another janitor.

Somehow, he'd missed that part of the job description.

But he couldn't go back. Not only would that be admitting to his parents that he'd been wrong about the job, but it also meant breaking contract with Desert Peaks, who were the primary sponsors of the Prospero Project. Doing that would ruin basically any chance he'd have of getting a better job once his three years on Prospero were up.

He sighed as he pushed the wheeled trolley filled with his cleaning supplies toward the Laboratory entrance. At least he had Kayla.

Reaching out with his handheld, the door dilated appropriately...but not because of him. Someone was coming out--no, two people left as he stepped back to give them space.

"I can't believe she said no," said the dark-skinned man to the woman with an eye shape that Ted hadn't seen before coming to Prospero. "I'll come with you. We can't let her get rid of the lura before we have a chance to..."

Their conversation drained into the background noise before shutting off completely as the door constricted behind him. Ted was in this section of the lab all alone, it seemed. There was a tray of half eaten soup on one counter, as well as endlessly confusing tools of all sorts. This was one of the things that he didn't understand about infidels: Why did they have so much hand-held tech (not like his handheld, of course, but other tools and instruments) when their much-vaunted augmented devices should have been able to do, well, everything? This was an observation he filed away to fill his faith, though he didn't put too much pressure on the question. It was easier to assume that they were wrong and he was right and try to coexist anyway than to really understand them.

His handheld buzzed. Picking it up, he flicked on the screen. Kayla's name showed an incoming voicecomm.

"Hey!" he said, clipping the handheld to his coverall's belt, then pulled out his cleaning supplies. He'd start at the sink and work his way around the room...same pattern he always used, it seemed. "What are you doing?"

Kayla's voice filled the small lab, making it easy to hear. "Nothing. I'm bored. I just got off shift at the docking station--some bigwig is almost here, but not before my time is off." She made a soft cheering sound and Ted smiled. Kayla was easily the best thing he'd discovered on the station. Like him, she was on her first trip away from family. Unlike him, she was interested in all of the newest tech. It made for an occasional awkward conversation, but there were other things they did together that didn't need as much talking. Still a lot to do with the lips and tongue, but not so much the verbiage.

"Well, you can come hang out with me. It's not the most exciting thing on Prospero, but at least there's, I dunno...dirty dishes to see."

Kayla laughed. "I'm okay with that. Where are you?"

"I'll send you my location," he said, setting down his cleaning rag and pulling up his handheld. "Come by. I'll be here for at least twenty minutes."

"Messy?"

"Not too bad. But it's not clean, either," he said.

"I'll be there soon!"

"Don't get lost," he said, using the same farewell that most everyone on the planet used.

"You, either," she said, and he could hear the smile in her voice.

Ted smirked and set about his job--emptying trash receptacles into his larger container for eventual recycling, wiping down the knobs on cupboards and the flat surfaces that weren't overcrowded with mysterious devices, and scrubbing out some residue from inside the sink--which kept him occupied until he heard a buzz on his handheld. Glancing at it, it was a message from Kayla: *Open up*.

He smacked his head. Kayla's aedee wouldn't allow her into the lab; it didn't have the clearance. Hurrying over to the door, he waved his handheld close to the center of the door, which dilated obediently.

"Hey, there," said Kayla, leaning against the doorjamb with her left elbow, her

arm across her forehead, and her other hand resting on her hip. Her short brown hair framed her face, which was attractive to Ted, though he figured the birthmark that worked its way from beneath her collar up to her jawline might have been a turnoff to some. He didn't mind it, and he was curious if he could figure out how far down it travelled below the collar. Kayla pushed herself off the door. "This it?"

"Yeah, this is today's work," he said, moving aside and letting her enter. "I rotate through the labs fairly often--apparently, these scientists make up a solid third of the waste of the entire Compound, if you can believe it. There are a lot of them, I guess, so..."

"What the hell is that." Kayla said it in a way that was one part demand, one part shock, no part question.

"Huh?"

Kayla pointed. "*That.*"

Following her finger, Ted's eyes rested on a creature kept in a glass container. He jerked in surprise. "Holy Fallen Earth!" he swore, though he immediately felt bad about it. The...*thing* was resting in a corner of the box. Ted had studied Earth fauna as one of his ancillary trainings--it fell in line with part of why he had remained faithful, though perhaps not devout, to Anachronism--and had even dabbled in the prehistoric megafauna of Earth's deep past. The creature looked like a garbled cross between the head of a *Pachycephalosaurus* and the lithe torso of a *Deinonychus* and the moist skin of a salamander, covered with natural armor like a *Scelidosaurus*. Rather than say any of that aloud, he said, "That's the weirdest thing I've ever seen."

Kayla, her curiosity apparent in the way she moved, walked closer. "Is that one of the creatures from here? Or is it some weird experiment?"

"It wasn't here last time I cleaned," Ted said, feeling more authoritative than he felt. How had he missed seeing the thing? He'd been focused on cleaning the outer edges of the room, not looking at what was in the middle. The most important thing in the lab and he'd missed it. A bit of embarrassment began to crawl up his face and he could feel his pale cheeks flush.

"It's really...weird." It was clear Kayla didn't have the language she needed to express what she was thinking. "But I like it."

"Yeah," said Ted, some of the embarrassment leaking into nervousness. If this was a special, secret experiment, then he shouldn't be in there to clean. And his girlfriend (if that's what she was, because it wasn't really an *official* sort of relationship, but there was an attraction, and she was a really...aggressive kisser that he liked and wanted to experience again...) certainly shouldn't be close to it. "But I don't think we're supposed to be looking at it."

"Oh, don't be such a cuss," said Kayla, though there wasn't any remonstrations in her voice. "It's kind of...cute." She turned to face him. "Can I hold it?"

"What? No!"

"Please?" Kayla pouted, her brown eyes glistening as she puckered her brow. She was so impossibly attractive that Ted wanted to take her in his arms and show her what he thought of that expression. Then his gaze fell on the creature, and he shook his head.

"No, I'm pretty sure it's not a good idea. I'm supposed to clean the lab, not touch their...experiments."

"Well, don't you need to clean the cage?"

"Huh?"

"Isn't that part of the lab? And look! There's some droppings in there."

Frowning, Ted leaned forward. Kayla was right. There were some definitive turd-like remnants, swimming in a shallow puddle of liquid--probably urine, though it didn't look the same as what Ted was used to seeing. And he'd seen plenty of that liquid in the time that he'd been on Prospero.

"Yuck."

"It's your job to clean it out, isn't it?"

Ted scowled. "I don't think..."

"Please?" She arched her eyebrow at him. "It'd mean a lot to me."

Ted fought to keep a presumptive smile from his face. "Well, I mean..."

She stepped back to give him room, a broad, excited smile painted across her features. Ted tried not to think about what she was implying. She had already hinted that she'd be willing to sleep with him, but they'd never made that active choice. The idea that they were simply exchanging favors rankled him, but the possibility that she would be so grateful, and would *want* to express that gratitude in a mutually enjoyable fashion? That made sense.

The container was standard for the lab, and the security passcode was within his clearance as a janitor. There were other levels of security that he couldn't bypass, meaning that the fact that his handheld opened the lock on the far side from where the creature huddled assuaged his conscience, if only a bit.

The container swung open on glass hinges, and a rank wave of stench rolled out from the box. Gagging and coughing into his hand, he stabbed a command into his handheld, turning the fan on. The exhaust pumped straight out into the oxygen-thin atmosphere of Prospero, which was done in part to continue the eventual process of oxygen-introduction. He'd learned about it when they had gone through the janitorial training, but he didn't understand all it meant. For the most part, he only cared that it cleared the room.

"Fallen Earth, what a stench," Kayla said, waving a hand in front of her nose. "That makes it a lot less cute."

Turning to the specimen container, he said, "No kidding..."

Ted's words fell off his lips. The creature stood at the precipice of the opening, its entire body trembling. Small protuberances opened and closed like so many miniature mouths. The smell worsened, a mixture of sulfur and sewage, almost profane in its thick stench. What Ted had thought of as armored bone stretched, almost like claws sliding free of a cat's paw.

A low, ominous gurgle bubbled out of the creature's cavity. Wet, the growl sounded like a backed-up pipe as it swallowed a particularly thick wad of slime. It ended with a series of clicks, fingernails on a piece of plastic, except...menacing.

Ted froze.

"Ted?" said Kayla in a frightened whisper. She'd backed up at the smell, and now stood only a couple of paces from the door.

"Don't...move..." said Ted, staring at the creature's head, trying to determine where its eyes were. The head had a casing, almost bone-like, that made it impossible to sense where it was looking.

The casing cracked.

Or, more accurately, splits in the casing opened up, spreading wide, and revealing a teeth-filled larynx. A vicious hiss escaped the tiny creature's body, and then it pounced, throwing itself through the air with such speed that Ted couldn't track it. All he knew was that he felt a heavy pressure on his chest, landing hard and pushing down on him, shoving the air from his lungs.

He clattered to the ground, his handheld flying free. It spun to a stop in front of Kayla's feet.

By then, Ted's vision had grown red and murky. There was pain, yes--sharp, searing, and inescapable--but also a vague sense of inevitability and...disappointment. Yes, that's what it was. Ted was disappointed that this was how it ended. Far from family, far from deciding what he believed. That was the great injustice, as this alien creature tore through his core: he'd been doubting Anachronism. Now he was on the brink of finding out if he was right...and that scared him.

He could hear Kayla's frightened cries, her screams, and the sound of her scooping up his handheld. Distantly, like through speakers turned down too low to truly hear, the sound of the door dilating and Kayla's footsteps sprinting away echoed into his ears.

His body convulsed, but he couldn't remember telling it to do that. A popping sound coming from his chest. A hot splash of something wet and a sloppy splashing.

His second to last thought was this: *I'm going to have to clean up that blood.*

His last thought was more lucid: *That was a stupid thing to think.*



## Chapter 6

### Charalee

The pod's controls connected to her aedee, and the seat held her secure against the atmospheric friction that shook the vehicle. The descent was gradual and following the dropped trajectory that she'd started upon when she disembarked. She'd sent her sister a message, letting her know she'd arrived in atmo and the sundry protocols and biometrics needed to activate the Portal were all in her aedee, safely stowed.

Nevertheless, Charalee didn't feel like she was in control.

And she hated it.

Thumbing her display to forward cameras, she saw, as she burst out of the cloud layer, the sprawling colony of Prospero. The pod's retroboosters pushed back on her, the change in gravity failing to affect her. Descending from a stargazer was never a simple--or safe--task, so she was attired for it: A skin-sheath wrapped her entire body, which provided basic human necessities via its (uncomfortable) catheter, but also interlocked its own battery-harness with the pod's seat. With a thin helmet firmly in place, the skin-sheath could regulate the effects of additional gravity up to ten times Earth 1-G. This prevented her from passing out or vomiting all over the place as she rapidly decelerated. It was also claustrophobic and made her itch.

The soft voice of the pod's systems spoke in her ear. "Orbital velocity reduced. Approach to Prospero imminent. Time to destination: Five minutes."

"It's about damn time," she muttered. Thumbing over to a display of her files, she selected the protocols for landing that Prospero needed, okaying the pod to access the clearances and beam them to Prospero.

The system beeped.

"You're being asked to hold."

"What?" A flare of indignation rose in her chest, but she pushed it back. She needn't get angry until she knew more.

"You're being asked to hold."

"I understand that. *Why* am I hanging out above the colony instead of landing?" She no longer needed the camera's view--she could see the swelling bubbles of the Compound as she approached. According to the information her aedee overlaid on her vision, the southernmost dome was the Hangar--not only where she was supposed to land, but also where the Portal had been receiving its final touches. If there were any justice in the galaxy, Charalee wouldn't have to do anything but stop in there, send some information through her aedee, and then walk through the Portal--home again after six weeks in space, teleporting across the expansiveness of space as easily as stepping through a doorway.

At least, if everything went according to plan.

"They have asked you to hold."

Charalee snorted. "Of course they have."

All the momentum of atmosphere-breaking was gone now, and her pod hovered on its vertical thrusters, consuming energy for no real reason, while she waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Finally, twenty minutes after arriving--and only because she'd been pinging the station for permission to land every ten seconds--Charalee was given permission to land. Giving the pod the clearance to follow the Compound's instructions, Charalee sank back into her chair, its contours shifting to give her a perfectly fitted seat. She touched her helmet to release it, but the pod squawked at that. "Please do not remove any safety devices until the pod has come to a complete stop."

Charalee swore at it, but the pod didn't seem to care.

The pod touched down gently, and Charalee felt the pressure around her torso and shoulders release. Straps retracted into the back of the chair. Through the microphone attached to her helmet, she could pick up the sounds of crewmembers servicing the pod and preparing the door to open.

Standing on slightly wobbly legs, Charalee balanced against the bulkhead, then straightened as the pod's entrance dilated and the gangplank extended. Stepping onto the surface of a planet--even if it was the concrete ground poured by the colonists--was an exciting proposition, and she'd be lying to herself if she didn't admit that a thrill went through her body. Because of the skin-sheath, Charalee didn't feel the effects of the greater gravity than what she was used to on a 'station, but none of the crewmembers appeared bothered by the extra gravity. They moved about the pod, double checking its smooth surface for damage from the extreme heat of entry, as well as any areas that could stand additional scrutiny.

One saluted her--a man wearing what looked like security coveralls--and said, "Welcome to Prospero, Envoy Timpson. I'm Nolan Lannings and I will be your guide." He extended his hand. "I have some aedee protocols I need to send to you so that you can access public areas of the Compound." He raised his eyebrow. "If you please?"

Charalee looked at him through her helmet, the sound of her own breathing loud in her ears, despite the ambient noise coming in through the outward-mounted microphones. Taking in a stranger's aedee message was asking for problems. While she doubted this Nolan was skilled enough to have concocted a way to hack her aedee, he could have a way of submitting tracking viruses, hiding Trojan protocols that could sabotage some functions, or beam sensitive information from Charalee to him. There were other possibilities, too, and Charalee didn't see why she would need to risk herself.

"I'll rely on you to guide me, then, Lannings. Isn't that what you're here for?"

Shock registered on Nolan's round face, his pale cheeks flushing. "You..." It took him a moment to gather himself, all the while his pudgy body stood perfectly still. "You don't want the clearances?"

"You're here, right? I'm not going to expose myself to anything I don't have to." She looked around, trying to catch sight of the Portal. "Is it ready? I'd like to do what I

need to and then go through the Portal. I'm not keen on sticking around."

Blinking a handful of times, Nolan dropped his hand and shook his head. "Uh, no it's not ready."

"What?" Her voice, distorted by the helmet's speaker, still made Nolan flinch with its sharpness. "What's the problem?"

"Yesterday, we had a massive storm. Largest we have on record. We lost a lot of our planned power conduits. They'll need to be repaired before we can activate the Portal."

Charalee felt a flame of frustration flash through her. "Why did no one tell me of the delay?"

"I can't answer that, Envoy. I'm simply here to guide you." He waved his hands. "The workers are on it as we speak. Last I heard, there was only one major conduit to restore, then the Portal can be properly prepped." He gestured to a group of people standing what felt like a quarter klick away, all of whom were deep in conversation. "Those are the engineers who are awaiting the final powering. Once that's done, they'll be able to get you ready to deliver your protocols." He faced her and shrugged, forcing a smile (she could tell). "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news. One thing you learn about Prospero, you have to be flexible. It's the only way to survive."

Her face hidden by her helmet's glass, Charalee felt comfortable sneering at the pudgy man. "Is that so?"

Nolan nodded. "Besides, Envoy, the captain has asked that all dignitaries always meet him as a first stop. If you'll follow me?"

Unable to do anything but comply, Charalee started after Lannings.

"The air is set to standard atmo, so if you want to take off your helmet, you're welcome to."

"Maybe in a bit."

"Suit yourself. The outside air isn't ready for human respiratory systems yet, but it'll change. Not in our lifetime, most likely. But that's what work is for--the future as much the present."

Charalee rolled her eyes, glad that the helmet covered her response. Lannings blathered on as they snagged a passing hover-pod--a platform that drifted about the immense hangar, shuttling people from place to place--chatting as they approached the main entrance.

Nolan pointed out the different features of the "landscape" as they zoomed by, but Charalee didn't pay much attention. She had her aedee on record mode, so if he said anything she wanted to review later, she could. Odds were likely that she wouldn't bother, purging the documents when she got back to the Vanguard. Instead, she chewed on the bone of discontent the inconvenience had thrown her way. A storm? She had a theoretical knowledge of weather, the same way a blind person could conceive of color as being part of reality, but having no capacity to interact with the experience. In Charalee's case, she'd seen visuals of prelapsarian Earth where weather happened. It was strange to think about how much space there was--how much sky, how much water, how much land--and, until she'd arrived on Prospero, thinking was where her

understanding remained.

She fingered her aedee to a query mode, turned off her internal microphone, and asked, "What makes a storm?"

The aedee began to list off information, applying appropriate snippets of visuals and audio descriptions on her eyes, allowing her to watch it comfortably within the confines of her own head. As the aedee read off the information of the database, Charalee began to understand what it was, exactly, that the "storm" could have done. She paused her aedee and looked upward, through the yellow-hued glass of the hangar. The sun had set--she'd seen the star as she'd approached the planet, but, after the delay and the amount of time it took to travel through the Hangar, night had fallen--so she couldn't see the endless expanse of the sky. That was a disappointment: She'd had some exposure to simulated, similar effect on the Gateway, but spacestations weren't the same thing as being on a real planet, staring up at the spreading canvas of a sky.

Shaking her head, she tuned into what Nolan was saying.

"...is pretty good, for the most part, but I would avoid the broccoli. It's not the same as on the 'stations."

Charalee queried her aedee, ran back a moment of the conversation, and had her augmented device play the information over again, albeit at a faster speed. Was he talking about *food*? *Here*?

"I currently have no plans to be dining here, Lannings," she said, her tone crisp.

"Surely you'll want something before the long trip back?"

"My trip back won't be long," she said.

Before Nolan could ask, the hover-pod slid to a stop, allowing them to step off. Like all of the doors that connected to major thoroughfares, these doors were thick, heavy, and took a fair amount of time to open and close. As a result, a smaller, more personnel-friendly aperture had been constructed to one side. This allowed a smaller number of people to pass into the Compound's side halls without the drain of time and energy needed to lift the large blast doors. Charalee's understanding of this came from the precautions that DP had felt were necessary to ensure the Portal was not only safe, but--and no one hoped for this--also protect the Compound from any malfunction or problem with the Portal.

"Will the PRISM engine work without a direct sight-line to this planet's sun?" she asked, the question obviously taking Nolan by surprise.

"Excuse me?"

"The PRISM engine. It's powering the Portal. I'm assuming that it will work even with a planet between it and the sun?"

Nolan frowned. "I'm not an engineer. You'd have to ask them."

Charalee felt another layer of frustration coat her. She basked in the holy righteousness of her justifiable rage. "You mean to say that I'm not going to be able to leave until *morning*?"

Nolan held his hands up in an expression of helplessness, and triggered the small aedee box next to the access door. It dilated, and he gestured her through.

"I'm sorry, Envoy. I don't know what else to say."

"Then don't say anything," she snapped. The helmet was getting too hot for her, now, and she twisted her left wrist, fingers splayed as the aedee movement to release the armor. It cracked along the seams, and she felt an immense pressure ease off her head. Plucking it off, she shook her long black hair free of its confines. She eyed Nolan, who stared at her in mute shock--a familiar expression she'd seen on more than one person who had assumed, for whatever reason, she couldn't be both competent and beautiful. But it was gratifying to see that even on this stone at the ass-crack of the galaxy could contain people who were dazzled by her as those back in the more civilized sections of space.

Nolan looked about ready to speak when an alarm went off, a buzzing sound, accompanied by the flashing of Compound lights. The alarm buzzed again. Nolan wiggled his fingers and looked at his empty palm. Charalee didn't ever bother to use the flesh-writing feature on her aedee--she found it tedious, preferring instead to have her aedee write any comms on her eyes, as it had the footage of storms--but it was clear that Nolan had received an important communication of some sort.

"Um," he said, licking his lips and looking around anxiously. "Uh..."

"What is it?" she asked, the irritation of everything that had gone wrong flashing through her. "What's that damnable buzzing about?"

"There's been a breach."

"A breach?" She looked at the walls, as if the tunnel that stretched in front of her, leading to who knew where, was the one attacked. "Where?"

"In the Laboratory. A...a creature escaped."

"Creature?" Charalee's eyes flicked to the world outside the Compound lights, a black smudge in the distance, scarcely visible through the transparent terraglass of the tunnel.

Nolan frowned. "Yes. It looks like..." He sighed. "This would've come to you if you'd had the protocols."

"I'm not interested in downloading from people I just met," she said, letting her anger flavor her tone. "Use your damn words: What's wrong?"

"We're on lockdown until we can figure out where this creature is."

"Lockdown?" Charalee looked behind her. The door had constricted already. They only had this one tube. It didn't look too thrilling, and she doubted that the captain was in it, to say nothing of the fact that--

A movement at the far end of the tunnel drew both their attention. They were the only two in the space, yet the both saw what could only be the missing creature. Charalee couldn't see it well, but her aedee read the fact that she was squinting and enhanced her vision, allowing her to zoom in on the beast. It was covered in bumps and protuberances, and though she logged the shape as looking similar to other quadrupeds she'd seen on 'stations or in visuals, it was the fact that it was covered in gore that drew her attention.

"What do we do?" asked Nolan in a low voice.

"I don't want to get stuck in this tunnel forever. Do you?"

Nolan shook his head, but Charalee could see a thin sheen of sweat beading on

the man's upper lip. Disgusted, she looked away. "We'll move in on both sides. Try to capture it."

"With what?" asked Nolan, his face paler than it was when she'd first seen him. She held up the helmet. "This'll do."

He swallowed, his pudgy face vibrating with the action. "O-okay."

They prowled closer. The creature didn't seem to notice them. It was busy sniffing, scrabbling against the terraglass, then puffing its body with a tremor before taking a few steps forward and repeating the process. As they approached, a distinct, rotten smell filled Charalee's nostrils. Nolan made a gagging noise, but a sharp look from her kept him from retching right there.

When she was within a dozen paces, she froze and readied her helmet. It would only take a moment, a quick leap, and the creature would be pinned beneath her.

Licking her lips, she dropped lower on her haunches. She counted down with her fingers. *Three...two...one...*

She jumped forward just as the creature squeaked in delight and ducked down to begin tugging on the vent at its feet.

The movement made her overestimate the jump, and she managed to clip the creature instead of capturing it. In an ungainly heap, the thing fell, knocked back by the force of the failed capture.

The beast squeaked in alarm and began writhing on the ground, the smell in the room becoming even more unpleasant.

"What...what is that?" asked Nolan around another choke and gag.

"Forget the smell!" shouted Charalee. "Just get the thing!"

The creature scrabbled to its feet, then began running away, heading toward a low vent on the ground some four meters from where Charalee had landed. Nolan took a tumbling step toward it, but tripped over his own feet. The creature skittered away.

Before it could get to the vent--from where it must have come, for Charalee hadn't seen the creature when they'd first entered the tunnel--she did the only thing she could think to do.

She threw her helmet.

It spun like a discus and crashed hard against the creature's side, stunning it. Charalee let out a whoop of delight.

"Call it in, Nolan. We caught their pest." She hurried over, scooping up the creature into the helmet and sealing the base with a command to her aedee. "And get them to open the damn doors."

## Chapter 7

### Ann

Her head felt like it was being squeezed by two enormous hands. Every sound and light sent a different, mild pain into her skull, but because the sounds were the buzzing of the alarm and the swirling of the emergency lights, what should have been a minor irritation had turned into a full-fledged migraine. Spots floated behind her eyelids every time she closed them (which she did as often as possible), and the right side of her tongue had gone numb. The tips of her right finger likewise had lost feeling. On the whole, Ann felt sick.

She had none to blame but herself, as everything had unraveled what felt like moments--but was probably closer to twenty minutes--after she'd taken the Calm and read her sister's comm. Then Senton and Korryn had arrived, trying to make an argument that was cut off when Senton started yelping about a breach in his lab. The distance from Ann's office to Senton's lab was long enough that a hover-pod would have been nice, but there weren't any available--too many other needs from the repair crews and those trying to get that blasted Portal ready--and they'd been forced to get there under their own power. She'd managed to sneak a downer pill to help cut off the effects of the Calm, but that had brought on her migraine.

Seeing all the blood had made it much worse.

When Senton had said that it had escaped, Ann had pulled rank and ordered a delay on in- and outgoing traffic as a precaution. The last thing she needed was for the creature to sneak onto a departing shuttle and get off planet. When they'd arrived at the lab itself, it was clear this was a full-blown emergency.

There was so much blood.

Now she regretted putting the lockdown into effect. Not only was Captain Rall trying to raise her via aedee (which she kept dismissing, despite the heat on her temple letting her know she had a voicecomm coming through), but it was clear that *someone* had been in here, which meant that there was a possibility that the creature had escaped in someone's arms. The problems were large, and the captain's insistence on being briefed didn't help.

Finally, as Senton finished cleaning up his own puke, Ann took the call. "Yes, sir?" she asked with a sigh.

"You're on lockdown without authority!" said Captain Rall without preamble.

"Yes, sir." She explained the situation. "It seemed the best choice."

"There's a xeno in our Compound?"

Ann closed her eyes. Usually Rall was a reasonable person, willing to listen to whatever his subordinates had to say. But this was an uncharted world and unexpected things led to unexpected choices, few of which would be considered good. He was understandably, if a touch too loudly, concerned.

"Yes, sir."

"Who authorized that?"

Ann winced at the sound of the shout as it ricocheted in her ears. Stroking down on her temple, she indicated to the aedee to lower the volume. "I did, sir."

"Are you insane?"

"Sir, it was captured by one of our scientists. He made a compelling case that we could benefit from studying it."

In the background, Korryn was muttering to Senton in a low tone that Ann couldn't easily overhear. She tweaked her aedee so that it would record the conversation and Ann could play it back at her leisure.

"And is this what he had in mind?"

"No, sir. There was...a breach."

"You don't damn say," snapped the captain. "What happened?"

"Near as we can tell from the logs, the janitor--"

Captain Rall swore softly and profanely under his breath, but it was clear he wasn't interrupting her.

--entered the room. Approximately fifteen minutes later, he opened the door. Then, five minutes after that, he opened it again."

"Okay. So hunt him down. What's his aedee signal?"

"Sir, he's still with us."

"He is? What's his name?"

"Theodore Culley."

"I want his ass in my office--"

"I should have said, sir, that he's the *late* Theodore Culley."

"What? Speak sense, Chief. I'm in no mood for games."

"I am standing in the lab, sir, and there is...a lot of blood. It looks like whoever killed Culley also removed most of his organs."

Rall gasped.

"The thing is, sir, he's an Anachronist."

"Piss and hell," snarled Captain Rall. "So what data do we have?"

"His handheld is missing--we only know he entered because he scanned it, as I said, three times. My visual check verifies that he's a janitor and is authorized to be here. But who killed him and why we don't know. The point is, sir, the door opened *after* he died. We can see bloody streaks."

"You think he was murdered?"

"It's the most likely scenario," said Ann in a cool voice. "The janitor was doing his job, someone pounded on the door, he opened it up, he died."

"Any visual feeds?"

Ann shook her head, then regretted the movement. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she gave a long look at the ceiling. "No, sir. This is a classified containment lab. Per DP instructions, this room is to be kept blind and deaf--"

"Yes, yes, I know. I was hoping it was a different room."

Ann didn't give voice to the fact that she had strenuously opposed the DP policy



when she'd heard it. Unfortunately for her, she had been overruled.

"And the creature?"

"That's the lockdown, sir. We've lost it."

"What, it walked away?"

Ann looked around. Senton and Korryn were done talking now, and were waiting for her to finish her conversation. "I don't know, sir. That's what I'm trying to find out."

"Then do your job. But let's do it quietly."

Ann drew up in surprise. "Are you saying to stop the lockdown?"

"Heightened security, yes. Lockdown? No. Once the morning breaks and we have direct sunlight, we're going to fire up the Portal. The last thing I need is a wide-scale lockdown screwing everything up."

"Sir, I don't think that's advisable."

Rall, his voice suddenly sharp, said, "I don't care. See to it."

"Yes, sir," said Ann, disconnecting her aedee and pushing aside her anger at being so hastily dismissed. It wasn't personal; she knew that. Didn't change the fact that she felt her authority had been undercut.

Raising her hand to utilize her flesh-display, Ann turned off the authority for the lockdown and sent out the command from her aedee. Sometimes it was nice to have one's entire body be the computer by which one did things. In this case, it meant that the entire Compound could instantly receive the message that the lockdown was over--it was just a drill--and thank you for your cooperation.

The silence was a welcome reprieve.

Ann looked around the room again. There were speckles of blood all the way up to the ceiling, with splatters headed in many different directions. Running a forensic protocol on her aedee, it didn't take long for Ann to see that whatever had torn up this guy had done so with a great deal of gusto. And the fact that she couldn't see traces of any of the organs? That was an alarming reality, too.

"Chief," said Senton, his voice raspy still from his sick-up, "we need to find the lura."

"We? *We* don't. *You* do."

Korryn interrupted, "Chief, it wasn't his fault..."

"You two came to tell me you thought of something different to do with the creature. You left the room, didn't you." It wasn't a question. She didn't even need to wait for a response. "You were negligent, and now a person is dead and that creature is escaped. There could even be a murderer on the loose."

"No, sir, that isn't the case," said Senton, pointing at the bloody streaks on the ground. The blood had been drying for the better part of an hour, but it still glistened in the harsh light of the lab. "See that?"

"I see bloodstains."

"No, they're not stains. It's what we were talking about," he said, gesturing to himself and Korryn, who nodded her agreement. "They're too regular. See? They head from the corpse toward the ventilation system. The lura escaped through there."

"So who left?"

"I don't know," said Korryn, "but I noticed this." She pointed at a partial footprint close to the door. "It's like mine. She hastily added, "But not exactly. They're standard issue footwear for most women in the Compound." She held up her left foot, and Ann could see that the treads were similar to those left behind in the blood of the floor.

"Okay. I'm going to find this woman and talk to her. You two," she said, pointing an angry finger at Senton and Korryn, "figure out how to find the creature. And, while you're at it, stay here. Don't touch anything."

"Do we...do we have to stay with the body?"

"I'll send some of my crew to help clean up in a minute. But they're going to need your testimonies."

"Chief Timpson," said Senton, his nervousness apparent in the way he shook his hands, "please don't kill the lura."

"What? Why?"

"It's *important*."

"People are important, Senton. People's lives and security are important."

"I know, but I don't want anything to happen to the *Dentolura*. I'm..."

He didn't finish his sentence, as Ann received a call. She put her hand up, then extended her thumb and pinky, letting the aedee connect the communication. It was Nolan Lannings.

"Sir," he said, his voice strained. "Sir, where are you?"

"I'm in the containment laboratory. Why? Where are you?"

"I, um...I went to pick up the Envoy."

The word made Ann's head clench and her stomach flop. She'd almost forgotten that her sister was planetside now. "Yes. And is she here?"

"Yes, Chief, but...well..."

Irritation welled within her. "Spit it out, man. What's the problem?"

"I think she found something that you might be interested in seeing."

## Chapter 8

### Ann

As they waited for Charalee and Nolan to arrive at the lab, Senton worked himself into a fine state. He paced constantly, shooting nervous looks between the still-cooling corpse, Korryn, and Ann. For her part, Korryn stood in one corner, absorbed in her own thoughts. To Ann's mind, she seemed *too* distant, *too* calm. Ann wished she knew what either was thinking, but that, of course, was impossible.

The communication she'd received earlier in the day floated up from the recesses of her mind. Lyle's so-called "Janus Protocol" would allow for the Office of Security to listen in on people's aedee communications. The whole thing was for safety's sake, Lyle had assured her, but Ann had always dismissed it. The fact that he had a prototype already prepared made her nervous, but at this particular moment--standing about the soiled lab, waiting for her sister, a potential killer on the loose, and the stress of knowing that she had deeply pissed off her boss--having some amount of control would be nice. She passed on the thought. Janus was a bad idea. She'd have to figure out what was going on the old-fashioned way.

The door dilated and a very nervous Nolan led the way. Charalee came in--not as her normal, grandiose entrance was wont, but instead sweating and hair in disarray, trying to keep the creature--Senton's precious "lura"--under control in her helmet. Ann had to (begrudgingly) give her sister credit: She'd been clever with what was available to her.

It was the work of the moment to get the lura back into its containment unit. The creature was obviously agitated, its gurgling squeaks quickly fading as the lid was closed. It ran against the sides of the container, slamming into it and dropping to the ground, only to stand and try again.

"Doctor, I don't remember it behaving like that before," said Ann, who had watched the entire off-loading process without so much as a hello to her sister or Nolan.

"It's agitated. Before, it was still sedate."

"You sedated it?"

"Not really. But it was scared, so it wasn't acting out." He hesitated, which let Ann know that he was likely making it all up as he went along. "That's my guess, anyway."

"Yeah."

"So, what do I get?" asked Charalee, wiping a hand against her brow. She still wore the skin-sheath that individual shuttles required for atmo-breaking. Ann caught Senton appreciating the way the skin-sheath hugged her sister's curvaceous body and rolled her eyes. "Is there some reward for finding this thing?"

"No," said Ann. "But I'll thank you anyway."

"What happened here?" asked Nolan, looking at the ground as if he hadn't

noticed the gore when he came in. His already pale face lost another shade and Ann worried the man might pass out.

"We aren't sure. We're trying to find out."

"Shouldn't we get the security here?" asked Charalee, also looking at the mess, though more with disdain than revulsion.

"I am security," said Ann. "And we'll have a crew here as soon as we can get this thing--" and she pointed at the creature "--out of here."

"What?" said Senton, an exclamation that was echoed by Korryn in the corner. "You can't just *take* him!"

"It's an escaped prisoner. We're lucky to have him back."

"You're welcome," said Charalee in the tone of smug satisfaction and sarcasm that Ann remembered (and loathed) from years living together.

"But I haven't had a chance to study him at all!" He waved his hands at the creature.

"There's a lot more going on here than a *lura*, Senton," said Ann with more heat than she meant. The headache hadn't really improved, despite her *aedee* trying to put some restraints on it. "There's potentially a murderer on the Compound."

Nolan held up a hand, confusion clear on his face. "Wait, what? A murderer?"

Ann pointed at the ruins of Theodore. Nolan followed her finger, then recoiled, looking away. "Right. Ugh."

"Look, we don't know who did this crime," said Senton, his eyes wide with eagerness and worry. "And I'm not saying we shouldn't look. But I don't think that means we should give up the *lura*. I mean..." He raised his hands, then dropped them in a movement of patent frustration. "I'm sorry this guy's dead, but I don't think that has anything to do with the specimen."

Ann shot a glance at the *lura*, which was now too tired to do much beyond sit and tremble. The small "mouths" on its body opened and closed. The room stank of blood and sewage. Her head pounded.

"Senton," she said, wiping a hand across her face, "you are wasting my time. My job is to find whoever took Theodore's handheld and figure out what really happened here. I've had my crew on the lookout for the last hour, but so far, there's no luck. We need to get this cleaned up as quickly and quietly as possible. That's my priority. Now that *it's* back--" another gesture at the *lura* "--you can dispose of it and I can go help them."

"But you said--"

"That was before," snapped Ann. "This is now. The terms have changed. We need to figure out too many things for me to worry about this creature."

Senton, obviously panicking, looked at the other Timpson for help. "Where did you find it?"

"Find it?" asked Charalee, glancing about in surprise. "In the tunnel."

"What part? Was it the primary entrance tunnel, the side tunnels, Challenger's Pass?"

Charalee gave him a blank look. "I have no idea what you're talking about. It was

a tunnel. Glass on the sides, cement on the floor. Why does it matter?"

"It was the side access to the Hangar entrance," said Nolan, one hand resting on his chin. It was clear to Ann that he was still trying hard not to look at the body but could hardly keep himself from doing so. Rolling her eyes, she waved everyone out and into the hall. As they left, she fingered a message to the janitorial staff that they would need to come clean the area once her forensic team had finished their job. The lack of hover-pods to this area had never seemed like such a major oversight before. Now, however, she could only grind her teeth in frustration that it took so long for anyone to arrive.

"What was it doing before you captured it?" Senton was asking as Ann finished sending her comms.

"Why does this matter, Senton?" asked Ann, losing patience faster than a PRISM engine pulling on a staranchor. The back of her mouth had a metallic taste, not unlike blood, but sourer and sharper. Her head throbbed.

"Because," he said, "it does. Okay?" He turned his attention to Nolan and Charalee. "So? What did you see?"

"It was scurrying around," said Charalee before Nolan could open his mouth. "It had popped out of one of the vents and was trying to get out into its natural habitat. It kept trying to scrape through the terraglass, from what I could tell."

"It stunk," added Nolan. "It smelled really gross."

"It stunk when we arrived in the lab," said Korryn softly.

Senton frowned, but shook his head. "Well, we've been noticing that the *Dentolura* can communicate in a very primitive way. Nothing advanced, of course, but we've also seen some incredibly coordinated attacks on prey--stuff that couldn't work through vocalization."

"What, they *smell* each other? Am I understanding you correctly?" asked Charalee. Ann heard the sharpness of irritation in her sister's voice, and for once she felt the same way as she.

"I think they communicate through pheromones," said Senton, taking a deep breath.

"How does that pertain to its behavior in the tunnel?" asked Ann.

"Well," said Senton, holding up his hand and wiggling his fingers. It took him a moment to access what he wanted, but when he did, he gestured at everyone around him. Ann felt her palm cool--a query to allow a download. She gave a thumbs up and the hand returned to its normal temperature. She looked down at the flesh-display of her aedee--a soothing purple that stood out well against the brown of her skin--and saw that it was a diagram of the Compound. Specifically, Senton had sent them a map of the schematics of the primary access tunnel to the Hangar. "Do you see this?" he asked, enlarging his display. The connected aedees all did the same, though Charalee stared at Senton with a bored expression. She, apparently, hadn't been given access to the Compound's network yet. That was strange.

"It's an external vent," said Korryn, her voice soft. It seemed like she didn't want to draw attention to herself, but she also didn't want to be left out of the conversation.

Ann couldn't pretend to understand someone like that.

"Exactly."

Ann frowned, then thought harder on the implications. What was it that Senton had said? That the lura could send off pheromones? And it was standing next to a vent...

Ann inhaled sharply. "Oh, no."

"What?" said Charalee, shaking her head as if she'd tuned into the conversation only when she heard her sister gasp.

"It called for help."

Senton nodded his head and Ann felt her guts go watery. "That thing sent out a distress call through the ventilation system, didn't it?"

"Possibly. That's what I'm worried about."

"But so what?" asked Charalee. "There's a massive fence that's protecting the Compound. I saw it on my approach."

"It got breached by the storm yesterday," said Ann. "Crews have been trying to repair it, but my last report shows that it's not finished."

Nolan, who had been facing away from the group while they discussed the problem, turned back to them now. "You know what?" he asked, shifting on his pudgy feet.

"What is it, Nolan?" asked Ann, pushing away her headache and her exhaustion. Taking the downer had affected her energy more than she cared to admit. She needed some Calm, but she also knew that now was not the time for it. She had to rely on her own strength to get her through this small crisis.

"Did you know you can see that area of the perimeter fence from here?"

"Yeah," said Senton. "It's on the schematic. Plus, you only have to look outside." Everyone stared at him. "What?" he asked, gesturing at the windows. "It's not a big deal. I know everyone talks about how the Compound is like a maze, but it's fine. Really. You can figure out where you are if you just--"

"No, I should have said, 'You know how you can see the broken part of the fence from here?' And you were supposed to say, 'Yeah. Why?' And then I would say, 'It's bigger.' And then you'd all--"

The group rushed past him, almost knocking him over in their haste. Even Charalee wanted to see what he saw.

Ann recognized the problem immediately. In the bright lights that always kept the Compound illuminated, the hole in the fence gaped at them like a dark wound in a pale body. The tree that had toppled it had been removed, but only a thin membrane had been put up to dissuade the luras on the other side from coming to investigate the place.

Ann's mouth went dry as she saw a large *Dentolura*--similar shape to the one inside their lab, except easily fifteen times larger, perhaps more--push against the membrane. Electricity--not much, enough to discourage the curious--crackled against the creature's body. At this distance, she couldn't see a lot of details, but it quickly became clear what was happening.

The creatures were breaking into the Compound.

## Chapter 9

### Senton

Because of his earlier stomach upheaval, the flopping of his guts on seeing the large *Dentolura* break through the fence made his legs weak and his head cloudy. He could hardly stand the excitement. The *Dentolura* had noticed the broken wall and come through! That they wanted the baby was the most likely explanation, though without some testing he couldn't say for certain. Still, this bespoke not only that his pheromone hypothesis was correct, but that there was some sort of familial structure--or, at least, protracted concern for their young--that the larger lura relied upon. This made him almost faint with excitement.

Looking around, he could only guess what the others were thinking, but based upon the intense frown on Chief Timpson's face, Ann wasn't very happy about the breach. Korryn had an expression of interest and thoughtfulness that Senton found alluring, while Nolan merely looked confused. The new Timpson, Charalee, was glaring at the distant arrival of the creatures as though they had personally insulted her by being there.

Before he could speak, Ann gave her verdict. "We need to lock down."

"Wait, you don't think they're here to hurt us, do you?" asked Senton, stepping in front of Ann and pulling her attention away from the creatures in the distance.

"I think I don't know what they want, and I need the Compound secured as soon as I can." She flicked her hand, obviously commanding her aedee to do something. Her hand actions were different than what Senton used, so he could only guess what she intended. "Secure this area, Senton. You, too, Korryn."

"Wait, what?"

Ann shot her a look. "You're interested in this specimen, right? You had better make sure it stays put."

"Why?" asked Senton, afraid of what Ann would say but anticipating it nonetheless. "You're not thinking of giving it back, are you?"

"I am going to report this to the captain, prepare my crew for a repulsion of xenofoms that we don't understand, and--maybe--figure out what happened to the other person who was in that room. If those creatures are here for their baby, I want to know precisely where it is."

"And what about me?" said Nolan.

"I need you to prepare the delivery of the creature."

"Um," he said, his face puckering in confusion. "How?"

"We need to get this thing outside to where they are, but I don't want them to think that they simply found their darling. I want them to know that we returned it, that we didn't kill it."

Senton made a rude sound in the back of his throat. "They don't think that way."



Ann turned toward him, her face a mixture of disbelief and fury that Seton had never seen before. "What's wrong with my plans, Doctor?"

Senton shrugged, then said, "We don't know enough about the creatures to be able to judge how they're going to react to seeing us with the baby. Maybe they'll think we took it and try to get revenge."

Korryn sighed. "The point is, we don't *know* what is best here. So why don't we do what Chief Timpson said and we'll go from there?"

Though Senton hated the idea of losing the little lura before he even had a chance to study it, he capitulated in the end. It wasn't worth the fight.

"I'm going to check on the Portal," said Charalee. "That's why I'm here. Your little domestic problem isn't mine."

Ann nodded. "The Compound appreciates you returning our specimen."

Charalee smirked. "You're welcome, sister." Charalee sauntered away, which Senton took a moment to appreciate before returning to the matter at hand.

"Take care of this thing. Make sure it doesn't go anywhere."

"Can we at least move it to a room that doesn't have a corpse in it?" asked Korryn.

"Fine. Update me on the location when it's settled," said Ann. "This is a big mess, Doctor, and I'm not happy that I have to clean it up. We aren't done, you and I."

Senton swallowed. "Yes, Chief."

Ann and Nolan headed down the opposite direction that Charalee took, both of them furiously wiggling their hands as they told their aedees what to do. Senton let out an angry breath and looked up at Korryn, who was watching through the window.

"Can you believe it?"

"Believe what?" she said, not turning to face him.

"That they want to get rid of the specimen."

Korryn shrugged. "That's okay."

"What? *You* were the one who thought that we should do something with it. Right? To make a profit?" He stepped closer to her--not too much, he didn't want to be too forward--using a chance to glimpse out the window as a pretext to do so.

"But there are more options."

"Huh?"

She pointed. Through the gloom, Senton could make out what seemed like an entire herd of *Dentolura* of almost every size and shape they'd documented pour through the breach.

Senton felt his knees wobble again. "They're...they're massing toward us."

Korryn glanced over, then smiled. "That's more for us."

The comment demarrowed his concern. "You mean--"

She nodded. "We can give them the baby, provided we snag some of these bigger creatures. That's a better move anyway--they're more likely to survive us taking them back to civilization if they're bigger." She paused. "Do you even know what they eat?"

Senton shook his head, then gestured for her to follow her into the lab. The fact that a lot of potentially dangerous creatures were rushing across the empty fields that

surrounded the expansive Compound didn't worry him over much. Not only was the Compound hermetically sealed against their atmosphere, but the terraglass that formed most of the tunnels was extruded in such a way that they could withstand thousands of pounds per square centimeter. They could prowl around the buildings all they wanted; they couldn't get in.

Still, Ann's precaution was understandable. If the thing they wanted the most was the baby, then the humans needed to make sure they could get the baby into the hands--claws?--of the parents. That only made sense.

"That is something that I've been working on," he said, tapping his temple. "I've a lot of research done, but much of it is guess work or hypotheses. I really want to spend some time with these creatures."

"That's why you're doing what I'm saying we should do?"

Senton paused, looking down at his hands. Centuries of scientific dogma had coalesced into the single greatest error in human history: The loss of their own planet. In the immediate aftermath of the loss of Earth, scientists were held responsible for such a mistake. But humanity needed the ingenuity and the advancements that only science and engineering could provide if they were to survive in the stars. Nevertheless, the purpose of science and discovery was still taught, albeit with a greater emphasis on considering the ramifications and impacts of what was being created.

Senton always chafed under that sort of thinking. Yes, losing the Earth and creating a postlapsarian migratory society was not the best thing that the sciences had done. But there was much good, too, that they had accomplished. Back before the regulations and societal disapproval of unfettered scientific exploration were enforced, scientists could explore the questions they found most intriguing. Confident in their knowledge that what they discovered would always, eventually, benefit Humanity, they were given free rein.

Senton wanted that back. And the only way, he begrudgingly admitted, was through commercial enterprise. No, he didn't want to sell off the creatures, or put them in zoos, or anything other than study them. But if working with Korrryn's plan to profit off the lura meant that he'd get to study them more? He'd have to bend to that rule of reality.

Looking up, he said, "Yes. I'm with you." He raised a finger. "But we're going to have to be really careful. We'll need to tranquilize the creatures so that they don't send out pheromones, as well as keep them tightly contained."

Korrryn frowned, then brightened. "I know of a place. It's in the Hangar. Fresh food has to be carefully checked to ensure we don't get any nasties from a spacestation--the last thing we need is an outbreak of some disease that proliferates easier in our more confined environment. It's large and, if I remember correctly, we took out the latest cargo a day or two ago. There's plenty of space for us to keep any specimens we find."

"Should we take this one there?" he asked, jerking his head toward the still-closed door of the lab.

Korrryn thought for a moment. "Yeah, I think so. I mean, *I* don't want to stick

around a dead body. Do you?"

"Not really." He finally admitted to himself that he felt bad, and the idea that maybe someone had killed the poor guy and was now running loose in the Compound made him uncomfortable, but Ann would take care of that. He had other things to think about instead. "Let's transfer the little guy."

Korryn laughed and threw him a smile that made his uneasy stomach tighten in excitement and hope. Their first couple of dates had been really enjoyable, and the idea that maybe they could turn it into something more was another tantalizing possibility. He tried hard to focus on the task at hand, but seeing her smile had sent his mind headed down...different paths.

He palmed the door open, talking as it dilated. "Do you think we should name it, or..."

He trailed off as he stared in mute dismay. Shattered terraglass sparkled over the ground, intermixing with the congealed blood. A large hole in the container gaped at them, the jagged edges of the broken glass looking like so many teeth.

Senton took a deep breath.

The box was empty.

"How is that possible?" he asked, a fire of indignation at the injustice of it all burning through what should have been a flash of distress and panic. He looked around the room, casting about for some explanation--an intruder who'd snuck in while they weren't looking, or maybe the dead corpse coming alive and letting the *Dentolura* baby loose--anything to keep him from accepting the truth: The baby had escaped again.

"It broke out," said Korryn, her voice tight with distress and worry. "Look, the glass is sprayed away from the container. It wasn't broken inwards: It was smashed out."

Wiping a hand on his lips, Senton turned on his scientific brain. He'd been running on enthusiasm and instinct for too long. He needed to focus again, to turn himself toward what he'd been trained to do: Observe, hypothesize, experiment. What was different in here? What could he rely on that didn't touch his personal anxiety?

Dropping into that mental state had helped him countless times before. When his mother had left them, he'd pulled himself deeper into his studies, one time tackling a genetic code that had been particularly vexing for days at a time with precious little sleep or food. He'd come to himself a week later, having discovered a mutation within one of the genomes he'd been studying that had explained how the specimen (it had been a particular kind of tree) had managed to adapt to the sunrays that came in through that spacestation's filtered windows.

When his father had suffered his debilitating accident on a job done to provide support for Senton so he could continue his training, thereby leaving him mentally irreparable and physically broken, Senton had done the same thing. The project had been a theoretical treatise on the way evolution of microbial life had changed by being exposed to centuries of artificial gravity and the modified human experience. Though he'd pulled himself out of that state often enough to tend his father until his father, too tired to go on in such a crippled state, had passed away, Senton's had found this the

best way to cope with the difficulties of life.

Losing the lura wasn't on the same level as losing his parents--one to selfishness, one to selflessness--but the principle remained. If he could focus on the questions and the potential answers, he could quiet his mind enough to get the job done. It was one of his talents.

"The body is different," he decided after a moment's quiet contemplation.

Korryn glanced over. She'd been checking the perimeter of the room, opening the cupboards to see if it had somehow gotten itself into one of them. "Ugh. I don't want to look at that," she said, turning away.

"But that's just it. I remember what I saw when we first walked in."

"Before or after you puked?"

His face prickled with an embarrassed flush. "After. And I know you don't want to look at it, but I think there's more of this guy that's missing. In fact, I'm almost positive."

Her curiosity obviously piqued, Korryn came closer to the body. Her petite nose scrunched up in a way that he found attractive, but considering the context, not particularly sexy. She dropped to her haunches and stared at the horrible maiming Theodore had taken. His eyes, glassy and vacant, stared off at nothing, his face still tight with a now-silent scream of dismay.

"What do you see that I don't?" she asked.

Senton pointed. "That. And that. And some here."

She stared at the indicated parts, but then shook her head. "I can't see it."

"They're bite marks."

"You're certain they weren't there before?"

Senton let his eyes rove for a moment, then sighed. "As sure as I can be without evidence."

"So, not very?"

He paused. He didn't want to say what had come into his mind. For a brief moment, he figured that if he didn't talk, it would mean that what he saw wasn't true. But the impulse faded and he said, "I don't think there's a murderer loose in the Compound. I think it was the lura."

Korryn blanched. "It's just a baby, though."

"But look what it did to the container," said Senton, gesturing with his chin. "And see this?" He pointed to the jagged flesh around the torso. "The bite patterns are the same as what's taken out of the cheeks here and here." He pointed to the same spots as before. "Additionally, if you look at how the body was emptied out--"

Korryn made a gagging noise, but waved him on to continue.

"--you'll see that its size is only slightly larger than what the lura's body is." He gestured at the splatters of gore that surrounded them. "You see this? The way the drops formed...it's like something was *writhing* inside him, burrowing in him--"

"Nope," said Korryn, standing up suddenly. "Nope, not gonna hold it." She spun and turned to the sink, her retching sound making him almost do the same. He gagged, but managed to keep his bile in place. Her reaction pulled him out of his analytical

mind, and he stood up, no longer able to look at Theodore. He spotted a recycling bag on the abandoned trolley that still sat off to one side in the lab. Pulling it free, he dropped it over the upper part of the man's ruined body.

"So you think," said Korryn as she washed her lips and turned back to him, her face ashen, "that your little friend ate its way through this guy, then, while we were out in the hall, had a second helping?"

Senton rubbed the back of his head and avoided her eye contact. "I know that I said we don't know a lot about these creatures, and I stand by that, but..." He paused, looking guiltily at his workstation's viz-player, then back at Korryn before dropping her gaze. "We know enough to realize that they're dangerous creatures. That's why I was so anxious to study it," he said as Korryn dropped her hands in an exasperated gesture. "I wanted to know what they can really do."

"Senton!"

"What?"

Korryn put one hand on her hip and leaned in, a movement that made Senton feel like he'd missed something important. "How are they supposed to be *pets* if they're dangerous?"

He shook his head. He hadn't wanted to consider that.

Disgusted, Korryn made to leave. "I'm done, this is stupid. I shouldn't be here."

"Hey, wait," said Senton. "This doesn't have to be the end." He licked his lips, his mind suddenly blank. Losing his chance with Korryn was bad enough, but he'd lost the specimen, too. A double loss was too much for him to countenance. Licking his lips again, he said, "Wait, there's still a chance."

"For what?"

"Modification. Gene therapy."

She rolled her eyes.

"No, hear me out." He stepped in front of the door. "You can't leave without my aedee anyway. Listen for a second, this isn't irretrievable."

"Get to the point, Trapp," she said, her irritation palpable.

"We find a few more specimens. It doesn't matter which ones--like you said, the bigger ones will probably be better anyway--and we store them. Just like you wanted. Then, when we get them back to the Vanguard, I will turn off their killer instinct. That's inside their genes. I can reprogram them."

"Like the digi...dige...what is it?"

"Digenetics?"

"Yeah, that."

He nodded. "Exactly. The digital genetics protocols are safe for humans--we understand the technology *really* well. It shouldn't take too much for us to turn them docile. Then..." He held out his hands and forced a smile onto his face. "Then we sell them off and make all the money you want."

Korryn paused. "It's risky."

"With large rewards at the end."

She thought a moment longer. "All right. We'll do it." She paused and looked at

the body again. "This was just a fluke, right? An accident?"

"I'm sure of it," he lied.

Korryn nodded at the door. "We should get going. I think it went into the ventilation system again. If those things are after the baby, it'd be better to know where the baby is, right? After all, they're dangerous."

Senton widened his eyes as he bobbed his head in agreement. "Very dangerous."

At that moment, the Compound shook and the lights went out.

## Chapter 10

### Ann

Heavy darkness spread in front of her. Involuntarily, Ann gasped, more out of surprise than fear. Still, everything had been illuminated, everything clear. Then it had, as simply as an aedee gesture, turned off. The lights flickered back on, but in a low-level setting, the same yellowish-hue of the flashing lights during the lockdown.

"Emergency power," said Nolan, who had stopped in the middle of the hallway when the lights deactivated and now stood, glued to the same spot. "Those are our emergency lights."

Ann fingered another increase on her aedee pain-relievers--they weren't the same as actual chemicals, but it helped tamp down some of the most adverse side-effects of the headache--and said, "I'm aware of that. What I don't understand is how we could have lost power."

"Did you feel the Compound shake?" asked Nolan, his face a sickly color in the lights. Sweat shone on his forehead and glistened on his lip. Ann felt a twinge of pity for the poor man: He'd come to Prospero recommended by one of Ann's friends on the Vanguard, but he had--quite unexpectedly--been diagnosed with colon cancer. The aedee spotted it pretty fast, but the process of stopping the growth had led to other problems. Now his aedee couldn't interact with his physiology, leaving it as a communication and personal computer, but little else. Additionally, he had suffered from some personality changes because of the treatments, and his abilities of organization, recall, and management had all dwindled as well. She didn't blame him for being scared--she was scared herself, though she manifested that through anger and commitment to seeing things resolved--but it was becoming a problem.

"Yes, Nolan," she said in answer to his question. "I did. And then the lights went out. Now they're back on. We need to prep security for these creatures, so let's not hang about in the halls and instead--"

A finger-length wide net of cracks grew out of the smooth glass to her left, accompanied with a loud *bang* as something collided with it. Embarrassingly, she flinched at the sound, recoiling from the darkness beyond. The terraglass was strong--palladium-infused glass would bend before it broke--and it also cut down on the glare between darkness outside and illumination within. This proved a useful feature in stargazers and spacestations, as it allowed the people within to still look out at the vastness of space without the reflections of themselves being as prominent as with other glasses. Plus it held the polarization that allowed some of the more brilliant aspects of cosmic phenomena to appear in a spectrum of colors more easily viewed by human eyes. These same features meant that the Compound could see out into the brave new world of Prospero while the humans inside were still protected.

A dark shape charged at the glass again, smashing into it with a deafening *crack*.

Ann stumbled back. Nolan fell over. Like most of the connecting hallways of the Compound, this area that connected the Laboratory wing to the main thoroughfares was built out of terraglass formed tubes. Metal joints at the entrances and exits of each hallway had been installed to allow any one section the ability to seal itself off in the highly unlikely chance of a breach in the glass. As Ann watched the shape, stumbling a bit from the second blow step back, only to make ready for a third charge, her eyes went wide. The net of cracks broadened under the third strike, one major break spreading up to the center of the tunnel.

"Nolan!" she said, running in the direction they had been heading. The exit was still a good hundred meters away, but if the system worked the way it was supposed to...

He looked up at her as she ran, a paralysis of panic spreading over his face.

"Get up, man! Run!"

The order helped pull him out of his own terror enough that he scrambled to his feet and began to chase after her, his cheeks puffing in and out and his arms pumping wildly. Ann, eight meters ahead of him, faced front and put on as much speed as she could muster. Her heart thudded dully in her ribs and her mind felt tight with pain and panic. Each breath rasped more than she cared to admit, and she berated herself for having neglected her exercise lately. There'd been so much work, so many reports to file, so many comms to receive that she had always found an excuse to avoid rather than an excuse to do.

She regretted it now.

Checking over her shoulder, she could see that Nolan was losing ground. Sweat poured off his face. Dark stains beneath his arms grew on his coveralls. The spot between his legs had a similar appearance. Without judging, it was clear the man had wet his pants. "Come on, Nolan! You can do it!" She should keep her breath to herself, save it for running. But he needed encouragement, he needed help. "Come on!"

That seemed to give him confidence and he sped up. Not much, but enough that Ann thought they might make it. Facing forward, she could see the metal mouth that would close if the tunnel actually broke--

The sound of the terraglass shattering filled the tunnel and made Ann's headache flare worse than before. The shrieking sound of the Compound's atmosphere rushing through the hole nearly deafened her, and she could feel the air she desperately needed pulled almost from her lungs as it fled. The concussive force needed to break through the glass rippled down the hallway, and she heard Nolan stumble.

In front of her, the emergency seals began to constrict. They moved slowly to allow people time to go through, but they moved steadily. Being on emergency power hadn't turned off this crucial system; Ann had no time to wait.

The dilemma popped into her mind immediately: Turn and help Nolan or escape and save herself.

It wasn't a hard decision, even if she felt it was the wrong one. She sprinted harder, now only ten meters away. The door contracted, the four sides of the doors pulling closed. There was a gap in the center--a steadily closing gap--that she aimed for.



"Ann! Please!" The shriek was so pitiable, so sad that she almost--*almost*--stopped. But she couldn't.

The hole continued to close.

The strength in her legs diminished. Like sunlight draining from the twilight, her energy flagged.

Nolan screamed.

Only a couple of meters now.

The door contracted.

Ann was close enough.

Nolan screamed, the pitch of it bending higher into a key of terror.

Ann dived, headfirst, through the closing aperture. Her left knee banged into the door, sending a burst of pain through her entire leg. Landing on her side, she slid a meter or so before scrambling back to peer through the door's sealing hole.

Bathed in yellow light, she could discern what looked like a larger version of the specimen Senton had coddled, except more vicious and pointed. What were protuberances and buds on the infant were full-fledged spikes and horns on the adult. A cranium of keratin-coated bone topped a heavily muscled head, with jaws that split open widely, as much down the middle as from the jaws. An array of eyes peered out from beneath the boney crest, each looking at Nolan. The haunches rippled beneath a slimy skin, and the spike-encrusted tail swung from side to side as it approached her friend.

The *Dentolura* lunged forward.

Nolan screamed.

The door slammed shut.

Ann leaned against it, gasping, trying to come to grips with what she'd witnessed. The creature had broken through the terraglass and attacked her crewmate. The Compound had suffered a localized quake. They were running on emergency power.

Swallowing, Ann tried to calm her pounding heart. This was not what she had been expecting of her evening.

Sucking in as many thorough breaths as she could, Ann fingered a voicecomm to Captain Rall. This was out of her jurisdiction; she needed guidance.

Rall responded almost immediately.

"Timpson! What's going on?"

"I don't know, sir," she said, still having difficulty breathing. "We found the infant specimen, but now we're under attack."

"I know that," said Rall, a sneer of frustration in his voice. "We've lost power throughout the entire Compound. We're running on backup batteries. The outer fences are toppled, and we have atmospheric breaches reported in sixteen different areas."

"Sixteen!"

Continuing without having heard his Chief of Security, Rall said, "We have reports of severe casualties as colonists are being attacked in the darkness, knocked out into the atmosphere of Prospero without appropriate gear, and injuries relating to

inexperienced dumbasses who fired on each other instead of whatever it is that's invading."

"It's the *Dentolura*, sir. They're attacking the station."

"What? Why?"

"We have their baby, sir!"

There was a pause, then, "Then give it the hell back!"

"Yes, sir!"

"We're sending everyone to the Hangar. It's the most defensible area, and we can also evacuate once help comes."

Ann tightened her jaw. "Yes, sir."

"Get as many people there as possible."

"Yes, sir."

"And find that baby. Get it back to them!"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and Ann?"

She cleared her throat and worked her way to her feet. "Yes--"

The metal door behind her bent inward with a deafening shriek. Ann stumbled away from it as the metal trembled. Another dent appeared, close to the first one. It was about the size of the head of the *lura* she'd seen attack Nolan.

"Sir, I'm going to have to call you back," she said, disconnecting the aedee with a flick of her hand. Then she told her augmented device to help block the pain from her leg.

She wasn't done running.

## Chapter 11

### Senton

Before Korryn and he split to finish their separate plans--he to try to follow Karl (his name for the baby), she to use some of the tranquilizers he'd furnished her with from the stock in his lab--Senton caught her by the arm.

"Hey," he said, the yellow lighting of the room making the bloodstains dark and ominous and her beautiful face strangely hued, "I want to see you again."

She nodded, giving him a slight look of confusion. "Of course."

"No, I mean, I think..." He paused. "I don't know how to say this."

Korryn shifted to another foot. "We're wasting time."

"I know, I know." Senton drew in a deep breath. "I think I like you."

"You *think*?"

He shook his head. "No, I mean I *do* like you. I like you. A lot." Embarrassment swam over him, tickling his brain and distracting him with a flutter in his stomach. He could feel heat on his face, but he knew that his darker skin didn't show through when he blushed, so he could be thankful for that much grace. "I mean, I want us to, y'know...figure it out."

"It?"

"Us. Not just this little business venture and scientific exploration. I mean, *us*."

Korryn leaned in and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "You're cute." Turning away, she glanced up one direction, then the other. "I'll think about it," she said, throwing him an impish smile that turned his knees to water. Then she was gone, her butt well framed by her coveralls as she ran down the right-hand hall.

"I'll take it," he said softly, one hand touching his cheek. A far away sound of crashing glass drew him back into the moment. The *Dentolura* were attacking, he knew that much. That was the only explanation for the loss of power. But were they actually getting inside? Was their plan going to work? He'd kind of doubted they'd be able to collect anything easily, particularly if there wasn't someone who opened it up. But that sound...what was that?

Shaking his head to dismiss the worry, he scooped up the collapsed specimen cage he'd used when he'd gone out to first collect Karl. It was built of a lightweight polymer--stronger than most unalloyed metals, but an eighth the weight--and could fold into a small package, no larger than a couple of viz-players placed together. It clipped onto his belt. Shucking off his lab coat, Senton also added a bevy of tranqs to his belt. He didn't want to be unprepared.

Stepping out of the lab, he went left, tracing the ventilation system in his mind as he walked. During his first couple of days at the Compound, he'd found that he'd get lost so easily that he had to constantly rely on his aedee's navigational protocols to get anywhere. While he didn't mind using the nav protocols necessarily, it was frustrating

to be ignorant about anything. Unlike others, he didn't enjoy relying on the aedee. It was a tool, not a way of life. As a result, he'd spent his first weekend memorizing the layout of his new home. This served him well now, because the aedees were given different levels of access when it came to navigation. They would plot out the best path for the types of clearance the owner had, bypassing areas that were off limits or under construction or whatever change might be there.

That meant that others didn't know the shortcuts and bypasses that he did. They weren't as likely to know, for example, that the ventilation system ran parallel but beneath the tunnels through the area of the Compound closer to the Laboratory wing, but then splayed out when they hit the Cafeteria wing and even more-so when they arrived at the Dormitory wing. There were manifold outflow areas, but they all received the cleaned, human-worthy air through a treatment on the opposite side of the Compound from where he was. In other words, the place where the smell of the outside was greatest was in the Life Support wing, and it was his best bet that Karl was trying to find clean air.

Indeed, that was something that had surprised him. Humans couldn't breathe Prospero's atmosphere, and he'd been worried about what would happen to the infant when he had caught it that afternoon--had it only been this afternoon? So much had happened, it seemed, since then--and only the desperation of needing to get Karl inside before anyone noticed had forced him to take the risk. If worst case scenario had surfaced, Senton would have been able to assuage his loss by knowing he could dissect the creature and study its remains.

But, to his surprise, and excitement, Karl had, after only a few minutes of obvious distress, adapted to the greater oxygen-content of the Compound. The little guy had regain his color soon after breathing normally, and within fifteen minutes, acted as though nothing were different. Though part of the scientist mind noted that this was alarming on a certain level, Senton ignored it. Rapid adaptation to atmospheric changes would be one of the greatest evolutionary benefits he could think of, and it explained why it appeared that the *Dentolura* had dominated so much of the ecological niche on Prospero. The creatures could inhabit habitats on the highest mountains, lowest valleys, areas of immense desert and humid rainforests. That flexibility was only one of the many reasons that he wanted to keep studying the creatures, and why it was so important that he kept playing Korryn along.

Of course, he cared about her. He hadn't been lying, he told himself as he ran down the hallway. She was ambitious, that much was certain. He didn't appreciate the idea of "selling out" in order to do his science, but the appeal was too great. He needed to understand these creatures, and no cost was too high. That she had said he was cute had helped him to push back the feelings of betraying his discipline for cold hard cash. The fact that they'd already dated a couple of times before and had both enjoyed it made him think that maybe she *was* the right kind of person for him. After all, wouldn't that be an incredible future for them both? She, making the money they needed to live in comfort, freeing him up to pursue additional scientific discoveries? Though they weren't the first to discover extraterrestrial life (that had happened on a planet near the

Sagittarius quadrant, a place with bacterial life) nor the first to discover complex life (that was on a moon orbiting a Goldilocks planet not too far from Betelgeuse), they would be the first to really study xenobiology in its manifest forms. Prospero was exciting because it gave that opportunity; capitalizing on it could be a way to fully explore that opportunity.

His thoughts continued to bounce around, from his studies to the possibilities with Korryn to what it would be like if Korryn really did like him to perhaps what they might do together--or to each other--as he scurried toward a service passage that would shave a few minutes of wandering down main thoroughfares.

The emergency lights cast everything in an ethereal hue, but he hardly noticed. Emerging from the connecting tunnel, he arrived at Desert Peaks Avenue--a large tunnel, sponsored by DP, of course--and turned left, heading northward. More than a few people passed him, and all those who did had a look of panic on their faces. One tried to stop him and tell him to go the opposite direction, but he ignored her and moved on with the most direct path to the Life Support area. To get there, he'd pass through the Dormitory wing, which was likely quite crowded. That could be problematic, but only if more thoughtful neighbors tried to stop him. Why were they all running away, anyway?

It was only then, after overhearing someone, her voice frantic, shout at her children, that they needed to hurry because it was an *emergency* that he realized he'd missed something. So involved in his own thoughts, Senton had missed the arrival of a Compound-wide broadcast from Captain Rall. Queuing it into his audio receptors, he let the message play through his aedee as he wove through the ever-thickening crowd.

"Citizens of Prospero," the message said, and Senton thought he could hear some strain in the man's voice, "this is Captain Rall. We are under attack by the xenofoms native to Prospero. For everyone's safety, please evacuate according to Procedure Six. Security guards will be stationed at every main juncture to help you get to the Hangar."

Senton cursed. More people at the Hangar meant more witnesses! Rall was ruining his plan.

"Do not return to your dorms. Take only your immediate possessions. For those with families, please await their arrival at the Hangar. We need the traffic to flow in only one direction. This evacuation is merely a precaution until the Security crew can secure the entire Compound."

Senton looked around, grinding his teeth in frustration. There were more people than before, all of them flowing the opposite direction he needed to go. A few meters ahead of him, he saw a Security crewmember, waving her arms to direct the traffic. Most of the faces of the passing colonists were painted with panic, fear, or worry. A few, like him, were frustrated. One approached the Security guard and began arguing with her about how he needed to get past. Senton used the distraction to get himself further along without being spotted, but he needed to leave DP Ave as soon as possible.

This was not good. Not only did it mean that the creatures really were inside, but it meant that more people were getting to see them. That probably would bother Korryn--he shook his head, cutting off the thought. How quickly he'd fallen into her

way of thinking about the creatures and Korryn's point of view. No, he needed to focus on getting his specimens secured. That was all that mattered.

A scream pulled him out of his thoughts. Behind him, perhaps a good twenty meters away, a *Dentolura* burst out of a side passage. This one looked quite different from Karl--instead of standing with its hips beneath it, this one's front legs were splayed outward. A large muzzle, filled with teeth on its jaws and bristling with spikes on its cranial helmet, snapped down on a fallen colonist. Senton's eyes widened in fear and surprise as the man's arm disappeared in a mist of blood, swallowed down the gullet of the sprawling lura.

The crowd surged, turning around and pushing each other toward the Dormitory wing. Senton stumbled, but regained his feet and, with the dozens of people in the Desert Peaks Avenue, rushed away from the rampaging lura.

As he turned away, he managed to catch a glimpse of it slashing out with its tail, a formidable weapon at least two meters long and covered with spikes, held out parallel to the ground. The person it connected with severed in two with the force of the attack. More people screamed. The smell of blood washed over him.

Fear warred with curiosity. Yes, it was dangerous, but what an opportunity! He was saddened by the deaths, of course, but he'd never seen the creatures up close before. This particular species of *Dentolura* had been called *Dentolura succhi*, and the drones had noted that they tended toward the rivers and lakes nearby. Spotting them had been difficult, as they preferred to keep underwater and relied on ambush tactics to bring down prey. To see one in action--even when that action was in the midst of a crowd of people--was thrilling.

He glanced back in time to see it pounce on one of the people in the back of the crowd, removing the woman's head with a savage snap.

Maybe thrilling was the wrong word.

Despite the press of people all sprinting in the same direction, Senton knew where he was. There was another service tunnel off to the left. If he could just get there through the press of people, he'd be able to avoid the mob and perhaps manage to get himself to the Dormitory wing without any more problems.

The process of working his way over proved more troublesome than he expected, and by the time he'd arrived on the left side of the hallway, he'd passed the door by a good three meters. Pushing against the stream of bodies, he navigated to the entrance and palmed his aedee against the wall-mounted pad. The door dilated obediently, and he slipped in. As it constricted, he saw the *Dentolura succhi* approach, its mouth open and a malevolent hiss roiling from within its barrel-chest.

Taking a deep breath, he hurried northward, following the appropriate pipes that showed him which turn to take if he wanted to get to the Dormitory. Of course, that particular lura was *also* headed toward the Dormitory. Still, if he could go faster than the mob, he'd get there, pass through, and be on his way to the Life Support wing before he had to worry about the creature.

Despite the adrenaline, he found himself tired by the time he safely arrived at the Dormitory. Stepping out of the service tunnel, he paused to catch his breath. The lobby

of the entrance was abandoned, but he could hear the sounds of the approaching mob. He'd accomplished this much, but he needed a break. He didn't exercise much, as a matter of course, and all this running was wearing him out. Off to one side, he saw a tray of food, abandoned, no doubt, when Captain Rall's announcement had come through the aedee network. He scooped up a roll and drank down the entire cup of cold tea, grimacing at the weedy taste. He'd never much cared for tea, being more of a coffee person. But coffee was harder to grow here on Prospero, which meant they had to import it--

The broad doors to the Dormitory wing's foyer began to open, and he could see people trying to scramble beneath it as it slowly raised. He didn't have any more time.

Jogging, Senton entered the main hallway. The dorms were laid out like a massive grid, with multiple levels, all identical. Though the colonists could dress up the outside of their rooms as much as they liked, the overall feeling was one of uniformity and depressing unoriginality. Still, it meant that he could run in a straight line all the way to the far end of the Dormitory wing, where the access to Gateway Avenue would help get him to the Life Support wing.

Behind him, screams began to come through the opening door. Glancing around, he saw that there were some people who were peeking their heads out from their dorm rooms. The thought of telling them to get to safety crossed his mind, but he didn't want to waste his breath. They'd probably be okay.

He focused on running. The screams, the snapping of lura jaws, the deeply pitched hissing--all of it followed after him, a wave of sonic despair that helped propel him forward.

After what seemed too long of running down the same colored hallway, he arrived at the far end. Palming open the door, he gasped and turned, watching the wave of people dispersing through the grid of dormitories. This was probably their best option, as it gave them multiple directions to go and plenty of areas to hide as the *Dentolura succhi* stomped after them.

He turned to the door, then his eyes went wide.

It was Ann.

"Senton?" she said, her sweat-streaked face a picture of surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Senton's eyes slid past her and, it seemed, time slowed. He saw Karl, wriggling free of a vent, heading toward the Gateway Avenue, which was surprisingly empty. In front of him, Ann was raising her hand, as if to grab him. Behind him, the *Dentolura succhi* growled, its jaws clamping down on another victim, whose screams cut off in a gurgle of blood.

Without thinking, without knowing why, necessarily, he made the choice.

He wanted Karl.

Snagging Ann, he whirled her into the dorm where she tumbled to the ground with a yelp. He slapped the door's pad with his aedee and closed it behind him.

Time to get his baby back.

## Chapter 12

### Ann

The door slammed shut and the sound of the creature and people's screams drew her attention away from what Senton had done. Ann brushed off her confusion. She didn't need to waste time trying to understand Senton's behavior when there was a more pressing problem in front of her.

Gathering herself, she flicked her fingers and activated a broadcast to her entire crew. "I need all available members to get to the Dormitory wing immediately," she said, her voice impressively calm. "We have a large creature killing people here."

A chorus of understandings came through, though a couple begged permission to remain and help the wounded of other areas of attack. She allowed that, logging away the information. The entire Compound was under siege. She didn't know the full extent yet, but every time the *Dentolura* broke through an external wall, it triggered localized lockdowns. Some of the major arteries of the Compound were now clogged, cut off from the rest of the colony. Everyone was in a panic. Ann wished more than ever to take some Calm--or a stiff drink...anything to cut the tension--but she only had the one she'd snagged from her desk when she'd stopped by her office to--

The squat, broad creature that looked like an old-Earth alligator, except enormous and covered in spikes, let loose a terrifying hiss as it lunged for another victim. It was approximately ten dorm blocks away--far enough that Ann would have to run, and likely wouldn't arrive in time--so Ann did what came instinctively. She shot at it.

The gun's projectile--a packet of condensed light--smashed against the lura's back, sending up a burst of steam, a shower of sparks, and an eruption of vibrant green blood that splattered against the wall. The person who was cowering in front of the creature's blood-dripped jaws looked up at her, surprise on his face. "Are you nuts?" he screamed.

"Get out of the way, you idiot!" shouted Ann, leveling her gun. Taking a careful stance, with her feet directly beneath her shoulders, she let her aedee overlay her view of the distance, generating a target that let her know the greatest likelihood of where the packet would strike when she pulled the trigger.

The would-be victim got up, scrambled toward a juncture, and threw himself out of the way as Ann squeezed the trigger. The lura, however, jerked to one side, letting the shot soar past it and explode in a flash of light and sparks at the far end of the hallway.

Gritting her teeth, Ann silently commanded her aedee to patch into the localized public address system. "Everyone in the Dormitory wing, take shelter in the rooms or retreat to the second floor. Repeat, everyone must evacuate the dorms. Do not take any possessions with you; do not interact with the creature." She blinked away the



comm-override and focused on another shot.

This one struck the lura in the bow-legged right shoulder, blasting away a hearty chunk of meat and plenty of bone. Its hiss sounded enraged, and despite being unable to move its right leg, it began to gallop toward her.

In the back of her mind, Ann was calculating the size and potential weight of a creature like that. She estimated that it clocked in at almost five metric tons.

Her little hand blaster wasn't likely to do anything to that.

She didn't stop firing anyway, carefully backing up as it got closer, pock-mark after bloody pock-mark erupting from its body as each super-charged packet smashed into it.

Now it was ten meters away.

Fire. Fire.

Seven meters and closing.

Fire. Fire.

Five meters.

Fire. Fire.

Four meters.

Its body tensed.

Ann fired.

Like an uncoiled spring, the lura leaped forward, its massive jaws splitting open vertically as well as horizontally. Sharp, conical teeth--layered with human blood and its alien saliva--glistened in the harsh emergency lights of the dorms.

Ann fired a parting shot as she dived to her left. She flew an easy two and a half meters before landing on her side and rolling up into a shoot stance.

The lura's head, complete with a crater where the back of its skull had been only a moment before, smashed against the door through which Senton had thrown her only a few minutes earlier. The stench of charred flesh and copper-coated sewage filled her nostrils and it took a concentrated effort not to gag. The body still twitched, and gaps in the creature's slimy skin, some as large as human mouths, opened and closed in spasmodic episodes for a full ten seconds after the rest of the body stopped convulsing.

Ann approached cautiously, but it was clear the last shot had done the job, bursting through the *Dentolura's* head when it had unhinged its jaws. The shot, she was certain, would not have done anything otherwise.

Her hands trembled as she tried to rein in the adrenaline that seared through her. She wanted to laugh and cry and she couldn't get her thoughts together. Maybe it she took a small hit--not a big one at all, not even half her normal dose--she could Calm down.

The tiny pod was in her hand, pointed at her nose, when she realized what she was doing. Startled, she nearly dropped the drugs. Looking around to see if anyone was watching, she pocketed the Calm and turned to the door.

It was destroyed. There was no way to get past it until they moved the lura, and that wasn't happening anytime soon. Ann drew in a steadying breath and commed her first lieutenant, Rander Jickson. She picked up immediately. "Yeah, boss?"

"What's your status?" asked Ann, trying to steady herself still.

"We evacuated the entire Cafeteria and Recreation wings. We're huddled up in the Hangar, awaiting further orders."

"I need a sweep done."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm getting occasional reports about where everything is going wrong, but I need better intel."

"What about the camera system?"

"It's out. Drains too much power, I'd guess," she said. "Are there any engineers with you? Someone who could give us a status on the power situation?"

"Um, I can check."

"Do so. Then I want you to help that person--or persons--to get main power back online."

"Okay."

"Take one or two crew with you, then send the rest out to pick up stragglers or relieve points of attack. I'm entrusting this with you, Jickson."

"Yes, sir." There was a pause, then she asked, "What are you doing, sir? Can I help you with that?"

"No, I have to try to get out of the dorms."

"What's wrong with the door?"

"It's..." Ann glanced at the ruined creature that stuck out of the door like a monstrous doorstep. "It's out of order."

"Understood."

"I need to track down Senton Trapp. I think he's hiding something that could help us out."

"I can't help there, sir. We're not allowed to track people's aedees that way."

Ann gritted her teeth. "The Janus Protocol..."

"What did you say, sir?" asked Rander.

Shaking her head, Ann said, "Nothing. Give me an update as needed. I need to find this guy."

"Good luck, sir."

They disconnected and Ann turned around, startled to see a group of colonists gathering around the creature. They were all in different actions, but Ann recognized the most common ones: They were snapping memory photos, storing what they saw in their aedees for future retrieval.

"Hey, you guys," said Ann, stepping toward them and raising one hand while resting the other on her holstered weapon. "We need you out, not gawking."

"But...it's dead!"

"And so are a lot of people," said Ann, casting a glance down the main hallway. Bloodstains dotted the floors, walls, and even the ceilings. "You all need to evacuate. Go back the way you came and get to the Hangar. That way, if needed, we can get you off Prospero."

"Who are you?" asked one man, tall and beefy, wearing the telltale insignia of a

miner on his lapel.

"I'm the Chief of Security," said Ann, straightening up and glaring at the man. Despite the height difference of nearly a half meter, she had a better glare than anyone she knew. "You're leaving here. All of you. Now."

Her tone had a blade's sharpness to every word. There was no arguing with the authority she exuded. A couple more people took mental snapshots and then turned around. "Move yourselves, people," said Ann, her stomach still flopping, as much from the fear of fighting down a charging *lura* as because she had more work to do.

The crowd dispersed, albeit reluctantly. Ann didn't care. She had to figure out where Seton had gone to.

Thinking back, she'd followed his gaze for the split second it took before he grabbed her and threw her into the path of a massive *Dentolura*. Had she been thinking clearly, she would have had her aedee recording what was happening, but the loss of Nolan and the residue of the different drugs had clouded her thinking. That caused a small squirt of frustration at herself, but she couldn't dwell on it. She'd have to face that demon another time.

Instead, she rifled through her memories. What had she seen? Had it been the infant? Was it escaped again? That certainly would make sense. If Seton had lost the creature, he'd be frantic--desperate, even--to get it back. Desperate enough to throw her to the bigger specimens? She shrugged. It was possible. But why would he be heading northward? The only thing there was the...

Life Support wing.

If something happened in there--if one of the adults got into that area, searching for their infant--the entire Compound would be compromised. It wouldn't matter how quickly the Vanguard dispatched stargazers to help out. The entire colony would be dead in a matter of minutes.

Recognizing the danger, Ann pulled up a display of the Compound and, tweaking the parameters of the path, told her aedee to guide her to the best path to the Life Support wing.

She had an appointment with the good doctor that she didn't want to miss.

## Chapter 13

### Senton

Scrambling on his hands and knees, Senton lunged for Karl. The lura's tail tensed beneath his grip as Senton's heart thumped with excitement. He'd spent the last ten minutes trying to get the damn thing back, but it kept scooting away at the very last moment. Now, however, he had a good grip on its tail and there wasn't anything it could do--

Yelping, he pulled his hand back, his palm sizzling with pain. Karl ran away. Senton looked at his injured hand, grimacing as he saw blisters forming on the surface--right where his aedee's flesh-display showed up against his dark skin. They stung enough to make him grimace and grit his teeth. It was too painful to even open his fingers, to say nothing of interacting with his aedee.

Karl's tail, wriggling as it tried to get a section of metal grating free, waved at Senton, a mocking flag, adding insult to his hand's injury. A flame of passion and fury washed through him, forcing him to forget the blisters for a brief moment. The damn thing needed to die. Just, die. Barbs, coming out of the miniature mouths on the outside of Karl's skin, slowly retracted as the lura continued its investigation.

Senton stood up. The Life Support wing mostly consisted of maintenance paraphernalia, with pumps, fans, catwalks, walkways, and more viz-panels than were likely necessary. Like all of the Compound, it was evacuated, the machines running well without human supervision--for now. Karl scampered from the unmoving metal grate, its body tipping back and forth as it would poke at one potential exit after another. Having used its (until now, unknown) self-defense system on its stalker, Karl apparently thought that Senton wasn't about to come at him again. It ignored the human, sniffing the air and chirping mildly to itself. The smell of sewage began to fill the air.

The smell was what pushed Senton out of his killing rage.

The smell. That had been in the lab, and he'd noticed it getting stronger the closer he got to the lura. At first, he'd passed it off as simply the natural odor of the *Dentolura*. But now that he thought about it more, it was clear that Karl's *pheromones* were responsible for the stench. The baby was still calling for its parents.

The idea that massive *Dentolura succhi* would be following him to the Life Support section made him queasy. He needed to pick up Karl--or kill it, either, at this point, would be fine--and get out of the area. Additionally, he needed to record his observations, as not only did he understand that there was something toxic--though, he desperately hoped, not lethal--that the *Dentolura* could excrete through hidden spines. His hand burned and prickled with every movement.

Senton took a deep breath. He needed to prioritize, plan, prepare. He couldn't do that if he was too focused on the pain of the moment. Dropping into his cold,

calculating mind, Senton considered things as rationally as he could. Through some miracle of luck, he'd managed to keep the collapsible containment unit. It could be opened with a quick message from his aedee, which would be difficult to do left-handed, but he'd be able to manage. Once that was open, he could lure the lura into his trap and get Karl back to his lab. There, he could finalize the download of all the information that he'd collected, meet up with Korryn, and add the baby to whatever collection she'd managed to gain.

Assuming, of course, that she hadn't met with another *succhi* or something even worse.

Swallowing against that possibility, Senton thought of sending a message to Korryn, but then decided against it. If they were caught, anything written between the two could be looked into and used as evidence. He wasn't keen on incriminating himself. No, it would be better to meet with her, as planned, in the Hangar. He had to get Karl first, though.

That ended up being far easier than he had anticipated.

His hand aching all the way up to his right shoulder, he knew he couldn't do anything to Karl with his body. He could hardly move faster than a shuffle, so chasing the stupid thing wasn't an option, either. So he decided to give Karl exactly what the lura wanted: An escape.

Snagging a multi-purpose tool from a workstation, Senton set up his cage around the corner from the grate Karl had been investigating earlier. With some difficulty (and more than one loud profanity), Senton had the grate wide open. He set the opened containment unit in the shadowy maw of the ventilation shaft, then painfully set it to trigger at a snap from his fingers. Then he moved away.

Karl approached a couple minutes later, the vast amount of air circulating up the metallic throat pulling it in like stupidity to the humanities. Senton smirked as Karl, cautious but curious, paused to sniff. It stood for a long moment, but, in the end, Karl took a step inside. Then another.

Senton snapped his fingers.

The trap sprang.

Karl gurgled in surprise.

Senton whooped, but then regretted it when he jarred his shoulder. Hissing, he stepped forward. "You're not going anywhere," he said, reaching into the shaft and pulling out the containment unit. It trembled, and Karl made more than one sickly noise from within it, but if Senton had to guess, he'd say that the fight had been knocked out of it. Karl was defeated, and Senton couldn't keep from smiling thinking about it. "I got you now."

"Funny," said a voice behind him. Senton turned in surprise, then gasped as the movement reminded him that he was, by no means, capable of moving so quickly. "I was going to say the same thing."

"Chief," he said, his voice sounding thin and guilty to his own ears. He swallowed and licked his lips. "I didn't expect...to see you here."

"Because you threw me toward the open mouth of a huge, human-eating

creature?" asked Ann, stepping out of the shadows cast by an overhang of pipes. The stench of the caught lura mingled with the smell of wet and grease that the Life Support wing always had. The odors combined and made Senton's already-uneasy stomach clench. He licked his lips and cast a glance at the closest exit. Ann was between him and it.

"That was a mistake," he said, shifting slowly, trying to force Ann to move so that he could make a break for it. "I'm sorry about that."

"You know," said Ann, not falling for the attempt. She knew that he had no weapon, nothing to fight him with. She had him. But that didn't mean that Senton would remain caught. "You know, finding you wasn't as easy as I'd hoped. I had to go through a number of different back-alleys to get here. Open up a lot of doors. Do a lot of thinking as I went."

"Oh?" He didn't know where she was going with her conversation, and that worried him.

"Yes. I realized," said Ann, her back straight, her expression blank, "that you're hiding something."

"Oh?" He hated that he sounded...caught, as if he'd confessed simply by saying that one word. Grimacing as the pain in his arm faded into a cold numbness, he adjusted his grip on Karl's cage. The creature gurgled, then fell silent.

"Yes. I think you know more about the *Dentolura* than you've let on. Your notes--research, observations, visuals--I want them all." She extended her hand, palm up, in the familiar sign of a person waiting to receive an aedee-to-aedee transfer. Taking a step toward him, her other hand tight on the unholstered weapon, she stared at him with an air of unmistakable authority. Senton stepped back, uncomfortable with her approach.

"Y-you're crazy. I don't have anything that you could use. I mean, I have notes, of course. But it's all in my own code, my own cypher..."

"How long do you want to be in the brig, Doctor Trapp?"

The idea of incarceration stoked a fire of indignation in his mind. "You think you'll lock me up? That you'll charge me like a petty criminal? Send me with Draymond Rall out into the depths of space on that pathetic tub filled with crooks and murderers?" He let loose a laugh that, even to his ears, sounded forced and shrill. "No, I don't think so."

"There are two ways this ends, Doctor," said Ann, walking closer. "You die or you go to prison. Which do you prefer?"

"Wait," he said, licking his lips and looking around for an escape. Maybe if his arm wasn't useless, he'd be able to figure something out--punch her, maybe, though he'd never done a lot of physical exercises throughout his life, so he didn't know how he could do that without hurting himself--but as it stood, he had Karl and his brain.

His brain.

He could think his way out of this if he just had time to think.

"You have three seconds," said Ann, leveling her gun at him.

"Wait," he said, closing his eyes and seeking the calm of contemplation, the cold

world of rationality and reason that had helped him so often in the past.

"One."

The path to freedom was clogged, yes, but clogs needed only a push to break through, an incentive to move along.

"Two."

If he could get to a position where he could move something along--but what?--then he'd be able to...

Ann shot him in the leg.

Senton screamed and dropped the cage which, in the one stroke of good luck that night, didn't break open. Karl gurgled his displeasure, but it was half-hearted. The creature was not in good condition, Senton realized in a detached part of his mind. The majority of his mind was echoing his voice, screaming that he'd been shot.

"You...you shot me!"

"Yes," said Ann.

"I thought you were going to count to three!"

"Three," she said.

Gasping, he looked at his leg, expecting a fountain of his blood to be ejecting from the hole. His jaw dropped, and for a moment, the surprise overpowered the pain. The leg was intact--not even his pantleg was torn. He looked up at Ann, who looked like she was waiting for this moment.

"What, did you think I was going to maim you?" She snorted. "There are plenty of settings on a Security crewmember's weapon, Doctor, including non-lethal ones."

"It's a trick?" he said. He put pressure on it, but his leg screamed in protest--a cry which he, unwillingly, repeated. He collapsed to the ground.

"After a manner of speaking. It's more of a command override I put into your aedee by virtue of shooting you with the program." She wiggled the weapon, then slid it into its holster.

"You miserable little b--"

Ann grabbed Senton by the lapel of his coveralls, the action causing a spasm of pain to ripple down his right arm and his left leg and cutting him off from whatever he was about to say. In a voice of cold calm, she said, "Let's go."

"You...you can't," he said, his teeth clattering with the agony that lanced his body. "I can't move."

"No worries. I'll carry you," said Ann, then matched action to her words. Senton found himself ignominiously draped over the Chief of Security's back as she holstered and secured her weapon and then scooped to pick up the dropped cage.

For the briefest of moments, Senton was confused. He knew that Chief Timpson exercised enough to be good at her job, but she wasn't even winded with hefting him, and he weighed eighty kilos. Then he understood: She wore a skin-sheath, likely one similar to what her sister, Charalee, wore. Most people used skin-sheaths as a type of dermal armor, used to prevent small-arms fire or other projectiles. But some models had muscle enhancements. He knew she hadn't been wearing the sheath before, but now that he had the chance to consider it, she did seem a little bulkier. The skin-sheath

wasn't ever too thick, but it gave a particular contour to the body. He was distracted; that was why he hadn't noticed.

As he bounced, too in pain to mount a defense, he said, "So you think you've won?"

Ann chuckled, a dry, humorless sound. "I have miles to go before I sleep."

"Miles?"

She shook her head, which Senton felt brushing against his side. It was difficult to breath with his guts on her shoulder, but he couldn't get himself in a more comfortable position. "Don't worry about that." She shifted him, which made it a bit easier to breath, though it jolted both of his injured limbs. "While we go, why don't you tell me all that I want to know about the *Dentolura* that are currently causing havoc in my Compound?"

Despite his pretended conviction, he found that he was unable to keep his secrets safe while his body was in such pain. He thought that he could probably sue Ann for torture, but that would have to come later. For now, he answered her questions immediately, as any delay would cause "accidental" bumps.

When they arrived in the brig--a secured section of the Security wing--Ann dropped him in a heap on the floor of one of the cells. "You should be comfortable here," she said. "And don't worry about trying to contact anyone. These cells are designed to dampen any aedee activity." Sighing, she held up the cage, looking into where Karl lay, looking sick. "I'm going to keep this fellow here until I can get it to its parents. Hope you don't mind."

Setting Karl's cage in the cell across from Senton, Ann straightened. She held up her hand. "Thanks for the information, by the way. I appreciate your cooperation in this difficult time."

"Yeah, don't mention it," said Senton.

"You're sure that's everything?"

He shrugged. "I guess." He paused. "If I think of anything, how can I contact you?"

Ann hesitated. "Why?"

He shrugged again, then winced as he straightened on the ground. "I'm in a lot of pain. I might have forgotten something."

She regarded him for a long time, but he studiously considered his swollen hand, avoiding her gaze. "Fine," she said at last. "I'll set it up that your aedee can only talk to mine."

Senton took care not to show a secret pleasure flash across his face. "That works," he said softly. He considered his leg. It was whole, of course, but it still ached like it'd been shot to pieces. "How long will this program run through my leg?"

"I don't remember," said Ann. "Somewhere between an hour and a week." Giving him a jaunty salute, she said, "Call if you think of something." Then she walked out the door.

"Oh, I will," he said, the smile he'd suppressed smearing across his face, filled with malice and rage and indignation. "You can count on that."



## Chapter 14

### Korryn

The allure of potential money had faded throughout the past hours. Korryn had taken a wrong turn somewhere--though why they had to make the Compound so confusing in the first place, she didn't know--and her aedee's navigational system wasn't working correctly. It kept trying to take her back to the Laboratory wing and use that to connect to Gateway Avenue. That didn't work, as there were sealed off portions and plenty of *Dentolura* throughout the hallways there. And though she knew she should be trying to gather more lura in order to take them back to a spacestation, she now worried that maybe the plan wasn't as well-thought out as she had hoped.

Walking down an abandoned hallway, the sky outside palely lit by the sprinkle of foreign stars, Korryn took stock of what she had in her favor. Five syringes of enough tranquilizer that, Senton had assured her, would be enough to bring down almost any lura she came across. A scalpel she'd palmed from the lab before she left. Her aedee, which was misbehaving. A death wish, apparently.

She shook her head. Regret roiled inside of her, fueled mostly by her own desperation. The money couldn't be *that* good, could it? Besides, she'd been "hunting" these things since she'd left Senton's company, and though she'd seen a couple, both were far too large for her to do anything to them. Even if the tranqs worked the way Senton promised, those creatures were too big for her to haul toward the Hangar. She needed a better way.

Of course, the danger of coming toward the creatures, not knowing what they were about, made her hesitant, too. Self-preservation was a stronger motivation than the potential profits and she wasn't ashamed to admit that. Still...she didn't want to go through this crisis empty handed. There had to be a way to capture a lura without risking her life to do it. She just had to figure it out.

The hallway connected with another, a larger one that ran east to west. At least, she *thought* it ran that way. Everyone she'd passed had been going the opposite way, and now that she'd gone some minutes without seeing anyone, she didn't know what to do. Querying her aedee again, it told her to turn around and head to the Laboratory wing. Screaming through gritted teeth, she slapped her hand against the glass that protected the hallway from the harsh atmosphere of Prospero.

She snorted. What a stupid name. *Prospero*? No one prospered here. It was a new world, sure, but the riches it promised were far away. The original colonists would all be dead by the time the air was safe for humans to breathe. The miners extracting all of the precious minerals had to either pressurize the mines--a dangerous proposition under good circumstances--or work in atmo-suits. Drones were no good underground because of radio distortion...everything horrible about the planet was part of what she had to deal with. Yes, she spent most of her time in the kitchens or in the Recreation

wing, but work and play in the same stilted environment? She could name a half dozen spacestations spiraling their way through the vastness of space that could promise that, and there was always some new thought or invention or drug to try out in the 'stations. Here? All the same. Always the same. All of the work, none of the prosperity.

Korrryn smacked the glass with her open hand again. What a waste.

"You trying to break out?" asked a voice that had a tinge of amusement in it but mostly rippled with a condescension that Korrryn didn't appreciate. She looked toward the owner of the voice, then grunted.

"Oh. It's you."

"Guilty," said Charalee as she strode up, her face framed by a mane of luxuriant hair. "But what about you?"

"What about me?"

"What are you guilty of?"

Korrryn flinched, but she was facing away from the Timpson sister, so she could safely assume the woman hadn't seen the reaction. "Nothing."

"That's too bad," said Charalee in a way that made Korrryn understand what the phrase "tsked" meant. "If you're going to be punished, you may as well have had the pleasure of at least having done the crime."

Korrryn almost let a flicker of a smile crease her face. She'd been known to think along those lines herself. "Life's strange that way," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been," said Charalee, a frustrated laugh that did little to put Korrryn at ease seeping through her words, "*trying* to figure out how to get the power back on."

"Isn't that someone else's job?"

"I'm supposed to turn on the Portal as soon as the sun rises," said Charalee, her voice turning stern. "If the power isn't up and running when we get full sunlight, the Portal can't open. If it can't open, then my purpose for being here is a waste."

"Prospero is good at that," said Korrryn, returning to her contemplation of the land outside the glass hallway walls. Squinting, she could see more of the *Dentolura* prowling around a distant wing--she couldn't tell which one from where she was--but there didn't seem to be any close to them.

"Being a waste?"

"Yeah."

"You found something," said Charalee. "Or, should I say, *someone*?"

Korrryn bristled. "You mean, Senton?"

"The very same," said Charalee. She leaned against the terraglass and looked at Korrryn with a knowing expression. "He and I dated, you know."

Korrryn swallowed noisily. What did this woman want from her? A confession of her love for the doctor? A recognition that she, Korrryn, was picking up what Charalee had rejected? A confession that she didn't really know Senton very much, but couldn't deny that there was an attraction? The fact that Charalee spoke with such surety about what Korrryn ought to know also rankled her.

"No, he failed to mention that in the few moments we've spent together."

"Few moments?" Charalee looked at her with an arched eyebrow. "I got a

different vibe from him." She paused. "But I know him a lot better than you do. So you maybe missed the clues."

"Yeah, maybe," she said, not willing to give anything to this Timpson woman. The fact that Charalee was trying to intimidate her into *not* liking Senton almost made her want to like the guy, if only to spite Charalee.

"But, yeah, he's a pretty good guy. If you like scrawny, obsessive, know-it-all asses who think the idea of good sex is that he gets off." She shrugged. "To each their own, right?"

"What are you trying to do, Charalee?"

"I told you: Get the power back on."

"And why are you talking to me about it? Shouldn't you be digging around for power cables to connect or something like that?"

Charalee snorted. "It's more complicated than that. Figuring it all out has been a problem for me."

"Well, I don't see why your problem needs to become mine."

"You already have Senton," said Charalee in a thoughtful voice, "so I figure you've a good sense for that by now."

Gritting her teeth, Korrryn said, "I'm not fighting over a guy with you."

"I don't want him."

"Then why are you talking to me?" It was all she could do to keep from screaming the question.

"I wanted to give you a heads up," said Charalee. "Female solidarity, or something like that."

"Thanks, but I think I'll figure it out." Korrryn turned to go, but Charalee called out after her, making her pause for a moment.

"You'll be better off worrying only about yourself. He's not worth it, you know? There are more men like him than there are stars in the sky. Don't bother with a guy you found on a mud clod."

"Thanks for the 'advice'," said Korrryn, resuming her departure. "I'll keep that in mind."

"You do that," said Charalee.

Korrryn clamped her teeth to keep a retort from slipping out. If Charalee had to have the last word, let her have it. At least that much Korrryn could control.

Stomping away in whatever direction she chose, Korrryn stewed in her own thoughts. Did she care what Charalee said? The woman had spent most of her time talking about the man she'd left behind--as if Korrryn cared about relationships right now. The thing that bothered her the most was that she had fallen into the conversation. She hadn't even wanted to talk about Senton, and she'd just wasted however many minutes chatting with Charalee.

But there was something else that bothered her, and only through a hefty helping of honesty could she pin it down: She worried about what Charalee had said. In the past, she'd never talked to exes when she started seeing a guy. It complicated matters. But this had sort of fallen into her lap, and though she wasn't entirely confident of her

feelings toward Senton, she had to admit that there was *something*. That he liked her was obvious, and she didn't find being around him that unpleasant. That he'd come along with her idea--bad though it was, she had to confess to herself--meant that maybe he was interested in pursuing the relationship.

Then Charalee had to sow doubt in the fields of her mind. Charalee wasn't entirely wrong about the guy: He *was* a know-it-all who had a tendency to get obsessive and focused in on one thing at the exclusion of all else.

But was that so bad? It made him a good scientist...

Shoving the thoughts away, she decided to stop thinking about him. This wasn't the time, and more than that, she didn't need to worry about these things at this moment. She had more important tasks ahead of her.

Surviving, for instance.

And figuring out where she was, for another.

Her temple warmed...a call was coming through. Frowning, Korryn glanced in the lower left of her peripheral vision. The aedee read the movement of her eyes and drew the caller's identity into sharp focus. *Senton Trapp*.

Why was he calling? He'd been silent for hours and now he was trying to talk to her? With a flat taste in her mouth, she tapped her temple to accept the comm.

"What?" she asked, her tone as irritated as she felt.

"I don't have much time," he said, his voice hushed and tense. There was an undercurrent of pain--she could almost hear him wincing--that brought her attention fully to the conversation.

"What's going on?"

"I'm in the Brig!"

"How...how did you call out, then?" she asked. Grudgingly--and why grudgingly, she had to ask herself--she felt an uptick in respect for the man's resourcefulness.

"Not important. Get here. I need you to free me."

For a moment, she thought of hanging up on him. But then Charalee's point about him being a know-it-all popped into her head. The man knew the Compound better than anyone--it was part of his obsessive personality--and if she wanted out, then maybe he would be the best chance for that.

She bit her lip and looked around. "I haven't caught anything yet."

"We'll do that later. Come get me free!"

Korryn hesitated.

"Oh, no," said Senton. Then the line went dead.

Korryn sighed as her temple returned to its normal temperature. They must have caught his broadcast. She glanced around. How was she supposed to get *anywhere*, to say nothing of the Brig?

Queuing up her aedee, she entered the request. Maybe he could help her. At least this way, it gave her something to do.

## Chapter 15

### Ann

Shooting an angry glance at Lyle Odenheim, Ann said, "I thought you made the Janus protocol transparent."

Lyle swallowed. A thin man with a thin moustache tracing his upper lip, his eyes bulged constantly. Coupled with the halo of hair that always seemed to float about his head, it gave him the appearance of a person who was in a perpetual state of surprise. This impression only became worse when he swallowed, his slender neck bobbing above the collar of his coveralls. "Uh..."

"He cut off. Right after saying that they were going to catch more 'things' later." Ann had learned how to glower from her mother; she used the skill well. "This isn't why I contacted you."

"Look," said Lyle, shifting from foot to foot, his nerves obviously frayed. He kept licking his lips and glancing at the door. Ann could guess that he wanted to get to the Hangar--she'd been lucky to have caught him before he'd heeded the evacuation call. And there had been blood--there was blood everywhere, it seemed--on their hasty trip to his workstation, where Ann sat now. He was still shaken by that. "Look," he said again. "I did the best I could. You told me--earlier today, as I seem to recall--that Janus was a no. Now it's a yes. I didn't have time to run everything I wanted to on the program."

Ann felt dirty. Biting her lip, she considered her words carefully. "I don't like what this is. Were we not in an emergency situation, I would never have done this."

"It's not unethical, if that's what you're worried about," said Lyle, putting his hand out to reassure her. "The concept has been thoroughly vetted by a consortium of private army CEOs and some of their ethicists."

"That doesn't really assure me of anything," said Ann, standing up. "And that's beside the point. I don't want this protocol in our system. Once this situation is tidied up, I want your work expunged from the Compound's mainframe."

Lyle licked his lips. "Chief Timpson, I beg you..."

She pointed at the aedee-pad on his workstation. "I only need one more thing from you."

"What?" he asked, sounding defeated.

"I need you to find me the coordinates of Korryn, the woman that he was talking to."

"I can do that," said Lyle. His attitude was sycophantic mixed with pride, which made for a most unpleasant combination to Ann's mind. "No problem."

He wiggled his fingers in a pattern that was both too fast for her to recognize and too unfamiliar to remember. A moment later, he held out his hand. Ann touched his palm, allowing her aedee to download the information via a tactile transfer.

"This will keep a bead on her until you tell Janus to stop. I've given you access to control that, as needed." Lyle looked morose. "But, please. Don't get rid of it until you've at least talked to me."

Ann stared at him, her expression a cold blankness that she knew was more discomfiting than neutral. "I'll think about it."

"Okay." Lyle nodded, his throat bobbing. "Okay. Thanks."

"I'm going to make sure that you're escorted safely to the Hangar," she said, gesturing at the door. The workstation was one of many of the engineers who worked in the same space. Their terminals dotted the room, making it a less-than-straight path to the exit. Still, Lyle knew what she was doing. He headed in the right direction, pausing once as if to ask a question, then changing his mind. When the door dilated, one of her crew was there, waiting for him.

"Come with me, sir," said the officer, but whatever else she said was lost as Bertram Callaway slid past the two and into the room.

"Bert," said Ann, somewhat surprised to see him. His skin-sheath was noticeable beneath his security coveralls, and he carried an aedee-rifle with him. The weapon was considered to be safer than any other designed by the PAs, but Ann thought the possibility of having a corporate entity be in control--even tangentially--of the weapon that was supposed to save her life was a possibility too large to agree with. While having a safety lock that only contact with one's aedee made sense in a theoretical way, the practical application of it was that Ann had to trust in the goodness of Desert Peaks to let her use her weapons. That didn't sit well with her. Bert, though, disagreed. They'd gone more than one round--both in drink and in conversation--about the topic.

"Chief," he said, adjusting the gun that also sat on his hip. "You wanted someone?"

Ann tried to recall. There had been a lot of orders, a lot of things to remember and keep moving. At last, it came to her. "Yes, yes. I wasn't expecting you, Bert."

"I was close by."

"How's the evacuation going?"

"We've had some problem spots, but we're moving along pretty well. The major thoroughfares are all broken into, so the system has sealed them shut." He grimaced, shaking a lock of his dreadlocked hair from his piercing brown eyes. "It is what it is, but it has made it harder to get anyone anywhere." Shrugging, he added, "I hope to finish up in the next couple of hours. Barring any unforeseen circumstances."

Ann tweaked an eyebrow. "Yeah, barring *those*."

He chuckled, but she couldn't sense any humor. "There are some casualties--we're looking at about nineteen deaths that we know of, plus twice that in injuries. Some are minor. Sprained ankles and wrists, a few bruises from panics. But we're still getting reports. The energy problem has put comms down in certain sectors--we're still trying to figure that part out."

"Keep it up."

"Thank you. How are you holding up?"

Ann sighed. She'd expected this question, but it didn't make it any easier to

answer. "I'm hanging in there. I don't have the luxury of feeling bruised, tired, or old."

"Well, don't burn yourself out. We need you."

She gestured at him. "You've been running pretty well without too much oversight from me or Captain Rall."

Bert shrugged. "You designed the procedures that we follow. If there are any changes to it, I'll let you know."

Ann nodded. "Excellent. Thank you."

"Yes, sir." Bert turned to go.

"Hey, wait."

He faced her again, his large arms unconsciously flexing as he adjusted his aedee-rifle on his shoulder.

"I need you to do something for me. Can you assign someone to watch over the Brig?"

He arched an eyebrow. "At a time like this, sir, we need every hand to help."

"I know. Pick someone green, anxious to prove herself." Then she shook her head. "No, never mind. Pick someone that you can spare for whatever reason. I'd...I would feel better knowing that there's a guard down there."

"Why?"

"I don't trust Senton."

"Doctor Trapp?" Bertram frowned. "He's in the Brig?"

"Long story. Point is, I need someone watching."

"I'll get someone there as soon as possible. Anything else?"

Ann shook her head, returned his salute, and sank into the chair. Having had Lyle here and finally compromising on the Janus protocol made it difficult for her to think clearly. She'd long resisted the power that the Janus protocol meant she could take, and, to be honest with herself, she'd expected more benefit for having sacrificed her good judgment. Still, she could keep track of Korryn with the access Lyle had given her. So maybe *some* good would come through?

Out of curiosity, she turned on the viz-player with her aedee, letting it project its three-dimensional version of her workstation. The new file glowed softly, letting her know that she had yet to access it. She reached out, then hesitated. Maybe it wasn't too late to walk back from a mistake?

But was it a mistake? Not being able to take care of these rogue elements--and how quickly she'd come to think of the small conspiracy between Korryn and Senton as "rogue elements" when the best she had was an understanding that they wanted to do something with the baby *Dentolura*--was dangerous. There were lives being lost because of Senton, so was it a sense of justice? She didn't want an emergency to prevent her from enforcing the laws of Prospero and those from the greater whole of humanity? Or was that petty? She'd used the idea of emergency to justify the way that she was behaving with regard to Janus. What other exceptions could she make?

The ideas rattled around inside her head, distracting her and making the omni-present headache that much worse. What she wouldn't do for a bit of Calm--not a lot, of course, but enough to take the edge off. Sighing, she pushed past the frustration

and tapped the icon on the viz-player.

Immediately, the display showed a map--a poor one that lacked detail, in Ann's estimation--of the Compound. There were two glowing icons, both labeled. One was for the doctor. Still in the Brig, not moving around at all, of course. The other was for Korryn, who was, to Ann's surprise, headed toward--at best guess--the Laboratory wing.

Frowning, she leaned in, squinting at the spot on the display. Her aedee zoomed in automatically, but there wasn't any more detail to understand. The program was showing the positions of the two people's aedees. That was it.

Waving away the display, Ann leaned back. She needed to get out there. She needed to help the rest of the colonists who were in danger. It was not the time to slip.

But there was so much banging about in her mind. From the attack to the different creatures to the fact that her sister was here to the downer from the Calm, all of it seemed too much. The last thing she needed to do was slip into a buzz, to take a hit that would impair her judgment.

Frustrated, she slapped the top of Lyle's desk. The force of the blow caused something in the drawer to rattle. Surprised at the sound, she peeked into the man's desk.

There, tucked into a corner, likely freed from her blow, was a small, familiar package.

Calm.

She could use this Calm, saving the one in her pocket for another time. That felt like a good enough reason to not fret about the high. She had an opportunity here that she couldn't--or maybe even *shouldn't*--waste.

Reaching in, she snagged the container. It was smaller than what she was used to, and the label on the outside a different color. Unsure what that could mean, she hesitated. But the pressure--the need--resurfaced.

She held the container to her face.

A flick of the finger, and she'd calm down. She'd Calm down.

She hesitated, but only for a moment.

Finger moving, she triggered the release. The package popped open, Calm misted her nose and mouth, and the drug acted immediately, sending her away, clearing her mind of what she'd done.

Outside, in the hallway, she heard screams.



## Chapter 16

### Charalee

A gurgle in front of her let Charalee know that one of the lura had found her. She swore under her breath, more out of frustration than anything else. The power problem on Prospero was real, and the fact that night was rolling on meant that she had limited time to fix it. The engineer she'd cornered soon after leaving her dear sister some hours before had explained the situation, albeit in a stuttering, almost incoherent matter. Still, Charalee had reviewed the information enough to understand why the Compound had yet to get its power restored.

Another gurgle pulled her out of her ruminations. While the lura was a problem, she wasn't too concerned. She'd killed a couple of them so far, and though they were tough--and smelly--she didn't have to worry about what they could do to her. The skin-sheath alone was protection enough from their teeth and claws. The problem was that *others* tended to become afraid whenever they showed up. She didn't appreciate them complicating her problems.

The lura snuffled closer, its nose close to the ground. This one's shape was different than the others--in fact, they were all distinct--with a long snout, rimmed with glistening teeth. Two sets of eyes sat atop the boney head, with knobby crests protecting the delicate organs. It walked on its hind legs, with a tail that looked more like a collection of writhing whips than a proper tail. Small arms poked out of the front of its body, the ends of which were an array of three sharp claws. They wiggled as it sniffed, its nostrils on the far end of its snout making a loud suction noise. Charalee curled her lip up in disgust.

Inwardly, she wondered how Doctor Trapp could want to investigate the animals. They were revolting, covered in a slimy skin that shimmered in the poor lighting of the connecting hallway that--she'd hoped--would lead her to the Energy wing. Not for the first time did she regret not taking Nolan up on the offer of joining the Compound's network.

The lura paused, a long tongue--it would have to be, to go the length of such a snout--flicked out and began to lap up a puddle it had found. Charalee wasn't sure about its contents, but the animal was busy. And, seeing as how its head alone was more than a meter long, she didn't feel particularly curious about getting up close to the end where it consumed its diet. If it wanted to slurp up some toxic chemicals, that wasn't really her concern.

Shifting lightly on her feet, she worked her way toward the creature. It had come from the direction she was trying to go, so if she could get past it, that would be best. And despite the fact she wasn't worried about being eaten by a *Dentolura*, she didn't see the harm in being cautious. No reason to make it worse than it already was.

This connecting hallway was packed full of cables and wires, dim lights scarcely

lighting the way--which she had her aedee adjust for her, so that hardly mattered--and alcoves, cubbies, and turn offs at almost every six meters. Or so it felt like, at least. The point was, she kept thinking she'd be in the right place at the next turn, only to realize that she was completely wrong. She was tired of making these miscalculations. Getting the power put back so that she could power up the Portal was all that she worried about, and the rest of this trivia could get out of her way.

Gritting her teeth, she eased onward, her helmet in one hand, her back pressed against the service tunnel's cable-coated wall.

For its part, the lura contented itself with the puddle. Its eyes were facing forward in their sockets, which gave her confidence. So long as it remained focused on the fluid, she would be happy. That wasn't asking too much, was it?

Rounding the corner, she kept up the steady, slow pace, not wanting to turn her back on the creature yet. Methodical steps, keeping the wall behind her...it would all turn out okay, she was certain.

Her helmet caught on a protruding brace that stuck out from the wall. It wasn't even a *caught*, it was more of a *snag*, but the end result was the same: The helmet slipped free from her grasp.

The sound of it crashing to the ground echoed painfully in the narrow corridor. Her ears rang with the echoes of it.

The lura leaped and spun around, its lengthy jaws wide and menacing. The gurgle, which sounded like an unplugged drain that was still too full of water and waste that it couldn't manage the trick of doing its job, dropped into a lower octave. Charalee swallowed, recognizing the ominous threat despite having had almost no exposure to the lura.

She tensed. The aedee sensed her response, noted the increase in adrenaline, the change in surface temperature, and recognized that she was in a dangerous situation. It augmented her senses, a handy trick when one had to fight free of a monster's jaws.

The lura leaped forward, moving faster than Charalee expected, its multi-headed tail writhing behind it while its snout split both vertically and horizontally. The long tongue, freed of its boney prison, whirled toward her. Sharp spines ran its length, dripping with a yellowish ichor.

Out of reflex rather than training, Charalee flung herself to the right. She crashed into the wall--the corridor was so narrow that she could touch both walls simply by stretching out her arms--but dodged the attack. The tongue snapped back into the lura's face, its jaws clamping together.

Pushing free of the wall, Charalee bent down and scooped up the helmet, moving to put it on her head when the tongue pierced it. With a jerk so powerful her shoulders ached trying to stop it, the lura pulled the helmet free of her hands. Charalee yelped in surprise at the speed with which the lura had resumed the attack, and was grateful that the helmet had stopped her from getting her head lanced.

The lura's jaws began crushing the helmet, but, to its surprise--and Charalee's relieved amusement--the headgear didn't bend. Holding onto the helmet with its tongue, the lura began to thrash and writhe its body--its tendril-tail doing the same,

striking out loudly and harshly against the pipes and the wall of the hallway--as it tried to destroy the thing that it had sucked into its mouth.

"Have fun with the ball, bitch," said Charalee, feeling snide, if a little shaken. The helmet was of the same material that Desert Peaks outfitted its soldiers. There wasn't a thing that naturally occurred that could break that armor. It protected the wearer from solar radiation, atmospheric catastrophe, and could even be submerged several kilometers under water. While not quite as durable as her skin-sheath, it was still powerful armor.

She turned away, heading toward the exit at a brisk pace. It was a nuisance that she lost her helmet, but it could be replaced. And, besides, that was one less thing to clutter her hands. She didn't like wearing the helmet, so...

An ear shattering *pop* made her spin around.

Some ten meters away, the lura stood, its jaws closed, its gullet bouncing, and an angry look in its four eyes. Pieces of shattered helmet littered the ground at the lura's feet.

"Well, shit," she said, and turned, sprinting down the tunnel. Behind her, she could hear the sounds of pursuit as the lura began scampering after her. The clawed feet clattered horrendously against the concrete floor, filling her ears as her lungs tried to fill themselves with more and more air. Her aedee took over some of the regulation of oxygen in her body--a new feature that she'd upgraded right before this trip, though it had been more out of impulse than planning--which gave her a stronger push. Powering her legs as fast as she could, Charalee propelled herself toward the exit. Her brown hair whipped behind her. The feeling of her blood thundering through her temples, the coppery taste in the back of her throat, and the imagined image of her own head being in the four-angled jaws of a lura, cracking open much easier than it had that helmet all warred for attention in her mind.

She pushed it all free and focused only on running, letting her skin-sheath lend strength to her muscles.

The sound of the lura increased.

A heavy weight slammed into her, knocking her flat and driving the air from her chest. The creature bounced off, landing and rolling a few meters forward while she skidded on the ground.

Groaning, she levered herself onto her hands and knees. The gurgle drew her attention. The lura had regained its feet and now bent low, its jaws clacking together in a staccato rhythm that reminded her of fingernails tapped on plastic. Its gurgle deepened, a wet, ominous sound.

Without warning, it burst forward, its claws scrabbling against the cement.

That was enough warning for her.

Her heart hammering in her chest, Charalee threw herself to the left, crashing against the door as the creature sailed past, its four-segmented mouth wide. The teeth glinted in the poor lighting, and for a moment Charalee felt as though she could count each one.

Scrambling against the door as the lura thumped with a furious grunt three

meters away, she slapped the jamb, desperate to get her feet under her. The panel beeped--she didn't have access. The door was locked.

A numb disbelief swelled within her. This was it. She was going to die in this hallway, and no one would even know it. Torn to pieces and unlamented, Charalee had not expected death to come to her this way.

That made her angry.

Dying this way was not what she had in mind. If nothing else, survival was the most important thing. The idea of being ripped apart and sucked down that narrow gullet, or crushed by those intimidating jaws, seemed almost insulting. She wasn't even a colonist! She didn't live here, she didn't have any reason to be on Prospero, save it was her job. Her job had killed her.

That made her furious.

Not only that, but the stupid door wasn't opening because she hadn't bothered downloading a protocol. That she'd been trying to preserve her aedee from any gross detritus picked up from using the Compound's network was the very thing that led to her death struck her as perverse.

That made her lethal.

Rage coursing through her, she balled her hands into fists and leaped out. The lura, as she'd guessed, hadn't thought that the cornered prey would attack. Surprising the damn thing was a highlight of an otherwise miserable day, and there was a gush of excitement and thrill that coursed through her as she landed on top of the lura's back.

Acting quickly but without forethought, she reached around the thing's thick neck, wrapping her elbow around its throat and locking her right hand in place with her left arm. The lura writhed beneath her, and she felt the whips of the tail arch over and rake her back. The skin-sheath did what it was designed to do: It protected her from attack. Hardening into an almost steel-like consistency, the skin-sheath's back surface absorbed the energy from the tail while also protecting her front from the thrusts of what she guessed were retractable spikes that came out of the mouth-like holes in its side.

A grim smile crept over her face.

Something was going to die right now, but she now doubted it would be her.

The lura lurched about, trying to dislodge her as she increased pressure. It was a guess, yes, but Charalee staked her attack on the idea that, like terran animals, there was blood and oxygen--or whatever it was the thing breathed--that circulated through the creature's system. And if it had a brain close to its eyes, like terran animals, then that meant she was making the lura choke.

Its movements became more enfeebled while still maintaining its frantic maneuvers. Charalee had her feet on the ground, now, and was able to add her weight to the back of the lura's skull, pushing it down harder while tightening the head-lock with her arms. A longer appendage from the tail slashed down, cutting her scalp from the top to just behind her ear. The pain spiked through her, and she unwittingly let go.

The lura scampered free, its claws raking the cement, and ran away. The color of the creature had faded to an almost white, the brown-and-green hue of its skin nearly

impossible to see now. A moment after it was released, the lura had left.

Charalee stood slowly, her head pounding and her throat raw. It was only now, with the danger gone, that she understood that she'd been screaming at the lura the entire time she'd attacked it. Touching the wound on her head, she winced. It was long, but not particularly deep. Still, the pain was not insignificant. It also wasn't something that she would worry about right now.

Arms leaden, she stumbled back to the door. The fight had taken more out of her than she'd expected, though certainly a part of that was lack of food. Breaking atmo wasn't a pleasant experience, and she'd found that piercing a planet's envelope worked better while fasting. As a result, she hadn't much strength left.

Still, that wouldn't be enough to stop her. She needed to live, she *had* to survive. That was all that mattered.

Thumping the unresponsive door, she mustered a weak shout. The likelihood that someone was on the opposite side of the portal gave her the energy she needed, but the hope was dwindling.

Sounds drifted in from the other side of the door. The words were indistinct, but insistent. Pushing past the exhaustion her body had wrapped itself in, she thudded against the door. She stood only because it took too much effort to sit; when the door dilated, she slumped through and fell into surprised arms.

"Good lord," said a voice that she didn't recognize. "Look at all that blood!"

"Is she still alive?" asked another.

"We're pulling all survivors together, that's what we do," said a voice with a ragged edge of authority. Charalee couldn't see anyone's face, which made her curious and surprised and sleepy.

More words blurred together, but it soon became easier to let her eyelids close. Holding them up was a massive effort that she didn't want to deal with. Why deal with anything? Why survive? It was only more pain.

She slipped into blackness.

## Chapter 17

### Korryn

It took a bit of humility for her to finally admit it, but by the time she'd passed the same blood-splatter on the wall for the third time, she was ready to concede: Korryn was lost. The fact that she didn't know where to go for *anything*--either to catch a creature (a losing proposition that sounded more and more stupid the longer she thought about it) or to get to the safety of the Hangar--only made the feelings worse. The Compound felt abandoned and isolated, yet dangerous and overrun with the *Dentolura*. She was tired, thirsty, and hungry. And if she never saw another lura again, she'd consider herself thrice blessed.

Turning at random, she wandered down another hallway. The lights flickered here--more problems, it seemed. Maybe the emergency power was failing. If that was the case, how long before the entire Compound was undone? The life support systems would fail without power to keep the air circulating. The food would spoil. No medical supplies. No way of communicating to the Desert Peaks commissioners. By the time they realized something was wrong, it would probably be too late.

All that was only if the *Dentolura* didn't kill everyone else, first.

She cursed Senton casually, invoking any number of lurid beliefs about him, his parents, and his genitals. The idea that she maybe had started to feel something for him made her skin crawl. The man was deplorable. What had she ever seen in--

A scream drew her attention. She thought it came from her left, but the echo of it wrapped her up, making her freeze in panic. Korryn flexed her fingers. She brushed them lightly against the hypodermic needles that she had bouncing off her hip. Despite her hope to sedate one of the lura, she hadn't had a chance to use any of the tranquilizers yet. She readied one now.

The screaming increased, certainly from the left now. Edging forward slowly, she decided that she should peek to ensure she knew what she was running from.

Tipping her head around the corner, she bit back a gasp. On the floor, perhaps seven meters from where Korryn stood, a round lura with a long snout was stepping toward a panic-stricken woman. She was scooting backwards, her face tight with terror; blood oozed out of a ragged hole in her midriff. Her tears leaked out of the edges of her eyes, but Korryn was more worried about the lura. Its whip-like tail slashed the air as it stalked forward, but its color was faded and sickly--nothing like any of the other *Dentolura* that Korryn had seen before--and it moved hesitantly, as if it, too, were injured.

Korryn swallowed. The needle was in her hand. She could sneak up on the creature, stab it with the sedative, save the girl. Korryn focused on the woman, noting the birthmark that looked like a bruise against her pale skin. Her brown hair stuck to her sweat-glossed forehead. She tried to think if she knew the woman, but nothing

came out. There were thousands of people who lived on Prospero. It wasn't a surprise that Korrryn didn't recognize her.

"Stop, no," sobbed the woman, scooting again as the lura opened up its two-way jaws. Korrryn had seen a couple of other attacks and knew how this was going to end. She wanted to jump forward, to be a hero, but the possibility that the lura would spot her--or hear her or smell her or whatever else these freakish creatures could do--made her stay rooted in place.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" shrieked the woman, trying to get herself up, but being unable to as much because of the blood-slicked ground as the long tongue of the lura slapped her down every time she tried to rise. "I don't have your baby! I don't know where it went! I'm sorry!"

Korrryn frowned. The baby? What did this lady know about...

Then it became clear. The maybe-murderer. This woman had seen the baby lura, she had been in the containment room when Theodore had been killed...at least, that was the most likely explanation. How else would she know that an infant was in the Compound?

Korrryn kept her breathing shallow, now knowing she couldn't interfere. The fewer people who knew about the infant, the easier it would be for her to deny any involvement when she got off of Prospero. It was a hard logic, especially as the screams escalated until, with a wet splash, the woman's protests were cut off by the snapping jaws of the lura, but Korrryn couldn't let herself be bothered by it. Harsh reality dictated that Korrryn take care of herself first. It was that simple.

As the lura dug into its meal, crunching through bones and rivers of hot blood poured out from its massive jaws, Korrryn steeled herself. What a waste it would be of this poor woman's life to not take advantage of the creature's distraction. It no longer gurgled, but made a moaning sound that made Korrryn feel like the creature was savoring its food.

Stepping out from the corner, Korrryn hesitated. The sounds of feasting turned her stomach, and the stench of the creature was sharper than before--more pungent, more coppery, more like a sewer--but what could she do? Run away? This was the moment she'd been waiting for. Yes, she had been ready to leave everyone behind, but that was because she hadn't been able to get her creature. Now, however, she had the chance.

Easing forward another step, she breathed shallowly through her mouth, not wanting to breathe in the foul air.

Another step.

The lura ate, oblivious to her approach.

Another step.

The dark shadows of the ill-lit hallway made her imagination see more than the lura in front of her, made her hear more scabbling claws on the tiled floor of the Compound.

She swallowed again.

Three meters away.

The lura tipped its head back, swallowing a bone-rife section of the woman's body--Korryn didn't want to guess which part--and in that simple movement Korryn could see one of its four eyes.

It looked at her.

She froze.

The creature stopped, the bloody morsel halfway down its gullet.

She had two thoughts: Run--

--and, *How much is that worth?*

It was shallow, she knew, as superficial as anytime she'd ever slept with a guy because of his great physique or that he looked like he would listen to her chat over drinks before making his move. Who cared what it was worth? If she died, she couldn't spend the money. It was dumb.

But if she lived, she'd never have to work again. She'd have enough money to float through life until she died sometime into her fifteenth decade.

In the end, that made it enough.

Lunging forward, she covered the intervening distance as fast as she could.

The lura, in a panic, began to regurgitate the half-eaten mess.

That was its mistake.

Taking advantage of its delay, Korryn closed the gap and knocked into the *Dentolura's* body. It only came up to about her midsection, but it was oily and wiry. It felt like she'd struck a package of pre-prepped food that they had in the pantries of the kitchen.

It didn't matter.

The tranquilizer acted almost immediately. The lura bucked once, making her dance backwards in surprise, but then paused, its eyes--all four of them--blinking wearily in its eerie skull. The whip-tails slapped to the ground like links of sausage. The lura's legs went wobbly and it dropped to one side. A massive disgorging of what it had eaten vomited over the floor. Only luck and an instinctively nimble dance out of the way kept Korryn from being splattered with the remnants of the poor woman who lay dead on the floor.

The lura opened up the mouth-shaped holes on the side of its body and ejected a dozen or so small pods that landed with a wet splat all over the hallway. In this, Korryn was less lucky; one of the disgusting things stuck to her coverall legs. The rest landed everywhere--the ceiling, the walls, the floors--and there trembled.

All fell still.

Korryn looked around, confused. "What are these?" she asked of no one. They didn't move. It was as if the thing had voided its bowels as it had slipped into unconsciousness. She'd heard of that happening to people, too, so maybe *Dentolura* were similar?

A moment passed until Korryn realized what she'd just done, what she had captured. A happy shout burst from her lips and she did a little dance. It was part celebration of success, part exultation at surviving. She had, by herself, taken down a disgusting, massive, blood-besmirched lura. How many other people could say such a



thing? Probably zero, if she had to guess.

Giggling and smiling, she glanced at the bloody mess of the trapped woman. "Sorry about that," she said, a frown flickering across her face. In the severed hand of the woman, she saw a device that looked vaguely familiar. Picking her way through the bloody hallway, she tugged it free of the dead fingers.

It was a handheld.

Clicking it on, the face of the dead man from the lab, Theodore, flashed onto the display screen.

"Huh," said Korrryn. "I was right."

Her temple warmed, and her aedee showed that she was getting another mystery call.

"Senton?" she asked as she accepted the request for the communication.

"Where are you?" he snarled.

"Calm down," she said. "I got lost, but look--"

"I need you to get me out of here. I'm shick, and I need shome help."

Korrryn paused, straightening herself. "Wait, are you drunk or something?"

"No, I'm shick," he said again. "Poishon."

"Ew. How?"

"Karl. Look, I need you at the Brig."

"Okay, but hey, I caught a *Dentolura*."

"I don't care!"

"It shtarted all these small pods when it went down, though." She paused. "Does that mean anything?"

"Oddsh are they're pheromone shacksh. Will you get here?"

"Can you send the location?"

"It'sh right pasht the lab where we shtarted." He sounded frantic and immensely unhappy. "Head down."

"Oh." Korrryn looked around more carefully, then started. She recognized this area. "Hey, I think I'm nearby. I'm going to put my trophy away, then head to you."

"Make it fasht. I need help and thish guard ishn't doing anything."

She snorted. "Okay. I'll be there in a few minutes." Disconnecting the call, she headed down the hallway toward where she thought the lab door would be. Yes, she could see the familiar landmarks now. The change in lighting made it hard to see originally. Using the handheld, she opened up the lab. "Let's see," she said, scrounging through the cupboard she'd seen Senton use when he pulled out his own containment device. There were three others. One looked big enough to do the job. "Time to get that big boy into his home."

Turning back to the hallway, the device in hand, Korrryn couldn't help but smile. Things had a way of working out. And she was going to profit off of that whenever possible.

Once the drugged lura was safely stowed--and Korrryn noted approvingly that it was in the same room its baby had been captured in--she headed through the Laboratory wing to the access of the Brig.

Things were looking up for her.

## Chapter 18

### Ann

Colors. Pain. Danger.

Everywhere Ann looked, another lura was waiting, their vicious jaws slavering. She saw blood in their mouths, venom on their bodies. They snapped at her, insubstantial and perfectly real, forcing her to recoil and throw her body away from their lashing tails. Too-sharp claws reached toward her, only to miss as she recoiled, slamming her body against whatever object was there but she didn't see: walls, tables, doors, chairs.

Pain lanced through her head, though she couldn't hold onto it well enough to recognize how she could have gotten it, and before she could really worry, another shadow lurched out at her. This time it was Captain Rall, his face torn down to the bone on one side, the other still intact. Snatching her arm, he grunted something, but his words came out, not as sounds, but an oozing vomit. His brown eyes rolled in their sockets, then dropped free.

Screaming, Ann wrenched herself free of his grip and began to run. Things tripped her--unidentifiable things that had edges and malicious laughs, that moved in front of her path and tangled her legs whenever she took more than two strides--and the world spun.

Leaning heavily against a wall that felt as though it had been built out of nothing but miniature razor blades (and why wasn't her skin-sheath, tucked beneath her Chief of Security coveralls, doing anything to protect her?) that slashed and sliced and parted her flesh as she stumbled onward. Her teeth dropped out of her head, dissolving into pellets and falling free.

She screamed again, rushing onward, oblivious to direction. Behind her, the cruelty of humanity threw the screams back to her, tearing her mind's sense. A diabolic gurgle that turned into a throaty, malevolent chuckle swirled around her, then dissolved into the hissing pop of searing skin.

Desperate, Ann tried to find something she could understand, something that made sense. A distant, logical part of her mind seemed to be shouting at her: "Bad batch! It's a bad batch!"

The words made no sense to her.

It seemed like she was trapped in her mind for weeks--years, maybe--as the terrors coursed through her. She fell, rose, fell again, and at last collapsed against the leg of a towering *Dentolura* whose slimy leg rippled with unimaginable muscles and whose mouth-like holes all spoke to her, each one saying the same thing in a slightly different voice: "Failure. Failure."

And they were right. She had one job: Protect the people of the Compound. And how many had died because of her?

Her neck pinched and she cried out. Darkness began to creep along the edges of her vision, but she pushed them back. "No, no, no, nononono," she said, her words feeling real and slurred and agonizing. She couldn't die. Not like this.

Buzzes of words that she couldn't recognize hummed about her, and she swatted at them, as though they were insects swarming.

She wouldn't die.

Not like this.

The darkness pulled her down for its own inimitable eternity.

The voices quelled.

The pain receded.

Ann slept.

Her aedee told her that it had been thirty minutes since she took the bad batch of Calm, but Ann couldn't quite process that. She wanted to sleep, but the bright image of the clock interrupted her rest. Why was it so bright? Ann tried to reduce its brightness, but the aedee didn't respond. The clock brightened.

She opened her eyes. The action hurt, but so did the lights.

Groaning, she tried to turn to her side. She was on her back, which was probably why she'd woken up. What day was it? She never slept on her back. Did she forget something? Her bed felt harder than usual. How long had she been asleep?

But she already knew some of those answers.

She asked them anyway.

A cold bottle pressed against her lips, and she sucked down instinctively. The cool liquid coated her raw throat and trickled down in a wide umbrella through her stomach. The feeling roused her, and more of her mind fell into place.

Medical wing.

She was on one of the gurneys.

The bright lights were so that the medics could care for the wounded--the Medical wing had priority only after Life Support wing for energy.

The attack.

Korryn. Senton.

Ann tried to sit up, when an anxious voice coupled a gentle hand in pushing her down. "Slow down, Chief. Slow down."

Blinking past the grit in her eyes, Ann flopped back and looked up. "Doctor Melsted?"

The medic smiled. A tired expression pulled at the smile's edges, though, and Ann could see a haunted look in the depths of her brown eyes. She wore a blood-smirched smock over the standard-issue coveralls, and her slender hands shook a tiny bit as she started her inspection of the Chief.

"You feeling okay?"

Ann grunted and shook her head, but the action sent a spike of pain through her.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," said Helena Melsted. Her smooth warm voice mirrored her smooth brown skin, the words balmng her mind. Ann had always liked Helena. She always felt more at ease in the woman's company than most. "You took a bad hit."

Helena gave her a knowing look. "Calm, again?"

"Never again," croaked Ann. "Can I have another drink?"

"Water this time," said the doctor, helping her sip from a bottle. "I gave you a quick-acting counteragent to the Calm, but it's important that you stay hydrated. You'll be okay, but you'll also take some time to patch up." She touched the spot on Ann's head that throbbed the most. "This is particularly nasty."

"Ugh. What happened?"

"I was going to ask you."

"Can't remember." Ann thought of the terrors of her waking nightmare as the Calm tore through her understanding of reality. She shuddered. "But it hurts like hell."

"I don't doubt it." Helena pulled on some gloves and began to administer to Ann's scalp. "This will hurt a little until the numbing goes through. Then we'll stitch you up."

"Is it that bad?"

"Pretty bad. Not the worst of the night."

"Tell me," said Ann, wincing at the pinch. Then her head became warm, a comfortable blanket of numbness prickling all the way down to her eyebrow on the front and the nape on the back. She could still feel the pressure of Helena's confident hands, though it no longer hurt.

"We've had multiple casualties. The breaching in the Compound happened all over the place--but you probably knew that. We've been trying to gather as many people as we could here in the Medical wing, then slipping them through the access tunnels to the Hangar. About an hour ago, though, a swarm of small--whatever they are--broke in and flooded the area. We're trying to clear them out, but we have limited supplies." She gestured over her shoulder. "Those men and women over there deserve a raise." She paused. "Or, at the very least, a round of drinks at your expense."

"I have good people," said Ann. For the first time, she could process what was going on around her. She lay on a medical bed in the middle of the Medical wing, with medical personnel rushing from place to place, their medical jargon providing the background murmur. On the beds were countless wounded. Some sat up, their heads bandaged and a dazed look in their eyes, or they sucked on a tube, their expressions blank and terrified at the same time. Some were crying, others were silent. Most had all of their limbs; some did not. Everywhere, people were trying to help, trying to comfort, trying to heal. But the numbers--there were easily fifty people on the beds, and more against the walls, those who were assisting or awaiting their turn. Security crew came in through the doors on a regular basis, hauling another victim into the room before heading out to find more. The five crew that Helena had indicated stood against the far wall, watching the room carefully, their eyes flicking over every possible area of attack, their hands casually holding their aedee-rifles.

"They've been saving as many people as they can tonight."

Ann winced.

"Sorry," said Helena. "Did that hurt?"

"Not you. Just...everything that's happened."

"Any ideas why we were attacked?" asked Helena as she finished up her repairs. "Some." She looked up at her friend. "I'm still trying to get to the bottom of it all." "Well, I think you'll have to wait until you're better..." Helena made as if she were going to leave.

Ann grabbed her by the elbow. "Wait, Doctor. No. I can't be out. I have to finish this."

"Why?" asked Helena, raising a slender eyebrow. "You're hurt. You don't need to fight on."

Ann wanted to confess that it was her fault, her mistakes that had brought this pain upon the colony. Instead, she said, "It's my duty. You have to patch people up. I have to stop this invasion."

The doctor paused for a moment, then nodded. "Do you give me permission?" she asked, taking off her gloves and raising her hand toward Ann.

Confused, she looked from the hand to the doctor. "For what?"

"To manipulate your digenetics. You have them, I presume."

"Oh." Ann nodded. "Yeah, I've some digenetic changes."

"I can use them to accelerate your healing and clean out the vestiges of your Calm." She paused. "It also violates the terms of service, so you'll void your warranty."

Ann chuckled. "Damn bureaucrats."

Helena nodded and smiled. "Indeed. So. Do you want this help?"

"Is it going to jeopardize your license if I say yes?"

Helena sighed. "Only if you're going to sue."

"No plans of that."

"Then let me in."

Ann hesitated. It was dangerous to let people poke around in one's genes, even if it was like any other code. That the doctor knew what to do in this instance made Ann curious--not suspicious, as Helena was too good a person to be doing this sort of thing in an illegal way--but she had to push that aside. She needed the help, and Helena said she could provide it.

Ann triggered the permissions in her aedee. The doctor put her warm hand against Ann's, and a swarm of relief surged through her body. The fuzzy pain of each bruise and contusion faded. The vestigial feelings of the Calm drained away. She felt...whole.

"Wow. Why didn't you lead with that?" she asked when the doctor finished.

Helena gave her a wan smile. "Warranty."

"Yeah, well. That should change."

Helena laughed. "You're welcome to stay here, but if you could clear off the bed as soon as you're ready, we'd appreciate it."

"No problem." Ann stood, though she was more wobbly than she'd expected.

"You okay?" asked the doctor, holding onto Ann's shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks, Helena. You're a godsend."

Helena's lips twitched in a slight smile. "You're welcome. Do me a favor, though: Stay well this time."

"That's the hope."

Helena released Ann and started away. She paused, then said, "By the way, your sister is here."

"What?"

"She got poisoned by one of those...things."

"They're called *Dentolura*."

The doctor bobbed her head. "Makes sense." She sighed. "I've more people to help. But you may want to talk to her."

Ann looked in the indicated direction, thanked the doctor, and began walking toward her sister. Her legs were unsteady, and despite the digenetic purge, Ann could tell that she wasn't actually well. She'd been patched up, not healed. She would have to be careful. The work that Helena had completed could be undone by any number of horrible possibilities, and Ann was eager not to see what would happen to her body if she weren't careful.

Leaning on the different beds, she found her way to where Charalee lay, her head likewise bandaged. She didn't see Ann standing nearby, so Ann had a moment to look her over. Normally, Charalee was filled with a vibrant energy, an anxious ambition. It was hard to pin down exactly, though Ann knew that if she'd seen such an attitude in anyone other than family, she would have done everything she could to avoid her. But, as it stood, Charalee was her sister. Still in her skin-sheath, her head swaddled, and a tube going into her sheath (which then relayed whatever medicine being given throughout the rest of her body), she looked a misery.

Ann almost felt bad for her.

"Hello, sister," she said, stepping close enough to draw Charalee's attention.

"What the...Ann? What are you doing here?" The question was surprisingly genuine.

"I...made a mistake. Hurt myself." The honesty shocked her, but she decided to embrace it. The chaos of the past few hours was enough to remind her that family still mattered. "Doctor Melsted helped me out."

"Yeah, she says that I've been hit with a toxin."

"Any idea how it happened?"

Charalee gave her a pained, sarcastic smile. "One of your pets, darling."

Ann frowned. "Not my pets."

"Your man's, then."

"He's not my man."

Charalee rolled her eyes. "I don't mean *that* way."

"You shouldn't," said Ann, remembering. "He was *your* man--in *that* way--before I got to know him."

Charalee gritted her teeth. "You're not the only one who makes mistakes." She shifted in the bed, wincing as she jostled something. "But I'm almost done with that."

"With mistakes?"

Charalee nodded. "I've learned a lot, you know. Since we left each other's company."

"You mean, after you betrayed me over becoming digenetic and took the job I was interested in?"

"That would be the approximate timeframe, yes," said Charalee slowly.

Ann grimaced, leaning against the bed. "You always have a way of interfering with my life."

Her sister shrugged. "Natural charm."

"I don't think so. What do you want, Char? Why are you here?"

"I'm the Envoy from Desert--"

"No, I mean why are you still *here*. The order to evacuate went out hours ago. You haven't been here that long, have you?"

Charalee pursed her lips. "Not too long, no."

"So what's going on? Why hang about. You've never been particularly philanthropic. Surely you aren't trying to *help* everyone."

"No, that's *your* job, my sanctimonious sister," said Charalee, wriggling her shoulders as she settled into the bed more comfortably.

"Why are you here." She didn't phrase it as a question, letting the authority of her office and her inborn talent for glaring like Mother push the importance onto her sister.

"Power, dear sister." Charalee flicked her fingers toward the lights above them. "It's what we need to get out of here."

"Power?" She frowned. "We've been working on that for the past day or so..."

Charalee sighed. "The storm knocked out the primary power, yes. But your engineers got most of it back up and running. I was headed toward the Hangar when I overheard some of them talking. The attack has ruined what they've recently repaired. They need to get the power restored to the Compound before anything will work the way it's supposed to...including our outbound communications." She sighed. "Without a direct sightline to Prospero's sun, we can't talk to anyone. There's no help coming...not yet."

Ann felt her legs wobble again. There had been something nagging in the back of her mind; now she knew what it was. The DP would be able to send relief come morning, but their delay...more people would die if they didn't figure something out. "Okay," she said, sucking in a deep breath. "What are *your* qualifications? You're not an engineer."

"No. But I have the protocols for the Portal." She tapped her head. "Putting in this information will allow the Portal to work as soon as the dawn comes."

Ann understood almost immediately. "We can save everyone. We all go through the Portal, get everyone off the planet right away." A thrill of hope and excitement shot through her. There was a chance they could get the colonists away, then send some of the DP's private army to mop up the mess. In three steps, she could save the colonists: Restore the power, turn on the Portal, and herd them through.

For the first time since she saw the *Dentolura* in Senton's lab, things seemed to be going right. "How do we restore power?"

"That...I'm still trying to figure out." Charalee sighed. "I can share with you the necessary protocols. Get to the Generator wing--that much I know we have to do."



Ann put her hand out, her palm cooling as Charalee's aedee transferred the pertinent information. "Why are you being so kind?"

Charalee made a snorting noise. "Do you think me some sort of monster? Ann, I'm hurt." She smiled. "You may be the noble one, but I can care about others, too." She waved her sister away. "You need to move on. Hurry. The sooner you've input the protocols and prepped the generators, the sooner we can queue up the Portal. Once we've enough power for the PRISM engine, we can step through." Charalee's smile grew. "You'll be a hero."

Ann narrowed her eyes. "Yes," she said, suspicious. "A hero."

"Oh, stop being paranoid. I'm trying to help." She waved again. "Go."

Ann turned, albeit reluctantly, and headed toward the door. She was still slightly unsure of her legs, but she had no choice. Who else could do this?

As she walked, her temple heated up, letting her know a comm had come through. To her surprise, it was a Janus notification: Korryn and Senton had spoken again. Ann paused, listening to their conversation. She grimaced. This was a distraction, something less important. But, at the same time, the Brig was on the way to the Generator wing.

Waving at two crew members to flank her, she exited the Medical wing.

She would take care of these conspirators, then prep the generators.

It was about time she had things work out in her favor.

## Chapter 19

### Charalee

The smile faded from her lips as her sister left the Medical wing. Charalee winced as she adjusted herself. She'd been delayed endlessly, through the stupidity of the Compound's design and the interfering of others. That Senton had been here, resurrecting her ire, only made it worse. And Ann? A waste of the family name. Never had Charalee been quite as embarrassed by her sister as she was now. No audacity, no ambition. The woman squandered whatever gifts she'd gained by being a Timpson, and now she was off to do her sister's errand. That, at least, made Charalee marginally more content. Her sister was so easy to manipulate.

Now that the power situation was taken care of--or about to be, assuming that Ann didn't screw that up, too--Charalee could focus on getting to the Hangar. She had her final piece to include in the Portal's protocols--the whole reason she was there as an Envoy--and then she could be free of this cesspool. What a horrible planet. She'd never felt so dirty in all her life. Being around so many people, with the filth just outside the windows, made her feel agoraphobic and claustrophobic at the same time. The second the Portal was charged, she'd be freed of Prospero. Let those in her way suffer the consequences. She was getting out, and nothing was going to stop her.

"How are you feeling?" asked the medic who had administered to Ann.

"Leave me alone," said Charalee, irritated at the interruption to her ruminations.

"No need to get snippy," said the medic, firing up something on her aedee.

"You're not in a position to get too bent out of shape. We know next to nothing about these creatures' poisons, and you got a fair enough dose in your bloodstream. The fact you're still alive is in some ways surprising." The medic checked the nutrient bag that was connected to her skin-sheath. "You should be grateful."

"To you?" Charalee couldn't keep the disdain from her voice--mostly because she didn't want to.

"Well," said the woman slowly, "I *was* the one who heard you on the other side of the door. I *was* the one who managed to get it open. So, yes, on a certain level, you definitely owe me that."

Charalee snorted. "You're straightforward."

"I'm a doctor. It's best that I am."

"Doctor." Another snort.

The woman arched a black eyebrow. "You don't approve of my training?"

"I'm fine, *Doctor*. I need to be going." Charalee made to get up, wincing as the movement again jarred the wound on her head. "I have an appointment."

"Much as I'd like a spikey-mouthed patient like you to be well and on her way," said the medic, putting out her hand and gently pushing Charalee back into her bed, "I can't, in good conscience, let you leave. Appointment or no."

"Don't touch me!" The violence of her cry was louder than she expected, but what

did she care? Her injury pulsed in her head, forcing pain deeply into her--lighting up her mind and bones with agony. Charalee shoved past it. It was a scratch and this "doctor" wanted her to sit around like an infant while Charalee's chance to get free of this hellhole diminished. Not likely.

"Listen," said the woman, her voice lacking all of the ameliorating tones she'd used before. "You're sick. We don't know what this toxin will do to you. It could affect you now, later, or maybe never. It seems to be interfering with your cognitive functions, and preliminary tests show that your body isn't doing much to shut down the invaders. So you're not only injured, you could also be a liability for everyone else. We don't know how this would mutate, if it's contagious, or anything about it at all."

"What about the evacuation?"

"We're safe enough here, for now. We'll be better off staying in the Medical wing and waiting for help than trying to pull a bunch of wounded people to the Hangar."

Charalee grimaced. "You're not going to the Hangar?"

"That's what I said."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Charalee, her voice low.

"You're not in the position to--"

But the medic never had a chance to explain what Charalee was in the position to do, as Charalee lashed out with one hand, cracking the woman across the jaw with a vicious left hook. The woman crumpled, taken completely unawares, and slumped to the ground. A shout at the attack from one of the crew made Charalee move faster. She didn't have time to waste with these idiots, and she wasn't really in the mood to explain herself, either.

Yanking the tube from the catheter-connector on her skin-sheath's harness-interface, Charalee stepped over the unconscious medic and headed toward the door. A couple of people cried out in fear as she came close to them, but for the most part, the patients found other things--their own problems, if they were smart--to focus on.

The closest Security crewmember stopped a couple meters away, her hand out to slow Charalee but the other resting warningly on her holstered weapon. To Charalee's left, one of the other crewmembers brought up his aedee-rifle, targeting the Envoy.

"I'm going to have to ask you to get down on your knees," said the woman member. "Put your hands on your head."

"I'm not interested in that," said Charalee, not even breaking stride.

The security woman put herself between Charalee and her path. "You're under arrest until--"

Triggering a squirt of strength via her skin-sheath, Charalee's muscles tensed with augmented power. She knocked the woman's hand to one side, grabbed her by the throat, and jerked the woman as if she were a doll. There was an audible cracking noise and the security woman slumped in Charalee's grip.

"Freeze!" shouted the security guard. Standing in between the different medical beds--all of which were occupied with frantic and frightened invalids--the crewmember couldn't risk a shot going astray. But, at the same time, he'd just witnessed his

co-crewmember die. Charalee thought she could hear some anger and pathos in the man's orders, but she didn't care to truly parse it out.

Holding the dangling, head-lolling corpse in front of her, she walked steadily to the door. Once clear of the aisle of the sick and injured, Charalee stalked toward the crewmember. Now that she wasn't close to the injured, the man opened fire. The whole idea was ludicrous. Not only did she have the corpse as a shield, but she was wearing a military-grade skin-sheath. The thing would be able to absorb and disperse almost any velocity of bullet that weapon could spit out, and Charalee would hardly feel it.

A couple of shots hit the armored back of the crewmember's mate, but then the man realized the futility. She heard him jabber into his aedee that he needed backup, that they had a crewmember down, and they needed to get to the Medical wing as quickly as possible.

Sneering, Charalee began to run, then spun in a brisk, sharp circle. Hurling the sixty kilo woman into her friend with that much force caused additional cracking--though whose bones broke, Charalee neither knew nor cared--and a deflated *whompf* from the man as he collapsed beneath the tangle of dead limbs.

Charalee stepped onto the woman's back, bent over, yanked free her weapon, and check its type. This one--unlike the aedee-rifles--could be used by anyone. That was good. It meant she didn't have to worry about it not working.

The male crewmember stirred and groaned, but that cut short as she fired a tight shot into his forehead. The smell of burning ozone and carbonized blood wafted toward her.

"You were in my way," she said matter of factly. "I didn't appreciate that."

A rustling her drew her attention, but too late. A heavy body tackled her from behind and she lost her grip on the gun as she toppled to the concrete floor. The stale stench of the assailant's hot breath punched her as much as the man's--it was clearly a male, based solely upon the amount of grunting he was doing--fists were. Stars burst behind her eyes when one of his punches landed on the left side of her face. The icy-hot agony of the recently-healed wound reopening sent a shock of pain from the tip of her skull to the right kneecap, glancing off a spasm in her heart. The world swirled. Charalee could taste blood.

Charalee didn't have time to calculate much, so instead of planning anything, she triggered her skin-sheath to release an electric current. It normally was set to simply incapacitate the attacker, but she cranked it up to almost-lethal amounts--as far as the aedee would let her go.

The man--a broad-chested fellow who was now missing an eye and a nasty gash in his shoulder told Charalee why he was in the Medical wing in the first place--chewed his tongue as the electrical current coursed through him. Convulsing on the ground, he dropped to one side, frothy blood dripping from his mouth. His eyes glazed, but it looked like he was still breathing.

Sucking in her own ragged breaths, Charalee regained her feet, picked up the gun, and looked around for any other would-be heroes. The Medical wing stared at her in mute terror.

"Quite the day, isn't it?" she asked, her voice raw from the screaming she'd done (when had that happened? She couldn't remember). Smiling, blood from her reopened wound seeping through her hair and painting the side of her face with a crimson sheet, Charalee pointed the gun at the unconscious man.

She pulled the trigger.

A moment later, stumbling out of the Medical wing's triage bay, Charalee steadied herself on the wall away from the door. The coppery taste of blood was thick in her mouth, and she found it hard to breathe. If she wanted to survive--and she *definitely* wanted to survive--she needed to get free of this place. There would be medicines on a spacestation that would help her. There was nothing on Prospero that would do anything for her except make her worse. She could feel that in her soul, in her deepest heart.

There was nothing for her here. She had to press on.

Sucking in another deep breath, she began jogging. The attack from the wounded man hadn't hurt--the skin-sheath protected her from that sort of thing--but taking that punch had messed her up. More than once, she found she had to stop to let a wave of dizziness pass. She didn't want to spend too much time heading toward the Hangar, but she also couldn't faint...not if she wanted to escape.

The sounds of pursuit drifted into her ears. Someone was following her.

Cursing quietly, she slipped down one of the hallways, unsure of where it would lead her. A door blocked her path. She still didn't have the aedee protocols to open anything on Prospero.

"Shit," she said.

The sounds of pursuit continued. Glancing around, she saw that there was only a small protuberance from the wall that would give her shelter. If they were looking for her, there wasn't likely a chance that they would miss seeing her, even if she pushed herself tightly against the wall.

She adjusted her grip on the weapon. She could shoot her way out. The skin-sheath would take a lot of the punishment they could mete out, and though she'd be in worse shape, she'd survive.

Unless they hit her exposed face.

Silently, she cursed the fact that she'd lost the helmet to that stupid lura in the tunnels. Of course, the helmet had saved her life, but that was what helmets were supposed to do.

Berating herself for dwelling on this, she flexed her fingers and settled into a shooter's stance. She'd blast her way through, then...

Then what? She still didn't know how to get to the Hangar. But if she didn't shoot her way through, it wouldn't matter either way, because she'd be in the Brig and what good did that do her?

The plan snapped into her head, like a door dilating open.

When the Security crewmembers turned around the corner, their weapons up, they were surprised to see Charalee, on her knees, the gun two meters in front of her, and her hands on her head.

"Please," she said, her breathing ragged and tears, expertly feigned, on her face.  
"Please. Just don't take me to the Brig."

## Chapter 20

### Senton

Senton's hand hurt. It had swollen, but he'd managed to finagle permission to access his aedee and deploy antihistamine blockers. It wasn't as good as an actual administration, but it was enough to reduce the worst of the swelling. He'd also administered a natural ibuprofen--though, again, it wasn't the same as the real medicine. Aedee interventions could only go so far. If he didn't get real medical help, he'd have some permanent damage.

The thought of all the injustices done to him made him furious and angry. He wanted Korryn there as soon as possible--she shouldn't be far, not if she was in the lab--but more than that he wanted out. The fact that Ann had tricked him into going to the Brig, had threatened him was an outrage. Yes, he'd managed to twist a couple of communications out using Ann's aedee connection as a guide--a trick he'd learned back in training, though not in a class--and while he wasn't completely certain Ann remained ignorant of his stowaway signal, the sooner Korryn got here, the sooner he'd be out and he wouldn't have to worry either way.

There was some stale water that he could drink out of the spigot in the wall next to the toilet. There was a mattress on a bed. The walls were beige. That was about all he noticed.

His leg's feeling had returned to almost normal--whatever that program was, it only lasted a certain amount of time. He wanted to dig through the aedee's memory and figure out what she'd shot him with, but he wasn't very good with his left hand. All of the gestures were backwards and counterintuitive, like trying to play a guitar with a non-dominant hand.

He paused at that. He hadn't thought of a guitar since he left home for training. The last time he'd touched one was the day that his father had had the accident. Since then, there wasn't any time...

Now, however, he had the time. Senton snorted. Not that he'd be able to play with his hand the way it was. Its pain was no longer sharp, save when he flexed his hand too naturally, but instead was a burning ache that rested in his joints when it wasn't busy feeling like his hand was coated in flame.

To get his mind off of the situation, he descended into his own thoughts, trying to generate arguments for why he should be allowed to officially identify Karl's species and genera. While he couldn't name the creature after himself (though *Dentolura sentoni* had a nice ring to it), he could still come up with something worthwhile. "Maybe *Dentolura painintheglutei*," he mused aloud.

He heard a strangled noise and muffled cries of pain, three shots, and the slumping sound of bodies dropping to the floor. Curious, Senton stood up and came close to the glass door. He glanced across the hallway, where Karl remained ensconced

in his cage. The creature hadn't moved since Ann had put him there. Senton hoped the lura wasn't dead, his injury notwithstanding. His scientific inquisitiveness overpowered his vendetta. Plus, it was just a creature. It hadn't meant to harm him. Ann, on the other hand...

"Korryn?" he called out softly, then yelped when the intruder rounded the corner. "Charalee!"

"Hello, lover," said Charalee. She looked...a mess. Her hair was matted with dried blood, as was most of her left shoulder. He spotted the telltale glint of genetic metal holding closed what looked to be a nasty head wound. Her skin, normally an attractive brown, looked sickly and wan, as though she'd lost too much blood. (If he had to guess, that was probably the case.) But more than that, Charalee's eyes were dark and distant--hollow. While he couldn't fully put a finger on why he thought this, he couldn't avoid the conclusion that her overall appearance was one of desperation.

"You've...you've been busy?" asked Senton, licking his lips and taking a step back from the terraglass door. She spoke, but her voice came in through a small speaker mounted next to the door. Save a vent too high above his head for him to reach--and, if he remembered correctly, impossible to remove--there wasn't any access to the outside world. He pushed that reality from his mind. Best not to dwell on it.

"You could say that," said Charalee as she stepped closer to the glass. She rested her hand against the door. Senton recoiled when he saw it was covered with blood.

"W-what did you do?"

"What I had to," she said, her voice flat. "I'm getting out of here. And you're going to help me."

"Help?" he asked, his voice squeaking. "Uh..."

"Listen, Senton," she said, the sharpness in her tone unmistakably hostile. "I'm on really short time and even shorter patience. So pay attention."

He swallowed. Their tryst hadn't lasted long--a few weeks only--and had been based upon mutual attraction. After their first night together, Charalee had said as much, telling him she'd likely leave him as not. They'd found reasons to keep seeing each other, but it didn't take long to realize that she was growing bored of him. There was sex and there was an occasional conversation, and then, as abruptly as it had started, it was over. Charalee hadn't offered any specific explanation, and Senton hadn't wanted one. The thing he remembered from the whole experience was that, when she sought attention, he had to give it. Her sharp-edged tongue was reason enough to capitulate on that front. Now, as she snapped for him to listen closely, he followed the command as much from habit as from an acutely developed sense of self-preservation.

"You are widely considered the expert on the Compound."

He shrugged. "I'm good with maps. I've memorized the place."

"And its byways and..." She waved a hand. "Everything?"

"Yes." He licked his lips. "Why?"

"I want out of this place."

"The Brig? You just go the way you came..."

"No, stupid. I want *out*. Off of Prospero. Out of the Compound."



Senton scratched at an itch on the back of his neck. "Isn't there relief coming? Some help to take care of the problem?"

"Yes, and I want to be gone before they're here." She pressed closer to the glass. Senton let his eyes drift down her body. The skin-sheath was custom fit and made her look distractingly good. He remember what it was like when she had first taken off--

"Hey! Focus!" Charalee snapped her fingers.

Senton shook his head. "Sorry." He kept his eyes focused on hers. "I, uh, I don't know how to help you."

"I need to get to the Hangar, but the main thoroughfares are all closed down. That's where the lura are thickest, supposedly."

"Well, it depends."

"On what?"

"On what's open. The likeliest route is through the service tunnels."

"Not happening."

"Okay," he drawled, thinking. "You could weave through the northern wings. I'm pretty sure the pods aren't running--"

"Not without full power," said Charalee, disgusted.

"Well, passing from one wing to another often works. Most of them are connected, so while they take longer to go through than the main hallways, they're your best bet." He paused. "Well, maybe not..."

She shot a glance over one shoulder, then looked back at him. "I told you, I'm in a rush. Can you hurry it up?"

He stared at the bloody hand again, suppressing a shudder. He could only guess what she'd done to the guards. The fact that he'd lapsed into ogling her surprised him in light of that likelihood. He couldn't help her anymore. It wouldn't be right.

"Take me with you."

Charalee snorted, then laughed, shaking her head. "No chance in hell."

"Look, I'll guide you. I can take you to where you need to go."

"Then you'll try to come with me."

"No," said Senton, "I'll stay here. It's fine, I'll figure it out. I just don't want to be in this cell anymore."

Charalee gave him a pitying look--one that he almost recognized from before. He thought, for the briefest of moments, that she would take him back. In one part of his mind, he always thought that she would take him back.

The look disappeared. "No way."

"Wait!"

Without hesitating, Charalee pushed off from the glass, the handprint streaking. "Thanks, lover," she said. An eerie smile creased her lips, and, despite his shouts for her to return, she slipped around the corner and out of sight.

"Well, that..." Senton groped for the right word. At last, he settled on, "was disappointing" and left it at that.

There was a familiar sound of approaching footsteps. "Charalee?" he said, perking up. Maybe she'd changed her mind?

His eyes widened. "Korryn!"

"Did you call me something else?" she asked. She, too, looked the worse for wear as she pushed a cart containing an oversized cage to a stop. Like most people on the Compound, she wore her work coveralls, which did exactly as advertised. In her case, though, the fabric was dirty, splattered with blood, and it was caked with a sticky substance. Her hair, too, was stringy with the stuff. Though it was markedly different than Charalee, he could see a haunted look in Korryn's eyes, too. Both women had passed through some pretty hard times, he was certain.

"What happened to you?" he asked. "And what is that?" He pointed at the container, then shook his head. "Never mind. You can tell me later. First, you have to help me out of here."

"I have this," she said, dangling a handheld from its lanyard. "I think it'll help."

Senton smiled for the first time in what felt like years. "That'll do! Wait, where'd you get that?"

"From a...body. Dead body. Dropped it."

"Killed by a lura?"

She nodded.

He grimaced. "We may have to rethink our plan."

Korryn snorted. "Yeah, well...once I get you out, I think we can--"

"I have to admit, Korryn, I'm disappointed."

Both Senton and Korryn's heads snapped in the direction of the voice. Senton groaned. "Not you!"

Ann stood, her hand on her weapon's handle, but still holstered, and glared at both of them. "Did you think I wouldn't know what you were up to, Senton? That you and Korryn's conspiracy would go unpunished?"

"You're going to waste time during an emergency to make sure we don't take some of these creatures out of here?"

"The last thing," said Ann in a dangerously low and calm voice, "that I want is the responsibility that will come on my shoulders when it becomes clear that a dangerous xeniform--one that's part of massive loss on Prospero--has been taken off planet. Do you know how many treaties, laws, and regulations you'd be breaking if you took a *Dentolura* off planet? There were ten *years* of litigation when it became clear that a new form of bacteria had piggybacked to the Gateway from one of our first outposts. Do you think taking *animals* anywhere else would be wise?"

Senton's mouth was dry. He didn't know what to say. He'd forgotten--or maybe, hadn't wanted to remember--about those laws. Forcing himself to swallow, he tried to mount a defense, but Ann cut him off.

"Shut up, Trapp. I'm not interested in discussing this any longer. Korryn, you're under arrest. You have the right--"

Snarling, Korryn shoved the cage, which was precariously set on a dolly, toward Ann. The Chief of Security, caught off guard, took an edge to the gut. Her gun flew free of its holster and spun away.

Korryn and Ann both froze. Senton watched, breathless. He didn't know what

else to do.

For once in his life, he had absolutely no ideas.

He hated the feeling.

The moment--strangely balanced in the clear processing of ramifications and ideas--snapped to a close as abruptly as Korryn had attacked.

Then the fight began.

## Chapter 21

### Korryn

Ann shoved the cart to one side. The door to the cage holding the *Dentolura* Korryn had tranquilized popped open, and some of the creature's whip-like tail uncurled like fingers opening. Korryn didn't have time to focus on the thing, but it didn't look like the fall had awoken it, which made her relieved. The last thing she wanted was to have that lura awake and cranky. Not only that, but a damaged creature wouldn't be as lucrative as an undamaged one.

All of these thoughts clicked through her head as she dived toward the still-spinning gun. That she would be worrying about profits and xenofoms at this moment was strange for her, but she decided, as her body slammed against the ground and skidded toward the weapon, that it was good to have something beyond what she was currently doing. Future goals, that sort of thing...

Korryn arrived at the gun first, but Ann slapped it free, sending it beyond Korryn's reach. Ann managed to get to her feet before Korryn, which necessitated the childish-but-useful technique of tripping Ann to keep her from securing the gun. Korryn crawled on top of the Chief of Security, pulling herself along toward the weapon, only to get a vicious elbow into the side of her face. Stars sparkled in front of her eyes and she yelped, rolling off Ann's back.

Maybe it was best to focus *only* on the Chief.

Despite the ringing in her ear, Korryn pushed off the ground, using the glass door of the Brig as a launching pad to throw herself into Ann. As the Chief bent over, Korryn slammed into her, sending her sprawling a meter and the gun clattering to the ground. Breathing heavily as much from the adrenaline as the exertion, Korryn scooped up the weapon and turned, only to catch Ann's shoulder in her own torso.

Air rushed from her, but Korryn had enough presence of mind to keep the gun in hand. They collided against the glass door of the cell in which a small cage was kept--it was Karl, Korryn felt almost certain--and she could hear a keening sound through the speaker. She glanced at the larger lura, worry springing through her. Did she see the tail move?

No time to consider that, she had to deal with an incensed Ann. The Chief pulled back, pinning Korryn's left arm against the wall--and the gun with it--and rearing back for a punch. Korryn brought her leg up, striking Ann uselessly. The Chief didn't seem to notice, but it allowed Korryn to push back, forcing Ann's punch to fall short. It landed hard against Korryn's leg. A thud of pain dropped through her, but it wasn't too bad. Wrestling as hard as she could, Korryn worked to get her left hand free, bringing her right hand up to try to switch the weapon over. Ann read the movement and started doing the same.

"Get off!" grunted Korryn as she and Ann began a tug-of-war with the gun.

Korryn bit down on Ann's hand, pain lancing through her teeth as she applied

more pressure. Ann screamed and let go, stumbling back--and releasing her weapon. Korryn steadied herself and pointed the gun at Ann's surprised face.

"It's done, Ann," she said and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Ann jumped forward, grabbing Korryn's hands, pulling her close. "Maybe having aedee-only weapons *isn't* such a bad idea."

"What?"

Instead of answering, Ann, her face streaming with perspiration, kicked out one leg, then twisted her body, throwing Korryn hard to the ground. She landed on her back and shoulder blades, but the shock of it sent her still-fragile breath out in a loud whoosh.

It was only at that moment that Korryn started to think that maybe she had made a mistake.

Ann wrenched the gun painfully from Korryn's hand, finally gaining full control of the weapon. Before she could level it at Korryn, however, the colonist lurched forward, snagging Ann's coveralls and tugging them down. Ann, obviously surprised, didn't expect the full-scale attack on her, and Korryn managed to rake more than few deep scratches across her face and neck before Ann flung her off with a harsh punch that nearly knocked Korryn unconscious. She slumped against the cell door.

Behind her, the cage of Karl rattled.

A gurgling sound came from the speaker.

The adult lura twitched.

Korryn hardly noticed any of it. The taste of blood distracted her. Was that *her* blood? Was it from the bite? Had she simply not remembered? It was hard to know. Everything was too hot; waves of heat came out of the collar of her coverall. Sweat got into her eyes, stinging as it dripped. It took a second for her to realize that, in the course of her attack, the polyps that were stuck to her coveralls had burst. Some of the smell was the now-familiar sewer stink permeated the air.

The adult lura made a distressed sound.

"You're...under...arrest," said Ann. She palmed open the door that Korryn was leaning against. A stench wafted over. Then the Chief of Security kicked the defeated Korryn into the room. She crashed against the cage, which caused the now-louder gurgles to transform into an alarmed squawk.

Korryn coughed, cradling her ribs. The last kick had been vindictive, totally uncalled for. "I'm..."

"We'll get this sorted out later. Once I get things back under control," said Ann, her shoulders heaving with the exertion of getting her breath back. "For now, you can keep Doctor Trapp company."

Korryn opened her mouth to protest when a noise drew her attention to the cage she'd upended. The metal plating of the cage bent outward. The bulge grew as the loud sound of ruined metal ended with a metallic screech and Karl burst out of the hole.

Korryn stared in open mouth shock. Out of the periphery, she could see Senton screaming something, pounding on the glass of his prison with his one good hand. She

couldn't hear him--the speaker wasn't turned on in his cell--but she got the sense he was trying to tell her something.

She looked over at him, then rocked backward as the small *Dentolura* plowed into her. Karl's jaws, flowering open wide, caught her by the neck. The hot press of its teeth seared through her, the bite unnaturally large. She could feel dozens of fangs pressing in on her, severing her flesh from her body.

The infant *Dentolura* flew off of her with a yelp, but landed on its feet. Through pain-hazed eyes, Korryn saw that Ann stood, her weapon pointed at Karl. The lura gurgled aggressively, its blood-stained jaws dripping. Karl looked sickly, a faded color scheme from what she'd seen the first time. Its tiny mouths on its skin were working overtime. The smell of the creature filled the room.

The weight of the adult *Dentolura* landing on her startled her out of her dazed analysis of the milieu. The too-long snout caught a chunk of her cheek, nearly blinding her with the suddenness of the pain. Its tails whipped out, and she heard Ann cry out. The Chief fell back, away from the door. Obediently, the glass door to the cell snapped shut.

Korryn was locked in with two *Dentolura*.

Screams were insufficient.

The last thing Korryn ever saw, as she pressed against the glass, tears and terror on her sweaty face, was Ann, a massive gash in her side, trying to get up, to get to the door in time. A mist of blood--her blood, she knew, but she couldn't believe it, not really--splattered the door.

Then pain.

Then nothing.

## Chapter 22

### Ann

The lura's containment was fortuitous. Both the small and the large one that Korryn had brought with her were focused on attacking Korryn's corpse, so they didn't notice that they'd been sealed in when Ann had let go of the aedee pad, thus closing the door. Though she turned away, the image of Korryn's terrified face as the creatures tore into her would always haunt Ann's memories.

Senton pounded on the glass of his own cell, his expression twisted into screams and fury. Ann took a deep breath, her body trembling still from the exertion of the fight with Korryn, then crossed the hallway to Senton's cell. Palming the speaker on, she listened to his accusations for a moment.

"--killed her! Why didn't you open the door? What did she do to deserve that death? You *monster!* You heartless *bi--*"

"Listen," said Ann, her voice sharp with frustration and exhaustion and too much adrenaline and digenetic hangovers and vestigial effects of the bad Calm hit and she frankly didn't have a lot of patience to deal with an overly-emotional doctor whom she held personally responsible for the entire mess she now had to clean up.

Apparently, Senton caught most of that in the two syllables she spoke, because he shut his mouth, tears still dripping down his cheeks.

"Listen," she said again, "I am sorry about her death. I'm not even certain why they attacked her and not me, but it is a tragedy. I'm sorry about it. But she killed my crewmembers and she was trying to get off planet with one--or more--of the *Dentolura*. I'm not saying that's deserving death," and she put up a hand to stave off Senton's excuse, which he looked anxious to share, "but I'm saying that she's not guiltless." Ann paused and glared at Senton. "This isn't right, by any stretch, but I'm pretty confident that I *told* you that having these things in the Compound was dangerous, that we had to get rid of them."

"But--"

She raised the hand again. He stopped. "You screwed up, Senton. In the worst possible way." Ann gestured at the bloody mess that had once been Korryn. "She didn't deserve that. And *you* have to carry on, knowing that's the case."

He pursed his lips. "She didn't kill them, you know."

"What?"

"The guards." He gestured with his head, his entire countenance scribbled with furious glares. "She didn't kill them. She arrived only a moment or two before you did, hauling along the adult."

Ann frowned. She had taken longer to get to the Brig than anticipated--only diverting when she realized that the Janus notification wasn't something she should ignore, sending her crewmembers on ahead to take care of the power restoration.

Almost as if on cue, the lights all flickered, dropped out, and the normal lighting of the Compound returned. Her members hadn't failed her.

Small consolation.

"So who did it?" asked Ann, looking over at the corpses of her crewmembers. Pol and Rander, two men who had shown great promise. Pol's wife was expecting a child--the twenty-ninth planet-born colonist--in a couple of months. Rander had been a wonderful musician, using his talents during his off time to provide some entertainment and culture to the too-often dreary world of Prospero. Thinking of their lost potentials and the pain that their deaths would cause made her heart hurt. A desire to find the perpetrator and deliver unmitigated justice on the accused's head shivered through her. She tamped it down with a professional jerk, but the sentiment simmered nonetheless. "Was it the same one who killed Theodore?"

Senton snorted. "I'm pretty sure *that* killed Theodore." He pointed at the infant. "The little prick."

Ann didn't disagree. She faced Senton. "So who did it?"

"You can't recognize family work?"

Ann's vision dimmed at the edges; her head swam. "Charalee?"

Senton pointed at the bloody handprint on the outside of his door. Ann looked at it, uncomprehendingly. "She did that."

"No." Ann could hardly believe it. What had Charalee said in the Medical wing? "*You may be the noble one, but I can care about others, too.*"

Apparently not.

"I don't know what she did, necessarily. I can't see them from here."

Ann looked over her shoulder. "You probably don't want to."

Senton shrugged. "She came to see me."

"I thought you two hated each other."

Another shrug. "For the most part. But she was interested in some of what I had."

"What's that?"

"Information."

"Yeah, you're filled with that." Ann tried--and failed--to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

He snorted, looking down his nose at his captor. "I know that the lura attacked Korryn because of pheromones."

Ann shook her head. "How can you possibly know that?"

"I've had a lot of time to think since you threw me in here."

"It's only been a couple of hours."

"And what else was I going to do?" he asked. "You notice the holes on their skin?"

"They look like mouths," said Ann, turning to face the mess that was Korryn's cell. The two had finished whatever feasting they were interested in. The small one followed in the pacing steps of the adult. They didn't look particularly similar, but Ann figured that, if that many creatures had come in for the baby, they weren't necessarily interested in close bloodlines. Even from here, she could see the holes on the side of the



adult open and close.

"They're vents. That's how they exude their pheromones. To us, it smells like coppery sewage. To them, it's a homing beacon. That's how they know where to go. Karl--the little one--sent out the pheromones into the atmosphere, letting the other lura where it was. They've been trying to meet up with it ever since."

"And why did they attack Korryn?"

Senton sighed. "I noticed polyps on her, stuck to her clothes. During your fight, some of them burst. Once those polyps popped, that's when the adult pushed through whatever sedation Korryn had given it." He shrugged. "I guess it's more of a hypothesis at this point, but it seems to explain the observations."

Ann snorted. "Always a scientist."

"I admit it."

Ann frowned and moved away from the cell. She'd noticed something in the corner of the large lura's cage. Crouching, she peered inside. Glistening in the newly restored lights, a couple additional polyps--unbroken--stuck to the cage walls. Holding her breath, Ann peeled one of them free of the sticky goo in which it had been stored, then--taking care not to squish it--she brought it back to Senton. "This brings them, then?"

He nodded. "I'd be careful with that. With the power on, the ventilation system is going to start pulling out all the stale air that's accumulated--secondary and tertiary priorities will be served." Senton licked his cracked lips. "There's a good chance that the creatures will become more attuned than before."

Ann carefully placed the polyp in an empty Calm cannister she had in her pocket. "It's sticky."

"Nature can be uncomfortable. That's how it solves its problems."

"Nature..." said Ann. Senton's words reminded her of something, but she couldn't remember it now. It had been said so long ago--as the sunset, before this hellish night had broken open. Something about nature...no, it was gone. Focusing instead on the doctor, Ann said, "I'm leaving now. Once this is taken care of, you'll be freed." She gave a command to her aedee and palmed the information into his cell's terminal. "Now that the power's back, you'll be taken care of."

Senton looked around. "Wait, you're leaving me?"

"Yes."

"You can't do this!"

"You'll have food. You have a bed. You have safety. That's more than ninety-nine percent of the colony right now. I need to get to the Hangar as soon as possible."

"Why, so you can take the Portal out?"

Ann shook her head. "No, I'm staying on Prospero until we can get this cleaned up."

Senton laughed. "You're so stupid, you know that?"

"Is that supposed to make me want to let you out?"

His laughter sharpened. "You think that Charalee is going to let you out? That you'll get to come along?" He gestured in the direction of Pol and Rander. "You think

she's going to be stuck with those murders? Man, wake up. She's going to go through the Portal and then close it down, leaving us here. Cover up. It's what she does."

Ann opened her mouth to rebut the arguments, but she couldn't get her words to work. Senton knew Charalee in a different way than Ann did. More than that, her sister had always had an ego--a selfishness that had shocked Ann on more than one occasion. Was she really interested in covering this up? They'd be able to communicate with the Vanguard now that power had been restored. Sunrise was less than an hour away. She didn't have a chance...

"How well do you know your sister?" asked Senton, leaning with his good arm against the glass. "How many people do you think she's willing to sacrifice to save herself?"

Ann's mouth went dry. There was something dark in Charalee, that much was true. But Charalee was family--Ann had to give her sister the benefit of the doubt. Didn't she?

"She's headed to the Hangar, where the Portal is." Senton shrugged, turning his back. "I'd guess you have ten minutes before she's gone."

Ann frowned, thinking. No, it didn't make sense for her to escape. That wouldn't be enough to cover her tracks. Ann still lived, plus there were thousands of potential witnesses to see her go through, then shut it off. The testimony against Charalee would be overwhelming--

Ann's eyes widened and her mouth slipped into a shocked O.

"Dear lord," she whispered. "I think she's..."

Senton perked up. "What? What is she?"

Ann didn't dare say it aloud. Instead, she spun around, took two steps to the bloody cell, and palmed open the door. Firing her gun into the face of the rising adult lura, she knocked it back and out before it could mount a defense. With a smooth movement, she kicked the infant into the open container, which so stunned it that Ann was able to slap shut the cage's door before the infant could escape. Leaving the cell door open, Ann righted the cart and began sprinting to the nearest taxi pod. Her own pain and exhaustion didn't matter now. Pushing herself to sprint even harder, she slung herself and the cart around a corner, the tinny sound of Senton's shouts echoing behind her, unheeded.

There wasn't time to stop and think. Action was required.

She had to get to the Hangar before it was too late.

## Chapter 23

### Charalee

The dizziness returned as she headed through the separate wings toward the Hangar. More than once, Charalee had to stop, leaning against a wall, a table, a door until the dizziness passed. The ache in her head never seemed to improve, despite tweaks to her aedee's protocols. When she'd joined up with Desert Peaks a few years back, she'd gone into beta testing aedee protocols, ones that would allow greater control of her physiology on a genetic level. It was understood that this could cause some unexpected and unintended side-effects, but the possible gains were immense. Being able to direct her body to increase production of cells at a specific site meant that she could accelerate her healing via direct intervention. The inverse was true--she could battle cancer, were it to strike her, the same way. A common feature most women used was to regulate their periods; Charalee could select a specific ovum to release, should she ever wish to have a child. Or twins. Or triplets. It was a matter of greater, larger control. That was why she'd gone along with it.

Now, however, the control didn't seem to be working. How was she supposed to pull herself out of this painful, dizzy spiral if her aedee wasn't responding to her requests? With a mental snarl, Charalee spat venom on the memory of the medic whom she'd knocked out in the Medical wing. Charalee had been too easy on the woman, only punching her when she should have punched *through* her, as she'd done to one of the guards who'd tried to stop her access to the Brig. Whatever that stupid woman had done to her had hampered her aedee's success, and that was enough to drive Charalee into a rage.

But the anger wouldn't help her get to the Hangar any sooner. She had to focus on that. Turning the power of her rage into a galvanizing force, Charalee pushed off the current support (it was a table she'd slumped against while passing through a rest area where people would sometimes sit and chat over tea or something equally as insipid) and moved on. The medic thought she'd stop Charalee? Well, that was a mistake on the medic's part. Nothing would keep Charalee from getting out of here. This whole thing was a disaster, and the fact that she'd be the only one to survive would become a sensation and sob-story once she returned to the Vanguard.

A couple of lura snuffled at the far end of one of the corridors. So far, she'd been lucky, and the creatures had seemed otherwise occupied. These two, however--of a different type than she'd seen before--blocked the direction she needed to go. They hadn't noticed her, yet, with their strange, skeletal faces and bizarre protuberances up and down their bodies. Instead, they appeared to be fascinated with the vents higher up on the wall. Since the power had returned, Charalee had noticed the air slowly clearing up.

One of the lura shivered, its glossy body rocking back and forth. The other one

gurgled a response, shivered as well, then hurried away from the juncture of hallways where Charalee had first spotted them.

Grimacing against the constant throb in her head, Charalee slid forward, cautiously peeking around the corner. The lura were out of sight.

Only once she'd realized that did she feel her heartbeat slow. The attack from the one in the tunnels had been enough to frighten her; no, not frighten, but certainly give her a sense of healthy respect and a desire to keep her distance.

A broadcast sounded throughout the Compound, which drew her up. Most people would have received this via their aedees or, if they were part of the imbecile minority of Anachronists, in their handhelds. Still, to ensure that everyone on the Compound got the message, the overhead announcements sometimes came through, as well.

"Attention, colonists of Prospero. This is Captain Rall. Primary power has been restored, allowing us to open up the Hangar doors again. We will begin an orderly evacuation of the planet of all those who wish to depart as soon as we can get the transports moving. Once the infestation has been eliminated, we can return and rebuild. For now, please continue to remain calm and orderly. Listen to the crewmembers of our Security force; they have instructions on how to best keep you safe. With restored power, we will be able to service areas that have been locked down and previously inaccessible. Please keep yourselves safe until we can help you. Thank you for your help and cooperation during this trying time."

The captain clicked off. Charalee snorted. Was that what leadership looked like to the colonists on Prospero? A man who stayed holed up in his office during a crisis, spoke to them when the end was in sight, and let all those who had been scared by the experience to simply leave? If she'd been in charge, Charalee would never have put the people in a single, tasty group and let them all await their deaths in a single place. The best thing would have been to arm them, have them defeat the creatures--Charalee had nearly done that very thing earlier--and reclaim their homes. Such weakness. Such stupidity. She couldn't get off this rock fast enough.

With the power back on, though, she assumed she could get to the Hangar by more conventional means. She again regretted not downloading the information that Nolan had offered her. Based upon the markings on the walls, she was fairly close to the Hangar. There were taxi-pods that would be up and running again, which would transport her the last bit of distance. All she needed to do now was find one.

Gritting her teeth, she decided to try one of the people she'd met. They knew the place and could get her to a station. At first, she tried hailing Korryn. The woman was more likely to be willing to talk to her, since Senton was (presumptively) still upset with Charalee for having abandoned him. Plus, she'd had her aedee pick up the comm information when she'd bumped into Korryn in the hallway a few hours before. It had been an impulse and an instinct--which Charalee had learned long ago to always heed--and it paid off now.

A moment after attempting to connect, her aedee displayed a message in Charalee's field of vision: COMM FAILED.

"Failed?" Charalee frowned. There were a couple possibilities: One, Korryn was asleep and her aedee prevented anything but emergency communications. That was unlikely, considering how stupid it would be to sleep at a time like this. Two, Korryn had deliberately set her aedee to AWAY, preventing the comms to come through. This didn't make sense, though, because there wasn't an ancillary option to try leaving a voice message for her to receive when she became available. The third was that Korryn was dead. Of the three, that was the most likely option, all things considered.

Despite her reluctance, Charalee tried for Senton. His query shut down after a few moments of hailing, letting her know that he'd refused her call.

"Well, fine. You've always been a prick; no reason to stop now." She glanced about, trying to see if there was anyone who could help her. Then again, Charalee didn't really look particularly trustworthy right now. Blood splattered all over her, and her right arm was crusting over with the guard's blood. She flicked the skin-sheath, which responded to the aedee signal to return to her preferred color, as well as knocking off the offending grime. A moment later, her skin-sheath was back to its black-and-gray format. It didn't do anything for the gore stuck on her hands or the way her hair felt sticky with all sorts of things she didn't want to think about, but she was a survivor, right? No one expected her to look perfect.

The moment of self-reflection was over, and now she had to do what she'd been subliminally refusing to do: Call her sister.

Ann had obviously managed to get the power back on--so she was (most likely) still alive--but reaching out to her felt like some sort of defeat. Charalee stewed on that for a moment. "Whatever," she said at last. "It isn't worth being stuck here." She shook her head as she queued her aedee's call to Ann Timpson. "Damn place," she said. "Who designed this nightmare anyway?" Whoever it was deserved to be dosed with some of the lura toxin and then left alone with a couple of the--

"Charalee?" said Ann. Her voice was ragged and eager, though Charalee couldn't quite pick out why.

"Hey, sis," said Charalee, affecting a raggedness of her own. She tried to sound scared, exhausted, and desperate without going overboard. In her mind, she'd made that work pretty well. "I need some help."

"Oh, yeah? Where are you?"

"That's the thing: I think I'm lost. How can I get to the Hangar?"

"You're not there yet?"

"No, I'm still on track."

"I'm in a taxi-pod. Can you come to me at the next stop? I'll take you there."

Charalee narrowed her eyes. Her sister was sounding almost excited to see her again. That was...unusual. "Well, I don't even know where one would be."

"I can come to you. Beam me your location."

"I don't have Compound access," she said.

"Right, right," said Ann. "Here's what I can do. I'm going to be to the Hangar in about five minutes. I'll send a pathway to you."

"What's a pathway?"

"It's something we've set up for lost kids who don't have an aedee yet. We use the lights to guide you toward a safe place. The kids know to follow the lights and we can usually find them in only a few minutes after they get lost."

"Did you ever think to build the Compound in a *logical* way instead?"

Ann laughed. Charalee didn't think she'd said anything funny. Ann sounded relieved--no, not relieved, necessarily, but less concerned--as she spoke. "That's a different story entirely."

"This place is a joke."

"It's more of a rhizome, as I heard told."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I have no idea. I'll be at the Hangar in a few. From there I can authorize a pathway to get you to me. Any idea where you are? If I can localize it, it'll take less time."

Charalee looked around and described what she saw.

"Okay," said her sister, "I think I know where you are. Not far away, as it turns out."

"Hurry," said Charalee, putting a drop of fear she didn't feel into her words. "I saw some *Dentolura* hanging around here. I'm not sure if they're completely gone."

"I'll be done in a few." Ann disconnected.

As her temple returned to its normal temperature, Charalee frowned. There was something in Ann's demeanor that made every instinct bristle. Unfortunately, she didn't know why. It was possible that Ann was simply feeling happy that the crisis was almost over. Having normal lighting in the Compound made a large difference, even in Charalee's jaded view. She looked through a window to the outside world. The green fingers of an approaching dawn made her anxious to be gone. If she did it correctly, she could burn this place behind her as she left. She looked at her hand, coated in the sticky remnants of the man she'd killed.

"Maybe I should take care of that before I get to Ann," she said to herself, then headed off to find a lavatory.

She didn't want to alarm her sister unduly.

## Chapter 24

### Ann

The Hangar was a mess.

Despite the fact that there was plenty of space for everyone, people had gathered together in a massive group near the entrances to the Hangar. Ann stared in surprise at the press of humanity. Navigating her cart slowly, she saw one theme in everyone's faces. They were defeated. They were shocked, saddened, confused, tired, angry, and even hungry, too, but more than anything, the entire ordeal had left them all feeling defeated.

Her heart ached at the thought. Daylight had come. They had survived. There was no doubt that they'd all managed to continue, despite horrible odds. More than that, Ann felt a twinge of regret that she hadn't managed to do more to help them. There were priorities, of course, that only she could have kept up with. She didn't think she'd done the wrong thing, necessarily, but perhaps she hadn't done the *best* thing? Looking at the despair on so many people's faces, Ann wished she'd been able to do more.

"Excuse me. Sorry. Can I get past? I'm sorry. Excuse me." The apologies ran on repeat as she navigated the crowd. Most people gave her a curious glance, but her uniform--sullied and stained and torn though it was--gave enough authority that no one did more than look. A couple of times, an attentive parent dragged her child out of the way so that Ann could angle the cart through the press.

The group dispersed more and more as they went, but no one seemed eager to go too far past the entrances. Part of that, she was confident, was because the lights weren't on.

She frowned. Why was that?

Once free of the crowd, Ann set her cart on one of the hovering pads that helped move people through the massive expanse. It didn't respond to the weight.

Ann tried a query from her aedee.

Nothing happened.

Grimacing, she brought up a location log on her palm. Almost all of her crewmembers were here, but there should be one person in control...Bertram Callaway. Well, that was a relief. He was as good as they came. He'd likely be looking at a promotion once the crisis was behind them. She hailed Bert.

"Yes, Chief?" he asked almost instantly after the connection came through.

"You're in the Hangar?"

"Yes, sir. It's been an interesting time, to say the least. We're understaffed by a magnitude of about one hundred times or so, I'd say."

"Do you have a sense of how many want out? How many want to leave?"

"Basically everyone here, from what I can gather, sir. There are pockets of other

groups that can't come out--Medical wing has had a severe accident, it looks like, and no one is leaving there."

"Accident?"

"That's probably the wrong way to describe it. One of the injured got up and started killing people."

"What!" Ann felt a shock of surprise ripple through her. She hadn't thought that *more* murders would have to be investigated, though perhaps that was too optimistic a hope. With this much chaos, people were bound to want to take advantage of the crisis. "What details do you have?"

"There's some people's aedee recordings to parse through, sir, but we haven't had the manpower to get anything taken care of...well, anything. We're lucky this place hasn't devolved into a mob. You can see how absurd this place is, how everyone is everywhere."

"Anything you can do to try to make this more organized?"

"Ever since I last reported to you, Chief, I've been working on getting this place more organized. There are only about a hundred crewmembers in the colony, and there are nearly ten *thousand* people. That's not good ratios."

Ann frowned. "You're right." She glanced down and saw the cart. "Look, Bert, I have a different priority right now."

"Different than these people?" He sounded incredulous.

"Different than crowd control, but still pertinent. I need to know why the hover-pads aren't doing anything. Why aren't the lights on?"

"That's a great question, sir, but I think it has something to do with the Envoy."

"With Charalee?"

"Is that her name?"

"She's my sister."

Bert barked a laugh. "Really? Small galaxy. Look, Chief, the power that's been brought back online throughout the Compound is being held in abeyance until the Envoy can input her protocols. That will then allow the modified PRISM engine that powers the Portal to run." Ann could almost hear the shrug. "It seems like that's what happened when the power was restored--I can't override it from here."

"You're certain of this?"

"Yes, sir. I'm standing at the terminal now."

She looked around, trying to find the place. There it was, off in the distance. A large tower that overlooked the entire Hangar. Calling it a tower was a misnomer, though; it was more like a pillar in the center of the Hangar that both supported the immense roof and gave the people inside it a 360 degree view of the entire place. There, the many different terminals and working cogs of the Hangar worked. Of course Bert would be there. If Ann had had any sense, she would've headed straight there.

"Okay, look, I need a pathway put into place."

"Why?"

"My sister needs to get here."

"She's the Envoy, right?"



"Yes."

Bert was quiet a moment. "Any idea where she is?"

"Near the joint between Gateway Avenue and the Longstand Street."

"Close to the lavatories?"

"I'm thinking so."

Another pause. "Okay, Chief. I've triggered a pathway. What do you want to do now?"

Ann bit her lip, thinking. She didn't trust Charalee. Her instinct was to club her sister in the back of the head, then throw her into the Brig while she evacuated the entire colony. But that wouldn't work--she had to be conscious to put in the Envoy's protocols. Nevertheless, having the Hangar open was only one piece of the puzzle. Would the Portal work? Could they mass-evacuate? Was there enough bandwidth for that? The entire thing was experimental in the first place. Ann couldn't reasonably rely on the new tech to teleport the people from Prospero to the Vanguard, could she? There were too many variables, too many possible areas where that could go wrong. But there were only five transports that she could see. Even if they were completely empty, they would have to be recharged--something that would take time--and restocked with food for the trip back to the Vanguard. That sort of organization would take additional time, all the while there was still the danger of the *Dentolura*, who were all throughout the Compound.

A sinking feeling dripped through Ann's stomach and into her body and soul. They weren't any closer to being done than any other time. They were...they were screwed, basically. There wasn't anything she could do. It had been a false hope that Captain Rall had given them. Yes, they were almost within lightline for contacting the Vanguard, but there was no cavalry on the way, no rescue to wait for.

They were on their own, and they had precious little that they could do.

Ann swore.

"Sir?"

"I said, 'Shitbones,'" replied Ann.

"No, I heard that. I was wondering if you had something you wanted me to do...and I was hoping it wasn't that."

"Wasn't what?"

"To...you know...shit out bones."

Ann almost smiled, but the gravity of the situation pulled her face into a perpetual frown. "Bert, this is going to be trickier than I thought."

"Why, sir?"

"I don't trust my sister to do the right thing."

"Um..."

She shook her head. "Look, I need to get to my sister and bring her to you. She has to have access to the system so that she can power up the Hangar and the Portal. But I don't want her to be touching anything else. Can you arrange that?"

"Anything else...you mean--"

"Systems, protocols, *anything*. As much as I hate to say it, she's the only key we

have to getting out of here, but she's a dangerous key."

"Isn't she your sister?"

"It's not something I'm particularly proud of, if you must know."

"Okay, Chief. Whatever you say."

"Do that. I'm going to go find my sister."

"Roger that."

They disconnected and Ann took a step away from the hover-pad, then paused. Did she want to be hauling around the *lura* that was inside? It kept rattling the cage, but its energy seemed to be fluctuating now that they had normal air circulating through the place. Maybe it couldn't handle their atmosphere for much longer? Ann heaved a sigh. No, she didn't need that thing rattling around--but she didn't trust to leave it unguarded, either.

Holding up her hand, she wiggled her pinky and then twisted her wrist, loading the previously generated list of locations and her people. It took another minute or two to find a crewmember nearby, but once she did, she called her up. Another minute passed before the woman showed up.

"Yes, Chief?" asked Pauline Su, approaching at a jog. She had her Security force helmet tucked underneath one arm, her short-cropped black hair tight against her face. Slanted eyes clicked from Ann's face to the crate sitting on the pad.

"I need you to guard this."

"Yes, sir."

"It has a *lura* in it."

Su tipped her head. "What's a *lura*, sir?"

"What we call the things that attacked us," said Ann, frowning a bit at the question.

"Oh. We've been calling them pisspots for most of the night," said Su.

"Have you had a lot of contact with them?"

An incredulous smile creased over Su's face. "That's putting it mildly. These suckers have been tearing through people all over the Compound. I myself have dispatched at least a half dozen of them."

Ann raised her eyebrows. "I can't wait to read the report."

"I sure can wait to file it, sir," said Su with a crooked smile. "I'm not too keen on reliving the experience."

"Did you record it through your aedee?" asked Ann. It was supposed to be standard operating procedure to activate one's aedee recording during a crisis like this, but, at the same time, one could be forgiven for having other things to attend to.

"Yes, sir," said Pauline Su, her face giving away nothing about how she felt having the question asked of her. "Of course I did."

"The visualization dump should be enough, then."

"Yes, sir," said Su, smiling. "That would be a relief."

"But you have to watch this crate for me."

Su saluted. "Yes, sir."

Ann nodded and moved to leave, then paused. "And Su?"

"Yes?"

"If I...If there's a need--if I give you word--you should let the cage open."

Su blinked in surprise. "Uh, if you say so, Chief."

Ann nodded, pursing her lips. "I do. I...Let's hope that doesn't happen."

Su shrugged. "Whatever you say, sir. Should I blast it when I open it?"

Ann shook her head. "No! No, please. Just...let it go."

"Okay. You're the boss, Chief." Su nodded deferentially to Ann, who returned the nod and headed back toward the entrance. She'd like to have the big, primary doors open, but she figured they were part of the system that needed the Envoy.

As she walked, she fingered the Calm packet in her pocket. It was going to turn out okay. She no longer needed the help. She snorted, remembering the bad hit from Lyle's terminal--that was the brightest memory she had of the entire night. That hit had made the rest of her thoughts fuzzy when she put too much pressure on them. And, after the fight with Korryn, she felt physically worse than she had in a long time. If it weren't for Helena, Ann didn't know what would have happened to her.

She pulled out the Calm pod, considering it carefully as she headed toward where the pathway would light up for Charalee. Maybe it wasn't worth it, after all. Sure, the Calm helped her think. Right now, it would be nice to take the edge off the stress. There were still so many variables, so many possibilities. Did she really want to deal with that alone? Without any help?

Ann held the packet in her hand, not willing to put it away yet. After all, didn't she deserve a little rest? She'd gone through a lot, and though they weren't finished yet, she could really use a boost. A bit of help, yes. That's all it would be...

Ann arrived at the entrance as Charalee arrived, along with a handful of other people who hadn't been able to find their way to the Hangar, either. Ann forced a grin she didn't feel onto her face and embraced Charalee fiercely.

"Uh...hello?" said her sister, hardly reciprocating.

"I'm so glad you're here," said Ann, lying through her teeth. She patted Charalee on the back and then led her through the crowd, explaining the situation as they walked. "I've ordered my people to get the system ready. Once you've inputted the protocols, we can start getting people off the planet."

"Yes," said Charalee, nodding her head in a way that seemed as forced as Ann's own jocularity. "That sounds excellent."

Ann kept careful watch over her sister, though she didn't know why. If the woman wanted to sabotage them, there was little Ann could do at this point. They had to have the Envoy codes. Without them, there was plenty of energy and no way to use it. More than that, she didn't trust Charalee. Her willingness to help out tickled a memory in Ann's mind. Something about the Medical wing...had Charalee been there? It had been so soon after the bad hit that she couldn't really say. The drugs that Helena had given Ann weren't as effective now as before, and Ann's thinking was getting foggy.

She had to remain...Calm...

They arrived at the pillar, entering into the elevator with Ann's aedee providing

the access. As they coasted upwards, Ann asked, "Did you...do you think the Portal will work?"

"Work?"

"We've had to make some changes, after all."

"Poor timing. I saw some of the patches you did because of that storm. Assuming the *Dentolura* didn't damage too much, it should work fine."

"And you're confident the Portal can work the way it's supposed to?"

"Yes," said Charalee, nodding. She shot her sister a wary look. "Why so interested?"

"We're going to get these people off the planet who want to go. But I'm worried about using new tech to do it."

"Oh, the Portal could handle twice as many people," said Charalee with a wave of her hand. "The issue is only about having enough power. The PRISM engines that we have attached to the Portal are the latest that DP has created. That should make you feel safe right there."

To Ann, it sounded more like a sales pitch than something that would make her feel better. Nevertheless, she nodded as if she agreed. "That sound perfect."

"Yes," said Charalee in a way that made Ann cold.

They entered the command station. Bertram stood next to the primary terminal. There were a handful of additional engineers and even a couple of Security crewmembers, but, for the most part, the space was empty of people.

"Skeleton crew?" she asked as the Timpson sisters crossed the room.

"Most of the engineers are done with their part. They're with their families," said Bert, nodding at Charalee and saluting his Chief.

Ann returned the recognition. "This is my sister, Charalee Timpson. Please show her to where the Envoy's codes belong."

"Yes, sir," said Bert. He looked at Charalee. "Will you?"

"With pleasure."

Ann ghosted behind them, not wanting to let Charalee out of her sight. The idea of what her sister might do haunted her, but she couldn't decide if it was petty suspicion or a genuine insight into her sister's personality that made her so distrustful. As it stood, Ann didn't want a misstep. Power up the Hangar. Deal with the next step only after that.

Charalee leaned forward. Ann noticed in the blue light of the darkened room that Charalee looked worn down. Her hair was a mess, and the wound on her head didn't appear too well healed. That surprised Ann. Hadn't Helena worked on her sister, too? She seemed to remember that. But it was murky, like trying to remember a dream.

"Damn Calm," said Ann under her breath.

"What was that?" asked Charalee, looking up from the terminal on which she was working.

"Huh? Oh, nothing," said Ann. She stood at military rest, her hands behind her back, feet a sharp shoulder-width apart. "I didn't say anything."

Charalee went back to her work, tapping her aedee and occasionally the terminal

in front of her. She moved with an efficiency that reminded Ann of Helena. That was strange. Why was she thinking of the medic again?

Then, almost like a breeze with a hint of perfume that reminded her of a long-left lover, a memory popped into her mind.

The Medical wing.

An attack.

Some deaths.

Charalee shouldn't be standing, now that Ann thought about it. She'd been hit by a lura, was poisoned. She wasn't even able to stand on her own; Charalee had been looking like she was a scarce meter from death.

Now she was up and moving. She was...

Ann grimaced. She shot a look at Bertram. He was watching Charalee just as carefully, but neither one knew why. They didn't know what she needed to do.

"That's it," said Charalee, pulling Ann out of her paranoid conclusions. "I have to go down to the Portal itself and input my code there." She pointed down to the Portal. It was positioned at the far end of the Hangar, a large platform built into long, sleek ovals. The Portal itself was supposed to generate a large amount of energy that would be funneled through the ovals and then create a tear in time/space that would allow a person to walk through, from one location to another, in this case, the other Portal on the far edge of the Vanguard.

"Let's get you down there," said Ann, reaching for Charalee's arm.

"One more thing," said Charalee, her fingers twitching.

That was the moment. That was the problem

That was the clue.

"Bert!" shouted Ann, but it was cut short as Charalee knocked her hard in the chest, sending the Chief of Security sprawling. Bert leaped in, but received a vicious elbow to the nose. A bone cracked and blood sprayed as Bert dropped. Charalee slapped the terminal panel before anyone could move.

The entire Hangar shuddered as the massive external doors began to yawn open.

On the other side, massed together in a herd too expansive to count, were the awaiting *Dentolura*.

The door finished opening.

The animals took a step into the Hangar.

Even from this height, Ann could hear the people down below scream.

## Chapter 25

### Charalee

The look of shock, betrayal, and anger on Ann's face almost made the entire debacle worth the effort. Almost.

Charalee sprinted toward the elevator, her skin-sheath taking a hit from a well-aimed Security crewmember. The skin-sheath absorbed the energy, dispersing it throughout the material. Charalee hardly felt more than a slight increase in heat, though she knew that the skin-sheath's ability to regenerate itself was the only thing that kept a second shot from tearing her in two. Skin-sheath notwithstanding, the force of it knocked her off balance, though not enough to do more than slow her for a pace. Ann shouted something about stopping her--it was clichéd, no matter what it was, Charalee felt sure--and more shots cut the air, sizzling against walls, glass, and consoles. Desperate engineers dropped to the ground, covering their heads in surprise and terror.

The elevator doors loomed in front of her. A couple of steps more...

She slammed against the unyielding doors, her breath rushing out of her despite her sheath. Furious, Charalee slapped the aedee terminal to summon the elevator--it should still be at the top floor, as no one else was coming up--only to hear Ann laugh tersely. Rage rushed through Charalee's body at the condescending sound.

"You don't have authorization to use the elevator, sweetheart," said Ann as she climbed to her feet. The remaining crewmembers stood in their stock stance, weapons trained on Charalee, who could only glare at her sister. "Keep her contained," said Ann. "We have an emergency downstairs that we need to--"

As Ann spoke, one of the crewmembers came close enough to touch her. Squeezing a hand to signal her aedee's interaction with the skin-sheath, Charalee felt her entire body stiffen with augmented strength. In a blur, she disarmed the man, then snatched him by the coveralls. With a spin, Charalee hurled him into the approaching three crewmembers, knocking the entire Security force to the ground in one move.

Before anyone could move, Charalee sprinted forward, firing the weapon--at the glass overlooking the Hangar. The shots burned holes in it, fracturing it enough. With another aedee cue, her skin-sheath hardened to a beyond-steel level, localized on her forearms. The shock of leaping into the damaged window was absorbed by her sheath. The glass bent, yielded, broke.

Charalee was in free fall, plummeting twenty-five meters toward the ground. As she fell, she could see the constellations of shattered glass falling with her, the morass of people below, the charging herd of *Dentolura*. The sound of screams echoed throughout the Hangar, floating up towards her as people began to panic. The air rushed through her hair. The ground loomed.

Executing a tight flip, Charalee redirected all of the protection that she could to her legs. The skin-sheath ought to be able to handle that much strain--it was tested to

work for upwards of forty meters--but, lately, things hadn't always worked the way she wanted, Charalee had noticed.

Her breath caught in her throat.

Panic started to edge its way into her mind.

The ground seemed to grow.

Then it was done, she'd landed, and though the force jolted through her entire body, causing one of the stitches in her head to burst and a fresh shock of pain and blood to leak through, she hadn't splattered as she'd feared she would.

Then momentum caught up with her; too much energy shoved her forward. Spilling awkwardly forward, Charalee's heels tripped upwards and she found herself midair and upside down, spiraling in an ungainly star shape, landing some three or four meters from where she'd touched down. Unprepared for this, she didn't have time to reprogram the skin-sheath. When she landed on her left arm, she heard--and felt--a dry crack. Pain spiked through her as she bounced, grunting and gasping, another meter through the Hangar.

As she rolled to a stop, she cradled her forearm, gritting her teeth against the pain. Blood dripped into her eyes as she tried to get up. Shock was rippling through her, making her empty stomach revolt, disassociating her ability to think clearly.

In the not-too-distance, the closest *Dentolura* rushed in, their sundry shapes and faces a terrifying reality to face. Behind the creatures, the sun peered over the lip of the horizon, pouring its golden beams into the Hangar.

Power.

Portal.

She could still escape.

Forcing her arm back into position--screaming as she did so--she ordered the skin-sheath to bind up her forearm, immobilizing it. The pain was intense, but it also served to clarify her purpose. She wanted to survive. Nothing would keep her from getting her freedom.

Behind her, the crowd continued to panic, pushing against each other, trampling one another in their haste and fear. In front of her was the onrush of lura, slaver on their jaws and violence in their eyes. In between was the Portal--off to one side and, mercifully, undamaged by the incoming horde.

She could do this.

She could pull it off.

Gritting her teeth (and triggering the best pain-blocking protocols her aedee had), Charalee began to sprint. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed something--one of the hover-pads that she'd taken upon arriving at the Compound. With the power returned, they would work.

Deviating from her straight-forward course, she jumped onto the closest one. A short Security crewmember saw her, yelped, and moved to intercept. Charalee fiddled with the controls as the member leaped onto the pad. Charalee fretted for a split moment about how she'd defeat someone with only one hand, but the woman didn't attack her--instead, she slapped the large crate that was also on the pad. The crate's

door popped open, releasing a noxious smell, but other than that, nothing happened.

Taking advantage of the woman's choice, she kicked the crewmember in the stomach, sending her sprawling, her slanted eyes wide with pain and anger.

Charalee laughed and tapped the control, shooting forward. With a flick of her finger, she increased the acceleration, zipping along faster than she could have run. Behind her, the thunder of the horde only grew. She knew she was cutting it close, and she hoped that she could avoid their notice, since there were so many tasty morsels in front of them.

Sparing a glance behind her, Charalee's stomach dropped into her aching feet.

The entire horde, it seemed, had started coming after her.

Swallowing hard, she glanced at the accelerator. A red light flashed. Shoving the wind-whipped hair from her eyes, she looked closer. OVER LIMIT. She glanced at the crate behind her.

"Good luck," she said to it, and shoved it off, the action causing a twinge of pain in her left arm. The cage clattered free, spinning wildly on its base as it skittered across the concrete floor of the Hangar. The hover-pad began to speed up. Charalee let out an exultant whoop and faced forward. The Portal was close now.

Charalee's temple warmed. She frowned. Who was calling now?

A glance in the bottom left of her vision let her know it was, unsurprisingly, her sister. Despite the pain in her head and arm, she felt a flutter of joy pass through her. Ann wanted to talk? Charalee was feeling expansive; she'd allow it.

"I'd like to thank you for this chance to escape," said Charalee as she rammed the hover-pad into a rapid deceleration. The change in momentum nearly threw her from the pad, but she managed to remain onboard until it was safe to run off it. "I couldn't have gotten here without you."

"Charalee," said Ann, her voice soft and sad, "I didn't want to do this."

"Do what, sister?" asked Charalee, sprinting toward the aedee-terminal that controlled the Portal. "Lose?"

"No. I didn't want to see this happen to you."

Charalee slapped the terminal, calling up the protocols she'd been sent as Envoy to turn on. The Portal began to warm up, drawing on the prodigious power of the PRISM engines, utilizing Prospero's sun as a connection to the star closest to the Vanguard. How it worked, Charalee had never understood. Something about restructuring the matter passing through the Portal and reassembling it on the other end. Whatever it was, she need only allow it to fully power up before she could step through, returning to the Vanguard and there relate the tragic tale of Prospero's demise, everyone dead as the hostile megafauna feasted on their remains...

Charalee laughed. In a few minutes, the Portal would be open. She'd be safe.

She turned to look at the tower where she assumed Ann still stood, watching her sister leave.

"You're jealous of me, Ann. You always have been. What have you ever done that I couldn't have done better? You were always inferior to me. It's something Mother knew. That's why she did for me what she refused to do for you: She paid for my



digenetic implants, Ann. She cared about me."

"I'm sorry, Charalee. I can't let you leave."

"You aren't likely to stop me, sister. That's a problem for you, isn't it?"

"Well, as Senton taught me, you never know when a biological solution will be what you need to solve your problems."

Charalee blinked. The timer on the portal read another three minutes. She couldn't leave yet, so she decided to indulge her sister's cryptic comment. "What do you mean by that?"

"Goodbye, Charalee."

Her temple cooled, letting her know that Ann had disconnected.

Behind her, she heard a distinct pop.

Confused, Charalee looked around. The horde had stopped chasing her, she realized. They had found something on the ground...the infant from before was in the midst of the mass of creatures. Had that been in the cage? That explained the smell.

Thinking of that stench was enough to make her smell it again.

Charalee took a deeper breath. No, she wasn't imagining it. There stink of copper and sewage invaded her nostrils.

The horde's attention on the infant snapped to her, almost as one.

Charalee's eyes widened. With trembling fingers, Charalee reached behind her. The pop, what had that been? A small protuberance came beneath her seeking hand. She plucked it free and looked at it.

A used Calm packet, one that required an aedee signal to open. Bringing it closer to her face, she took a whiff. The smell of the *Dentolura* pheromones still lingered thickly around the opening.

Charalee looked up at the approaching horde of lura, her face frozen in fear and dawning understanding. Ann had betrayed her. She'd tricked her, let her go...

The closest lura leaped forward, its jaw unhinged and wide.

The timer read ninety seconds when she began to scream.

The screams stopped when the timer read twenty-eight seconds.

## Chapter 26

### Ann

Standing at the shattered window, Ann watched the horde of *Dentolura* finish off her sister. The people below stood in mute horror and confusion, as the creatures had blitzed the Hangar, only to divert themselves to chase after a single person on a hover-pad. Now, even more inexplicably, the creatures turned away, shuffling out of the Hangar and into the thin atmosphere of Prospero. When the last lura had stepped out of the massive door, she signaled to Bert to close it up.

"Sir," he asked as the door clanged closed, "is it over?"

"I think so." Ann sighed. "We still have clean-up. That will take its own time." She took a deep breath. To her surprise, she was crying. Looking around, she saw her crewmembers and all the survivors staring at her. "Healing always takes time," she said with a weak smile.

Below them, the crowd began to cheer. Their long night of fear was over. They deserved to celebrate.

Exiting the tower at its base--using the elevator instead of the unorthodox approach that Charalee had elected--Ann met a press of people. Most were anxious colonists. Some were her Security force, smiling and happy to see the invasion successfully repulsed.

A short man with narrow eyes and short-cropped hair worked his way through. "Captain Rall!" said Ann, throwing him a sharp salute, though her entire body wished that she could curl up and sleep. What she wouldn't do for some Calm right now...

"Chief Timpson," said Rall, returning the salute. His stern face broke into a genuine smile. "You've done a remarkable job. We will begin the evacuations immediately."

"Is that still necessary, sir?"

"Won't the creatures attack again?"

"I don't think so," said Ann. "They were here for the infant. We gave it back."

"But is this place safe?" He looked at her shrewdly. "Are they likely to forgive us?"

Ann paused. "I don't know. You'd have to ask Senton Trapp."

Captain Rall's face clouded. "The doctor in the Brig?"

Ann nodded, her head thumping.

"One of my assistants was moving through that area--"

Ann's eyes widened. "That's dangerous, sir. There's a lura inside one of the cells."

"There's a lot going on in the Brig, Chief Timpson, but that wasn't her largest concern. My assistant said that Doctor Trapp isn't likely to survive."

"What?" Ann straightened. She didn't like the doctor, but she didn't want him to die. "How?"

"Allergic reaction is our best guess. The man...it wasn't a pleasant ending, I'm afraid."

Ann tried to feel bad, but her emotions were too drained. She'd been through too much. She'd seen too much. Done...well, what was done was done. She had to focus on that, even if it was a cold comfort.

"I need a full debrief."

"Yes, sir."

"But evacuations first."

Ann nodded. "It's your colony, sir. You decide."

"I stand by my offer to send everyone through who wants it." He nodded at the Portal, which was shimmering, like a tear in the air, on the platform where Charalee had died. "Does that thing work?"

"I guess so. I don't know..."

A flash of light drew everyone's attention to the Portal. The light continued to brighten, illuminating the Hangar's shadows until it was too bright for anyone to look directly at it. As suddenly as it came, the brightness dropped. A person, dressed in the military gear of Desert Peaks, walked through. Though helmeted, it was clear that the person was a woman. She was unarmed--at least, she wasn't carrying a sidearm or rifle--and looked about in confusion when she saw the bloody remains of Charalee near her. Judging from her posture, she wasn't particularly happy with what she saw.

"I think that's something you'll have to deal with, sir," said Ann, smiling without any real mirth.

Captain Rall straightened. "I don't suppose you're up to talking to our investors?"

"That's above my paygrade, sir. I just had to save our colony."

"And I thank you for that." He took a deep breath. "Wish me luck," he said.

He must have taken some of that luck, for the DP rep was less angry and more anxious. Relief was dispatched through the Portal, and soon Prospero was connected more fully to the Vanguard than ever before. Essential help to clear out the final *Dentolura* came across, as well as food, medical supplies, and additional manpower. Most colonists decided to take the generous severance package from DP and find a new home. Some chose to stay, rebuilding what had been broken. The clean up process would take an unknown amount of time, during which precious little work would be done in the mines. All in all, it was a massive loss for Desert Peaks.

Ann, however, didn't much care about that. As she sat in her office, looking out at the now-familiar tree line, she felt only emptiness. In the drawer behind her was a package of Calm, if she only wanted to...

The door chimed. Her aedee told her it was Bertram. She fingered permission to open the door and her newly-minted Deputy Chief walked in. "You wanted to talk to me, sir?" he asked, standing at attention.

"Sit down, Bert," she said, though she didn't turn away from the view. "We need to talk."

As he sat, Bert said, "About what, Chief? I've been going over the records one more time. It looks like we'll be able to put this behind us once the DP reps have given

the approval." He held his hands out. "Within two months of the most catastrophic loss of a colony in the history of postlapsarian humanity, we're almost back to where we were. You were instrumental to this success." He shrugged. "The only thing that we have left to do is get roaring drunk and find some willing partners for a night of debauchery."

Ann turned around, her expression empty and hollow.

Bert's smile dissolved. "Cripes, Chief. I'm sorry, I didn't..."

She held up a hand. "Bert, I don't want to be here anymore. The dreams, the pain." She shook her head. "Every time I head into the Dorms, I think of the lura that killed so many. I can't pass through the Laboratory wing without remembering how it all started." She sighed, her shoulders slumped. "I can't keep up with it any more. The depression. The sadness. The desire..." She thought of the Calm again, but decided to move on. She didn't need the drugs, she needed a new home. "I'm retiring, Bert. I want you to take over."

He gave a weak laugh. "Sir, with all due respect, I've barely managed to figure out what to do as a *Deputy* Chief. I don't want your job."

"Neither do I. I'm taking the severance offered by DP. I'm going to try to overcome this."

Bert shifted in his seat. "But, what about all the little details? All the parts that I don't know how to do?"

"You'll learn. It's how I did it." She shook her head. "I wanted to let you know, Bertram, that I appreciate your support and help over the past few weeks. I couldn't have done it without you."

"You're welcome, sir."

Ann gave him a slight smile. "You know, I think you deserve your party." She nodded to the door. "Go. Celebrate. You deserve it."

"But...what will you do?" he asked, standing slowly.

Ann rubbed a hand across her face. Despite the worry, fear, sadness, and trauma that she still suffered, she felt a genuine feeling of hope return to her. By leaving Prospero, she could seek out the thing that haunted her the most--banishing the echoes of her sister's screams. They were there, every night. She needed to be free of that. She had to see if there was a possibility that she could find, perhaps, absolution. One thing was certain, she couldn't find it on the brave new world of Prospero. She could only find that in the stars.

"I think," she said, accompanying her friend to the door, "I'll take some time to heal."