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Chapter 7 *Food. Food, The Problem Is Always Food*

James and I spent that night at the plant, after first gulping down all the water we could hold and ransacking the place for anything of value.

The first was just short of heaven, the second next to useless.

My world would qualify as arid by galactic standards, few bodies of standing water and only small oceans. That might be one of the reasons that I never did understand the human concept of bathing. Plunging oneself headfirst underwater where there was the possibility of asphyxiation? Two days ago I would have told you I'd never do it. But the moment we were able to get the lid off of one of the massive thousand litre drums, James leapt in. I'm not ashamed to say that I followed a heartbeat later.

The water reserves here had been chemically pure and hermetically sealed. They weren't that way once we were done with them.

Sopping wet and dripping, we'd then set out to scour the plant from floor to ceiling. All we managed to find of value was a few more of the absolutely putrid survival bars that James had been living on.

I was so desperate at this point that I had tried again to force one down. The result was predictable.

The sloppy mess left a trail dripping from my chin as I fought to hold back the reflexive gag that wracked its way up from my gut. For a handful of heartbeats it almost felt as if the unholy concoction had settled into a liquid lead lump in my stomach. It was nothing but a ruse, as a moment later I found myself on all fours, vomiting across the ground as my body forcibly purged itself.

Wiping my chin, I looked up at James. "Do you remember how I said I never wanted to do that again?" He nodded. "Just hit me next time. It'll be less unpleasant."

We set out shortly thereafter. North, towards where the plant's computer had placed the location of this mythical 'head office'. The walk would be at least three days, possibly a week. I was doubting that I would ever see the end of it.

I should have been the one carrying the backpack full of water. I should have been the one lending my strength to do what the frail human found so difficult.

But I couldn't.

My limbs had grown so weak that I could hardly even hold myself upright. It was degrading, but I was forced to walking on all fours at times to keep from simply toppling over.

The water had helped, of that there was no doubt, but it could only do so much. My kind were descended from predators, hunters. We were designed to be able to go for long stretches at a time without food. But not like this, on a hellish alien planet.

Walking all day seemingly did us little good. The grey pebbles and sand under our feet looked exactly the same as those not ten strides from the plant. I could almost convince myself that we had been going in nothing more than circles, and the mechanical monstrosity of pipes and panels was lurking no more than just out of sight behind us.

Dropping for the night, I was so exhausted that James practically had to force the water into my hand.

"Come on, buddy." His voice was calm, but his eyes were fearful. "We need to keep you alive. We've gotten this far together, right? I don't want to lose you now."

I did my best to try and raise my lips in an approximation of a human smile, I doubt it came out as anything more than a pained scowl.

"James," I lifted my hand to rest on his wrist. Even in my weathered state it was still far larger than his. I could feel him shift to take the weight of even a single one of my limbs resting upon him. "I don't think I can make this."

He refused to meet my eyes.

"I'm not leaving you here, Crit." He let out a breath, "You're the first real friend I've had in a long time. In case you haven't noticed, the life of a hitchhiker doesn't exactly lend its self to making a lot of relationships."

The stretch to my lips widened now, showing my receding pink gums. "I thought you were scum, James. Bulla only brought you on board at the last minute for some perverse reason of his own. We've only ever had a single dogsbody on the ship before. I argued with him for an hour when he brought you on. You were useless to us, only increasing the overhead."

He looked at me for a moment, shocked and unspeaking until I continued.

"But I'm glad he did." I'm sure the gesture was lost on him, but I folded my ears to the side, about the equivalent of one of his grins. "I'd be dead already if not for you. And," I paused a moment, searching for words, "Thank you. You're not the kind of person I would have ever associated with if given a choice, but I am glad to call you my friend."

He chuckled. "Heh. Thanks. I think."

I let my grip tighten on his wrist, just enough to know that I'd sent a shot of pain up his arm. "You need to leave me here, James. Go on without me. You have enough supplies to make it to the base, and with a little luck from the gods, you might just be able to get off this rock."

"I'm not leaving you here, Crit." His fingers were prying at my grip as he spoke. I refused to be shaken off.

"Listen to me, James. You need to go on without me." He never looked up, fingers still pulling ineffectively at my hand. "You're not a predator, James. You don't understand. I'm starving."

Now he did raise his eyes to meet mine. Steady and unwavering. Stupid human.

"I'm not leaving you here, Crit. You said you don't eat people. I trust you."

My gut spasmed a moment later, pulling me into a ball. James took that moment to slip from my grasp and scoot away.

We spent the night sleeping under an unfamiliar sky of stars, not a single cloud to obscure my view.

Up there, somewhere, was home. I didn't know which of the tiny specks of light it was that made the sun I had woken to every morning, but I knew it was there. My father was out there, somewhere.

James lay a few feet from me, just out of reach. Facing my direction, his eyes fluttered every so often as he slept.

The next day's walk started off little different from that of the day before. Crit moved even slower now. And my arm still hurt from where he had grabbed me last night.

I could only hope that the walk wouldn't take a full week. I don't think either of us would be able to make that. My rations were limited at best, Crit was nothing but fur and bones, and we had already drank through half our water.

We began well enough, but with each step Crit fell further and further behind. We were practically crawling along by the time the sun was above the hills to the east.

"Buddy?" I stopped, turning and waiting for him to catch up yet again.

He was huffing and wheezing when he made it to me, almost swaying on his feet. He'd refused to walk on all fours today. That suited me just fine. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand straight to have him walking beside me like a three hundred pound feral animal. "Why don't..." I paused for a moment, he hadn't care for it much last time I'd tried this, "Why don't I give you a hand?"

I saw the flash of barred fangs for just a moment before he let his head fall, almost touching his chest.

"Yes." His voice was little above a whisper. I had to strain just to hear it. "Please..."

I began to reach out to him when his whole body jerked suddenly. I leapt back, scrambling away, afraid that something was wrong. It wasn't for a long moment that I heard him laugh.

He fell to his knees and began pawing at the dirt.

Oh God. Had he snapped? Was this it, had he gone around the bend in whatever way his kind did?

"Crit?" I carefully edged up behind him, not daring to come within arm's reach.

His laughter grew as he spun, turning on me. I fell back onto my rear in an undignified heap, arms held before my face in a meagre show of defence. He was still laughing when I slowly lowered them.

"Look!" His voice was rough and harsh, "Look! Life! This worthless dirtball has life!"

Slowly opening my eyes, he was inches from me, pressed up, holding out a clump of featureless gravel.

For a long moment I couldn't see anything other than the simple grey silt and rocks. Then, seemingly by magic, small green and rust-orange spots began to appear.

The longer I looked the more there were. It was almost like they wormed out of the very earth.

"Moss! Moss, James." His grin was growing to near maniacal proportions, "The first step in introducing life to a dead planet."

He threw the soil down now, leaping to his feet as he began to run out ahead of me, a newborn strength seeming to propel him.

"If there's moss..." His voice was nearly lost to the wind as I trudged up behind him, "Moss, then there has to be things that eat the moss. There has to be a bio-system."

His eyes were scrubbing the horizon, searching vainly for anything moving at the edge of our perception. There was nothing there.

"There has to be..." His sudden burst of energy was quickly fading now, "There has to be... something..."

Silently, I stepped up beside him and threw one of his arms over my shoulder as he near collapsed back to the ground that he had so recently been scratching at.

"We'll find it, Crit. If there's anything out there, we'll find it."

His eyes were almost closed now as I all but dragged him forward.

"Thank you." His voice was faint, but pronunciation perfect. "Thank you, my friend. I won't forget this."

Night came mercifully soon after. I'd thought I'd been straining under the weight when I'd been lugging my pack, now weighed down with water, and hauling Crit with me, was a near titanic task. It was clear that he was doing all he could, feet slipping and skidding in the dust, but even a fraction of his weight was too much for me.

Now that I was looking for it, the moss that we had first found not a kilometre back was growing, sprouting like flecks of multi-colored pepper across the ground. Where before there had been nothing but the tiniest specs of green and rust, now the hardier variety were joined by all colours of the rainbow. From green to lilac, yellow to white, soon the ground beneath us was a riot of colour, like a field of mountain wildflowers blossoming into life as we trudged forward.

The moss did little to slow us down, if anything it helped traction by holding together some of the soft silt, but that was more than offset by monstrous crags that opened in the earth.

The seaside had been rolling flat flood plains, the terraforming plant perched atop towering hills, but the land here was broken and split.

The crags were so deep that I couldn't see their bottoms, shrouded in shadow were they. I could however hear the rush of what on any other planet I would have associated with water. On this death trap? I wanted none of whatever it was down there that could chew such incredible divots from the land.

Crit's weight was all but crushing me when the sun finally set. I couldn't bear another step, and I think he had passed out some time ago when I at last settled to the ground. The land here was so covered with moss that it had grown up to form a soft carpet beneath us. It was a welcome change to

lay on. I could hear it crackle and pop softly as I set my weight on it.

Okay, I'll bite. The question had been nagging me ever since we'd come across the first spores. What were they, and why were they here? Were they really part of the terraforming effort like Crit had claimed? He hadn't spoken another word since, so I hadn't the opportunity to quiz him on it.

And why were they here, inland, and not by the ocean? Granted, the ocean wasn't a place I really wanted to be either, but didn't even these things need water to survive? There was none of that to be found here as far as I knew.

Well, it was beyond me. If I couldn't hit it with a wrench or plug it into my diagnostic unit, then it left me scratching my head. Literally. I'd set my head back onto a pillow of moss, a bunch of the stuff got itself tangled up in my hair.

Heh. I must be looking a right mess now. A couple of hard days in the same clothing and not a shave to be seen. Much longer like this and people will think I've gone native.

Crit on the other hand... he was an odd one. He was thin and strung out from the hunger that ate away at him, but his pelt looked far more at home here than my bare skin did.

He was laying curled up in a ball, hands clutching at his sunken gut. I could just see his lips moving, whispering in a language that I couldn't hope to understand. Looking closer, I could just see his eyes open.

"Hey, Crit. You okay, buddy?"

I reached a hand towards him. He didn't move away as my fingers brushed his fur, as if he hardly even knew I was there. I could feel his muscles trembling.

This was not going well. All I could hope for now was that we would stumble across another plant tomorrow, one that had stock of something he could eat. There was no way he would last the rest of the walk to the mythical head office.

Then again, who's to say that he couldn't try eating the moss beneath us? His biology didn't play well with my power bars, but maybe he could choke down enough of that plant matter to keep him going. That was, assuming, that it wasn't highly toxic.

That was the last thought that crossed my mind before I fell away into an exhausted sleep. It would be just our luck if this moss was poisonous or, worse yet, carnivorous.

I wasn't sure what time it was when I next awoke. All I knew was that it was night. This gods forsaken planet had no moon to help me gauge the coming dawn.

The hunger that gnawed at me was almost comfortable now, like it had always been there.

Rolling onto my back, I sat up, staring out to the boundless sky that opened around me.

I guess this was it. I'd never seen anyone die of starvation before, but I couldn't imagine it being far away. My mind kept running back and hiding behind memories of home. Of stalking through the long grass, the scent of the prey. I could feel the rush of the air around me, smell their terror as I leapt upon them.

Faster and faster the memories came, blurring together until the bitter aftertaste of ship rations became one with the sweet tang of the herbal tea my mother would make before a hunt. I couldn't see anymore, couldn't hear anything but the rush of the wind in my ears.

Then, all of a sudden it was gone. I was alone, sitting out on a barren and desolate planet where my body would never be found.

But I wasn't alone... the scent of prey weaved around me, pulling me from my stupor.

My mouth watered, claws springing forth as I rose to my feet, silently stalking forward. It wasn't until the form rolled over in its sleep that I realized what lay before me.

The dim light that filtered through the night around us was only just enough to throw his features into relief. His pale human face was so alien as to be almost unrecognizable.

Falling to my haunches beside him, I froze. His face was so different from mine, hairless and rounded. Was he really a person? Was there truly anyone behind those eyes? He didn't have the whiskers nor the fur of my people, not even the teeth or flat, upturned nose. His ears were all wrong, and they didn't move when he spoke. Trying to watch them for a sign of his mood was as useless as trying to decipher his scent.

He didn't look like an azlin, but nor did he look like any of the prey I'd hunted over the years. To be honest, it had been two decades since I'd last hunted my own meal, back on my *own* world. I knew I could still do it, but...

I had to shake my head, a sharp snap that left me seeing double. This was James, the man who had saved my life again and again. I was indebted to him as surely as I had been to Bulla before. Only this time it was for something of worth. He had treated me with every kindness, even his indignities were rooted in a misguided effort to aid me.

Like having kept me alive. Like having dragged me with him, starving, out to the middle of nowhere. Then trusting me enough to sleep undefended by my side.

Even the mere thought of what was going through my head was wrong. He was not just another creature of the galaxy to be bullied and roughed up at Bulla's command. He was my friend.

But yet the smell... the scent of flesh, of meat, sent my nose twitching. I could not deny that he was the only thing that could keep me alive. He had saved my life in the past, would he do so again?

Slowly, hesitantly, I quested out a claw, pricking him ever so slightly on the back of one of his pale and hairless hands. A single drop of dark red alien blood welled to the surface, clinging to my claw as I lifted it to my lips.

The scent was nothing less than intoxicating. The idea of a feast lying no more than inches away from me while I stood here starving...

The taste of his blood on my tongue was as mind-blowing as it was unexpected. I'd hoped, in some corner of my mind, that he would be as inedible as the food he ate. That was not the case.

He tasted of nothing I had ever experienced before.

It took everything I had to turn, stepping away from him.

"James." My voice was weak, hardly more than a whisper. I wasn't even sure if I was speaking Standard. "James!" When he still didn't move, I lashed out with a savage kick to his back. I was only just able to keep the claws of my toes retracted. It raised welts none the less.

He was awake a heartbeat later, a hand pressed to his back where I'd hit him. His eyes were still unfocused and blurry. When he spoke, it came out as a slur.

"Crit? What's going on?" He turned, scanning the dark distance for any sign of danger. He

couldn't even realize that the threat was standing right next to him.

I took another step away from him, proud, in some perverted way, that I still had the self-control to do even that much.

"Go." He looked at me quizzically as I spoke. "You need to go. Now."

He tried to take a step towards me, to bridge what little distance I'd been able to put between us. I lashed out at him again, not bothering, or even wanting to sheath my claws. The wind whistled as I fell short of him by less than the breadth of a single hair.

"Go!" It wasn't, as I feared, a plea that escaped me. It was a snarl, a scream of the hunt. I could only just form the words in Standard, my lips so heavy that the sounds forcing their way out of me were just short of incomprehensible. "One of us is going to die tonight. And... and..." I was gulping for air now, as if I'd been thrust into space without a pressure suit. "And I don't want it to be you."

"We'll make it, Crit. I swear. We'll find something..." The expression that lay frozen on his face was somewhere between desperation and horror. "I won't survive out there by myself..."

"And I'll kill you if you stay here!" I snatched up the backpack that lay between us, still half full with water, and threw it at him. The impact forced him back a couple of paces, almost knocking him from his feet.

That final show was all I had. I collapsed to the ground then and there. It was all I could do to glare up at him and growl.

"Don't make my sacrifice worthless, James. Get off this world. Send them to hell, James. Send them all to hell for doing this to us. To me."

I closed my eyes for a moment, panting. I was tired. So, so very tired.

When I next opened my eyes he was gone, melted into the shadows of the slowly gathering dawn.

This was bad. This was really, really bad.

The straps of my pack bit into my shoulders as I all but sprinted across the waves of multi-coloured moss that crunched and snapped under my feet.

Crit was going feral. That was the only word for it.

Was this the end of it? Was this the last I would ever see of him, or would he come after me when his hunger grew too great?

A shiver passed down my spine. I didn't know. And I never wanted to find out. Even in his weakened state he was far too great of a match for me to ever hope of holding back.

Though, I'd never heard of a predator sparing a meal, letting it run, when he was starving. Perhaps Crit was above this all. Perhaps it was nothing but a ruse to allow him to die with dignity.

No. The fear that had been held behind his slitted alien eyes had been far too real for that.

The sun was starting to rise in the east now, a lighting to the featureless sky that slowly began to replace the stars.

The azlin may not have realized it, but he was the one who had kept us on course for our journey through the wastes. Even half dead, he'd still kept us stumbling in the right direction.

I could find anything in a city, get anywhere on a spacecraft, but put me in a wilderness like this and I was lost beyond all hope.

It took everything I had to simply keep myself from walking in circles. The sun overhead should have been enough to do that, but every time I let my mind wander I found myself veering back and forth aimlessly.

I suppose that's what I was. Aimless. I doubted that I'd ever find the main base without that beast's help. By myself I was as good as dead.

Setting down in the shadow of a hill, I let the ever higher moss crunch beneath me as I pulled a half full jug of water from my pack.

Bugger. I hadn't left Crit any water. Well... I wasn't sure if that was necessarily a bad thing or not. Death by starvation was a long and drawn out affair. Dehydration, at least in humans, was far quicker. I hardly wished either upon him, but I suppose the quicker would be more merciful.

The shade of the hill was a welcome respite, but something left me feeling uneasy. I couldn't place my finger on it, but the need to be on the move again, anywhere, kept me from settling for long.

It was nothing, I was sure of it, but I walked on anyway. The only other living thing I'd seen on this whole God forsaken planet was Crit. Him and the now ever-present moss. I had to be imagining things.

I sat there in the darkness for a long time after James left. Alone.

I was never really sure if I'd truly expected him to leave. He'd stood by my side for what seemed like such a long time that I was never really sure he would abandon me. Even after I had threatened his life.

If the hunger had dragged at me before, now combined with the thirst that followed, I was nearly floating.

I wasn't sure when I next looked up at the stars, but they were moving now. No... wait, it was me who was moving. The stars were calm and still.

I was striding across the plains, stalking a prey that wasn't there. For a long time I simply let my body do as it wished, as it would. I had to be dreaming. But that couldn't be it. The pain was too real. I could feel every crunch of moss beneath my bare toes, every ache and pain as my malnourished joints ground against each other.

There was a sent in the air. I knew what it was, but I couldn't place a name to it. I wouldn't.

It was food. That was all that mattered.

That was all there was in the end, wasn't it? Survive or die. Some creatures could live from eating nothing more than vegetation, but none of them had evolved high enough to join the space fairing races. Then again, azlins, as far as I knew, were the only true carnivores to journey to the stars...

Perhaps there was meaning to that... perhaps it took a more adaptable creature to become bold enough to strike beyond their own horizons, to seek out new worlds for conquest...

The thoughts slipped from my mind like sand between my fingers. I didn't want this, gods, I didn't, but there was no choice. My life was the one and single thing that I held above all others. I could pose and act mighty and magnanimous, but it was the simple truth. I didn't want to die.

On all fours now, prowling forward, I followed the track of the one living thing on this planet. His trail was faint, but it was the only trail there was. I couldn't lose it no matter how hard I tried.

The sun was up now, its warmth little comfort to me. Only just ahead, my prey rested. I couldn't see it, but I knew it was there.

I'd never hunted anything with a name, with a face. This was a far cry from the simple beasts that roamed the grasslands of my home. They were creatures, they were sentient, but they were not... they were not *people*. They were not someone I owed my life to.

The feeling of being watched persisted as I sat in the shadow of the hill, sipping my water and looking up at the faultless sky.

There was nothing more to do here, I needed to keep moving. Not that I had much of any idea where I was going anymore.

There was a faint haze on the horizon to the north. Well, that was unexpected. We hadn't seen so much as a dust devil on the entire planet. Could it be a storm? Well, that was the direction I was headed anyway, I might as well investigate.

I had to be careful as I walked now. The cracks and gullies had been growing the further I journeyed, ballooned to such a degree that they seemed to be taking up a third of the ground. I paused to peer down one, but all I could see was blackness. There was what I still would swear to be the unmistakable sound of running water down there, but it just didn't make sense.

Another hour slipped past and the cloud on the horizon had grown closer, almost upon me now. I'd stopped a couple of times as I walked, convinced that I was being watched, but no one answered my calls.

A single deep growl, echoing off the rifts around me, was all I got as a warning.

I nearly turned quick enough to overbalance, my heavy water-filled backpack almost pulling me off my feet. I knew *that* sound. A smile began fighting its way to my lips before I saw him.

I'd almost thought that Crit had rediscovered his urge to live, to join me again on the trek. The nice little fantasy didn't last long once I saw him. Any human would have wasted away, muscle long gone by now. But yet there seemed to be nothing but muscle left on the azlin.

He was no further than a dozen meters from me, stalking forward so low that his shrunken belly nearly brushed the ground. His tawny fur and dirt brown mane looked so out of place amongst the rioting colours of the moss as to be almost laughable. That didn't slow him down.

"Buddy? Crit?" He didn't acknowledge me as I spoke to him, didn't even look up. I could see nothing more than the rare flash of his eyes. There was nothing there. He was stripped bare. All that remained was the predator.

There was only space in my mind for two thoughts. Fight or run. They both seemed equally as futile. I'd seen Crit move before. Even ravaged he could sprint at speeds that I could never hope to match. Dying with my back to this Thanatos was hardly the way I wanted to go.

To fight seemed equally as useless. I had what against his fangs and claws? My entire arsenal consisted of nothing more than my stained and ripped ship uniform and a rucksack full of water bottles.

Well, it was no club, but I pulled the pack from my back and held it out by the straps. I didn't want to hurt him, even now, but I doubted he would leave me much in the way of a choice.

He paused for a moment in mid-stride as he came towards me, head lifting. I couldn't see his shadowed eyes, but there was the feeling that he was still there, *somewhere*.

Call me less than chivalrous, but I took that moment of hesitation for all it was worth. The honest fact of the matter was that *I was scared*. That was all there was to it. The dull and unevolved parts of my mind were screaming at me.

There was a three hundred pound killing machine looking to make a meal of my flesh. I hit him over the head with my backpack.

I'm guessing he wasn't expecting it. Or at least that's what it looked like to me. One good whack over the head with the water bottles I'd been lugging around and he was flat. It was a testament to the bottles themselves that none cracked. I couldn't say so much for his skull.

I didn't bother to take the pack with me when I ran. I doubted I'd get another free shot at him, and I could move faster without it weighing me down.

I made it over the next hill and beyond, just out of sight, when I realized he wasn't chasing after me. I should have kept running, I really should have, but I wasn't in much better shape than Crit. It had only been a few hundred meters and I was exhausted.

Poking my head back around the dune, I could see that Crit was already back on his feet. He'd ripped the top off of one of the water bottles and was chugging it down, just like he had back at the plant when we'd first found them. His actions were a shade less feral now, but no less alien.

He turned to look at me. I'd thought for a moment that I was hidden from him, but it was obvious that I'd never truly escaped. Even from this distance his eyes tracked me.

His lips pulled up in a snarl. I got the feeling that my next escape wouldn't be as easy.

Once again I set out. I didn't run, that wouldn't get me far. I simply strode through the undergrowth of moss as quickly as I was able. Hoping that somehow Crit wouldn't follow.

I'd seen the fog of clouds in the distance before, and had been making my way in their general direction, but I aimed straight for them now. No clue what it was, but anything was better than the empty hills and dunes of moss that surrounded me. The only thing I could hope for was the storm would be great enough for me to become lost in.

I could hear Crit behind me again, his feet treading roughly through the moss. I could make out each and every step as he came closer. His long strides moved him faster than I. It was only a matter of seconds now.

The cloud of dust began just beyond the next ridge, cutting off before me like a pencil line drawn in the sky. I could hear something now. It wasn't the wind, and it wasn't the sound of machinery.

Diving over the ridge, I could feel Crit's claws snatch at the hem of my pants as I rolled away, sliding down the steep embankment.

My head hit hard as I landed, nearly knocking me senseless. I thought I must have been dreaming when I opened my eyes again.

We weren't alone.

I'd never learned their proper name, everyone just called them goat-cows. There were at least a couple dozen of them grazing on the knee high moss that grew in the valley.

Behind me, Crit's leaping form blotted out the sun for a quarter second as he hurled over the crown of the hill far more gracefully than I had.

I didn't even have time to scramble out of the way. He landed upon me with perfect precision, claws wrapping around my neck before his feet even touched the ground.

"Crit!" My voice was little more than a croak as he shifted his grip, tightening. My world quickly faded to black and white. The sound of blood rushing in my ears was long gone.

All I could see were his wide eyes staring into mine. He looked almost as frightened as I felt.

One last burst of strength was all I had, nothing more. I wasn't nearly strong enough to pry his hands from me, all I could do was swing a fist.

I hit him dead center on his upturned tan nose. I could feel its leathery surface give as I connected, blood flowing free a moment later.

In an instant, the pressure was gone from my neck. I pulled in a long and ragged breath, feeling like someone had shoved a red hot poker down my throat.

I couldn't stand, couldn't even look up. It was all I could do to kneel there on all fours, gasping.

A moment later I heard another growl. A shadow passed over me, changing course at the last moment.

I still couldn't look up, couldn't see anything but the blot my own shadow made on the ground before me, but I could hear.

Another growl came forth. It was further from me, somewhere ahead. Where every sound that had come from Crit before had contained at least some tiny measure of civility, of... of, well, *humanity*, this one was truly and purely beast.

No more than a second later I heard the wet crunch of two bodies smacking together. Then something that sounded like the tearing of wet silk. The scent of blood was seemingly universal no matter the species.

Screams followed, but not those of the azlin.

A stampede must have been in progress, but I couldn't see it. I could feel it in the ground beneath me, hear it in the air and taste the dust in the wind, but I couldn't see it.

When at long last I opened my eyes the two of us were once again the only living things in sight.

I very nearly pitched back to the ground again, vomiting what little there was in my gut. Crit was buried to his jaws in the bright pink flesh of a goat-cow.

The heard of animals that had been around us was long gone now, though not far. The stupid beasts had run just over the next rise. Once they were out of sight they must have just as well forgotten what they were running from and stopped to graze again.

The sound of Crit eating – and I use that term loosely – was still enough to turn my stomach, but at least it wasn't my guts he was pulling out.

He didn't even bother with his hands, he simply tore into the body of the animal with his fangs before it was even fully dead. Massive chunks of meat disappeared between his fangs as he gorged himself, pulling down more than I would have ever thought possible.

"Crit?" I called to him, but wasn't dumb enough to try and take a step in his direction.

He didn't even lift his face from the offal, just loosed a growl in my general direction and continued to eat.

It must have been the better part of an hour before he'd sated himself. His tan belly was so distended now that I could hardly remember it showing his ribs poking through just minutes ago.

I'd tracked our footsteps back during this time, finding my backpack where it lay tossed aside and forgotten in the moss.

Sitting within sight of Crit and his meal, I twisted the cap on one of the water bottles, taking a swig. I'd hardly gotten more than a gulp down when his eyes raised to watch me.

A shiver ran down my spine again. The golden eyes were not those of the beast that had been here moments ago, but neither were they the quiet and reserved First Officer of the *Serius*. I just couldn't reconcile the blood soaked face of the predator that crouched before me with the same man who had once told me off for being late for duty.

His eyes continued to track the water bottle as I lowered it from my lips. Heh. Well, I guess everyone enjoys a drink with their meal.

"You want it?" I recapped the bottle and held it out before me.

He was a good ten meters away, but his arm still reached tentatively towards me, shaking slightly. Gaze not meeting my eyes.

"Fine." I said. A quick flick of the wrist and I sent the half full bottle tumbling through the air towards him. It landed a few feet short and rolled. He leapt upon it like it was prey, clutching it between his claws before shaking his head with a snap and dropping it like a hot coal.

He stood there for a moment, still on all fours, not an arm's reach from the body he'd been tearing apart. He didn't move for a long time, simply stared out into the distance.

I almost didn't hear him when he spoke. The words were rough and cracked, like he was forcing them from his throat one at a time.

"Thank you."

Popping the lid from the bottle with a claw, he swigged down half the water in a single gulp. Carefully, he used the rest to rinse some small amount of the blood from his hands. He didn't even seem to realize that his face was stained such a dark red that it might as well been black.

He tossed the empty container aside as soon as he'd used it up, it had helped little. He still looked like a demon risen straight from the pits of Hades. He hadn't said another word as he sat there. He met my eyes now.

By the gods, what had I done?

Truly, I didn't know anymore. All I could remember were snatches every now and then. James leaving was the last memory I held clearly. I could recall sounds, still images, scents, but little more than one at a time.

The pain had grown after he had left, that I knew for certain. I'd been dying.

There was the scent of James' trail. There was the scent of prey. They mixed, they had been one.

I could remember seeing him, I could remember feeling him struggle under my claws. I could still feel the pain from where he had struck me on my vulnerable nose.

I had very nearly murdered him in cold blood. That was what it had been. One could slaughter an unthinking animal, but one murdered another sentient creature. Even if it was for food.

And then... and then I'd awoken with my senses full of the most beautiful ambrosia I'd ever experienced. For a moment I'd thought I'd killed him. For a moment I'd thought I was consuming James.

And yet I hadn't stopped.

I'd eaten until I couldn't force down another bite, gorging myself on the flesh that lay before me. Hearing James' voice from behind me was like a thunderclap to my world. But that still left the question: what, or who, was I eating?

Trying to clean at least some small amount of the incriminating blood from my hands, I finally got a look at what I'd killed. An Introlock Early Introduction Special. Possibly a model twelve.

That was a relief. Introlock was a multi-system company that specialized in developing bio-system products. The beast that lay before me was one of their lines designed for introduction to planets under terraforming, used to jump start the biosphere.

And, thankfully, they were non-toxic. And non-sentient.

Trying to calm the beating of my still frantic heart, I turned to look at James.

He was more or less where I'd left him, sitting in the shade of a steep ridge. He stared at me like he'd never seen me before.

Well, I suppose that was appropriate. It wasn't everyday someone tries to eat you.

Slowly, without any sudden motions that would set him to flight, I raised to walk again on two feet, like a civilized being.

I could see his eyes carefully following my every move, weighing the chance that I would again turn on him.

No thought could be more forward in my own mind.

I'd almost killed him, almost murdered the one person I owed my life to. There were so many things I wanted to say, to fall upon my knees and beg his forgiveness, but I couldn't trust my own voice. I'd only just gotten out the two small words, and I feared what would come if I said more.

Slow and plodding, I walked towards him until I could stoop down to pull another bottle from his pack. We had too little water to start with, but I was going to waste a whole bottle to try and cleanse myself of the blood.

"Uh, you've got a little something..." His hands gestured towards his head, the ghost of a smile

returning.

I quested out a tongue, tasting the fur of my face. I was coated from crown to chin.

"Thank you." The words escaped me before I could even think. They were still ragged, but not so nearly bestial as they had been.

Turning, I scurried up the ridge we had tumbled from, out of sight.

It was only once I had the concealing earth between us that my hands began to shake.

I had to set down the bottle to keep it from falling as I slowly lowered myself to the ground.

I'd only heard stories of things like this happening. Stories that were told to fussy kitts to make them eat. Stories about what *could* happen.

My world was plentiful enough, especially in this modern age, that things like this simply didn't occur.

It was hardly unheard of for my kind to fight, even to the death. But not among family.

Family?

That hairless *thing* was hardly my family. I shook my head. I've been out among these aliens, these *creatures*, too long if I was beginning to think of them as family. My own were waiting for me. And, for the first in a long time, I was free to return to them.

But it was still true. James was dearer to me than anyone I had known in many, many years. He was hardly an azlin, yet he was family.

I pushed the thoughts firmly aside as I began to wash the blood from my fur. Raw meat, while not particularly common, was routine enough that I already knew how to rinse it cleanly.

The problems only came every time I looked at the pink drops. Remembering that they could just as easily be human blood.

Wait... water.

Introlock creatures were designed to seed a bio-system that already had its basics in place. That included water. For the creatures to be here there had to be a drinkable source of water.

I nearly tumbled over as I lurched to my feet, throwing drops through the air. I wasn't yet clean, but I was clean enough.

Stumbling back over the ridge, James nearly leapt from his skin when he saw me, scrambling to his feet before I wrapped my hands around his shoulders.

"Water! There has to be water!"

The blind fear in his eyes shifted to shock and confusion as he realized I wasn't out for his blood.

"We have water, Crit. At least enough to get us through..."

"No," I shook him, a bit harder than I intended. "The introduction species can't survive without water. There has to be a natural source."

Sure enough, there was a small pool nearby, likely fed by an underground spring. It was a good ten meters below the rolling land, like the water itself had dug a hole for it to sink in. A narrow path, well covered with hoof prints, lead the way down.

Crouching at the water's edge, it smelt like heaven. James didn't seem to notice anything, but the scent of standing fresh water was enough to make me smile even after the events of today.

"Okay, you've got me." James said, kneeling down, but refusing to touch its surface. "How'd we get oceans of acid, and inland fresh water?"

I just shrugged. "Perhaps the other terraforming installations are still functional? At least one has to be running to continue to provide oxygen to the atmosphere, otherwise it would all be used up. There isn't enough plant life to sustain the gas cycle for more than a few oxygen users, and if the pirates have a base here..." I left the rest unsaid, I didn't want to ruin my new found good mood by thinking about what our odds were against a group organized enough to keep even a single terraforming plant operational.

Carefully, James dipped the tip of one finger into the pool. I could already have told him it was pure water. He smiled as he lifted a double handful to scrub his face.

"Well, it's an improvement, I suppose." Straightening, he took a step back to stand behind me and look out across its almost perfect mirror surface.

Then he reached over and pushed me in.

The sudden sharp shove was so unexpected that I didn't even have time to react, my arms windmilled in the air as my tail fought to keep balance. It didn't make even the slightest difference. An instant later my head was underwater, only to be quickly followed by the rest of me.

Coming up sputtering and dripping from my already wet mane, I glared at him.

He just grinned and replied, "You were still covered in blood."