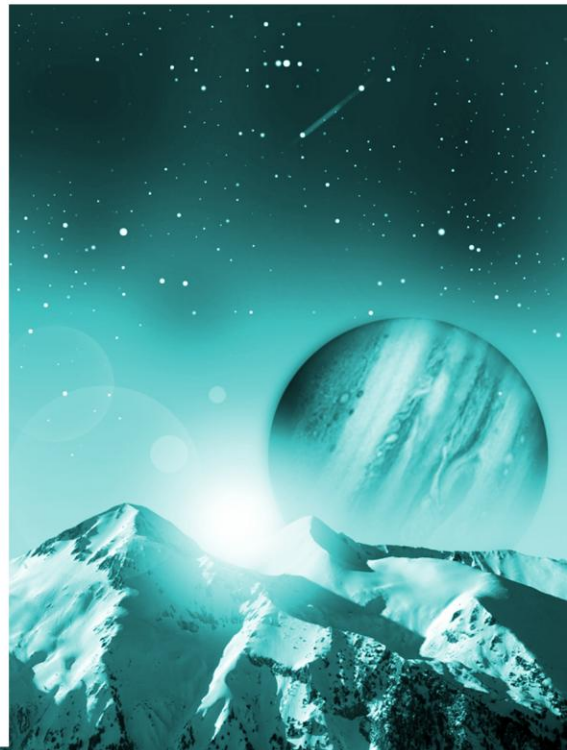


# Space-D

by Ella Drake



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*A Daphne Adventure: Space Worms Gone Wild.*  
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## Episode: Space Worms Gone Wild

The gun in her shoulder holster made her back ache, but no way in hell would Daphne open the hatch and step out onto Planet H311 without it.

Thumbs hitched in her coverall straps, she sneered at the portal. The planet's red sky roiled with an electrical storm that lit up the plexi. "I might be stuck on hell, but you suckers are the pit's end of hell's throwbacks. And you're going down."

Too bad nobody heard her trash-talk. Then again, she still wasn't any good at it.

With a shaking hand, she slid the locking pin out of the emergency door's push bar.

When she heaved it open, the hatch clanged against the outside hull and reverberated down the empty antechamber. The echo reminded Daphne of her status. Alone. Stuck on a terraformed planet settlement gone wrong. This enviro-struct her only shelter in a world teeming with carnivorous worms larger than her daddy's pet python and meaner than his crazed, outlawed Rottweiler robo-dog. That damn cybernetic had outlived them all besides Daphne. Faced with being alone or living with that dog, she'd given him the business end of her shot gun.

The worms wouldn't touch him.

"Bastards."

She stepped over the wires and chips of the dog's carcass and heaved the portal back in place.

After prying open the next-to-the-last box of rations, she'd decided she had to do something, or eat the damn robo-dog, and he was too crunchy for her taste. So, maybe it was time to eat a few worms before they ate her. Back on homeworld, her daddy hadn't minded eating air-rail kill. She could choke down most anything.

*Time to get off this stinking planet.*

The emergency beacon sat on the tallest rock they'd been able to find. Unfortunately, a vast prairie of worm nesting grounds stood between the settlement and the beacon. Something they'd discovered, to their horror, when the hungry critters came out of hibernation.

The oxygen pumps still worked. She didn't need a rebreather, but so early in the terraforming process, the temperature hadn't normalized. Between the steam clouds mid-day and the extreme drop into freezing temps at night, she had to plan her outings well or chance dying from exposure.

Wouldn't that be a bummer way to go? She'd rather eat worms.

"Tee-hee." She cracked herself up. Cracked she was, talking to herself all the time.

Her snicker cut short with the rumble beneath her feet. With an effortless motion, she slid the rifle from the holster and yanked a few kinky-curved red hairs out in the process. She didn't flinch.

In the dark black dirt that stretched into the distance, large mounds undulated and moved in waves toward her. She cocked the rifle and spent one last second wishing she still had ammo for the hand cannon.

"Hell, a canister of gas for the throw torch would be even better."

With a firm grip on the trigger, she swept the barrel left to right. The soft fertile earth muffled the usual scuffle of her boots.

Sweat trickled down her neck to pool in her jumper beneath the holster rubbing her skin raw. She wanted to scratch the nagging itch, but she kept her finger on the trigger.

Each step across the flat expanse made her stomach pitch.

The skin on the back of her neck prickled. Even without the rebreather catching each exhale, her panting sounded loud in the quiet.

Vibrations beneath her feet grew stronger.

Closer. The sifting earth agitated several measures in front of her, but she kept moving.

Sprays of black, rich sands circled her, taunting her.

A plop landed on her boot. She kept moving and tried not to wonder if that bit of ground contained castings made from the bodies of her friends. Her coworkers. Her daddy.

She shuddered, and her finger clenched on the trigger.

*Swipp.*

The stock of the rifle slammed back into her shoulder, but her stance never changed. A moving mound of ground split apart, dirt flying everywhere, when the bullet plowed into it. The ooze of black muck confirmed a hit.

The mound didn't move again.

"Not very sporting of you, I'm afraid." The cultured but high-pitched voice came from close behind her.

The spit in her mouth dried to ash. She hunched her shoulders, cringing, but kept moving, her gun aimed in front of her.

The swishing sound of sand moving followed her. With perspiration dripping into her eyes, she dared hitch a shoulder to wipe her face on her sleeve. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the source of that admonishment.

Just as she suspected—and feared—a slimy-ass worm. Brown snaky body, slitted unblinking eyes, and a wide mouth full of razor sharp teeth. Daphne shuddered and the gun slipped. She jostled her weapon for a blink before she clenched it tight.

“You do look a tasty bit.” The worm continued to chat at her as if its every word didn’t make her want to heave right onto her casting coated boots. “You’ve waited in there long enough, but do please, go ahead and start the beacon. We’ll wait for you.”

She nearly stopped in her tracks, but—*What the hell?* Why look a gift-giving worm in the mouth?

By the time she reached the top of the rock, she was slick with sweat, her head throbbed, and her stomach churned.

The swishing never stopped, never dropped back, and never ceased its prattling.

“You see, we decided we needed to leave one of you inferior beings alive to signal more.” A slurp and a smack made her finally lose her rations. “Your rescuers will be as easy a prey as the rest.”

“Bile coated varmint.”

“Not too bright are you, sweet meat?”

Damn, when she got out of here, she was going to work on that trash talk.

“Sub-standard species that you are, you do have those handy – and deliciously crunchy fingers. Do pop open the beacon cover and signal for more to come.” He smacked again.

The worm stopped prattling on. Silence reined, as if all the worms on H311 had paused, mid squirm. Daphne stood, the rich scent of fertile earth filling her, sitting heavy on her skin in damp fecundity. She didn’t want to die. Didn’t want to be worm food.

“If I push the button.” So her voice sounded a little squeaky. She could live with that.

Dropped to her knees, Daphne brushed dirt off of the metal box staked into the rock. She fingered the catch on the lid. “You’ll let me go back to the enviro-struct to wait?”

“Sure we will.” It replied before it chortled.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” It chortled again. What a revolting sound, the glee and the hunger all mixed together.

Setting her jaw until her teeth ground, she paused, determined to think this through, make the right decision. Past the worm that she refused to focus on, the ground wriggled with the slimy creatures that even with their tails curled at the end, their extended bodies rose above her height as they waved in the air. Daphne’s throat, drier than ash, burned. She spit to the side, but it didn’t help take away the sour taste.

There had to be hundreds of those vile worms.

The enviro-struct appeared small in the distance, like a toy dollhouse. If she lifted her hand at full reach, she could blot it out, as if this vast prairie had never housed humans.

She snatched her hand down when the worm eased forward and flicked his tongue over her fingertips.

“Eww,” she croaked.

“You aren’t so tasty after all.” The worm made a spitting sound.

Daphne jerked her attention skyward, unable to look at this planet’s surface without a sense of vertigo.

Above, a churning white cloud hovered. The same mass that had been in the skies for the past several days as she gathered her courage.

She gulped.

Her hand shook as she fiddled with the cover of the beacon.

“Why do you taste, different?” The worm’s sing-song voice had disappeared to be replaced with a distracted murmur.

“Ask the damn robo-dog.” Daphne flipped the cover and pressed the button. “I’ll take my chances with the rescue ship. Can’t stay on this planet another day.”

The strobe light atop the beacon lit, oscillating blue and white lights into the sky. She surged to her feet.

A vise clamped around her shin. Sharp teeth dug into the meaty part of her calf. Mind instantly shut off from the pain, she whipped the gun around, depressed the trigger, and steeled herself against the backlash as the repeating rifle fired volley after volley.

A worm exploded into flesh and splattered all over her and the ground.

In quick succession, a dozen worms disintegrated into piles of flesh and gore on the ground.

The bite around her leg released.

High whining and chatter erupted around her. Her brain spun, trying to decipher the squealing.

The worm nearest sputtered and spat on the ground and shuddered with a choked off, “Yuck”.

The worms slithered away leaving their dead and wavy dirt trails behind them.

Daphne inspected her wound.

Pants ripped, her flesh-matting peeled back to expose the inner workings of her mech leg. Small wires dangled out.

She had to get that fixed.

With a grimace, she bent and forced the opening closed and tucked her pants flap over the damage. The smell of oil told her the worst.

“Damn. A leak.”

She hobbled back toward the enviro-struct and to that damned robo-dog. Looks like those parts would come in handy.

Daphne hoped the rescue ship would show soon, because she still didn't relish eating worms.

### More about Ella

Ella Drake is a Dark Paranormal and Science Fiction Romance author published with [Cobblestone Press](#), [Liquid Silver Books](#), and [Samhain Publishing](#). Sometimes she dabbles in Weird SF stories and is a regular contributor to the [Raven Happy Hour](#) in a monthly column on SciFi and Future Technology.

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