

FAST RIDE

"The Dreamer will go to the Mother." The Terrian that suddenly appeared in front of Alonzo trilled calmly. The pilot stared back at the creature in puzzlement and it took him several minutes to realize he was on the Dream plane. He absently mused that it had been a long time since they had forced him onto the plane. Or the plane onto him, that was something he could never make up his mind about.

When Alonzo didn't reply, the Terrian trilled again. "The Dreamer should go into the Earth." Alonzo arched his brows, wondering what the Terrian was talking about. 'Going into the earth' was the Terrian equivalent of dying. And 'Dreamer' was the aliens' honorific title for himself, he understood that much.

"I've no intention of dying anytime soon," Alonzo replied, "so thanks, but no thanks." He tried to sound offhanded, yet didn't quite succeed. The mere fact that they contacted him on the Dream plane meant their message must be important to the aliens. And the possible implications of their words rattled him.

The Terrian cocked his head, appraising the pilot for a moment. Alonzo thought he detected confusion in the creature's eyes, then decided that was his imagination. The aliens weren't prone to emotions like that, let alone show them. With a quick twitter that Alonzo couldn't quite make out, the creature winked out and he found himself back in reality.

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"Alonzo? Are you even listening?" Julia Heller's voice sounded a little annoyed. He remembered they had been discussing their future together; Eden project would arrive at New Pacifica soon, if all went well. He shook himself; a cold shiver ran down his spine as the image of the Terrian faded from his memory. He was grateful for the warmth of the campfire, its flames licking hungrily at the logs that fed it.

"Yeah, I'm sorry," he told the doctor. "Guess I blanked out for a while."

Julia's face clouded with sudden concern. Without a trace of her earlier irritation she asked him, "Are you okay? Was it the Terrians? Maybe I should forward your bi-monthly check-up and do it now?"

He flashed her a mischievous grin. "That would be nice," he replied. The remark earned him a flustered smile and an embarrassed jab in the ribs. Still, she took his hand, and after they said their goodnights to two watchmen sitting across the campfire, she led him

to the med-tent. Baines winked suggestively at Alonzo as they left, and the pilot was glad Julia's back was turned.

"Sit," she ordered when they entered the tent and obediently Alonzo plopped down on her bunk. Outside the camp was dark and quiet, the Edenites having withdrawn to the privacy of their tents for the night. The only sound that broke the silence was the low murmur of the two night guards warming themselves at the fire.

Julia took her diaglove from its accustomed place on her worktable, its surface cluttered with slides and gadgets, and pulled it up on her left arm. When she approached Alonzo, he took her free hand and began to place light kisses on her palm. Julia giggled; she withdrew her hand reluctantly and continued to put her gloved fingers against his neck.

"Stop that," she chided. "I'd never get any work done if it were up to you."

"It is late," Alonzo whispered seductively, again taking her right hand and drawing her to him. "Time for the Doctor to go home and play." He pulled on her arm, forcing her to bend down slightly, and began to nuzzle her ear. Again she tried to pull away, half-heartedly, and he held her easily.

"Lonzo--" She swallowed, her voice husky now, "I really should finish your che--" He stopped her mid-sentence, placing his lips over hers, and kissed her deeply. She sank on the cot next to him, answering his kiss and slowly he lay back, drawing her with him. He pulled off the glove, dropping it nonchalantly next to the bunk, where it lay forgotten during the rest of the night. The display blinked the results of its data gathering patiently, not caring if anyone paid attention or not. After a few minutes, when no further commands were forthcoming, the contraption switched itself off and the display went dark.

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Occupied with the day-to-day problems and their trek across the planet, Julia forgot all about her intentions to run a full medical check-up on Alonzo. The Terrians didn't visit him again, so it wasn't until several weeks later, when his regular physical was scheduled, that she finally scanned him.

"What is it?" Alonzo asked when she frowned. He had been feeling a little under the weather lately, he was easily tired and irritated, and had put it down to travel weariness. New Pacifica was close, tantalizingly close, but the old Earth saying about the last straw breaking the camel's back turned out to be true on G889 as well.

"How old are you biologically speaking?" Julia asked him, evading a direct answer. "In

waking years, I mean."

"Dunno know exactly," he replied. "Twenty-five, twenty-six, thereabouts. Why?"

Her frown deepened and she motioned to the glove. "According to your cell-scan, it's closer to forty," she said.

"What?" Alonzo exclaimed. "That can't be right!" Deep inside a small grub of fear wriggled, sending icy sparks through his bowels. It wouldn't be--? He quickly pushed the thought away before he even finished it. "Do I look like forty to you?" he said with a lopsided smile. "Your glove must be wrong."

"I know," Julia said. "It's just that everyone else checks out fine. I better take blood- and tissue samples and test them the old-fashioned way." With those words she turned away and prepared to draw some blood. She didn't notice the grin fading from his face nor the worried frown that followed it for a moment.

When Julia was finished taking samples and began her tests, Alonzo walked out of the med-tent, away from camp. He needed time alone, to think. He was afraid of what Julia was going to find--if she did find anything wrong with him, he reminded himself. It could still simply be a matter of the glove malfunctioning. No need to feel doomed before the results were in....

As he walked through the woods, the sounds from the camp quickly faded behind him, to be replaced with the calming noises of nature. Birds chirped in the trees, the wind whispered through the foliage, insects buzzed. Alonzo took a deep breath, enjoying the clean air of G889.

He liked it here, odd as that might seem. During his sleep-jumping years he never felt at home anywhere, always moving on to the next port, the next future, and yes, the next girl. But here--Alonzo felt he belonged and he knew he wanted to grow old here.

He wandered deeper into the woods, plodding through the undergrowth and wasn't really paying attention to where he was going. Deep in thought, he unexpectedly walked into something unyielding that abruptly appeared in his path. As he took a startled step back, he recognized the Terrian that had swum up in front of him. It was the same Terrian that brought him the strange, worrisome message a few weeks ago. Behind the creature, and partly obscured by the dense brush, Alonzo noticed a rocky precipice going straight down. He gulped as he realized he'd have stepped right off the edge if the Terrian hadn't interfered.

"We will need you," the Terrian trilled, his words translating automatically in the pilot's

brain. "We cannot allow you to die the human way. You would be lost to us forever. You must join the Mother." And the creature sank back down into the ground.

"Hey," Alonzo cried after the disappearing form. "I wasn't planning to step off that cliff, you know. Not like before--" and he shivered as he recalled the earlier occasion when the Terrians stopped him from going over an edge. Then, he'd been very unhappy, and tried to put an end to it. Now, he knew Lydia was right. Growing old would be an amazing ride.

Suddenly his heart grew cold as the rest of the Terrian's message sank in. You must go into the Earth--could they know something he didn't?

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Alonzo stood on the edge of the precipice staring down into the dark canyon, not really thinking about anything. Only random thoughts whirled inside his head. Thoughts of Julia; he considered himself so lucky to have found her here, light years from civilization. Thoughts of Lydia. And mostly, thoughts of his one-time friend, Bob Clemmons. He also chose to take the amazing ride Lydia talked about--except for his friend the ride was over too soon.

After a long time, the light already fading from the sky, Alonzo shook himself out of his reverie and decided it was time return to camp. Julia would have finished her tests by now and the verdict would be in, one way or the other. He started to go back. Before he was halfway there, he heard her calling his name.

"Doc, I'm here," he called. Soon he discovered the glow of a Lumalight dancing among the trees, headed towards him. When Julia caught sight of him, she hurried forward, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing herself against him tightly. Alonzo didn't have to see her face or hear her words, to know what she'd found and he felt himself go cold to the bone.

"Lonzo," Julia said, and he could feel her bracing herself. "I finished the tests. I'm afraid it isn't good news."

"It's Cryo Degeneracy Syndrome, isn't it?" Alonzo asked quietly. His voice sounded distant to his own ears, as if coming from someone else. She drew back to look at him, surprised.

"Yes. You know about it? I thought the authorities kept its existence under wraps," she answered. Her tone carefully designed to be reassuring, she added quickly, "No need to worry though. I'm sure I can find... something."

"Julia, the doctors on the stations, with all their research facilities, never found a cure. And you don't even have access to a full lab here--there *is* no cure." His self-possession surprised him. She had just handed him his death warrant and absently he noted he should be screaming, and kicking at trees, in anger at the unfairness of it all. But he just felt cold and numb.

"Alonzo, you can't give up so easily. Maybe those doctors never tried hard enough to find a remedy. Maybe--maybe there's something on this planet that will heal you. Maybe the Terrians can help?" The words rushed out while her voice rose in agitation. Her blue eyes looked up at him, almost pleadingly.

Alonzo shook his head and drew her close to him, hugging her. He needed to feel her near him now, needed to feel her softness beneath his hands, bask in her warmth, and inhale the smell of her. Soon, he thought, she wouldn't let him touch her anymore--she'd be repulsed by what he would become.

"I had a friend once," he muttered in her hair. "He was a sleep jumper, like me. When he was ninety years or so old, and still looked like twenty-one, he fell in love. He gave up flying, and stayed on the stations to marry the girl. I came to visit him two years later. He was an ancient man, looking his true age. His wife had left him, she couldn't handle it. She was only twenty, you know. He suffered from CDS. He died shortly after my visit, from old age." A long silence fell. He could feel her quick breathing beneath his hands but she remained quiet. "There is no cure," Alonzo finally said.

"You mean," Morgan asked hesitantly, "we could all get this disease, this CDS?" He stared down at his hands, scrutinizing them for liver spots or other outward signs of aging. The group was gathered around the campfire. Julia and Alonzo had returned to camp a few hours earlier and Julia had taken him into the med-tent immediately for more tests. But the diagnosis remained the same and it was time to inform the rest of their crew.

"Theoretically, yes," Julia told Morgan. "The chances are minimal, though, since you've only had one cryogenic sleep experience." He looked at her uncertainly and puzzled expressions showed on the others' faces. She sighed and tried to explain.

"The cells that make up your body divide constantly, renewing themselves. It is how wounds can heal. But cells can only divide a certain number of times. Once it has reached its limit, the cell stops dividing completely. And when the body's cells cease to replicate, the body cannot renew or heal itself. The body grows old and eventually dies."

She was silent for a moment, gauging to see if her audience followed her explanation so far. Devon nodded and Julia continued. "When someone is put repeatedly in suspended

animation, especially for longer periods of time, it sometimes triggers cell division to speed up upon defrosting; the cells start dividing at an increasing rate. It's almost as if the body is catching up with the time it was frozen. This syndrome is rare. It was kept quiet on the stations and as far as I know, nobody discovered how to make replication slow down again."

Julia turned to Morgan. "Even if you got this disease, you've only been under for 22 years. You would age those 22 years. Replication would return to normal and continue at a natural rate. Alonzo--" her voice caught and she swallowed. "Alonzo already surpassed the natural life span of most humans," she almost whispered.

"So, what are you saying?" Danziger asked. "That he's going to die?"

Julia nodded, not trusting her voice. She swallowed again and continued quietly, "He's going to grow old very rapidly, and then he'll die." The others gasped as the horrific implications of what Julia just said dawned on them.

"How long?" Devon asked. "Years? Months?" They had to know.

"I don't know," Julia answered. "The rate of degeneration is still going up-- a few weeks, at most."

Danziger swore beneath his breath, slamming his hand into the side of the TransRover in frustration. Devon took a step backwards as if she'd received a physical blow and leaned heavily against the large truck. Morgan glanced uncomfortably at the med-tent where Alonzo was a vague shape against the canvas wall. Baines muttered, "Holy cow," and a sob escaped from Bess' throat. To have come all this way, to have survived Gaal, the Council, and winter, to have nearly reached New Pacifica, only to lose another of their crew--it was a severe blow to the group's morale.

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Without argument, without discussion, without even taking a vote, it was decided they would stay in their current camp and give Julia as much time as possible to find a remedy that would heal Alonzo. She sealed herself and her patient in the med-tent, the only ones allowed to disturb them were Yale and Bess. Both were helping as much as they could; Yale accessed the near-infinite information in his databases, while Bess handled the manual chores that needed to be done.

For a while, Alonzo endured Julia's attempts patiently. He had resigned himself to his fate; there was no hope, yet he realized Julia needed to try. If not for him, at least for herself; he knew it was important for her to have done everything possible. But finally,

he had enough. He asked both Yale and Bess to leave the tent, against Julia's protestations. One look at Alonzo told them he was serious and they left quietly, Yale sealing the tent-flap behind him.

"Lonzo," Julia protested, "I need their help." She didn't look at him, she couldn't. It pained her too much to see how he had aged. Several days ago the degeneration of his body had begun to show externally as well as on the med scans. Crows feet circled his eyes and deep lines were etched in his still handsome face. Alonzo stood up, a slight stoop in his shoulders. He took her arm and made her turn around. He gently took hold of her chin, lifting her face, forcing her to look at him and into his eyes. His eyes were still the same, brown and warm and she swallowed.

"Please," Alonzo said. "You're exhausted. And I'm tired. I just want to lie down on the bed for a while and hold you. Will you let me?" Julia nodded wordlessly; tears clogging her throat prevented her from speaking. Instead, she hugged him tight and he led her to the cot. They lay down, her arms wrapped around him, his head resting on her chest. Tenderly, she pushed the hair, now streaked with gray, from his forehead. He lifted his head for a moment, gently kissing her on the lips before lying back. Tears threatened to fall and she closed her eyes in an attempt to keep them in.

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With a start, Julia woke. It was dark in the tent and she was alone on the bunk. She jumped up. Where was Alonzo? Worried, she rushed towards the opening. When she passed her worktable, her eye caught the Gear set that lay there, its controls flashing to indicate a recorded message was waiting. With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Julia grabbed the Gear and put it on. She pressed the 'Play' button and Alonzo's face appeared in front of her eyes.

"Doc," his recorded voice began. "No more. No more tests, no more experiments. There is no cure for CDS and you know that as well as I do. Better probably." Julia's vision swam at the edges when tears welled in her eyes and she blinked repeatedly to disperse them.

"Julia," Alonzo continued, "I truly wish I could spend my last days with you. But I can't. I don't want you to remember me the way I am, or what I'll become before I die. I want you to think of me as I was when we first met. And I want you to hold on to that memory. It's the only way you can keep me alive."

Alonzo's voice broke and a single tear slid down his cheek. He wiped it away impatiently, his hand a quick blur across the recorded image. Clearing his throat, he said, "I've got an--invitation I guess, from the Terrians. To join them in the Earth. I'm gonna take them up on that offer. Doc--" Again he stopped. "I love you," he whispered. "I

always will. Please remember that."

Julia was no longer able to stop the tears from falling when Alonzo's image faded. She tore the Gear set off her head and ran out of the tent. Outside, twilight had fallen. The camp was quiet, a small fire crackled. Obviously nobody had noticed Alonzo leave. Julia stood for a moment, not sure which way to go. Several flashes of lightning streaked across the sky in the distance, briefly outlining the trees that covered the hills. The ground rumbled below her feet in a farewell that rippled through the Earth.

And she knew he was gone-- forever.

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