

## FLORAL NOSTRUM

"Solace, look," Baines pointed as he lowered the jumpers. Alonzo stood next to him on the ridge that overlooked a small valley. The hills on the other side were hidden beneath the trees of a dense forest. Alonzo took the jumpers from Baines.

"Where?" he asked.

"Right there," Baines pointed again. "In the tree line, a little to the left."

Alonzo followed his directions and replied, "Yeah, I see it. Do you think we're near its lair now? "

"I sure hope so," Baines answered. "We've been following it long enough. And we can't turn back empty-handed."

The two men exchanged a wry grin. Devon had sent them forward to check out the terrain and scout for a route the Rover could handle. But they'd gone off chasing a Grendler instead when they caught sight of the creature sporting Eden Advance garments. Devon was going to be mad, but the men were hoping the Grendler would lead them to its stash so they could ransack it for whatever belonged to them to begin with.

It wasn't easy to follow the Grendler. Despite its clumsy appearance the creature was very well adapted to the rough terrain of G889 and even with the DuneRail the two humans had a hard time keeping up. But now they were slowly advancing on it.

As they searched for a way down the steep incline, they saw the Grendler sitting motionless between the trees, hunched in that peculiar way the alien species had. And when the men finally neared it, slowing down the vehicle to near walking speed so they wouldn't startle it, it still didn't move.

"I don't like this," Baines said while he brought the Rail to a halt.

"Don't like what?" Alonzo asked while he jumped out the vehicle to continue on foot. "Hey, it probably just realized we're smarter, so it gave up running."

He hesitated a second. It *was* a little strange for the creature to just sit there and wait for them to catch up. He took a closer look and noticed the Grendler breathed heavily. Large strands of saliva hung from its mouth and it swallowed spasmodically.

Alonzo grabbed for the Mag Pro. Baines was right, something was wrong with the Grendler.

Cautiously he began to approach it, Baines close on his heels. But before they'd taken two steps, the Grendler suddenly jumped up and disappeared into the forest.

With a yell the two men broke into a run and followed it between the trees. The large Grendler cleared a path through the dense undergrowth, breaking off branches and trampling bushes, so it was fairly easy to follow. A few hundred meters into the woods they came to a small clearing. On the other side a large black hole opened at the base of a rock.

"I bet it went down there," Baines said, whispering involuntarily.

"I think you're right," Alonzo whispered back. "You take the right, I'll go left. But be careful, it might turn violent."

Baines nodded and moved off to the right, approaching the hole on a circuitous course. Alonzo, powering up the Mag Pro, moved to the left using the low bushes as cover between him and the cave. As he came into position, he motioned for Baines to proceed forward while Alonzo kept the large gun trained on the hole.

Suddenly he heard harsh slobbering sounds coming from the opening.

"Get out of there," Alonzo yelled a warning at Baines.

But with a loud bellow the Grendler stampeded out of the cave, heading straight for Baines.

"Move!" Alonzo yelled again and he tried to aim the Mag Pro at the maddened Grendler. But he couldn't get the creature in his sights properly and the pilot was reluctant to shoot the gun; he might hit his companion instead of the creature.

Its large head bent forward, the Grendler butted into Baines and with a grunt they went down. Enraged noises came from the Grendler as it tore at the man. Baines screamed once, twice. Horrified Alonzo ran to help his friend.

As he came close, he swung the Mag Pro and with a loud thump the gun connected with the Grendler's misshapen head. With a sigh the creature slumped forward.

"Baines, are you okay?" Alonzo called while he tried to push the Grendler off the man. A groan from below the large body confirmed Baines was still alive and with a final grunt

Alonzo managed to pull him free.

Baines looked awful. His clothes were torn and a swelling lump showed where his head hit the ground on going down. Blood seeped from a large wound near his left shoulder. And he was covered in the creature's saliva.

"Damn, it bit me," Baines spat in disgust as Alonzo cautiously helped him to stand up. "And it drooled all over me."

Alonzo took a closer look at the bite wound. It didn't appear too serious to his layman's eye.

"We'd better get you back to camp a.s.a.p.," he said, "have Julia take a look at that shoulder. Good thing she insisted on putting a first aid kit on board the Rail. At least I can bandage the wound to stop the bleeding."

"Don't you want to see what's inside?" Baines asked and motioned towards the hole.

"Nah," Alonzo said with a distasteful look at the unconscious Grendler, "I've seen all I need to see."

oOo

It was already pitch dark by the time the two men made it back to the main group. Danziger, Devon and Julia were waiting for them at the edge of the camp. Exhausted the two men climbed out of the Rail. Julia immediately took charge of the wounded Baines, which left Alonzo to take the full brunt of Devon's anger.

"So," she said.

Her voice was dangerously calm. Danziger recognized that tone and searched for something that urgently needed his attention. He bent over the DuneRail, suddenly fully immersed in giving the vehicle a once over.

Alonzo also recognized Devon's tone and he shrugged.

"Hey Dev, it stole \*our\* things! The stuff belongs to us," he attempted to divert her anger. But it was in vain.

"What is wrong with you?" Devon raised her voice. "You were supposed to find a safe route for the TransRover. Instead you two go off chasing some Grendler halfway across the continent."

"Ah, Devon, come on," Alonzo said, but she wasn't fazed.

"You got off easy this time, you know. What if you'd gotten yourselves killed? Have you thought what it'd do to Julia to see you die over a few \*clothes\*?"

When he heard Devon referring to the young doctor, Danziger cringed and he ducked even lower behind the Rail. That was below the belt!

But it got the message across; Alonzo looked suitably chastened.

Having vented her anger, Devon said, "Get yourself cleaned up and go see Bess. She's saved you some dinner."

oOo

Devon pushed aside the flap to the med tent's entrance and ducked in. Baines sat on the cot, his upper body bare. Julia was sitting on a stool in front of him, her diaglove firmly on her left hand as she bent forward to examine the results from the scan.

"How's he doing?" Devon asked, concern for her crewmember obvious in her voice.

"He's okay," Julia answered. She pushed back an aberrant strand of hair and stood up to face the other woman.

"I cleaned and disinfected the bite. It's a clear wound and should heal nicely."

She turned back to Baines.

"I'll give you an antibiotic just in case."

She put the derm to the man's neck and with a soft hiss the medication entered his bloodstream.

"You can go now," she told him. "But if the wound gets inflamed or you don't feel well, you come see me, okay?"

Baines nodded and with a furtive glance at Devon he quickly slipped out of the med tent.

Julia exchanged a look with Devon.

"Baines got lucky," the doctor said. "An enraged Grendler could've easily torn him apart."

"Yeah," Devon answered. "I've already told Alonzo what I think of their reckless act."

"I know," Julia smiled. "We heard you."

oOo

"How is he?" Alonzo was next person to ask as he walked into the med tent, stepping aside for a moment to let Devon pass on her way out. A few moments ago he'd seen Baines come out of the tent, on his way to get some food and then some rest. Alonzo decided to check on Julia first, before going to see what Bess had saved for dinner.

"He's fine," she answered. "No thanks to you."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" he asked, a note of slight hurt creeping into his voice. "That Grendler just went crazy."

"You shouldn't have followed it in the first place," she said. "When are you going to get it into your head that you can't just blunder forward without thinking? This planet can be a dangerous place; you could've both been killed!" Her voice broke on the last word and she sat down on the cot.

"Hey, Doc," Alonzo said, walking over to her. He cupped her chin in his hand and slowly lifted her head so she faced him. "What's with the tears? We're okay, right?"

"I'm sorry," she sniffled and she got up again to start pacing the tent. "I'm just so tired of it all. Ever since we got here everyone expects me to have all the answers ready. I'm supposed to be the smart doctor that knows how to cure every sickness this planet throws at us. Well, I'm not. I'm scared half to death most of the time. I've got to jury-rig most of the equipment I need and I can never fully trust anything to work as it's supposed to. We're running low on medication and I can't synthesize everything I need. We've already lost Eben. We nearly lost Devon because I didn't know what to do. And then you and Baines go off \*looking\* for danger..."

Her voice trailed off. He was silent for a moment, mulling over her words.

"Doc, you know what you need?" She looked up at him, to see a mischievous grin creeping over his face. "You need a vacation!"

She snorted. "And how am I going to get that?" she scoffed.

"Oh, I'll think of something," he replied lightly, not in the least fazed by her sarcasm.

o0o

The Eden Advance team spent the following days in a tedious routine of breaking camp, traveling and setting up camp again for the night. The only good thing to have come from the botched scout was that at least they knew where \*not\* to go. According to Alonzo and Baines the vehicles wouldn't be able to drive through the woods.

On the fourth day of travel Devon called the caravan to a halt, as she did every day when the sun reached its zenith. They usually spent the hottest hours of the day resting in the makeshift shade of several canopies they could set up in a manner of minutes.

The travelers all sank down tiredly. The continuous hiking across the rough terrain was taking its toll and Devon realized they'd have to take a longer break pretty soon. She worried about that, they still had such a long road ahead to New Pacifica and so little time...

Only Baines remained on his feet, pacing restlessly back and forth among the shelters.

"Baines," Walman called out, "sit down. You're making me tired just looking at you."

"Oh yeah?" Baines answered. "Then that's too bad. I'm not sitting down just cause you say so. And I don't feel like sitting down right now."

"Gentlemen, please," Yale interjected as Walman made to get to his feet. With a belligerent look Baines challenged Walman to stand up, but the other man was the wiser of the two. It was way too hot to get into an argument.

Instead Walman turned to Yale.

"He's getting on my nerves, you know. He hardly sleeps and when he does he's tossing and turning like crazy. Keeps me awake all night."

"Maybe he should go see Julia," Yale advised. "Or you can stay with some of the others, until he's got it out of his system. Whatever it is that's plaguing him."

Without a further thought to Baines' odd behavior Yale turned away to play peacekeeper between Uly and True who were once again arguing.

o0o

Julia lay beneath one of the shelters, tired from walking all morning. Alonzo dropped

down beside her.

"Doc, when we start moving again, I want you to come with me in the DuneRail," he said.

She looked at him questioningly. She hadn't seen much of him during the past two days; he seemed content to spend most of his time talking to Devon and Danziger.

"Why?" she asked. "It isn't our turn..."

"Remember I promised you a vacation?" he said. He grinned at her expectantly, his smug face not unlike that of a cat that dropped a mouse at the feet of its master.

"Lonzo, what crazy scheme've you hatched this time?" She tried to sound stern, but couldn't stop herself from smiling. He looked devastatingly handsome when he smiled this way.

"My schemes are never crazy," he replied, looking quasi-offended. "I just want to take you on a brief trip, that's all. Don't tell me vacationing goes against your chromosomes," he teased.

"Alonzo, I can't go away with you," she protested. "In case you hadn't noticed, we're traveling, moving to a different campsite every day."

"Don't worry," he said. "We won't go far. I checked with Danziger and Devon. The TransRover'll have to detour around those hills in the distance," he pointed toward the horizon. In the haze of the shimmering heat she saw the vague shadows of gently sloping hills.

"With the Rail we can go across, have a few days for ourselves and catch up with the group on the other side."

She was silent for a few moments. The offer was tempting.

"But what if someone gets hurt when I'm away," she voiced her last feeble resistance.

"We can get back in no time. We'll take our gear and stay within range. C'mon doc, live a little!"

oOo

It was too attractive an idea to resist any longer. So when the sun began its descent

towards the horizon and the group prepared to get moving again, Julia and Alonzo climbed in the Rail.

"You guys all set to go?" Devon asked as she walked near.

"Devon, if something happens, you'll call us, right?" Julia fidgeted with her gear.

"Of course," Devon smiled. "Don't worry about us. Just have a good time, okay?"

"We will," Alonzo grinned as he gunned the vehicle to move away at high speed.

"Careful with that," Danziger called. "If you break it I'll get you!"

At that moment Morgan Martin walked up to them as they waved at the disappearing Rail.

"Where are they going?" he asked.

"On vacation," Danziger replied with a grin. He was curious to see how the bureaucrat would take this bit of news. He wasn't disappointed.

"What?" Morgan yelled. "We're traveling across a dangerous planet and our only doctor takes a \*vacation\*? But... but..."

"Shut up, Martin," Danziger growled. "It's better to have a doctor that's on holiday than one that burns herself out trying to deal with all your whining."

oOo

As the temporary campsite fell away behind them, Julia settled back in her seat. A tiny worried frown still showed between her eyes.

"Relax doc, they'll be alright," Alonzo smiled upon noticing it. "You're on vacation now, remember? You don't think about them, you don't think about any of your experiments, you don't do squat. I'll handle everything."

She smiled at that and the tiny frown disappeared.

"Everything? Does that include cooking? If so, maybe we should head back right away," she teased.

"Ha," he replied, "I do cook a mean semolina porridge, if you didn't know."

Julia laughed out loud at that and visibly relaxed deeper into her seat. She closed her eyes, enjoying the warm sunshine on her face. Now that the hottest part of the day had passed, the sun was actually quite nice.

Alonzo smiled inwardly. Julia did need a break. She'd been working non-stop since they crash-landed on the planet, trying to cure new and mysterious diseases one after another. Having to put Devon in cold sleep had taxed her confidence and Alonzo hadn't realized how stressed-out she was until she broke down in front of him. When he explained the situation to Devon, she'd been easily convinced that a few days away would be the best cure for Julia.

Danziger had actually suggested the trip through the hills, when the mechanic realized the 'Rover would have to traverse around them. He was reluctant to have the DuneRail out of his sight for days on end, but explained to Alonzo a couple of the most basic repairs that might be needed during their trip. After all, the vehicle had some delicate technology aboard and the terrain was rough and uncharted.

Alonzo drove for a couple of hours, closing on the hills steadily. When he noticed Julia had fallen asleep beside him, he slowed the Rail to a walking pace and tried to find the smoothest route. In his opinion, she needed to catch up on some much-deserved rest.

oOo

By the time dusk fell, they'd crossed the first of the hills. When they came to a small valley Alonzo stopped the Rail. The sudden cessation of motion shook Julia awake. She yawned and she gazed at him bleary-eyed.

"Where are we?" she asked not really understanding at first.

"Well, hello, sleeping beauty," Alonzo smiled as he jumped out of the vehicle. "This seems like a good place to camp for the night, don't you think?" He motioned about him.

Julia looked around. They were on a softly sloping meadow strewn with pretty flowers. In front of the Rail, a few meters away, a small stream gurgled happily across the valley floor. A cluster of trees stood on the far side of the meadow.

She got out of the Rail and wandered around a bit, stretching her legs and walking the stiffness out of her muscles. She already felt much better than she had at any time during the past few months. As she turned back, she saw Alonzo struggling to set up the tent. She hurried back to help him.

"I can manage," he grunted, pulling on the heavy tarp.

"Lonzo, don't be ridiculous," she said as she grabbed a couple of the collapsible tent poles and unfolded them. "I'd feel pretty silly sitting around watching you do all the work."

"Well, okay," he gave in. "But I'll do the cooking."

oOo

By the time they had their tent set up, it was too dark to go and explore their surroundings. Stars twinkled above them and in the light of the rising moons they built a small fire. Alonzo settled to prepare dinner. Julia sat quietly and watched him deftly put together the infamous semolina porridge. Mixed with a couple of the dried berries they brought along, it wasn't half-bad either.

When they satisfied their hunger, they sat together in comfortable silence. They heard no other sounds but the wind through the trees and the gurgle of the small stream. Julia felt herself unwind from the stressful months on the planet. She was grateful. Tonight, for the first time since they left the stations, no one was clamoring for her skills and she could relax.

Alonzo sat on the ground with his back against the DuneRail's front wheel for support. Julia leaned into him, his arms wrapped around her. She stared up at the stars.

"Do you miss 'em?" she asked softly.

"Who?" he wondered. Then, following her gaze he knew what she was talking about.

"Sometimes," he admitted. He was silent for a moment. "Not as much as in the early days though," he continued. "Then I got real crazy about being stuck here. I missed the freedom of going wherever my fancy took me." He paused again.

"I wasn't supposed to be here, remember?"

"Yeah," she replied, "but I'm glad you are here." She didn't want to voice the next question, afraid of what his answer might be. But she didn't have to ask it.

"So am I," he said. "So am I. Julia, I may have lost the stars, but I found something very valuable in return." He hugged her closer and as she turned her head to look up at him, he bent forward to kiss her gently on the mouth. She moved around to find a more comfortable position in his arms and the gentle kiss changed to something a lot more urgent...

oOo

The next morning Julia awoke from the sunshine warming her face through the opened tent flap. Birds were singing gaily in the trees nearby. She sat up and noticed Alonzo preparing breakfast. She sniffed the air; he'd even made coffee.

"Morning," she said as she crawled out of the tent and walked over to him. "You did think of everything, didn't you?"

He handed her a cup of the dark, steaming liquid and replied, "Yeah, you know, nothing like a boost of caffeine to kick-start your day."

He smiled. "Breakfast is nearly done. But we'll have time for a quick dip in the pool I found behind the trees... that is, if you're up to a little skinny dipping early in the morning."

He grinned when she colored a little. "There's no one here to see us..." he teased and the blush deepened.

"Uhm, I, eh" she stuttered but he jumped up and grabbed her hand, nearly causing her to spill the coffee. "Come on," he yelled. "Last one in has to do the dishes."

An hour later, refreshed from their swim and filled up with breakfast, Julia wandered about the meadow. The plant life on this planet never ceased to fascinate her and she crouched to dig up a couple of very promising looking stalks. She knew the curative potential a lot of the flora had; she just needed the time and the equipment to discover it all. She decided to bring a few specimens along for later analysis.

As she walked back to the Rail, her arms so full of plants she could hardly see where she was going, Alonzo began to laugh.

"Wow," he exclaimed. "Flowers! You shouldn't have... but thank you."

She stared at him. The dumbfounded look on her face made him laugh even harder.

"Julia, what are you going to do with all those?" he finally asked as his mirth abated a little.

"Analyze 'em, of course. What did you think?" she replied, a little offended that he laughed at her. "There's a lot to be learned here, you know."

"Can't help it, huh," he said. "You're on vacation, remember? You're not going to analyze anything."

"Oh... yeah," she smiled at him sheepishly. "It must be the chromosomes," and her smile widened. But she put the plants in the backseat of the Rail nonetheless.

oOo

They spent the next couple of days in the same leisurely manner. They traveled through the hills for a few hours at a time, stopping often to swim, to walk around a little or just to enjoy the few days of freedom from the constant presence of other humans.

Despite their frequent breaks they made good progress and by evening of the third day they'd nearly crossed the hills. Alonzo checked in with the main group every night, but it seemed he'd been right; they were getting along fine without their doctor.

But in the early hours of the fourth day, the urgent beeping of the gear woke them.

Still half-asleep Alonzo grabbed for the nearest set and turned it on.

"Solace here. What's up?"

Julia sat up, a worried look on her face as she watched him. He frowned and asked, "Come again, Devon. What did you say?"

Julia put on the other gear set. The look on Alonzo's face told her the main group was in serious trouble.

"Devon, this is Julia. What's going on?"

"Julia, it's Baines. He's gone crazy. He locked himself in the TransRover and he keeps ranting about aliens and Terrians. We can't make any sense of it but he refuses to come out of the cabin."

"How long has he been this way?" Julia asked, immediately going into doctor mode.

"Well," Devon hesitated. "Since last night, I think. At least that's when he began running about the camp, throwing things around and yelling at anyone approaching him."

"Anything else you can tell me?"

Devon was silent for a moment. In the background, over the open gear channel, they

could hear people yelling, telling Baines to open the Rover.

"He was complaining about shortness of breath earlier on. And now he is ... eh, frothing..."

"He drools like a Grendler," Danziger took over, painting a not so very pretty picture.

"Where exactly are you, Danziger?" Alonzo asked as he began to throw their stuff in the Rail and started to tear down the tent.

"About two hours away from your location," and Danziger continued to give them the exact coordinates. "Lonz, you two better hurry back, this looks serious," he concluded the conversation.

oOo

It was exactly two hours later when they reached the main camp. Alonzo had pushed the DuneRail to its limits. The vehicle skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust and Julia jumped out before it had come to a complete standstill. Both she and Alonzo were coated with a thin layer of fine yellowish sand.

"Where is he?" she asked without preamble.

Devon pointed to the parked Rover.

"Still locked inside. He's quiet now though."

They walked over towards the vehicle. The rest of the group stood at a distance in a half circle around the large truck. They were quietly talking among themselves.

"We told everyone to stand back," Danziger said. "It seems to disturb Baines when we come close."

"Good thinking," Julia said absently and she squinted to peer through the cabin windows.

Baines sat on the driver's seat. He was slumped forward slightly, but she could still see his face clearly. She was shocked by his appearance. His skin seemed to have taken on a grayish cast and dried saliva clotted his chin. He was having difficulty breathing, she could tell; his chest was heaving with every breath. As she neared the window, he looked up and stared right into her eyes.

She stood stock-still. His eyes were bloodshot and not focusing properly. He did spot her

though and started to shoo at her wildly, breaking into a violent coughing.

She turned towards the others.

"This didn't happen last night," she accused. "He must've been showing symptoms much earlier. Why didn't you call me?"

"We didn't want to spoil your trip," Devon said. "You needed the rest."

"And he wasn't this bad," Walman added. "He was just acting a little strange."

"What do you mean, strange?" Julia asked.

"I don't know, just weird," Walman answered. "He was irritable, easily offended. He didn't sleep well, kept me awake most of the night. Until I moved to another tent."

"We'll have to get him out of there first," Julia said. "I've got to get close to him or I can't find out what's wrong, let alone find a remedy."

"I can cut the Rover's lockup wiring," Danziger offered.

"Okay, let's get to work," Devon decided. "But Julia, we better be ready with a sedative when John opens that door."

oOo

Ten minutes later, Danziger waved his okay. He was on his back beneath the TransRover, having climbed underneath from behind the vehicle so as not to disturb the man locked in the cabin.

"Get ready," he stage-whispered to the others, "I'm about to open the door."

Alonzo and Walman moved cautiously closer to the Rover. Every muscle in their bodies was taut and they were ready to grab Baines as soon as he came out. Julia stood a little way off with a sedaderm hidden in her hands.

"Ready when you are," Alonzo called softly to Danziger. Julia nodded that she was prepared as well.

"Okay, here we go," and Danziger cut the last wire. The door of the TransRover swung open and with a loud angry roar the man inside fell out. Alonzo and Walman jumped forward and pinned him to the ground. Baines was thrashing wildly, all the while

screaming vile curses.

Julia hit Baines with the sedaderm and a second later he relaxed. With a nervous laugh full of relief the other two let him go and got up.

"Wow," Alonzo said, "that was exciting."

"I never figured he was that strong," Walman answered in awe. "We could hardly hold him down with the two of us."

"Let's get him to his tent," Julia said and the two men bent to pick up the unconscious body.

oOo

Inside Baines' tent Julia hovered over him, diaglove on her left arm. They tied him to his cot, for his own protection as well as theirs. Once the sedative wore off, Baines might get all upset again. Alonzo sat quietly in the corner, keeping an eye on things.

"Hmm, he's running a high fever, 40.2 Celsius," Julia reported to her gear log. "Heartbeat's irregular. Breathing is irregular too. Tear ducts and salivary glands are extremely active."

She straightened and moved her hand over her forehead to wipe away the sweat, leaving a streak in the dirt on her face. It was hot in the tent and she was scared, although she didn't want to admit that, even to herself. Was this another of the mysterious planetary diseases?

"Any idea what's wrong with him?" Alonzo asked, moving to take a closer look at the still body.

"No, but it must be some kind of virus," she answered as she adjusted some buttons on the diaglove.

"You know," Alonzo said thoughtfully, "what he reminds me of?"

She turned to look at him and raised her eyebrows in question.

"That Grendler we chased the other day. Same heavy breathing, same drooling, same unusual aggression..."

Julia's eyes went out of focus for a moment. She stared into nothingness as her brain

processed the information. Then she focused on Alonzo once more, her eyes wide.

"That's probably it!" she exclaimed. "The Grendler that bit him. You didn't get bitten or scratched, did you?"

"No," he answered but she had already turned her attention to the sick man.

"I'll have to run some tests on his blood," Julia muttered, "but I'm quite positive..." She put the glove to Baines' temple and reactivated her gear. "The brain appears inflamed, swollen. Pressure from cerebrospinal fluids is higher than usual. Initial diagnosis - Baines is suffering from a virus similar to rabies."

"What's that?" Alonzo asked when he heard her record the diagnosis. "Is it serious?" One look at her face told him the answer to the latter question.

"Come, I'll explain to everyone." She grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the tent.

Outside the entire group sat gathered, waiting to hear Julia's verdict.

"Julia, you know what's wrong with Baines?" Devon asked the question that was burning on everyone's lips.

Julia bobbed self-consciously on the balls of her feet; being at the center of everyone's undivided attention was a little unnerving. She looked around at their faces. Curiosity and fear was written clearly on them.

"Yes, I think I do," she replied. "It isn't conclusive yet; I still have to run some tests to be one-hundred percent positive but my best guess right now is that Baines has caught a variant of rabies."

It remained silent in the camp. Their looks of curiosity and fear changed to one of confusion. "What's that?" Danziger repeated Alonzo's question.

"Basically, it's a viral infection that affects the central nervous system. It usually resides in the saliva of animals and is transmitted to humans through broken skin, mostly when the human's bitten. They often had cases of rabies on earth, when there still were wild animals."

"Oh God," Morgan breathed, catching on. "You mean, he got sick from the Grendler spit? But one of those slobbered all over me once too..."

Morgan sank down on the nearest crate and put a hand to his forehead. "I don't feel so

well... I'm kinda woozy... Julia, you don't think I got it too, do you?"

The doctor sighed. Morgan and his hypochondria could really be a pain in the butt.

"No Morgan," she assured him, "you'd have gotten sick a long time ago if you did. The Grendler that bit Baines was infected itself." Bess patted her husband soothingly on his back while he looked doubtful at the doctor.

"So, what do we do about it?" Devon asked.

Julia's shoulders slumped. "That's just it," she said. "I don't know."

"Rabies..." Yale mused. "That is fatal, isn't it? Once symptoms begin, survival is unlikely..."

oOo

When she got back inside the tent Julia heaved a deep sigh. Vacation time was definitely over; once more the Eden project relied heavily on her knowledge and skills as an analyst for their survival.

She set to work, drawing several samples of blood and spinal fluid from the still unconscious Baines. Walman walked in with her worktable and travel lab.

"Where d'you want me to set this up?" he asked. She pointed to the far side of the tent.

"Over there's fine," she replied. "Can you ask Bess to come in? I could sure use some help here."

Usually it was True she asked if she needed help. The little girl had taken a liking to the medical arts since practicing on a Koba in their winter camp. But given the seriousness of Baines' condition now didn't seem the right time to expose the young girl to the grimmer side of doctoring. If Julia couldn't save Baines, it'd be hard enough for True without adding a misplaced sense of guilt to her grief.

Walman unfolded the worktable, then left the tent. A few moments later Bess ducked in.

"What can I do?" she asked.

Julia pointed to the cot where Baines lay.

"He's running a high fever. We've got to get his temperature down as best as we can. Ask

someone to bring some cold water and sponge him with that. That should help some. It's about all we can do right now."

oOo

By nightfall Julia wasn't even close to finding a cure. The only thing she'd managed was to confirm her initial diagnosis. Baines did have an unknown strain of the rabies variety and it was most likely that he got it from the Grendler that bit him. But that was all she had to show for her efforts so far.

"Any luck yet?" Alonzo stuck his head inside the tent. Julia looked up from her research. She got to her feet and stretched to loosen the cramped muscles in her back.

"No," she said.

"Don't you two forget to eat," he reminded the women inside the tent.

Bess' stomach rumbled at the mention of food and Julia realized she was hungry too.

"Bess, you go get something to eat. I'll watch him while you're gone," Julia said. "And could you bring me a plate back?"

Bess nodded, then walked out of the tent. Julia stared down at Baines. Alonzo walked over to her and gently squeezed her shoulders. "Don't worry," he said. "You'll find a cure, I'm sure."

She turned to look at him. Her face was still smudged with yellow dust and her blue eyes stood in stark contrast to her pale skin. Uncertainty mixed with fear shone in her eyes.

"I wish I could be so confident," she said. "They were never able to find a real cure for rabies on earth. Why should it be different now?"

"You've got to believe in yourself, Julia," he said after a long silence. "And in this planet."

She didn't reply, but turned to the sick man instead. After a few moments he retreated to let her continue her search for a remedy.

Julia bent over Baines' sleeping form, intent on scanning his vitals once more with her glove. As she put out her hand he suddenly opened his eyes and tried to sit up. His eyes were blood-red and unfocused. He looked about him wildly. Gently she took his shoulders and pushed him back on the bed. But as she touched him his crazed look zeroed in on her slowly and he began to thrash around wildly.

"Calm down Baines," she tried to soothe him. "No one is gonna hurt you. You'll only hurt yourself if you keep this up."

But the words didn't reach him. Instead, the sound of her voice seemed to agitate him even further and he struggled to sit up. He fought the bonds that kept him tied to the cot. As one of his hands snapped free, she grabbed him and tried to keep him pinned down. But when she felt his strength she realized she would never be able to control him in his current madness.

"Don't touch me," Baines hissed through clenched teeth. His free arm swung around wildly. "Let me go!"

"Alonzo!" Julia yelled for help while the second restraint tore and Baines' other hand was free. The pilot rushed back in and surveyed the scene of the petite doctor struggling with the larger man. He didn't hesitate but rushed to her side.

"What's happening?" he asked as he tried to get hold of Baines' flailing arms.

"I don't know," she answered and ducked to avoid being hit by a large black fist. "He just woke up crazy. I think he's having some kind of seizure."

Alonzo managed to grab one arm and Baines now turned all his attention to this new opponent. His free arm hit wildly at the other man.

"Ow!" Alonzo yelled as knuckles connected with his head. "Julia, do something. I can't hold him!"

"Just a sec," she muttered, rummaging through one of the boxes. "I must have another sedative here somewhere."

As her hand closed around the capsule she breathed a small sigh of relief. They were running so low on medicine she feared any capsule to be the last. She readied the sedative and turned back to the couple that seemed engaged in a weird kind of dance. Alonzo desperately held on to the one arm that he'd managed to grab. Baines' other arm swung around through the air, trying to hit the pilot or anything else within reach. Equipment flew through the air and Alonzo ducked to avoid another blow to his head.

"Julia, hurry!" he yelled.

She moved over to the two men, careful to avoid Baines' churning arm. But just as she was about to inject the black man, he renewed his struggle to break free from the pilot's

grip.

With a wide swipe of his free arm Baines caught her square across the face and she flew back to land in a disheveled heap next to the tent wall. In a daze she watched Baines finally breaking free from Alonzo when the restraints that tied the man's legs to the cot broke, and through the black spots dancing in front of her eyes she saw him rush out of the tent.

On the other side Alonzo stood gasping in pain, bent over and clasping his stomach. With a last desperate blow Baines had punched the wind out of him.

"Doc?" he managed between gasps, "You okay?"

"I guess so..." Julia answered. She shook her head cautiously to clear her vision and slowly stood up to assess the damage.

At that moment Danziger barged in the tent, Devon hot on his heels.

"What happened here? Where's Baines?" Danziger noticed the empty cot.

oOo

As soon as Baines came out of the tent, the bright light of the campfire assaulted his eyes. He whimpered as the bright light hit his sensitive optic nerves and he held up a hand to screen his face.

His eyes darted around, looking for an escape. He had to get away and quickly. Or they would catch him again, these creatures disguised as humans. They thought they were so clever, but he was smarter. He was on to them. And he'd stop them. But first he had to find a safe place.

He ran around the tent and disappeared into the darkness. The hills. He had to go to the hills. He didn't know why, but he felt he'd be safe there.

oOo

"Hurry, he can't be far," Danziger yelled. He pushed Devon aside and ran back out of the tent. Devon rushed after him and so did Julia. Alonzo, who was slowly regaining his breath, followed a little slower. Once outside they looked around, but the camp seemed peaceful. Bess was approaching, carrying a bowl laden with food.

"What's going on?" she said.

"Did you see Baines? Did you see where he went?" Devon asked her.

"No, of course not," she replied, bewildered. "He's in the tent... isn't he?"

"We've got to find him," Julia said. "And soon. In his condition, he won't last long outside. He must've gone in the direction of the hills. Otherwise someone would've seen him as he passed by the fire."

"I think you're right," Devon said. "John, you and I take the Rail. We'll head straight for the hills. Alonzo, get some of the others and search on foot a little to the left and right of our course."

Alonzo nodded and walked off towards the fire, to gather the others and explain to them what was needed. Julia followed Devon and Danziger to the Rail.

"When you find him, call me right away," she said. "He's going to need immediate attention. But be careful. He's delusional and if he feels threatened..."

"What the hell is that?" Danziger cut her short and pointed to a crate full of plants in the back of the Rail. He dragged it out and dropped it on the ground.

"Those are mine," Julia said. "I brought them from our trip; I wanted to catalogue the specimens. I forgot all about 'em."

"Hmm," Danziger huffed, but didn't comment further. He jumped behind the wheel of the Rail and Devon took the shotgun seat.

"Be careful," Julia called after them as the vehicle sped away. Devon raised her hand in reply.

Julia picked up the crate. She didn't have time for the plants now, but she wasn't going to throw them away either.

"True," she called, when she noticed the girl standing at a distance, looking after the DuneRail with a troubled face.

The girl turned towards her.

"Could you put these in my tent, please?" Julia asked her. "I'll want to research them later."

"Sure," the girl said and took the plants. Julia returned to Baines' tent that currently held all of her equipment and ongoing research experiments.

oOo

Danziger didn't dare push the Rail. He was navigating by the headlights only since the two moons hadn't risen yet. And the terrain was rough and unfamiliar. He wasn't about to risk crashing the Rail.

Three hours later they arrived at the foot of the hills.

"Do you think Baines could've made it this far already?" Devon asked him. He shrugged.

"I don't know," he replied as he stood up in his seat to take a better look around.

"What's that?" Danziger pointed at a small white object fluttering from the branch of a scraggly tree. A patch of low shrubs surrounded it. Devon pushed through the foliage to get to the tree.

"It's a one of the restraints we used to tie down Baines," she called back to the man in the Rail.

"Good," Danziger commented. "So we can be sure he's been here."

Devon walked deeper into the thicket and bent to peer at something.

"John," she called but before she could finish Baines burst through the brush and grabbed her. She squealed, more in surprise than fear.

Danziger grabbed instinctively for the Mag Pro, even though he knew he couldn't use it. Baines held Devon in front of him and yelled at Danziger.

"Stay away!" he screamed.

"Baines," Devon tried to talk to him, "let us help you."

"Don't speak to me," he shouted and he shook her violently. "Don't you think I can't see through your lies? Oh yes, I do. I see through your masks and know what you really are. But you won't get me, like you did the others!"

"Baines, calm down," Danziger tried to soothe the clearly upset man. "What are you talking about? We're all trying to help you here." He cautiously approached the thicket.

"No, stay back," Baines yelled. He trudged backward through the brush, dragging Devon along. Danziger hesitated. Should he go after him? He decided it was better to call the camp instead, to let them know what happened and ask Julia for directions on how to approach Baines.

oOo

"What on earth has gotten into him?" Danziger asked over gear, after he explained the situation.

"I don't know," Julia said. "But the rabies virus causes brain swelling. My best guess is that he's hallucinating. He's obviously scared of us, thinking we're someone else. Or something else."

"So what do we do now?" Danziger wanted to know.

"Keep an eye on him," Julia advised. "But don't try to approach him. As long as you don't provoke him, I think Devon should be alright. I'll take the ATV and come to you. Maybe I can get close to Baines and sedate him again."

oOo

Danziger signed off and sat down in the Rail to wait for help. He looked grim. He didn't like being this helpless. He was a take-charge kind of guy but now he had to sit back and wait. Devon was in the hands of a very sick man and there was nothing he could do about it.

Or was there? Danziger shifted restlessly in his seat for at least an hour, thinking over his options, before he made up his mind. He jumped out and grabbed the Mag Pro. He cautiously walked over to the thicket in which Baines disappeared with Devon.

He'd almost lost Devon to a fatal illness several months ago. To postpone what seemed inevitable they'd put her in cold sleep until Julia found a remedy. He shuddered inwardly as he recalled how much Devon's pale beauty reminded him of the ancient tale of Snow-white, the way she stood in the glass capsule.

And though he wasn't about to admit it, Danziger felt like he received a second chance when they were able to wake her. He wasn't about to leave her to the mercy of a delusional man.

Mag Pro held ready he carefully pushed aside the branches. Even though Baines was a

member of his team, his \*family\* almost after all the long months on the planet, Danziger knew he wouldn't hesitate to use the weapon if it came to a choice between Devon and Baines.

He tried to make as little noise as possible. It wasn't an easy thing for a man as big as he was, but he progressed steadily. When he broke through the undergrowth he found himself staring at the previously concealed opening of a cave a little higher up on the hillside.

He shifted the Mag Pro and climbed towards the cave, all the time keeping the barrel trained at the opening. A rock broke off under his feet and clattered down the hill. He stopped and held his breath. The sound of shuffling feet reached him from the inside of the cave.

"Who's there?" Baines' voice trembled. "Stay away or I'll kill her. I swear I will."

"John," Devon called out. "Listen to him. I'm okay. He's just scared."

oOo

Night was almost over by the time Julia reached the abandoned Rail. The first rays of sunlight peeked cautiously across the hilltops, almost as if they were checking to see it was safe to proceed into the world.

She looked around, trying to figure out where Danziger went.

"John?" she called out. "Danziger, where are you?"

"Over here," he called through the brush. Julia set off in the direction his voice came from.

"He's still somewhere in that cave over there," Danziger pointed. "I can hear Devon trying to talk to him."

Julia cautiously approached the opening.

"Baines," she called softly. "I'm coming to you. Don't be afraid, I'm not gonna hurt you." She received no reply and continued to move forward.

"Julia, be careful," Danziger admonished her. He followed her and crouched besides the mouth of the cave. He cautiously peered in. Julia walked in slowly, her hands held out at her sides to show she didn't mean any harm. Suddenly Baines appeared from the

darkness deep inside the cave. For a moment nobody moved.

Then Danziger got up. As soon as the man showed himself, Baines howled, in anger or fear or both, and charged him. In a reflex Danziger brought up the gun.

"No!" Julia and Devon both cried when the shot went off. Baines knocking into Danziger caused him to pull the trigger. The shot went wild, hitting the cave ceiling. In the midst of a cloud of dust spiraling down, both men fell to the floor.

Danziger caught the brunt of the fall and was dazed for a moment. Baines swung at him wildly, hitting him where he could. They rolled across the floor and Danziger tried to hold Baines off. He grunted in pain as a fist hit him in the eye. Half-blinded Danziger swung back. He caught Baines on the chin and the other man relaxed instantly.

Shakily Danziger got to his feet.

"Devon, are you okay?" he asked.

Julia rushed forward to Baines. She felt for a pulse and breathed more easily when she found it, weak but definitely there.

"We've got to get him back to the vehicles," she said. "I left my diaglove in the ATV. When he's steady, we go back to camp."

She turned to Danziger to take a look at his eye.

"You'll have a nice shiner for a while," she said, "But at least your eye doesn't seem damaged."

oOo

When they reached the vehicles, Danziger lay Baines gently on the ground. He groaned and shifted a little.

"He's coming to," Julia said while she pulled on the diaglove.

Baines tried to open his eyes but as soon as he did he rolled on his side into a fetal crouch, whimpering softly and his arms held over his head. He cringed as Julia touched him with the glove.

"Hurts," he moaned.

"Shh," Devon hushed him. "It's okay. We won't hurt you."

She looked at Julia. "What's going on?" she whispered.

"I think it's the sunlight," Julia replied, drawing back her arm to view the results on the glove's display. "Rabies also attacks the optic nerves, making them extremely vulnerable to bright light. We've got to get him back to camp as soon as possible. I can ease his pain. But I still haven't got a clue how to cure him."

## Part 9

They returned to the campsite and Danziger, with a little help from Alonzo, carried Baines back to his tent. By now the sick man seemed too weakened to try another escape but they decided to tie him to the bunk again.

When Danziger left, Alonzo turned to Julia. She looked exhausted, he thought. Since they'd returned from their brief vacation, the day before, she hadn't slept and had hardly eaten at all. Dark circles showed beneath her eyes. Her face was still streaked with dirt from the hasty return trip the previous day and last night's excursion had added new dust.

"Julia, you should try to get some sleep," he said. "It won't do any good if you collapse from exhaustion."

She sighed and looked at him. He was shocked to see the hopelessness in her eyes.

"There's no time," she said. "He's in the last stage of the disease. Even if I find a cure, it might be too late to save him. But I've got to try."

He nodded his understanding. She wasn't a quitter and would continue to fight to the bitter end.

Julia had already returned to her worktable. She wasn't a step closer to finding a cure for Baines' ailment and they'd lost valuable time trying to find him.

oOo

An hour later she stared uncomprehendingly at the monitor that blinked the test results from her latest attempt to find a cure. The digits seemed to dance across the screen and she closed her eyes briefly, lowering her head on her arms...

Only to be awakened again by a loud sneezing fit and a surprised yell. She blinked and

gazed around the tent with bleary eyes. True was standing next to the cot, her face flushed as she looked at Baines. He was sneezing uncontrollably, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Fearing another seizure, Julia hurried over to him while she grabbed her glove and switched it on.

"True, what happened," she asked as she quickly scanned the man's vitals.

"I don't know," the little girl hesitated. "I just put those here, and he started sneezing." She pointed at a single stem laden with tiny purple blossoms that lay near the head of the bunk. "I didn't mean anything bad, I just thought he might like 'em, him being sick and all." She looked up at Julia for approval.

But Julia didn't pay her attention. She snatched the plant away from the bunk. Immediately Baines' sneezing fit abated. She stood thinking for a moment, looking from Baines to the flowers and back. She returned the stem to its earlier spot. At once he erupted in another sneezing fit.

Out of habit she scanned the flowers. Baines was obviously having a strong allergic reaction to the blossoms, but neither she nor True seemed in any way affected. Julia blinked as she read her gloves' results.

"True, where did you find this flower?" she asked the girl.

"It was in that box you gave me, the one I put in your tent," True answered.

"Are there more like this one?" Julia realized the flower was one of the specimens she brought back from her brief trip with Alonzo.

"Oh yes, a whole bunch," True said. "That's why I thought it'd be okay to take one to give to Baines."

"True, bring me the rest," Julia commanded and turned to her workbench to investigate the flower further with her larger hand scanner. She crushed one of the tiny purple blooms between her thumb and index finger and a bittersweet smell wafted up at her. She passed the scanner over the resulting pulp.

"This is amazing," she muttered. "This could be the answer..."

oOo

"True says you asked for these plants you brought back yesterday," Devon walked in the tent carrying the crate of flowers. "Are you on to something?"

"I might be," Julia replied cautiously, but she couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice. "Baines had a severe allergic reaction to one of the species I brought back. I scanned it and the plant appears to have a genetic structure that's very similar to human DNA."

"What are you saying?" Devon asked her. "That this is a human plant?"

"No," Julia said, "not exactly. A very small difference in genetic structure can result in a completely different species. Like this flower and us." She rummaged through the contents of the crate, looking for the exact same kind of tiny blossoms.

"The rabies virus attacks the central nervous system," she continued her lecture. "The same system that controls our senses like sight, touch and smell. The genetic similarity is so great that breathing in the smell of the flower was enough for the virus in Baines to react to it, causing the allergies."

"But how can this cure him?" Devon asked, still not quite understanding what Julia was telling her.

"If I can get enough of the DNA from these plants," Julia explained, "and inject that in Baines, it might neutralize the virus. I'm not saying it will work, but it's the best chance he has right now."

oOo

They set out to work. Devon and Bess harvested the tiny blossoms and crushed them to a pulp that they mixed with water. Danziger, under Julia's direction and using various odds and ends, rigged a distillation apparatus. Drawing power from the TransRover's battery Julia heated the watery substance, evaporating and condensing the fluid repeatedly to extract the genetic material from the plant pulp in the process.

By midday they'd exhausted their stock of flowers. Julia looked worried, she wasn't sure if she had collected enough DNA. But it'd have to do; they didn't have time to go looking for more plants. While they worked, Baines remained quiet, sinking deeper and deeper into a coma-like stupor, and he no longer responded to any stimulus.

Julia readied the sedaderm.

"Okay, here goes nothing." She took a deep breath and held the injector to Baines' neck.

Bess said a silent prayer as the DNA was injected into the sick man's bloodstream.

For a moment nothing happened. Then a shiver ran through Baines. He began to shake, first lightly, then stronger until at last violent convulsions racked his body.

"Easy now," Julia said as she tried to scan his vitals with her glove.

"What's happening?" Bess asked a little frightened. "Is this normal?"

"I don't know," Julia replied, glancing briefly at the woman. "But it makes sense. The virus reacts to the DNA that attacks it. And the virus has immersed itself throughout his nervous system. So the nerves respond violently, causing his muscles to contract."

She turned back to Baines and moved the glove over his body. "I just hope his heart won't give out," she muttered below her breath. A few minutes later the spasms abated a little and slowly they changed into feeble shivers.

"I think we've seen the worst," Julia commented. "He's asleep now. All we can do is wait and see if it helped any."

oOo

Since there was nothing more Julia could do for Baines at this point, Devon ordered her to get some rest.

"I'll sit with him," Bess offered when she saw the doctor hesitate. "As soon as there's any change, I'll call you."

After another moment's hesitation, Julia nodded. She left the tent to return to her own.

Bess stayed with the sleeping Baines. As far as she could tell, he was sleeping peacefully, his fever gone. She prayed silently that he'd be okay. They'd lost several of their party over the past year, but without Julia a lot more deaths would've been mourned. She hoped the doctor had worked her magic once more.

While she sat musing over their adventures, Baines shifted slightly. His eyes fluttered and when he opened them they focused on the woman sitting near the bunk.

"Bess?" he whispered. She looked up as she heard his voice. Her heart skipped a beat as she noticed his clear gaze.

"Why am I tied up?" he asked next, his voice a hoarse croak.

"How are you feeling?" she asked. She grabbed for a cup of water, giving him some to drink.

"Like I got the worst hangover possible," he said after he swallowed the liquid. "Could you untie me, please?"

"Just a sec," Bess evaded his question. "I'll call Julia." She activated her gear but the doctor didn't answer. She called Devon instead.

"Devon, he's awake. I can't get Julia, but I think he's okay. Can you wake Julia? I don't want to leave Baines alone right now."

"Okay," Devon replied and she signed off.

A minute later both women entered the tent. Julia looked a little dazed, having just awoken, but she seemed excited. She grabbed her glove and scanned Baines.

"He's okay," she pronounced after a quick scan. A large smile of relief appeared on her face. "No sign of the virus anymore. You can untie him now," she motioned to Bess.

"What happened?" Baines asked curiously as he massaged his wrists where the restraints had been.

"Don't you remember?" Devon asked.

"I don't know," he replied a little uncertain. "I think I had a nightmare. Something about Terrians invading our bodies?" He stared vaguely in the distance. A light shiver went through him as he recalled the images. Then he turned his gaze back at Devon. "And I had a fight with Danziger," he smiled. "Silly dream, huh."

"Yeah..." the three women replied.

At that moment the tent flap was pulled aside and Danziger walked in.

"I hear Baines is awake?" he said. He noticed Baines sitting up on the bunk, appearing bright eyed and lucid.

"Hey man, good to see you're better," Danziger said and walked towards the cot to clap Baines on the shoulder. When he walked into the circle of light thrown by the lumalamp, Baines noticed the black-blue circle around Danziger's left eye. His smile faltered as he recalled his 'dream'.

Seeing the nonplussed expression on Baines' face, the women couldn't help themselves and burst out laughing. Danziger glared at them.

"Did I do that?" Baines whispered in horror.

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