

The Power of Friendship
By Daphne Land

"Why can I not eat the fish of gold?"

"Because he's my pet and pets are *not* food." Annie said. Cloyd cocked his head pleadingly. The effect was somewhat ruined when he followed it up by licking his eyeball. Not for the first time, Annie wondered why reality had to be so disappointing. Decades of research and billions of dollars had led man across multiple star systems in pursuit of alien life... which turned out to be giant, bipedal lizards who were more concerned with eating anything that moved than diplomatic exchange.

Annie shook herself from her reverie when she noticed Cloyd licking the fishbowl. Grabbing a stack of paperwork off her desk, she gave him a light whack on the head. Hissing, he retreated to a corner of the room, where he proceeded to chew on a plastic ficus.

"Human is mean," the alien hissed between bites, "Human is mean to Cloyd."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a regular dictator." Annie said. She sighed and ran her fingers through her knotted hair. It wasn't like she hadn't tried to make nice, but she and Cloyd had been "friends" for nearly a year now and her patience was wearing thin. Every time she thought they were close to reaching a deeper understanding of each other the conversation circled back to sleeping, mating, or that most favored of subjects, eating. She wasn't alone. Every member of the *Dauntless'* crew was paired with an alien who had agreed to leave their home planet in the name of friendship (and free food.) No life-changing revelation had yet been reached.

Static crackled over the loudspeaker, startling Cloyd into scaling the wall. *Attention all crew members, a monotone voice drawled, please report to the assembly room for a meeting. This announcement pertains to all crew members. Please report to the assembly room.*

It took Annie ten minutes to talk Cloyd down from the ceiling. They were one of the last pairs to enter the assembly room. Annie snagged two seats in the back row. Not that it mattered—Cloyd promptly slithered off with a female of the species named Visha.

"Well, at least somebody's happy." Darrell, Visha's partner, slid into the empty seat next to Annie.

Annie raised an eyebrow. "What, people aren't going to be jumping for joy after this meeting?" Darrell chuckled and fidgeted in his seat but didn't answer. "Ok, Mr. Suspicious, now you've gotten me interested. Spill." Darrell was one of the higher ranking officers and a reliable source of information on the mission's latest initiatives.

Darrell rubbed the back of his neck. "People are getting fed up with the lack of progress. There's been talk of calling it quits and going back home. I haven't actually been briefed of the content of this meeting—"

"Which is weird," Annie interrupted.

"Yeah, but it's probably some rah-rah believe in the cause pep rally."

"Ugh, heaven help us."

Darrell laughed. "It can't be all that bad. Beats emotion comprehension testing any day of the week."

Annie snorted and began to respond but a snarky quip died in her throat as Captain Smith took the stage. The stalwart captain of the space station looked paler than a sheet of paper. A hooded figure kept a plasma gun firmly pressed to his back.

"People of the *Dauntless*," the captain said. He didn't have a microphone and Annie strained to hear him. She saw the hooded assailant jab his gun into the captain's side. Smith raised his voice. "There has been a mutiny."

Annie gaped like a fish out of water. Her coworkers' gasps and chatter seemed distant and muddled. She could only stare at the stage, where the mutineer was brandishing his gun and beckoning to someone in the wings. Darrell gripped her arm suddenly. "Annie!" he said. "Look behind you!" A stream of hooded figures were pouring through the main entrance and taking up positions around the room.

"No, no..." Annie mumbled. "This can't be happening."

One conspirator leapt onto the stage and took over the job of watching Captain Smith. The man who had first revealed himself, who appeared to be the leader, stepped forward to address the crowd.

"The *Dauntless* set out with a grand and glorious mission: to discover intelligent life and ally ourselves with them for the benefit of both races. We found alien life, yes, but you know as well as I that they are anything but intelligent! For a year we've sat out here babysitting glorified toddlers! No more! This man—" he gestured wildly towards Captain Smith "—would have you stagnate in pursuit of sentimental fantasies! But not us! We will enrich mankind through a simpler method. *Brute force*."

"Already the engines are warming in preparation for our return to R-17. After dumping those reptilian imbeciles off where we found them, we will fill our storehouses with the precious resources Earth desires and return home conquering heroes!"

His announcement did not go over well. The crew surged forward like a tsunami, jeering and shouting, only to be subdued at gunpoint. "Those lowlifes must have raided

the security armory," Darrell seethed, "If only I had a plasma gun, or even a shock blaster!"

One brave scientist jostled their way to the front of the crowd. "What you're talking about is narrow-minded and irresponsible! While we've examined the physique and behavioral habits of these aliens, we have no long term studies of their planet's environment. Removing various objects could disrupt their ecosystem!"

The mutineer cackled like a gleeful hyena. "I'm sure they'll get along fine. You see, the reptile lovers like you are going to be left behind with them!"

At his signal, the conspirators began to lead the crew back to their personal quarters. As Annie was marched out of the assembly room she saw one mutineer poke an alien with the barrel of his gun. "Hey, boss, how're we gonna round up the reptiles?" he asked.

"Leave them for now. We'll flush them out when we get to R-17. They can amuse themselves until then. Just keep them away from the necessary machinery and provisions."

"Sure thing, boss," the man said. Annie gulped and hoped Cloyd wouldn't get into any trouble.

Annie's office seemed cramped and claustrophobic when she was confined to it. She paced back and forth as Darrel sat on her desk, fuming. "When I get the names of those two-faced thieves there'll be hell to pay," he said.

"We have to get out of here first," Annie said. "Then we have to disable the mutineers. How are we going to do that? How—" Annie sank to her knees. Her vision blurred as unshed tears threatened to make themselves known.

Darrell knelt next to her. "We *will* be okay," he assured her, "You have to believe that. We'll find a way out of this."

"Out of what? Door is open," a familiar voice hissed.

"Cloyd!" Annie gasped. She enveloped the alien in a bear hug. Unfamiliar to such a display of affection, he squirmed a bit, but didn't try to escape.

"Door is open," Cloyd repeated.

Annie wiped her eyes. "The door is open but there are bad men outside. They've taken over the ship."

"So we sleep here. Eat the fish of gold."

"Will you quit it? You are not eating my goldfish! Is that why you came back here?"

"No," he said, "Cloyd comes to eat with human."

"Huh?"

"Cloyd and human are friends. We eat together. Cloyd wants food but human is not there, so Cloyds comes to find human."

"You mean... every time you talk about food... you're trying to be a good friend?"

"Mostly every time."

Annie laughed. Then teared up. Her laughter took on a hysterical tint, then died out in lieu of contemplative silence. "Cloyd?"

"That is me."

"I have a favor to ask you. Would you be willing to eat something for me?"

"Yes! Yes! Very much I would eat!"

"What are you doing?" Darrell asked.

Annie turned to him, a gleam in her eye. "Think about it, Darrell. The aliens have free reign of the ship! And they are omnivores..."

"Whoa, do you think it's a good idea to give them a taste of human flesh? What if they like it too much?"

Annie smiled teasingly. "Weren't you listening? Cloyd and I eat together, not each other." Turning to the alien, she told him "The bad men on this ship all wear black hoods that hide their faces. Tell all your friends that the humans in black hoods are food. But be careful; you'll have to eat together, at the same time. They could hurt you if you don't"

Cloyd nodded eagerly, panting like a dog. "Cloyd tells friends." He gave Annie a quick lick on the cheek and scampered out of the room.

"Now what do we do?" Darrell asked.

Annie pressed a hand to the wet streak on her face. "Now we wait."

All over the *Dauntless*, the aliens moved in packs. They swarmed the ceiling above the guards and sprawled in a heap outside the bridge.

"Stupid thing nearly hit me with its tail," one mutineer grouched to their partner, "Wish I could take a couple potshots."

"You'll only get them all worked up. Wait 'til we reach planetside."

Cloyd, positioned in the hallway outside Annie's room, produced a high-pitched click that was taken up by every alien on the ship. As the conspirators looked up, the aliens dropped down. Flailing, biting, screaming, gunshots. More than one alien fell from a well-placed plasma blast. Darrell ran into the fray and started throwing punches left and right. The tide began to turn. The aliens were relentless in their pursuit. Before long, every mutineer had disappeared under a seething mass of scales and teeth.

Annie knocked on Captain Smith's door. Cloyd tried to copy the motion and left several claw marks in the imitation wood. "Captain Smith? It's Dr. Annie Profitt, worker rank C. The mutiny is over."

The door swung open. The captain was bright-eyed and looked no worse for wear than a rumpled suit. "The traitors have been disarmed?"

"In more ways than one, sir."

The captain leaned out and saw a pack of aliens finishing off the man who had been guarding his room. "Egads, Profitt, what got into them?"

Annie glanced at Cloyd, who bared his teeth in an approximation of a smile. She mirrored the gesture. "The power of friendship."