The siren roused him with such a start that Avery almost opened his eyes. He squeezed them shut as the pump kicked on and the out-take shaft slurped up goo. Edwards had been so sure the trip would be uneventful. He swallowed a wry chuckle as he fidgeted, envying her optimism.

The fans kicked on as the level dropped and he coughed and pulled at the feeding tube, desperate to get it out. Too slowly it scraped across his throat. He took a hurried breath through his nose. Still thick with artificial amniotic fluid, it ran down his throat as thick as snot. He gagged before he spat it into the surrounding slurry, cleared his nose and took another breath. Panic was pointless.

To his left Rodriquez pounded on his pod. At only five foot three, he wouldn't be able to breath for another three minutes. Avery thumped back, slow and steady while, to his right, Edwards maintained her trademark smug, stoic silence.

Something, a hundred somethings, hit the ship in an endless succession that threatened his composure. Rodriguez stopped pounding as a computerised voice announced they were on auxiliary power, with life support at ninety-eight percent. That, in itself, didn't sound too bad but he needed to get to the bridge to determine what has hitting the hull and if it the fleet was still intact. The computer continued to drone warnings as Avery's shoulders rose and tensed. His hands clenched and unclenched in time with the siren and he knew he was in trouble.

"Wait for it," he whispered as he rolled his shoulders.

He raised his hands above the surface and scraped them across one another in an effort to clean them before he moved on to his face. The crap was stuck in a beard he shouldn't have and Avery's heart began to race. He could think of only two explanations and neither had them in orbit around Gliese. Either a malfunction had lengthened his wake cycles, using extra power and threatening his mental acuity, or they'd bypassed their destination by countless light years and were now stranded in unknown space with failing support. Neither was good.

A strong light bathed him in warmth as the amnio level fell below the interior utility hatch, giving him access to the only pod towel that had survived cost cutting. Like diluted Vaseline, it seeped between his lashes to cloud his vision. Through the pod's clear polymide walls, Rodriquez seemed to waver before him like a grumpy fun house reject.

Rodriguez's raspy voice was like hearing a favourite song. "With all the fucking money they threw into this crap mission you'd think they could afford to give us more than a fucking face wipe."

Avery smiled at the welcome distraction. "You ok?"

"Yeah, I'm fi… fuck." Rodriguez nodded his head towards Edwards' tank.

Avery turned and instantly wished he hadn't. Through the murk inside he could discern a collection of bones congregated at the bottom. Edwards was soup. After fifteen years, she deserved better than to go out like that.

As a boy he'd dreamed about flying through space in his own rocket ship, rescuing pretty girls. The Tamara wasn't his, and the prettiest girl was beyond saving.

Avery blew out a couple of deep breaths and struggled to get back on task. He removed his waste tubes with care and watched as their contents flowed back into the tank. He stood, up to his ass, in shit of his own making while the slurry continued its lazy swirl down the drain. When they were finally clear to climb out, there was still enough goo on their feet that they slid across the room, grabbing at pod handles to stay upright.

Avery hit the opposite wall and thumbed the button that silenced the alarm, leaned over the one working computer and held a bleary eye to a retinal scanner that failed to identify him. He stepped back and let Rodriquez have a go while he struggled into a set of coveralls that twisted and clung to his still wet legs despite his best efforts to get them straightened out.

He was fighting with the zipper when Rodriquez gave his assessment. "We're fucked."

It was the inflection that told the tale. "What about the rest of the fleet?"

Rodriquez just shrugged. The computer showed they'd been travelling normally, but for way too long, when their power had simply vanished. If they didn't get it back up soon the pods would start shutting down by reverse priority order.

The problem was that the fuel cells weren't disconnected—they were drained, and auxiliary power was dropping.

A panicked voice came over the com. "They're alive."

Rodriquez rolled his eyes. "Was that Callaghan? What the fuck's he doing on the bridge?"

Avery shook his head. “Best find out.”

They ran through the ship, flattening themselves against the wall to make way for techs in too much of a hurry to observe protocol. Rodriquez clapped him on the shoulder. “Glad to see someone useful is awake, but Callaghan’s an idiot. How many people gotta die before they leave him in charge?”

Avery stopped just outside the bridge but the answers on the other side of the door didn’t care if he was ready to hear them. “He’s the last of the civilian command.”

Rodriguez held open the door. “Want me to shoot him?”

He laughed as he walked through. “Not yet.”

Still naked from his pod, Callaghan leaned heavily against the helm. His entire left side was a withered mess of atrophied muscle; the clear result of cheap electrodes. Avery resisted the urge to run his hands over limbs he’d already assessed. “Sit rep?” he asked.

Callaghan turned. He looked frightened but hopeful as he slammed his palm down on a control panel initiating an emergency landing procedure. “I’ve saved us,” he announced.

The ship bucked and groaned as hundreds of magnetic clamps let go and ejectors launched the satellites that would stay behind. Without manual guidance, all these vital systems were locked into predetermined paths meant for a different planet.

Avery hurried across the deck. “What have you done? Where’s the captain?”

Callaghan staggered over to the captain’s chair. As he sat down, his voice shook with false bravado. “I’m the captain. Buckle up boys. We’re going in.”

Avery ignored him to study the screen. There were gaps in the fleet and hordes of tiny adversaries attacked every ship that remained, sipping energy and initiating widespread panic—the airwaves were a garbled mess of terse voices issuing contradictory orders. However, with no evidence of debris from the missing ships he was hesitant to correlate disappearance with destruction.

“Well, ain’t that convenient.” Rodriquez leaned over Avery’s shoulder, pointing to a second data stream. Beckoning from below was a planet the computer deemed habitable. The visible portion showed a vast ocean surrounding a large continental landmass and a few islands. There were no signs of advanced civilization, past or present.

“Very.”

Rodriquez snorted as he pointed to another screen. “Callaghan’s not the only civie to have panicked.”

More blips on the screen broke formation, forcing the rest of the fleet to follow suit. Avery looked back at the planetary data. He felt like he stood at the mouth of a cattle chute, but there was nowhere else to go and no time to worry about anything beyond the degree of their entry.

Avery buckled into the helmsman’s seat and disengaged the computer guidance system. He attempted to make course corrections as Rodriquez read from a manual. The monitors showed other ships doing the same, but not all. A couple skipped off the atmosphere and careened back into space, others over-corrected to plummet towards the planet too steeply. They broke apart, creating obstacles for those who followed.

As they neared the planet, the magnitude of error in Avery’s course corrections increased exponentially. He’d come in too hot and missed the main continent.

The screen revealed a swarm of tiny points funnelling towards the planet in their wake—whatever had brought all this down on them hadn’t lost interest yet. Rodriquez’s voice was flat and fatalistic. “You think they’ll follow us in?”

Avery rotated the ship, using sideways displacement to steer them towards a small island. The planet’s gravity grabbed hold of him like a vice, forcing him deeper into the chair and making speech difficult as the Tamara’s pre-programmed landing sequence released its six landing craft.

“I hope so, it’s the only way we’ll get any payback for being trapped here. Now find a seat and buckle in. This is gonna be rough.”

Ekki stood on the hillside, pretending she wasn’t alone.

Before her an assortment of divergent patterns grew in a clump. So greatly had they changed during her last sleep cycle that she couldn’t predict what they would look like by the time she checked on them next. While most of her terrestrial creations still fanned out low, hugging the ground, these few had grown tall. They had branched as they climbed, sprouting flattened spheres at each of their terminal ends. They reached for the duplicitous sun, unknowingly threatening their unchanged brethren.

Ekki leaned to examine them more closely, despairing at the constancy of their change when her own existence was most terribly fixed. She brushed up against the plants with a melancholy affection that dislodged a puff of fine particles. It was the beginning

of a cycle she had been forced to end many times. Some of the pollen clung to her outer layer, others drifted on the breeze towards distant relations with no understanding of the danger.

In time the flowers would evolve until they required the assistance of other creatures to propagate, which would likewise evolve until the ground was covered with myriad forms of life. It was always so beautiful… until the Aloika started to hunt, and corrupted everything.

She had shielded the planet to the best of her ability, cut herself off from all of the others the Conductor had trapped in this system, even Hetchi—yet still the Aloika got through to menace her children. Ekki had covered most of the planet with water both cold and deep. It quenched the Aloika's fire almost instantly, protecting those that dwelled below. On land, all she could do was initiate a freeze and start again.

Ekki despaired as she cradled a first flower. How long could she postpone the inevitable?

Before she could answer the question she was distracted by a violent disruption of the shield around the planet. Vast beings of various size and shape burst through the upper atmosphere. The mammoth creatures cleared a path for tens of thousands of Aloika who swarmed through the breach in pursuit. Without grace, they pitched themselves against the descending bulks in a frenzied and futile attack that belied them ever having been star dancers.

Revulsion mingled with hope as she watched the Aloika suicide against hulls that refused to admit them. It was impossible to tell if they attacked out of fear or hunger. What in the stars had found her? Allies? Prey? Had a new enemy come to threaten her garden?

The beings kept a steady trajectory, either unconcerned with the Aloika or incapable of evading them. Any hope for companionship was crushed as Ekki watched them fail to slow their descent. They were a disparate group, and they were in trouble. She wasn't strong enough to save them all, but she called the winds to catch those closest to her, rocking them gently to disperse their momentum while she buffeted the Aloika away. Even from this distance she could hear their collective hiss, but it was of no consequence.

Thunderous crashes rocked the ground as the hulks impacted with the planet, crushing untold thousands of her emerging patterns. She mourned their losses as she descended the foothills, swatting away the few Aloika who challenged her directly. They were visionless cowards who threatened the vulnerable from the safety of a mob. Their punishment had taught them nothing.

She reached the nearest impact site and paused, uncertain. She gazed upward towards the distant moon that imprisoned Hetchi and wondered if the perforations in her shield were large enough to let her speak to him. “Can you hear me Hetchi?”

Ekki pushed down her disappointment at the silence. Perhaps he was too far away. Perigree was still days away, she would keep trying. For now, she was still on her own.

Avery placed his hands to either side of his head in an attempt to silence the noise that surrounded him. He hadn’t expected to make it. Their landing had been hard enough to knock out all of their electronics but he didn’t need sensors to tell them they still had company. Outside, the aliens hammered against the hull like giant hail. His head pounded in syncopation. Through it all were moans, curses and pleas for help that prodded him. He took two slow breaths and he opened his eyes. The emergency lights flickered.

“Rodriquez, you breathing?” he asked as he hauled himself up.

“Over here.”

Avery made his way across the bridge, checking on other crew members who’d made it out of stasis and assessing the damage. The landers were meant to be taken apart and repurposed, but there was enough buckling of the supports that he didn’t imagine the envisioned city would ever be more than an artist’s sketch. Across the room, Rodriquez guided an uncooperative Callaghan back into his captain’s chair. “We need to find some steady light,” Rodriguez called, “and secure our position.”

A shout from across the room cut off Callaghan’s reply. “Heads up.”

He turned in time to catch an old LED flashlight one of the crew had found. He thumbed it on and made his way to where Callaghan continued to proclaim his authority. Avery glanced at the hull, the persistent hammering reminding him they weren’t alone. “This is a military operation now.”

He and Rodriquez shared a silent look before heading deeper into the ship, looking for anyone who could help with defence. They busted open every pod they found, spilling more amnio over the already flooded drains. The people waking deserved an explanation but there was no time to say more than “Help the others, convene in the cargo bay” before they moved on to the next room. Few were in any condition to fight. The best they could do was hope the hull held long enough for them to get their shit wired.

They cleared the last of the pods and made their way to the lab, and the cargo the success of their mission depended on. The room was dark, unpowered, but the door waiting inside was cold. Avery consulted a manual thermometer encased in a clear

plastic housing by the door. “Minus one ninety.”

“That’s got to be cold enough, let’s go,” Rodriquez said as he hovered by the passageway. Outside the aliens continued to knock.

With no first-hand account of what was attacking them or why they needed to prepare for anything, they rushed to the small arms locker, but to Avery's disbelief found that it had been re-appropriated by one of the science teams without consulting him. They rolled out multiple carts loaded with carefully labelled supplies, hoping to find the shelves and hooks behind them properly equipped. No such luck.

“You gotta be fucking kidding me,” Rodriquez muttered.

Avery scanned the room and managed to out-curse Rodriquez when he found a drawer helpfully labelled Unnecessary Weapons. Inside were four SMG and a half-dozen sidearms. One weapon for each of the twelve military members of the original crew, before resource allocation had diminished his team to three.

By the time they reached the bay, it was crowded with people rubbing their eyes and asking questions he couldn’t answer. Avery was trying to organize them when a runner pushed through the edgy throng followed by an emergency response team.

“Communications are down. Captain Callaghan ordered me to report that he is triangulating the fleet’s position based on their trajectories when we hit the atmosphere.”

Avery nodded. If they survived the day, that would be useful. The team were working their way through the room, calling for calm and assessing the structural damage, when an ear splitting shriek froze everyone in place.

Giant metallic burrs flooded into the cargo bay through a small breach he hadn’t noticed. They whirred through the air with a high pitched drone, hundreds of needle-like projections vibrating while they hovered as if making their own assessment. They looked more like an intelligent weapon than a life form as they darted into the crowd.

The scientists around him quickly fell into disparate camps. Many pushed their colleagues aside in their rush to flee the cargo bay while others flailed, trying to defend themselves with makeshift weapons. A small group stood their ground in naïve awe, oblivious to the potential danger and actively obstructing Avery and Rodriquez’s efforts to defend the lander.

“We have to block that breach,” Avery shouted.

“We’re on it!” one of the ERT shouted.

A burr buzzed by Avery’s head. Too close to fire at, he batted it away with his bare hand, sending it towards the opposite wall. It changed course before impact and came at him again. Rodriquez shot it just as another one careened into the back of his shoulder. It split open like a hot coddled egg, spreading pain as its remains dripped down his arm. Avery twisted, wiping some kind of burning, viscous liquid from his sleeve, and discovered a two inch red worm crawling towards his neck. He jerked his arm, scraped the worm off and stomped on it, unleashing a string of obscenities.

“If you’re done dancing, I could use some help.” He turned to see Rodriguez providing too little cover for the ERT folks, two of them wielding what looked like fire extinguishers. He added more fire power as the men doused the breach in foam vacuum sealant. It began to harden even as more of the burrs fought to get in, solidifying around them.

Their combined efforts turned the tide, and more civilians joined the fight or went to the aid of those who had fallen. Several people lay prone, with broken burrs on or near them, but—worryingly—no sign of the red worms.

Callaghan limped in just as the last of the tiny targets were eliminated. He gave a hearty whoop. “We won!”

Rodriquez shook his head. “We haven’t won shit. They’ve been raining down on the hull ever since we landed, there’s got to be thousands of them out there.”

“And out there is exactly where we got to go.” Avery slapped Rodriquez on the back. “The day is young and you’re only seven up on me.”

A young scientist blanched and sputtered. “We can’t. They’re waiting for us out there.”

Avery looked around the room at all of the frightened faces, people who thought they’d wake up to spend a life time in a sterile lab, playing god. “We have vital intel we have to share and missing landers we have to find. There won’t be any communication with the fleet until we get a receiver set up.

“We can’t stay in here forever.”

Ekki hid behind a fall of rocks and watched as the vessel cracked open further.

Dozens of upright beings with bilaterally symmetrical appendages emerged in a slow, spreading pattern that radiated out from the opening. As the Aloika attacked the newcomers attempted to drive them back, but their weaponry was only partially effective against the armoured shells the parasites had created for themselves. Many

were taken, their bodies writhing noisily as they fought the conversion.

Ekki found the chaos unnerving. It brought back painful memories of disorder. A loud noise from one of the beings recalled the pattern, and she realised that they communicated verbally, like animals. Their pattern contracted as those at its farthest reaches pulled back, collecting the fallen they passed while those nearest the conveyance held their position until all who were mobile were inside. Fascinating.

In time, the remaining Aloika burned themselves out in futile efforts to regain entry. Ekki glided closer. She moved quietly, over rocks and between gullies where her small patterns had been crushed by debris from the newcomers' ship. The material was of a type she was unfamiliar with, and she absorbed a small piece of it for future study.

She cautiously approached one of the abandoned beings. It lay next to many of the hard husks that protected the Aloika in space. Ekki had shed her husk long ago. On the planet it was cumbersome and unnecessary. The newcomer was still alive, but appeared weak, as it made small sounds from inside a flimsy husk of its own. She reached into the wound and withdrew the Aloika before it could burrow further, crushed it before tossing it aside.

Her appendage was covered in the newcomer's fluids, and she altered her vision to study its pattern. The complexity was astounding. Not even her oceans held life this advanced. Down and down she spiralled through the layers, until she reached its core… and recognized its primary construct.

She tried to speak to it but failed. Its mind was too primitive. Ekki swam through the being's pattern, looking for answers. She found many dormant strands that needed only to be reactivated, but there were other strands that were missing entirely. Whether they had been discarded or never acquired didn't matter. She had not the skill to manipulate patterns on this level.

She tore apart the thin husk to find a being encased in an opaque membrane. Desperate for knowledge, she tore this open as well, soaking up what data she could. The being expired and Ekki felt a pang of guilt. Would she have been able to save it if she'd known more? She recalled the other vessels that had been scattered across her world. Did they all hold similar patterns? Did they boast enough variation to be viable? She had so many questions and all of the answers lay with frightened, cowering children.

Ekki stashed the body in the gully for future study, and considered how best to approach the ship.

Avery dragged Rodriquez back into the cargo bay just before the door closed. His buddy was barely bleeding but was curled in on himself, unable to walk. One of the

worms had burrowed into his neck and disappeared.

He laid him on the floor and yelled for a medic. The only one they had was busy with triage and it took long minutes for her to get to Rodriquez.

She looked at his wound and shook her head. “I don’t know what we’re dealing with here. I can’t go digging around in his neck. He needs a surgeon.”

“We don’t have one.”

“I tried digging one out of Henderson’s bicep. I didn’t find it until I got to his shoulder. He’s got seven inches worth of stitches. Rodriquez can’t afford that.”

Rodriquez grabbed her arm. “Get it out of me.” Avery knew it was bad when Rodriquez stopped cursing and reverted to Spanish that was fit for church. He nodded, but the medic kept shaking her head. She left them alone to wait for a surgeon that wasn’t coming.

Avery watched her abandon another soldier with a gut wound only to begin cutting into another woman’s leg. He knew it was the right call and he clamped down on emotional objections that would change nothing.

Rodriquez began to twitch. Avery pulled him up into a half seated position as wild, flopping movements threw his limbs in all directions, as his speech regressed even further. Broken prayers were repeated amongst deep ragged breaths, interspersed with pleas to ease the pain. As the spasms passed he curled into a ball, leaning his head into Avery’s chest. “Help me.” It was the last sensible thing he said.

Across the bay, a man lurched to his feet and attacked the medic with clumsy determination before he was taken down and restrained. Rodriquez’s struggles became stronger and more co-ordinated. Avery tightened his grip and ran through a short list of horrible options as a third victim launched a weaponless attack against Callaghan, sending him to the floor.

The two traded blows briefly before the infected man awkwardly reached for his weapon. His shot went wide, but it easily found a target in the crowded room. As fresh cries rang out, three shots from different directions felled him before he could try again.

Callaghan scrambled to his feet shouting, “They’re being taken over!”

“Calm down,” Avery barked, the order reverberating through the room.

“The aliens are taking over!” Callaghan cried again.

“We don’t know that. You’re just speculating,” the medic snapped, hard at work on the bystander who’d been shot.

Avery held Rodriquez as he struggled to stand. “What else could it be?”

She shook her head and gestured with bloody hands, clearly frustrated. “It could be any of half a dozen different things. All we know is that housing an alien alters people’s behaviour. They could be coated is some sort of poison or psychotropic drug like a frog, in which case they might come out of it.”

Avery latched on to that option. “You think this is just a bad trip?”

“He tried to kill me!” Callaghan shouted, pointing at the dead man.

The medic took a deep steadying breath. “He could have been hallucinating. There are a lot of possibilities here. It could be a slow growing parasite like some kind of tape worm, which would give us time to get proper medical support. It could be a brood parasite laying thousands of microscopic eggs, in which case we’re screwed, or Callaghan could be right.”

“Of course I’m right.”

Avery tightened his grip on his friend. He didn’t want it to be true, but he couldn’t risk it. He nodded towards the dead man. “We’re not waiting. Cut him open, find out.”

She knelt next to them. “Even if I find a worm in his brain that doesn’t mean it’s taking over. For all I know, they could be symbiotic lifeforms looking for a way to say ‘hi’.”

“Just find it,” Avery said. Next to him Rodriquez had stilled. The Spanish was gone now, and in its place was a stuttered string of mismatched syllables. Had the alien gained accessed to his speech center? He drew Rodriquez close, wishing he could will the worm into himself.

Rodriquez’s struggle became frenzied and he almost slipped from Avery’s grip as he twisted and got partially to his knees. Avery’s response was automatic. Back on Earth they’d wrestled so many times he’d lost count. He grabbed hold of Rodriquez’s coveralls and tried to turn his friend back around, but it was no good. Rodriquez tucked in his chin and stood up, ducking under Avery’s arms. If the coveralls hadn’t been slick from all the fake amnio they’d absorbed when Rodriquez had first put them on, Avery might have been able to keep his grip. It was a classic move, one the smaller man had used time and again and it gave Avery hope that, fundamentally, Rodriquez was still himself and that by tomorrow they might share a strained laugh over rations.

Rodriguez lunged to his feet as a shot rang out. Rodriquez tilted and fell to the floor.

Avery twisted to see where the shot had come from. Across the room, Callaghan was defensive. “He was one of them. I didn’t have any choice.”

Avery scrambled to Rodriguez’s side and applied pressure, knowing it wouldn’t matter in the end. The bullet had opened his femoral artery. He gathered his friend up in his arms and whispered, “I should have let you shoot him,” as the guilt settled over him.

Rodriquez offered no smart-ass reply, only a silence that seemed accentuated by soft shallow breaths. When they stopped, a part of Avery stopped with him. He looked up and his eyes seemed to focus beyond the shocked faces that had begun to gather. They needed something from him that he wasn’t ready to give.

The senselessness stunned him. He felt like pieces of himself had scattered, looking for meaning, and come back empty handed. He wasn’t sure Rodriquez had even understood he was dying.

He laid Rodriquez back down on the floor and slowly rose to his feet, turning towards Callaghan and thinking about Edwards’ last words to him. It’s like we’re starting over, and we’ll be there right from the start to build a better, more just world.

One of the ERT guys stepped between them as Avery tried to wipe the blood from his hands. He was a big man, about forty years old, with the name Bouchard embroidered on his stained coveralls. He stopped just short of laying hands on Avery. “He’s just a kid. He panicked. And your friend was… gone.”

Avery held the man’s gaze as he steadied himself. The words formed automatically in his mind but they were so at odds with how he felt that he just couldn’t say them. He closed his eyes and wished he could close his ears. He longed for a peace of mind he knew would be forever denied him. He nodded as the words came, “I know.”

All eyes in the room were on him as he walked over to the where the medic knelt in a pool of blood next to the first gunshot victim. In her right hand she held up a small vial containing one of the alien worms. “Where’d you find it?” he asked.

“Attached to the brain stem. I have no way of knowing what it was doing there but, it’s changed.”

He crouched down next to her. “Show me.”

She held out the vial. “It’s grown tendrils that attached themselves deeper within the brain. I don’t have enough training to tell you anything more specific.”

“I knew it,” Callaghan yelled, struggling to shake of Bouchard’s restraining hand. “We have to kill them all.”

Avery looked from Callaghan to the med tech to where Rodriquez’s body lay. He should have ordered her to operate on Rodriquez straight away, but he’d balked, looking for the moderate answer. He shook his head as the guilt goaded him, mocking his caution. “We’re not killing anyone else, but neither are we giving those things a chance to get cozy. Cut them all out.”

The medic paled and shook her head. “I’m not a surgeon. I don’t have the training for that.”

Avery feared the day when he confronted a stranger with no way of knowing if they were fully human. “None of us are trained for this. I’ll hold, you cut.”

The drumming against the hull stopped.

The room stilled as everyone listened. Avery brushed his bloody hands against his coveralls, but they were already soaked through. He wondered if he’d ever get either clean again.

“I need some air,” he muttered as he walked to the door.

Bouchard stood to accompany him, “You think they left or just got bored?” A heavy thump against the door seemed to answer his question. After a pause, it was followed by two more thumps, then three, four.

Brouchard snorted a weary laugh. “Who isss iiit?” he crooned, a crazy edge to his voice, as people jumped to their feet and readied their weapons.

There was no answer beyond the escalating number of knocks. Whatever was out there could count, something the flying burrs had shown no evidence of. Anyone they had left behind when they went out to set up the solar powered receiver was surely infected, if not dead.

When the count reached seven, Avery thumped back eight times. There was a gap, then the knocking started over. Two. Three. Five. Seven.

Avery rolled his eyes before he thumped back the next prime number. “We’re being tested.”

Bouchard’s nod was grim as they waited through the ensuing silence. “We’re as ready as we can be.”

Avery stepped up to the manual release and cursed its placement, switching his sidearm to his left hand. It felt awkward and insufficient. He gave a nod and pulled hard, the door groaning open as he raised his weapon.

On the loading ramp stood a… four foot jelly salad, the green one no-one ever wanted to eat. He watched as a prehensile appendage, which had been raised in the air close to the door, withdrew and was absorbed in the main body. It reminded him uncomfortably of the red worms and their tendrils. It appeared to be alone.

The being wobbled slightly while Avery studied it, looking for vulnerabilities, possible means of attack. Thankfully, there was nothing else wormlike about it. Translucent skin allowed him a glimpse of what had to be internal organs, but his mind kept returning to his Aunt Eustice's inedible Christmas creations.

The silence behind him was broken by a dispassionate, "Huh." He glanced at Bouchard, who hadn't moved, then slowly backed up into the ship.

The being followed him, maintaining its distance. As soon as it was clear of the door, one of the soldiers slammed it shut. The alien didn't react. It twisted its upper portion, presumably to look around, though if it had eyes Avery couldn't identify them, paying no more or less time assessing the crew than the ship.

Avery flashed back to Mrs. Okeke's grade four music class. He leaned forward and tapped out a ta-ta-ti-ti-ta on a nearby container. The alien extended its handless arm and repeated his knock, before it knocked a more complex pattern for Avery.

Before long, Avery was knocking out the intros to his favourite songs. The alien never missed a beat, but exercise was bringing them no closer to learning where they were or what had attacked them. Avery knocked back a final pattern, tapping his chest. "Avery," he said. He pointed to the alien and waited.

It seemed to sag in disappointment but made no sound.

Avery crossed to the door and tapped a two handed rhythm against it. The alien rallied and joined him, growing a second arm to repeat the pattern.

He opened the door slowly. "Bouchard, watch my back," he said as he went outside, keeping an eye on the sky and waiting to see if the alien would follow. The sky was empty, but as he rounded the ship he saw three stray burrs, buzzing erratically like lazy bumble bees. They darted at him, before suddenly veering away. From a distance they hissed like startled cats. Avery glanced back, to see the alien close behind him. It seemed he wasn't the only one with bad memories of jello salad.

He gestured to Bouchard. "We need one of them alive."

Ekki watched the children clumsily try to capture an Aloika. She decided to do it for them before they hurt themselves. Though she was still tired from her previous exertions, she called a puff of wind to propel her adversaries within range. She snatched one of them out of the air and handed it to the Bold One. He put it in a small rectangular box with a locking clasp and carried it back inside the conveyance. Ekki followed close behind but hesitated at the craft's entrance, where some of them were constructing something.

She wanted to stay and watch, but was wary of losing the rapport she was building. Back inside the vessel, Ekki played more tapping games with the children, marvelling at their behaviour. They appeared to make no effort to mask their pheromones, but their responses to one another's emotional needs were inconsistent. She wondered if these discrepancies were the result of some of the newcomers being more advanced than others. The other options were chance, which was unordered, or bias, which was unnerving.

The imprisoned Aloika whined softly until it died. Its death appeared to go unnoticed by its captors. She tried again to mindspeak with the Bold One, but only succeeded in raising his stress levels. When he began to rub at his head she stopped.

One of the others brought forward a large flat strip of cambium covered in intricately patterned markings. The newcomers discussed it at length before making more markings with a small stick. Ekki grabbed the stick impulsively and examined it. It left marks on her flesh and she quivered in excitement. Blank cambium sheets were brought to her and she experimented with marking them. Her efforts were clumsy but she was hopeful.

Her first picture depicted her dancing through the stars with Hetchi under the jealous gaze of the Conductor. The second showed the Conductor's scorned advances being mocked by those in the chorus. Lastly, she drew the Conductor's terrible wrath, as he trapped Ekki and her lover on separate cosmic bodies and banished the Aloikan chorus to burn in the sun.

Finished, she held the stick out to the Bold One hoping he would understand.

Avery watched the alien draw. With each panel its proficiency grew, but he had no idea what he was looking at. It was like a comic without captions and he had no frame of reference. When the marker was returned to him he hesitated. How was he supposed to tell the story of his entire species in a handful of pictograms?

"What am I supposed to draw?" he asked no one in particular. The suggestions were few. The Milky Way. Earth. Gliese.

The Milk Way seemed the most useful of the three so he started with that. His drawing sucked, it wasn't to scale, and frustration was giving him a headache. He tried for an image of their intended mission. The armada of ships was bigger than the planet they left from and, without context, the Gliese system was just a collection of circles and dots. Damn. If Edwards were alive, she'd likely have found a way to discuss philosophy by now.

A crackle of static came over the radio, eliciting cheers from the crew and distracting the alien from his artistic failures. The boys at the panel fiddled some knobs and intercepted a message.

"—ort their positions and situation on this emergency frequency for orders. This is Admiral Pardos of the Gantry, to all ships in the fleet. All ships are to report their positions—"

Callaghan snatched the receiver before Avery could reach it. "This is acting Captain Stephen Callaghan of the Terrestrial and Marine Animal Resear—"

Avery grabbed the receiver out of Callaghan's hand and pushed him away. "This is Lieutenant Commander John Avery, sir. "Tamara suffered thirty percent losses to the crew from equipment failures in transit. Lander One's hull was damaged upon impact and parasitizing life forms claimed a further nine souls before we took them out. Power is at minimum and communication is spotty. We've had no contact with anyone else in the fleet. We'll organize a search for the rest of the landers in the morning."

"There's another alien!" Callaghan shouted.

"Commander, are you currently under attack?" barked Pardos.

"No, sir," Avery said, as he motioned to Bouchard to take Callaghan elsewhere. "Some of the civilians are just a little excitable."

"Get them in hand. This is a military mission now," Pardos said. "What is the status of the library?"

"Undetermined. We've had our hands full, sir."

"Resolve that, Commander. The library is your highest priority."

Avery looked around at a room of people who'd just discovered their value. "Securing it now sir."

Avery watched the green slime toss aside his awkward drawings in favour of taking a marker to Callaghan's satellite images. If the military found out about it they'd lock it

away and dissect it before they even learned to communicate. He needed more time to decide what to do.

Ekki was delighted by the image of her planet the children had brought with them. She lovingly added details of her garden to the map and drew a simple icon of the Bold One on the point where his vessel had landed. Surreptitiously, she watched as he spoke into a lifeless flattened sphere. Somehow it spoke back. There was a long exchange between the Bold One and the disembodied voice. She longed to take it apart and examine it more carefully.

A few of the children came to stand by her. They pointed and exclaimed over the marks she'd made and new emotions flavoured the air. She calculated their landing points of the other vessels she'd seen and marked their general locations as well. The children's excitement grew. It was infectious enough that soon they were gathered around her communicating animatedly. Ekki felt a sense of place and purpose.

She began to think that their anxiety had been caused by the disembodied voice and not any actions of hers. This was good, but she wished again that she understood their words. She wished for larger pieces of cambium to complete the picture but had no way to make the request. She would have to exercise patience.

The tension rose again before the Bold One finished his strange conversation. He beckoned her to follow and headed deeper inside the conveyance. Hoping to learn more about the children, she followed.

They walked alone. Ekki began to worry that she was being led away so the others could hide from her, and that she would be alone once again.

They travelled through a tunnel with many rooms leading off it. Together they entered one such room, and the Bold One sealed them in. Briefly he slumped against the door. The air around him became heavy with grief and Ekki longed to comfort him. Before she could try, he opened a second door to reveal a room within the room. Ekki's unease grew as a deep winter cold escaped the interior chamber and thin white frost covered all of its inner surfaces.

The Bold One entered but did not beckon her; indeed he seemed to have forgotten all about her. Ekki hesitated on the threshold. The room contradicted nature and felt like a trap, but curiosity won out.

She followed him inside.

Avery stood at the door to the library with a sense of urgency but no clear plan. The room was twenty feet deep and twelve across, and dark—no power. Frost covered industrial shelving filled the room and acrylic holders of test tubes filled the shelves,

but it wouldn’t last. The shelf labels were covered in a thin frost that made them illegible and Avery didn’t have time to read the individual tubes. Without a map, he had no way of knowing which vials were most important.

He grabbed a portable freezer unit from the rack outside and filled it from the first shelf he encountered. He’d cleared less than a quarter of it before the unit was full. He closed the lid and switched on the battery power. If they didn’t get some solar cells working in a day or two he’d have another problem. For now, he had to deal with the fact that he couldn’t save even one percent of what they’d brought with them.

Trying to hedge his bets, Avery moved through the room grabbing vials randomly. He felt like he was picking lottery numbers. When the last portable unit was full, he headed for the door, only to find it blocked—by the alien.

It had one of the tubes in its strange hands and appeared to be studying it. Avery wondered what it might be seeing. Heat from its body had melted the frost of the label. He twisted his head to read it. Muscovy. He was pretty sure it was some kind of duck.

Avery scratched a simple sketch into the softening frost on the wall. The alien studied it for many minutes before making refinements, adding feathers to the body and webbing to the feet. He figured it was definitely smarter than he was—until it ate the tube.

Ekki studied the dead pattern with a burgeoning understanding. Somehow these creatures had come into possession of a great wealth of patterns, frozen and preserved, but they didn’t know how to create them. No other explanation explained the Bold One’s grief.

He was deeply distressed, but now she knew how to sooth him. Ekki thinned her membranes until she was able to ingest the pattern sample she held. She kept her membrane translucent, so the Bold One could watch as she borrowed basic ingredients from within herself and began to weave a primary pattern.

He exclaimed repeatedly and his anxiety levels rose and fell, but he did not try to stop her.

Manipulating the primary pattern to match that of the dead sample was a slow and tedious process. In the outer room, overwhelmed by the stresses of the day, the Bold One slept. Quietly Ekki opened the door and retraced her steps until she found herself in the main room of this strange burrow. None of the children kept watch, and she was grateful the Aloika had so exhausted themselves that another attack was likely many days away.

In the soft moonlight, she sang quietly while she continued her work. As her lover took ascendancy in the night sky, she called out to him as she brought forth this new child, laying it amongst the flowers that had grown in spite of her attempts to limit them.

“Hetchi, my love, see this new pattern. I will fill my garden with them as a testament of my love.”

Through the holes left in her shield by the arrival of the children’s ship, a weak voice answered. “I have missed you Ekki. Your garden is beautiful, but to see it and not hear you tears at my soul. Must you repair the whole shield? Can you not leave one opening for me?” Hetchi’s emotions flooded her mind. He was so desperately lonely. Without her, he had not even flowers to talk to.

She soothed him with a dance as she looked out over the land at all that she had created, all that the Conductor’s cursed Aloika strove to take from her. She was conflicted. Ekki closed her eyes as Hetchi’s distant dreams caressed her mind, reminding her of how happy they had been while twinned. She continued to dance for him, craving the touch of his thoughts. She could not lose him again, but how could she protect her garden if she kept a window open?

A gasp from behind alerted her to the Bold One, awake and watchful. He had followed her from the vessel, and stood staring at the still wet pattern Ekki had brought to life. Behind him, half a dozen sleepy children looked at her in wonder. Protectively they crowded around the child she created and cooed softly as it waved its upper limbs and struggled to stand.

The newcomers were fragile but tenacious. She would study their pattern box until she found a way to make them stronger, so she and Hetchi could dance and sing.