

GAAL'S CURSE

Julia stomped through the undergrowth without noticing the thorns that snatched at her clothes and skin or the branches that lashed at her. She was furious. That presumptuous, arrogant, egotistical sleep-jumper, she ranted silently. Where the hell did he get the nerve to call her an uptight chromo-tilt who didn't know how to have fun?

Through the buzz in her ears she heard Alonzo call after her, yelling for her to stop and listen. Yet Julia wouldn't stop. She couldn't stop, now. She was too angry. And anger was not an emotion she was familiar with. She had to get away from him, to calm down and collect her thoughts.

Julia stumbled and fell to her knees, skinning her palms on the rough surface of the rocks. She ignored the pain and scrambled back to her feet to push forward again. She barely paid attention to where she was going. The sun had sunk below the horizon and its last glow was fading fast. Abruptly, her feet stopped touching ground while her legs were still moving. Julia had barely enough time to draw a single breath before she plummeted down. Too surprised to be afraid, she yelled as she fell.

Her voice cut off when she struck the surface of the churning river at the bottom of the ravine. White-foamed water seethed around her, enclosing her in its cold embrace. The impact forced the air from her as she plunged deeper and deeper into the froth. Julia fought against the urge to breathe. Her lungs burned with the lack of air, screaming for oxygen. Desperately she kicked her legs, forcing herself upwards, struggling with the heavy walking-boots that filled with water and tried to drag her back down. Just before her strength gave out, she broke the surface and filled her lungs with air, the blessedly clean air of G889.

But the river wasn't about to let go of its prey so easily. It pulled at her and took her in its mad run through the gorge. Julia rolled and pitched in the water. Frantically she tried to keep her head up but the current flung her around so violently that she soon lost track of which was up or down. Her head hit a rock that was submerged in the flow and sparks flashed in front of her eyes. Her last thought was her lover and the things he said...

oOo

Alonzo listened to her shout as it first faded, then abruptly broke off. His breath caught and he bolted in the direction of her voice, calling her name repeatedly. His own voice echoed in his head, with the words he had spoken in anger and without thinking. He could still see her eyes, wide with shock and pain.

In the fading light, he frantically tried to follow her path through the dense undergrowth. What if something had happened to her? He would never forgive himself if she got hurt.

Visions of penal colonists and enraged Grendlers flashed before his eyes. Alonzo raced in the direction of her voice and skidded to a halt at the edge of a cliff that plunged straight down. His heart skipped a beat when he stared into the black depths. Deep below, at the bottom of the ravine, he could make out the white foam of a churning river, the roar of the current faint in his ears. Did Julia fall down the cliff into those raging waters?

"Please," Alonzo muttered, "let her be okay?" His eyes darted around and scanned the surrounding brush, looking for a sign that she was still up here on the mesa. He didn't see anything. He was about to turn back to camp and alarm the others when his eyes fell upon a small strip of cloth that clung to a large thorn. Carefully he peeled it off. His knees went weak when he recognized it – it was a fragment of the blue jacket that Julia wore. He turned again towards the cliff, peering into the dark gorge. If she had fallen down— He couldn't bear to finish the thought. Instead, he began to run back to the camp.

oOo

"I'm sorry, Alonzo," Devon said quietly, her voice thick with pain over the loss of another crewmember. She gently took his arm to lead him away from the river's edge. He shrugged her off and continued to stare across the raging torrent. The pilot's features were hard; his face seemed hewn in granite. Devon followed his gaze. Rocks broke the river's surface in several places, the water splashing over them in swirling waves. Overhead, a small strip of sky was visible from the ravine floor. It was colored in fiery red with the oncoming of day.

"Alonzo," Devon reasoned. "We've searched all night. Julia's gone. There's no way she could have surv—" Alonzo spun around, his body tense as a coiled spring and his eyes smoldering with mad fire. Startled by his obvious anger, Devon halted mid-sentence. Danziger took a step forward as if afraid the pilot might pounce on her.

"Julia's not dead," Alonzo growled. "I'd know if she was. We've got to keep searching."

Devon exchanged a glance with Danziger and raised her eyebrows in a silent plea. Taking his cue, the tall mechanic clamped his hand on the other man's shoulder. "C'mon, man," he said gruffly. Devon could hear her own pain reflected in his tone, although he tried to hide it. "You're not being reasonable. We've done everything possible to find her and—" Alonzo whirled around and slapped Danziger's hand away.

"Reasonable?" he snarled. "Reasonable?! I'm not gonna give up on her. Not until I hold her body—" His voice broke and he noisily cleared his throat. After a minute he continued more calmly, "It is my fault. I've got to find her."

Devon and Danziger both nodded. They understood his feelings of guilt, misplaced as they might be. Again they exchanged a glance and wordlessly came to an agreement.

"We'll follow the course of the river for a few days," Devon said. "We will find her if she... if she came ashore somewhere." Alonzo studied her for a moment, his dark eyes expressionless. Then he nodded and turned back to stare at the current.

oOo

The Grendler squinted down the steep incline, against the glare of the sun's reflection on the water. He slouched near the edge, his stocky body bent low near the ground. Below, half in and half out of the gently flowing river, lay a bundle of water-soaked rags. He squeezed his eyes half closed to see better in the bright sunlight when a tiny ray of light reflected from the bundle. His heart began to beat faster; the reflection meant there was something metallic in the bundle. Maybe even a gadget of sorts. Something that he could trade. Or, if he were really lucky, something He would be happy with... The Grendler licked his lips at the thought of possible rewards.

He descended the incline in his lumbering gait and when he came closer he realized the bundle wasn't just rags; a body was wrapped inside. He crouched near the body and turned it over. A soft moan escaped the alabaster lips of the creature. It was alive! He stared down at the white face and closed eyes. Strands of honey-colored wet hair were matted with dirt and clung to pale cheeks. The Grendler was momentarily unsure what to do. This creature was something he'd never seen before. It wasn't a Grendler, or a Terrian. It resembled Man most, yet it was subtly different.

His gaze fell upon a trickle of red seeping from a wound to the creature's head. He rumbled excitedly and cautiously smeared the liquid on his stubby fingers. Bringing his hand to his nose, he sniffed. Yes! Blood! He licked it off his fingers. Thrilled, the Grendler jumped up and down, grunting happily to himself. This creature was definitely similar to Him – the blood tasted the same. The body was so much smaller though. He sucked in his lower lip, thinking hard. Suddenly his face brightened. Perhaps this was a female Man?

Then another frown creased his brow. This female was unconscious and in need of help. He grabbed the collar of her damp jacket and slowly began to climb back up the riverbank, dragging her body after him. Once he reached the summit, he bent down and hoisted the unconscious form over his shoulder. Head lolling and arms dangling, her

body hung limply. The Grendler started off in the direction of his dwelling.

oOo

Slowly Julia became conscious of a fetid stench that entered her nose and assaulted her sinuses. The dank smell made her retch and she began to cough until her head throbbed with the rhythm of the choked gasps. Gentle, strong hands held her when she vomited up the water that she had swallowed in the river. Having emptied her stomach, her awareness dissolved into darkness again while the hands lowered her back upon a soft bed and covered her with a coarse blanket.

She felt hot, very hot. She was burning; flames licked at her skin. Frantically Julia beat at the fire trying to put it out. She didn't feel the pain as the flesh melted from her hands and dripped sizzling to the floor. Then, abruptly she found herself on a snowy field. The flames disappeared, leaving her feeling scorched.

For a moment, the cold whiteness felt so good. She saw a shadow between the trees at the edge of the field and she squinted against the glare of the snow, trying to make out who it was. The form stepped towards her and she breathed in sharply. It was Alonzo. His dark eyes were hard and unyielding, flitting over her and staring intently at something behind her. A grin lit up his face but it didn't reach his eyes. She swung around to see what he was looking at.

Right behind her was a spaceship, its metal skin gleaming silver in the snow. A small ladder led up towards a doorway in the hull of the ship and at the bottom of the ladder stood a woman. When she recognized her, Julia swallowed. The woman was her mother.

She waved at them. "Come," she called, "come." Alonzo briskly walked past Julia, in the direction of the ship. Julia followed as if in a daze. When she reached the ship, her mother's gaze fell on her and looked her up and down. Her eyes were full of disapproval and rejection. "Not you," she told Julia frostily, "you're not worthy. You betrayed us."

"Please?" Julia tried to plead, when a roaring laughter coming from the top of the ladder drowned out the sound of her voice. She looked up at the laughing man. "You'll die running," he yelled, "you'll die running."

Councilwoman Heller turned with a last hostile glance at her daughter and began to climb the ladder. "No, wait," Julia cried but the woman didn't look back. Alonzo stepped to the ladder and began to follow the Councilwoman. "Alonzo, no, don't go, don't leave me!" Tears streamed down her face as she desperately clung to his arm.

He pried her fingers loose from his leather sleeve. She had to let go and he pushed her

away before he slowly started up the rungs. Upon reaching the top, he stared down at her. "Guess I broke your heart after all," he said and climbed in the ship, slamming the hatch behind him. "Nooo!" Julia screamed. Sobbing she sank to her knees in the cold snow.

Suddenly it was dark around her and the horrid smell assaulted her again. Hands held a beaker to her lips and she drank greedily from the cool water it offered. She began to shiver. So cold. She was so cold. Her teeth chattered and exhausted she lay back, drifting off into sleep again.

oOo

The Grendler wrinkled his nose and drew his lips back in a snarl. He could smell the sickness on her skin and he knew death sneaked closer by the hour. He grumbled angrily to himself. He couldn't do anything more for the woman than he had done so far. He needed help. He must ask Man; this female was like Him. The Grendler was sure He would know a way to save her. Regrettably, it also meant giving up the secret that he found her and that scared him. Man didn't like it if the Grendler kept things from Him.

He sat a few moments more, looking down at her feverish body. The coughing spasms passed and she mumbled incoherently, imprisoned in her nightmarish delirium. Careful not to disturb her, the Grendler took the little metal plate that hung on a thin chain around her neck. He didn't know what it was but Man might like it, and be appeased by it; He seemed to relish all things metal. For a moment the Grendler studied the marks that were etched into the metal, then put it in his satchel.

He glanced at the woman's hands, clenched tightly in fists beside her body. The rings on her fingers gleamed dully in the meager light. He hesitated, then decided not to take them. The Grendler lowered the blanket over her sleeping form, carefully tucking it in below her chin. Then, with a last wistful glance, he lumbered out of the underground hole.

oOo

Eden project traveled alongside the river for days, following its meandering path. Once they were past the dark gorge, the waters calmed and flowed more gently. They stayed as close to the river's banks as they could, scanning for anything out of the ordinary. For anything that might tell them what happened to Julia. But they found nothing. Until, at last, even Alonzo was forced to admit that it was hopeless. Julia was gone. However, he refused to allow Yale and Bess to hold a small ceremony in memory of her.

"No," he told her when Bess first approached him with the idea. "It isn't over yet. I'll

come back and search for her when our journey is over. Once I find her, then you can have your ceremony." One look at his eyes, determined and dark with pain, told Bess it would be no use to argue; Alonzo wasn't susceptible to reason. So, on the fifth day after Julia's fall down the cliff and her disappearance, they simply changed course and once more followed the path to New Pacifica.

Alonzo was quietly walking behind the stretched-out caravan. His feet dragged through the dust; he was reluctant to leave the river behind. He kept glancing longingly over his shoulder as if he hoped Julia would suddenly appear in the distance.

"I'll be back, Julia," he silently vowed. "I'll come back to find you." Tears welled up in his eyes when he thought of her and he wiped them away with the back of his hand. He remembered her strength and resilience, her beauty. He swallowed hard to force down a lump. Again, he glanced backwards. This time, he saw movement in the distance.

Hope flared and his heart jumped in his throat as he grabbed for the jumpers. He brought them to his eyes and the flicker of hope sizzled and died. His heart dropped back to its appropriate place to sit in his chest like a cold rock. It was a Grendler. Just a stupid Grendler. He lowered the jumpers and kicked angrily at the dirt. A small cloud of dust whirled up. "What were you thinking?" he berated himself. "Of course it's not her."

The next time he looked back, the Grendler was still there. He had come closer and was apparently hot on their trail. Alonzo activated his Gear. "Devon, we got a Grendler following us." The caravan ambled to a halt and Devon walked back through the ranks of travelers to stand next to Alonzo. He pointed at the Grendler, who was still headed towards the group, moving determinedly in his waddling trot.

"What does it want?" Danziger asked. He pointed his MagPro in the direction of the creature. Devon shot him a warning look that he shrugged off. "Just taking precautions," he muttered loud enough for her to hear.

When he was close enough for his smell to reach them, the Grendler halted. A few meters apart, the two species stared at one another for long moments, the humans trying hard not to wrinkle their noses too obviously. The Grendler appeared fascinated by the humans; his eyes darted from one to another and slobber dripped from his mouth. His lips drew back in a snarl, or maybe it was a grin, and Danziger hefted the MagPro. The Grendler held out his arm.

"Maybe it wants to trade?" Morgan ventured. "That's what they always want, isn't it?"

It looked as though Morgan was right. The Grendler held a small object in his large paw; sunlight reflected from it. Alonzo took a step closer. The creature opened his fist and

revealed a dog tag on a silver chain.

Alonzo gasped when he recognized the object. "That's mine," he exclaimed. "I gave it to Julia."

Excitement rippled through the gathered travelers. "Where did you find this?" Alonzo asked the creature. Urgency raised his voice. "Where is she? Did you find her? Is she alive?" The Grendler just stared at him in puzzlement. It didn't understand the human speech. Then it moved its large arm.

"I think it wants us to follow," Devon said slowly. The Grendler put the dog tag on the ground and Alonzo sprang forward, snatching it as if the small object itself would bring Julia back. The Grendler began to walk backwards and again motioned with its arm for them to follow.

oOo

When the last vestiges of the dreams dissipated, Julia awoke to an intense darkness that enveloped her. She breathed a sigh of relief. It was peaceful here in the blackness, after the horror of her nightmares.

She pricked up her ears. Someone was humming softly, a toneless singing that seemed to come closer and closer. She lay on a lumpy bed made of coarse cloth, rough to the touch. A blanket of the same material scratched at the skin of her bare arms and under her chin. Julia realized her eyes were still closed. Cautiously, she opened them.

Rough, stone walls surrounded her, barely visible in the darkness. She remembered the smells that permeated the dreams sometimes. Grendler cave, her mind whispered. A small light twinkled at the other side of the room and silhouetted in its glow she saw a tall figure, his back to her. The humming came from his direction, low, in a singsong voice. Dressed in flowing robes, his hair long and unruly about his head, the figure seemed familiar but her fuzzy mind couldn't quite grasp the memory that the silhouette evoked.

She felt so tired, so weak. Her left temple throbbed and Julia tried to move a hand to the sore spot. Her arm fell back limply before she managed to bring it halfway up.

The movement caught the attention of the shrouded form, and he turned to approach her, a large grin spreading on his features. When the light fell on his face and reflected from his bared teeth, memory returned to Julia with a vengeance. She inhaled shakily.

"Gaal! You can't be... You're dead," she managed to squeeze out, despite the fear that

clenched her throat tight. Then the cave darkened and while she drifted back into emptiness, she heard his raucous laughter fade in the distance.

oOo

The next time Julia woke up, it was Gaal's menacing grin that she remembered first. She lay motionless and tense, and kept her eyes closed. She strained to hear if anyone was close. Her nose wrinkled when cooking smells wafted to her and her stomach rumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten for days.

Opening her eyes, she attempted to sit up. She had managed to upright herself to a half-slouched position when a wave of dizziness assaulted her. The light faded and Julia had to use every ounce of willpower to remain conscious. The smell waned for a moment but then came back twice as strong.

"Ah, my fair young doctor is awake," Gaal said. He knelt next to her and stretched out his hand to stroke her cheek lightly, tracing her jaw-line. Inwardly, she shuddered when his stubby fingers grazed her skin and it took all her self-control not to shrink back from his touch. Julia knew that if she did, it would only serve to show him how scared she was.

To her surprise –and relief– he handed her a bowl filled with steaming broth and dropped a spoon in her lap. The food smelled so good that her stomach fluttered happily at the thought of ingesting it. Still, she hesitated. God knew what Gaal used to cook the meal.

"Eat," he grunted. "I didn't heal your fever to let you die of hunger." She glanced at him – he sounded almost normal. But when their eyes met, she wished she hadn't looked up. The madness swirling in his irises jolted her. He drew back his lips in a mean grimace. "I have other plans for you, pretty one."

Julia shuddered, her appetite suddenly gone. But she had to eat if she wanted to get out of here alive. She cautiously sipped the liquid. It was hot but tasted delicious. Despite her loathing for the cook, she gulped down the contents of the bowl. Gaal watched her silently, crouched near her feet.

When she finished, he took the bowl from her without a word and put it away. The food both warmed her and revived her spirit, and Julia sat up a little straighter. When she spotted a MagPro in the nearby corner, she eyed it longingly. However, Gaal was too close and she too weakened. She'd never manage to grab the weapon, point it and power it up in time.

"How did I get here?" she asked. "This *is* a Grendler cave, isn't it? And why are you

here? We thought you were dead."

"Questions, always questions," he sighed theatrically. With a wide sweep of his robe he sat again in a crouch near her. Every fiber of her being screamed at her to get away from this man, but Julia held her place. She managed to stare right back at him while his gaze traveled over her.

"It's a long story," Gaal said at last. "And I don't have much time. But I will tell you how I survived the Terrians." He settled back in a more comfortable position. He smiled coldly and stared at the far wall, clearly relishing the opportunity to gloat on how he managed to get away from the alien species.

"I grabbed a bone," he said. "That's all. When the earth closed over my head, I snatched one of the Terrian bones from my necklace. And the Terrians, they're such a peaceful race." He snorted in disgust. "They can't fight their own, you know, or even their dead. Once in the tunnels, they had to let me go. Ah, I spent days walking through the maze, down below." Gaal managed to look pained and even insulted at the fact. Absently, he stuck a hand inside his robe and brought out a shiny oblong object. Spitting on it, he dragged it up and down across his sleeve in a thoughtless gesture. It gleamed dully. Julia recognized the object – it was a MagPro grenade; Eden project had a few of those among their weaponry.

"Finally my good friends and servants, the Grendlers, found me and brought me out in the daylight," Gaal continued. "Of course, by that time you and your band of travelers were long gone. And so were young True and her father." His eyes focused on Julia again and he bared his teeth in a snarl. A shiver ran down her spine. She drew up her knees and clasped them tightly to keep her hands from trembling.

"Then the Grendler that dwells in this dank hole," another broad sweep of his arms took in the entire room, "followed the spiders to tell me about the woman that he found half drowned in the river. You will understand my euphoria when that woman turned out to be you: the comely doctor of my favorite pilgrim band." Gaal chortled below his breath. "You were more dead than alive though," he added as an afterthought.

"Where is that Grendler now?" Julia asked. She glanced uneasily at the bowl she used for her meal, a queasy feeling clamping her stomach. The food suddenly sat like a stone in her belly.

"That," Gaal said gleefully, "is the best part. I sent him to bring your fellow travelers here. Oh, and they will come." His eyes sparkled and he chuckled. "Once they see that little dog tag the handsome pilot gave you, they will come. A very touching gesture, by the way." He grinned. "You see, I have a score to settle." He slowly caressed the barrel of

the MagPro. In the far corner, Julia detected a launch tube for the grenades he was polishing.

Furtively, she felt for the silver chain around her neck that held Alonzo's tags. It was no longer there. She noted that her rings were also gone. Peering at Gaal through her lashes, she discovered her thumb-ring on the man's pinkie.

"I will kill the men," he continued coldly. "And the women? Maybe I'll let them live, if they behave. Then again, maybe I won't." He sniggered. "Those beautiful vehicles will finally be mine." He shook with silent mirth. "Ah, and the little True, she will be mine too. I always wanted to have a daughter."

Julia squeezed her eyes shut and tried to banish the images his words called up in her mind. It didn't work. Her mind's eye kept showing her devastation and killing: John Danziger, Morgan, Walman, all dead. True, in the hands of a remorseless killer. And Alonzo... She grew cold to the core of her soul when she pictured him being torn apart by a MagPro grenade.

oOo

Julia pretended faintness and lay back on the mattress. She needed to think of a way that would stop Gaal from executing his gruesome plans. Gaal bustled about the cave for a while, continuously humming in that maddening drone. But finally, after checking to see that she was asleep, he grabbed the MagPro and left.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Julia sat up. When she attempted to stand, she moved too quickly and her knees buckled. She collapsed, her forehead resting on the damp ground. She desperately tried to gather all her strength and the image of Alonzo's dead and mutilated body that flashed through her brain got her moving. More cautiously now, she again climbed to her feet. Sweat broke out in tiny droplets along her brow and she fought a spell of dizziness but managed to remain upright this time.

On legs that trembled with the effort to carry her, she tottered out of the chamber. To her left distant sunlight glowed and using the tunnel wall for support Julia moved in the direction of the light. When she got to the opening, her breath caught in her throat. Gaal was sitting outside in front of the tunnel's exit, polishing the damn grenades on his sleeve again, mumbling below his breath.

Quietly, Julia backed away. There had to be another way out. She shuffled through the tunnels, heading deeper into the maze of interconnecting caves, hoping to find another exit. Utter darkness surrounded her, occasionally dispersed by sunlight that filtered in among gnarled roots sticking down from the ceiling. The tunnels must be close to the

surface. It gave her hope she might find another way out soon.

Julia slid her hand alongside the tunnel wall, as much for support as for direction. Stumbling repeatedly, she found it harder to get up every time. She had no idea how long she was walking around; she had no sense of time passing.

Again she tripped. Catching her breath, she rested for a moment on hands and knees that were scratched and bruised. She no longer had the strength to push herself back to her feet but the terror of the horrid images in her mind drove her to continue. Crawling on all fours, she came to another chamber; sunlight filtered through a tiny crack in the ceiling. No other tunnels opened into this chamber and Julia's eyes widened in dismay. It was a dead end. This last blow made her finally give in to despair.

She slumped on the damp floor and curled up in a ball. A few tears of frustration leaked from her eyes, leaving a trail in the dirt on her cheeks. She no longer had the energy to continue and defeated sobs wrung from her throat. Gaal would kill them all.

Suddenly, she felt eyes watching her. Her heart began to beat faster and fear released new adrenaline in her bloodstream. Had Gaal followed her? She raised her head slowly and gazed around. In the far corner of the room, hidden in the shadows, stood a lone Terrian.

He dipped his head and twittered softly. Julia shook her head. "I don't understand."

She scuttled backwards to the far wall when the creature stepped out of the crevice. He held out his hand to her, in an inviting gesture. Slowly, unsure of his intentions, she stuck out a trembling arm. The Terrian grabbed her hand and with an abrupt forward motion Julia was drawn *into* the cave wall. She let out a surprised little yelp, when a sudden chill raised the hairs on her arms. The coldness washed over her briefly and was gone as soon as it had come.

The Terrian took her to another chamber, much larger than the first one, and left her there, crouched on her knees, before he sank back in the ground. Julia glanced around the cave. Several tunnels opened up in the walls and veins of Morganite illuminated the ceiling. The ground rumbled and before her eyes a wizened Terrian swam up. "Come," his voice rang clearly in her mind.

Her eyes widened in surprise. "I can understand you? How is that possible?" she asked, astonished. She craned her head to look up at him. His skin was a dull gray, the creases filled with dust and sand. His eyes, incredibly old and hidden in the folds of skin, looked down at her kindly.

"You are very weakened," he replied. "And your need is great. That's why we can make you hear."

"I— I don't understand...," Julia said. She got to her legs slowly and leaned heavily against the cave wall, careful not to touch the pulsing Morganite.

"Your subconscious is translating my thoughts into words you understand," he explained. "The same way I can understand your emotions. I sense a great sadness, a great hurt in you."

She glanced about uncertainly. Did this creature read her mind?

"No," his voice said gently in her head. "I'm not reading your thoughts. It may seem that way to you; yet, it is not possible. Your mind is yours alone to control. But I can pick up the emotions that you are permitting to get out. Your fever, and concern for your tribe, lowered the barriers in your mind. Come, we need to talk." He motioned her with his hand to follow him.

He took Julia deeper inside the mountain to a gurgling pool. Steam rose up and she couldn't detect the pool's surface. She recognized it as one of the Mooncross pools that Alonzo had described to her. Along the walls, several Terrians stood in niches, motionless, as though they were sleeping. The air in the small room was moist and warm. The withered Terrian lowered himself on his haunches next to the pool and motioned for her to sit as well.

"Your help is needed," he said. "My brothers are stuck in the Inbetween. They are wailing to be released. But they are incomplete; they cannot enter the Earth. You and your tribe, you must help us take the Evil One to the Mother. Only then will we have peace in our minds again."

The Terrian words echoed in her brain. Julia blinked. 'Evil one?' she wanted to ask. Suddenly her eyes widened in understanding. Gaal! She recalled the clutter of bones hanging from the man's neck and realized that they must be Terrian bones. After his escape he had apparently resumed his one-man-war on the Terrians.

She stared at the Terrian, her eyes wide, and he nodded in confirmation. "We cannot stop him as long as he possesses the remains of our brothers. And my brothers will have no peace until they can pass on to the Mother." His expression, as far as Terrians had any, was one of infinite sadness.

"Why haven't you contacted Alonzo?" Julia wondered out loud. "You have dreamt to him before, to call us." Just thinking about Alonzo brought back the hurt in full force. A lump

formed in her throat and she swallowed it down before it could wring tears from her eyes.

The Terrian gazed at her with kind eyes. "The Dreamer," he said, "does not hear us. His soul is closed to us; his mind is filled with thoughts of you. And you fear for him. Your need to save his life brought you here. Yet, you also believe you have already lost him. I am confused."

"We had a fight," Julia explained. "A bad one. I said things I didn't mean..." Her voice trailed off and she blinked hard several times. A single tear slid down her cheek and she brushed it away impatiently. "I'm afraid I pushed him away," she whispered, looking down.

The old Terrian remained silent for a moment. He looked at her with that inscrutable stare so common to the alien species. Then he tilted his head.

"I do not understand your reasoning," he said. "Yet I understand what you feel. But you are wrong. The Dreamer cares for you, very much. He mourns, he believes the Mother has taken you."

She looked up in surprise. "He thinks I'm dead?" Then she realized it made sense. After her fall in the river, her friends would have searched for her. And when they didn't even find her body – they would draw the only conclusion they could.

oOo

Eden project continued on the Grendler's trail. He walked quickly, setting a steady pace that they would have found difficult to follow without the vehicles. It never ceased to amaze the humans how deftly these clumsy-looking creatures moved through the undergrowth that covered the hills.

Hours after their first meeting, by late afternoon, the Grendler finally slowed down and stopped. They were in a narrow valley; hills covered with brush and clusters of small trees rose sharply on all sides.

Alonzo ran forward, urging the creature on. The pilot's face was drawn tight across his handsome features and worry-lines creased his brow. Behind him the caravan of travelers stretched far back; not everyone had been able to keep up with the pace.

"Where is she? Are we almost there?" he called.

His anxiety over Julia's fate kept him from paying much attention to anything else and

when the ground rumbled to spew up a Terrian right in front of his feet, he stumbled and nearly crashed into the towering figure. Alonzo glared up to meet the creature's eyes. An expressionless face looked down at the man, not in the least fazed by his angry stare.

"What do you want?" Alonzo snapped. He didn't attempt to sound friendly. The last thing he wanted was for the Terrians to bother him with their cryptic messages. He didn't have time for them right now, when he knew he so was close to finding Julia.

"We need your help. The Evil One is near," the Terrian trilled.

"What do you mean?" Alonzo asked, his attention wavering. He strained to look beyond the tall creature at the Grendler, that was staring back at him and the Terrian. The Grendler was shuffling his feet uneasily. Low moans came from his throat.

The Terrian continued his warbled speech. Images of shattered bones and of Terrians being taken into the ground flashed through the pilot's brain. He shook his head to clear it. "I don't have time for your games right now," he snapped. "I got to find Julia!" Ignoring the trilling creature, he circled the Terrian and approached the Grendler. Behind him the Terrian twittered sadly and sank back into the ground.

Danziger made a beeline towards Alonzo. "What was that all about?" he asked. "What did the digger want?" A worried frown creased his brow. Through slit eyes he peered suspiciously at the small depression in the earth that the Terrian's disappearance created.

"I don't know," Alonzo replied. "They're never very clear in their communication."

Dismissing further thoughts of the Terrian, the humans turned again to the Grendler. From the back of the long queue of travelers they could see Devon quickening her pace. She was making her way forward, no doubt to see why they had stopped.

"Where do we go next?" Danziger asked. The Grendler motioned for them to sit down and they looked at it questioningly.

"You gotta be kidding!" Alonzo yelled at the creature. Annoyance hardened his voice. Angry eyes flashed at the alien, pressing him to explain the sudden delay.

The Grendler simply repeated his gesture and waited until they complied. The last of the stragglers reached the small group, and tired and weary, the travelers plopped down on the ground. If the Grendler wanted them to sit, they'd sit and wait. They had been walking all day, so a brief respite was welcomed by most. Alonzo was too restless to sit. He kept pacing back and forth, fretting over the delay.

The Grendler stuck a hand inside the rags passing for his clothes and took out a weird looking instrument. Placing it between his lips, he whistled. An eerie, moaning sound echoed through the hills and faded into silence.

"True-girl? True!" Danziger yelled, breaking the silence in the valley. With a soft 'thump' the girl had slumped to the ground and lay motionless, eyes closed. Danziger crouched near his daughter's body, cradling her head.

"True? Talk to me, True! Please?" Shock and fear pitched his voice higher than its usual low rumble. His unruly hair hung forward, half covering his face and, irritated, he shook it back. Alonzo found himself searching among the travelers, scanning their startled faces. He was looking for Julia, he realized with a painful pang of regret.

Devon hurried to see what was happening. She knelt next to Danziger and grabbed True's wrist, feeling for a pulse. A soft whimper escaped the girl's lips and her eyes fluttered open. For a moment they were clouded with confusion, then she focused on her father's face. "Dad..." she sighed.

"Are you alright, True?" Danziger asked. Relief washed over his face upon hearing her voice again.

"Gaal," she whispered, terror quivering in her voice. She tried to sit up and repeated the name more forcefully. "It's Gaal."

"What do you mean, True?" Devon asked her. She and Danziger exchanged a concerned look. What was the girl talking about? "Gaal's dead, remember?"

"Yeah," True answered, a little hesitant now. She caught sight of the Grendler, still standing with the whistle in his hand. She pointed at the creature, her hand shaking.

"That whistle, it's Gaal's. He gave me one too. He said I'd only have to whistle to call him..." Her voice trailed off into a horrified sob. Danziger pulled her close to him and hugged her tightly, mumbling consolingly into her hair. Devon stared down at them for a moment, then looked up with a shocked expression on her face.

When the meaning of True's words sank in, the Eden project members whirled around to stare up at the steep hills. Gaal! But Gaal was dead, wasn't he? With a start, Alonzo recalled the Terrian trying to talk to him, only moments ago. What was it the creature said? The Evil One is near? Grendlers helped Gaal before. Had he sent the Grendler to bring them back?

An even uglier thought presented itself. Could it be possible that Gaal had found Julia and held her now? Anger, no, hatred boiled in Alonzo. First the Terrians, now Julia? His heart hammered in his chest. If Gaal dared hurt even one hair on her head, he would pay, Alonzo swore to himself. He'd make the convict wish he had never been born.

The pilot looked around and his blood turned cold as he fully realized the danger they were in. The narrow valley offered only one way in and out. High hills loomed on all sides, covered with small trees and brush. The perfect place for an ambush, Alonzo thought.

One look at Danziger told him not to expect much in the way of guidance from the man right now. He was still trying to shush his daughter, who was sobbing quietly from shock and fear. Alonzo's eyes met Yale's.

The tutor nodded at Alonzo. The cyborg's military background would tell him the same thing – they had allowed themselves to be led into a very dangerous position.

Yale called out to the others to scatter and to find cover. Everyone ducked behind the vehicles or outcroppings of rock that were scattered across the valley floor. Baines and Walman powered up their MagPro's, while Alonzo grabbed Uly and without further ado dumped the boy in the Rover's cabin, where he would be safe.

The pilot crawled over to Yale, who crouched near the back of the Rover. Devon followed closely, her eyes silently thanking Alonzo for taking care of Uly.

Danziger managed to calm True and carried her to the TransRover's cabin quickly. He closed the door and commanded, "Vehicle secure. My voice only." The two children slouched to the floor, making themselves as small as possible. Their eyes were shining with fear.

"Now what?" Danziger asked the others near the TransRover. A few meters on either side of the large truck, Walman and Baines lay flat on their stomachs, MagPros pointed at the invisible danger.

"We have to find him before he finds us," Devon said. She shrugged helplessly. It sounded simple enough.

Yale motioned to the hilltops. "He's probably up there somewhere, waiting for us." The tutor pointed to a particular spot, a ridge that was partly covered by dense brush. "That's where I'd go," he said. "Good cover, perfect view and a straight firing line."

Alonzo trained the jumpers at the spot for a closer look. Yale was right, it was a perfect

place to lay in hiding. He wished the jumpers were equipped with infrared sensors; he would have been able to tell if anyone was hiding in the thickly leafed brush.

Danziger motioned to Baines and Walman to come with him and started to crawl to the foot of the hills. Alonzo made to follow but Danziger stopped him. "You and Yale stay here with the others, we need some armed men in the camp too. Just in case." Alonzo nodded in understanding and touched the handgun in his belt. He desperately wanted to get his hands on Gaal and wring the truth from the man's throat, but Danziger was right.

"Where you going?" Devon cut in.

"Up there," Danziger answered. "We've got to stop him before he kills us."

oOo

Julia gazed at the Terrian. She recalled Gaal's menacing promise, his plans to lure the Eden project into a trap. "Gaal is going to kill them. As he has killed so many of you," she said. "We've got to stop him. What can I do?"

"The Evil One must be stopped," the Terrian agreed. He motioned to the steaming pool beside them. "The Earth will take him, here, so he can do no more harm. He has to pay for his sins." Julia stared up at the Terrian, her eyes wide.

"You mean, you want to kill him?" she gasped. She wanted Gaal stopped. But help the Terrians murder him? That, she feared, might go against her oath as a doctor. The Terrian gazed down at her in understanding.

"That is what you humans call it, yes," he confirmed. "Our people believe that it is part of the greater circle of life. Once he is brought to the Mother, the Evil One will atone for sins done in the past. And he will not suffer. Not the way our brothers suffer, the ones that he prevents from entering the--" The Terrian stopped mid-sentence and tilted his head, apparently listening to something. Julia remained silent, straining her ears but no matter how hard she tried, she didn't hear a sound except for the soft gurgle of the pool beside her. She glanced at it. Yellow vapor drifted up slowly and disappeared. She wondered absently if the vapor was toxic.

Abruptly the Terrian rose to his feet in one fluid motion. He towered over her and she cocked her head to look up at him. He gestured to her to stand up and follow him. "We must go," he said. "Your friends have arrived. We have to hurry. There is no more time to explain."

Julia climbed to her feet. Her heart began to beat a little faster. They were here; Eden

project had come for her. She realized that time was short, that Gaal would be waiting for them. A shiver ran down her back when she remembered how he had stroked that MagPro almost hungrily, anticipating his revenge. Quickly she followed the old Terrian that disappeared into one of the tunnels.

oOo

Gaal woke with a start. Groggily, he glanced around, then chuckled to himself. He must have dozed off in the warm afternoon sun. He remembered his dream and his lips curled. He had been dreaming of revenge.

Abruptly he realized he heard voices, drifting up from the valley. That's what had woken him. Cautiously, he pushed a few twigs aside so he could look down. His smile widened. The time had come to make his dream come true.

With practiced movements, he loaded one of the shiny grenades in the launcher and took careful aim at the humans down below.

oOo

Eden Advance waited for things to come. They cowered behind rocks or beneath their vehicles, barely daring to breathe. The sun slowly sank below the crest of the hills and shrouded the valley in shadows. The only sound to break the tense silence, that hung almost palpably in the air, were Morgan's quiet mutterings, coming from behind the DuneRail where he lay with his arms around his wife in an attempt to protect her.

Danziger turned his attention back to the small animal trail he was following through the undergrowth and up the mountain. Baines and Walman had spread out and in a semi-circle formation they approached the ridge where they expected that Gaal was waiting. When they reached a scraggly brush above the ridge, Danziger cautiously pushed a branch aside and peered down.

They had picked the right spot. Gaal was flat on his stomach with a grenade launcher in his hands. The muzzle pointed down, straight at the group in the valley. Danziger gritted his teeth. This man had threatened his daughter once. Now, he did it again. Would they ever be able to stop him, short of killing him?

He was about to signal Baines to sneak up on Gaal, when the earth rumbled beneath them. The noise was familiar and Danziger fully expected a Terrian to appear. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw the ridge beneath them give way and begin to slide down in a jumble of loose rocks. Gaal had to let go of the launcher and grab on to the brush for support. This was their chance!

With a yell, Danziger jumped to his feet. Baines and Walman followed his example and together they pounced on Gaal who was catching his breath after nearly plunging down the mountain. At three to one, the odds weren't exactly in favor of the convict and the scuffle was brief. Danziger swung his left fist and it landed hard on Gaal's jaw. His knees buckled and Walman caught him when he slumped to the ground.

Baines climbed to his feet and pushed the brush aside. He waved at the people down below.

"We got him," he called.

A deep sigh of relief rippled through the group. Joyous grins relaxed previously grim faces. For once, after all the misfortunes they suffered, Lady Luck had smiled down on them. They all stood up, stamping their feet and stretching to relieve muscles that were cramped from their unnatural positions. Excited voices called to one another. Morgan's was the loudest. "I knew we'd be okay," he called, grinning, to whoever was nearby. He kept hugging Bess, who endured his affections with a tolerant smile.

oOo

The Terrian led Julia through the maze of tunnels and caverns, briskly and sure about where he was going. She tried to keep track of where he took her but soon lost her way - she wouldn't be able to return to the Mooncross pool without a guide if her life depended on it.

Her newfound vigor waned quickly and only her concern for Alonzo and the group kept her going. The fever had sapped her of her energies and Julia was soon gasping for breath, struggling to get one foot in front of the other without tripping over them. She stumbled and crashed into the wall, hard. The rock wall swam in front of her eyes and she called out to the Terrian. "Wait!"

He turned upon hearing her voice and walked back. "I'm sorry." His apology rang in her head. "I would take you through the Earth but that is not possible at this moment. We are almost there." He allowed her a few moments to catch her breath, then continued his walk through the tunnels.

A few more turns and twists, and the sun was a red ball on the distant horizon. Julia sighed with relief she saw the exit. Near the mouth of the tunnel the Terrian halted and raised a hand, warning her to be careful. Cautiously, she squeezed past him and stepped outside. The tunnel exited upon a narrow ledge, a cluster of brambles hiding the opening from curious eyes. She pushed the brush aside and peered down into a small, shadow-

filled valley.

She breathed in sharply, when she recognized the Eden project vehicles, a cluster of people milling between them. She squinted into the low sun to see better. Gaal was standing in the middle of the cluster, a small circle of clear ground around him. Several MagPro's were trained on the man. And in front of him stood Alonzo, shoulders hunched in obvious anger.

She took a breath and was about to call out to the group, when suddenly Alonzo lunged forward, knocking Gaal to the ground. He swung a hard right against the man's jaw, then scuttled away while Gaal was lying dazed on the ground. He grabbed the MagPro from Baines and pointed the weapon at the man on the ground. Even up on the ridge, Julia could hear him power up the weapon to maximum...

oOo

Gaal sported a split lip and an ugly scratch on his forehead, a lump was swelling slowly in the middle of it. He glared around at the camp, getting small satisfaction out of people backing up when his gaze fell on them.

Walman and Baines were laughing and throwing high fives with Magus and Cameron. True and Uly sat watching the scene behind the window of the TransRover's cabin. They were smiling, although True's cheeks were streaked with dried tears. "Man," Baines said, "if that ledge hadn't given way when it did, you'd all be dead meat!"

Devon walked up to Danziger, who held his MagPro aimed at their prisoner, barely concealed hatred flashing in his eyes. Alonzo followed her closely and before Devon could say a word, he turned on the criminal.

"Where is she?" he demanded. "What did you do to her?"

Gaal grinned maliciously. "I've no clue who you're talking about," he replied smoothly, "I sincerely wish to help, but alas..." He motioned with his hand in a helpless gesture. Something flashed on his pink. Alonzo caught the flash and squinted at the hand. His heart stopped beating for a moment when he recognized that it was Julia's thumb-ring that adorned the man's little finger.

"That's Julia's," Alonzo gasped, incredulously. A look of horror crossed his face and hatred burned in his eyes when he looked up to meet Gaal's malevolent smile. "You bastard!" Before anyone could stop him, the pilot leaped forward, pounced on Gaal and threw him to the ground. "You're dead," he grunted between clenched teeth as he swung a right hook against Gaal's jaw. His fist connected with a painful crunch and Gaal's eyes

glazed over.

Alonzo scrambled back and shook his throbbing hand before grabbing the MagPro from a startled Baines. He powered it up to maximum. A red haze swam in front of his eyes. Gaal had found Julia and stolen her ring – there was no way to know if she were alive or dead when he did. And God only knew what else he might have done to her...

He pointed the gun at Gaal, ignoring Devon's pleas and Danziger's shouted warnings. Slowly he placed his finger upon the firing button and pressed down...

"Stop! Alonzo, no!" A familiar voice reached him through the pounding of the blood in his ears. Julia!

He turned in the direction of her voice, the red curtain of rage slowly melting away. There! There she was, on a ledge overlooking the valley, right above them. Alonzo unceremoniously dumped the MagPro back in Baines' arms and raced up the hillside. He scrambled on the loose footing, sending down debris with every step. Julia! He charged through the brush, ignoring the large thorns that scratched at his arms and hands. She was here and she was alive. That was all that mattered.

Half way between the ridge and the valley floor he reached her, Julia cautiously making her way down. He lifted her and swung her around and they fell together in a jumble of arms and legs, sliding down a few meters in a shower of small rocks and dirt. He was appalled by the way she looked: eyes that were dull and sunken above hollow cheeks. Yet, she had never looked more beautiful to him. He hugged her tight, nearly crushing her, and kissed her fiercely.

"Oh God, Julia, I thought I'd lost you!" he breathed in her ear.

She hugged him back and sighed against his throat, "So did I, 'Lonzo..."

Tears trickled down her cheeks and he kissed them away. "I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean what I said—" Before he could continue she put a finger to his lips to silence him. She smiled through her tears.

"Neither did I," she apologized. He stared at her a moment, gazing deep into her eyes. He could drown in their blue depths, he knew. "Lonzo, we both said some things—" Suddenly Julia's smile faltered and concern flashed across her features.

"The Terrians, Alonzo, we've got to help them." He climbed to his feet and helped her get up. Their arms locked tightly around each other, they started a cautious descent along the treacherous slope.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Is it Gaal?" She nodded in reply.

"Yes. He's been murdering them again, just like before. And he keeps their remains, preventing them from entering the earth. I'm not sure I understand it completely," she said as they reached the bottom, where Devon met them. The two women hugged briefly.

"Glad to see you back," Devon said softly. Julia nodded.

"Devon, the Terrians want us to hand over Gaal to them," she said. "They want to take him into the earth to stop him for good – and they need the remains of the Terrians he murdered. From what they tell me," –Devon exchanged a surprised look with Alonzo — "I think their spirits can't find peace if their bodies aren't taken into the ground," Julia concluded. Alonzo nodded slowly, a pensive look on his face. It made sense; after all, the aliens were a part of the planet.

"Why don't they take Gaal themselves?" Devon wondered.

"Because of the bones," a small voice piped up. They looked down to see True had joined their group. "He's wearing a necklace of Terrian bones to keep him safe," she continued to explain. "Just like he was last time. He said he would make one for me too..." Her voice faltered while her eyes drifted towards the man who was slowly climbing back to his feet.

Julia knelt and hugged the girl's small body. "He won't hurt you, True," she said. "We'll make sure of that." Over the girl's head, her eyes locked with Danziger's, who was guarding Gaal. He nodded once in agreement to her words.

The small group walked to the middle of the camp, where Gaal stood. Three men hefting MagPros guarded him, daring him to make a false move. The crewmembers all greeted and hugged Julia, welcoming her back. Alonzo stayed close at her side, beaming with happiness. Julia gladly returned their hugs, grateful to be back among this group that she considered her family. Then she approached Gaal; she glanced up at the ridge and thought she detected a tall shadow in the brambles.

"Well, well, doctor," Gaal sneered, ignoring the guns. Madness flickered in his eyes. He tentatively touched his bruised jaw, glaring hotly at Alonzo. "You are far more resilient than I gave you credit for. I should have let you die. You couldn't have warned your friends then."

"That wasn't me." Julia shook her head. "And I am grateful that you saved my life. Still, it

doesn't make up for all the harm you have done."

Chapter 9

Eden project was divided. The discussion centered about whether or not to deliver Gaal to the Terrians. Julia was in doubt, but Alonzo adamantly argued for surrendering the criminal. "Gaal has to be handed to the Terrians, so they can take him into the earth," he stated. "It is only right that the Terrians can extract justice after the harm he did them."

"Woah," Morgan said. "I'm not so sure. Isn't this a matter of Terrian politics? Devon, I don't think we should get involved in this matter. Let's simply leave that man here and get back on our way."

Devon was undecided. "That's not a solution, Morgan," she said. The idea was appealing though. "No matter what, Gaal is a human being. Perhaps he should be brought to human justice."

"Human justice?" Alonzo said hotly. "That's what created this problem in the first place – by dumping him here." He threw his arms wide, indicating the planet. "Aside from the practical problems, we can't take—" From the corner of his eye he caught Julia yawning, exhaustion finally catching up with her. His dark eyes suddenly softening with love, Alonzo squinted in concern. Devon caught his worried glance and stood up.

"All right," she said. "I need time to think. We all do. So everybody, go get a good night's sleep. We'll decide in the morning, when we're fresh and rested."

Casting a grateful look at the group's leader, Alonzo led Julia back to her tent. She leaned on him tiredly. Bess and Morgan retreated to their sleeping quarters and slowly everyone followed their example. Soon, Devon was alone, staring in the flames, trying to make up her mind. She knew that, in the end, they would all look to her for a final decision.

After a while, she sighed and got up. She walked toward the lone tent at the edge of camp where they kept Gaal, under guard. In front of the tent, his eyes on the opening, sat Danziger, MagPro resting on his knees.

"Evening, John," Devon said and plopped down next to Danziger on the fallen log that served as a seat.

"Adair," he nodded, without taking his eyes off the tent. Through the parted opening she could see Gaal sitting with his legs folded under him. He softly hummed a toneless tune, his upper body swaying back and forth. Idly, he fondled his necklace of bones. As if he felt her eyes resting on him, he suddenly looked up and grinned knowingly. She shivered

involuntarily as his gaze traveled over her.

"So, what are we going to do with him?" Danziger asked.

"I don't know," Devon replied quietly. "I'd like to hear your opinion. Handing him to the Terrians is the same as sentencing him to death. And I'm not sure if we have that right..." Her voice trailed off. Danziger stayed silent for a moment.

Then, his voice low but resolute, he asked, "Do we have a right *not* to deliver him to the Terrians?" She whirled her head around and stared at him. "Look at it this way," he continued. "Gaal paid for his crimes against men when they dumped him here. He'll now have to pay for his crimes against the Terrians. Shouldn't they be the ones to pass their justice?"

oOo

The next morning over breakfast Devon announced her intent to take Gaal to the Terrians. Not everyone was convinced that this was the right thing to do, but nobody was prepared to take Gaal along to New Pacifica either. And they couldn't simply leave him behind. Thus, while the sun advanced over the crest of the hills, a small procession climbed up the slope towards the entrance of the tunnels.

Julia led the way, closely followed by Alonzo who kept a fond eye on her. Gaal was next; his hands were tied in front of him and he seemed unconcerned by his fate. Close on his heels were Danziger and Baines, both armed. Devon—who felt that since she was the closest thing to human authority here, her presence was required—followed the two guards.

When they came to the cave, Julia hesitated. "I don't know the way," she said softly to Alonzo. Before he could reply, a shadow moved inside the tunnel and the old Terrian stepped out. He tilted his head at Julia, then turned to eye Gaal. Terrians weren't prone to emotional displays but he stiffened ever so slightly when the criminal glared a challenge at him. Without a sound, he turned, leaving the group to follow.

During the long walk through the maze nobody said a word. They were all immersed in their own thoughts. Only Gaal broke the quiet shuffling of their feet as he was humming his maddening tune. At last, they came to the chamber with the steaming pool.

For a moment, the humans looked about them uncertainly. Alonzo recalled the time that Uly stood near an exact replica of this pool, talking to the Terrians. It was the first time the boy's link to the Terrians had manifested so clearly. He cast an eye at Devon. She was shifting restlessly, no doubt remembering too.

Julia glanced at the Terrian that stood waiting near the pool. In niches along the wall, other Terrians stood motionless, staring ahead. They weren't sleeping though. Alonzo could almost grasp their thoughts as they flitted across his mind.

When Julia moved, he turned his attention back to the young doctor. She approached Gaal slowly, quietly. He stared down at her, an insolent half smile on his face.

"Doc, be careful," Alonzo admonished her. He shifted his weight. He wasn't very comfortable with her standing so close to the dangerous criminal, even with two activated MagPros pointed at the man's head and his hands tied.

"Maybe this will purge your soul," Julia said in a low voice. She hesitated a moment longer and, with a quick, sideways glance at the steaming pool, she reached up to his necklace of bones.

Gaal's head whipped up, staring past her, eyes wide. "What the..." he said. The attention of the guards wavered for a brief moment when they turned to see what caught Gaal's eye and quick as a snake he grabbed Julia's wrist in a sudden fluid motion. He twisted it painfully. Julia let out a yell, both in surprise and in pain. He spun her around and clamped his arm around her throat. His face contorted with a triumphant grimace. "Gotcha," he growled.

Julia struggled to draw breath, slowly choking in the man's strong hold. She fumbled with her free hand for the necklace. When she managed to wrap her fingers around a large bone, she tugged violently. With a soft snap the cord broke. Gaal shrieked in anger and in fear; his face contorted with terror, eyes bulging. While the bones scattered across the chamber floor, he backed away slowly, dragging her along.

The MagPros, though fired up, were useless now that Gaal held the young doctor as a shield in front of him. When the air in her lungs gave out, Julia lost consciousness and slouched in his arms. Gaal reached the entrance to the chamber, dropped her body and disappeared into the dark tunnel.

Danziger uttered an expletive so cruel that it sent the blood rushing to Devon's cheeks. As one, Baines and Danziger lunged for the darkness that seemed to have swallowed the criminal. A sudden, bright flash of light caused them to avert their gaze, blinding them for a few seconds. The Terrians that stood in the niches came to life, their staffs crackling with energy. The smell of ozone permeated the air. One by one the Terrians sank in the ground, leaving the stunned humans behind. A loud scream rose deep inside the tunnel, followed by another. Then only silence remained. Cautiously, Baines and Danziger peered into the tunnel.

Alonzo raced over towards Julia's still body as soon as Gaal disappeared, dropping to his knees. He cradled her in his arms and bent over her.

"Julia, please, say something," he pleaded. But she remained unconscious. Cold fear gripped his heart. He lost her once; he couldn't lose her again. He felt for a heartbeat and was relieved to feel a weak pulse beneath his fingers. Suddenly, a strong hand clamped his shoulder. He spun around, nearly dropping Julia's body, fearing attack.

He sighed with relief when he recognized the old Terrian that stood behind him. Gray and wizened, the creature stretched out his hand and covered Julia's brow a moment. Then he withdrew. Alonzo turned his attention back to the woman in his arms. Gratitude welled in his heart when her eyes fluttered open and focused on his face. Groggily, she sat up, staring around a little nonplussed. Then she spotted the Terrian standing behind Alonzo. She eyed the creature questioningly and he twittered softly.

Bewildered, she turned to Alonzo. "What did he say? I didn't understand... like I did before." The creature trilled again, a low rumble that seemed to come from deep inside his chest.

"He says that your need is gone. His people are grateful for your help. Gaal is taken to the Mother."

Cautiously Julia got to her feet, holding on to Alonzo for support. She stared around the chamber and noticed the scattered Terrian remains on the floor. A small bone was lying near her feet and she stooped to pick it up. She placed it gently in the Terrian's outstretched hand. The creature bowed his head slightly and garbled some more.

"He thanks you for bringing peace to his brothers," Alonzo said softly in her ear, his arms slipping around her waist. Julia turned in Alonzo's embrace to face him. He gazed into her eyes a moment and slowly lowered his head to kiss her gently on the lips.

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