

Meyers looked out through the window at the spiderweb of connectors that gave the Space Colony Lattice 14 its name. She had lived on the colony fleet her entire life and had yet to see even a third of the ships and ports that made up the colony. Let alone the multitude of planets throughout the arms of the galaxy that humanity called home. She let out a sigh and hung her head, her asymmetrical hair hanging in a curtain to the left side of her head. "One day," she muttered to herself, "One day." Today there was work to be done in the lab.

Xenobiology was what Meyers hoped would get her off of Lattice 14 and into the grand scheme of the galaxy. On an isolated backwater like Lattice 14 it left her with little to do and even less to improve herself with. A few days ago, according to the Home-world Clock the station ran on, a specimen was taken aboard by one of the rare landing parties approved by the colony's board of directors. And so it was Meyers found herself with a morning cafe brew insta coffee stepping into a specimen chamber for the first time since she was first on Lattice 14's bio-station.

Meyers closed the door behind her and brought out a tablet computer from her work satchel. "Okay system," she spoke to the computer's voice activation program. "Lockdown containment room A, leave internal comms system open, and begin recording when on my command." The system responded with a pleasant sounding chirp from Meyers' control tablet.

"So what do we have here?" Meyers rhetorically asked as she walked up to the clear containment room barrier wall; a structure designed to withstand force strong enough to tear the hull of the craft around it.

What she saw was a creature she had never encountered before. The creature was quadrupedal, roughly nine foot long by her estimate, with a whip-like tail nearly three feet on its own. Its was front heavy, she noted, with tall, powerful shoulders and arms compared to the hind legs, though the hind legs weren't small by any stretch of the animal kingdoms she knew of. It was plated with a series of scales and thick dermal patches on much of its body, but the presence of what were clearly quills along its dorsal area marked the creature as perhaps some form of mammal. She stood near the clear barrier, speaking details into the computer she held in her hands.

The beast moved closer, placing one five digit paw against the barricade. Meyers stared at it for a moment and saw the shift in position of what she presumed was a thumb. "Opposable," she noted. When she saw the twisting motion the creature's forelimb made as it turned away, she added, "Far more range of motion than expected."

*Finally! Something new. Something dangerous!* thought Meyers with a half giddy smile. The creature's muzzle was heavy and box like, though the rest of its skull she would have pegged as caniform. All the while she lamented her incomplete and woefully out of date study materials that left her making weak comparisons to long ago Earth species. But with this new find she knew she had her ticket off this station and into the real galaxy! She spun in place and gave a laugh of triumph to the empty room and the great beast that watched her from the other side of the barrier.

BWAM! BWAM! BWAM!

The emergency alarm blared. The containment room lighting turned furious red. Meyers looked up at the ceiling at the sudden change in color and down to her tablet screen for confirmation of the problem.

"Well. Shit," a deep and thrumming voice spoke in a matter-of-fact way.

Meyers looked over her shoulder, computer screen forgotten, at the beast. The beast simply sat at the barrier and looked back at Meyers.

“Did, did you just talk?”

The beast grinned a doggish grin. “I did, that is to say, I am. Could you perhaps turn down the alarm?” he inquired, pointing a heavy clawed digit at Meyers’ tablet. “It’s annoying.”

Meyers dumbly tapped her screen, acknowledging the alert. The sound died down, and the pulsing red light faded to the ever present white glow again.

“Thank you,” the beast said, “That would’ve given me a headache had it gone on much longer.”

“You can talk?” Meyers repeated herself, still not quite understanding just what was going on.

The beast huffed and with exaggerated effort began to pace behind the containment wall. “And without a translator, no less,” he said with a sniff of pride.

Meyers put her hand to her head and looked downward at a spot in the floor. Not only a new predatory species, but one that can talk! A crooked grin spread across her face at the potential ahead of her.

“You, oh,” the beast began to laugh. “You really have no idea, do you?”

Meyers looked back at the beast, suddenly feeling a pit of doubt in her stomach. “Idea about what?”

The beast sighed and put a paw to the side of his muzzle. “Help the ignorant,” he said to no one in particular. “I’m a Kilnan. A Quill as the humans without a lick of creativity in their epithets call my kind. We’re an interstellar species, just like yours.”

Meyers began to see visions of her hope flying away like so many birds in a storm.

The beast grinned, this time he showed fangs. “Oh, this is a backwater I’ve stumbled onto!” he said with a laugh. “So many humans, so many cultures! Some are bound to be utterly ignorant of the things going on around them.” His tail curled into a question mark shape in the air behind him.

Meyers felt a growing unease, like the creature, Kilnan, she reminded herself, was studying her. She held up a finger in weak protest, but it fell to her side. “I am the worst xenobiologist in the galaxy,” she muttered.

“Okay, Kilnan,” Meyers started to pace. She looked the beast over and narrowed her eyes. “Just why didn’t you say anything to the team that took you here?”

“I was sleeping peacefully when a group of random humans stormed my camp and stuck military grade weaponry in my face. It wasn’t exactly the best time to strike up conversation, I thought you were pirates!” the beast declared,

waving a dismissive paw in the air.

Meyers placed her fingers at her temples. "I guess that makes sense, but why keep quiet until now?"

"I had to assess the situation. And beside that I found your assessment of me amusing," the Kilnan answered. "Though I must ask, aren't you concerned for that alarm?"

Meyers looked up at the unblinking light. "No," she answered through a sigh, "Happens every time we have a disruption in the connectors. You get used to it." She looked down at her computer. "It's probably nothing, I can just check out-"

A loud banging interrupted Meyers' thought. The door to the containment room shuddered. A second banging and the scream of metal on metal. Meyers stared at the door in the silence that followed.

"This might be more dangerous than you thought," the Kilnan spoke up. He tapped a heavy claw against the containment room. "If your computer can open this door from within, I suggest you might find it safer in here with me than out there."

Meyers looked back at the Kilnan. He had been polite, and if he was to be believed, was a member of the interstellar community. A third bout of banging on the wall and Meyers decided to take her chances with the Kilnan. She swiftly entered the passcode and ran behind the protection of the shielded wall. As the door closed, her breathing began to slow down to a more reasonable rate despite the intermittent clanging of the door.

"Your computer wouldn't happen to have any data on what might be causing that, would it?" the Kilnan asked, standing alongside Meyers, even on all fours his head reached hers in height.

She nodded. "Already checking on it," she says. "Shit! I've got alarms from all over." She groaned and began to flick her fingers over the screen. She had set the whole system on ignore, not realizing things were swiftly going from bad to worse.

"Damage, damage, decoupling, firearms and fire alarms," Meyers read out loud, both for her and her new companion's benefit. "All stemming from an airborne pathogen warning?" She shared a look of befuddlement with the Kilnan before she looked back down at the screen. "Something called a Protean Strain. Not heard of it. Looking it up now."

The Kilnan sat back on his haunches, letting out a chuffing sigh of relief. "If it's only Protean Strain, we don't have anything to be too afraid of. The violence is more important. My kinds immune systems are strong enough to handle it. And you should've been inoculated."

The look on Meyers' face made the Kilnan's ears flatten against his skull. "Perhaps you should remain here," he said with a look toward the door. "Not inoculated against Protean?" he grumbled, "Miss, you need off this platform as much as I do when this is over."

"What's going on out there?" Meyers asked the creature. "You know so much about all this, you tell me." Her words

were firm and her eyes serious. She stood locked eye to eye with the Kilnan.

“I don’t know that much, only that you don’t want to be out there until things are secured and that could take some time,” the Kilnan said, the quills on his back rustling with restrained annoyance. “We’ll be here awhile, we could at least sit and pass the time. You’re scientist. Perhaps I can sate your curiosity? I wouldn’t mind getting to know you.” His offer was sincere, and though his smile held a predator’s teeth, it was genuine.

Meyers, frustrated but keen enough to know when she had little options, groaned and sat on the floor, her back against the chamber wall. “Okay,” she said, “We’ll make this fair. One question for one question. I won’t ask you to just spill your guts at me.” She pulled her knees up and rested her elbows on them. “I go first, though. Who are you?”

The Kilnan sat opposite Meyers and watched the human woman as much as he did the door behind her. “My name is Arkoan. I’m an artisan.” He considered the human woman. “What is your name, human scientist?”

“Meyers” the woman answered. “You’re an artisan? Really?”

Arkoan huffed. “I’m counting that one,” he told her with a raised digit. “I am. I was studying the plant life on that planet your people took me from. There are rare wood and gems there. Excellent material and inspiration for my designs. By the way, your people took my things when they kidnapped me. Where are they?”

Meyers frowned and rubbed the back of her hand, they were feeling dry. “Probably in security,” she answered. “The bag had blood on it, the report said you killed someone. Is that true?”

Arkoan leaned away. “Hardly. Well, not a sapient. It was a large rodent. I was hungry, and I got a little on my bag. We’re civilized, but we are still predators.” As he spoke his tail curled about him, whip like tip flitting back and forth. “You’re a xenobiologist, what more can you tell me about your study?”

Meyers smiled and licked her lips. She wasn’t one to shy away from her favorite topic. She scratched at the back of her hand and looked up at Arkoan. “Apparently one with limited information,” she gave a half serious joke. “I specialized in biomechanics. I may not know much about your species,” she said, pointing a sharp nail at the Kilnan, “but I can tell, for example, that you can operate your arms at a range of motion more comparable to bipedal creatures than quadrupedal. You also have a thumb, but I keep seeing it seize up when you move on all fours.”

Arkoan looked down at his paws and back at Meyers with no small amount of impressment. “You’re right, we can stand and walk on our hind legs. It’s more comfortable on four.” He pushed himself up for demonstration. Front heavy before, now he stood with a hulking presence on powerfully crouched legs. A few lumbering steps and he dropped back down to all fours, his motion swiftly becoming more fluid and comfortable. “My turn again,” he said, “What does Meyers do for fun.”

Meyers brushed her hair to a single curtain with her fingers. They were thicker at the tips, her nails darkened and claw-like. “That’s your question?” she asked, smiling with amusement. She shifted her posture and tried to adjust the shoulders of her coat; that coffee was making her uncomfortable. “I suppose I like music, when we can get anything new over the far grid. Signal out here is terrible. I’m probably decades behind most scenes in this, or any solar system. Some day I’ll see things out there that aren’t this station” She watched Arkoan and thought before asking, “Where do you come from?”

For a moment, Arkoan watched Meyers. A sinking feeling plunged deep into his belly. His mind started to race. *I brought the Protean Strain on board*, he thought, *That would have explained the travel warnings for immunocompromised individuals*. He looked at Meyers, the human woman was larger than she had been when they began their game. The Strain was progressing, and she was still unaware.

“Well?” Meyers asked, hunching forward and looking at Arkoan with large, dark eyes. Her skin had begun to scale in tiny patterns around her eyes, and her nose was growing darker still.

Arkoan didn’t have the heart to frighten her, so he continued to play their game. “I come from the Kilnan homeworld, Sair. It’s a warm place, at least for the most part. Quite arid. Very dangerous but what has lived there has thrived. Perhaps someday you will find your way off. Perhaps when the threat of all those, um, problems, have passed.” He grinned a fang-filled, if wholly nervous, grin.

Meyers chuffed. Her ears slowly elongated and caused an itch that she scratched at with hands far larger and thicker than before, tipped with sharp and sturdy claws. This time she noticed the knitting of dermal plates up her forearms. She made a snarling sound that was certainly not human and with a swipe, shredded the left arm of her coat.

Her skin was turning a dusky silver. Her mouth hung open and she spoke wordless panic at nothing and no one.

“I’m sorry,” Arkoan said, reaching out to put a paw on Meyers shoulder. He didn’t know what else to do.

The touch only caused Meyers to skitter away from the Kilnan and stare at him with betrayal. She reached for her tablet and fumbled it with her far too changed hands, unused to the shape or feel or size. “Protean,” she said in quiet realization, “Damn it!” She slammed a paw on the ground and her shoulders hunched, straining the shirt and the lab coat she wore.

“Changing. It’s changing me. That’s what it does. It’s right in the name,” Meyers stated before she slapped her forehead. For a moment, she remarked in the range of motion and simply started at her hand as it broadened and stretched with new strength and razor claw. “You tricked me,” she said, and looked up at Arkoan. The moment of fear had passed, now her mind ticked and sparked with thoughts and ideas.

Arkoan swiftly shook his head in denial. “Honestly,” he pleaded, ears flat against his head. “I make jewelry. We’re immune to Protean, I never thought I could carry a form of it, or it could adapt to me. I’m not the scientist here. I was merely trying to protect you.”

Meyers huffed and stood up. She started to pace, calming herself down with each step. She looked at her arms and the silvery-blue hue they were starting to take. She turned her paws over and looked at them. She flexed her heavy digits, and stretched them. She worked exercises on her thumb and touched each tip of each finger. All the while, she ignored the creature in the cell with her. A creature she would soon share much in common with.

“No more games,” she stated firmly. “You’re copper colored, why am I blue?”

Arkoan shook his head. “How should,” he stopped and the wheels in his head clicked. “Grey is common, Northern

mostly, toward the tundras. A grayish white or silver. I'm from closer to the equator, to blend in with the sands and mesas, we're more colored. But the blue." He pointed to her hair. "You didn't dye that, you're genetically fixed for it. The virus must be working with what it has on hand, as it were."

Meyers thought for a moment. "Clever," she told Arkoan. "I should've figured that out."

"I am observant," Arkoan said, his tail tip waving a slow rhythm. "You're larger than before," he noted quietly, walking toward Meyers. "Your wrists are showing out of your coat."

Meyers stopped her pacing and looked at Arkoan, not stepping away from him this time. He seemed genuinely apologetic earlier, and part of her wanted to accept that he was. She shrugged off her coat and sat down to take off her boots and socks. Her pants looked short on her, skin tight and only reaching so far as the tops of her calves. Her shirt was, thankfully, sleeveless, though it now showed a generous amount of her stomach. A stomach which was slowly covered with scales lighter and finer than the ones on her paws and starting to plate her arms. She ran her paws over them. "They're soft."

"I know," Arkoan said, sat next to Meyers. "We are mammals in your definitions," he added.

"You have quills," Meyers told Arkoan. "Modified hairs." She blinked as Arkoan lifted her paw to show the beginnings of what looked like fur growing from the backs of her forearms. She touched it to confirm the silky strands for what they are. "You don't have them," she said, "Female characteristic?"

Arkoan nodded and smiled. "This is much easier and less panicky than I'd feared when I saw the first changes," he pointed out. "You are a brilliant woman, Meyers." Especially that she didn't put him in a situation over it.

"I'm going insane inside my head, Arkoan, but I know it won't help me to freak out. I'm only losing my species, having my body ripped apart from the inside. No big deal," Meyers said before she took her head in her hands and leaned forward into her knees. Her feet had been shifting as they spoke, sharp clawed and broad for gripping and moving a heavy predator with frightening speed, they were oversized on her body despite having one less toe than she had just a moment before.

Meyers pitched forward and started to shout. Her back hunched and down her spine her vertebrae popped and shifted. She planted her long, scaled arms on the ground and heaved herself onto her paws. Almost instinctively, her thumb claws snapped into a locked position by a secondary tendon. Her breaths came out quickly as the fire burned within her, organs writhing and twisting as they grew and changed. Her cries of discomfort and fear came out in a bestial wail.

And then she stopped and sat back again. She panted and started into the air. Then she saw Arkoan sit in front of her and put his paw over her nose. She noted it smelled like leather and something distinctively Arkoan. She'd been smelling it for a time, only now noticing the details in new ways. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Arkoan laughed nervously, it was a deep thrumming sound all the same. "I was told humans find this gesture cute," he admitted. He noticed then that his paw was resting on a small extension, Meyers' jaw had pushed out into a heavy muzzle, though more sleek than his own.

Meyers snuffled with her growing snout, and closed her eyes though the stuffiness of a head growing and thickening in size with the rest of her body. With a snarl, she fell back from Arkoan and gripped her shirt. With a strength held by tight muscle that was growing and toning every minute, she tore through her shirt with her new claws and cast the shreds aside. What was left of her sports bra was next. Her chest freed, she breathed deeply. She was never large chested in the first place, having only slight curves was nothing new, but they felt different to her. She looked down at her wider shoulders and moved her arms.

She found no real change in her range of motion, but a far greater support when her paws were both on the floor. She felt the strength that her growth was giving her and when she stood she noticed that Arkoan had stood with her. She gave a smile to the male, showing a little too many of the sharpening carnivore fangs that once were human teeth.

Facing each other, Meyers noted that while she seemed slimmer than the male, her changing physiology was still powerful and indeed lumbering on her still very human lower limbs. The posture couldn't be maintained long. She fell down and landed heavily on her paws, but they caught easy and she stared with surprise at the agility with which she landed.

"I could help you with that?" Arkoan spoke up. He took the nod from the female as acceptance and with a swipe of his paw, he helped her tear her way out of her pants, freeing the tail she had been growing much of the time. Long and whip-like as his own, it held the same soft curtain hairs that had grown on her limbs. He smiled as he watched her. All in all, it was a fascinating thing to see first hand, he felt.

Meyers leaned forward as she felt the tail free. It waved in a ripple behind her like a snake but after a moment, she felt it like any other limb. She turned her head, ears flicking free from the plating she had already grown, and her dark, Kilnan eyes watched as she curled and swayed her tail in position, even copying the question mark shape that Arkoan frequently made. "Prehensile?" she asked the male with curiosity. Her voice was breathier now, husky from the change and her growth.

Arkoan nodded. "It's actually a major part of our language," he said. "When we get off this thing, try to keep it still around any other Kilnan until you learn what you're saying with it. It can completely change the context of what you mean. Sarcasm is easy to understand, though."

Meyers laughed and Arkoan grinned. She sat down and in that moment felt the final shifting change to her body. She stayed sat for a long moment. The curiosity kept things at bay, but now that it ended, she began to feel the weight of what had just occurred fall onto her mind for the first time.

She shivered and lurched forward, baring her fangs as along her spine, sharp spines and quills began to push their way through her dorsal armored back. Her tail lashed back and forth. Her claws dug at the containment room floor in desperation and the moment dragged on for what felt like hours, but when it ended, the cool rush of relief led the newly minted Kilnan to collapsing on her belly, feeling the coolness of the floor against her.

Arkoan looked at what Meyers had become. Nearly as long as he was, nearly as tall, he lamented her leanness made her look more toned than his sturdier frame did, and she had longer quills than he. She did have those curtains, and the faint blue tinge to the silver grey of her scale patterns was very attractive. He'd seen a few who had

gotten patterned that way. He considered the circuit pattern burn etchings he had on some of his plates. No other Kilnan would suspect that Meyers was nothing but a natural born female. He smiled at her, sniffed the air as her scent had changed and the fear was leaving her. Then he suddenly frowned.

*Oh shit, he thought, she's hot.*

Meyers exhaled through her nose and ran her new tongue over her teeth. She made little mental notes over the kinds she recognized and the ones new to her. She was a carnivore now, that much she could figure out, though she felt more exhausted than hungry at the moment. Moreover, she felt calm. A sense of fatalism brought her to acceptance faster than she should have. She pushed herself up to her haunches and smiled as she saw her tail curl around her. Her ear flicked and she looked over to look at Arkoan staring at her. "Is something wrong?" she asked. "Is there more I don't know about?"

Arkoan swallowed. He opened his mouth, and closed it, and opened it again before he fell upon an uneasy grin that only occupied half his muzzle. "Oh no, no no no," he said with a shallow laugh. "Not at all. So. So." He drummed his claws against the floor. "How does it feel? Are you sick? Are you hurt? Can I help you with anything?" His ears perked up and his tail curled out behind him.

"Probably," Meyers admitted as she turned her paws over to look at them, outstretching them and splaying her digits in study. "These were so heavy when I first saw them." She laughed, "When I first had them, but now they seem." She curled her digits and made a self-satisfied sounding hum, "dexterous. I can see how you can make jewelry. I," she smiled at Arkoan. "We'll have to get your bag, I know where it is."

She stood, moving with a fluid grace on all fours, passing by Arkoan to her tablet computer. "That is, once we can make sure it's safe out there. I've just got a whole new way of seeing life, don't think I want it to end now, you know?"

Arkoan blinked at Meyers. "Of course," he offered, nearly falling over when he tried to lean against a wall that wasn't there. *She's a smart, pretty Kilnan*, he thought, terror alarms blaring inside of his head. *And she expects you to help her get you both out of this.* He swallowed and joined Meyers at the tablet still laying on the floor. *What have I gotten myself into?*