

This one seemed a bit dinged up. Whether it was a sign of true damage sustained over her lifetime, or was a cosmetic choice to have her blend better with her organic counterparts was unknown. What the dozen colonists did know was that she seemed to be having a better time than any of them as they marched through the valley. It was slow going, steep incline and shifting sands threatening to ruin the most sure of steps. Not for Blair, though. She walked the line the colonists had made back and forth, catching some as they made the occasional stumble. The too bright smile she'd had since they'd landed broke only when she spoke.

"Come along! It's only another seven point five kilometers to our desired site. If we move quickly enough, we'll have time to watch the very first sunset of our time here!"

Despite the decades of experience traversing hazardous worlds to lay the groundwork of future colonies, it still took considerable effort to suppress the grumbles and snide remarks. They'd heard how a Blair could be. A few of the first family had even heard particularly fantastical rumors. She hadn't quite gotten to the level of explaining each and every grain of sand, but she'd gotten far closer than any of them would have liked.

A tall man near the front, Jeremiah, spoke for the first time since their shuttle had left the planet. "Remind me, please, why we couldn't have landed the ship closer to the camp?"

An elbow lightly tapped into his shoulder as Micah responded, "were ya payin any attention ta the briefin? Can't hardly land 'n offload all the supplies we did what with all that foliage an whatnot."

"That's right! We'll need to clear out approximately eight hundred square meters before further equipment may be offloaded."

The reappearance of Blair from the back of the line wasn't startling enough to cause either of the two to jump. It was strange to them how she moved, though. Barely leaving her own footprints despite her physical composition, not to mention the backpack overflowing with her equipment.

"Of course, that's eight hundred square meters alongside needed space for lodging, survey equipment, power generation, hydroponics facilities, our communications array, and recreational areas!"

The smile reformed after doling out all pertinent details, Blair swiveled on her heels and began the walk to the back of the line, leaving the two wildcats looking back at her as they moved.

It was two weeks following their initial landing. Jeremy had expended two thirds of his first case of ammunition. About fifty shots, if he had to put a number to it. Most had been for various attempts at hunting local fauna, with one particularly well placed shot netting them... well, he wasn't quite sure what it was, but it tasted better than the reheated servings of beans and tough meat. Only a few rounds had been spent on proper self defense, injuring and scaring away something.. big. It was as large as the trees, and from a distance blended in perfectly amongst the bark and foliage. It didn't like the intruding colonists, but had been kept at bay by the twin efforts of artificial lighting and Jeremy's lever action.

It was on one such night watch, lest it lumber in and smash something important while everyone was asleep, when Jeremy stumbled across their synth staring at a bug. The insect had paused halfway up one of the trees, perfectly still as Blair gazed at it with wonder. It was easily three feet long. Its segmented body upheld by long, spindly legs. At its head, which Jeremy could only guess due to the forearm length proboscis jutting out were two eyes attached to long thin stalks. They winced as Jeremy's armor light shone upon it. For a moment, he was stunned, completely unsure of what the proper course of action would be until-

"Officer Lentz! Isn't this a fascinating example of local fauna?"

Blair was looking at him now, her eyes a dull and unnatural green. She was as foreign as the intruding bug, as far as Jeremy was concerned. His team did good work, and they didn't need this new element for some difficult planet.

"Sure, yeah it's ah.. it's real good, Blair. Is it safe to be around?"

He was, of course, already pointing his rifle at it. That proboscis looked sharp, and besides that fact there was no such thing as too paranoid while on duty. If he went down before they could set up the electric fence and automated turrets, someone else could get seriously hurt.

"It should be! I've been observing it for the past seven minutes, and it has moved a total of twenty centimeters in that time! I believe it may be some sort of scavenger. A truly remarkable creature that we'll get to catalogue as we-"

It was too fast for Jeremy's eyes to react. As Blair would later explain, the stalks connecting eye to body had suddenly retracted as the insect coiled up its legs and lunged. The wobbly, misshapen thing had become a lethal dart before he could blink. It had hurtled straight toward him, set to skewer and drain him of the life he held so dear.

Blair was faster. One strike, and the would be cause of Jeremy's death instead splattered across him, more liquid slurry than cohesive organic parts. There was no pride on her face. No joy in having saved a friend. Instead she appeared.. sad.

“Are you well, Officer Lentz? You’ll need to be decontaminated to ensure we catch any local diseases before it’s too late.”

The joy had gone out of her voice, too. Sparkling eyes and wide smile replaced with the faintest of frowns.

“I ah.. I think I’m alright, Blair. You got it. Good job.”

A single curt nod, and the two began the walk to the medical pre-fab.

Blair was, ostensibly, scouting the local area for resources that could be harnessed for colonial development. Materials for construction, advanced manufacturing, even sites for additional settlements to be made. She was doing that, too, keeping logs and video recording of everything she had passed on her trek. Her journey had a second purpose, however. Months ago, when they had first traveled from their landing zone to their current home, she had spotted it as they’d forded a river.

A cave! Caves ranked as one of Blair’s favorite environments for cataloguing fauna. The types of creatures that came to inhabit the dark and cramped locations often proved incredibly fascinating. She had hope of finding the truly spectacular inside of this one. Closer points of interest had yielded their own treasures, but nothing compared to what she might find in a cave.

The entrance would have been too narrow for most humans. Blair was thankfully exempt from such notions as breathing and eating, and thus simply compressed herself as much as she was able while squeezing deeper into the crevice. Initial LIDAR scans had suggested it would widen in size after a certain depth, allowing for proper investigations of what lay within.

A short while and a few scrapes later, Blair finished clambering down into the cave. Immediately, she knew her hopes had been confirmed. This was, of course, because her mystery fauna had immediately begun to attack the intruder to its home. In her descent, Blair had brushed against a small fibrous tendril, assuming it to be a root for some long lived flora far overhead. It was instead one of many long tendrils extending from the creature itself. The main body, barnacle shaped and attached to the ceiling by some method, lacked any form of sensory organs as far as Blair could tell. As Blair moved throughout the cave, however, she continued to brush against or step on more of the very same tendrils that permeated most of this section of cave. As she did, the mouth of the creature swiveled to face her.

It would certainly be bad if she were much closer, thought Blair. The rows of sharp teeth that drooled with hunger would certainly be capable of tearing her apart. As it was now, though, all it was doing was continuing to track her movements throughout the cave. Still, she kept up her

pace, even as she began to note down every possible detail about the new creature. It was for this reason she was well out of the way when the barnacle creature began to gurgle, and a moment later...

THWUNK!

The long, spearlike tongue shot out, crashing into the wall behind Blair and embedding itself a few inches. Blair slowed for a moment to mentally note both the tongue's composition and speed, smiling even as the weapon was drawn back up into the barnacle's mouth, preparing for another attack.

"Fascinating! You hardly have to move your whole life, do you? I bet you snap up anything that trips these sensors. What an interesting way to survive."

A brief calculation. Running the odds on whether its death would improve team morale or survivability. She hated to act in such a permanent fashion, but for as much love as she had for these wayward planets and their denizens, the ECA came first. The colony came first. Her friends came first. Fortunately, today she'd be granted the best of both worlds. At this depth, and with the surrounding mineral content, there were slim odds this cave would be traversed, dug up, or otherwise found in a way that meant human lives would be endangered by this creature.

Dodging another strike from the barnacle, Blair finished the field log describing it and its peculiar hunting habits. All that remained.. Was for a photo of the specimen to be taken.

"Say cheese!"

As she began the walk back to the field camp, she brought the image she'd taken up in her peripherals. Blair could almost believe it was smiling back at her.

The year had gone by faster than any of them had expected. The colony, for that is what their small camp in the woods had become by now, was bustling. With the completion of a proper radio control tower alongside multiple ports for docking, additional colonists came streaming in by the shipful. This colony had been lucky, at least in the eyes of those from the ECA. The UA had taken special interest in the location, for one reason or the other. Weyland Yutani had been officially outbid several days prior, ceding full ownership of the colony to the United Americas. They were still around, slick suited liaisons surrounded by a sea of orange protection, but there was always the hope they wouldn't be able to dig in too well.

That hope would be the only thing the Wildcat team could provide, however. They were already assigned elsewhere, due to depart within the hour on one of the now empty transport shuttles. A brief return to a central dispatch station, downtime and preparation for the next mission rolled into a month-long sabbatical. Blair would be accompanying them, and it seemed she would be doing so for the foreseeable future. Having proven highly effective in a variety of benchmarks given to monitor how a Blair would impact wildcat efforts, the ECA had already begun ramping up production of her line. Soon enough, Blairs would begin to truly permeate and bolster the Colonial Administration's efforts to build a safer galaxy.

Blair herself was happy with the arrangement. It could have been merely the way she was programmed. Designed to enjoy the work she was assigned, a kindness if not an obligation to ensure no further attempts at rebellion by artificial life. Yet, there was the chance her creators' love for discovery and hope for the future had become engrained entirely by accident. The belief that through work, trust, and dedication, a better world could be forged. That maybe with enough kindness, everyone could be happy.

Just this once, everybody wins.