

DNA Prospector

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James Gregson passed the last of the carnivorous trees and was halfway through the clearing before he realized there were two men in his camp. One sat on a log and the other on his chair, relaxing, making themselves right at home. Not far away was a black and red jeep, and on the jeep's door was the Bankrightk company logo.

One of the men looked up as Gregson approached. Gregson didn't seem much of a threat; he was tall but good-natured looking, with curly black hair and brown eyes. In his arms, however, was a long, elegantly crafted electronic rifle.

"Look at the size of that stunner!" The man exclaimed, laughing. He was thin, small, and had a pinched-looking face. He wore an gray-green jumpsuit with what looked like 50 randomly-placed pockets, and had a name-tag that read, JACKO. "What is it, a hundred years old?"

The other man, who was taller, rounder of features, wore all black and was carrying a 10mm projectile pistol. His shirt bore the Bankrightk logo and underneath was the stitched-in name RUDD. "We hear you're really onto something, Gregson," he said.

"I don't appreciate you coming into my camp like this," Gregson said. "This area is staked and registered to me, and you're trespassing."

"Hey, you don't have to go all huffy with us," said Jacko. "We're here to offer you a position with Bankrightk."

"A job?"

Jacko nodded.

"Prospecting?" Gregson asked.

"DNA prospecting."

"For what? A salary?"

"Salary, expenses, and a cut. More than you're getting right now---"

"Which is nothing," Rudd said. "We ran a check on your account. You're broke."

Gregson powered up his rifle. The indicator lights flashed on, startling the two men, who stood suddenly and backed off a few meters. "I didn't spend my life's savings to get all the way out to this hairball of a planet, live in a tent in a field of mud, and eat gristle worms and drink peat water for a year and a half, just so I could have a cut of what I discover."

"They're making you a generous offer," Jacko said. "It's not going to be repeated."

"You can repeat it until doomsday. I'm here as an independent, and whatever I discover is mine. A hundred-percent mine."

"I don't think he's interested," Jacko said to Rudd.

"Your alternative is no employment at all," Rudd told Gregson. "It's hard to go prospecting when you're laid up in a med center."

"Accidents happen so suddenly," Jacko said. "You never know when to expect them."

"That's true," Gregson said. He slung the stun rifle over his shoulder. "You want to make an accident happen, do it now."

Jacko and Rudd glanced nervously at each other.

"If you threaten me, you'd better be ready to back it up," Gregson told them. "I've killed deadlier creatures than you on five different worlds, and I wasn't using an old stun gun, either."

Rudd sneered. "Gregson, you're way over your head." He and Jacko turned and walked off toward their jeep. Gregson let out his

breath and relaxed. He watched as they started the jeep's engine and rumbled off over the uneven ground. When it was out of sight he leaned his rifle against the log and collapsed in his folding chair with a sigh.

#

The main difference between civilized worlds and new colonies, Gregson noticed, was that one had paved walkways and the other had dirt paths. This planet, Aeolus, didn't even have dirt paths. He made his way through the broken foliage, following the trail that the Bankrightk jeep had plowed back toward "town." His stun rifle, which was an antique his father once used, was slung casually over his shoulder.

Gregson knew the moment he heard Bankrightk had established an office on this planet he was going to have trouble. He, like his father before him, had wandered to the farthest reaches of human space to get away from the corporations. It was no use, though -- wherever he went they would sooner or later show up. It stood to reason that if there was a huge profit to be made, that is where the corporations would go. It was like that throughout history. A few brave souls would strike out into the unknown, searching for that one big discovery, but the moment anything valuable was found the corporations would step in and take it over.

Halfway to town Gregson made a detour, picking his way through the branches and undergrowth, following the smell of hot bacon and fried eggs, and -- oh heaven! -- freshly brewed coffee. The trees thinned and were replaced by Earth plants; rows of corn, potatoes, cabbage, carrots, tomatoes. There were pens with pigs, cows, and a few horses. Chickens roamed about, each with a silver inhibitor band around their necks to keep them from wandering too far. This was Vern Hudson's farm, and the farm house ahead was a large cylindrical water storage tank off one of the first colony ships. The crops and the animals were all Vern's test subjects -- he was a certified Ecesist, specially trained in adapting Earth life to alien environments. Vern was nowhere in sight, but his teenage kids, Bethany and Frank, were on the front porch with their dog.

"James!" Bethany called. "You're just in time. I made an extra portion just in case you showed up." Bethany, who Gregson had been courting for several months now, was 19 years standard, with olive-brown skin, brown eyes, and long straight brown-black hair. The top of her head didn't quite make it to Gregson's shoulders, so she had to look up at him to show him her smile.

Her younger brother, Frank, wasn't smiling. He was 17 and shared his sister's hair and complexion. He was a head taller than her, however, and almost as tall as Gregson. He was huskier than Gregson, with square shoulders and a beefy chest. He reached down as Gregson approached and touched a button on the digital panel embedded in the dog's head. The dog began to growl.

"Frank!" Bethany said. She touched the animal's head, and the growling stopped.

Frank reached for the dog again and she slapped his hand. They glared at each other for a moment, and he turned and stomped off. She turned and smiled at Gregson again, ushering him up to the house and inside.

The food tasted wonderful, and the coffee was nice and strong. As he ate, Bethany walked lightly around the table, talking. "... and since we haven't seen any large tracks of any kind, we don't think it's really an animal at all. Dad thinks it's spoor from one of the plants. And I was thinking, if we could find what the source is before my Dad does, you and I could share the title."

Gregson sipped his coffee, watching her walk, admiring her soft curves and listening happily to her disarming voice. "If I agreed to something like that," he told her, "your father would have your brother kill me."

Bethany stopped, cocking her head to one side and looking at him through wisps of her hair. "I don't think so."

"Besides, if it's a psycho-reactive agent then it's probably useless to us. It can be reproduced artificially. The only thing that would be valuable is if it's something that can only be produced by a living thing, and we get the rights to the DNA code. That's the key. If only the DNA can produce it, if the living thing in and of itself is of value, can we profit."

"Like, if it's a psychic effect."

Gregson nodded. He stabbed the last bit of egg with a fork and put it in his mouth.

"Dad doesn't believe in that sort of thing."

"Where is your Dad now, anyway?"

"Out at the catfish farm."

He paused in his chewing for a moment, looking into her eyes. "Out there, huh?"

"Yeah." Her eyes betrayed worry. "I hope he's okay."

"I'm sure he is. You said you never found tracks. It's not an animal."

"I said we never found large tracks."

Gregson dropped the fork on the table and reached out for her. "Come here." She leaned into him, and he put his arms around her and gave her a long hug. "He's going to be okay," he said.

"I know," Bethany said. She kissed him. They smiled at each other, and kissed again. Gregson pulled back, still smiling, but she wasn't finished kissing yet. She leaned hard against him to the point where he almost lost his balance and fell out of the chair. It was then that they noticed that her brother was yelling, and that something was happening outside.

They hadn't made it to the door before it slammed open and Vern came stumbling in, looking deranged. Close on his heels was Frank, shouting, "What's wrong? What is wrong?"

"Dad?" Bethany said.

He bumped against them, stumbling, shaking, mumbling something unintelligible. He got down on his hands and knees, crawling under the table. There he curled into a fetal position, his eyes rolled back so that they could only see the whites. He was panting and sweat soaked his clothes, beading his face and making his hair hang in wet, wiry strings. "It's ... a horrible, a demon ... gonna get ... everywhere ... follows me. I think it's a demon ... can't get away ... can't ..." He shuddered, falling silent. His children joined him on the floor, hugging him, telling him that he was safe.

Gregson went into the man's work room, passing the man's elaborate bio-computer, his genetic assembly/disassembly peripherals, found a cabinet full of pharmaceuticals and pulled out some anti-shock tabs. He carried them into the dining room, knelt down under the table, and placed one of the little white stickers on the man's throat, near the jugular vein. Within minutes he began to come out of it. He looked up at Gregson from under the table, a shade of embarrassment in his expression.

"What was it, Vern?" he asked.

"It was horrible," Vern whispered, shaking his head. "Overpowering."

"You saw it, then? An animal?"

Vern's mouth moved, but no words came out. When he found his voice, he said, "Don't go out there. Don't do it."

"You know I've got to."

"Don't do it!"

Gregson turned to leave. Bethany shouted, "James!"

He turned back. "I've got to see what it is."

"It's not worth it." Bethany's eyes were pleading.

He gave her his best smile. "I'll be back."

#

The carnivorous trees looked more like gigantic moss-covered fish bones than trees. They had an exoskeleton structure not unlike Terran insects, and the "moss" was a sticky, deadly substance which paralyzed and slowly digested several species of indigenous birds. The most common was the flying dodo, which was a big green bat-winged creature that regularly crashed into obstacles such as houses, light poles, and carnivorous trees. One was fluttering and crying out in its final moments as Gregson entered the forest.

He walked for a couple of kilometers before coming upon a large, winding creek. He turned and followed it up hill, heading east. The carnivorous trees thinned, being replaced by a taller, uglier variety, which grew closer together and blocked out more sunlight. Here and there a shaft of sunlight made it through, but otherwise the forest was frighteningly dark.

Gregson slowed his pace and finally stopped. In front of him the creek was dammed, creating a shallow pond of crystal clear water. It was here that Vern Hudson was working on a strain of catfish to be released into the main river. Beyond the pond is where the trouble was.

He pulled out his biotscope and waved it back and forth. There were hundreds of life form readings, mostly bugs. There was nothing much bigger than his thumbnail. He checked the plant life for biological outgassing; there were numerous substances, but none registered as a psychoactive nor a pheromone -- at least none that should affect a human being.

All around the pond were human footprints. One fresh set, heading straight away from the pond and into the forest back toward town, were clearly from someone running hard. As he studied them Gregson realized his heart was pounding, that he was already afraid. He wondered if it was natural, or if it was somehow being induced. It's natural, he told himself. I'm a natural coward. He took a deep breath and pushed on, walking cautiously around the pond and into dense woods beyond.

About 40 meters past the pond, his biotscope began picking up readings of a creature. It was right on the outside range of the device, so he couldn't get much information. It was a larger life reading, bigger than a dog but smaller than a human. He moved toward it, wanting to get a look. The forest was so dense here he couldn't see more than a few meters in any direction; the pond was completely out of sight.

There was a loud cracking sound, and looking down Gregson saw a crushed, hollow branch under his right foot. It was like the leg of a large, dead insect. So much for being quiet, he thought. Then he looked up, his eyes widening. There was a change to the forest.

Gregson's vision crystallized, the edges becoming sharp, distinct. Tiny details of the trees, the forest floor, the light and shadow, were all very clear. The feeling of dread swelled inside him. Something was very wrong, very dangerous. His immediate urge was to back away, to turn and run.

He took several long, deep breaths, forcing himself to perceive. To analyze. This is like a drug effect, he thought. Or like being in high quality VR. Or it's something supernatural, his fear voice told him.

Gregson fumbled with his biotscope, making sure it was set to record.

He began moving slowly toward the creature. It was like trying to walk upstream in a river. Every cell in his body was trying to get him to turn around and go the other way. His heart was thudding so hard in his chest that it hurt.

The dark tangle of branches around him were sinister, hiding menace everywhere he looked. He could feel he was being watched. He could feel the tension in the air, like a predator was stalking him and was moments away from pouncing. Gregson became aware that his mouth was dry, and that he was breathing hard. Sweat was streaming down from his forehead and into his eyes.

Gregson had made it a dozen meters in toward the creature when the sound came. Starting low and soft, it was an eerie undulating cry, growing in volume and pitch. It was a horrible sound, a sound that made his pounding heart skip a beat. Then he heard a crashing in the forest behind him, and wide-eyed and gun ready Gregson whirled around. He saw the two Bankrightk men, who had obviously followed him into the forest, turning tail and running away. Gregson's whole body shuddered, wanting to follow them, but he clenched his eyes tightly shut and took deep breaths, trying to calm himself.

The undulating cry was loud, now, and unnerving. It made it impossible to think. Vern Hudson had called it a demon. It sounded like a demon. But demons weren't real, they were fantasy. This couldn't be a demon. This couldn't be anything supernatural. It was just an animal. Just another animal ...

Gregson recalled all the deadly animals he'd seen in his career, animals vicious and deadly. This creature didn't have to be supernatural to be a demon. A demon could be an animal. A demon animal that paralyzed its prey with fear and then went in for the kill.

His biotscope made a sound. It was the proximity alert. Gregson opened his eyes and glanced down at the screen, and saw that the damn thing was right behind him. He yelled and ran. He didn't look back, he just ran. The running was such a glorious and wonderful relief that he kept going, effortlessly, as if a terrific pressure was pushing him from behind.

#

Gregson arrived at his camp exhausted, only to find that the Bankrightk men had been there first. They had taken revenge for the fright they'd received. Gregson's tent had been cut apart with a laser torch, and the contents smashed and strewn about like so much garbage. He stood there, kicking at the remains of his cot and portable cooking equipment. His power plant and biopack computer were gone. It was basically everything he owned.

Of course he had insurance. Unfortunately, it took several Earth-months to process, and until then he had the choice of signing up with Bankrightk or being a bum. Without the biopak computer, there was no way for him to register DNA samples.

He felt it welling up inside of him. Anger, and the desire to kill. Common animal emotions. It was very distasteful, very unpleasant. They were overpowering.

Gregson hefted the stun gun. It was a large, heavy weapon, but it would not kill -- unless you used it as a club.

He set off purposefully toward town.

#

Bankrightk had the newest and nicest building in town. Unlike most of the other reused tanks or spaceship pods, this foam-concrete building was actually built as an office. It had an authentic Sante Fe adobe look to it. The front door was securely locked, and peering through the windows Gregson saw that it was deserted.

The local law enforcement offices were a rusty old half-tank propped up as a rain shelter, with an empty glass office in the back. The glass was cracked in several places, and the public terminals to the orbital police station were all vandalized. Gregson had known it was a useless gesture to even try, but he thought he should go through the motions anyway. One of the terminals, damaged as it was, still worked enough for him to report the crime. The reply he received was that the department was overwhelmed with search and rescue efforts, and wouldn't be able to get an officer down to the settlement for at least a week.

Gregson pushed the key to acknowledge the message, but the key stuck and the terminal began making an annoying beeping sound. The screen filled with garbage characters. He stared at it for a moment, then pounded on it with his fist. It stopped beeping, the screen cleared, and on the display appeared an application for employment. Gregson stared at it quizzically for a moment, then shrugged and filled it out. Lord knows he was out of a job. It was better than working for Bankrightk.

Gregson wandered around the settlement for a while, hungry, unable to afford to eat, then in a depressed mood returned into the wilderness heading for Vern Hudson's farm, hoping for another charitable meal from Bethany. When he was in sight of the place, Vern came running out, yelling hysterically. He was waving a blaster in the air.

Gregson stopped short, wondering if the old man was angry at him for something -- wondering if he should run. He almost did. But there was desperation in the man's voice, and Gregson realized Vern was yelling for help. "Bethany's out there!" he yelled at Gregson. "Frank and Bethany went out there, and she's still out there!"

"What?"

"Frank came back, but Bethany didn't!" Vern yelled. He was wild-eyed with panic and worry. "Can't get Frank to show me where she is -- can't get him to talk at all!" He grabbed Gregson's arm, looking at him desperately. "I can't go out there alone."

Gregson took a deep, calming breath, but he was still gritting his teeth. "Okay," he said. "Let's follow the tracks."

#

There were tracks all around Vern's fish pond. Gregson had isolated Frank and Bethany's, but there were two more sets. He remembered that the Bankrightk men had followed him there earlier, then had run off when the terror struck. Gregson's fear was that they had gone and armed themselves to the teeth, returning with enough firepower to level the forest. His fears were justified when he and Vern heard shouting and gunfire coming from the dense, dark woods ahead.

Gregson already had his biotscope set to record when the terror started. He had some interesting readings from his previous encounter, and wanted to confirm them. After the terror started working on him he ceased to care about the recordings ... there was no good reason for him to be out there, except that Bethany was lost somewhere and he needed to bring her back. His worry for her was like an anchor that kept the terror from carrying him away.

The Bankrightk men continued to shout and fire their weapons.

They sounded wild with fear and panic. "Those idiots," Gregson whispered to Vern. "If Beth is out here, they're liable to kill her."

Vern said nothing. He clutched his blaster close to his chest, sweat pouring from his forehead. His eyes were bulging and his head continuously turned from side to side, like he was expecting something to sneak up behind him.

They trudged several meters further into the murky forest, and Gregson paused, pointing down. Bethany's footprints continued forward, while Frank's lead around and back. This is where the terror had gotten to him, and he'd left his sister all alone. The Bankrightk men had paused here, and had continued on following Bethany.

From somewhere in the forest came a weird, undulating cry. Vern began to back away, but Gregson grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him forward.

Vern blustered. "Let go of me!"

"Stay with me, Vern."

"I ... I can't."

"She's your daughter, damn it -- if you love her half as much as I do, you going to stay with me."

It was dark, but there was a breeze tousling the tops of the trees and occasionally a shaft of sunlight would spear down for a second or two. The warbling, undulating cry seemed to come from everywhere. Gregson pushed forward, rifle pointing forward, every nerve on edge. He felt like he was dancing across the surface of the terror, keeping above it while still feeling it. It was a freefall feeling, unnerving and at the same time exhilarating. He moved through a momentary patch of weak sunlight and once again into shadow, the shadow now seeming deeper than ever.

His biotscope registered a life form ahead. A humanoid in a highly agitated state. Blood pressure high, pulse rate high, adrenal secretions abnormal. Neural pulse rate was two per second higher than the usual ten. A far removed part of Gregson thought that was odd.

Gregson made it to twenty meters from the person, keeping a tree trunk between him and whoever it was. He turned to say something to Vern and found he was alone. Vern had slipped away, abandoning him. Gregson felt like turning and running after him, but he didn't. He wanted to, but instead he held tightly to his father's gun and closed his eyes, focusing his will. I am here for Bethany, he thought. I am here for her.

He opened his eyes and studied his biotscope. The person near him wasn't Bethany -- the body mass was too high. It was probably Rudd, from Bankrightk. Beyond him was another humanoid, and thirty meters further in was the creature.

There was more yelling, and then gunfire. Gregson stayed behind the tree, hiding. The idiots were firing wildly at random, totally out of their minds. The bio-readings from both were identical; same high pulse, same accelerated neural rate. The brain pulse, which was usually right at 40 cycles per second front to back, was at an odd 57 cycles per second.

Gregson struggled to keep his breathing under control. Sweat dropped from his forehead and smeared the readouts on the biotscope. He squinted, focusing his attention with great effort. The pulse in his own brain was also at 57 cycles per second. Gregson wiped at the screen, touched the controls. He focused on the creature, focusing on the neural indicators. It took a while, as the creature was distant. The number finally came up.

It was the same magic number.

Gregson adjusted the stun setting down to it's lowest and

peered around the tree. Rudd had his back to him; Gregson saw him as a dark patch of gray against darker gray. He aimed carefully for the man's leg, and let off a shot. The gun discharged with a twang. Rudd rolled around the ground, crying out. "It's biting me!" he screamed. "It's biting my leg off!" He writhed in mindless panic for a few more seconds before finding his feet, then ran careening and stumbling back toward town.

There was a sudden flurry of gunfire, and Jacko came out of the shadows, firing at Gregson. Gregson ducked behind the tree, hurriedly fumbling with the settings on the rifle. Jacko was yelling wordlessly, his voice undulating almost like the creature. It was a mindless shouting that almost sounded like he was crying. He kept firing, and firing, walking around the tree that Gregson was hiding behind. Gregson circled, keeping the tree in-between the two of them. Finally the gunfire came to a halt, the blaster in Jacko's hand had over-heated. Gregson stepped out and leveled the rifle at the man's stomach, then pulled the trigger.

Jacko's whole body gave a spastic jerk, his legs pushing him a half meter into the air. He landed flat on his back, arms and legs spread, mouth open in a horrible expression. He was out cold.

Gregson turned toward the direction of the creature. He felt dizzy and sick. The creature's undulating cry grated against a dull pain in his head. He stomped forward, pushing against a sea of dead air, getting mental images of dark and horrible things ahead. He saw rending flesh and spraying arterial blood, dark fangs, long hooked claws mangling gnarled gore. He tromped forward, unable to breathe, his eyes affixed to the flickering screen of the biotscope. He came into range of the creature, finding a clear line-of-sight view. Leveling his father's rifle, he squeezed off a shot that hit the creature dead center. Designed neither to kill nor wound, the weapon was made to disable a creature harmlessly, which it did.

Like a dark fog lifting and dissipating, so went the terror.

Gregson's ears were ringing. His own footsteps sounded too loud to his ears. The forest had a dry, musty smell to it, like old dust.

He saw the creature on the ground in front of him, a dark thing lying on its side. Not far away, curled into a shaking, huddled ball, was Bethany. He went quickly over to her, picked her up and held her. Still clenched tightly in her hand was one of his sample collectors. After a moment she dropped it and put her arms around him, holding tight.

Gregson held her until she began to come out of it, and when she finally let him put her down he picked up the sample collector, walked over to the creature -- which turned out to look like a turtle without a shell -- and sampled the DNA. This sample, he knew, was the motherload. DNA containing the code for true telepathy.

It was worth a mint.

Carefully he took hold of Bethany, who was still in shock, and led her out into the sunlight, and then home.

#

Gregson, dressed in his new uniform and wearing a shiny alloy badge, stepped nervously up to Vern's front door and knocked. Frank answered. "Hey, look at the threads!" He ushered Gregson in, got him a home brew and sat him at the table.

It had been several weeks since Gregson had used Vern's bio-computer to register the DNA and have the copyright granted. So far he'd had several very lucrative offers on the license to use



the DNA code, and he had turned every one of them down. Bankrightk had made some strong-arm efforts to force him to sell, but being that he was now an officer of the law, they had quickly backed off and the local office had closed down.

"Ah, James!" Vern said, coming into the room. He grabbed Gregson's hand and shook it hard. "I'm afraid you've missed Bethany, she's out at the market right now."

"I know. Actually, it's you I've come to see," Gregson said.

"Me? Well!" He sat down at the table across from Gregson.

"What can I do for you?"

Gregson cleared his throat. "As you know, I've decided not to sell the license to use the telepathy DNA. Bethany and I figured that there was too many unethical uses for it, that it outweighed any good that may come out of it."

"I have to admire you for that, though I can't say I would do the same thing. You're passing up a life of ease for, what, a career in law enforcement? What a choice."

"Out there in the forest I reached a turning point for my whole life," Gregson said. "That's why I am here right now."

"Really?"

"Yes sir."

"Sir?" Vern grinned.

"Yes, sir," Gregson grinned back. "I realized that while most of my adult life I was searching for that motherload, that one DNA fragment that would make all my dreams come true, I've come to the point where I would trade it all for one thing. And that is your daughter, Vern. I am in love with Bethany. I realized out there that nothing mattered to me but her. And so I'm, um ... I'm asking your ... um ..."

"Yes?"

"I would like your permission to take her as my wife."

Vern was smiling broadly. "Well now! I have to admit I expected this, but it's still refreshing to think that in this day and age a man will still come and ask a girl's father for permission to marry her. Son, I can't think of a single reason to say no. You have my blessing."

A while later he stepped outside, only to see that Bethany was waiting for him. "He said yes," Gregson said.

She squealed with delight, jumped into his arms, and they kissed.

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