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Burned

by
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Daura plunged her hand into the cold water and snatched a darting, silvery fish out of the bucket. It squirmed in her grasp as she pursed her lips tightly and whistled through her implant, summoning T'kee.

"My partner will be along shortly," she said. Under the light of the stars, she looked down on her customer and smirked. He should start squirming any second now.

The short man in front of her cast furtive glances over his shoulder and out, to the surrounding water. He was sweating. "Y-y-you sure nobody's watching? You're not AGPOL are you?" Daura's smirk widened. Pop! They're so predictable. "No, we're not being watched, and do I look like Agricultural Police?"

The short man looked to the ground, shuffling his feet. He took a deep breath before continuing. "Yes - I mean no! I'm just nervous. I've never done this before."

Sure you haven't, fat-boy. "Look, I guarantee my product and I guarantee your anonymity. Unless, of course, you talk. Do that, and I cough up your name to a couple of very good customers of mine." She crossed her arms in front of her, daring him to challenge her. She knew he would.

"You're threatening me? You don't even know my name!"

Here we go! She unfolded her arms and pointed at him with the fish. "I'm not some common vendor, Mister Ryten Gullson. I do my homework and I get you the goods. Top quality, no questions asked. None of that street jerky, stuff. You got problems? Now's the time to float off!"

The man looked up at Daura, surprise registering on his face. "How did you . . .?"

"I told you: I do my homework. Never mind how." The rhythm of the waves lapping against the quay wall of the floating island changed faintly and Daura turned. "He's here. Are we still in business?"

"I suppose. I'm just nervous, is all."

"Fine." She whistled a series of notes that sounded to the unaugmented human ear like she was blowing through a drinking straw. T'kee slipped to the surface in front of her, glancing over her shoulder at the man behind her. Daura kneeled and handed the fish to her partner, who gulped it down. "It's time, T'kee." She whispered to him.

The dolphin nodded and quietly submerged, disappearing into the dark water. Daura stood and turned, facing the short man.

"Where's he going?" He asked.

"Mr. Gullson, I'm afraid this is where we stop. Look behind you."

He glanced over his shoulder. Seeing nothing, he turned back to Daura. "What do you . . . hey!" He raised his hand to push the transmitter implant on his temple as the dart injected its payload into his neck.

Daura grabbed his hand as the man collapsed to the ground. "Agent Spring, I told you I do my homework. You've got nothing on me but words. This won't kill you, but your friends hiding in the shrimp barn won't be able to do a thing for your memory."

She looked toward the structure to see shadowy figures exiting the door and running toward them. Blinking her eyes quickly, she shifted her contacts to infrared, counting the agents moving toward her and trying to discern if any of them had gill suites on. Seeing none, she turned and dove off the quay wall, into the water.

She pulled the plugs in her neck as she swam downward, allowing her gills to unfurl. She stopped for a moment, fighting the urge to surface. The urge turned to panic as the primal chemistry in her brain fought to avoid drowning. She thrashed briefly, then calmed herself, willing her lungs to collapse and her body to realize it was still receiving oxygen.

I'll never get used to that, she thought, as she dove further toward the ocean floor. She activated her sonar and squealed the area around her. The images that formed in her translator showed the area below her. Except for T'kee and a school of greenjack, it was clear. She turned her attention toward the surface using a higher frequency for better resolution, counting six fins from stingray hover/floaters, and several divers with external gill skins entering the water. Some of those had power turbines strapped to their backs. She turned and kicked toward T'kee.

The dolphin swam up to meet her, giving her an affectionate nudge. She whistled the signal for danger, pointing toward the surface, and the rapidly approaching AGPOL divers. The dolphin

turned, giving Daura access to one of the two hardened packs attached to his back. She pressed the release button on the rearward pack, the front one being T'kee's external gill, and pulled out the pressure skin within, which she donned with practiced ease.

The divers were close now, almost within gun range, and T'kee was getting nervous. With a final press on the fabric along the ribs of the body hugging suit, she was satisfied that it was on correctly. She moved quickly now, retrieving the harness from the pack and securing it over T'kee's head, allowing the stirrups to fall freely downward, and gave him a tap on the head.

The dolphin shot down, stirrups flicking up toward Daura. As they passed in front of her, she snatched them with her hands, and secured the wrist straps. The reigns tightened and she was propelled downward. A dart shot past her ear and stopped, reaching its maximum range. She smiled as she adjusted her contacts and checked the time. Thirty-three seconds. That's squeakin' close, Daura. She relaxed as T'kee drove them onward and downward.

"You've pulled your last deal for a while, Daura."

She glared at the small, orange, glowing button in front of her on the wall. "I got away clean, Audun."

"Negative. Your image was recorded and DNA gathered. We'll have to inoculate you."

"Audun?"

"Yes?"

"Have you any idea how much that hurts?"

"I suppose I could program a nervous system for myself, but it would be rather inconvenient for our purposes, don't you think? It's necessary, and you know it."

Daura moved to her closet and began stripping out of her pressure skin. "This will be the third body lift you've given me."

"Be grateful it's possible. We'll need a complete makeover, down to DNA level. Are you fond of the current growths?"

"Tides, yes!" She stepped in front of her mirror and examined her gill plugs. They were near seamless.

"Then we'll keep them. Everything else goes." The computer said.

"Everything? I mean, can I stay female?" She examined her body, noting the musculature and smooth cinnamon skin. "I kind of like this body."

"The price you pay, Daura. For nearly loosing it, I mean. I'll let you stay female this time. It's easier anyway. We'll need to move us, too."

"Anyplace but inland, Audun. T'kee needs us near him." She thought a moment and then added, "Maybe closer to the beef farm?"

"There are no available solo-islands within our budget, and a bubble or sea-dome would be very risky. I suggest we move to a coastal area. St. George?"

"U'tah? I hate that country, they even tax your pico circuits!" She left the closet, touching the door jam as she exited. The door hissed closed behind her. "Just a second."

Walking across the room, she faced her library wall and focused on the small dots covering it. Finding the teradot she needed, she flipped through the maps until she found the one she wanted. "Here. Teton. I love those cliffs and rolling hills, not a lot of people, and the government stays out of your hair." She flicked her eyes toward the glowing dot on the wall, uploading the image to Audun.

"Will that be close enough to the beef-dome for you, Daura?"

She touched the wall under the library, and settled down in the auto-chair that sprang out of the floor, preparing for the injection that would soon come. "Well, it's -what?- twenty minutes by methane plane, then a quick dive to the San Andrea plateau and the dome. That's close enough, I suppose."

"Done!" Said Audun. "A nice lot overlooking the sea on the Jakzon Peninsula. I've ordered a terra-form cabin via nano-link. It will be ready within the hour. T'kee is on his way there, now.

He should arrive in three days if he runs deep enough to catch the slip-current."
A tiny needle appeared from the arm of the chair and moved to Daura's.

"Are you ready?"

"I guess," Daura said.

The needle slipped into her arm and injected its genetic reprogramming solution. Daura clenched her teeth and waited for the cellular changes to begin. It didn't take long: the pico circuits worked fast.

The meth plane glided quietly over Jakzon Peninsula and circled, waiting for its passenger to adjust her harness. The turbine thruster atop the vehicle occasionally fired, helping the solar powered vehicle maintain altitude.

"Ready." Daura told the plane.

"Have a pleasant day, and thank you for flying Transoceanic. Prepare for bubble drop in five seconds."

Daura mentally counted down. When she reached one, the payload door opened and the membrane bubble adjusted its hardness. Then it dropped into open air and Daura was freefalling toward her new home. She looked up in time to see the plane shoot up into the sky and disappear.

The earth grew beneath her, its trees and rocks standing out against the sea beyond. A small dwelling pulled into focus that could only be hers. Since the plagues, and tectonic shifts, humans were scarce. The chance of the structure belonging to anybody else was slim.

She moved her index finger across the control pad and felt the mini-thrusters adjust and fire, slowing her decent and angling her toward the terra-form cabin. "Audun, is that you?"

"If by 'me' you mean: 'Is the cabin I'm currently on course to crash into, thus undoing all of Audun's hard work, the one I'm supposed to be landing at?' Then, yes, it's me." The computer replied in Daura's ear. "Further, I suggest you alter your course a little to the north, to avoid said collision. Or, gasp, you could actually utilize the autopilot."

"Not necessary, thanks." Daura moved her finger slightly up on the touch pad, and increased her pressure on it. The mini-thrusters fired and stopped her inches from the ground in front of the cabin. The bubble settled quietly to the ground and began dissolving, its job completed.

Daura stood and removed her harness, slinging it over her shoulder. She looked around and drew a deep breath, smiling at the smell of the salt sea and nearby pines mingled together. It wasn't a smell that was common on the floating agfarms, whose sole jobs were to grow produce and move about the ocean surface keeping always in an optimum growing climate. The produce they grew, along with the fish that were farmed along their coasts, were vital, and every inch of their surface and subsurface was utilized. Pine trees were a luxury few had. She continued into her new home, thumbing the door jam as she did. The circuits built into the house quickly scanned the trace DNA left behind, and keyed the house security and computer functions to her.

"Welcome to our new home, Daura." Audun said.

"It's nice. Cozy. I like it." She sat on the old fashioned couch, feeling its cushions give way beneath her with the audible sigh of real fabric. "Any word from T'kee?"

"He's making good time. He should be here in two more days."

She stretched her new body out on the couch. This one was taller than the old body, but seemed as powerful. Audun did a good job programming its appearance. It would do nicely. She allowed herself to relax, and closed her eyes.

"Audun?"

"Yes, Daura?"

"You're a good friend. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Daura drifted off to sleep, hoping to dream of high mountain tops and a world filled with open land.

"T'kee, I'm coming out to see you." Daura said through her translator as she rode her elevator down to the beach. A whistle and a pop in her ear told her the rogue dolphin was excited to see her this morning.

"Yes, we're going to the beef-dome, T'kee. We gotta make some creds." Another string of excited whistles and squeals filtered into her eardrum and the translator printed the words across her eyes.

"I'm sure Kunda will be there, yes. He runs the place, after all. You like him, don't you?" The door opened on the elevator, letting Daura out onto rocky beach. "I'm on the beach. I'll see you in twenty minutes."

"I don't think this is a good idea, so soon after that last brush with AGPOL," She heard Audun say through her ear receiver.

"Good or no, we need the creds, Audun. Or was that cabin free?" She scanned the horizon, looking for her transportation.

"No. It wasn't. We're running low. Can't you find another occupation?"

A glint of sunshine off metal from the west caught her eye. It grew larger as it neared. A four seater, good. "The people need to know that the old life can still be had, Audun. The cow disease is gone, and we don't have to be at the mercy of AGPOL any longer. My calling is to break AGPOL's grip, you know that."

"Fine. Be careful, though."

"I will."

The meth plane hovered while Daura clipped her harness into the awaiting retrieval line. Once locked in, it hoisted her up, into the belly of the plane, then roared southwest, toward the San Andrea Plateau.

The flight lasted just long enough for her to prepare the landing bubble. That done, she waited, glad to be the only passenger. The plane announced their arrival at the programmed location,

and she was ejected toward the water. As she left, she transmitted a wipe signal to the plane's memory, effectively erasing any record of her destination. She allowed the bubble to disintegrate on the way down, and dived, headfirst, into the sea, pulling her gill plugs as she plunged into the blue water. Large salamander gills streamed from her neck, absorbing the oxygen in the surrounding water. After a brief struggle, she swam deeper.

"T'kee?"

I'm here. Her readout translated.

She could see the dolphin's shadow materialize from the darkness below her.

We go to dome now?

"Yes, T'kee. Let me get my pressure skin."

The dolphin turned and presented the pack. Daura donned the skin, then slipped the harness over T'kee's snout.

"Let's go, T'kee," she whistled to him.

They shot downward, toward the sea bottom. "You're eager this morning!"

Kunda there.

"Yes, Kunda is there. What's your fascination with that man?" She could see the large dome looming on the ocean floor, a dark shadow against the inky blackness. Daura adjusted her contacts to see more clearly.

As they approached the dome, a voice called to her. "Daura, is that you?"

"Yes, Kunda. Here for a pickup."

"You got a customer?"

"I will in a day. You know me."

"Fine. But only because it's you." A bright rectangle opened in the side of the dome. "Airlock's open."

"I see it. Thanks." The dolphin, with woman in tow, arrowed toward the opening. As they swam, Daura caught a glimpse of another dolphin speeding toward them. "T'kee? One of your friends? You know the rules about that," she chirped at him.

It's time, Daura. I'm sorry.

"Excuse me?" They stopped in front of the airlock.

Look.

Daura looked about her. Dolphin converged on them from all directions. Hundreds of them, some were towing people, some not.

"T'kee, what have you done?"

AGPOL said I could work at the fish farms. They got me on the way to your new house. Said I can go free if I turn over the dome. New Identity and everything. I'm tired of black market, Daura.

"Kunda! AGPOL!"

T'kee lunged away, hitting Daura with his tail, driving her into the airlock. The lock's door began to close as an AGPOL agent lunged into it with her.

"Good morning Ms. Zakai," the agent said.

Daura saw the man's face through his gill suit. It was Agent Spring.

"Surprised? Not nearly as surprised as your friends are going to be. Come along, now." Agent Spring raised his dart gun and shot. The dart penetrated Daura's pressure suit and paralyzed her.

"A little reprogramming, and you'll be a new woman."

She felt herself being dragged from the airlock and fastened into the security harness of a large bottlenose. The water around her was a whirlpool of activity as humans and dolphin placed explosives around the dome.

"Kunda . . . get out."

"No talking!" A commanding voice interrupted. "Let's go, folks!"

Daura lurched in the harness, snapping about like a whip. She stared behind her, at the receding dome.

"Audun?"

"Yes, Daura?"

"You've been monitoring, right?"

"Yes."

"You knew?"

"Yes."

"Are you AGPOL?"

"I am. T'kee gave them our frequency. They reprogrammed me when you left. I'm locked, can't retrieve my old personality."

Daura sighed, willing her lungs to inflate, and retracted her gills. She watched the water around the beef dome roil white and angry, vaporizing into steam as the explosives released their energy. The dome collapsed. Shockwave will hit us soon, she thought.

"Goodbye, Audun."

"Goodbye, Daura. I'm sorry."

She felt her lungs fill with water, welcoming death like a warm blanket. This isn't as painful as I thought it would be. . . .