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Chapter 6 *Well, One Thing Is Still Working*

There was nothing else to do, not a single sign of civilization, so we began walking inland. Hopefully we'd encounter some patch of vegetation, of life. The planet had been registered as 'In progress terraforming', so there had to be *something* here...

Crit's burnt foot left a trail of orange-red blood with each step he took. He refused the offer to lean on me for the longest time. I offered it to him again and again. The pain was clear in his face as his teeth flashed with every stride.

It wasn't until we'd taken yet another break in yet another featureless grey valley that it came to a head. He couldn't even struggle to his feet now. He didn't meet my eyes as he took my hand.

"It's not proper." I could only just make out the mumble under his breath.

"What?" I'd thrown his long and heavy arm over my shoulders to try and carry at least some small fraction of his weight.

He stiffened for a moment, likely not realizing that he had spoken aloud.

"You might as well spit it out, cat." I didn't turn to him as we kept walking. "We're long past the point of being stuck in this together. Just spit it out and talk to me."

The silence stretched out before us as we trudged on. He didn't say a word as we crested a half dozen more hills. If not for the soft sound of his breathing I would just have assumed he was among the walking dead.

"I'm sorry." He whispered it. So quiet that I at first didn't even realize what he'd said. Coming to a stop, I turned to him, settling myself on the ground. He stood for a moment longer, wavering on his feet, before finally sitting down next to me, face turned away, towards the sun.

"It has nothing to do with you, James," He continued, voice never raising. I had to lean forward to hear him, my chin nearly brushing his pelt. "You're a nobody. You shouldn't even be here." He paused for a moment before chuckling, "No offence intended."

I shrugged. "None taken. The Serius was just my ride to yet another planet, nothing more."

Another laugh escaped his lips, more life animating it this time as it slipped into the thin sky. "In some ways, I envy you, James. You have the whole of existence at your beckon call, no lays to answer to beyond your own and those you stumble across on any given day. No dependencies, no

family. No honour."

I bristled slightly at that one, but he continued on, oblivious.

"That's not the way my world turns, human. We don't live a nomad's life like yours. I have my family waiting for me back home. My parents, kin, my lifeblood waits for me there. I think of them every day. Every night I dream of being back under my orange sun, striding the red soil to find my prey."

I scooted a little bit forward to work my way in front of him, kicking up a cloud of dust in the process that wafted off, high into the air.

"Then why not go? Home can't be that far away. A thousand credits will buy you third-class passage to nearly any planet in the galaxy. Or you could just hitch a ride like I do." I couldn't imagine that funds were what was keeping him away. Bulla was a penny-pincher of the first degree, but he must have paid Crit well for the man to stay with him.

"If only that was what had held me." He reached up to draw the back of an arm across his face. His eyes were shining now, and I doubted it was because of the dust I'd kicked up. "But what would a human know of honour? The ties that bound me to that gods forsaken lizard were stronger than anything you could ever hope to conceive."

I shoved a finger into his chest, catching him off guard and nearly sending him tumbling backwards. "Cut it out with the 'poor me' crap. I may not be one of *your kind* but I have an honour of my own. And I haven't exactly had an easy life either. Cut to the point, Crit. You've got a stick shoved so far up your tailpipe that you're in danger of knocking your teeth out with it. Why were you with Bulla?"

He fell silent again. I was just about ready to throw a handful of grit into his face to provoke a reaction, any reaction, when he spoke. His words had a harsh edge to them now, almost falling back into his guttural speech. He nearly spat every time he said Bulla's name.

"My world isn't built up like many others. We've had a spaceport for generations, but that was built by foreigners, by aliens like you. My people are content with the world we have. It is ours, and it fits us just as it should. We are the rulers of our world and see no reason why we should journey outwards and become mere citizens of the galaxy."

"My father, the leader of our family, thought differently. He always did. That was what had propelled us to become the most powerful family of our world. My father is not an ambitious man, not power hungry, but he knew that someday we would need to expand. We had to plan for that day that we, as a species, would be forced by some power greater than our own to look towards the stars."

"Bulla was the lucky trader who had been in the right place at the right time to accept my father's offer, nothing more. He was a sly one, of that there was no doubt. Deceptions such as his are hardly unknown among my people, but he had no honour. Those of my world, we are not perfect, but we have our honour. He had none. And that was how he played my father like a gambling chit."

"The offer was simple. He provided his ship to us for half a year, at a rate that seemed reasonable. We would go out into the vast stars, trade and learn. At the end of the contract we would pay Bulla from the profits we had made. It was as simple as that."

"It's never simple with Bulla," I said. "That bugger would sell his own eggs if he thought he could turn a single credit from them." I let my eyes roll as I lay back in the dust. I could smell where this was going a mile away.

"It seems obvious now," Crit continued, "Now that we know him for what he was. We were not supplied with a crew, nor with the training to operate the ship. In a six month contract, it took us four to simply learn how to leave our own atmosphere. Another month and a half to transit from the system."

"So, I'm guessing you didn't get a lot of trading done, eh Crit?"

"To say the least. We never even made landfall on another world before we had to return to Bulla, back home. That cold-blooded creature cared not for what he had bound us to. He not only charged us every credit we had agreed, but also found a countless number of things on the ship that he claimed we'd damaged."

Yep. That sounded like Bulla.

"But I thought you said your family was rich, Crit. Why didn't they just pay him off?"

"We did. Every Standard credit we had. But credits are of little use on our world, and we had stockpiled few of them. It seemed that it was not credits that he was after in any event."

A ragged laugh escaped me as I sat up. "You?! He was after you?" This I couldn't believe. I've seen *a lot* of kinky things in my bouncing around the stars, but inter-species is a heck of a lot less common than one might think.

A warning growl came from the azlin's throat as he shot me a glance that could cut hull plate. "Don't ever suggest such a thing again." The fight left him a moment later as he slumped back, deflated. "He didn't want *me*. He wanted my sisters. My kind are rare among the stars, and by all accounts the women are highly prized for their beauty. That monster wanted to take my five sisters to tour between the worlds. An inter-planetary freak show, if you will. My father would not permit it."

Despite myself, I was grinning from ear to ear. "And how did he go from a harem of beautiful women, to *you*?"

This was going to be good.

Despite the snarl that pulled at his lips, a grim smile slipped through. "We were taken for all we were worth. There is no other way of saying it. But my father stood firm on refusing to allow his daughter's to be taken away. Bulla had been smart enough not to spell out anything so vulgar in the contract, but that also left us enough room to do as we wished. We were obliged to provide service to him until such time as our debt was paid. Five of us would have paid off the debt in five years. My father elected to send only one of us. He was a proud man, and would not allow himself to be accused of sending any but his very best. I was his first son, and heir to the family. He sent me. For an endencherment of twenty-five years standard he gave me to Bulla. That was twenty years ago."

"Bulla was nothing if not a business man. I was not what he had come to our world for, but he knew it was all he would ever get. He threw me aboard and took off. And that has been the last I've seen or heard from my family."

I scratched my head, "Why? An inter-system call is cheap enough these days. You could get them on a link anytime you wanted while you were planet side."

His eyes never moved from their hold on the horizon. "There were no links outside the spaceport when I left. And... it would not be honourable to speak to them while I was still indebted to another. My father sent me on this journey for more than simply a repayment to Bulla." He let out a huff great enough to raise a cloud of dust around us, "If I am to become the head of my family, lead us

forward after my father passes to the gods, I must know more than he. Even after what Bulla put us through, my father was still determined to take us to the stars. What better way to prepare us for such a journey than to send me on it?"

"Bulla started me off in much the same position as you held, James. I was uneducated in the ways of space. He had little use for me beyond running errands and intimidating others." His face fell now, a horror hiding in the back of his eyes. "Can you imagine such a thing, James? He used me as nothing more than a monster to growl and spit at those he wished to grind under his scaled heel. He played the same trick on countless other worlds as he had on mine, and he used me to ensure that he always got the better part..." He grunted out a laugh, "The lion's share, of the deal."

"I'm... I'm not an animal, James. I know that's what I look like to so many. I'm just as civilized as any human, or any other being for that matter. But every time I walk into a room, on any planet, everyone turns to watch me. I'm alone wherever I am. I am the only one of my kind among the stars, and I feel it every day."

"Okay," I gave him a shove on the arm as I spoke, it sent him swaying gently. "That's all fine and good, but why do you seem to have such an issue with taking even the simplest courtesy?"

His face pulled into a grimace. It looked alarmingly like a snarl, but I was getting to know him well enough to tell the difference.

"It's not *appropriate*." The word came from him like a curse. "That is not the way of my people. We do as we must to survive, to move forward, but to show weakness to someone outside the family is not to be done."

I laughed, deep and real, almost falling onto my back. "Ha! Your father must have been pushing out bricks when he had to ask Bulla for a deal. Doubly when he agreed to send you with him."

"That was different." The azlin's nose turned up, huffing in a breath as he tried to look dignified. "That was an agreement. That wasn't charity."

"Nothing Bulla does is charity." I poked him again as I spoke. The slightest grin split his lips in return.

"Few truer words have been spoken."

"Fine," I rolled my eyes at him, "How about this: I'll help you with the foot, and you promise not to eat me."

A look of horror spread across his face. "I do not *eat* people." He very nearly spat out his tongue.

I paused for a moment, surveying the empty grey sand around us. "Sounds like a good rule to live by. But we've got one problem," I cast out my arm melodramatically, "I don't know about you, but I for one haven't seen a single sign of life. We can't eat the rocks, and we can't drink the sea. We need to either find something in a hurry, or we'll be in for a long, slow decline." I reached a hand into what shreds remained of my backpack. "I wasn't exactly planning for a crash landing, and the power bars I packed won't last long."

I pulled two of the three silver foil wrapped packages free, tossing one to Crit as I pulled the tab on mine. The slab was about the size of my hand. There was a puff of air as I broke the seal. I'd had to live off these things before, but that still didn't help the taste.

The bars were no-name survival rations, human standard mix. Each one had enough

compressed into it for a full day's go. They were even as moist as possible, in an effort to add water.

I'd learned long ago to not take it slow with these things. They tasted somewhere in between beet soup and last week's garbage. And I'd never liked beets anyway.

Holding my nose, I took a big bite of the bar, choking it down before I could gag, then throwing back the rest. A couple of deep breaths later I turned to look at Crit. He had yet to even open his bar, simply watching me in abject horror.

"You eat these things?" He held the foil wrapped packet away from him like it was infected with plague one-forty-two.

I just rolled my eyes. "Not willingly." My voice was rough, throat still recovering from forcing that mess down. "But, hey, anything if it keeps you alive." I lifted a finger to my chin in thought, "Although, I am sorry to say that they are mixed to human standard. I'm not too sure how they'll do with your digestive system. I kinda doubt anyone made these things for you." He just grunted in reply as I asked, "What do you guys eat anyway?"

Still without opening the foil, he sniffed the package carefully before speaking. "Meat. Mostly meat. But I've had to learn to adapt to life with Bulla. Flesh is almost always more expensive than processed foods." He patted his gut while making a face, "I've had to learn to experiment. Somethings don't down as well as others. My... palate does not accept as wide a range as your human tastes do."

With that he pulled the tab on the foil wrapper. I could smell the open sewer stench of the ration from three feet away.

All I could do was smile in sympathy as I tried to reassure him. "Just shoot it down. There's no better way to do it. They're designed to keep you alive, not happy."

He held the pouch at arm's length, covering his nose as he eyed it with disgust. "You cannot be serious, James." He was able to only just bring the packet to his nose for a sniff before pulling back in revulsion.

"It's either that or nothing, buddy." I shrugged. "Sorry, nothing I can do."

He took one more dubious look at the packet before dutifully opening his mouth wide and upending it in a single, fluid motion. I watch the mash disappear into his fang lined maw in less than a second. He must have been listening to me, as he didn't stop to try and taste it. His teeth snapped shut with the sound of razor blades coming together, throat gulping a moment later. Even from a distance I could tell that it was forced.

"That was..." He let out a choking sound as he tried to speak, "That was not good, James."

We had a handful of heartbeats while it looked like the ration might just settle after all. Then a high pitched chirp came from the back of his throat. I was struck with the ice cold thought that I might have just poisoned him. His eyes grew wide as he fell forward on all fours, head low as the sound came again.

A second later the cry changed into a more human like gag that came twice before the ungodly mash of the survival ration made its triumphant reappearance. If it smelt like an open sewer going down, it was twice as bad coming back up. I had to turn my head and cover my mouth just to keep my own firmly in place.

"Not again, James. You can keep your food. I'll find my own." Crit wiped his fur covered chin with the back of one paw, his voice rough and cracked. "I don't want to experience that again."

I couldn't do anything but laugh. He'd wasted one of my precious power bars, and likely lost anything else he had in his stomach, but I couldn't help it.

"Stop that." His voice held the hint of a growl as he continued to try and wipe away the drool that still hung from him.

"Sorry, sorry." I still couldn't keep from chuckling, "It's just that... hey, what's that?" Something translucent white and almost invisible snaked above the hills on the horizon.

Crit was next to me in a second flat, gaze following the finger I'd raised to point out the trail of vapour. Such a thing shouldn't be of any interest, but I'd yet to see anything like it on this planet. The sky had been almost perfectly clear. This was the first cloud we'd seen since arriving.

The trail was gone almost before I could focus on it. I hesitated to believe I'd seen it at all. Then it came again. We watched it for a good five minutes before we could convince ourselves there was anything there at all. It came in random fits and spurts, never predictable.

"Man made?" I wasn't sure why I was whispering, but my voice came out as barely more than a breath.

"Likely." Crit spoke in kind beside me. Neither of us lifted our eyes from the trail.

A moment later we set out, James pressed once again under my arm. It wasn't that he was able to take even a fraction of my weight, but having him there helped none the less.

Every step became easier as we moved forward. My foot, like the rest of me, healed quickly by human standards. A necessity when one comes from a race that still enjoys hunting its own food.

The path to whatever-it-was was no easier than what we had been following before. We'd been tracing the valleys at first, but this trail took us nothing but up. Likely to the highest point in kilometres.

It wasn't until we were practically right upon the thing that we could see it at all. A structure. No, more than that. A mega-structure. It was a terraforming plant.

It was nestled within a depression on the highest peak in sight. Its light grey ceramic pipes and billows hugged the ground, spreading wide into the distance. The only things that had led us find it in the first place were the occasional puffs of white ozone that whispered from its near silent stacks.

"This isn't right," James said, scuttling out from under my arm as he dashed forward. His voice was wavering. "Plants like this should be running twenty-four seven, shoving out as many organic building blocks as they can synthesize from the soil. This one is barely running at all." He waved a hand to the few weak puffs of white. "That should be a pillar of gas."

I limped forward. Taking a deep breath, I searched for any trace of workmen, anything at all. There was nothing. Even the pipes around me smelt as though they had been here for all time, taking on the same scent as the empty land around them.

"Perhaps it's just piping out invisible gasses?" I suggested.

He just shot me a look over his shoulder as he worked his way deeper into the maze of machinery. "I spent six months working a terraforming plant, stranded there until the next cargo hauler came. They always colour the output stream so craft don't stumble into it. This place should be going full production. These types of installations are too expensive to ever let them grind to a halt." He

ducked under yet another pipe. I was having trouble keeping up.

"They take decades to get all these things set up and running," he continued. "There has to be hundreds of them spread across the planet. They all work together to keep the terraforming process moving forward. And," He stopped suddenly, turning towards me, "They don't run fully automated. There should be a good ten people operating this thing. We should have tripped dozens of alarms when we splashed down, and dozens more now that we're wandering around in the belly of the beast. Where is everyone?"

Deeper into the maze, it quickly became impossible to continue on ground. Climbing a maintenance ramp, we found ourselves on a catwalk that lead us towards the centre of the installation far more quickly than our previous roundabout ramblings. There was still no one to be seen.

The pipes and conduit spread out around us like a ceramic and steel spiderweb. I hadn't even realized how freeing it had been to be out of the confines of the spaceships. Now, feeling the piping snake around me, the claustrophobia that I had learned to live with was quickly returning.

The billowing towers of the plant threw their shadows over us now. The moment of cool was welcome, but the oppressive feeling of emptiness was gnawing ever deeper into me as we neared the centre of the web.

James was right. This place was far too large and complex to ever be left unattended. And, even if it had been designed to operate without oversight, where were the security systems? This place looked like no one had set foot here in years, decades even.

Deep under an overhanging tower, we finally found an entrance door. The portal was simple and utilitarian, a flat metal slab set with a cut out to pull it open.

James was still in front. He pushed me to one side as he stooped to peer through the handle.

"What are you doing?" I was tired, hungry, and thirsty. I just wanted to shove him from the way so I could get within and see if they had even a scrap of food.

He shot me a hard glare that froze me before I could take a step forward.

"We haven't seen a single security system since we found this place. A multi-billion credit installation, and nothing to protect it. Doesn't that seem a little odd to you?" I cocked an eye at him as he continued. "We've passed mounts where there should be defensive heads, but they've all either been worn away by time or torn clean off. Take it from someone with experience, things break down a heck of a lot more outside than they do indoors. Just because we haven't found anything that's taken exception to our poking around yet, doesn't mean we won't soon."

"You seriously think there's going to be something dangerous in there?" I almost laughed. "Doesn't that break every law in space about acceptable use of force?" One of the things I'd been forced to pick up over the last two decades was interstellar law. There wasn't much of it, but one of the basic tenets was 'killing is bad'.

He just sighed and shook his head. "We're not in space any more. This is landfall, private property on a planet with no government. This entire planet likely belongs to the company that's terraforming it. And private companies rarely have any issues with *defending* themselves."

He pulled the door open slowly, it howled on its hinges. Anyone in a mile would be able to hear it over the wind, the only other sound. It was only then that I realized that we had walked into the heart of a terraforming plant without hearing any machinery.

The hallway within was dim and cramped. It fit James' frail human form well enough, but I nearly had to walk sideways to even so much as enter. I wasn't sure where we were going, I simply followed James. Every so often I could hear him muttering something about 'following standard layout' and 'primary junctions'.

There were just enough functioning lights scattered here and there to keep us from being plunged into complete darkness. I was surprised that James could see at all, likely so much as to lead. That was until I noticed that he was walking with his hands out, brushing the walls about him. He was blind as a mole, yet still leading me behind him like a kitt.

We rounded yet another corner in the darkness and I could now hear... *something*. A high pitched whine, the sound of an old transformer long overtaxed and dying. I hadn't heard anything like that since we had been back on the Serius.

Without thinking, I reached out a hand, hooking it around James and pulling him back to me. I snatched him so quickly that I heard the air escape his lungs in an oof as he slammed into my chest.

I had acted only just in time. There was no further warning before a hail of bullets streaked down the corridor just inches from our faces. Bullets? No one had used those archaic things in decades!

James fought with me, trying to pull away as I dragged him further from the assailant's line of sight. He just as likely as not hadn't a clue what was going on. The gun had been silenced, sounding like nothing more than a high-speed collection of muffled coughs, and the patter of slugs had impacted the far wall like rain.

I wouldn't have known myself, if Bulla hadn't gotten us in so many firefights with his deals gone wrong.

Only once we were several paces back did I release James. "It would appear that at least some of the systems here are still functioning."

"That was..." His voice trailed off as I could just make out the colour fading from his hairless skin. "Bugger. Only one thing's left working and it has to be the auto-turrets."

"I can assume that we must be getting somewhere if we're beginning to encounter resistance?" I kept my voice calm and level, but my gut was beginning to roll as the first twinges of my inbuilt combat reactions began to kick in. The world around me snapped into sharper focus as my body prepared for battle.

"The entrance to the plant's CNC is right up there. The command and control is the brain of this whole place. Anything worth having would be there."

"Any other way in?" I had to force myself to ask. The surge of my heart tried to pull me forward to tear that turret to pieces, but my logical mind knew that it would be a foolish risk if I didn't have to. I was weak enough as it was, peppering myself with bullet holes would only run down my already limited resources.

The human snorted. "Not a chance. The CNC is the one place worth protecting. One way in, one way out. It's designed just for situations like this."

"Then we will simply have to eliminate the danger." My voice had fallen in pitch. Not a snarl, not yet. My father had long ago taught me how to hunt, but the rules were completely different in situations such as these, in worlds of metal and ceramics. This was what my father had sent me out

here to learn, and I would not disappoint him.

"What do you know of the defences?" I whispered to him as I edged closer to the corner. I wasn't sure why I was whispering, the gun was likely only motion sensitive, but it was easier to think of it as a living being rather than simply an ageless and emotionless application of metal and electronics.

"Not much." James was behind me now, following me step for step. "They pop down from the ceiling whenever a lock-down is called, then shoot at anything in sight. There's supposed to be a freighter worth of flashing lights and signs when they're active, but, of course, they're all dust and the gun is still working."

"Of course." I poked my head around the corner for just a moment before I heard the whine of the transformer picking up. I had only an instant after that to pull back before the projectiles brushed the tips of my whiskers.

"Could we simply wave something in front of it until it exhausts its ammunition?" I suggested. I was still fighting to hold back the instincts that screamed at the back of my mind. The urge to simply leap out and rip it end from end.

"Good luck on that one." He replied, "If it's like any other turrets I've seen, it shoots micro projectiles that are under a millimetre in diameter, and it's hooked up to an armoury that's a good five meters square." He tossed a pebble out into the hallway. It was reduced to dust almost before it hit the ground. "It could keep up a steady stream for a good two months without pause before running low."

"I'm open to suggestions."

He paused for a moment, finger to his chin in the darkness. "It's got to be stripped for power even now. This place can't be providing much voltage anymore, and the batteries built in to it should be long worn down..." He began backtracking up the corridor, "If we can cut its power, we might just be able to stop it dead."

I felt useless now, as the instincts at the back of my mind were no good for this. All I could do was watch James as he slowly traced his way down hallway after hallway. Every so often he pried the panel off an access hatch, only to sigh in disgust.

"It's got to be here somewhere."

"What are you looking for, James?"

"One of the primary power conduits. The CNC pulls its power directly from the main line, but the turret doesn't. If we can kill off the remaining lines we can cut it off."

"As simple as that? One would think they would protect against such an easy work around."

He laughed. "They do. That's what the gun's backup batteries are for. I'm betting on the fact that most batteries don't age well."

Another twenty minutes and we pried off yet another corroded panel. James had long given up doing it alone. My hunger was not showing well now, my arms shook every time I plied my strength.

The wiring behind this wall looked the same as every other one, old and corroded conduit running from floor to ceiling, faded and brittle. I could, however, hear the high pitched whine of power coming from a thick yellow cable the size of my wrist.

James began poking around, seemingly incapable of hearing the plain as day hum. "That one." I pointed a claw tip to the wire, careful not to touch it. "That is the one carrying the power."

He gave me an odd look. "How can you tell?"

I just shrugged back. "How can you not?"

He left it at that, turning his attention to a small maintenance control next to the floor. The space was filled with knobs and switches. I was expecting him to fiddle with the controls, somehow elegantly cutting off power to the turret, but rather he simply raised the panel we had set aside and rammed it repeatedly down.

The first hit did little more than send a wall shaking boom to echo down the hallway, but the second and third pierced the housing to make a mess of the circuitry beneath. It wasn't long until all the lights on the small panel had gone out, the whine of electricity was long dead.

"We'd better get moving." James tossed the panel aside as he spoke, "That should take it down, but there's no promises that we won't have to worry about a backup system coming online to cover for it."

Just what I wanted to think about. We could be halfway towards the turret with no cover in sight when it came back to life.

Back through the labyrinthine hallways, they were darker now that even fewer of the lights were working.

We huddled around the corner from the gun, neither of us wanting to take that first step to see if it was good and truly dead. I picked up another piece of debris and tossed it into the gun's line of sight. It bounced off the wall and clattered to the ground without complaint.

I was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when I heard a whine. It was fainter now, just barely reaching into my perception, but it was there. A second later the chunk of drywall I'd tossed was reduced to dust by a hail of bullets.

"I thought you said it would be offline!" I hissed into his ear. He was pressed up beside me in the hallway, both of us making sure to keep back from the gun's line of sight.

"It should be!" His eyes were wide as he spoke, voice just shy of frantic. "That's the only bypass I know about. This place must be newer than the plant I worked at." He paused for a moment and tossed another chunk of wall into the field of fire. There was a noticeable pause before the torrent of bullets reduced it to nothing at all. "It must be operating at its minimum power level. The tracking system is just barely kicking in. Do you see that five second delay it takes to lock-on?"

"I don't think I like where you're taking this, James." Despite the growl in my voice there was a part of my soul that was all but jumping up and down in joy at the thought of actually being able to do *something*. I'd spend so much time having to use my brain that my muscles sang at the very idea of doing anything of value.

"Unless you've got any better ideas." He sagged against the wall, breathing heavily at the very thought of trying to outrun the turret. "We could spend weeks looking for the remaining power feed and never find it. And who's to say there's only one?"

I quickly poked my head around the corner, reviewing the final steps to the CNC. The corridor wasn't long, no more than perhaps nine or ten meters. We were the closest junction to the door that I could see. The hallway stretched out into blackness in the other direction. I couldn't even make out where the stray bullets were impacting.

I had to duck my head back and wait for the system to power down again before taking another

look. The floor was relatively clean, little to trip over, and the door to the CNC was – surprisingly – sitting wide open.

"Can the turret pivot to follow us once we're beneath it?" I asked, looking at James, "Could it hit us once we're in the CNC?"

He shook his head. "They would never want it to accidentally kill any of the employees working in there. We'll be fine once we're underneath it."

"What about once we're in the room, could we disable it from there?"

He winked at me. "I could. You couldn't." A slight smile crept to his lips, "I have a little experience in getting around security systems."

I huffed out a breath and tried not to laugh.

"Fine." I pushed him back into the safety of our little alcove. "I'll go first. I can run faster than you. If I don't make it, don't even bother trying. And," I shot him a glance, "Don't try to pull me out if I go down."

I expected him to roll his eyes, but instead he simply laid a hand on my arm, "Crit, you don't get it." He let out a heavy breath, "If that turret tags you there won't be enough to try and drag back to safety. You won't even feel it when that thing pumps you full at a thousand rounds a second. You'll be dead before you hit the floor."

Well, that was a pleasant thought.

I began flexing my muscles as I stood there in the darkness, rolling my joints and trying to banish the stiffness that had built up during our long walk. I did my best to ignore the hunger that balled my stomach into a tight knot.

I paid special attention to my wounded foot. There was little left of the burn now, but it was still tender and twitchy. Pulling free the bandage that James had wrapped around it, I was pleased to see that no more blood leaked from the wound. I handed the blood soaked cloth back to James to stash in his backpack. The choice was between the fabric of the bandage and the pad of my natural foot. I would take the traction and power of my unaided body any day.

Poking my head around the corner a handful of times more, I carefully gauged the time delay in the turret. I was disappointed to note that it wasn't growing.

One last glance at James, and I took a deep breath to prepare myself. I was pushed up against the far wall of our side corridor, just out of sight of the turret. Edging as close to the main hallway as I could in order to reduce the turn I'd have to make when I made my dash.

Without thinking, I began running. My limbs moved of their own accord. Just as when I'd been hunting, back home with my father. The dark metal encased hallway on this nameless hellhole of a planet was a long way from home. But, if I closed my eyes I could almost feel the familiar rush of air and smell the scents of long grass and gengevia plants.

I'd only just cleared the edge of the turn when the almost imperceptible whine of the system powering up edged into my mind. I could barely hear it over my own heart and rasping breath, but it was there.

My eyes sprang open now, searching for even the slightest detail as I sprinted down the way. It wasn't far, but, counting the heartbeats, it seemed to stretch on forever.

Ahead of me, I could see the turret start to turn, begin to track my motions. Its actions were slow at first, halting, but each fraction of a second brought it closer to full alertness as it narrowed in on my moving form.

I dove forward at the last moment. Tucking and rolling under it as its muzzle zeroed in on me. The instant I'd fallen from its range I could hear it begin to power down, to return its aim to the middle distance.

My shoulder hit the hard metal floor as I rolled to a sudden stop, skidding into the CNC. The room wasn't big, I only just avoided running face first into a chair that had been kicked off its feet.

I didn't move for a moment. I simply sat there, breathing hard, a wide grin edging its way to my lips. I hadn't felt this good in years. The adrenaline still rushed through my veins. I wanted to roar, to drag my claws down the prey's back and tear into it with my fangs.

I had to content myself with simply letting out a whoop of triumph.

A moment later I heard James' frightened voice from back up the hallway. He sounded so small, alone.

"Crit! Are you okay? Did you make it?"

The silly human must have confused my cheer with a yowl of pain. It took me a long moment to bring myself back to a state that could speak Standard again.

"I am here, James. I made it."

Even from this distance I could clearly make out his relieved exhale of breath.

"Okay. Okay." I could hear him breathing heavily now, psyching himself up for the run, "Catch my pack when I throw it, then I'll follow."

I edged my way back out into the hallway, under the turret, testing how far I could move forward. A second later I saw James' pale arm throw his pack through the air. It arced far too quickly for the gun to ever latch on, landing in my outstretched arms. Its loose loops of fabric flopped easily into my waiting hands.

"I've got it." I called, stepping back from the doorway to provide him enough room to dash in. "Whenever you're ready."

He waited only just long enough for the security system to power down before making a mad dash towards me. At first it seemed he would have no problem. He might have even been able to make better time than I, his smaller frame having an easier run in the confined space.

However, where my natural traction had served me well on the metal flooring, his ship issue boots slid. They slipped from beneath him, sending him falling headlong to lay sprawled out just beyond my reach.

"James!"

I could hear the whine of the turret powering up as he lay there. He looked up at me, eyes pleading. For a moment all I could think about was being alone on this alien planet...

Reaching out, I couldn't hope to cross the distance in time to pull him to safety... My other hand, still holding his backpack, shot forward, the straps reaching out just far enough for his flailing hands to wrap around.

Feeling the muscles in my back tense, I pulled him forward with everything I had as the barrel came to focus upon him.

He shot towards me like a missile from a supersonic launcher as I fell backwards, over balancing. I could hear the deafening blast of the turret opening fire from just over head as the two of us crashed into the CNC.

I laid there for a moment in the darkness, James' still body next to mine. I could hear nothing over my own heartbeat. It wasn't until I shifted, expecting to see a bloody corpse, that I realized he was still alive.

He rolled over, looking up at me. His voice was rough and weak as he spoke. "Okay, buddy, let's not do that again."

Pushing off the floor, I reached for my pack. It was still tangled in Crit's claws. I breathed a sigh of relief after I'd looked inside to find my diagnostic in one piece. It would be just our luck to get in here and have my little tool shattered into a thousand pieces.

The CNC was in about the same condition as the rest of the plant. That was to say, dark, cold, and age worn. The lack of living things on this world meant that the systems were in relatively good condition, all said and done, but time did take its toll.

Crit was still lying on the ground, his yellow eyes following my every step.

There was no smell beyond the omnipresent scent of dust. That was why I nearly fell backwards on my rear when I spun a chair around to find a withered and dry body sitting there.

The corpse was shrunken and near perfectly preserved, with the lack of organisms to consume it. It was a woman... I think. The hair was still attached to her shrunken head, brown locks spilling to her shoulders. There was little else I could tell from the body, other than she was wearing a standard corporate uniform. That, and she'd taken several laser shots to her leg. That was likely how she'd died, bleeding out slowly from her wounds.

Crit was on his feet now, kneeling beside me as he looked at her... a bit too closely for my tastes. He took a deep breath, huffing in through his nose.

"Foul." He made a face and pulled back.

"What was that all about?" I took a step away, putting some space between me and the body.

He gave me an inscrutable look. "The flesh is too far gone. It is of no value."

"Wait..." Now it was Crit I was scrambling away from. I almost stumbled back into the line of fire from the turret. The azlin's hand shot out at the last moment to hold me from stepping too far. I had to shake my head before my thoughts would come clear again. "You said you didn't eat people."

"I don't." There wasn't even a shadow of a smile on his face as he spoke. "If the creature is dead, then it's not a person anymore. Only meat."

"Fine." I pushed his heavy hand from my shoulder. He didn't fight me. "You do whatever you want. I'm going to try and get the systems online."

I sat at the nearest console, but never took my eyes from the azlin. He'd barely said anything, but it still made me shiver. How much longer until he started to look at *me* as nothing more than meat?

I had to push the thought from my mind as I began working. I had been right, there was at least one remaining power line running to the CNC, possibly more. The first thing I had to do was take the sentry gun offline so I could use the voltage it was drawing.

A few quick taps to the screen before me did about as much as I expected. Nothing. Great, I had to find a way to get things working, without first having those very things telling me what was wrong.

Getting up, I walked back out to the gun emplacement in the hallway, being careful not to step out from beneath it. The thing was too high for me to reach. It was a good eight feet off the ground.

"Crit," I called back over my shoulder, "Can you find anything for me to stand on? I need to get up to the turret so I can pull it from the circuit."

I was staring up at the panelling when, a few moments later, I felt a pair of hands wrap around my chest.

"Wait... what?!" For a moment I almost thought he was going to crush me, but instead he simply lifted me as though I weighed nothing at all. His head was already up to the roof, so holding me within reach was easy for him.

"Close enough?" His face was only inches from the back of my head. I could smell his breath.

"Uh, yeah." I quickly set to work, pulling the armour from the weapon. This would have been impossible in a real military installation, but this was just corporate. The gun was purely for last ditch defensive purposes, the armour came off easily under my screwdriver.

Within were the guts of the system. I was no weaponsmith, so I simply did what came naturally to me – I smacked it with my insulated tools until all the wires dangled freely.

The entire time I was up there Crit never once complained or shifted. It was as if he hardly even noticed my weight.

"Got it, buddy." I squirmed in his grasp as I tried to get back to the ground. I made a beeline for the nearest chair after he set me down.

Okay, we had a little more voltage now... what to power up? I'd only be able to bring on a single system at best. Oh well, I didn't know what they had stored on any of them anyway. Reaching down, I hit the large hammer switch at the bottom of the control panel before me.

I was pleased to note that my efforts were met with a whirr and clicking. A moment later the system came to life. It was one of the older monochrome screens... or at least I thought it was a monochrome screen, it might have been in colour when last it was used.

The boot up logo was happy to tell me, in no mean words, that this system and all its data was the property of the Centenarian Terraforming Corporation. Centenarian? Were they even still around? Terraforming was a notoriously risky business, many companies going under long before the first of their projects ever finished.

It couldn't have taken more than another minute, but it still seemed like hours before the next screen flashed up. Blast it, a secure log in. Oh well, there were always ways around such things.

I powered down the system and cracked open the maintenance panel on the front of the case. People always seemed to forget about proper security. I could do anything once I had physical access to a box.

It wasn't long until I located the jumper to put the system in maintenance mode. Heh. 'Maintenance mode' was my friend.

This trick would have never worked if people were around and using the system, but I had it all to myself. Rebooting the box put it in a type of recovery mode intended only to deal with major system failures. Single user mode, minimal load out, all that. Thankfully, 'minimal load out' almost always meant no security. For every defence there was always a work around. You needed it for the operator pinheads who seemed to lock themselves out on a daily basis.

I began humming under my breath as I plugged away at the newly unlocked console. Crit shot me a glance from behind. Who knows, he might be thinking that I was growling at it.

It took only seconds from there to locate the password file and overwrite it with all zeros. Didn't matter what type of encryption they might have on passwords to prevent me from reading them, they were all gone now.

One more reboot and the normal login prompt returned. Username: nothing, Password: nothing.

Two blank entry boxes and the system dropped me in to a superuser account. In less than ten minutes I'd unlocked the primary control system of the whole terraforming plant without so much as breaking a sweat.

I'd like to say I'm that good, but anyone with a basic knowledge of system maintenance could have done it.

Okay, we're in. What now?

The interface was beyond archaic, benefiting a system that hadn't been touched in ages. I ran a quick directory listing. Assuming the time stamps on these files were right... no one had been in here in over a hundred years.

Oi.

A few more commands and I'd tracked down the name of the last account to access the system. The user name was 'abant'.

I turned around to take another look at the body that was still lying slumped on the chair beside mine. There was a patch on the uniform's breast that read 'Amy Bant'. Well, that answered that question.

Poking through the user's files didn't show much other than the normal day to day of a mid-level administrator. There was, however, a single file that was hundreds of times the size of any of the others. It was a video stream.

It took me a few more moments to be able to pull up the replay. The computer was still limping along at far below its normal power requirement, starting the codex nearly caused a brown out as it read the stream.

The basic text of my screen washed away to show the grainy green and black image of a young woman. Even with the low resolution I could tell she was pale and gaunt. Crit was pushed up against my back now, straining forward to see the image and hear the tiny sound from the half fried speakers.

"--llo, hello? Is this damned thing even recording?" Her hand came up to smack the camera, leaving half her face off screen. Her voice was fast and frantic, the telltale signs of shock already

setting in. "This is plant supervisor third class Amy Bant. We're under attack. We don't know who they are or where they came from. The radiation of the system prevented us from even seeing them until they were right on top of us. We can't even contact any of the other plants to warn them. For all we know they may have already fallen. They've..." She paused for breath. I could hear the familiar sound of the turret spinning up behind her. "They've killed everyone else. We thought they were just another shipment from head office until they opened fire. They killed half the staff before we even had time to fall back into the building. We're not soldiers!" Her voice was raising pitch now, becoming almost indecipherable as she began to babble. "We haven't done anything wrong! Why are they here? Why are they doing this!? Trevor thinks they're pirates... thought they're pirates..." She paused for a moment, gulping in a deep breath of air. Even through the recording, I could hear the rasp of her lungs. "I've engaged what's left of the security systems. They don't seem to care about me. They've entered the main building, but they don't seem to care about anything..."

It drifted off after that. She kept talking for a long time, an hour or more, but became more and more incoherent as the blood slowly dripped from her wounds. The camera never did shut off. It recorded her slumping forward, falling unconscious. Then, sometime later, she stopped moving at all. The recording only ended when the maximum file size was reached.

I didn't say anything after I closed the stream. A moment later I felt the heavy weight of Crit's hand settle on my shoulder.

"Is that all there is, James? Nothing else, nothing to tell us who it could be?"

I shook my head. "There aren't any other recording files on the system. No other cameras are hooked in, if there are even any more in the complex."

"So it's pirates, is it then?" His voice was smooth, calm, and relaxed. It was starting to scare me.

"I suppose. That's all we have to go on."

"That's good." I swivelled my chair around to see his face as he spoke. "I like that." A slight smile parted his lips, a canine glinting brightly in the dim light of the control board. "I like having a name I can hang my problems on. No more blaming fate for what has befallen us. There are pirates who have done this to us? Very well. We will have our revenge."

"Revenge?" I nearly face-palmed as I looked at him. "Are you crazy, Crit? We're still in the middle of nowhere, with no resources. We don't even have any food or water, and you're planning *revenge*?" All I could do was sigh and slump back in my chair as his golden eyes watched me impassively. "Let's just worry about getting off this rock, okay? We'll let the police or military take care of this problem."

"*This problem* is our problem, James." He was grinning now as he dragged another chair up to sit facing me. "Do you truly believe a band of pirates will allow us to leave the planet unmolested?" His voice was just short of dreamy now as his eyes stared off to some vague point above my head. "You can do as you will, James, but I plan to escape. And the only path apparent is through the belly of the beast. The pirates took our ship, so we will use one of theirs to return home, victorious."

I didn't like the way he was talking about *victorious*. It reminded me too much of how he had spoken about Bulla.

"But," He began speaking again, pushing down his blood-lust with obvious effort, "That is for the future. What do we have available to us here?"

Happy that we had switched subjects, I swivelled to the still humming computer. "Well, let me pull of an inventory of systems..." A few taps later I had a rather disappointing list. "The communications are offline, of course. Both short and long range are totally dead. But hey, one point in our favour – we might just still have a working hydration system."

"Hydration?" The azlin rolled the word around on his thick tongue.

"Water." I was grinning ear to ear. A moment later he joined me.

"Would it still be working after all these years?" He followed me out of the CNC and past the shadow of the now dead sentry gun.

"Can't see why not." I shrugged. "Basic survival equipment like that is designed to last forever. It's not like they've got a lot of impurities to remove on a planet like this anyway."

The readout had located the hydro systems on the third sub-basement, a long way down. It was unlikely that we'd ever have found them by ourselves. A little bit of searching and a few stubbed toes later, the two of us were huddled around a nondescript wall panel in the dark.

The controls only threw just enough light for me to see Crit's eyes shining eerily like a cat's.

"Can you get it open?" His voice was rough with anticipation now. The last drink either of us had was back on the Serius, back before this had all started. That must have been close to forty-eight hours ago.

"Just give me a moment..." I tapped at a couple of the more welcoming buttons. "It's not locked... I just need to find the right command to make it dispense a sample."

A couple of clicks and a whack to the front of the machine and it popped out a clear two litre bottle of water.

I would have said my mouth was watering at the sight, but I don't think I had enough spit to make it happen.

Crit was the first one to reach out, his hand nearly ripping the bottle free from its dispenser he moved so fast. He didn't bother twisting the lid off, but simply put the narrow end between his jaws and bit down until it came free. Spitting the cap down the hall, I could hear it click and roll as it bounced off in the darkness.

He didn't waste any time. All he did was raise the upturned bottle over his head and let the clear water rush down over him, emptying it in seconds. I'm not sure how much he got down his gullet, but I think that was almost an afterthought to simply feeling it on his fur.

"Hey, wait!" I reached out a hand to try and scoop the bottle from him before he wasted it all. "We don't know how much there is left."

I pulled my hand back reactively as a low growl came from the darkness. The sound cut off almost before it had begun, but it chilled my heart none the less. It hadn't been the sound of Crit, First Officer of the Serius. It had been the primal warning of a deadly animal.

The growl died in my chest almost before I'd realized I was doing it. My throat snapped shut so quickly that I almost choked on the water that was still working its way down.

By the gods, what was I doing?

I took a deep breath through my newly whetted down fur. The cool moisture felt better than anything I could have recalled in years. Only belatedly did I realize that I'd run the bottle dry. It was still held above me, but now only drops trickled out.

Dropping it, I watched the empty plastic bottle bounce along the floor. Its hollow plunks echoing back at me.

"James..." I had to gasp for breath before I could speak again. "I'm sorry." I looked down at my soaked hands. "I'm so sorry." I couldn't bring myself to meet his eyes. "Please tell me there's more. I didn't... I didn't mean to use it all..."

I could only just make out the slightest flashes of his human teeth in the darkness. Among my kind that would have been a threat. Among the humans, it seemed to be the exact opposite.

"It's okay, Crit." I could hear the effort he was putting into his voice. He was struggling to sound calm, but was only just putting up a false front. "I'm sure there's more. These things should be able to hold thousands of litres."

A few more presses of the panel and a second bottle popped forth. Despite quaffing the first I was still parched. I had to make a concentrated effort to not snatch it away.

James looked up at me before moving, the white of his eyes clearly visible in the dark. Slowly, his hand reached forward, as though afraid that I would lash out at him for coming between me and the life giving water.

He had good reason to be wary.

It was all I could do to remain still and focus on my breathing as he slid the bottle free. Some species say that water has no scent. Tell that to someone dying of thirst. Water has an aroma all its own. One that can entice you more deeply than even the most exotic musk.

It was clear that James had been just as parched as I when he pulled down a quarter of the bottle, running another good litre over his cracked skin.

Then he offered the rest to me.

I simply stood there for a moment, blinking. I had robbed him of the first bottle, one that he had deserved more than I. And now he offered me the remainder of his?

His teeth glinted again, an easier and more natural motion now that we were both sated to some degree. "Come on, Crit. Take it, buddy. You probably need it more than I do." He gently pressed the bottle into my hands.

"It's yours..." I wasn't sure what else I could say.

He just rolled his eyes. "I don't know about your kind, but I have to take it slow re-hydrating. Its better you drink it, anyway. If I go too fast I'll rupture my gut."

I grunted and meekly accepted the bottle. Anything that would take him from me was just short of unthinkable. He was the only reason I was even alive. He had saved me on the Serius, then again when we crashed. Now he was the only reason I wasn't drying into a leather covered bag of bones.

It wasn't until I'd already gulped down the remainder of the bottle that I'd even realized what I'd done.

My arm was still soaking wet when I laid it upon James' shoulder. All I could say was, "Thank you."

Three more bottles later, we had his pack loaded with as much as it could hold. I was the one carrying it now as it was too heavy for his frail body.

Not a mote of dust had changed in the CNC since we'd last left it, but it seemed more welcoming now, brighter and easier since we had gotten our most pressing need dealt with.

A twinge of pain spasmed through me as my gut rolled. It had expanded with the liquid I'd brought down, but now it was seeking food when there was none to be had. All I could do was sit behind James and focus on the screen before him. Trying to avoid thinking about the hunger that was eating me from within.

He was working faster than I could track, switching from screen to screen, flipping back and forth as he searched for any information that might be able to aid us.

"Well, buddy," His voice was tired now, "The good news is that we know where we are. The planet is listed as NC1982. That's it, just a number, no name."

"So I was right," I muttered, "This is a nameless, gods forsaken dirtball."

I got a grin from James over that one.

"The bad news is that's about all we know. The records here are as out of date as the plant. However," He clicked a switch and the screen faded, reforming into a map of the planet. "If the pirates are still active," A slight growl built in the bottom of my chest, "They would most likely be located here." His finger raised for a quick jab at a speck labelled 'Head Office'.

"It only makes sense, Crit." He pressed a couple more buttons. "It's already built up, has all the facilities that a self-respecting pirate could ever want for, computers, repair bays, massive storage, you name it. And," He let out a sigh, "It's likely the only place we'll find a ride out of here."

I let my lips rise into a smile that had no shadow of the same meaning as a human one. "Wonderful. How soon do we depart?"