

THE BURBLE

Bubbles cascaded up through the purple water. Scandal bent over to see what caused the disturbance in the pool. The amethyst walls, lit with the twin moons, looked like a gigantic geode. He leaned out to discover the bubbles' source and caught a shadow's movement below the surface. A cave-size mouth opened, a sticky tongue lurched, attached to Scandal's face, sucked him from his perch on the pool's ledge and swallowed him whole. Scandal felt the acid of the burble's digestive tract before he realized why everything had grown black. The two moons' reflections, etched on his retina, moved with his searching eyes until they, too, succumbed to the burning acid. He died screaming, trying to understand what enveloped him and ate his flesh.

Manny jumped as a log snapped. The crack sent sparks shooting from the fire like a comet's tail. Eliot and Nance laughed. Jude only smirked. "What a wimp," She thought. Manny slapped his leg for what must have been the 143rd time. Once more, it would just be plain gross. There hadn't even been a mosquito tonight. The fire settled. The flames danced softly and joined the matching moons to light the members of the expedition's feast.

"It's not funny," Manny said. "You told me I'd have all the luxuries of home. Instead, I have mosquitos and spark-shooting fires. Not even a decent Cabernet for this canned meat. I don't like being out after dark. I'm used to finer living."

"It's rehydrated, not canned, and any alcohol in your system will interfere with your concentration during the morning dive." Eliot tossed back his silken hair, a habit that made him come off as some famous model. He was the dive chief, and his time near the water showed in his breadcrust-tanned complexion. Eliot was the best diver on the planet, but that wasn't saying much in a world whose population was under a million, most of whom were scientists or geologists like Manny—all looking for one big score.

Nance scoffed down the last of her faux pulled pork. "It's not meat. It's rehydrated spaghetti squash. I don't eat living creatures."

THE BURBLE

“Well, the creatures here may eat you,” Manny answered. “You have no idea how dangerous this planet is.

Nance took a swig from her canteen. “Ahhh, Vintage 2183. An excellent bouquet, extra wet, with a hint of steel.”

Manny ignored Nance’s almost comical critique of the water. “When is the sleeper due?” he asked Jude.

“I thought you were kidding,” Jude replied. “Who uses sleepers out here? We have halo-tents. We’ll set up as soon as Scandal gets back.”

“Halo-tents? Their walls are paper-thin. Do you know they’ve identified over a hundred colossal reptilian species in this sector alone? And the snakes—half of them are cheetah-fast and skyscraper-long. At least in a sleeper, we’d be secure.”

“We’re not funded. You knew that. Halo-tents will do us fine. Just relax, Manny, will you? The snakes don’t go anywhere near sweaty, smelly humans. And they avoid fire like a virus. The evac vent of the halo-tents will smear your smell around and keep everything away, including us.” Jude pinched her nose at Manny, leaned over and threw a thick stick into the flames.

“You’re as cancerous as a positive pap smear. I knew it that first day you coerced me to come out here. You’re lucky I need this gig, or I’d fly back to Druid tonight.”

“I needed you for the expedition.” Jude shrugged. “If not for your geological aptitude, you’d still be begging for food on the streets.” Engineering and fuel were Manny’s specialties. He needed a killer payout to return to Earth, where he had pissed off an AmzaWal Global Government militate who then sent him to Tapa as punishment—just because he could.

AmzaWal Global Government had sent thousands of criminals with each cargo vessel to rid Earth of its less desirable. They had formed a militant government over the populous, so Jude was careful to keep their expedition’s location and purpose secret. Manny had come in on one of those vessels but checked out okay with no significant criminal record.

THE BURBLE

Her connections in Druid were prepared to set up a mining rig in days if she unearthed anything valuable. Manny had been the perfect candidate to coerce into helping with this potential quarry. She wouldn't admit it to anyone but Nance, but she needed this score, too. Jude's daughter Terisa was stuck near the outer rim, and Jude's starship wouldn't navigate the light jump without a new wave generator.

Jude stood, catching the snap of a branch just outside camp. "Scandal, that you?" She pressed the receiver implanted under her ear. "Everyone quiet. Scandal, do you copy? Check-in."

"I need a bath," Manny said.

"I said, *be quiet*, Manny. Nance, your blaster!" Jude pulled her own and switched the sound blaster out of safety mode. The unit hummed alive. The vibration of the sonic amplifier itched her trigger finger.

"What in hell's going on?" Manny said.

Jude's stare got him to shut his mouth.

"Scandal, report in now." Jude pointed her blaster toward the wooded area beside their camp. A slithering emanated from the foliage. A diamond-shaped head rose above the thick leaves. Elliptical eyes, reflecting both moons backlit by the fire, blinked. Its head was as massive as a ground flyer, maybe twice a flyer's size.

"Oh No!" Manny went to stand, to run, but Jude clapped her free hand down on his shoulder to keep him seated.

"Shhh!" she whispered. Jude switched the setting on her blaster to its lowest frequency wave. "The fire will make it hard for the snake to see." The monster snake inched forward, revealing more of its scaled length, rising above the trees before approaching. Armor-like plates clicked as it glided toward them. It focused on the fire—licked the air with its forked tongue to test and taste the flames. It blinked, hissed, turned its devil eyes and slipped into the deep undergrowth.

"Bigger than a dragon." Jude's body eased off its tension as she gazed after the colossal snake. She released Manny, switched off and holstered her blaster. "Nance, go find Scandal, will you."

THE BURBLE

Nance holstered her blaster, too, and hiked off in the opposite direction the snake had gone. She called up the tracer for Scandal's locator. Her hunch had paid off. The signal was pointing right in front of her. "I knew he couldn't wait until morning to check out the pool."

Scandal's signal led her to the pool's edge. She leaned over to see where he was. *Why would he go in without an oxygen suit?* Bubbles cascaded up through the purple water. She caught the movement of a shadow below the surface and assumed Scandal was swimming toward her. She squatted for a better view.

"Did you find him?" Jude called over the communicator.

Nance stood. "Fool's gone for a swim without his suit," Nance stepped back and sat on a rock to wait for Scandal to surface.

"We need him fit and able for the morning dive. Get his butt back to camp."

"He's still under. He should have surfaced by now. All I can see are air bubbles."

"Damn! We're coming." Jude switched off her connection. "Grab your suits, boys. She picked up her own, Scandal and Nance's.

"What's going on? What if that snake comes back?" Manny said.

Eliot flicked his hair as he stood. "Diving a new hole at night is not a good idea. Hunters like the dark."

"We may not have a choice," Jude said, leading the men through the foliage. "We will be the hunters."

Manny hurried to catch them up.

"How long?" Jude asked, arriving at the pool.

"Too long." Nance accepted her suit and began changing. "Maybe he tossed his locator and took off with a core sample."

"Not Scandal. We've worked together for twenty years. He's loyal as this planet's 36-hour day is long. We searched forever to find this hole. He's down there, dead or alive."

THE BURBLE

“Likely dead.” Eliot pointed to Scandal’s suit. “Fool to dive without that.”

Jude tossed Scandal’s suit to the ground.

“I’m not going in there,” Manny crossed his arms, one fist clung to his dive outfit, unclad.

“You gonna stay up here alone with that snake around?” Jude asked. She sealed her neckline, pulled on her hood and locked down the facemask. The suit snugged up against her frame, and the temperature control—initiated—cooled her overheated flesh.

Manny put on his suit. “This is a stupid move, you know that. If Scandal’s dead, he’s dead. What killed him? Why dive into this stupid hole to retrieve a dead man? He’ll be just as dead in daylight.”

“Just stay close, and you’ll be safe,” Eliot said. “Commlink check.”

“Check,” Nance answered.

“Check,” Jude said.

“Com check, Manny?” Jude asked.

Manny pulled the hood over his black hair. “Yeah, yeah. I’m good.”

“Okay.” Jude took charge. “Eliot, take point.”

Eliot jumped in.

“Nance, you first, then Manny. I’ll tail.” Nance jumped. Manny hesitated. Jude pushed him over the pool’s edge and followed, jumping in beside him. The amethyst lining lit the water with a perfect purple haze. Eliot was already twenty meters down. Just above him, Nance faced in the opposite direction to watch his back. Manny was still trying to initiate his negative buoyancy regulator. Jude punched his chest—it kicked on. Manny descended. Jude scanned the upper cavern and opened the link on her faceplate to monitor everyone’s location. The display gave a three-dimensional view of the cave and a blip with an initial for each of her team. The depth and distance from her were displayed in red, and the depth of each of them from the surface was in blue. The velocity of each was displayed in green. Scandal’s locator showed at a 200-meter depth. He was moving. *How can he still be alive that far below?*

“He’s coming back up,” Nance said. “Fast.”

THE BURBLE

Jude's fins had deployed, and she used them to flip over and check for Scandal coming up through the purple haze.

"He'll give himself the bends." Eliot looked down to where the signal raced toward them.

Scandal's speed kept waning, then lurching up. Jude didn't like it. "Blasters, Nance." She followed by pulling her blaster. "Everyone, against the walls." Jude pushed Manny back just as some screecher creature with a froglike face swam under Eliot and opened its gaping jaw.

Jude fired.

Nance fired.

Manny screamed.

The shockwave tore through Eliot's foot and cut through Frog Face's head. Eliot screamed.

Purple-shaded blood squirted out of Eliot's foot. The creature sucked him in. Eliot's call for help was cut off. Frog Face turned toward the pool's depths. Jude and Nance continued to fire. The burble evaded the shots and dodged behind an outcrop, disappearing below.

Manny slammed his chest, hit his buoyancy regulator to ascend, and began kicking his flippers, racing toward the surface. His screams echoed in Jude's headset.

Eliot and Scandal's locators withdrew deeper and deeper into the purple darkness.

"Surface Nance," Jude yelled. They rose slowly to avoid decompression sickness, keeping watch for any other creature that might attack or for the return of the burble.

Manny was already changing out of his suit when they emerged. Jude pulled off her hood. "Not so fast, Doc."

"Screw that! I'm done. No thanks. Snakes, sea monsters. Poor is better than dead. I'm not dying on this stinking planet. No thanks."

"Your ride back to Earth is about 50 meters down in this hole. I saw it, Manny. I saw it. The platinum vein. We need the sample, and we're *all* off this stinking planet."

"No way. That was a burble, a burble tadpole." But Manny stopped stripping off his dive suit.

THE BURBLE

“We hit it. It dove down, deep, dying most likely. You need this, Manny. We all need this. One dive. One quick dive, and we’re set for life.”

Nance looked apprehensive in the moonlight, but Jude knew she’d do whatever was needed.

Manny hesitated. “This is ridiculous.” He began putting back on his suit.

“I’ll lead,” Jude said. “I stay below and watch for Frog Face in case he’s still hungry. Manny, you get the sample while Nance watches your back. Twenty minutes, and we’ll be on our way back to Druid. Wealth awaits once we claim the mining deal.”

Nance wiped her face and slipped her hood and mask back into place.

Jude jumped into the pool, slapped her buoyancy regulator, and began her fall. She passed the cache of Platinum, pointing it out to Nance and Manny, who were following her down. Eliot’s beacon flashed on and off her screen, moving around 250 meters below her position—Scandal’s no longer registered. It must have fried out. The frog thing was still alive. “Hurry! Get the sample, and let’s go.”

Manny worked out his specimen kit. He shook visibly as he extracted the core. He showed Jude the reading on his wrist monitor—70 percent yield. “Jackpot,” Nance said. “Let’s move.”

Jude pressed her regulator and began her ascent. Eliot’s beacon lit brightly on her screen until it, too, fizzled out. She knew—Frog Face was coming.

Jude reached Manny’s location and hit his buoyancy regulator.

Nance called out, “The burble.” She began racing up with Manny. Jude turned and fired blindly into the dark purple water, wondering if her blaster could even kill the beast. Rising face-down, she reached the surface.

Nance pulled Manny out first.

Jude climbed out behind him, her blaster still in her hand resting on the outcrop as she lifted herself from the water. Something wrapped around her leg. She fired instinctively as she was pulled off the shelf. The shot cut Manny in two. She flew backward down into the purple depths. Darkness enveloped her. She fired and fired. A skull floated before her mask. She fired again and again. Her leg

THE BURBLE

started burning. She swung her blaster madly, rapidly firing in every direction. An opening showed the purple water. She used her free hand to pull herself out of the burble's belly—free. The pain hit her. She started crying, and through her bloody eyes, she watched the carcass of Frog Face drifting down into the deep purple abyss. She rose through the purple haze. Her suit doing for her what she could not do for herself.

Jude woke before a fire in Nance's arms. Her legs were wrapped in bandage foil. Not enough, she realized. There was not enough foil for her legs to be whole. Nance's arms encircled her. "Please don't go. I love you," Nance whispered.

"I'm here," Jude said. "We're rich. I can go get my baby back from the outer rim." She reached up. Part of her hand was gone, too. It was also wrapped in bandage foil, numb from the medicine it was pumping into her. She raised her gun hand—still intact.

The sound of the snake slithered near them through the woods.

There should be enough payout for prosthetics. She unholstered the blaster and pointed it at the foliage.

A full-grown burble hopped into their camp. Frog Face's momma, maybe. It eyed them.

The mouth opened. The snake lurched and latched onto the burble's head at the fat neck. The burble leaped, dragging the snake across the camp, crushing Jude and Nance under its massive form. The burble's tongue sprang out, attached to the face of the snake. The burble's leg kicked, trying to remove the snake from its head. Crushed, Jude's eyes closed for the last time. Nance grabbed her blaster, screamed and started firing. Titan vs Titan vs Titan...