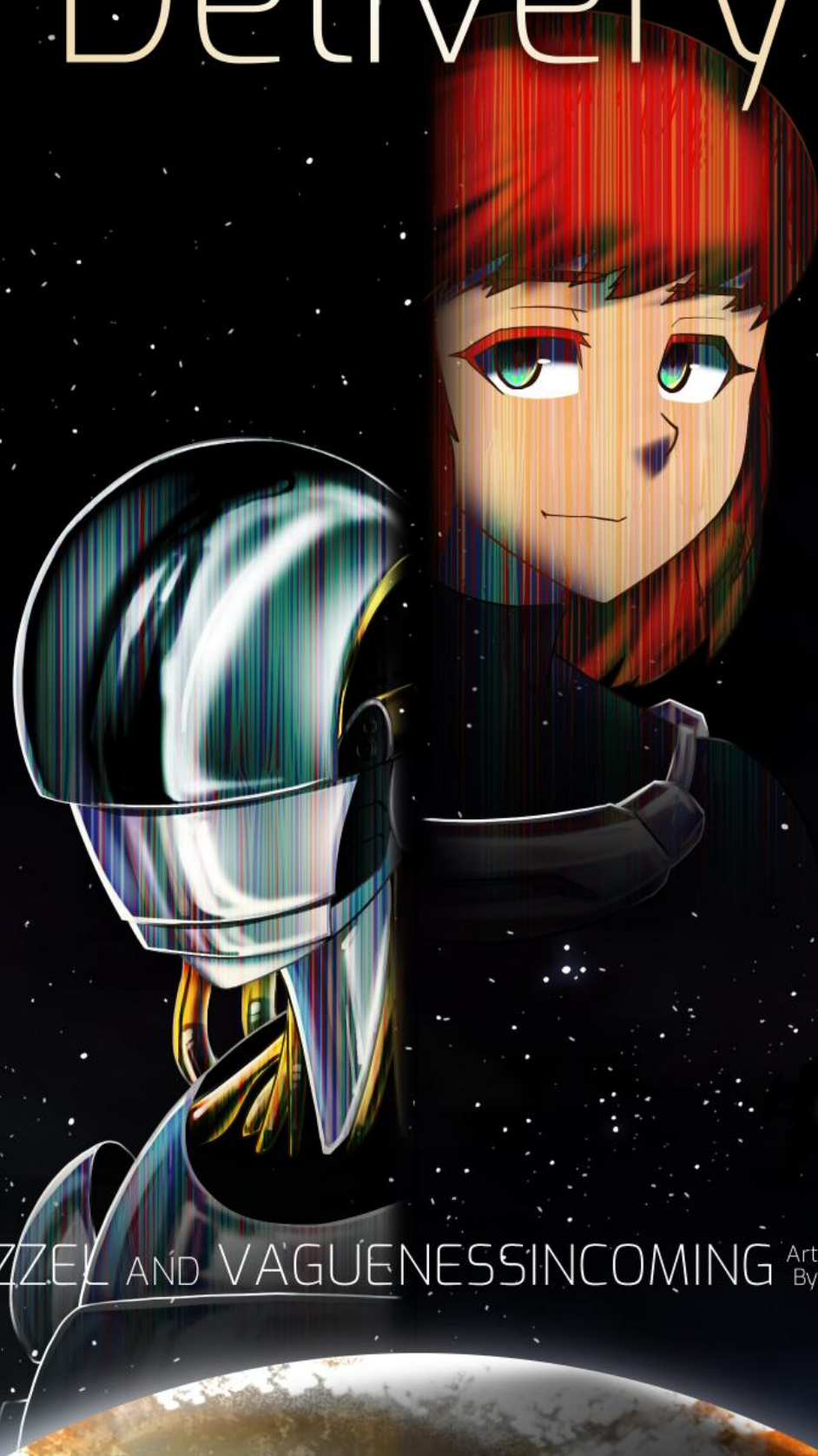


Deep Space Delivery



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"Who goes there?"

Caustic clouds roiled overhead, blotting out the twin suns. In the stillness below, crystalline trees basked, their sharp tops filtering microscopic lifeforms from the moisture.

"Help me lift this, Venice," Grace said, gesturing towards a black-brown outcrop nestled between two trunks. Its porous surface and jagged edges collected yellowish liquid from the atmosphere.

"What we're looking for won't be under that rock."

"It's not a rock, Venice, it's a coral. And I want to take a sample from under it."

Venice's antennae retreated into her bony crest, in a display Grace had learned to associate with annoyance. The Kentarian turned her catlike eyes to Edwin, who was leaning over a holographic map display peppered with blinking red dots.

"Captain?" she asked.

"Not right now, Neverender."

Klaus hadn't changed out of his overalls. Only the slightly singed badge on his chest betrayed him as the ship's chief engineer. Of course, he was the only engineer on board at almost any time.

"Ah, just humor her, Venice," he said. "She'll be complaining all the way back to Earth otherwise."

The massive alien rolled her shoulders. With slow, lumbering steps, she gently pushed Grace out of the way and lifted the rock. It was surprisingly light; all her effort did was

send it rolling downhill. She watched it go.

"We should have gone with Balkin," she said. "He can't defend himself from half the lifeforms on this planet."

"But he should be able to run from most of them," Grace said, shoveling dirt into a container. "Most predators in the area are ambush-based or filter feeders."

A wide, crescent-shaped shadow moved through the clouds and disappeared.

"That's not any better." Venice tapped the insignia on her chest. "Found it yet, Balkin? Over."

"If I did, you would know. Over."

Venice returned her attention to Grace, who was busy scraping purple gunk off of a patch of soil. With a gentle shake, she tapped it into a glass vial.

"You're doing that thing, Venice."

"What thing?" Venice asked.

"The thing where you stare."

Klaus chuckled as Venice wandered away to the edge of the camp. His arms were coated in oil up to the elbow, but the landing gear he had been working on was finally extending properly.

"Captain, she needs a job or she's gonna go native," he said.

"She has a job," Edwin mumbled, squinting at his screen. "She's protecting us."

"From what? You heard Grace. Most of the shit on this

planet shouldn't be able to touch us, but Balkin on the other hand—"

"Is fine," Edwin said. "He's got his receiver, he's got his gun, and he's been doing this a lot longer than we have. If you insist, though."

He tapped the insignia on his chest.

"Balkin, mind if we send you a babysitter. Over."

There came no response. Edwin frowned.

"Balkin, check in. Over."

Venice had returned from the edge of the camp and was standing with her arms folded over her broad chest. Grace looked up from her fieldwork. Klaus put down his wrench. Glancing at them all, Edwin clenched his jaw and jammed his finger into the receiver.

"Balkin, goddammit, respond now. Over."

A crackle filtered out of the receiver. There was a noise like scratching and a sharp breath. A glug. Something wet sliding over something wet and a moan, not human, at max volume, followed by a shriek. The line went dead just as the badge dropped from Edwin's fingers. Venice was already running.

Balkin had been exploring the south end of the grotto where their ship had landed. His location overlapped with one of the dots on Edwin's map; just another shot in the dark.

"Careful," Grace warned, "of the sharp edges."

Venice pushed past the crystal thicket, shattering

branches in her wake. When she disappeared into the darkness of the grotto, her skin shimmered for a moment until her flashlight switched on, flooding the area in a bright white glow.

The terrain before them got trickier with each step. The floor was riddled with natural holes, just large enough to trap their boots if they tried moving normally; instead of running, they slowed to a crawl. A fall here could get nasty. Those edges were sharp. A low rumble came from below; the sound of running water. The air smelled bitter, like sulfur.

"What in blazes was he doing here without permission?" Edwin grumbled. Grace shot him a puzzled look.

"You said he was free to explore and look for the subject."

"I didn't expect him to take it this far!"

"Ssh!" Klaus whispered. "I think I hear something."

Thump. Thump. Thump.

"Me too," Edwin said.

Venice blinked. "What does it sound like?"

"A knoc—"

Something shattered under Venice's boot. A burst of static came from the group's communicators, before cutting off.

A shape moved in the darkness. Venice pointed her light towards it.

"Balkin?"

Six beady eyes reflected it back at her. A bulbous body seemed to absorb the rest.

Grace relaxed. "It's just a scolomorph."

They had seen them before, grazing on the valleys, attaching their mouthpieces to the trunks of eroded trees and grinding holes into them while hugging them with their many legs. Harmless creatures. They didn't even have teeth.

Grace stepped forward. Venice pushed her back. She landed in Edwin's arms, who looked up at the Kentarian in disbelief.

"What are you—"

Venice hefted her plasma gauntlets.

"Don't get close! Something's wrong with it."

"Sick, maybe?" Klaus asked. "Mutated?"

Edwin's eyes widened. "The subject!"

The creature ignored them and resumed slamming itself against the cave wall.

Venice froze.

"...Balkin!"

She tackled the alien. As her forehead connected with the soft tissue, it caused it to bend, and for a moment, in the writhing black mass of its belly, they saw a shape.

A human shape.

The creature managed to wrap around Venice's body, thwacking its stomach against the hard stone once more before Venice wrestled it onto its back. They all heard it, like

the crack of an eggshell. The shape inside of its stomach went still.

"M-maybe the transceiver," Grace whispered.

Edwin's hands shook as he picked up the plastic remains that Venice had stepped on when she entered the cave. Even shattered, it read 'Balkin, Ambassador'. Their communicators gave a garbled hiss as he dropped it back onto the ground.

"I don't think so," he said.

Venice had her arms locked beneath the creature's stomach and was heaving, trying to get it to eject its meal as the creature thrashed and hissed. Its soft mouth lashed around to gnaw harmlessly at her shoulder. More crunches could be heard from its stomach.

"Venice," Edwin said.

She gave the creature another squeeze. A wet mulching rumbled through its skin.

"Venice."

The Kentarian gnashed her teeth as she let go of its stomach and raised her hands to its neck. Steam was rising from her plasma gauntlets. In the faint glow, the others could see her face contort as the mechanical fingers closed around the creature's neck.

"Venice!"

It was Grace that broke through to her. Venice blinked, easing her grip, and in the lull, the creature gave a satisfied purr. Its stomach had rounded out, free from sharp edges.

Grace stepped forward with her flashlight in hand and, with a brief glance at Venice, placed her hand on the creature's distended gut. The rest waited with bated breath. Grace just nodded and let her fingers slip from its skin.

"That's Balkin," she said.

"Fuck."

Klaus, whose face had turned white from the moment they entered the cave, crouched next to a metal device half-hidden in the gloom. The face of it glowed green, but the screen was shattered, as were the prongs that sent the signal. Still, Klaus pocketed it.

"His detector is scrapped," he said. "I might be able to repair it."

"Why?" Edwin asked. "I think it's pretty obvious that our target is right there."

"We should kill it," Venice said. "It ate Balkin."

"We can't," Grace said. "They want it alive."

All four stared at the creature who was now watching them back, its six beady glazed over in what looked a lot like satisfaction.

Venice punched a hole into the cave wall.

"Pass me the taser."

- - -

Venice cracked her knuckles. Her eyes were narrowed to

The creature managed to wrap around Venice's body,
thwacking its stomach against the hard stone once more
before Venice wrestled it onto its back.
They all heard it, like the crack of an eggshell.
The shape inside of its stomach went still.

Satan



"We should kill it," Venice said.
"It ate Balkin."

slits; they had been since they'd returned to the *Ambrosia*.

"I can cut the airflow to the brig and asphyxiate it," she said, leaning over the table. "You wouldn't have to move a finger."

"So we'd have come here for nothing, then?" Grace protested. "We already completed our assignment; all we have to do now is deliver the package and get paid."

"Balkin is dead."

"You're too close again, Venice," Klaus said.

The Kentarian flared her nostrils and leaned back. Grace breathed a sigh of relief. She had nothing to fear from the even-voiced alien—she knew that well—but it was hard not to feel uncomfortable when that wall of meat decided to seethe mere inches from her face.

"Balkin is dead," Venice said, "and as this ship's security officer, it's my duty to make sure whatever happened down there doesn't happen again."

Edwin stared out the window. The swirling hues of gold and green that covered the planet's surface grew blurred with distance. Soon they would be no more than just a speck in a field of stars—and soon after, once the hyperspace drive engaged, not even that.

Cold coffee spilled onto the table when his shaky hand took hold of the mug.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Klaus said. "But if we don't finish this job, we lost Balkin for nothing."

“When risk overtakes reward, you pull out. You don’t double down.”

“We don’t know if it’s a risk,” Grace said, and before Venice could point out the obvious, she added, “not when it’s secure in the brig. Scolomorphs aren’t particularly smart. If it’s a mutation or an infection, it doesn’t seem to have affected its physique, only its... appetite...”

She trailed off, leaving a void where her voice had been. Klaus continued typing at his workstation. Edwin got another cup of coffee. Nobody spoke as the deck filled with the sound of mechanical clicks and beeps and the rhythmic tapping of Venice’s foot against the steel floor.

“Captain,” she said.

Edwin bit his lip. Whenever she called him by title, stress soon followed. “What is it, Venice?”

“Your decision?”

“I knew you’d ask that,” Edwin said, sighing. “Everyone raises good points. I need to think for a little bit. You all feel free to take some time off and relax too, I guess.”

Silence. Venice stared; the others shared a frustrated glance.

Klaus was the one to break the tension.

“Well, that’s me knackered,” he said, sighing and pushing away from his chair. “I’m gonna take another look at that detector tomorrow.”

“Why?” Grace asked. “We know where the alien is.”

"I dunno. Just something to do."

Venice slapped his shoulder as he passed, causing him to stumble. Edwin gave a meager wave. He hadn't touched his coffee.

"Honey?" Grace said. She tugged his sleeve. "Maybe we should turn in for the night, too. I'm gonna test the samples I took tomorrow and someone should probably go through Balkin's notes. Klaus could do it, or...?"

"I'll do it," Edwin said, rubbing his forehead. "I might visit Trici for a massage before I head down, though."

Grace frowned, but after a brief look at Venice, she shook her head and followed Klaus out of the room. Venice waited until her footsteps had receded to speak.

"She doesn't like you visiting Trici," she said.

"I know," Edwin said. He had turned to look at one of the screens. Security footage showed that the alien was still sleeping off its stupor, its feet twitching in its chains. Edwin avoided looking directly at its stomach. Some of Balkin's remains were still visible against the surface.

"Why?"

Edwin bent forward so that his head was touching the cool metal surface of the display. It helped to soothe the headache he felt forming behind his eyes.

"Because she's a leisure robot," he said. "There's a stigma."

"I thought they just played sports," Venice said,

scratching her cheek. "And hasn't she been reprogrammed?"

"It's a marriage thing."

"How?"

"It just is," Edwin said, walking past her. "Goodnight, Venice."

- - -

The ball bounced on the net and fell to the ground. Ed threw his racket on the floor in a fit of rage, and watched it bounce harmlessly away. Trici dropped her ready stance.

"Your aim is off, Captain Winchester. Is something bothering you?"

"Reading my body language, now? I didn't realize I had two Venices on board."

"Just a guess, Captain Winchester. Your reaction interests me, though. Would you like to talk?"

Edwin huffed and, sheepishly, picked his racket back up. He avoided facing her for as long as he could; only when he felt that lukewarm metal hand press on his elbow did he dare to glance at the robot.

"He was a friend."

"Are you referring to Mr. Balkin?"

"Mhm."

"He was a friend," Trici said. "He had been with the Ambrosia since its shakedown cruise, three years and eight

months ago.”

“Yeah,” Edwin said. “Back when we were a research vessel. Back before we had to turn to glorified trucking. I don’t expect you to understand how much his loss affects me... but I don’t know, I feel like I don’t have it in me anymore.”

Trici crossed her arms. Her chrome polish glimmered under the tennis court’s lights. Edwin had always found it distracting—the way her soft curves were designed to exploit ambient lighting. In moments like these, he almost understood Grace’s reticence in having him alone with the ship’s handywoman.

“I don’t understand,” Trici said, “not because I’m not human, but because I’m not you. I do feel the loss of Mr. Balkin—maybe not as you do, but in my own way. I have been receiving inputs from interacting with him for close to half a decade; now I will never experience those specific inputs again. There is a feeling of absence.”

Edwin whistled. “They do make you more ‘human than human’, huh?”

She smiled. “That’s ‘better than human’, Captain, which is why I keep beating you at tennis.”

In the silence that followed, both of their smiles faded.

“Can you do me a favor, Trici?”

“Yes.”

“Can you go to the brig and take a look at the alien?”

“What for?”

“Nothing, just... look at it, and then come to the bridge and tell me what you think. There’s a decision I’ve been trying to make, and I could use everyone’s point of view.”

Trici nodded. “Of course, Captain Winchester. Same time tomorrow?”

“We’ll see.”

- - -

Trici’s glowing visor was the only light she needed. Usually it displayed human emotion summarized into blinking lights—happiness, anger, surprise, watered down to easy-to-read symbols and letters. However, with every pixel glowing a searing bright white, it now lit up the mechanical guts of the *Ambrosia*. It came in handy whenever a panel had to be removed and a mess of sparking wires untangled; it helped her just as much on an empty hallway.

Her steel heels tapped on steel tiles in a perfect, even rhythm. Clumsiness of motion had been one of the biological imperfections her creators had deemed unnecessary; her design was meant to tread the fine line between appealing and charmingly human. This had the side-effect of everyone on board recognizing her through her footsteps.

The gates to the bridge presented a hand scanner as she approached them. She ignored it. Instead, she looked for the

small round slit three inches above the sensor; the tip of her index finger detached, and she pressed the connector underneath to the opening. The gates didn't just open; they stayed that way, too.

Six cages lined the walls of the brig, each of them protected by a thick glass shielding. Four of them were empty; the fifth had been repurposed by Grace to keep soil samples. Only the sixth's lock was engaged.

Trici approached it. She stared through the glass and into the darkness, and saw nothing but a shape huddling up in the corner.

"Lights on."

A dim white glow slowly filled the brig, revealing the figure in hiding.

It was Klaus.

"Mr. Huysmans?"

The figure gasped and stumbled towards the door.

"It tricked me," he said. "It pretended to be dead, and when I got in to check on it, it ran away and locked me in."

"That was an irresponsible thing to do, Mr. Huysmans, and a breach in procedure to boot."

"Whatever, just get me out of here and sound the alarm!"

With a press of her finger, the door unlocked, and Klaus stumbled out.

"Oh, thank heavens," he said. "Call the captain—and

unlock the taser lockers for me, will you? I think it went to the engine room."

She nodded, sent the order, and, with a thought, opened communications.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Trici?"

"Is that Trici?" a familiar voice asked in the background. "Tell her her monthly maintenance is overdue."

Trici froze. She looked down the hallway she had just seen Klaus run down.

"Captain, Mr. Huysmans... lock the entire ship down, don't let anyone out of your sight. I'll be on the bridge in five minutes. I think we have a shapeshifter on board."

- - -

"How could you let this happen?"

Trici stood with her hands folded at the front of the table. Klaus—the real Klaus—sat at the other end, twiddling his thumbs as Venice paced in front of the monitors, swapping between each camera. So far, there was no sign of the intruder.

"Trici," Edwin said, snapping his fingers. "Are you there?"

"I am, Captain," Trici said. "It is as I told you. I saw Mr. Huysmans in the cage and he told me that the alien had tricked him into letting it out."

"And that didn't strike you as odd?" Grace asked. She sat next to Edwin with her hand on his leg. "The alien we captured should have been unintelligible. How could it have tricked Klaus?"

"I am programmed to obey commands given to me by the crewmembers," Trici said. "I did not take into account the possibility of a shapeshifter."

"Well, it explains why our clients wanted it, at least," Klaus said. The detector sat on the table in front of him, its wires sprawled like intestines over the polished chrome. The screen had been replaced, but the antennas were still bent. "A shapeshifter is more valuable than a hunger mutation."

"Should have let me kill it when we had the chance," Venice growled, flicking to another camera.

"What do we do, Captain?"

A vein in Edwin's temple had started to throb. He massaged it, glancing at the four pairs of eyes now directed toward him. There was a map of the ship lying on the table. A red pen was grasped in his palm.

"Nobody leaves the bridge," he said. "Not until Venice finds the creature on the cameras. If it really is a shapeshifter, then there's a good chance that it will look like one of us, but if we're all here, then..."

"We'll know it's the alien," Grace finished.

"What if Venice doesn't find it on the cameras?" Klaus asked. "Or what happens when she does?"

"If she finds it, she intercepts it," Edwin said. "The rest of us will stay on the bridge and-"

"Wait," Grace said. "You want her to do it alone?"

"Fine by me," Venice snorted.

"Yes," Edwin said, pounding his fist on the table, "because if she doesn't go alone, then how is she supposed to know whether it's one of us?"

"The detector," Grace said.

They looked at Klaus who had put his boots up on one of the workstations. The pliers he was twirling around his finger stopped.

"I'm going to need more parts," he said. "My bag is in my room."

"Can you make do with stuff from the bridge?" Grace said. "You could strip down one of the stations and use its parts."

"I could," Klaus said, sucking his teeth, "for everything but the transmitter. We're also going to need another sample from the alien, which might be difficult."

"I have one," Grace said.

"Where?"

"In the brig."

The crew groaned. It was as if a stiff chill had descended upon the bridge. Where to go from here? None of their training, none of their varied and complementary skillsets aided in any way with the risk of a rogue alien lifeform. That

was...

That was Balkin's department.

Venice snapped her fingers. "It's taking out the cameras," she said.

"What?"

Both Klaus and Edwin rushed to her side. Indeed, three of the monitors had gone dark.

"The brig, the engine, and the bedrooms," Edwin said. "How the hell did it get through the gates? We shut everything down."

"If it turned into something small enough, it could crawl through the vents," Klaus noted.

They all looked up at the grate on the ceiling. Suddenly, the normal rumbling of the ship seemed far more ominous.

"Do you think it's trying to mess with the engine?" Venice asked.

"It shouldn't know any of the passcodes," Grace said. "It can mimic bodies, not minds. Besides, the destination has been locked from the beginning. It shouldn't be able to change that either."

"We're still left with a murderer on board that we have no idea how to find!" Edwin shouted.

Venice put her hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off. His nails were biting red crescents into his palm. Trici, programmed to handle outbursts, stepped forward, but Grace held her back. She went instead.

“Honey?”

At first, Edwin didn't respond. He had his head in his hands and she could hear his teeth grinding.

“Honey, one problem at a time.”

“Right,” he muttered. “I know. Right. One problem at a time. Er...

Lifting his face, he surveyed the bridge as he had never seen it before. His eyes fell first on Venice, then Trici, then Klaus.

“Okay,” he said. “How about this?”

- - -

The holoscreen winked to life. A stocky human with a bald head and wearing a golden robe peered much too close to the camera. His smile was plastic.

“Good tidings, crew of the Ambrosia! I trust your assignment is—”

Edwin's knuckles turned white. His fists trembled.

“You didn't tell us we were after a fucking shapeshifter. We already lost a crewmember.”

All around him, Edwin's crew slowly rose up. They had been waiting for hours, now, waiting on their captain's plan; now they were witnessing it being executed.

He was calling their employers.

Venice stood behind him. Much too close to him—he



The holoscreen winked to life.
A stocky human with a bald head and wearing a golden robe
peered much too close to the camera.

Selen

could feel the metal studs of her armor brush up against the back of his head. Her hand rested on his shoulder, and he resisted the urge to shake it off. Grace was leaning back on her chair, asleep. Trici was monitoring the cameras, but when the holoscreen came on, she turned one of her eyes towards it.

Alone in a corner, Klaus took a multitool to the detector.

The man on the screen leaned away, shared some words with his similarly-dressed cohorts, then faced Edwin again.

“We were not aware...”

“If you don’t tell us what that thing is right now, we’re

going to jettison it.”

Another pause. More whispers.

“We are willing to pay you twice the agreed amount as compensation... providing you complete the delivery.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Edwin said.

The man on the screen took a moment to think.

“You were right, the being in question is a shapeshifter. An entity able to assimilate the minds of what they consume, as well as change their physical appearance in order to ambush prey. This is information which we were reticent to share with you, due to its... sensitive nature. We were hoping to preserve your safety by keeping you in the dark. Evidently, that was a mistake on our part.”

“Will it kill again?”

“We can’t say. Have they... *processed* the victim?”

Venice’s eyes tightened to slits. Her hand nearly crushed Edwin’s shoulder. “Listen, you...”

“It has,” Edwin said.

“Then they are more likely a human-level intelligence by now. Depending on their behavior, they can be reasoned with, but I would advise against any direct contact.”

“What would you advise, then?”

“We have a lot of experience dealing with situations like these, and have a team of specialists at the ready. They are not authorized to leave orbit, but if you land, they are well equipped to capture the creature. I would suggest that you

lock in the coordinates to avoid tampering, keep the crew assembled, and simply wait it out.”

“See you, then. Trici, cut communications.”

The robot leaned forward and ended the call just as Venice brought her giant fist down on the consul. The noise woke Grace up from her nap.

“Huh? What?”

“That was useless!” Venice said. “It was less than useless. They didn’t tell us how to deal with this at all—just to lock our coordinates and hang in there. What is this about ‘near-human’ levels of intelligence? Assimilating minds? Processing the victim? You told them that one of us died and they wanted to know if their cargo was okay.”

“It might actually be worse than that,” Klaus said, giving his screwdriver a twist. The screen on the detector flickered, then went dead. “I don’t like the sound of ‘assimilating’. Could be that the thing has Balkin’s memories, in which case, it knows our passwords.”

“And it knows about us,” Edwin said. “Trici, can you change the passwords from here?”

“I can,” she said, “and would you like me to...?”

“Lock the coordinates,” Edwin sighed. “We’re gonna have to ride it out.”

“Wait, wait,” Grace said, getting up from her chair. “I’m only just catching up. What did the employer say about the shapeshifter?”

As Klaus filled her in, Edwin paced back and forth in front of the terminal. Trici's fingers were busy on the pad, editing passcodes and updating them on each of the crew's personal communicators. Venice, who had gone quiet, slammed her fist again.

"We have to catch it," she growled. "Get it back in its cage."

"There," Trici said.

Coordinates floated on the screen for a moment before congealing into a countdown. The ship would arrive at the destination in exactly twenty-three hours.

"It's locked," Trici said, her voice even. "The creature will not be able to tamper with the location even if it were to process one of us."

"Great!" Edwin said. "Then we can just hold tight in the bri—"

The lights flickered, then died. There was a gentle hum as the backup generator clicked beneath their feet, sending power to the red emergency lights overhead. Each of the terminals had gone dim during the outage, but due to internal batteries, they stayed alive. Movement blurred across one of the monitors.

"It's in Electrical," Venice said, and before anyone could stop her, she was out the door.

"Venice!" Edwin screamed. "Get back here right now!"

He sprinted to the door, but once he got to the glowing

red entrance, he stopped and stared down the hall. There were three doors leading from the bridge to different ends of the ship, including a hole in the floor. Venice had gone to the right toward electrical. Her footsteps could be heard receding into the distance.

"We shouldn't split up, Captain," Klaus said, coming up behind him.

Edwin, whose legs were already starting to shake, took a quick step back.

"No," he muttered. "Perhaps you're right."

He allowed Klaus to lead him back into the bridge where Grace and Trici sat waiting at the table. The door closed behind him with a slow hiss, then locked.

- - -

"I think it would be best if I got the detector up and working as quickly as possible," Klaus said. They had been sitting in silence for ten minutes. Trici was watching the cameras, but there was no sign of Venice. "To avoid ambiguity."

"I agree," Grace said, "but that would take us through the sleeping area and the brig."

"Impossible," Edwin snorted. "We wait here."

He was sitting with his knees tucked up to his chest. Grace kept trying to take his arm, but he wouldn't let her. His

left foot tapped against the chair.

"I think Mr. Huysmans' plan is sound," Trici said. "If we went in pairs, then we wouldn't have to worry about the creature assimilating us. We would be able to communicate."

"Nobody leaves this room," Edwin said.

"But Science Officer—"

"Nobody!"

His voice echoed through the bridge. Grace and Trici exchanged a look. Klaus continued to work on the detector. Another ten minutes passed with no movement before Trici tried again.

"Captain," she said, "I can manually open and close the doors leading to different areas of the ship. Science Officer Winchester and you can retrieve Mr. Huysmans' bag from his room while Mr. Huysmans and I can retrieve the sample from the brig. I shall lock the outer door of the sleeping area so that only the two of you will have access to it. Does that sound reasonable?"

Edwin's face burrowed further into his palms.

"Honey?"

Grace laid her hand on his elbow and when he didn't shake it off, she began to run his arm. Slowly, he uncurled.

"Sorry," he said, wiping his eyes. "Just... sorry."

"This whole thing is ridiculous," Grace said. "It's not your fault. But we do need to deal with it, right?"

"Right, right."

Klaus pretended to be scratching his nose as the Captain shot a look in his direction. It wouldn't do to hurt his fragile ego by acknowledging that he had seen him cry. Grace, still holding his elbow, got him up out of his seat and, with a nod to Trici, led him toward the door.

"We'll get the bag," she said. "Are you okay getting the sample, Klaus? Two blue vials in a chest labeled 'T-301'. Should be in the cage next to the one the alien used to occupy."

"Right," he grunted, coming up to stand near Trici. "We should be fine. We've got a taser if need be."

- - -

The red emergency lights cast strange shadows across the walls of the sleeping chamber. Edwin looked through the slats in the metal walkway as Grace surveyed each of the doors, pushing them open as she passed. Venice's room was bare except for a bed and a pile of stuffed animals. Balkin's room was a mess of maps and journals. Books lined the shelves that had been carved into the bedframe. There was still a fresh set of clothes laid out on his chair.

Klaus's room doubled as a personal workshop. A metal bench took up half of the room, its surface a neat array of tidbits and tools. Pegboards dominated the walls—including the one over his bed—though it was hard to tell what color it

was given that every possible inch of it held some sort of device. His bag was on his bed, as he said it would be.

"This is it," Grace whispered. "Now we wait for Trici and Klaus."

She turned to find Edwin peering out into the hallway. His knuckles were white against the doorframe.

"What?" she asked, startling him.

"I thought I heard something," he said.

His shoulders slumped as he turned around, but Grace was waiting for him, taking him into her arms. He melted beneath her touch. There was nothing else he could do.

"It's okay," Grace whispered, stroking his hair. "You're alright."

She could feel the tightness in his chest; the weakness in his arms. He was hurting and she was there to soothe away the pain. Eventually, he sagged against her, allowing himself to just be held.

"I'm pathetic," he murmured into Grace's hair.

"You're human," Grace murmured back.

"Balkin shouldn't have been alone."

"Probably not."

"That was my fault."

"No, sweetheart," Grace said. "Our employers lied to us. We didn't know what that thing was and the only one who might have had a clue was the one who asked to chase it. You don't have to carry that burden, Ed."

His lips brushed against her cheek. Turning, Grace met them, and soon her own anxieties started to melt as well. Edwin's hands were warm. She hadn't realized how cold she was.

"We, um, should probably get back to the bridge," Edwin said, clearing his throat.

"We're supposed to wait for Klaus and Trici," Grace said, taking his hand.

She pulled him out into the hallway and through the door on the opposite side. Their own bedroom was tidy, and it was the only one with a double bed. Edwin's breath hitched as Grace kissed his neck. Her fingers swept across his lower back. When she moved beneath his waistband though, he jolted.

"No?" she asked.

"Sorry," he said. "I uh..."

He nodded toward the bathroom.

"Take your time," Grace said with a wink. "But not too much time."

He looked over his shoulder as he moved out into the hall. The mood was still there—she could see it in his eyes—but so was the fear. Grace took a step toward him, but before she could take his hand, he shook his head.

"I'll be okay," he said.

He waved to her as the bathroom door closed. Grace sighed.

The red lights continued to strobe as she lay on the bed. After a few seconds, she turned and checked beneath it. Nothing. Her husband's tendencies were rubbing off on her.

- - -

"Do you want to talk, Mr. Hyusmans?"

"Not particularly," Klaus said, his eyes trained on every shadow. "Not keen on getting ambushed while I'm talking about how many screws I tightened today."

"That's fine. Door ahead."

Klaus took firm hold of his taser and pointed it at the steel bulkhead in front of him.

"Are you ready?" Trici asked.

"Go ahead."

The robot nodded. She slid her finger into the hole in the wall, and the door rumbled to life. It began to open—Klaus took aim—and revealed more unlit corridors, more locked doors, more cables sprawled across the floor.

"Watch my back."

Trici looked over her shoulder, while Klaus stepped through the door. Each of them covered the other's blindspot as Trici stepped through the door and closed it from the other side.

Their twin sets of footsteps echoed through the silent corridors. The minutes dragged. The silence began to creep

into Klaus's skull, until finally, he relented.

"So, why Edwin?" he asked. "Why the Ambrosia? Having to swap entire chunks of your personality and programming to match crew member standard must have been difficult."

"The change was minimal," Trici said. "Most of my original programming remains. I wanted to see the universe, form bonds with sentients that went beyond the physical—Captain Winchester was looking for a crew at the time, and from what I understand, neither of our standards was too high. I wanted to work, and he wanted a robot on board."

"Any idea why?"

"It's good for securing contracts. Captain Winchester likes bringing me to meetings with possible employers, and makes a big show out of adding new directives to my core programming, things like 'ensure the package's safety' or 'do not allow the package to be opened' or 'finish the delivery within the deadline'. Clients feel safe knowing there is someone on board that will not allow them to get screwed over."

Klaus whistled. "Marketing. Of course."

"And I'm programmed for charisma and empathy, so I help him with negotiations when Mr. Balkin isn't available."

Trici knew she had said something wrong the moment she saw Klaus's expression drop.

"That's enough talking," he said. "We're getting close to the brig. I'd tell you to keep your wits about you, but I'm sure

that's also part of your core programming."

- - -

Grace was about to check the bathroom when Edwin reappeared. He stood in the doorway, his face hidden in shadow, but when he stepped into the room, she could see that he was grinning. Grace released her grip on the taser she had strapped to her waist.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"Much," he said. "Sorry for worrying you."

Grace patted the space on the bed beside her and Edwin sat. His hands were folded in his lap.

"I'm not sure I'm cut out for this alien stuff," he said. "We've had close scrapes before, but not like this."

A vivid sense of déjà-vu washed over Grace. She felt like she had heard those exact words in another time and another place. Shaking her head, she tried to smile.

"There are only a few more hours until the ship lands," Grace said. "We'll manage."

She took Edwin's hand and placed it on her thigh. He took hers and placed it on his. Something shifted beneath his belt. Grace smiled for real this time.

"I think we still have a few minutes," she said. "You want the usual?"

"Yes."

“Good.”

His back hit the bed at the same time Grace’s knees came down on his arms, pinning him. Lifting one leg, she managed to pull off her pants.

“Ready?” she asked as she lowered her crotch onto his face. His lips brushed against her and she shuddered.

“Oh yeah.”

His tongue traced a line across her thighs, bending the soft skin before swirling back to fall, ravenous, against her clit. Grace let out a small gasp as he dug in deep.

“Careful,” she whispered.

He shifted beneath her.

Maybe it was the open door that caused Grace to lose her concentration. She hated having it behind her, an invitation for an ambush. Leaning back, she placed her hands against Edwin’s chest to steady herself, taking a deep breath, and as she did so, she felt something odd. His muscles. How could she explain it? It felt like they were traced from memory. Her hands had explored those curves so often that it was hard for her to put into words what was wrong, but it was wrong. Edwin continued licking.

Slurping.

Tasting.

Slowly, Grace started to get up.

“I think that’s enough, honey,” she said. “The others will be coming for us soon and I don’t want them to find us like

this.

Edwin ignored her. His hands were clamped against her thighs. The sound of his tongue, once sensual, had taken on a disgusting quality to it. Was she being paranoid? No, something was wrong.

"Honey, really, we're done."

That phrase—'I'm not cut out for this alien stuff'. Where had she heard it before? They had only been working with live cargo for a couple of years; a change that Edwin had been hesitant to make, and their first delivery had almost ended when a venomous Lytheropede bit Venice. She had been sitting with Edwin in camp when he said it, waiting to



hear if their security officer was okay, and there had been someone else with them. Who?

Grace bit her lip as Edwin's tongue wormed its way inside of her. She tried to pry his fingers away from her thighs, but they wouldn't give. The phrase. It seemed important. They had been sitting in the camp and she had never seen him look so disheartened. It was the first mission where he had ever questioned his role as the captain. She had reached for his hand, trying to comfort him when he turned... to Balkin.

He had said it to Balkin.

Her right knee barrelled into Edwin's chin as she pushed herself backward, escaping his grip. He merely looked at her, licking his lips.

"More," he said.

It was Edwin. It looked just like Edwin. His pants had slipped down around his knees and he stood, erect, as Grace scrambled toward the door, hitting her shoulder against the frame. The alien took a step toward her. Grace screamed.

"More," it repeated.

"Get away from me," Grace said, moving into the hallway. Her taser was still in her belt and her belt was on the floor of the bedroom. The alien stepped over it as it followed her.

"Honey, it's me," it said. "Please come back to bed. The usual. I would like the usual."

It made a grab for her, but it was too slow. Grace ducked under its arm and bolted down the hallway.

She could hear its footsteps banging against the metal walkway as she made a dive for Venice's room. Its fingers brushed her legs as she rolled through the door and slammed the bolt. A moment later, something heavy hit the frame.

"Grace, open the door."

There had to be a weapon somewhere in the room. Grace started throwing aside pillows and stuffed animals, searching the panels on the walls. The pounding on the door got louder. Edwin's voice got huskier.

"Come on," it said. "Darling, we can talk about this."

Something hit the door so hard that it rattled on its hinges. A dent appeared in the thick metal, then another. Grace hastened her search.

"Grace, open the door."

Venice's voice now. A fist-shaped rupture tore through the left side of the frame. Grace could see a hint of Venice's muscled arm as it wound back for another blow.

"I promise I'll be gentle."

Slam! One of the hinges came off and hit the far wall. A hand reached through the hole and started to claw for the bolt. The fingers looked like they were made of viscous liquid. The eye that appeared in the crack was not Venice's.

Grace swore. Of course Venice didn't keep weapons in

her room. They'd be in the security office, locked behind her desk. She looked around for the heaviest object that she could find and, armed with a lamp, waited for the inevitable breach. The alien's fingers had found the bolt and were beginning to push it back. Grace raised the lamp above her head. The bolt clicked as it disengaged...

The arm shot sideways, cracking against the doorframe before disappearing out of view. An inhuman roar sounded from the hallway, followed by a sound like a hammer smacking a rack of meat.

"Get away from her!"

Grace flung open the door just in time to see the alien slither off down the hall. Its form seemed to melt as it oozed through the cracks in the grates, entering the bowels of the ship. Venice stood with her back to Grace, her enormous chest rising and falling. Her knuckles were red and bloody.

- - -

Trici's eyes scanned the shelves, taking in the four-digit codes of each of the vials at a glance. Each code corresponded to a file in her memory banks, and each file to a mission. Emergency medical aid in Tarsus. Artificial intelligences were anathema to the local religion, so Trici had to stay on board—but when it became clear only she was immune to the plague ravaging the settlement, it had fallen

to Balkin to convince the locals of their need for her help. Bounty hunting in the Galleon Belt, and their first meeting with a real outlaw. Surrounded, she had offered to come peacefully if they'd allow her to partake of Trici's original programming. The memory of the following several hours—erased. Later on, Klaus had told Trici that the outlaw had used a hacker tool to reprogram her into assisting her escape. Specimen gathering in the Betelgeuse system. Guard duty for a Kentarian VIP—Venice had to spend a week in the biosculpting pods after that one.

Wildlife collection at Clarke VII.

“Found it.”

Klaus peered over her shoulder. “Are you sure that’s the one Grace asked for?”

“T-301,” she read aloud. She took the vial, examined it, and unfastened the top. The goopy blue substance within barely moved as she stirred it; a closer examination of the sediment at the bottom revealed it to be some kind of thick gel which filtered through the thinner liquid as if breathing it.

She looked at Klaus.

“How much do you need for your sensor?”

“Maybe a milliliter or two. Why—”

Trici brought the vial to her lips and let its slimy contents roll down her throat. She closed her eyes, closed the now mostly empty vial, and handed it to Klaus, who stared at her in disbelief.

“What.”

“Due to the state of emergency, Captain Winchester was kind enough to allow me unhampered access to Science Officer Winchester’s systems,” she said, her eyes still closed. Klaus saw a lump of something descend her tubelike throat. “And I took the liberty of adding some of her analysis algorithms to my toolset. Now, even if we lose the sample, some base information may be retained.”

Klaus bit his lip. “I didn’t realize he gave you that much freedom.”

“Besides,” Trici continued, “the rest of the sample can be safely retrieved from my chassis within the next... let me access some preliminary data... six to eight hours.”

“And then?”

“It will be relabeled as biofuel and exploited.”

Klaus rolled his eyes.

“That’s so far from standard issue, I don’t even know how to begin. You’re not a normal leisure model, are you?”

“Specialist model,” she said, displaying a wink on her visor display. “Heavily modded.”

“I’ll be sure to make a comprehensive list of all your hardware during your next maintenance... so that’s why you only ever let me check your secondary systems.”

Trici’s focused her attention on the distance. While her display dimmed its lights, her *real* eyes, the two cameras on the sides of her head, narrowed—their shutters tightened,

reducing the glow of the cameras to two pinpricks. "The analysis is complete."

"And?"

She didn't answer, instead turning around and stepping out of the brig. Klaus hurried, his shorter legs and human need to catch his breath stopping him from keeping up with her.

"Slow down," he said.

She did.

"Are you going to tell me what you found out, or...?"

"It's a lifeform. 47% scolomorph DNA," Trici said. "47% human."

"That leaves 6% unaccounted for. In DNA terms, that's a whole lot."

They took a turn. A distant bang echoed. A nearby emergency light flicked. Klaus skittered closer to Trici. The robot continued:

"It also contains extremely high concentrations of oxytocin."

"Oxytocin?"

"So far we've observed one main drive controlling the creature—the desire to eat. However, this might be inaccurate. I think this lifeform might be wanting to mate. A lot of its behaviors so far correlate with that of lifeforms in heat."

"So you're telling me that thing wants to fuck?"

Trici shook her head.

"I can only hypothesize, but I think it's confused. I am programmed with extensive knowledge of most known sapient species' social intricacies and reproductive systems, and I think whatever this lifeform is, it might be struggling to express its animal needs through its newfound sapience. In other words..."

"It can't tell between a cuddle and eating someone alive."

Trici shook her head again.

"No, it can. It just doesn't care."

Another loud noise in the distance. This one echoed through the empty hallway. Klaus pulled a wrench from his toolbelt and held it up, Trici's visor display dimmed, and both slowed their pace so they could hear more than just their own footfalls.

"Stop," Klaus whispered. Trici froze. Klaus did two. Two sets of footsteps fell silent.

The third did not.

"Who goes there?" Trici called out.

The steps got faster.

"Who goes there?" she repeated.

Silence.

"Venice," came the answer.

"And?"

"Just Venice."

A familiar silhouette emerged from across the hallway,

her eyes aglow when the lights shone on her. For the first time, the Kentarian seemed uncomposed; messy clothes, fangs clenched, claws bared, antennae flailing wildly. It reminded Klaus that she, too, was a predator; a descendent of a species that, unlike humanity, had not clawed its way up the food chain through intellect and technology, but reigned over from the start—the byproduct of a people forged in the fires of war, of finely-tuned instincts refined by the ages, and suppressed only for the sake of civilization-building.

Humans, Balkin had once told him, had come together naturally—but the sons and daughters of the frozen world of Kentar had had to consciously combat their genetic hatred of community to become a people—and tame their weariness of other species to make peace with them.

Now, Klaus felt as if he saw a glimpse of what Venice might have been without her friendships, her loyalties, her self-discipline, her sense of belonging.

She frightened him.

“Venice,” Trici said.

Venice approached them in long bounds. “Did you see it?” she asked.

“Venice,” Trici repeated, putting a finger to the taser’s trigger. “Are you alone?”

The Kentarian didn’t slow down.

“I was with Grace. She must have not been able to keep up. But you saw it, right?”

“Venice, stay back.”

Venice broke into a dash.

“Trici, wait!” Klaus shouted.

There was a click, a clap, and a roar turned into a gurgle as Venice doubled back, two taser darts sticking out of her right shoulder. She stumbled forward, her clothes rippling, fabric-like at first, then more liquid, until they were reabsorbed into her skin. Even with all pretense of disguise dropped, she retained Venice’s naked form—the most efficient killing machine the alien had witnessed, now bleeding lust and bloodlust both.

The darts fell at her feet, two clinks on the metal floor, as her flesh bubbled and stirred, struggling to regain solidity after being disturbed by the electric shock.

“Now!” Klaus shouted. “Trici, shock it again!”

Trici placed her finger on the trigger one last time. When the time came for the electromagnetic impulse to leave her positronic brain and reach her finger servos... it didn’t.

Her world went red.

The fake Venice leaped towards Klaus.

Trici tried to intercept her. It would have been easy. Flesh against composite alloys. She could have intercepted the alien five times before Klaus even screamed.

But something stood in the way.

“What the fuck, Tri—”

Two clawed fingers plunged into Klaus’s throat, pressed

his tongue down, and silenced him. The fake Venice blinked; she turned her cat's eyes towards Trici, who just stood there, still trying to push through her inability to act.

"You can't," the alien began, still borrowing Venice's voice, but deeper, drier, hungry, "harm me."

She blinked, then furrowed her brow, as if shaking off the soapy bubble of a realization.

Blaring sirens of meaning blew inside Trici's transistors when she tried to shoot the alien a third time. *This action is not allowed by your core programming. Please contact an IT assistant or the 3Corp helpline.*

"But you can harm a friend."

The fake Venice stood up, carrying by the neck the kicking, sputtering wreck that was Klaus. His eyes bulged out, his nostrils flared, and he breathed in wheezes what little air he could push past her assailant's fingers. She lifted him over her head. Her whole body steamed with desire; steamed, literally, as wisps of condensation rose from her bare skin, and her fingers sent searing heat around his neck and down his throat.

"Or let a friend come to harm," she continued.

Trici stepped forward. She grabbed the alien's wrist with one hand, locked her leg, prepared to take her down; she put in as much force as she could safely conceive, but the towering Kentarian didn't budge, nor did her grip loosen, and when it became too forceful, again did Trici's appendages

stop responding, again did her signals stop sending to the rest of her body; ensure the package's safety, her inner voice repeated, monotone.

The fake Venice shoulder-checked her, and she fell to the floor with a clank. A foot pressed to her neck and held her in place. She planned her escape, but then the fake Venice shifted her balance onto her, and Trici's risk assessment subroutines started flaring up. If she moved, the package could fall. If the package fell, it could be damaged.

The likelihood was low, but not low enough.

And so she froze, her visor display blank, focused on the proceedings. Watching, assessing, as machines do.

Klaus saw the same from a different angle. He watched as the simile of his friend grinned. He saw her display all those teeth Venice always tried so hard to conceal. He saw her stretch out that sinewy tongue that seldom left her mouth, breath heavy, and pull him close until his face pressed hard against her lips, and then further as her jaw dislodged, her tongue flattened, and her arms tightened around his body. Her fingers released his throat, only to be replaced by a tongue that tasted fishy and plunged in deep, spreading its sickly warmth through his insides; he felt it down to his stomach, and when it pulled back and curled in his mouth, he felt its absence.

His eyes darted. He caught one final glimpse of Trici below him, but soon the rippling tongue covered that, too.

And yet he refused to look forward, to the void of her gullet, to the black, subtly expanding crevice that hinted at his destination; amidst the sea of flesh and fang, the only certainty. And her powerful arms, thick as trunks, pushed him in effortlessly.

For a moment, he wondered. He always slept during Xenobiology class. Was he a victim of the alien's shifting flesh... or were all Kentarians able to gape this wide?

She threw her head back. The swallow came fast, hard-expected, yet sudden, a rocking of Klaus's whole body. As he sank, as he bent and twisted to the will of the unyielding tube ahead, Venice's tongue slid out of his mouth, but the deep breath he so desired brought him no relief. It stung all the way down.

Blood rushed to his head. Rising wetness spread to his chest, his waist, and at least, his kicking legs. Tears mixed with saliva. Tears mixed with slime. Venice surrounded him. Venice in the throat muscles that pressed down on his sides, squeezed his arms against his body; Venice in the hot secretions that wormed down his body, made it slick, made it slippery. It made him barely feel the sink. His legs kicked, the last hint of freedom in a world of pulsing flesh; a worthless effort. Each kick only made him sink further, each struggle only made the path before him open earlier. Pulse. Heartbeats. Pressure.

Another swallow.

Klaus relinquished control. His muscles were too battered, too soft. The warmth all about him grew to a boil, evaporating thought after thought after thought, evaporating strategy and sorrow, until only one thing remained—the animal drive to screech and struggle.

It accompanied him all the way down, until he sank into something, something thick, something sticky, something that bled from the walls and ceiling of the hard, fleshy hell of Venice's stomach. And as the alcove from which he'd fallen closed off above him, dimly lit by the dying light that filtered through the alien's flesh, he saw the seal of his fate being stamped.

Everything shifted. His surroundings quaked, the floor trembled, and he felt a sharp wheeze course through the creature's lungs. A glimmer of hope welled up inside him. Trici, he wanted to shout, Trici, help me, Trici, but the rolling slime that surrounded him stuck to his mouth.

Trici did not come.

Only the placement of the pool of stomach acids let Klaus know up from down. He was flat against something, something hard and bumpy, dulled but not concealed by the fleshy cage that contained him. It wasn't until he felt it move that he realized that was Trici.

Sandwiched between Venice and Trici. He was pretty sure he had joked about it being his ideal way to die, once.



He watched as the smile of his friend grinned.
He saw her display all those teeth
Venice always tried so hard to conceal.

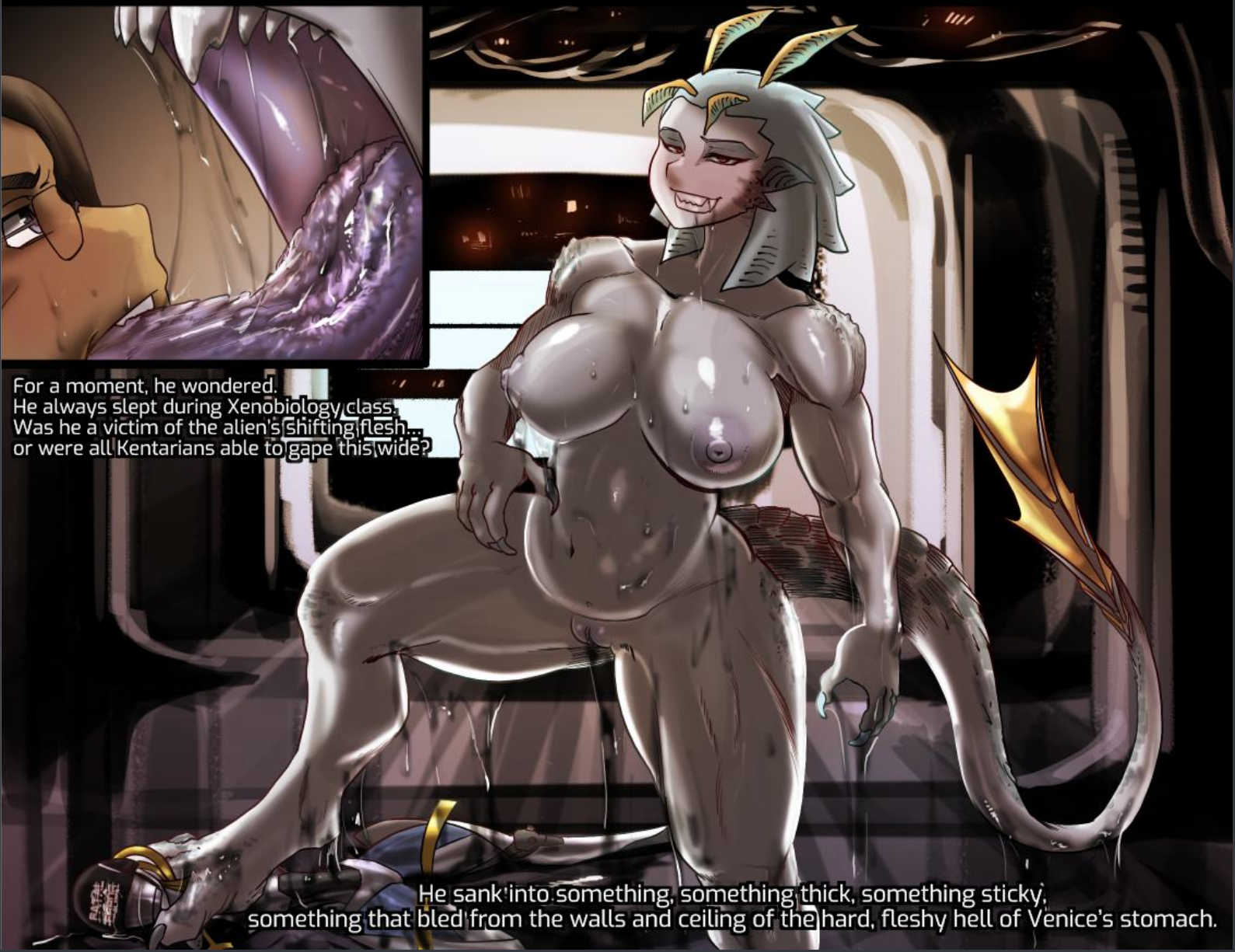
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- - -

“What was that?”

“Don’t hesitate. Go.”

Grace could barely muster a grumble as Venice’s strong hands pushed into the supply closet. There, finding a place to sit amongst the piles of empty storage pods and industrial-strength cleaning fluid, she watched the Kentarian close the door and shuffle over. There wasn’t much free space in the closet, but did Venice really have to press up to her like that?

“Where’s Ed?”

Venice pressed her knuckles to Grace’s cheek and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath, then spoke, in a whisper filtered through sharp fangs that made her slight lisp even more noticeable.

“Unaccounted for.”

“Do you think—”

Venice’s pupils narrowed. “No way to know.” She removed her hand. “Sorry.”

Grace buried her head in her hands. “So what do we do now?”

“We sit and wait,” Venice whispered. “We make no noise. If anything comes through that door, or even comes close to it, I’ll wring its neck. We just have to wait. It’s less than a day. Can you do it?”

“Yes.”

Venice extended a hand. Grace pressed her palm to hers. The Kentarian's hand dwarfed hers.

"Can you?" Venice asked.

"Yes."

Venice nodded and pulled back her hand. "Okay. Try to get some rest. I'll keep watch."

Grace tucked herself into the cleanest corner she could find. The fumes from the chemicals stung her nose, but worse was the grate that gaped in front of her. The usual, it had whispered in her husband's voice. The memory sent a shiver down her spine.

If Edwin was alive, then where was he? She hadn't heard a struggle coming from the bathroom, but the alien had been the one to appear at her door, dressed in his body. It had pulled his words from Balkin's memories, which was good, because that meant it hadn't assimilated Edwin's brain, and if her husband had been inside of it, well...

She would have felt it.

Fatigue forced her to close her eyes after the first ten minutes. Stress kept her awake for the next thirty. She was aware of every second that passed, carrying them closer to their employers, but every second also carried the possibility of being discovered. Of Trici and Klaus being discovered. Of her husband being discovered. Would a taser fend off the alien if it got the jump on them? And if it devoured one of their brains, what damage could it do with the knowledge it

found there?

Eventually, fatigue won, and clutching a barrel of solvent like a teddy bear, Grace drifted into an uneasy sleep.

She woke to the sound of a struggle.

“Venice?” she called. “Venice, are you there?”

The supply closet was empty. The sounds were coming from the hallway. Grunts. The clang of metal on metal. Fists pummeling flesh. A roar shook the entire hold as Grace scrambled to her feet, followed by a different, defiant cry.

“The scolomorph,” Grace gasped.

She threw open the door to the supply closet to find the hallway in chaos. Shattered glass glittered red against the dull grey walkway that had been dented in a fight between two titans. Grace could see a fist imprinted in the wall, as well as a warning that flashed from the panel beside the door.

“CONTAINMENT BREACH—GET TO THE BRIDGE”

Another crash sent Grace scurrying toward the source of the noise. Why had Venice left the room? Had the alien snuck in while she was sleeping? The fight had gone down through a hatch in the floor where the ladder had been torn from its holdings. Grace stared through the gap, holding her breath.

It was Venice that appeared first. She was launched sideways, hitting the wall with a sickening thud before getting to her feet. Her teeth were bared. Her plasma

gauntlets were covered in blood. From above, she looked larger than life, a giant amidst the equipment designed for humans, but then Grace saw the alien and her heart sank. It had grown.

The scolomorph took up the entire hallway as it skittered across the wall, using its many appendages to throw itself at Venice who caught it in mid-air. With a screech, she slammed it against the ground, but before she could pin it, it was already up and dancing, ready for another attack. Venice started to pull something out of her pocket.

"Alright, fucker," she screamed. "Let's dance!"

The taser came whipping up at an angle, catching the scolomorph in the side of its jaw. It shook for a second, stunned, but even as Venice was pulling her arm back, it was shrugging off the effects. The taser hit it a second time, then a third. Venice pressed it deep into the alien's skin and kept it there. Grace could smell what she only assumed was burning flesh.

And then the crackle of electricity died down and the creature remained, its circular mouth open wide.

"Shit!"

She raised her fists—a cyan glow lit up the darkness—and slammed them both down on the creature's head. They sank deep into its shapeless flesh, and a muted shockwave echoed through the hallway. The creature slumped, melted to the ground. The corner of Venice's mouth curled upward

into a smirk, but when she tried to pull her hands out of the writhing mass, she couldn't.

The gauntlets were lodged into something.

The scolomorph's eyes fluttered. Its legs skittered on the floor, then, all of a sudden, stopped.

And Grace watched as the alien's form coalesced, its color faded to translucent blue, just like the sample she had taken from it—and began to creep up Venice's arms. The Kentarian saw what was going on before Grace did. Her antennae flattened against her scalp, her pupils gaped, and as a mass of tendrils reached for her face, she bit into them, tore through the slimy appendages like so many cobwebs. But there was always another wave.

"Run, Grace."

Her voice was almost a roar.

"Run!"

It sent shivers of primal fear down Grace's spine.

The last thing she saw before she turned tail was a tide of ooze crashing onto Venice; a barely-held-together tentacle forcing itself down her throat and bursting through her uniform's collar. It pumped, pumped, pumped, and with each pump the slime shrank and Venice filled up. Then she gasped and the pumping stopped; ooze poured out of her nose, ears, tear ducts; she slumped in defeat; she was full, and now that there was nowhere left to go, it washed over her in a uniform wave, until she was but a dark shadow floating in its writhing

Shen

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and bursting through her uniform's collar.

It pumped,
Pumped
Pumped

With each pump the slime shrank and Venice filled up.

mass, lit only by the dying light of her plasma gauntlets.

When those snuffed out, Grace knew it was time to go.

She ran through hallway after hallway, desperation guiding her every move. There was no time, no will to think, only the need to keep moving, keep running, to get as far away from the fading sloshing sounds as possible. She needed to find Klaus. Trici. Anyone. Anyone who could protect her. Anyone who could be beside her until docking.

Edwin.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, she bumped into something. She tripped; screamed in terror, and heard another scream, followed by the clanking of metal against the floor.

“Grace?”

She screamed again. Edwin winced away from the sound. He was ragged, tired-looking; the bags under his eyes and look of utter bewilderment betrayed every bit as much hardship as what Grace had been through. He rose to his feet, he was shaking.

Grace stared at him in disbelief. It couldn't be.

Then he saw what he was hauling—Trici's lifeless body.

There was no way an alien would bother carrying that hunk of junk around. It would only slow it down.

“Ed!”

She hugged him, sank her face into his chest. As the tears finally came, she slammed her fist down on his chest,

again and again; anger, terror, and relief swirled inside her, a toxic combination that almost rendered her unable to function.

“Grace. Is that you, Grace?”

He watched her blabber in a mix of fury and desperation. It answered his question better than any words ever could.

“Thank heavens you’re here, Grace. We gotta get out. I found Trici near the brig; she’s been manually deactivated, but I think her memory banks are still untouched, and her sensors are all working.” He paused. “She’s still alive and conscious. Where are the others?”

She looked up at him, teary-eyed, and shook her head. He pulled her close.

“Oh, Grace, Grace, Grace... how did it go so wrong?” He took a deep breath, steeled himself. “Take Trici’s other arm. It’s only a few hours until we arrive; if we book it for the Umbilical Ports, we should be able to lock the bulkheads behind us and wait it out until we’re at our destination. That ‘specialist team’ better be damn good...”

Dazed, Grace accepted. She did not question why she was asked to carry Trici’s heavy metal body; Ed seemed rock steady in his resolve, for once. Trici was, after all, a friend.

They dragged down the hallways, painfully aware of the sounds of their own footsteps. Here, the ship’s advanced age played tricks on him. Metal whined in the distance,

pressurized air escaped from gaps in the ventilation system. Only the bubbling remained unaccounted for.

And it was getting closer.

"There!" Edwin whispered.

Down the corridor, starkly lit by spinning red lights, the bulkhead leading to the Umbilical Ports awaited them. Beyond twenty inches of the strongest alloys in the universe laid a small white room lined by pressure suits, and beyond that, a tube ready to attach itself to any dock. When the Ambrosia finished its automated landing, the winding white path to survival would begin there.

Edwin pressed the tip of Trici's finger to the slit above the keypad; the motionless robot's eyes glowed, the tip snapped off, and the connector jutted out of its metal casing.

With a puff of steam and pressurized air, the bulkheads began to open. The growl of metal scraping against was deafening.

Grace saw Edwin's eyes widen with the realization of what he had just done.

The sloshing sounds grew louder... they grew closer...

"Get in there!" he shouted, pushing Grace through the gap, then Trici, and then finally squeezing through it himself, before pressing the button on the other side. The bulkheads creaked to a halt, then slowly began to close again.

A tentacle pushed past, seized Edwin by the throat, and pulled.

Grace screamed as he disappeared into the gap. The amorphous alien slammed itself against the bulkhead; through the narrow transparent aluminum windows, Grace could see it now occupied the entire width of the hallway; a translucent bluish shape in which only two solid shapes swirled: the crested skull of a Kentarian... and Edwin's body.

Another tentacle pushed through the gap. It wiggled towards her like a crawling worm; the bulkhead closed around its stem, cutting it off, and leaving the semi-sentient body thrashing on the floor until it grew still.

"Edwin!" Grace shrieked, beating against the door. "Edwin! Edwin!"

She could see him. He was right there, twisting and turning inside of the alien's body as it coalesced around him, becoming solid in places and liquid in others. Edwin's face came to the forefront of its stomach as the skin started to form around it. Grace saw intestines lock into place. She saw its organs pulse. She watched as the pink, wrinkled walls of the stomach stretched around her husband, caressing him in the fluctuating heat of the alien's innards as it completed its transformation. Suddenly, the translucent creature was gone, and in its place stood Grace, her stomach bulging in front of her.

"Open the door, Grace," the alien said in a perfect mimic of her voice.

"No," Grace whispered. "No."

Her hands scraped down the surface of the door as her knees gave out beneath her. The alien walked up to the window, mashing its stomach against it.

“Open the door, Grace,” it repeated. “You’re killing him.”

Lumps formed against the smooth white skin. The alien was naked, which meant that there were no obstructions to witnessing the horror occurring within. Edwin pressed the flat of his palms into the space beneath her breasts; stretching, straining, but the elasticity pushed him back into the roiling mixture the creature had concocted. Grace could see that too—the liquid pumping into the bloated organ, enlarging it to the point of parody. Yellow steam passed between the alien’s lips as it smiled. Its fingers drummed on its stomach.

“Open the door.”

Grace scrambled backward until her shoulders hit the wall. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the window.

“How long until we reach our destination?” the alien asked. With one finger, she traced a line over her breasts—Grace’s breasts—shuddering as Edwin pounded within her. Her other hand hovered over her crotch. “A few hours? That’s a long time, Grace.”

Her index finger glided over her sex.

“Might have to amuse myself.”

Grace finally closed her eyes as the wet smack echoed off of the bulkhead. She plugged her ears to avoid its calls,

but soon, it was Edwin screaming out for her, then Venice, then Klaus. She heard herself giggle as a sharp crack resonated against the other side of the door.

“I could show you what he looks like,” it said. “I could open your stomach up and show you, you know, or maybe he’s deeper already. Think about it, Grace. Open the door.”

There was no urgency in its voice anymore. It was toying with her, biding time until the ship arrived at its destination, and only for the briefest of moments did Grace consider the implications of its actions. She clutched Trici to her chest because synthetic skin was the only comfort she had as images—horrible, mutated images—passed by the window in a slideshow. Wicked laughter counted down the hours.

- - -

The orange glow burned Grace’s retinas. What little hope her heart could bear, she felt at that moment, after the quaking of metal and creaking of hinges, and even as the bulkhead opened before her to the vastness of a bubble city floating in russet skies.

She stepped forward. The weight of her pressure suit made her feet drag, and complex calculations flashed through her visor—*ATMOSPHERIC ANALYSIS IN PROGRESS*. Trembling, exhausted, she walked down the landing ramp, and found herself surrounded by familiar faces. One of these

She could see him.

He was right there, twisting and turning inside of the alien's body as it coalesced around him, becoming solid in places and liquid in others.

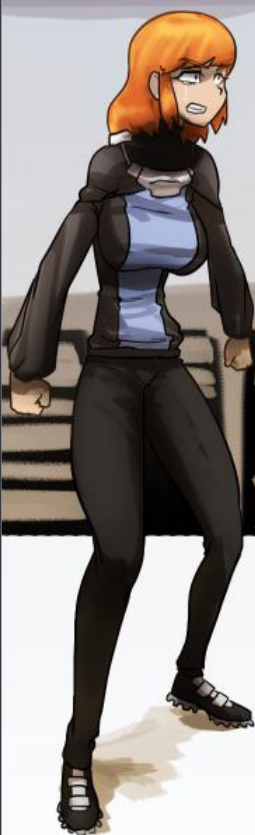
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"I could show you what he looks like,"

Sasha

stepped up to greet her—the man who had spoken to them over the holoscreen, in his billowing regalia. He shook her gloved hand. His voice, filtered through her pressure suit's audio suite, sounded raspy.

“What happened?”

“/t happened,” she spat.

He looked around. She followed his eyes as they rested on a dozen other humans that stood beside him, thirteen little figures cast against the scale of the cityscape and the dust clouds that battered its dome.

“Any survivors?” he asked.

Grace shook her head.

“I truly am sorry.” He nodded at his entourage; three of them nodded back, and hurried into the ship. They were unarmed.

One of them came back out moments later, with Trici over his shoulder.

“Ah, the 3C model from the meeting,” the leader said. “I remember it well.”

He turned to Grace.

“Our people thank you for the sacrifice, for what it's worth.”

“What is it?”

The leader blinked. “Excuse me?”

“The alien. What is it? What do you need it so much for?”

“It? Oh, you mean...” He glanced at the ship, then at his

cohorts, who nodded. "You mean her?"

"Her?"

"A lost soul, misplaced and driven mad by a hostile planet. A tragedy that we aim to correct."

Grace's eyes widened. She took a step back. Results rolled through the screen.

ATMOSPHERIC ANALYSIS COMPLETE.

Carbon Dioxide 96.5%, Nitrogen 3.5%, Argon...

WARNING, TOXIC ATMOSPHERE.

"What do we do with the robot?" someone asked.

"Bring it to our workshop and scrap it. The *Ambrosia* was lost in space. There were no survivors."

"What... what are you talking about?" Grace asked.

He turned to Grace and bowed his head in apology.

"Thank you for retrieving our sister. She was lost, and her mind was lost, but she can still be saved and raised back into sapience." He shook his head. "We regret that we cannot let you go. We cannot allow the galactic community to know our full life cycle yet, you understand. It would cause diplomatic rifts, break treaties... end lives by the millions, perhaps."

All around Grace, her welcoming committee seemed to shift and stir—their skin rippling, their flesh discoloring, their clothes fading into a now too familiar cyan color and texture.

"No," she said. "We were dead... we were dead the moment we locked in the coordinates."

"I am sorry," the leader said. His billowing robes flowed; there was no wind. "There was no other way."

He looked past her, and his mouth curled into a smile.

"There she is," he said. "Oh, you poor thing, what has happened to you?"

He stepped past her, emotion swelling his voice. The stark orange sun cast its sickly light over him, and in his widening and misshapen shadow, Grace sank to her knees. Tears pooled in her visor. Six robed figures stepped forward, their figures coalescing as one, blotting out the sun, silencing the winds.

They descended upon her, and she let them.



Solo



Hey there!

Thank you for buying this book. We poured a lot of work into it, and we genuinely hope you've enjoyed it.

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Happy reading!

Love,
the Snakethroat Crew

(also, if you'd like to chat with us, we have a [Discord server](#)!)