

# The Creature

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The border planet Chadishrael was terraformed, but only just. Halfway between Mars and Earth in size, it was a world lashed by near-constant storms driven by its fast, sixteen-hour rotation and thirty-seven degree axial tilt. Had the original colonists known that the end result would be a planet as unpleasant as it would turn out to be they most likely would have moved on to some better prospect. But if you could tolerate the near-constant earthquakes and the winds that occasionally slowed down to hurricane force, and if you were happy with ninety-nine nights out of a hundred dumping thirty centimeters of rain, it was a good place to settle down.

The planetary population was nearly a quarter million humans and a hundred thousand Thessi, the two populations getting along perfectly well, integrated into towns and even a few outright cities dotting the planet. Humans had done the heavy lifting of terraforming the world, a project that hadn't required much since it already had an active if primitive biosphere; but the Thessi had brought their plants and animals along as well. The ecosystems from two alien worlds had competed and eventually meshed, finding a rough balance with each other and with the cruder, hardy forms of primitive life that had been native to Chadishrael. In a way it was something of a success story, but the wind rarely stopped blowing and the rain rarely stopped falling, so nobody could really get a good look at the biological miracles that had formed.

This much Zane Waterman knew before he had landed there in the commercial starship *Corpus Georgi*. He had piloted the ship to a landing at the old spaceport outside of Crashton a few hours before sundown. Sarah Rhoades, owner and captain of the vessel, had hoped to get the cargo of Thessi atmosphere processing equipment unloaded as quickly as possible but, like the rest of Chadishrael, the cargo loaders ceased operations when the rarely-visible sun went below the never-visible horizon. With the end of the chilly overcast day came the fall of night and the downpour of cold rain and lashing winds, so the ship was left half-loaded sitting inside one of the spaceports great armored hangars. The hangar doors had been slid mostly closed, left open only far enough for a person to squeeze through.

The *Corpus Georgi* was alone in the darkened hangar, its main cargo loading ramp down and interior pressure doors open. Sarah wanted to be ready to unload the rest of the cargo just as quickly as possible when the rains stopped and the cargo unloaders returned. Apart from lightning in the sky, the world outside of the hangar was pitch black. Nobody landed at Crashton after sundown so there was no reason to keep the airfield lights on. The interior of the hangar was also darkened. The only source of light was the interior of the *Corpus Georgis* cargo bay.

For Crashton it was night, but for the crew of the *Corpus Georgi* it was only early afternoon, time synchronized to the ships home base on the planet Atlantis. The crew had recently grown to four: Sarah had only a few weeks earlier hired a technician and flight engineer, a Thessi named Loff. When they had encountered Loff on a cargo run to Barth, he had seemed a perfect hire: being an alien, he didn't really set off Sarah and Zane's misanthropic tendencies. The Thessi were well known loners, and tended to have personalities as exciting as your average cow. The ships AI George had not been consulted about the hire.

As the rains fell outside the great steel and concrete shelter, the crew of the cargo ship within settled in to wait out the night. Zane and Sarah were on the flight deck while Loff was conducting some checks in the engine room and George reviewed the entire planetary data net. All was calm and still inside the great vessel. From what they knew of the culture of Chadishrael – namely that work stopped at night as everyone, human and Thessi, relaxed within their bunker-like homes and that the crime rate was so low as

to be statistically insignificant – the crew of the *Corpus Georgi* were certain that they were alone and secure from intrusion.

A dark form dashed across the airfield. The creature had escaped from a starship a few days earlier and had spent the intervening time skulking around the field trying to survive as best it could. It did not understand this new world, and certainly did not like it; the weather was all wrong, the days were too short and there was not nearly enough prey. And it seemed like half the prey was poisonous: one bite and it felt sick to its stomach. It was confused, angry, soaking wet, cold and desperately hungry. But it had caught sight of lights on within the hangar; the bright white lights within the *Corpus Georgis* cargo hold flowed out through the open door, sending a fan of light out into the night. Through the dense rain the creature's sensitive eyes could see the illuminated raindrops pointing the way into an open building.

It had stared at the opening for several minutes, its suspicious mind looking for threats. Was the open door an opportunity, or was it a trap? It did not matter. The gnawing hunger and the miserable rain drove the creature forward at top speed, heedless of any other dangers that might be lurking in the dark. All it cared about was gaining access to the interior of the hangar. It was mildly surprised when it passed through the door and nothing leaped upon it; it streaked across the epoxy-coated cement floor towards the freighters loading ramp and the light within. Once again it was unmolested as it ran up the ramp and into the starship. There, at last, the creature found itself bathed in warmth and light; no rain or wind assailed it. The smells were, perhaps, all wrong... metals and composites, machines and processed air rather than the scents of nature. There were no plants to lurk behind, no scent or sound of prey to attack and kill. But neither was there any hint of enemies, none of its own kind, nor of any other type of enemy. It seemed to be alone. This place could, perhaps, be a new base... when the sun emerged again, it could strike out to find prey and bring it back here to consume in privacy. It had to be certain that it had unquestioned dominion over the environment. It detected no competitors, but it had to be sure. So it confidently strode to the widest, most open area of the cargo bay, an empty area in the middle surrounded on all sides by great steel cargo containers.

Looking around once more it let out a mighty roar, challenging all comers. It fell silent and listened as its powerful voice echoed within the metal cargo hold and between the metal cargo containers; there was no response. It repeated the challenge, again with no reply. The creature waited for a moment to be sure, then began to sing in celebration.

It sang out its joy at finding a dry, warm, bright place. It belted out a tune of its own composition in celebration of meals soon to come, of quarry soon to be chased down, dragged here to this new place and eaten. It created a hymn of satisfaction, imagining a full belly and the thrill of combat to come. It knew its voice to be musical perfection married to power and ferocity.

In some starships there are so many internal cameras and sensors that the controlling AI has near omniscience. Not so much as a gnat could sneak on board and hide, no matter where it went. The *Corpus Georgi* was not such a ship. It had hundreds of internal cameras and thousands of sensors, but with the cargo bay still stuffed to the rafters with containers it could see very little of the hold. All the majority of the wall-mounted cameras could see were shadows and the surfaces of the standard intermodal shipping containers, used throughout human and half of Thessi space. Great corrugated steel boxes, painted various unimaginative shades of gray, with patches of rust coming through here and there. Not only was there little to see, what George could see he didn't want to see. So he had turned off the cameras in the bay anyway.

George had not detected the intruder when it came on board, but the singing attracted his attention. With great irritation he pulled his attention away from the planetary data net, pausing the historical documentary he was reviewing about the early colonization of the planet. He activated all of the cameras within the cargo bay, but could not see what was creating that horrible racket. It would be easy enough to wake a drone to go into the bay and see what the fuss was about. It was easier still to delegate.

“Loff,” George said over the engineering section intercom. The Thessi was closer than the humans on the flight deck and, from George’s point of view, was the lowest crewman on the corporate totem pole. Certainly lower than himself. “There’s something in the cargo bay making noise. Go see what it is, get rid of it.”

Loff looked up from his work, ears twitching. So far he’d not had much interaction with the ship’s AI, and still didn’t know quite what to make of it. His own people had never made sentient machines and remained somewhat baffled by the human penchant for that sort of thing. But the task he was working on was minor and easily dropped, so he soon made his way to the cargo bay. He pressed a panel next to a door – a little higher than he’d like, since it was sized for humans – and the door in the back wall of the cargo bay quietly slid open. The sound of the creature carried instantly through the open doorway. Loff stood for a moment, silent and motionless, then his upper right hand shot out and pressed the panel again. The door quickly slid closed again. His ears folded back, his fur lay flat, his eyes dilated. Breathing shallow and fast, he backed a few steps away from the door. It took several seconds before he caught his breath.

“Loff to Zane Waterman,” he said to the air. His voice carried through the intercom to the flight deck, where Zane and Sarah were laughing. Zane instinctively looked up towards the ceiling where the voice emerged.

“Yeah, Loff, what’s up?” he said, still smiling. Sarah was not much of a jokester, but she could sure put a smile on his face.

“Could you come down to the hallway between engineering and the cargo bay? Please avoid passing through the bay.”

Zane’s smile faded, as did Sarah’s. “Why? What’s up?”

“There’s a... creature in the cargo bay. I think it’s a zothtar from the sound of it.”

Zane frowned. Sarah shrugged. “And what’s a zothtar?”

There was silence on the line for a few seconds. “It’s an apex predator from my homeworld. Very dangerous. They are... legendarily dangerous. I can’t imagine that my people would have transplanted them to this world, but... there seems to be one.”

Zane stood. “George, do you have eyes on this thing?”

George snorted. “I can’t see shit,” he said.

“Terrific,” Zane muttered. He reached down to a nondescript panel in the side of the pilot’s seat. Out popped a holster and pistol. Standing and strapping the weapon on, he looked at a suddenly concerned Sarah. “Stay here,” he said. “I’ll take care of this.”

Sarah began to stand. “I’ll go.”

Zane shook his head, knowing of Sarah’s somewhat – in his mind – excessive love of all creatures great and small. “No. If this is what Loff says, I’ll probably have to shoot it. You don’t want to see that.”

Sarah looked a little sad, nodded and sat down. She had had the same thought, and was just as glad to avoid the forthcoming scene.

Zane turned to go and patted Sarah on her shoulder. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll do what’s right and best.” Sarah gave him a grateful look; she knew what he meant, and knew that he would take care of the situation as quickly and cleanly as possible.

Zane calmly strode out of the flight deck. As soon as the door closed behind him, he broke into a sprint. On the one hand, he was excited: it had been a good long while since he'd gone hunting. On the other hand, killing an animal on board the *Corpus Georgi* would be just plain bad news. No matter how it went down, Sarah wouldn't like it... no matter how terrifying the animal, it was still an animal, and she loved animals. Zane... his love of critters was not nearly so strong. Certainly he loved to eat the tastier ones, but a Thessi species? The chemistry was all off. Organisms from that alien ecosystem were generally not only unpalatable but also faintly poisonous. So... no Zothtar chops. And mounting its head to the wall would not go over well with the boss. There wouldn't even be a decent souvenir. He wondered if perhaps zothtars had impressive claws that he could keep in his desk...

Zane arrived at the hallway where Loff stood waiting, standing motionless and looking for all the world like an oversized four-armed teddy bear wearing coveralls and boots. Zane noted the folded ears and matted fur; he was new to Thessi emotional displays and did not know that those were the equivalent of a human blanching a bloodless white in stark terror. Hand on the grip of his holstered pistol, he walked up to Loff.

"Zothtar, huh?"

Loff nodded.

"So what's a zothtar like? How big? What does it have for weapons?"

Loff looked, seemingly blandly, at Zane. "It's longer than you are tall," he said. "Masses as much as the two of us together, but very lean. Six limbs, all with four sharp claws. Large fangs, venomous saliva. Tail with a spike at the end. Covered in fur modified into hard sharp-edged plates. Black."

Zane scowled. "Well, shit," he muttered. The thing sounded like one of evolutions more enthusiastic projects. He pulled out his pistol and held it before Loff. "This thing do the job?"

"It should," Loff answered. "It's big and dangerous, but it's still just an animal. Get it in the head and that should do it. But they are supreme predators, very skilled killers. Very fast."

"Spectacular," Zane grumbled. Then he noticed that he and Loff were, indeed, alone in the hallway. It suddenly occurred to him that George could have easily sent any of a number of android avatars and drones, but had not done so. He decided to not give George the satisfaction of calling him out on it. If he gave the arrogant AI even a hint that he needed help, George would never let him hear the end of it.

"Alright," Zane said quietly, checking over the pistol. He took a ready stance, holding he weapon in both hands and aiming it at the door. He was as ready as he was going to get. "Open the door," he said to Loff, who hesitatingly pressed the panel again.

The door slid aside. The sound of the creatures vocalizing spilled through again. Zane, still aiming the pistol into the hold, frowned. "The hell?" he muttered, quickly glancing over at Loff. Loff was visibly cringing at the sound. Zane looked back into the hold, the pistol lowering fractionally. "Stay right there," he said to Loff. Then he stepped through.

The singing continued, the creature entranced by the sound of its own echoing voice. Suddenly, though, it stopped: there was another entity nearby. There, opposite the way it had come in, was a bipedal creature stepping out from behind one of the cargo containers. The singer looked at the intruder, its eyes narrowing. Was it threat, or was it prey? In a split second it made up its mind. It had encountered beasts like this before; they posed no threat. They meant that it would soon have a full belly. It charged at the intruder.

Zane saw the sleek black animal, saw it charge. He shoved the pistol back in the holster just as the creature leaped at him. He smiled as it struck him in the chest.

Loff hid off to the side of the door as Zane went through. For a moment he heard the zothtar continue it's horrible calling, then it fell silent. He did not hear the sound of electromagnetically propelled supersonic

bullets being shot at the monster, nor did he hear Zane screaming as he was torn to shreds. He was puzzled. Not quite puzzled enough to poke his head around the door to look and see; instead he was frozen in fear. So he was shocked when Zane came walking back through the door. “Bah,” the human said to him with a shake of his head. Loff closed the door as soon as Zane was through and took off after the human, hoping for an explanation, receiving only silence. Zane, legs twice as long as Loffs, walked with a speed Loff could not easily catch up to. Loff was still a few meters behind as Zane walked through the flight deck door.

Sarah was standing in the middle of the flight deck, her face a mask of concern, when Zane entered. Loff was hot on his heels. “Zothtar, he said,” Zane said, turning to smile at Loff. “Big threat, he said. Ooh, booga booga.”

Loff didn’t quite understand that, but he had the feeling he was being mocked. He just looked up at Zane quizzically.

Zane turned back to Sarah. Smiling, he held out his hands and the cold, wet, black bundle he held. “It followed me home. Can we keep it?”

Sarah looked at the proffered animal, then looked at Zane. “Are you *crazy*?” she asked, shocked. Just as Zane began to frown, she continued. “*Of course* we’ll keep it!”

Zane smiled again and handed over the kitten. Sarah held it close, cooing at it and petting its head; it looked back at her with bright, emerald eyes. Soon, snuggled against Sarahs chest and cradled in her arms, the small black cat began to purr.

“I say we name it Zothtar,” Zane said, grinning at Loff. Loff, for his part, was baffled. He’d never seen a cat before and did not know what to make of either the animal or the humans oddly emotional reactions to it.

Sarah looked up at Zane and gave a disgusted look. “Bleah,” she said.

“Zothie?”

“Nah,” Sarah muttered

“Coerl?”

“Nah,” Sarah repeated, looking down at the cat again. She thought for a moment, sitting down into the co-pilots seat. “How about Esmeralda?”

Zane shrugged. “Sound ok to me. If that’s a girl cat. I didn’t check.”

“It is,” Sarah said. “I just know.” Zane raised a skeptical eyebrow at that, but said nothing.

Zane looked back at Loff. “Zothtar, huh,” he said. He pointed at Esmeralda, who, it seemed, had already gone to sleep in Sarahs arms. “That’s your terrifying creature of legend?”

Loffs nose twitched in mixed embarrassment and irritation. “They are... bigger than that,” he said in his own defense, “but they sound the same.”

“Uh-huh,” Zane replied with a grin.

Loff looked at Esmeralda. “Is that thing going to keep making that horrible noise like back in the hold?” he asked, his voice as full of disgust as any Thessi’s ever could be. Zane thought he detected a slight change in the tone of the alien’s voice, but gave it little thought.

“Naw, probably not,” Zane answered. “Cats are usually pretty quiet. Sometimes they yell at the walls, nobody really knows why. This one’s just a juvenile. It’ll likely settle down some as it gets older.”

Loffs fur shifted into his species equivalent of a frown. “You’re not really going to keep it, are you?”

Sarah looked over at him and smiled. “You bet we are,”

Zane shrugged. “Every ship has to have a cat,” he said.

“Nuh-uh,” George added. “I don’t approve.”

“We’re keeping the cat,” Sarah said, flatly.

George did not reply, but Zane swore he could just make out a low grumble coming from the PA system. For Loff and his far more sensitive ears, there was no doubt.

Loff agreed with the AI that bringing this small creature into their midst would only lead to trouble. It had the voice of a monster, and it was apparently going to get bigger. Who knew what sort of nightmarish beast it would become? He would have to keep a wary eye on it. Loff knew that nothing good would come of this. And he certainly knew that he would never be like the humans and allow this *horrible thing* to sit on him.