

CHAPTER TWO

Dassin

Dr. Dassin Selmi bit her lip as she replayed Voicke's voice-mem. He'd done 'the-more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger' number on her. Shaking his head and emphasising his disappointment at her "unexpected breach of security in passing on classified info to Professor Bai," he'd even managed a heartcrushed sigh. Smiler didn't do subtle and if she wasn't so crumming mizzed, Dassin might have found it funny. But his unfounded accusation just about pushed her to the end of her airline and she was fighting a wimping impulse to sit down and cry.

Banjuk, the DNA and genetic scientist in whom she *had* confided, popped her head around the corner of her workstation booth. "Did you hear about the mega-scene Bai made in Smiler's office? 'Parently he erupted into Admin like a probe hitting warp-speed and poor Jarca-" Banjuk intruded into her space, "Are you smooth? Cos if you're not well, you've probably gone down with the same thing that's hit Bai."

"I'm fine, thanks muchly. And try to remember that Bai is only on some gape-brained exercise for his own amusement." Dassin didn't bother to cut her any more slack, as the crumming woman obviously couldn't keep her mouth welded shut.

Banjuk snorted - a loud, equine sound that Dassin hated. "If you think that, you should take a look at him. He's clearly running a mega-temp and sweating enough to drown himself."

Dassin flicked the grotting memtab across to Banjuk, sick of trying to hold together some non-existent team for the sake of the lab unit. Time she told it like it was. "Well, this is my problem right now. Know anything about it?"

As she listened to Voicke, Banjuk's avid interest morphed into guilty confusion, then wide-eyed contrition.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, returning the tab to Dassin.

"Well?" Dassin found her craven apology vexing. Banjuk should've known better. Sorrying wasn't going to fix this mess. Dassin gazed angrily around the semi-circular laboratory area that had been her working environment for the past two years. The luminously bright surfaces and walls, hung with every type of nanolab kit she could possibly need; the crawler bots ceaselessly trundling around the lab monitoring for any dangerous microscopic organisms; her own workstation... Galaxytrust did technical design well and until a few months ago, she had felt safe and happy working here, convinced they'd beat this problem, despite the mega difficulties. Then everything had changed and the grotting lab had become more like a battle zone.

Banjuk slumped onto the nearest lab stool and moved it far too close to her, "Bai went on and on word-wheedling at me; wanting to know what you were doing for Voicke. I couldn't focus on my work, so I..." she shrugged.

"Well, thank you overmuch for nothing at all. Now I'll know what to do next time you're zilched, Banjuk. I'll just flush you out the airlock in exactly the same way." She shook with an unexpected blast of fury - after all the times Dassin had helped her out.

Before receiving Voicke's memtab, she'd been looking forward to a quiet afternoon from the humming tension that Bai always produced in the lab. Pretending to be infected by a nanobug, he'd shut himself up in the Quarantine Quarters. She'd not met anyone of Chinese extraction before his arrival, but understood from the dataslabs she'd scrolled through that the Chinese were generally a close-mouthed, inscrutable lot. An info nugget that hadn't seeped through to Professor Bai Xing-hua,

who was exhausting to work alongside. Dassin hadn't fully appreciated the quiet teamwork that old Hanson had built up till Bai had abruptly replaced him, four months ago. It seemed more like four years. And they were still no nearer fixing the problem that had zilched Hanson.

Dassin turned away from Banjuk and wondered for the *n*th time how she was going to stick out this noxious contract. Bad enough that she was stuck in the lab with Bai and Banjuk, who quarrelled constantly about every double-cursed hypothesis and result. But her own work was also stalled. She was supposed to be down on Hera's surface, examining the planet's bacteria and microbial life. Except that since last month's fatality, all non-essential staff were withdrawn 'until further notice'. Meantime, Voicke had foisted upon her a trolleybot of vids on flickering lights, mumbling something about "...this lot being her field." Where'd he got that gape-brained notion?

"Dassin? I am so mega-sorry. I'll go and see Voicke, tell him it was me." Banjuk's eyes brimmed with tears.

Dassin sighed, her righteous anger leaching away at the sight of Banjuk's distress.

She awkwardly waved her hand, "Don't bother. I shouldn't have told you, either. You'll only get one of his grotting little lectures, and we'll still be in a black hole with him till we've sort out the Heran problem." She tried to smile, but her face felt stiff. "Galaxytrust have probably given him a verbal whipping, so he's just passing on the pain."

Banjuk gabbled something in reply, but Dassin wasn't listening properly. She'd just seen the memtab transferred onto her official log and realised that there was a second part to the message that she hadn't bothered to access. The part where Voicke informed her that she would be working with the newly arrived Sigs and Coms unit - part of Intel. Dassin closed her eyes in silent despair. First Bai Xing-hua and now Intel. What had she *done* to deserve these shoddy breaks?

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Xing-hua

Bai Xing-hua staggered to his feet, half asleep, waking painfully when he walked into the bulkhead where his toilet should be and only then remembering that he was still in the Quarantine Quarters. After finding the toilet and having a pee, he knew he wouldn't get back to sleep so he waved a hand at the timer option. It was 03.36.

Ah, so his forty-eight hour infectious stage was now up and he could now safely leave the Quarantine Quarters. As a precaution, he gave himself a physical. His temp was back to normal, and although his mouth felt as if something had crawled inside it and died there in the night, his head was no longer throbbing and his joints were almost pain-free. He wandered into the lab, intending to cut through to the all-night counter in Galley No. 2. But as he passed the stack of soil samples in their sealed containers, he paused. Why not perform the experiment now, while no one was else around?

Heart pounding, Xing-hua prepared a meddy bot with burn-relieving gel and painkiller. As he cracked the seal on the first soil sample from Hera, an alarm skirled and the lighting flickered. Cursing and sweating, Xing-hua rushed to kill the noise, then manually over-rode the auto filter controls in the lab.

“Professor Bai here. Many regrets for the row. Everything is Alpha Uno Green. No problems, excepting this clumsy boff knocking the bench and disturbing some equipment.”

The slow voice of a sleepy guard muttered, “Thanks muchly for letting us know double-hasty, Professor. It’s downright shoddy how many bods don’t bother to info us when it’s a false alarm.”

Xing-hua muttered an acknowledgement and returned to his soil sample. The small pile of red dirt in the bottom of the container looked innocuous enough. But soil from the planet Hera attacked human skin causing deep, burn-like injuries. The whole colonisation project on Hera had been slammed into reverse while the scientists struggled to find a cure. In the two years that Space Station *Ilex* had been orbiting the double-cursed planet, hundreds of screening agents, emulsions, barrier creams had been tried. And every single one had failed.

When Xing-hua had arrived four months earlier, it seemed self-evident to him that they needed to break the soil down to its microbacterial constituents and isolate the offending microbes. This was relatively quick and easy, as part of the work had already been completed during the production process of all those null-brained creams. The next step was to concoct a vaccine to neutralise the aggressive microbes. He had battled unceasingly with Banjuk, who’d wanted to genetically alter the planeters’ immune system to cope with the soil. However, Xing-hua had enough experience within Galaxytrust to know that would tie them up for years trying to get permission for human experiments.

Meanwhile, the colonisation of Hera would be zilched, for cert. And Xing-hua wasn’t having a failure like that baning his ceevee. Oh no. So once he’d made up an effective vaccine – relatively straightforward for someone of his genius - he’d used himself as a labrat. He had already tried the soil antidote on a couple of mice and a puppy he’d grown on from the stored embryos, so he was sure it would work. But monitoring the vaccine’s side-effects was only the first part of the experiment. Would he now be immune to the soil burn?

Xing-hua took a deep breath and extracted a tiny pinch of dirt from the sample. His hand was shaking so much that the fine dust spilt across the palm of his hand. Xing-hua reacted instinctively. He frantically washed the dust off his hand and watched for the reddening rash to appear; for the painful itching to start; for the skin to bubble into pus-filled blisters; for the blisters to pop into weeping sores that took months to heal, often needing the help of a regen tank which the station didn’t yet possess. Nothing happened. He examined his hand under the ‘scopescreen. The skin structure was completely intact.

Blotting his sweaty forehead on the sleeve of his lab robe, Xing-hua carefully extracted a small scoopful of soil and trickled it onto the back of his little finger. The dry dirt spilled over his skin and onto the bench cover. His finger remained pale yellow. No scarlet welts seared the skin. He pushed the tip of his little finger into the mound of soil still in the container. No reaction. Recklessly he buried his whole hand in the dirt. Which felt scratchy and dry. But no burning. No blisters. Just to make sure, he cracked open every other soil sample from Hera and shoved both hands into the containers. The dirt slid harmlessly off his unblemished skin.

Xing-hua’s emotions surged with triumphant joy.

He capered around the dimly lit lab, “I’ve done it! I’ve done it!”

Then collapsed onto a stool, relieved tears trickling down his face. So much had been at stake. His reputation; the continued success of his career; the future of this space station as well as the very generous credstack that Galaxytrust had offered

him, if successful. Once he left here, he could afford to start up his own lab. Xing-hua's head spun with the cresting possibilities suddenly peeling open to him. Now, he just needed Voicke's permission to test his vaccine on a couple of volunteers.

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Tate

Tate Yarker, Maintenance First Grade, snapped awake, panting and sweat-slicked, his head ringing with receding echoes of the same old dream. Lally screaming to him for help... him a sobbing mess on the floor... the Intel bod staring at him, in silent accusation. Didn't save Lally. Didn't save any of them. Just walked away from the whole mess without a scratch.

Tate stumbled to his feet. It was stifling in here and reeking of his fear stench, he couldn't breathe. Needed to get out. He pulled on some clothes and staggered out of the tiny dom. Corridor lighting was dimmed to night level and the traveller was still and would be until someone stepped on it. Tate didn't bother. He ran along the corridor until he came to the steps and lift. No one ever took the ladder-like steps, there in the event of the anti-grav or the station power supply failing. Tate climbed down them now, feeling the harshness of the metallic-tasting air burning the back of his throat as he gasped. Needed to spend more time in the gym, that was for cert.

As he stepped off the bottom rung Tate bent over, grabbing his knees with his hands as he got his breath back. Then, slightly giddy, he walked slowly along the corridor, taking a couple of right turns until he came to Life Support, Section 3. Red light strobed across the door, as Tate fixed his eyes on it. One of the trimsome perks of his job, was his ability to access almost any part of the station and once his retina scan was complete, the door slid open.

The reeds rattled gently until the door closed again and a rich smell of water and wet dirt wafted across to him. He slipped his shoes off and gingerly stepped onto the soft green shoots carpeting the ground. Apparently this stuff grew by the yard on many planets, though Tate had never seen it outside purification plants. Grass, they called it. He carefully walked to the edge of the pond, sat down and stretched out along the damp ground. The longer blades tickled the side of his face, as he gazed into the still water, through the reed stalks. He felt his tension-knots uncoil, lying on the bank. Lucky to get this place to himself. Other people liked coming here, too. Especially lovers. Sex on the grass was a supra experience, apparently. Tate hadn't tried it. He wondered if Raneë would like to come here with him, once their relationship reached that stage. Another, entirely more pleasurable tension started to build, as he fantasised about having Raneë alongside him right now.

For the hundredth time, Tate wondered whether to go to the VR Bar, dial up Raneë's stats and make love to a virtual model of her. He sat up and fumbled for a credtab. If he couldn't find one, that answered the question. He cursed as his fingers closed around a 100 credtab in his trouser pocket. He'd been struggling with this temptation for the past four months, since she'd arrived on the station. But he'd had to join the end of a long line of throbstruck men and a few women. Interest died, as it generally did, when the word went round that she wasn't making free with her affections. Didn't put Tate off, though. And a few weeks ago they'd gotten into the habit of meeting up for a drink together.

He found it hard – in all senses – to be with her and not touch. But her aloofness was part of the draw. His mates couldn't understand why he didn't ease his frustration down by a cresting slot-sesh with her in the VR Bar. However in his

experience, that always took the shiny off the real thing and he fiercely didn't want that with Raneë.

Perhaps he could bring her here for a picnic. Offer her food and drink and get to know her better. Then, maybe... just maybe she would lie back on this wonderful grass and love him. Help ease down the tension knots in his head. And help to banish the fear constantly lurking on the edge of his being, since Intel's arrival on *Ilex*.

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Jacey

Jacey hadn't thought she'd sleep well in these new surroundings but she'd been wrong. Her head had hit the stylocush and she didn't know a thing till she awoke to Lieutenant Krama's voice shouting through the intercom. As she sat up in bed in her very own snug dom, she grinned up at the wallscreen holo of *Ilex* spinning in space where she'd transferred from her dataslate. It had been the longest time since she'd slept in a room alone. She was majorly going to like it here.

She pulled on her Body Honing kit and set off for the gym, as per Lieutenant Krama's yelled instructions. She jogged along the corridor, instead of taking the travellator, trying to unstiffen sore muscles that had seized up in the crash couch. Last night all her airy intentions to exercise had blown away with her sudden exhaustion. She took the lift down to the gym and met up with the three uniforms and Krama.

Who had a face on him moodier than the blackest hole. "When I say I want you here in ten, Rexen, I'm not talking days!"

"Regrets, sir." Grotting hells, she'd need to get her sleepstuffed bod out of bed at least another ten minutes ahead of the dressing males as the female doms were right at the other end of the station.

Krama had them all running, jumping and drilling up and down the noxxing gym, till Jacey reckoned they'd worn grooves in the floor. As she slogged back to her room, dripping with sweat, one of her neighbours started to stir so she grabbed her clean uniform and rushed off to the showers. The water was the colder side of tepid, but Jacey didn't mind as it helped cool her down. She recalled her initial disappointment with *Ilex* with tilted amusement cos she'd done the place a disservice. It was better constructed than military buildings with unexpected touches of luxury that surprised and pleased her, like holos on the walls and carpeting on most flooring, other than corridors. And her own dom, of course.

Galley No. One was situated on the level under the gym, and by the time Jacey got there, the men were already shovelling their breakfast down. Jacey wondered if slotcrawling males had designed the station so they got the best places in the gym and the galley. At this time in the morning, they were the only people in the galley and the foodtechs weren't a happy-looking bunch. Jacey put on her best smile for the bane-faced bod behind the counter. Always supra policy to get on the cresting side of the folk with the food... But she might as well have saved her strength. The foodtech gave her a shoddy look as he shucked the leaves off an eggplant, cracked it open and fried it, smiley face up. She snagged a chunk of breadfruit to eat with it, along with a couple of baked bacon petals and joined the rest of her team.

"Making a career out of being tardy, Rexen?" Krama growled.

"Regrets, sir." Nothing more to say, really. If she tried to offer any excuse, like the fact that her dom was over half a mile away from the grotting galley, she'd only find herself scumsprayed even deeper with Krama. She hunched over her food

and tried to down it fast, which was a major shame cos they might be mizzed out drossers, but those foodtechs cooked a scorching good brekkie.

“We’ve got an RV with Captain Farr. While you scumsacs have been wafting about the gym and gluttoning your food, the Cap’s been familiarising herself with the Station’s Receiving Unit.” Krama announced.

Jacey mopped up the last of her egg juice with a hunk of bread and stuffed it into her mouth, as everyone else rose from the table after a comfortable wait to let their food settle. It was gonna be one of those days. However she was able to catch her breath while Krama and Corporal Pickett messed about with the station’s security over-rides.

S.S. *Ilex*’s Receiving Unit was on the end of the station just a short walk along the corridor from Galley One and up one level in the lift. As it had been sealed off from the rest of station personnel, Lieutenant Krama had been given a security key. However it wasn’t working. Corporal Pickett offered to “fix” it so they could get in, which got the first smile out of Krama, that Jacey’d seen so far since they’d arrived on *Ilex*. Young Private Capov was sent right to the other end of the station to the lab with a message for Dr. Dassin Selmi, the xenoboff who also had a copy of the key. Jacey reckoned it was baneful lackluck on Capov that he was instructed “not to prone all over the grotting traveller.” A long old run, there and back. Not that Jacey was too sobstruck over the prospect of standing around propping up the station bulkhead for a coupla dozen mins.

In the event, Capov accompanied by Dr. Selmi and Captain Farr turned up together. Captain Farr had gone scouting for another key, as her copy also didn’t work. But as she wasn’t panting like a worn airscrubber, like poor Capov, Jacey reckoned she didn’t run all the way. Jacey was pleasantly surprised; Dr. Dassin Selmi was a friendly bod who seemed more than happy to show them around the R.U.

The Receiving Unit looked like a bubble stuck on the end of the *Ilex*, bristling with receiving dishes, antennae and amplifying nets. It was on three levels, jammed with observation and recording equipment and designed to be fully automatic so they had to squeeze between and around all the technical furniture. Jacey noticed that there was just one small stool – and only semi-organic at that. It was going to be a miserable butt-numbing experience, standing watch in the R.U, she reckoned.

But that was before Dr. Selmi showed them the obs that the R.U. was picking up. As Jacey watched the ‘scope screen, she was startled to see flashes of light flickering in amongst the ochre-orange clouds of Zeus.

“Hey! Look at the ‘scope on Hera. Is there anyone down there?” Pickett called out from behind her.

Dr. Selmi moved away from her side and went to look, with Jacey following. Hera was a lot closer than Zeus. The lights from the gas giant appeared to be intermittent blue-white flashes, but on Hera, they were far more intense and strobed through the full colour spectrum.

Jacey stared at the lights while time around her slowed... She scabbled for her dataslate and was dimly conscious of jabbing out the order in which the colours flashed. All that mattered was recording and recognising the pattern...

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Jacey took a shuddering breath and blinked her sore eyes. She looked up from the ‘scope screen. Captain Farr was quietly scrolling through the coms data but no one

else seemed to be in here. Jacey flexed her cramped hand and looked down at her dataslate. The screen was full of letters.

She read the last line – BGGRVIVVYOOG – then scrolled up. And up and up. There were pages and pages of letters, as she'd punched out the letters of the flashing lights.

How long had she been standing here?

She felt queasy. This was the first time since her familiarisation training that her neural implant had kicked in. She hadn't imagined it would be like this...

"You're back with us, then."

Jacey spun round at the sound of the Cap's voice. "Yes'm."

"I haven't worked with a Planter before, so I wasn't sure what to expect. What happens now?" Farr's voice was cold.

So she'd stumbled into yet another anti-Planter bod. Her captain. Slotting hells!

Jacey tried to keep her voice level. "I need to process the data I've snagged, ma'am."

"I sent the rest of the team off to the galley to get lunch. You'd better join them. Then at 1300 hrs if you go to the lab, Dr. Selmi has agreed to help. She's worked with your sort before, apparently."

Jacey didn't trust herself to speak. She scooped up her dataslate and stumbled off to her dom. Alright for slotting Captain Farr, wasn't it just! Plenty of creds stacking up in *her* family, otherwise she wouldn't be a captain. Jacey hadn't wanted to be phaze-fodder all her career and Aunt Ro and Uncle Vanti couldn't afford to sponsor her commission. They'd done more than enough for her. So after she applied for a commission grant, Intel approached her and explained that as she had a gift for pattern recognition, would she be prepared to have a neural implant to enhance her natural ability? And Jacey had said yes.

She fumbled for the key to her dom, tears blurring her eyes. The door slid open so suddenly she almost fell into the room. She flicked the lock on and slid down onto the floor, weeping angrily. Would she do it again? No she slotting well wouldn't! They'd made it sound so straightforward. And it wasn't, not at all. Initially the implant was incorrectly sited, causing sizzling whiteout when she'd tried to focus on any pattern, making her physically sick. So they'd re-operated, which fixed that problem, but then the wound had become infected...

Jacey fingered the lumpy scar as she sobbed. They'd never fully explained how she could live with the trances she drifted into every time a pattern tugged at her. She couldn't watch ships arriving at a busy spaceport, or crowds of people bustling in a mall thoroughfare without trying to find the pattern. There'd been talk of removing her from the program as her response was "compromised". To go through all that dross, only to have them flush her down the chute!

"At least give me a chance," she'd pleaded. "Think of all the cost and time you've invested in this. If I zilch out then I'll have to leave but you can't know how I'll work out till you give me a chance." And unbelievably, they had.

S.S. Ilex spun and glittered down at her from the wallscreen and she gazed at its otherworld beauty for several long mins. Then Jacey stood up, picked a bodwipe from the wallpocket, mopped her eyes and blew her nose. She'd got herself here when they'd wanted to zane her a dozen times over. So Captain Farr had a thing against Planters. She'd deal with it, just like she'd deal with the trances and the passing of time and the headaches. This wasn't grotting well going to space her. Neither was Captain Farr.

She squared her shoulders, picked up her dataslate from where she'd dropped it and unlocked the door to her room. She had an appointment with Dr. Dassin Selmi in the lab. Time to get back to work.