

Alien Jungle

PLANET 327-01 DG TAURI B

Ice exploded like a shot, filling the air with crystalline shards. Trace Hanson dove behind an outcropping, drawing his stat-gun. The cavern was large and laced with passages, slicked over with ice glowing blue with trapped gas. Ledges rose in levels from the curved floor. Nothing moved. He leaned forward, searching.

A blast shattered the frozen ridge, stinging his face. He ran for a tunnel and pressed against the wall. Who? Where? The cavern was filled with places to hide. Think. Think.

Ice blew apart above his head.

Trace ran. The weight of his footsteps jolted his body as he thundered through the tight corridor. This was ridiculous. He was a Colonial Scout, trained in first contact situations. If someone was shooting at him, he needed to take control.

He'd arrived on this world the day before, dropped onto the middle of a glacier by an Impellic ring, a programmable wormhole. He had three days to prove the planet worthy of colonization—and he didn't want to activate the ring prematurely.

A bang rang his ears. Slush struck his cheek. Trace ducked and fell, sliding down a slanted tunnel, arms and legs flailing, fighting for purchase. He came to rest against a blue-splotched embankment. He looked back. No movement. Get up. They might be following.

Who might be following?

Struggling to his feet, he crept along the new passage, wiping gloved hands over his

dripping face. He pulled his mask down from atop his head and snapped it into place, keying the mike with his tongue.

“Davrileo, what’s your position?”

Only static. Trace winced. Why had he listened when Davrileo suggested they split up to search the caves? He was team leader—his partner’s safety was his responsibility. Leave it to him to screw up his first command.

“Davrileo! Come in!”

“Right here, boss,” said Davrileo Mas.

Trace sagged in relief. “Where are you? Are you all right?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Someone’s shooting. An energy weapon.”

A pause, then, “That doesn’t add. I’m seeing evidence of a primitive race—nothing to indicate high-level weaponry.”

Trace scowled. “I’m telling you, your primitives are armed.” He shook his head. “Look, just get back to the mouth of the cave. Keep your eyes open.”

“Roger, that.”

The com clicked off. Trace continued forward, eyes darting, cursing himself for his cowardice. As team leader, he was expected to be equal to any challenge. His job was to certify a planet safe. He’d wanted this mission to be perfect, wanted to impress his superiors, show them what he could do.

But most of all, he wanted to impress Impani. He groaned. Impani had already been named team leader three times. She embraced each new planet like a fascinating puzzle. Like he should be doing—instead of running away.

He slumped against the wall. His body ached, crawling with sweat, the skinsuit unable to compensate. Growing circles of fog marred his faceplate. He lifted his mask.

Cold. So cold. His nostrils crackled. Breath hung in a frosted cloud. Pulling off his gloves, he wiped his eyes and breathed the warmth of his fingers. He imagined steam rising from his overheated body.

The ceiling shattered. Trace dodged into a narrow passage, running full out with arms over his head. Ice pelted his back as blasts rang behind. The tunnel twisted. His feet shot from beneath him, and he skidded on his backside into a large cavern. The gun clattered away.

Movement caught his eye. He looked over at a scrawny, hairless humanoid swaddled in strips of fur. It was the size of a child. Its mouth dropped open, showing blocky teeth.

Trace scuttled backward, boots slipping on the slick floor. He fumbled blindly for his gun, not willing to take his gaze from the alien. The ice felt hot against his bare palm. It felt wet, as if melting. Cracking and popping, the ground burst into slush beneath his hand.

Trace froze as if time had ended. Ice. Trapped gas. The ice exploded *beneath* his hand. Realization thudded against his stomach. The blasts started after he removed his mask. No one had shot at him. His body heat caused the gas in the ice to explode.

He stared at the alien, saw the beaded necklace about its neck, saw the emptiness in its hands. Then he saw Davrileo Mas step from a tunnel across the cavern, raising his gun.

“Wait!” Trace cried too late.

Davrileo’s shot illuminated the alien, encasing it in a bright aura, holding it upright. Its body was whisper thin. It fell in slow motion.

Time released him. Trace rushed toward the fallen alien. Scorch sizzled in its back. He turned the body over, searching for signs of life, not knowing where to look for a pulse.

“You told me they were shooting at you,” Davrileo said, his voice sharp with recrimination. “You said they were armed.”

Trace looked at him, words caught in a knot. It was a mistake. A terrible mistake. No one had shot at him. Then his thoughts settled on Impani’s mantra: we aren’t here to butcher the locals.



PLANET 1186-9 HH30

How could things go so wrong? Impani wondered, gazing over the turbulent lake. Driving rain pounded her body.

Her partner climbed beside her. “You can’t be serious.”

She looked at him, past his rain-streaked faceplate and into his large black eyes. Anselmi was humanoid—two arms, two legs, one head—but so pale he was silver, so thin he appeared brittle. People said that he and his kind were telepathic. Not many Scouts

wanted to work with him. But Impani liked having a partner who knew her thoughts. Until now.

“You said it yourself. There is nothing here,” she shouted over the rain. “We have to cross the lake.”

“It’s too wide. Even your resonator can’t reach the other side.”

She looked back at the craggy, scabrous land. No animals. No plants. A paradox. I’m team leader, she thought, and I make the decisions—then wondered if he heard her.

“Impani, not every mission has to be spectacular.”

True. But she had gained a reputation as a risk-taker who always learned something extraordinary—and she found that she liked being a rogue.

“I’m going.” She switched on her jet pack. Its power rattled her teeth.

“Why?” shouted Anselmi. “Why is it so important?”

“Because there is air,” she shouted back. “An m-class oxygen atmosphere. There must be plant life somewhere. And I intend to find it.”

She lifted from the rough bank. Rain lashed as if to push her back to ground. With one hand on the control pad, she rose over the churning water. The land disappeared as if it had never been, obliterated by the sheeting storm.

Impani felt enveloped in gray fog. She felt that she could fly for days and not see anything. No visibility. No resonance scans. What was she doing?

She thought again about being a rogue. She knew not everyone admired her for it, even suspected that several of her peers avoided her. Reckless, they said. It didn’t matter. She didn’t need anyone’s approval.

But then Anselmi pulled alongside, hanging like a shadow. Immense relief flooded her. The com clicked in her ear.

“Something is there,” Anselmi said.

Impani squinted through the rain. A jagged mass loomed ahead. Most likely it was rocks on the opposite shore. She smirked with vindication. Then the mass moved.

“Look out!” yelled Anselmi as a huge tentacle splashed down between them.

Impani reeled to one side, caught in its wake. She struggled for altitude, felt a sickening drop as the pack sputtered. Before her, a massive balloon-like body broke the surface of the lake—and part of her thought, this is new, we haven’t seen a giant squid monster before. It appeared transparent in the dark water. Tentacles waved around a beak-like

mouth. Reaching for her.

Impani screamed. She mashed the controls of her jet pack, kicking her feet as if she would run away. With horrible slowness, a tentacle curled about her chest. Impani arched her back, clawing at the crushing pressure. Flashing stars encroached upon her vision.

A spear of light shot through the haze. The grip about her slackened. Impani wheezed and gulped the air. Anselmi fired his stat-gun again. Tentacles thrashed. For a dizzying moment, Impani was hoisted upward. Then the creature plunged her into the water as it dove beneath the surface.