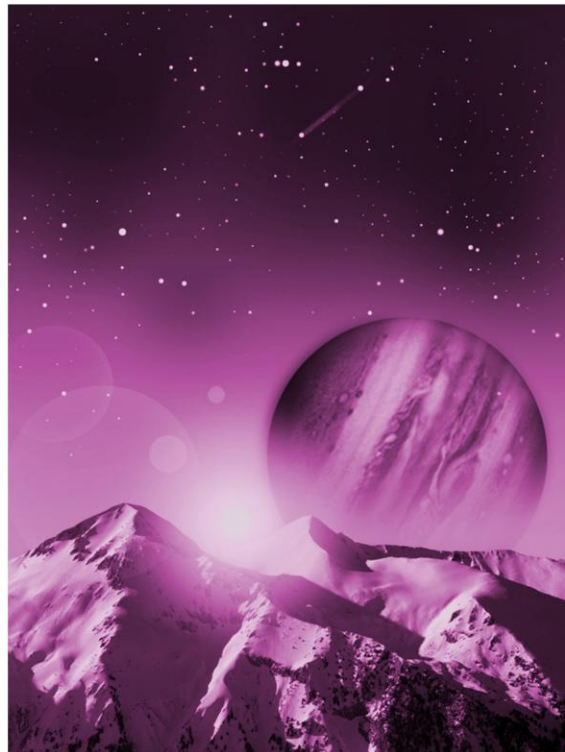


Space-D *Two* by Ella Drake



Space-D: Episode Two
A Daphne Adventure.
By Ella Drake

Space-D: Episode Two

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Episode Two

The gathering of white fluffy clouds shouldn't have looked so ominous, but they weren't natural. Then again, nothing was natural on this heaven forsaken hunk of rock floating in space. Not even Daphne.

The portal window fogged over as wisps of fog covered the enviro-struct she'd been trapped in for an interminable about of time. Hiding. Alone. Choking down the only sustenance available to her now that rations were gone—dried out hunks of carnivorous worms.

Daphne shuddered. Whatever rolled in on that mist had to be better than living one more day hearing the echo of her steps in empty corridors. One more day wishing her daddy could get her out of this mess like all the other messes.

Knock. Knock.

Daphne nearly died of system failure. What a way to go, heart attack right on this spot where she stood for hours a day looking out and hoping. She spun toward the hatch and slid her rifle from her shoulder holster. A hunk of curly red hair yanked out along with it. She leveled the barrel at the portal. "Go away, slimy worm."

"I've been called a lot of things, but slimy worm is a new one," came the muffled response. "I think."

Daphne's hands remained steady. "Who are you, besides worm bait?"

"Trooper Aspen. Did you set off the emergency beacon?"

For a split second, she processed the likelihood this was a trap by those sneaky ass worms, but that didn't seem plausible. They didn't want to eat her, and she'd blasted oodles of them to smithereens in the past weeks. On the other side of that door was her ticket off this planet.

She pointed the rifle to the metal sheeting floor, out of the way but ready in case she needed it, and pressed down on the door handle. The hatch flung wide.

Backlit by the now bright day, four men in dark green fatigues stood there, two facing out, submachine guns sweeping the area. Another gripped a side arm and watched passively, but his readings showed an elevated heart rate unlike his companions' ruthlessly normal bio rates. Only strict training could keep that kind of control over responses in a strange, potentially dangerous situation. Daphne blinked once to turn off her scanners and take a closer look at the fourth man without the mappings and computations scrolling through her visual cortex.

Mussed, cropped black hair and piercing blue eyes accented with the dark shadow of a rough shave should have made him look dangerous with all that combat gear positioned all over his six foot five frame, but he smiled at her with an easy grin. He hooked his thumbs in his belt and stood relaxed. “What seems to be the problem, Doll?”

Spoken like she strolled the county fair and happened upon one of the peacekeepers there to keep the drunks in line. Though, her daddy didn’t let her talk to strange men, especially the law.

Wait a minute. The word hit her like a slap across the face. She shook her head, tightened her grip on the rifle, and snarled. “Doll?”

The ease of the trooper fled before she could blink her scanners back online. With a smooth draw, his sidearm aimed at her and his tone turned deadly. “Don’t move.”

Self confidence oozed off of him, and his piercing blues focused on her rifle grip with a sharpness that was almost a physical prod. She wanted out of here. Bad. She didn’t move, though she wanted to slug him for the insult. Nobody talked to her like that. Not even her daddy.

Not that he could talk to her anymore now that he was worm fodder.

Trooper Aspen didn’t so much as breath heavy, outfitted with his combat gear, the sub strapped to his left leg, and a stun bar strapped to his right. A thin coil of rope wrapped his torso crosswise and a survival belt outfitted with the latest circled his slim waist. All of him shined, gleamed, neatly pressed—tucked in green canvas shirt, blast vest, and rebreather hanging around his neck. He took care of his rough hewn body as well as his gear.

All this she noted in a split second as her scanners accessed her situation. Though she shouldn’t move, she couldn’t stop herself from running a hand down her stained, rumped, and torn coveralls.

In his ear, a comm unit came to life, whispering to the trooper so low that no other human could hear. Daphne was no human.

“Harris to Aspen.”

Aspen didn’t flick a muscle in his weapon stance. His jaw vibrations transmitted to the comm as he talked in a subvocalization. He needn’t have bothered. Her scanners picked up the signal.

“This is Aspen. Report, Harris.”

“We’ve searched the area. All the scientists and outpost civilians... They’re all dead. There are remains littered all over the place. Parts so small I can’t see them, but the scanners can. Something took these people apart and scattered them for as far out as we can detect. We also found most of the remains of a robo-dog. I think I can recover the memory banks.”

A tick started under Aspen’s eye as he thumbed off his safety. He looked like a predator as tough and determined as any Daphne had faced.

With a clatter, Daphne dropped her rifle and put her hands up. “It’s not what you think.”

“Take it easy, lady,” said the trooper with the elevated heart rate.

“Turn around.” Aspen’s gaze of sheer ice never wavered. “Slowly.”

She did. No hesitation.

Within seconds, she could take them all down before Aspen could squeeze the trigger, but that wouldn’t get her onto whatever ship hid behind that cloud cover. If they arrested her, she could get off Planet H311.

“Aspen.” The voice on the comm wavered. “There’s something out here.”

Aspen clamped restraints on her wrists. “You just told me everyone was dead except this one survivor I’ve got here. There’s nothing out there.”

“Survivor?”

Daphne’s shoulders slumped. If they went too far after that train of thought, they’d figure out she was illegal, and she’d never get up on that ship.

Aspen spun her around, a frown forming lines between his eyes. “Who else is here? What’s your name?”

“Daphne.”

He canted his head, the corners of his mouth dipping down.

Screams blared from his head piece. He flinched and pulled the comm off of his ear.

“What the hell was that?” asked heart-rate boy.

Aspen held his comm in front of his mouth. “Harris, come in.”

No response.

“Harris, one click if you can hear me. One click, buddy.”

No response.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.” Aspen gripped her elbow and pulled her toward the hatch. Hand in cuffs, she stumbled until she caught her balance. “Let’s lock her in the shuttle and find out what the hell is going on.”

Outside, the black sand dunes rippled. The two troopers with the submachine guns crouched and visually swept the area. Only a few feet away, a shuttle—boxy, ugly, stunted triangular wings with huge unsightly landing wheels, scorch marks on the dull metal underbelly—had to be the most beautiful sight Daphne had ever seen.

Only six feet from the enviro-struct.

The black dirt spewed up in a surge. Fecund moisture coated her skin.

The lead trooper went down.

Bullets sprayed out, twipping into the undulating sand waves.

Two worms, mouths crowded with razor sharp teeth, clamped onto the legs of the lead trooper. His submachine gun sprayed into the air uselessly as he flailed. Before Daphne could process rescue strategies, before he could yell, half the trooper's body yanked beneath the ground. The swish of sand filled the silence as it filled in over his disappearing head.

The screams started.

Daphne's body reacted. The shudders stopped. Her shoulders squared. Her mouth dried. Scanners blinked on. Muscles surged with extra adrenaline. The ramped up mode of her comp systems made her leg ache. The recent repair there hadn't fully remeshed. The scent of oil coated her tongue from the leak in her shin.

A moment passed as her body reacted without conscious decision.

The screams stopped, and there were only two troopers left.

Falling to the ground, heart-rate boy went into cardiac arrest. He wouldn't make it.

"Leave him," Daphne commanded Aspen as he bent to take the arm of his comrade. The trooper didn't listen and kept tugging at his buddy. Only three feet from the opening shuttle ramp.

A dune sped toward them.

"He's already dead, Aspen. Move your pretty ass." Daphne fisted her hands and yanked her restraints apart.

Aspen flicked a frosty glare toward her hands and kept tugging on the man.

Four squirmy, slimy, disgustingly icky space worms burst from the ground. They were surrounded.

Another trooper stood on the ramp, a hand cannon pumping shot into the mass of worms popping from the dunes all around them. Daphne's scans counted them, though she really didn't want to know the numbers. Twenty-five. Twenty-six. Thirty.

With a shove, she threw the worms the only bait she had, the trooper whose heart had exploded inside his chest. She picked up his weapon as Aspen hurled curses at her.

"You bitch. I had him."

"He was dead. And you will be, too, if you don't get your ass on that ship."

Keening growls rended the air. Blood sprayed in the flurry of slimy bodies wiggling to get at the fresh kill. Daphne shot into the squirming mound.

Bullets plowed into the worms coiling, lunging for Aspen. She sprayed cover fire in a large arch. Behind her the loud boom of the hand cannon joined hers to a deafening cacophony.

Aspen shot at a worm that lunged from the side but it managed to snap its jaws, grazing his uniform leg. The tang of blood infuriated the worms. Daphne's gut pinched as she scanned his leg. The wound wasn't deep, but it pissed her the hell off.

They hissed and struck out.

Daphne shot in a blaze too fast for the eye to see, inching toward the hatch.

The man onboard the shuttle pulled the limping Aspen onboard.

The landing ramp groaned as it lifted off the ground. A worm slithered across it toward Aspen.

"Come on, woman, move your pretty ass," Aspen yelled. He aimed his rifle down the open mouth of the worm and shot. Pieces flew everywhere.

Daphne lunged toward the closing hatch. She caught the upper lip and hauled herself over. She barely fit. Her coveralls caught on the door and ripped. She fell to the floor with a clang.

The soldier with the hand cannon ran from the bay. "Let's get off this rock."

"The others." Aspen panted, dirt smudged and rumped on the floor.

"They're all dead." The trooper, already on the move, answered over the echo of his pounding steps. "I lost all their life signs. You're all that's left."

The shuttle rumbled and Daphne spread her feet to avoid hitting the floor when the craft lifted from the ground.

"You threw him to those... things, and they didn't even touch you? Why?" He hadn't moved from the floor. In fact, he spread out on the floor and looked to the ceiling, his face etched deeply with lines that weren't there minutes ago.

"They don't like how I taste." She left it at that.

Her reactions slowed down. Body shifting out of battle mode, she blinked her scanners offline. She was tired and hungry from the rapid depletion of energy. Her vision blurred and all she could see was the gray of the ship walls.

"Is that what happened to everyone in the facility? Those things." He sounded as wiped as she felt.

"Yes." She was too tired to move, so she collapsed onto the floor where she stood.

"You sure know your way around a gun."

"My daddy brought me up right."

He snorted a sad and lonely sound.

They stayed like that, quiet, his thoughts more than likely reliving the horrors until a short time later the shudder of the craft signaled they'd docked.

The hatch clanked open.

A breath of sterile, clean air gave her a rush of energy.

Freedom.

“Go ahead. I have to report. They’ll want your version, but go get a shower and get some rest. I’ll put them off for a bit. Just ask for the women’s dormitory. Anyone can point you to it.” Aspen didn’t acknowledge her again as he hauled himself from the floor and limped in the direction of the cockpit.

Daphne walked from the shuttle, through a deserted bay, and into a wide room in the throes of a party.

The large auditorium was decorated with colorful streamers and lights. People milled about with drinks in their hands. A passing woman with shining, perfect blonde hair and a clean, spiffy uniform, grinned at her as she shoved a cool drink in her hand.

“Merry Starsmas.” The woman giggled and moved on, chatting with the as immaculately pressed man at her elbow.

Daphne plucked at the strap of her rumpled coveralls and tried not to stare at the hundreds of dazzling people laughing and eating from a delicious smelling buffet. Many wore finery. They all wore variations of the same uniform, standard and formal blues. Obviously a few were on duty but stopping in for festivities.

They didn’t know. Not yet. That they’d lost several men today.

The scent of oil from her injuries finally moved Daphne. She needed food. She needed rest. Then she’d finally face it. Her future. Today was the first day in her new life.

Mouth watering, she picked up a danish from the nearest table.

Sweet and tart. Just like her.

Wouldn’t her daddy have liked this buffet?

She ignored the twinge in her gut and relished the pastry.

Thank the stars she didn’t have to eat worms again.