

Roaches In The Attic 3  
Non-Retrieval



Raymond M. Towers

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*Aliens and alien planets at their best! I could not put this one down. (C. Blake, Smashwords)*

*Great mix of action, hard sci-fi, conflict and characters. (anonymous, Barnes & Noble)*

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## Roaches In The Attic 3 Non-Retrieval Raymond M. Towers

(This novella is part of the Roaches In The Attic Series. For more information on additional novels in this series, please refer to the More Books By This Author section at the end of this ebook.)

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### Roaches

*Like a plague they descended, dropping into the midst of the unprepared and frightened soldiers as dozens of bouncing, pummeling cannonballs. Plasma fire whines across the battlefield as skittish fingers pump on smoothly gliding triggers, hitting the alien creatures' hard shells and deflecting the lethal beams in all directions, including back among our own troops. Howls of pain erupt from the mouths of mortally wounded men, only slightly eclipsed by the orders from their commanding officers.*

*Through it all, the balled-up insects roll toward where the concentration of soldiers is at its thickest. Then, displaying an uncanny and unnerving sense of synchronicity, the tumbling balls halt all at once and begin to unfurl. Their trademark clicking commences, a combination of sharp screeches and disconcerting snaps that causes involuntary wincing and fuels an instinct of panic in some of the Marines. This noise, of course, serves to briefly stun the troops, as half a dozen jet-black limbs telescope from the rising monstrous bodies. Their two thick and thorny legs lift them to nearly an equal height as the men, and two pairs of arms simultaneously uncurl and clasp together, as if the creature were uttering some dark prayer. For a brief moment, a split second, it seems as if nothing is happening, until the first shockwaves hit.*

*Death comes quickly to the innermost circle of gawking and gaping spectators, as invisible beams of intense heat immediately incinerate or explode their bodies. The after-effects of the assaults consume a second row of the tightly grouped soldiers, bursting their hair and clothes into flames, and melting their hard plastic weapons in their grips. A high percentage of the frontline infantry, whether through panic or injury, or even simple confusion, is rendered ineffective.*

*(Partial notes recovered during the aftermath of the War on Betelren Six, Space Corps Outpost 02-27. The author's identity is not known, and the date is Tuesday, January 20, 2060. This is the date of first contact.)*

## Roaches In The Attic Non-Retrieval

1

*"Platoon 10-20's moving out."*

*"Platoon 10-20's moving out."*

*"Opposition had best watch out."*

*"Opposition had best watch out."*

*"Left, right."*

*"Left, right."*

*"Left, right."*

*"Left, right."*

*"We find ourselves so far from home."*

*"We find ourselves so far from home."*

*"On a purple rock, we're all alone."*

*"On a purple rock, we're all alone."*

*"Left, right."*

*"Left, right."*

*"Left, right."*

*"Left, right."*

*"As usual, we'll rise to the task."*

*"As usual, we'll rise to the task."*

*"Platoon 10-20's gonna kick some ass!"*

*“Platoon 10-20’s gonna kick some ass!”*

*“Ten, ten!”*

*“Twenty, twenty!”*

*“Ten, ten!”*

*“Twenty, twenty!”*

*(A typical cadence.)*

Date: Thursday, January 27, 2061

Location: Puller Spaceport, MDRS (Marine Division Recruit Station), San Diego, California

Once I’d rotated the co-pilot’s chair by one hundred and eighty degrees, I scanned across the innards of the Unilink Space Transport, designated number One-Twenty-Six. The Space Marines were filing in through the small vessel’s hatch, some looking impatient, others somber, all rarely speaking, and in their usual manner they filled in the seats starting from the furthest back and moving forward. The seating consisted of two long, gray metal benches running along either side of the transport, with heavy-duty black nylon seat straps for each occupant, and an overhead spot for them to snap their weapons into.

Dutifully each of the hard-nosed soldiers secured their weapons, in this case the newer Spitfire v7 plasma rifles, into their spots, before removing their helmets and laying them across their laps. They reached down past their laps, bringing up the adjustable ends of their security belts, and with a loud snap, they clicked their belts locked.

Space Infantry, Space Marines, their cammies and weapons I’d seen many times before, perhaps too many times already, during the ongoing campaign against the nefarious Roaches. On this particular mission, however, it was the bizarre coloration of their uniforms that held my attention. The squad of twelve, plus their fearsome and well-known commanding officer, were all wearing the standard issue, camouflage pattern fatigues. In contrast to the tan or green shades I was used to, however, the articles of clothing I was looking at before me had been dyed in an uncommon combination of gray and black.

The outside of our vessel had undergone a similar metamorphosis, with the addition of an even more bizarre color, dark purple. The lower parts of the ship were painted in an irregular black pattern to represent grass, the middle and top half in various shades of the same gray as the soldier’s cammies, and the very top had purple streaks on the roof and upper edges to mimic hanging leaves. Even with the quick-dry techniques the Space Corps contractors had used, we’d still been waiting a few hours for the paint to dry.

Upon viewing the odd hues for the first time, the ship’s Senior Spaceman, Royce Tennard, had immediately and affectionately nicknamed the vessel the ‘Purple Haze’. He said he’d named it after some obscure twentieth century rock music, but I’d never heard of that song, personally. Who the hell was Jimmy Hendricks? (sic)

With both the Marines and the Unilink Transport so curiously disguised, I thought that the landscape of our target planet, Lesenia, must be a very strange one, indeed.

“I hope we run into some o’ them black devils.” One young ebony soldier beamed,

and I immediately thought of the term B.A.M., or Broad Ass Marine, that I'd heard somewhere or other. The woman aimed an invisible weapon across the transport, and slowly squeezed its trigger. "Boo-yeah!"

On the opposite bench, a freckled blond man pretended he'd been shot. He grabbed at his heart, closed his eyes, and lolled his head to one side. As a final gesture of his fatality, he stuck his tongue out. This man's name was Finn, I would come to find out very shortly.

"I hear that." The heavy shouldered Marine sitting next to the black woman nodded. "Some filthy Roaches are about to get themselves served!"

"Are you finished sightseeing, Douglas?" An impatient voice grated at my ears, and I swiveled my seat back around to face the front of the ship. My head I turned toward the Senior Spaceman's seat, where the pudgy pilot was seated.

Tennard leaned in close, since the cockpit was of open design, and sound carried well against the mainly metal interior of the transport. Tennard leaned in close enough for me to get a good look at his balding brown hair, thick brown mustache, and fleshy jowls. "Just listen to those turkeys. They actually think we're going to see some action on this trip. So Lesenia hasn't communicated with CP-1 (Command Post One) in thirty-six Earth hours, big fucking deal. Things like that happen all the time at these new outposts.

"CP-1 panics every time, and they send in the cavalry, and all for what? We go halfway across the universe to an outpost in butt-fuck Egypt, only to find out that some relay burned out, or that they need to realign their satellites one more time. Then, we stand by and watch as the outpost reboots its computer system, and voila! The problem is solved. Try explaining that scenario to Renquist's lynch mob. You'd think they all jerk off to their rifles, except for that dark-skinned woman. I bet she uses her rifle as a dildo."

As if on cue, the stern voice of Staff Sergeant Renquist cracked through the vessel's bowels like a whip. "Davis, Knotts, secure your traps."

"Yes, Staff Sergeant." The two Marines complied. "Oorah!"

The grim-looking man slammed the transport's hatch shut, hard enough that I winced even though I saw it coming. The lean man next pressed the small control pad that would secure it and give it an airtight seal.

Since the two bench seats were completely full, Renquist unlatched an auxiliary seat that folded out from the wall. The problem with this was that Renquist would be seated directly behind Tennard, and this would severely curtail the Senior Spaceman's ability to colorfully express himself.

"Fuck." Tennard mumbled.

"We're all in." Renquist growled.

Tennard glanced over. "Douglas, why don't you do one last safety check?"

I nodded, retrieving the metal clipboard from its narrow slot to my side. The list on it, I knew, was a hastily printed out copy of the Marines we'd be transporting.

I left the semi-comfort of my padded seat, and strode down the center aisle, which was a good four feet wide and far enough away from the passengers that I didn't end up stepping on anybody's boots. I began checking the names on list, after reading the stencil writing on the soldier's front left pockets.

The Marines all looked to be in their twenties, except for the Staff Sergeant, whom I guessed to be between thirty-five and forty. They were all part of one of the better-known outfits in the Space Marines, Platoon Ten-Twenty, and from what I'd heard, each Marine

was specifically chosen for the mission by Renquist. Most of the soldiers looked well seasoned by war, with weathered faces creased by hard lines, and I wondered, just how much action had these young soldiers seen?

I took in their duds, too, contrasting them to my dark blue Spaceman uniform. Cold eyes and dark countenances met mine, and becoming unnerved by the scrutiny, I lowered my head and focused my attention on the clipboard. Although part of the safety check included making sure that all seatbelts were secure, I skipped over that detail and returned to my chair. "All passengers accounted for, sir." I told Tennard.

"Good." Tennard nodded, standing and leaning forward with a cloth towel in his hand. He impatiently removed a smudge on the corner of the rectangular Plasti-Shield window. Afterward, he tossed the towel into its holding bin, and dumped his big butt back in his chair. "I've decided to shake things up a little, Douglas. You've seen me take this bird out enough times, haven't you? How would you like to do it on your own for once?"

Whether the question emerged as the result of actually advancing my training, or was just plain laziness on the part of the Senior Spaceman, was a moot point. I nearly jumped out of my seat. "I'd love to!"

"Don't get all worked up about it." Tennard pointed a warning finger at me. "You have to remember to do everything in its proper sequence, and you have to make sure each step is done correctly before you proceed with the next one. Exactly the way I've been showing you for the last couple of months."

"Right." I nodded.

"Now, have you informed our target Link of our impending arrival?"

"I have. Five minutes ago."

"Have they given us a confirmation code?"

"Yes."

"Have you double-checked the landing coordinates we were given, to make sure they match up with the coordinates on our master list?"

"Coordinates have been confirmed."

"So far, so good." Tennard scrutinized the information on his side of the dashboard, which was a mirror of mine, except for the override control cluster which was nearly centered between us, but leaning a little toward him. This cluster would allow Tennard to quickly take control of the situation, if, heaven forbid, some mishap were to occur. The hefty man reached for his security belt. "Let's get ourselves buckled in, and you can continue with the fire-up procedure." He tilted his chair by about ninety degrees to one side. "Sergeant Renquist, the Purple Haze is about to depart."

Renquist shifted his own gaze toward the back end of the transport. "You heard the man, jarheads! We are Pulsing out! Dempsey, what in the name of all that's holy are you sitting on? Will you stop squirming around so much?"

I heard a Marine bark back, "Sorry, sir!"

I'll tell you right now, I was nervous. I took a good breath, and glanced over at Tennard. Once he'd given me his nod of approval, I pressed the first of the four Pulse-Magnifier buttons. Next to the button was a small bar, and I watched closely as it filled from red to green, and once it did, a read-out next to it showed one hundred percent. I pressed the second button, and repeated the same sequence, until all four Magnifiers were fully loaded.

The Pulse Activate button came next. I hovered my finger right over the little black square, and once again looked to Tennard for confirmation.

He was watching my actions intently. "Go ahead."

This is it, I thought to myself, and I brought my index finger down on the button. Almost immediately, the Purple Haze began to quiver. The first Pulse took place, giving me the impression that the transport's walls were contracting inward. The second Pulse followed shortly, repeating the effect of the first, while adding a bright, white sheen to everything in sight. The third Pulse arrived several seconds later than the others, bringing with it a blinding white glare that made me wince, and this Pulse proved to be strong enough to send us out.

To someone observing from the deck around us, it would have appeared as if a great ball of light had enveloped the Purple Haze, briefly glowing like a miniature sun, then fading away a second later. Once the glare was gone, so too would be the Unilink Transport, number 126.

To the shuttle's occupants, however, the ride was disappointingly short. The Link System had been perfected to the point where the journey through the stars was about as exciting as a trip to the post office.

As quickly as it had appeared, the glare subsided. I opened my eyes to stare out the lone Plasti-Shield window and verified that our trip through space had been a success. The first words to greet me were 'Link Outpost: 01-77', stenciled in large, black, block letters high up on a plain concrete wall.

"Yes!" I ejaculated, but the word had already spilled out and all over the inside the shuttle before I realized how loud I'd said it.

"Remember protocol, Douglas." Tennard reminded me.

Eagerly, I scanned around the small dock, becoming a little disappointed that no human beings were around to witness my very first hands-on Pulse jump. I did see a Navigation Droid, however, about four feet tall and shaped like a cylinder with three short, stiff legs, rolling out to greet us. The Nav-Droid's large display panel flashed the word 'OKAY' on it, and at the same time, it was also emitting short bursts of light toward our transport's receptor unit. The ship's computer converted these electronic signals into readable data.

"Target link has been attained." I proudly read off my display. "Nav-Droid reports a perfect link-up, with no structural or radiation damage to either our vessel or to the outpost, or to the general surface of the planet we just landed on."

"Well done, Douglas, theatrics notwithstanding." Tennard more or less congratulated me. The portly man busied himself with the navigational charts on his screen. "Inform me as soon as the Pulse Magnifiers are ready again."

What a bitter turd, I grumbled in my head. I glanced over at the first Magnifier button, noting that it had gone down to sixty-two percent, right before I clicked it on. It would take a minute or two before all four Magnifiers were loaded again.

While I waited, I leaned forward to peer out as far as I could past the edges of the window. "Where is everybody?"

Tennard didn't even bother to turn his head away from his screen. "You need to pay better attention to your surroundings, Douglas. It's after hours. Everything was done through the computer system."

The curt answer made me feel stupid.

I looked on my computer screen, discovering that it was half past three hundred hours in, where were we again, oh, in Dengas time. Next jump, I thought, I'd just keep my mouth shut. Was I the only person on the transport that was excited about traveling through the stars?

I caught the blink of the instrument panel, telling me that Magnifier One was full, and I clicked for Number Two to begin loading.

After this, I shifted my attention toward my computer screen, and switched over to the navigation charts. Our next stop was Kuatica, and I clicked on the name, prompting the computer to take me to the planet's information page. After a quick scan through the entry, I learned that Kuatica was a planet whose surface was covered nearly ninety percent under ice. Only a short strip of land had escaped this eternal winter, along the equator, and even this area was prone to temperatures of minus one hundred and twenty-eight degrees Celsius.

The idea of a planet covered in ice was fascinating to me, but I resisted the urge to reveal this to the Senior Spaceman, who had the personal demeanor of an ice cube that had accidentally gotten buried in the freezer, and soured behind the veggies and meat. Instead, I pursed my lips and returned my focus to the Magnifiers. A few minutes later, I said, "Pulse Magnifiers are fully replenished, sir."

"You may proceed in ten seconds." Tennard said flatly. He shifted his chair back to face our live cargo. "We'll be making our second jump in just a few seconds. It should be as smooth as our first."

A few grunts and whispers reached the front of the vessel, but not much else.

Steadier than the first time, I pressed the Pulse Activate button. The Pulses came again, as before, with each one stronger than the one previous. This time, it took us four tries to Pulse out.

Our arrival on Outpost 03-24 was as mundane as the previous one. A sentry garbed from head to toe in extra thick clothing stepped in front of the transport and waved a friendly arm in our direction. I waved back.

Another Nav-Droid rolled forward to stand beside this person, and oddly enough, it too was covered in thick cloth, all the way around except for its big, bright display. The droid started spouting out its short series of digital flashes.

"Another textbook landing." I said, as the incoming data was being translated on my screen. "The Nav-Droid is reporting that their main Pulse Generator is down for routine maintenance, and that their back-up system is up and running in its place."

To manually confirm this, the sentry held up a lone finger, and right after gave us a thumb down. The person then held up two digits, and gas the thumbs up. I held out an open hand to signal that we understood.

Tennard flipped his chair around to relay this to the squad leader sitting right behind him. "The main power grid here is down, but their secondary system is available. It'll take us a few minutes longer than usual to get back up to full power."

"Whatever it takes." Renquist bluntly replied.

"It's not like we have a choice." One of the other Marines muttered.

"Yeah, we do." Another countered. "We can get off right here. I heard they have a seven day (convenience) store right around the corner. Hey, Spacemen, open up the hatch so we can jump out and head for the nearest beer garden!"

"Shut up, Brick."



Tennard rolled his eyes at me, before he started switching the Pulse Magnifiers to draw from the auxiliary system instead of the primary. It was a brief task, and the man was soon sighing and leaning back in his seat. Wordlessly, he stared out through the rectangular window, with his hands clasped over his stout stomach.

For half a second, I wondered what the man might be thinking, until I happened to glance at the temperature reading for the dock. I converted it into the more familiar Fahrenheit. "It's minus one hundred degrees out there!" I blurted out, but if I was expecting some kind of reaction from Tennard, I sure didn't get it.

The burly man kept staring through the Plasti-Shield, with an irritated look in his face, as if he'd rather be anywhere else in the universe than packed into a tin can with over a dozen Marines.

The sentry, I noticed, was now tinkering with the engine on a small forklift, and I wondered how that guy could stand working in such extreme cold. He must have been freezing balls!

Since there wasn't much else to do but wait, I swiveled my chair around and glanced back into the cargo section. Staff Sergeant Renquist, I noticed, was busy giving a last minute briefing to his people.

"According to our higher-ups," The hard man was saying. "Outpost 04-91 stopped responding to transmissions at nineteen hundred hours, approximately one day and a half ago. The usual culprits turn out to be minor technical glitches, but..." He cast a quick, sharp glance in Tennard's direction. "You never know until you actually get there."

"We'd just started our seventy-two hours (three days off)." One of the more broad shouldered of the bunch shook his head. This was Knotts, if I remembered right. "It just doesn't seem fair, Staff Sergeant. We were finally getting some time off before being whisked out to Twenty-Nine Stumps (Marine Division Combat Center at Twenty Nine Palms, California) again, and, Boom! We're on another fucking mission. We didn't even have time to make a pit stop at Tia-Juana."

"Well, let's just hope somebody forgot to switch their transmitter on." Another Marine commented dryly. "And that it isn't anything more serious than that."

"Don't you worry about a thing, Staff Sergeant." The ebony woman, Davis raised her hand to high five Knotts sitting beside her. After a loud smack, she added, "Me and Numb-Nuts here, and the rest of our posse, can take care of anything that so much as blinks at us the wrong way."

"Yut, yut!" Somebody seconded.

"It's Knotts." Her fellow corrected. "Stop calling me Numb-Nuts, please."

A few suppressed chuckles erupted.

"So, we're getting sent out to the farthest end of the freaking galaxy, and all for what?" The soldier I recognized as Dempsey spoke up. "Just 'cause some purple branch fell off a stupid tree, and knocked some egghead on his ass, so hard he forgot to check in with CP-1 later?"

"It's a little more complicated than that." Renquist grimly explained. "The equipment was already working properly. The problem is, we haven't gotten any word from the outpost in a day and a half, and they haven't responded to CP-1's calls, either. And, there are other security measures available."

"They've got a couple of those, right?" A new face asked. "Security measures?"

Renquist nodded, once. "If the main hardware did happen to go down, there are two

recently instituted options available. One is the Pulse System itself. A coded message can easily be transmitted in a relatively low powered Pulse. Also, every outpost is now equipped with a tracing beacon that emits a steady distress call, and any space-faring vessels or satellites have the ability to pick this signal up. As of the time we boarded this transport, neither one of these security measures has been activated.”

“So, what does CP-1 think happened out there?” This question came from a Hispanic soldier, sporting short-cropped hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. “You’ve got what, maybe ten survey people unaccounted for. Half of them are eggheads with at least basic weapons training, and the other half are full time infantry, right?”

“If it was a typical survey mission, they had wide range, energy trace scanners and perimeter motion sensors. They’ve got the works out there. How could anything big enough to take out that many people and defenses, just sneak up on the outpost and not give anyone a minute or two to send out a distress call?”

“Rubalcava, that’s just it.” Renquist answered. “Command Post One doesn’t know what happened, and that’s why they’ve assigned us to find out. Our M.I.A count is much higher though. We’ve got just over thirty people on Lesenia, plus the three transports and all the equipment they took out there with them.”

“Thirty people couldn’t send out one simple message?” Rubalcava asked. “Why so many bodies out there, anyway?”

“The brass had big plans for that neck of the woods, up until about thirty-six hours ago.” Renquist informed them. “Lesenia is an ideal location. Its atmospheric conditions are perfectly suited for humans, it has no intelligent cultures to speak of, and the few reports regarding the larger wildlife indicate that it should domesticate easily. The planet is positioned in a good central location, and that makes it an ideal jumping point for the unexplored solar systems nearby. The original plan was to build a full-scale regiment headquarters on that rock, and to pop out new outposts from there.”

Ominously, the entire transport got quiet, and the Marines began to look at one another thoughtfully.

“I’ll say it, because I know everybody here is thinking about it.” Dempsey sounded agitated. “Betelren Six.”

“Four words, shit-brick.” Davis snarled. “Shut. The fuck. Up.”

“The last word is,” Renquist went on. “That the outpost personnel had just started sending out satellites to investigate the rocks around them, and to bring back samples.”

“Maybe an Explorer Drone brought back something that wiped them out.” Someone suggested.

“Or maybe something changed on Lesenia.” Rubalcava theorized. “Maybe the temperature suddenly dropped, or the air quality changed, and it happened too fast for them to deal with it.”

“Maybe they ate something they didn’t agree with.” Knotts shrugged.

“Or maybe, they didn’t agree with something that ate them.” Someone joked, causing a short ripple of laughter.

“We’re assuming that the planet’s atmosphere will not be a problem.” Renquist stated. “Explorer Drones thoroughly tested the air quality and soil well before any human being set foot on Lesenia. In the highly unlikely event that the atmosphere has somehow changed, the monitors mounted on the outside of this transport will warn us about it. In that case, we’ll simply Pulse back to the nearest outpost, and report our findings to CP-

1.”

“That’s even worse than being yanked off leave!” Knotts complained. “We’ll be sitting at that outpost and playing with our balls, until somebody rounds up a bunch of bio-dorks, and then we’ll still have to go back to Lesenia, as their chaperones!”

“We are in The Big Suck.” The Marine named Brickwell commented.

The Senior Spaceman started tapping impatiently on my side of the instrument panel. “Pay attention, Douglas.”

I turned my seat around, realizing that enough energy had been drawn into the first Magnifier for me to move on to the next one. As I started loading the next, I tried to keep an ear on the conversation going on behind me.

“Hey, Brick,” Someone said. “You haven’t been out to Lesenia lately, have you? I heard Brickwell once wiped out an entire colony with one of his gas attacks. Maybe he snuffed the outpost after one too many bean burritos!”

“Oh, stuff it up your...”

“Next one, Douglas.” Tennard was trying to jerk me back to attention, but I was still watching the read-out. I clicked on the third Magnifier, and watched it fill up as quickly as the second. I never did understand why sometimes one Magnifier would take forever to load up, while the rest only took a fraction of the time. The fourth took less than a minute.

“Are we ready now, Douglas?” Tennard was trying to irritate me now, and I have to admit, it was working pretty good. He spun around, as if he couldn’t wait to get the mission over, and the Marines off his transport. “System’s up, we’ll be Pulsing out in five seconds.” To me, he said, “Go ahead.”

I waited five seconds, and pushed the magic button.

Once again, the transport began to Pulse. The long sentry had turned to watch us, and I waved at him in between white flashes. After a mere seven Pulses, we finally left.

Unexpectedly, The Transport 126 dipped hard enough to feel like the sudden descent on a roller coaster. Right after, it began rocking forcefully, from side to side, or in deep plunges like a wild bronco.

My first thought was that I’d done something wrong, that I’d done something out of sequence, or that I had somehow screwed up the coordinates. When I turned to look at my superior’s face, I could see that it was finally registering some kind of emotion. Unfortunately, it was a mask of fear that stared back at me.

“Something’s wrong!” Tennard cried out in terror. “This pathway was rated as being low risk!” He tried to keep his head still to scan his computer screen. “This can’t be! The coordinates have changed midway through the jump.” Futilely, Tennard glanced out the window. We were both shocked to see that the white glare of the Pulse was still evident outside, enveloping the entire transport. “We’re caught in flux!”

With my head rattling from the jarring motions, I looked down at my own set of coordinates, only to see the digits flicker before my eyes. “The coordinates just changed again! Our new landing site is several hundred miles away from our original target.”

“What?” Tennard asked in disbelief. He verified this on his own terminal. “These numbers are random! Try entering our original coordinates in manually, while I try to stabilize us!”

Without answering, I slapped down the override button, clearing the landing coordinates from the screen. I started punching in the sequence to Lesenia’s outpost

again, but before I could finish, the transport bucked forward, and only my tightly secured restraining belt kept me from smashing my face into the bank of controls.

“Yeeehaaa!” One of the Marines behind me yelled. “This beats the state rodeo!”

The vessel suddenly pitched upward, and my suddenly flailing arms and legs caused me chair to drift to one side. I watched two unlucky Marines roll off their seats and down the center aisle, and get knocked into the legs of their own comrades and against the hard parts of the transport benches. Quickly, they regained their bearings and recovered their helmets, and with the help of their fellows, they made it back to their seats.

“Freaking Sunday drivers!” One of them complained.

“Strap yourselves in tighter next time, girls.” Renquist admonished them with his grating barks. “I hear the main feature is about to begin!”

I clasped the control panel with both hands, and forced my chair to face forward. I’d just finished entering the correct landing coordinates, when the screen replaced them with its own numbers again. I nearly screamed out loud.

Tennard had witnessed this unexpected change as well. “The computer won’t let us use our original site!” He said, flailing his arms out as he lurched sideways in conjunction with the rolling transport. Tennard’s restraint pulled tight against his middle. “Uuunnn!” He grimaced. “We’ve got to use whatever the computer will allow! Lock in to the next set of numbers that’s anywhere near the outpost, while I try to level us out again!”

In an even sharper angle than before, the front of the Purple Haze pitched upwards, and I found myself pinned back hard on my seat. I strained forward to reach the terminal controls, but even with my fingertips stretched to their limits, I was still several inches too short. Tennard smashed at the stabilizers with his fist, causing the back of the vessel to buck up once, nearly putting us level. The next time he punched those same buttons, the back of the ship jolted upward, and behind me I could hear a helmet bouncing around on the floor.

“Marine!” Renquist’s voice cut through the chaos like a saw. “Retrieve your cover, NOW!”

“Yessir!” A muffled voice answered him.

Tennard was pounding at the stabilizer controls, while cursing them for not responding immediately. When they finally did, it was totally unexpected and felt as if somebody had slammed on the brakes. The force threw us both forward, and this time the restraint tore into my gut as well.

The soldier who had gone to retrieve his helmet had been hopelessly caught by surprise. With nothing to hold him in place, the poor guy flew forward, and cruelly slammed into the rear portion of my seat, which was hard metal covered by a thin layer of foam and fabric. The impact was a loud and sickening crack, like the splintering of ice, and so revolting that I couldn’t even bring myself to look back and see if he was all right.

“Finn!” Someone called out. “Finn!”

“Marine, get on your feet!” Renquist ordered. “Get on your feet now!”

“He’s not getting up, sir!”

“I can see that, you moron!”

Tennard finally managed to decrease some of the rocking and rolling, and this gave me the break I needed. “Coordinates locked on, sir!”

The Staff Sergeant’s loud voice boomed out again. “Nelson! Come up here and check on Finn! Everybody else, stay put! That includes you, Dempsey!”

“Sorry, sir!”

“Stand by, Douglas!” The Senior Spaceman shouted. “I’m going to try and get us out of flux!”

I moved my hands away from the instruments, and tightly gripped the sides of my seat. The transport started vibrating so violently it seemed as if it was about to shake apart.

“Finn’s life signs are down!” Nelson called out, from right behind my chair.

“Well, don’t just gawk at him, help me roll him back and strap him down with the floor belts!” Renquist ordered.

“Yes, sir!”

The vessel shuddered so hard it made my brain hurt. “What’s happening?” I asked through chattering teeth.

“The outpost computer is still trying to send us somewhere else!” Tennard growled. “Prepare to switch all auxiliary power to the Pulse Magnifiers, on the count of three!”

I switched to the correct screen, and quickly set this up.

“Three!”

“Two!”

“One!”

“Go!”

Simultaneously, Tennard pushed the manual override, and brought the locked-on coordinates back onto the screen. I channeled all non-essential electrical power to further boost the waning energy in the Magnifiers, and the moment this was done, Tennard punched the Pulse Activate button.

The entire inside of our small ship went black, while outside the bright glow of the Pulse still engulfed us. A moment later, the Pulse faded, and we were left to stare through the Plasti-Shield at an endless wood of thick, gray tree trunks with large, drooping purple leaves. The Purple Haze appeared to be lying awkwardly on a slope, and tilted some forty-five degrees up at the highest point.

“How could the outpost override our manual commands?” I asked, hurriedly unbuckling my seat restraint. I half-climbed onto my angled seat and began examining the various readings and instruments.

“Maybe someone at the outpost became aware of our distress, and tried to redirect the ship back to the original landing site, I don’t know.” Tennard surmised. “For a second, it felt as if two computers were trying to send us in different directions. The way the coordinates were jumping around like that, we could have been in flux forever, or worse, we could have run out of energy and blinked out of existence altogether. I’m just glad we’re still in one piece.”

“Do you think it was Roaches?” I asked.

“It couldn’t be.” Tennard shook his head, finally managing to undo his own restraint. He took in a deep breath, before he continued. “The Link System is beyond their technology, and they’ve never been spotted in this side of the galaxy before. Activate the auto-check circuit. Let’s see if anything got damaged during our little joyride through hell.”

I did, and within a few seconds, the system beeped its completion.

Tennard was already staring at his screen, propping his legs against his seat to keep him aloft. “Life support systems are still at full power, thank heaven. All of our auxiliary

systems are way down, between ten and twenty percent, but that's to be expected after such a huge power draw. Interior lights and interior electronics are either at zero, or almost there. The Magnifiers are all at zero." He shook his head. "A couple more seconds in flux, and we would be nothing but memories right now."

"How's the air quality outside?" Renquist got out of his seat. He used the back of Tennard's seat, and braced his own legs against the edge of his chair, to keep from sliding down into the dark bowels of the ship.

"Give me a second to reroute some power." Tennard said, and it only took a few moments to get this done. "According to the sensors, air quality and environmental conditions are precisely as expected, and well within safety standards."

"Did you hear that, you jarheads?" Renquist's voice boomed through the darkness like a freightliner's foghorn. "It's party time! Secure your brain buckets, unfasten your seat belts, and grab your weapons, all in that exact sequence. Proceed towards the hatch in an orderly fashion, and prepare to exit. Menden, unsecure that hatch! It's time for us to evacuate this sardine can!"

Glimpses of the shuffling Marines were visible, barely, through the tiny rays of sunlight that managed to invade the inside of the transport.

"Sir, the hatch is not operational!" Menden called out, punching repeatedly, and fruitlessly, at the unlocking pad.

"You might consider manual overriding it, you imbecile." Renquist spat back. "Davis, Knotts, you two are bringing up the rear. Bring Finn outside with the rest of us."

With a loud wrench, Menden forced the lever that kept the hatch in place, and we could hear the air seals being released. A couple of awkward kicks dislodged the hatch from its thick rubber surrounds, and finally, the hatch jerked open and allowed a long stream of daylight to enter the dark vehicle.

Menden slid aside, going back to his seat to grab the rest of his gear, while the rest of the Marines used whatever handholds they could grab, and filed into a short line that started at the hatch. One by one, they exited, although there was a gruesomely uncomfortable moment as Davis and Knotts tried to maneuver themselves while carrying the dead body of Finn. Menden helped solve this problem, by bracing Knotts' back until the two sturdy Marines got out with the corpse.

Right behind Menden at the hatch was Renquist, who paused and glared back at the two Spacemen. "Some technical glitch." He cursed, before he too was gone.

The Senior Spaceman ignored the sarcastic comment, choosing instead to focus his attention on the vessel's barely functioning control panel. "That's strange. The comm. system doesn't want to power up at all."

"Short circuit?" I asked, rummaging through my head for the location of the repair equipment the transport carried. "Blown fuse, maybe?"

"I don't think it's either one." Tennard scratched at his fuzzy gourd. "The auto-check circuit reported that everything was in A-One condition. The display is showing that the comm. is at fourteen percent, and I've checked it two different ways, so the number has to be accurate. The problem is that every time I try to route more power from one of the other systems, it doesn't go through. The power goes back to wherever I drew it from. I've never seen anything like it."

"So, the last jump might have screwed up the comm. system?"

"But why only the comm. system?" Tennard frowned at me. "Watch this." He poked

at some buttons, and the transport's lights flickered on, although at around fifty percent of their normal brightness. "I can turn on the lights, and I can even start up the rag cleaner if I wanted to, but I can't call out."

"Wait, what's our minimum power requirement for calling out?" I thought back, suddenly feeling anxious all over again. "It's twenty-five percent, right? That means we can't even call the outpost to tell them where we ended up?"

Tennard nodded. "We can only get incoming messages, but at the moment it doesn't sound as if the outpost is all that concerned about what happened to us." He filled his cheeks up with air, and blew it out, as he changed the display on his computer. "What's worse, is we ended up some fifty miles north and, uh, slightly east of our original landing site. And with all the random numbers that kept flashing up on the screen, I doubt that either the outpost at Kuatica, or the one here on Lesenia ever got our final coordinates."

I asked, "We're lost out here, just like the scientists from the outpost?"

Tennard glanced into the bowels of the ship, as the lights suddenly began to glow brighter. He turned back to the control panel and shifted screens again. "Oh, good! Outside power is being channeled back into our system. That means the Pulse Generator here on the planet is still operational, and still capable of sending energy to us. I think the outpost might be trying to rescue us, finally. Let me reroute all this extra power away from the lights, and over to the Magnifiers."

"The outpost is okay?" I wondered, and you don't know how much that relieved me.

"It certainly appears so." Tennard nodded. He tried the comm. again, and made a quick grimace. "Still no luck on getting through to them, though. Here's what we'll do: I'll keep watch on the Magnifiers, and you start working on a Long Reach Radio. We've got to get some kind of communication going with the outpost."

I went through a mental inventory of the equipment in the cargo holds. "We should have enough parts to make at least five of those things."

"The power is flowing nicely into the Magnifiers." Tennard noticed, sounding as comforted as I felt. "See if you can raise anyone on the outpost."

I excused myself, and clambered down toward the hatch. The eerily toned landscape, with its vegetation of gray trees and dark purple leaves, and the knee-high grasses in varying shades of black, was nothing short of spectacular, and if there was one thing I regretted, it was not having the time to enjoy it more.

## 2

I jumped out of the transport, noticing that the Marines had all taken their packs out of the cargo holds, which were set up similar to the holds of long distance travel buses back on Earth. I took a moment to close and secure all the doors, and stepped down to the one reserved for extra field equipment. There were a few other cases in the way, containing short-wave radios, general purpose tools, and the like, and I finally located the case marked LRR (Long Reach Radios). It was a heavy case, I found out the second I'd hauled it into my arms. I closed the storage door and latched it shut, before I stepped away with the single case.

"I've got more power on the way now." Tennard's voice drifted out. "I'll be out in a second to give you a hand."

“Gotcha.” I called back.

Menden was standing guard just a few feet away, shifting uneasily, while the rest of the Marines had retreated to a spot some twenty feet further away from the vessel. It looked as if they were preparing for a long march, and I groaned inside, when I thought of the fifty long miles between us, and the outpost.

“I heard that.” Menden said. “About getting power from the outpost. We shouldn’t be stranded out here too much longer, right?”

“Not much longer.” I reassured him, pretending the equipment case wasn’t as heavy as it really was. I glanced around for a good flat spot to set the case, since I knew I was going to have to put the radio together regardless, but I didn’t want to sit right next to the Marines either.

By now, you might have guessed that Spacemen and MAD (Marine Division of Space Corps) did not always get along. The rivalry was even worse between MAD and SID (Space Infantry Division of Space Corps), and I usually tended to stay out those kinds of things, because in the end, we were all on the same side, right? At least, I thought we were.

I’d barely lowered the heavy burden to the ground, when I heard a commotion start up from the Purple Haze.

“Staff Sergeant!” Menden shouted, and I spun around to observe the familiar white glow weave itself around the tilted transport, and peaking much more rapidly than it should have. The lone Pulse got so bright, it caused the panicky Menden to run for cover, and I had to lower my head, wince my eyes and cover my face all at the same time. The damned vessel looked as if it were about to go supernova.

A second later, the flare dwindled away into nothingness, and it had taken the Unilink Transport away with it.

Knotts invaded my peripheral vision, his Spitfire rifle grasped and ready. “What the hell just happened?”

“Those flyboys showed their true colors.” The unruly Davis stepped up next to him. “Yellow.”

“Naw, look.” Some unknown soldier pointed at me. “One of them got left behind.”

“You’re in The Suck now.” Brickwell commented in my direction. “Right along with the rest of us.”

“Spaceman Douglas, ree-port!” Renquist commanded. The stern man had been hurrying toward the spot where the transport had lain, but now diverted his steps toward me.

I was as flabbergasted as the rest of them. “I’m not sure what happened.”

“See, that goofy Spaceman knew we were all goners.” Dempsey whined. “He lit out the first chance he got!”

A lot of big, ugly Marines were coming at me now, and I straightened up to try and defend my superior. “Tennard couldn’t have done that. We were still in the process of replenishing the Pulse Magnifiers. He wouldn’t have Pulsed out before they were ready. Maybe the outpost sent out a single, high powered Pulse to retrieve the transport.”

“Can the outpost even do that, Staff Sergeant?” Dempsey asked.

“Sure they can, you shit-bird.” Renquist snapped. “That’s how the Space Corps gets its vessels back, when they’re out exploring new planets like this one. They just don’t do it very often because it’s such a drag on the Pulse Generators.”



“I heard the Spaceman saying it was too much power.” Mended added. “Why would they need to use an emergency Pulse, when the outpost was sending the transport plenty of energy already?”

Renquist’s sharp features sharpened even more. “Douglas, what are the chances that whoever sent that emergency Pulse locked in to our present location?”

“One hundred percent.” I answered. “As soon as Tennard punched in the request for more power, the outpost computer, or whoever else it was, would have locked onto these coordinates.”

“We have to press on to the nearest defensible position.” Renquist concluded. “We can’t afford to take any chances by staying here, not if the Roaches or anything else might pop up at any second, and with all of us just standing around like a bunch of school girls waiting to be asked to the dance.” He glanced down at the closed case on the ground. “What’s in that container?”

“LRR parts.” I replied. “I was about to put together a radio.”

“You’ll get that chance, but not here.” Renquist said, before he turned to address the rest of the Marines. “Two columns, ten feet apart, weapons at the ready. Davis, Knotts, bring Finn’s body with you. Douglas, fall in to the rear. Rubalcava, give me a heading.”

“Finn’s backpack, sir?” Somebody asked.

“Give it to Douglas.” Renquist said.

“Staff Sergeant,” Rubalcava called out, staring into the small screen of his GPS (Global Positioning System) Mapper. “We’ve got a wide clearing, about half a click to the east. We’ve still got trees all around it, but we should be able to pick up anything moving toward us from this direction.”

“All right, leathernecks, you’ve got the word.” Renquist said. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

A backpack dropped on the ground beside me, and just from the sound of it, I knew it was going to be heavy. I glanced around at the sturdy Marines, and I’d heard that most of them could bench-press around three hundred pounds, and here I was, doing my reps at one third that weight, looking at a seventy pound backpack, and what was probably a sixty pound equipment case sitting a couple of feet away from it. FUBAR (Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition), I thought.

I hoisted the pack on my shoulders, but didn’t even have time to adjust the straps on it, before the small squad was already positioned to march. Clumsily, I crouched and nabbed the equipment case.

As I took my spot at the end of the line, and right across from the two Marines holding a dead body aloft, in my thoughts I started cursing the Marine Division, Space Corps, and all interstellar species currently posing a threat to humanity.

The group started moving, fast, and I was having trouble keeping up even with the corpse. Its head and body lolled about slightly as the two big Marines carried it over the uneven terrain, I morbidly noticed.

Less than ten minutes later, we left the cover of the vegetation and crossed the clearing, only to continue on into the shadow of a new set of trees. These were bushier than the previous ones, and their purple leaves much smaller and more abundant, so much that many of them had dropped to clutter up the ground. The few visible patches of dirt we trudged over were colored in an elephant shade of gray.

My biceps were straining now, from the weight of the stupid case, and I was doing

my best to not give away my discomfort to any of the other soldiers.

“Radio silence, unless it’s an absolute emergency.” Renquist barked. “We don’t want any unfriendlies picking up our chatter. Brickwell, Dobson, you will scout one click to the east of our position and keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary. Davis, Knotts, you will do the same to the west.”

“Staff Sergeant,” Brickwell muttered. “This whole planet is out of the ordinary. The leaves out here are fucking purple.”

A few of the others chuckled.

I thought Renquist would pitch a bitch over being interrupted, but he didn’t. He just went on, as if he’d grown accustomed to such things from his subordinates.

“Menden, find yourself a good tree to climb, and make like a squirrel.” The hard man continued. “Neelson, Strawberry, you two are on fire-watch, on opposite ends of our position. As for the rest of you, Dempsey, Mason, Zachs, will be digging out a resting place for our fallen brother, and Rubalcava, whenever you’re ready, feel free to give me your own odd perspective on this cluster-fuck we’ve gotten ourselves dropped into. Spaceman Douglas, you will be stripping off your uniform, and replacing it with Finn’s.”

I’d intended to set my case on the ground, but my biceps were throbbing enough to get my fingers to rebel. The case slipped out of my hands, and made such a clamor upon bouncing onto the leaves, that you would have thought I was a little kid having a tantrum.

A lot of Marines turned to gaze at me, and these faces included that of Staff Sergeant Renquist, and his cruel, predatory eyes. “Is there a problem here, Douglas?”

“No, sir.” I said, quickly thinking up what one of his people might say. “I was just in a hurry to get going, sir.”

This seemed to satisfy the man, as he turned back toward his squad. “Let’s get moving, jarheads! We’ve got daylight burning out here!”

Wordlessly, I stepped over to where Finn’s body had been lowered. The man’s neck lay twisted to one side, his still open eyes staring in my direction, as if they were accusing me prematurely for the unholy act I was about to commit.

I glanced at some of the other men, but they were too busy removing Insta-Shovels from their backpacks to notice how uneasy I was.

Knowing I couldn’t put the gruesome task off any longer, I removed my backpack, which was really Finn’s backpack, and I knelt down by the dead man. I reached out to touch his chest, as if worried that he might suddenly awaken and start grabbing at my arms to stop me.

Appallingly, his body was still slightly warm to the touch. I didn’t look back at the others, in case Renquist was watching me. I knew the man wouldn’t hesitate to jump down my throat if he saw me having any misgivings about undressing a corpse.

Instead, I took the deepest breaths my lungs would allow, exhaled, and embarked on my assigned duty. I unbuttoned the dead man’s field shirt, and proceeded to yank it off the limp and flopping arms. The belt I undid quickly, after which I began pulling and tugging fruitlessly at the camouflage pants, before finally realizing that the dead soldier’s boots were still keeping them on.

“Any bright ideas, Rubalcava?” Renquist vocalized from a short distance away.

“I can’t figure this place out.” The Marine answered. “I read this planet’s description as soon as I heard we were coming out here. We’re supposed to have grazing animals, birds, and insects all over the place, but where the hell are they? We haven’t seen or

heard anything except the bunch of us, ever since we exited the transport.”

“You know, I think you’re right.” Renquist commented, and this was followed by a quick humff. “There’s never a local zoologist around when you need one.”

By this time, I’d set Finn’s outer clothing and boots into a neat pile a few feet from his body. I began taking off my own clothing, and making a new pile next to the first one.

I also noticed that the Marines had already marked off a suitably sized area to serve as the dead man’s grave, and were efficiently loosening up the dirt.

One of them, a square-jawed man, stepped back to wipe a line of sweat with the back of his hand, and glanced at me standing there in my underwear. He had thick limbs, and a strong, five o’clock shadow, and the lettering on his cammie blouse read: Mason.

It felt a little awkward, as the guy didn’t get back to work, but just stood there, watching me. In my most casual voice, I asked, “Why, exactly, am I doing this?”

Mason smiled. “Take a wild guess, pretty boy.”

Beside Mason, the Marine called Zachs, short for Zachary, snickered.

Not thinking I was going to get any further response, and feeling more visually violated by the second, I grabbed Finn’s pants, and started putting them on.

“Have a good look around, flyboy.” Mason spoke out anyway. “You’ve got your gray tree trunks, and your black grass, and you’ve got purple leaves all over the floor.”

“So?” I asked.

“Now, take a look at your cute little uniform.” Mason continued, and he was still ogling me like a lecher. “You tell me what doesn’t belong.”

I glanced at the pile of clothes I’d just taken off. They were a rich shade of blue. Against the strange background of the forest, I realized, my uniform would stick out like a sore thumb. I looked back at Mason.

“See, you’re not as stupid as you look.” The soldier concluded with an unnerving wink, before returning to his shoveling.

Feeling more than a little disturbed, I got dressed in a hurry. As I finished, I ran my eyes across Finn’s body one last time, when I noticed the thin, metal bead necklace secured around his throat. I crouched down, not really wanting to reach down to pull on the necklace, but I did. I soon had the soldier’s dog tags in my fingers. They were simple, flat metal tags, with the bearer’s last name and Space Corps ID number engraved on them, as well as a tiny holographic image of the man’s face.

Tradition held that if a soldier were to be killed on the field of battle, and if his body could not be brought back to the soldier’s home planet, his dog tags would be removed and eventually returned to his surviving family. The pair of small items meant so much, and at the same time, I thought, they meant so very little.

“What do I do with these?”

Mason was already making a face even before he glanced over at me, but his countenance softened once he saw what I held in my hand. Very seriously, he said, “You can’t lose those tags. No matter what else happens, you can’t lose them.”

I’d already unclipped the dog tags, and I stood up to stick them in a pocket.

“Not there.” Mason shook his head. “They might fall out, and get lost out here forever, in this Godforsaken, shit hole of a planet. You can’t take any chances with our tags. You have to wear them around your neck until you can hand them to somebody who knows what to do with them.”

Quietly, I secured them around my neck.

“And if something happens to me,” Mason continued. “Make sure you get mine, too. Make sure they get back home to my family.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but Renquist’s loud voice interrupted me.

“Spaceman Douglas, I’d like a word with you.” The Staff Sergeant said. He stepped up beside me, and he stared at the dead man so long, I eventually started staring at him myself. “Finn was a good man. Hell of a way to go.” He said. “I would like you to put your uniform on this man’s body, before we place him into the ground. He’d look proper being buried that way.”

I nodded, half-heartedly, but trying not to show it. It had been bad enough to strip the dead man, only for me to turn around and dress him up again. I decided to start with the pants this time.

I’d expected Renquist to stride off right away, but he didn’t. He just loomed beside me like a small tower of pending violence.

“Have you seen a lot of casualties, Spaceman?” He asked.

“I’ve seen quite a few.” I admitted. “I helped transport wounded soldiers during the battle over Betelren Six. We had some men expire during transit.”

“Any combat duty?”

“Negative. I guess I’ve been lucky in that respect. I’ve always been popping up in places well back from the front lines.” I sighed, remembering how happy I’d been earlier. “Today was the first time I’ve ever taken a bird out, and I sure made a big mess out of doing that.”

Renquist considered this. “I don’t see how you can be blamed. Senior Spaceman Tennard was sitting right beside you, and even his many years of experience weren’t enough to keep us out of the frying pan.”

I started yanking my blue pants over the humps of the dead man’s buttocks.

“Douglas, I know you haven’t received the same intensive training that my Marines have,” The man stated a moment later. “And I understand that the Space Corps and the Marine Division don’t always see things eye to eye. What I need to know from you, is that you realize that we’re all in this situation together, to the last person, and that if we want to survive this mission, we’ll have to do it as a team.”

It was an odd thing to say, since we hadn’t encountered anything hostile yet.

“If I give you an order, an order that might even contradict Space Corps training, I want to be sure that you will do your best to follow it, just as any of the other Marines here would. I’m asking for you to be one of us for the time being, and until we get off this stinking planet.”

Don’t ask me how I knew this, but I got the impression that Renquist truly believed he was going to die on Lesenia.

“I will do my best to follow your orders, sir.” I told him.

“Very good.” Renquist said, immediately after doing an informal about-face, and stepping toward one of the taller tree trunks. He stared up into its branches. “Menden, do you have any observations to report?”

“Only scout team one.” The Marine’s voice drifted down, and it was only then that I saw the man. He’d broken off a couple of leafy branches, and set them all around his spot so he’d be harder to pinpoint. “They’re about two hundred yards out and approaching. Other than that, all is clear.”

“Menden, I want you to climb back down.” Renquist ordered. “On the double.”

The Staff Sergeant paced about a bit, as if he were trying to sort things out in his head. The moment Menden reached the ground, he said, "Come with me."

Both men soon stood by my side.

I was on my knees, struggling to get my shirt on Finn's much longer arms.

"Menden, finish dressing Finn." Renquist requested. "Douglas, let's get a look at those radio parts. Rubalcava, I'm going to need you as well."

More than glad to leave the corpse behind, I left Menden to the grisly chore and stepped over to the LRR case. I unsnapped the hard plastic clasps keeping the case shut, and opened both halves flat on the ground. When I saw the parts, and the condition they were in, I bolted to my feet, and felt angry enough to start screaming obscenities into the air. Only the fear that some unknown enemy might hear me kept me from spouting off. Still, I stood there grimacing and gritting at the sky.

Renquist took a lingering glance at me, and casually asked, "What is it, Douglas?"

"The dock personnel back on Earth did not replace the LRR case with a fresh one." I growled. "Half the parts in here have been tagged for repair!"

"Murphy's fucking Law." Rubalcava shook his head. (For those of you that are unaware, Murphy's Law is an adage that signifies: Anything that can go wrong will go wrong, and at the worst possible moment.)

"That's what they should have named this rock." Renquist crouched down, where sure enough, he saw yellow and red tags in abundance. "It's been nothing but Murphy's Law ever since we made that last jump. Sort through this stuff, Douglas, and see if you can find anything we can use."

Still fuming, I dropped to my knees, and started tossing out everything that was internally broken or externally damaged. Long Range Radios were always sent out in fragments, because the pieces were so expensive to make, and it was easier to replace half the radio, than it was to lose the entire thing. The four basic parts were the transmitter, the receiver, the coupler that held both things together, and the battery. When I was done, I didn't have enough parts to make even one good LRR.

"I have three unused batteries," I inventoried the contents remaining in the case. "And two working transmitters. I have no good receivers, and no good couplers. We still can't call anybody to tell them that we're stranded out here! This is fucking bullshit!"

Renquist straightened up. "Neelson?" He called out.

"Yes, sir."

"Any sign of scout team two?"

"That would be a negative."

"We've been sitting in one spot too long." Renquist turned back to face the rest of us. "Mason, Zachs, Shit-For-Brains, hurry up on that gravesite. I want to get moving as soon as possible."

"Staff Sergeant." Rubalcava said. "I have an old model X-13 in my backpack."

"The old field radio?"

The Marine nodded. "It's almost an antique now. I was going to send it to my father, because he has a collection of old war memorabilia. I picked it up at MDRS (Marine Division Recruit Station in San Diego) this morning, along with a couple of other things, but since we didn't have any resting quarters there, I just stuck everything into my backpack. The LRR radios evolved from the X-13s."

"What are you suggesting?"

“The X-13 is a short range radio, but it does have a smart coupler on it.” He looked at me next. “Do you think you can take it apart, put it back together with some of the parts you have there, and call out with it?”

“No.” I said. “The coupler doesn’t have the right shielding to handle the battery from an LRR. I can connect the pieces together, and maybe use the radio for all of ten seconds, before the battery will start frying up the components. Even then, we’ll only have half a working radio, because we won’t have a receiver capable of picking up a long distance signal.”

“But you will be able to transmit for ten or so seconds?” Renquist asked.

“Theoretically, yes.” I admitted. “If the coupler holds together that long.”

“Ten seconds may be all I need.” The Staff Sergeant calculated. “Rubalcava, let’s get that radio out, and find me the location of the nearest outpost to Lesenia.”

“That would be Enoria, I think.” Rubalcava quickly retrieved his backpack. He pulled out a tiny, laminated sheet from an outer pocket and began to study it. “Here it is. Enoria is outpost 03-44. If we can find a spot with decent elevation and no obstructions, I should be able to bounce a signal off one of the satellites orbiting this planet, and send it their way.”

I started sensing hope. “Once we transmit to the satellite, the satellite will inform the outpost computer of our radio signal. The outpost will know exactly where we are, and they’ll be able to come and get us!”

“Right.” Rubalcava nodded.

“No.” Renquist said. “This is exactly what we don’t want. We don’t want the outpost to know our location.”

“Why not?” Rubalcava asked.

“Because I have a hunch.” The Staff Sergeant said, and he put some distance between himself and the rest of the men. “I need a minute to think.”

I noticed that the three men had stopped working on the grave.

“Did he just say he had a hunch?” Dobson asked.

“He sure did.” Rubalcava nodded.

“We’re fucked.” Mason grimaced. “Plain and simple, we’re fucked up the yahoo.”

Even though I wasn’t part of the clique, I still asked, “What does that mean, when Renquist has a hunch?”

“The day that the shit hit the fan on Betelren Six, Renquist had a hunch.” Rubalcava explained. “He just walked into the barracks at MDRS that day, and he looked like he was going to be sick, and he said he had a hunch.”

“Not even three hours later,” Menden added. “The entire compound halts its training and we all get rounded up into the auditorium. The news starts trickling in on the space channel, that the Recruit Station out there is under attack. We all know how that went, right, at the beginning?”

Mass casualties, I vividly recalled. And a brand new enemy from the stars.

“When the Staff Sergeant has a hunch, it’s never a good thing.” Rubalcava said.

Mason repeated, “We’re fucked.”

Renquist rejoined them. “Three words. Our message will consist of three words to Enoria. These three words will be; Planet Lesenia, Non-Retrieval.”

Suddenly, half a dozen faces were gapping in the man’s direction, including mine. Non-Retrieval was the term used by troops when they were completely surrounded by the

enemy, and when there was no possible way out without an unacceptable loss of life. Any unit broadcasting such a message was in essence, asking to be left behind to die.

“Staff Sergeant, will all due respect,” Rubalcava tried to reason with the hard man. “We haven’t seen anything hostile yet. We don’t even know if there are any Roaches on Lesenia. All we know so far, is that we had a rough last jump on the Links, and that could have been caused by a random magnetic field out in space somewhere, like from a comet getting too close to our path. There could be all kinds of explanations for what happened during our trip.”

“I’m not talking about the links, I’m talking about this planet.” Renquist corrected. “Hell, it may not even be the Roaches, but something native here. I don’t know for sure what it is yet. What I do know, is that I am not willing to further expose the Link System to anything that’s out here, not until I’m positive that whatever we’re up against can’t hop onto the Links and make it back to any of the populated worlds.”

“Come on, Staff Sergeant!” Dempsey complained. “Don’t you think that going Non-Retrieval is taking it a little bit too far?”

“If it’ll make you guys feel any better, we’ll broadcast a cancellation code once we find and secure the outpost.” Renquist said. “But until then, my word stands. We’re Non-Retrieval, and that’s final.”

After a few muttered grumbles, the three gravediggers went back to their task.

“Team one is coming in.” Nelson called out.

Renquist hurried over to meet them, followed closely by Rubalcava, and since I thought I could get away with it, by me also.

“Marines, report!” Renquist shouted.

“There’s nothing to report.” Dobson shook his head. “It’s as dead as a cemetery out there.”

“Did you see any movement, whatsoever?” Renquist pressed. “Any birds or animals? Did you hear any kind of wildlife noise at all?”

The two scouts looked at one another. Brickwell shrugged his wide shoulders.

“Nothing at all, sir.” Dobson repeated. “The only thing out there making noise was the two of us.”

“Damn.” Renquist growled, and spun around to face the gravesite. “Hurry up with that hole, jarheads!”

“We’re going Non-Retrieval, guys.” Dempsey informed the recent arrivals. “I just thought you ought to know that.”

Brickwell shook his head. “I keep telling you guys. This rock is The Big Suck. The Suck Of Ages, even.”

Rubalcava stepped back over to where his pack lay, and he scoured through it until he found the X-13 radio. He brought it back and handed it to me. “Hope you can make it work, man. And for the record, I’m not liking this Non-Retrieval deal. Not one bit.”

“Yeah, get started on that radio, Douglas.” Renquist acknowledged. “But do not transmit until I give you the word.”

“Yes, sir.” I replied, heading over to the LRR case. I took out a battery package and a transmitter, and pulled out the quick-soldering supplies, which were hardly used, since every outpost had their own set of tools on hand.

A handful of minutes later, I had the X-13’s coupler attached to the LRR transmitter, and had ready a couple of wire leads that would lead out to the small, screw post battery,

which was the only thing left to connect. I wasn't going to take the battery out of its package, however, until it was absolutely necessary. Just holding that radioactive thing too long, without the proper shielding, would probably make me glow in the dark.

I looked over at Rubalcava. "You guys brought a Med Kit, right?"

"Yeah." The Marine glanced at the wrapped battery in my grip. "Nelson's got one in his backpack. He's our beans, bullets and bandages (supply logistician) guy. He'll get you all fixed up, unless you melt first."

"Thanks. I feel better already."

A small stir arose when the second scout team returned. Both Davis and Knotts looked shaken up.

"What's up, guys?" Strawberry, the first person to spot them, called out. "You both look like you've just seen yourselves in the mirror."

Knotts chuckled at the joke, but Davis sneered, "I will cut you, fool. You think I'm playing with you?"

The Marines not currently digging plots started hovering toward them, and since I was as nosy as they were, I went over too. Heck, in Finn's clothing, I looked like one of them now.

"So tell us what you saw." Rubalcava stated.

"We're not sure." Knotts replied. "We went out a full click, keeping our eyes peeled, but we didn't see much of anything except these gray trees. That is, until we came up to these hills." He paused.

"Continue." Renquist urged.

"We saw a bunch of rolling hills, at about a click and a half, and we figured we might get a better view of the area if we climbed up on top of one. So we went out there to take a look. One of those hills was weird, because it was small, and it looked perfectly round on top, like the top of a roll-on deodorant. And all around this weird hill, there's another kind of tree. These look like giant, gray pineapples, with the same color purple leaves that are on everything else. These pineapples were about five feet high, and they had these long, oval-shaped leaves with one sharp end, and the leaves were all about three or four feet long. We estimated that there were thirty or forty of these pineapple trees surrounding this rounded hill. It just looked bizarre."

"Anyway, we're checking out these trees, when both Davis and I start to get that itch on the back of our necks, as if somebody was watching us. We heard a noise, like a short little rumble, coming from somewhere in the cluster of these pineapples, but we can't see what made the noise from our twenty (location)."

Davis cut in. "We split up. I went one way, and Knotts went the other. The plan was for me to head to three o'clock, and Knotts to nine, and then we were going to converge at dead center. We were hoping we could get the target between us."

"Yeah, only the target must have seen us coming." Knotts said. "By the time we closed in, whatever made that noise was long gone. We never even saw it."

"Did it leave any tracks?" Rubalcava asked.

"Nothing." Davis shook her head.

"Things just keep getting better and better, don't they, Rube?" Renquist snarled. "You said these hills have some elevation?"

"Not much." Knotts guessed. "Maybe sixty, eighty feet or so. They are higher than all these trees, though."



“That sounds like a good spot for our radio message.” Renquist said. “Davis, Knotts, I want you to escort Spaceman Douglas back to that area. He’ll have a better transmitting angle out there.”

Knotts made a face, clearly not eager to go back, but he didn’t speak out.

Davis wasn’t as polite. “Can’t you send someone else this time? We just came from there. Why the hell would we want to go right back?”

“Negative.” Renquist stated. “Rube, I want you to go with them. Maybe you can figure what’s lurking out there.”

“Yessir.”

“Hole’s done, Staff Sergeant.” The lanky Zachs called out. “Four feet deep.”

“Good enough.” Renquist replied. “We’ll be using a flash grenade, with a twenty minute timer, to give us time to get Finn covered up. We’ll be tossing all those broken radio parts in there as well.”

“We don’t need to do that, Staff Sergeant.” Rubalcava said. “We can just bury Finn, and I’ll mark the grave down on the GPS, and we’ll come back and get him later. That way he can get a proper burial.”

“No.” Renquist refused. “I don’t want to take the chance that whatever’s on this planet might find Finn’s body and desecrate it somehow. I don’t want any trace of Finn left, or of those broken radio parts. Mason, Zachs, you have your instructions. Davis, Knotts, we’ll be heading due south at a steady walk. Keep your radio chatter short, just in case there’s anything out there than can scan us.”

Davis and Knotts were both grumbling, as Rubalcava and I hoisted on our packs. The makeshift radio I’d already placed inside the top of my backpack.

“Hey, flyboy, you might need this.” Mason’s gruff voice called out.

I turned in time to see a plasma rifle cutting through the air, and I barely had time to get my hands up to catch it. Once it was in my hands, I tried to glare back at Mason, but the Marine had already turned in another direction.

Zachs tossed over Finn’s helmet as well.

“Now you’ve got a full outfit.” Rubalcava said. “Let’s get rolling.”

Clumsily, I stuck the helmet under an arm, while I slung the rifle on my shoulder. The helmet I set and adjusted on the move.

“Stick your thumb up near your right ear.” Rubalcava informed me. “If you press the button there, you’ll turn on the short-wave wired into your bucket.”

I did, and we both stepped over to join our two escorts. Davis and Knotts were both looking at me as if I were their stepchild.

“Shit.” Davis mumbled. “We’re babysitters now.”

The two hardy Marines started across the clearing.

“Don’t worry about that.” Rubalcava said, trailing along beside me as he adjusted his own helmet. “New guys are always shunned a little bit, until they prove themselves in a skirmish or two. Same thing happened to Neelson, when he first joined the platoon a few weeks back.”

If I was supposed to feel some type of relief by that, it didn’t happen.

“The funny thing about Neelson, though,” Rubalcava continued. “He’s been around for a minute or two, but he hasn’t been able to click with any of us yet.”

We trudged along silently for a few minutes, before I worked up the nerve to ask a question that had been bugging me ever since the squad had entered the Purple Haze

earlier. “How do you guys do it?”

“Sideways, mostly.” Rubalcava joked. “Just kidding. How do we do what?”

“You know, start killing.” Awkwardly, I tried to explain. “I’ve never killed anything in my life.”

Rubalcava stared into my face for a long moment. “That, my friend, is a good thing. Most of us Marines don’t see it so much as killing, but as reducing the enemy’s ranks. The less of the enemy there is to contend with, the better the chances are of us making it home. Of course, you’ve got your Hard Chargers like Davis and Knotts, who happen to thrive on death and destruction. Man, just wait until you see those two in action. At all times, they know exactly where they are, and what they’ve...”

“But how do you know?” I cut in. “How do you find out if you’re even capable of killing another sentient being?”

“Sometimes you don’t know, at least not at first.” Rubalcava answered. “Sometimes it’s the situation that will trigger the response. I wouldn’t spend too much time worrying about it. If we end up getting in a firefight on this planet, you’ll have zero time to analyze shit. Your instincts kind of take over, and either you do it, or you don’t. In the Marines, we call it being Born Again Hard.”

“Well, what if...” I’ll admit it, I was uneasy here. “What if the time comes, and I can’t do it? What if I wimp out?”

“Like I said, don’t sweat it.” The man replied. “When it happens, it happens, but until it does, you’ll be on one side of the white line. If you have what it takes, then you get to cross that line and become like one of us, the Space Marines. And if you don’t, you shouldn’t take it so hard, because not everyone is cut out for this kind of job. That’s why the Marines are a tiny, little part of Space Corps. And that’s why we have SID (Space Infantry Division) mopping up after us, and you bus drivers escorting us around.” He leaned over to punch me on the shoulder, and we both shared a quick laugh. “Just try not to get anybody killed while you figure things out.”

I lost track of time, as we kept bullshitting with each other, and it came as a mild surprise when we reached the end of the normal-looking trees. There was a space of about thirty yards or so, with nothing but black grass, and then the gentle slopes of the rolling hills started up.

Davis and Knotts were up further ahead, and they’d angled their path sharply in one direction. Just past them, I could see the unnatural shape of one hill, which was about thirty feet high, cylindrical with a dome top, and covered with the same grass as the rest of the landscape. Compared with everything else around, the hill definitely looked artificial.

And like a weird swirl, a flock of bizarre pineapple trees could be seen, with the widest part being approached by the two Marines ahead of us, and the thinnest grouping up near where the strange hill stood. They were just as the two scouts had described: scaled like a pineapple, but without the sharp edges. Their color was a strong gray, slightly darker on the edges of the scales, and they stood at a range of between five and five and a half feet high. A handful of leaves stood straight up at their crown, almost doubling the size of the trees with their heights of between three or four feet, and these leaves were in a shade of purple comparable to that of the other vegetation we’d seen.

“What the heck are these things?” Rubalcava jogged over, and I followed suit. He halted at the furthest edge of the trees, as seen from the hill, and began examining their

leaves more closely. “Lanceolate.”

“What’s that?”

“A type of leaf.” The Marine explained, stepping around the tree without touching it. “These leaves are about half as wide as they are long, with no indentations.” He glanced at the rest of the tree. “The distance around the trunk is about eight feet.”

I watched as the man reached out and put his palm on the tree, probably to get a feel for its texture. As if he’d been bitten, Rubalcava jerked his hand back.

“Holy shit!” He exclaimed. He bounced up and down on his toes, as if he was daring himself, and he put his hand on the scaly bark once more. Again, he jerked his hand away. “Hey, Douglas, come and touch this thing!”

I stepped over, yes, a little hesitant, but since Rubalcava had done it twice already, I reached out and put my own palm on the bark. For the first moment, it seemed as if nothing was happening, but then I felt as if the tree was pulsing next to my flesh. Another moment, and a strange, prickly sensation began to spread all over my palm and fingers, and this unnerved me so much that I yanked my hand back. The feeling faded away a few seconds later.

“What do you make of that?” Rubalcava asked, and he repeated the experiment using his other hand.

“I’ve never felt anything like that.” I shrugged. “I think the closest I came to it, was back when I was a kid. I used to put nine volt batteries on my tongue. This felt a little like that.”

“You used to do that, too?” Rubalcava laughed. “The thing is, that tingly sensation doesn’t leave right away. It stays in your skin, like some kind of numbing agent.” He set his hand on the tree again, and held it there for what seemed some thirty seconds. Once he’d removed his hand, he stared at it, as if he were mentally timing the creepiness. “My whole hand is numb!”

“You’d better be careful with that.” I warned.

Rubalcava glanced back at the tree. “Yeah, you’re right. This thing could be Lesenia’s version of Poison Ivy or something. I’d like to dig one of these babies out and take it to a botanist back on Earth, if I could. Too bad I don’t have the time, or a big enough pocket to put this thing in. Let’s catch up with the others.”

We both jogged past the seemingly endless row of pineapples, and joined up with both Davis and Knotts, whose pace had slowed considerably.

“Why do we always get the big green weenie (shit work)?” Knotts could be heard complaining.

“Because we’re the best at what we do.” Davis replied. “We earned the big green weenie.”

“All right, you two.” Rubalcava said, loud enough to halt their conversation. “Why don’t you ‘fess up to what really happened out here?”

Davis grimaced.

“What are you talking about?” Knotts asked.

“You think you fooled everybody, but you ain’t fooling anyone.” Rubalcava shook his head, and spit. “The old man saw right through your shit story, but he didn’t want to make it a big issue in front of the others. Why do you think he asked me to tag along with you guys? So, what’s up? What did you guys see out here that got you all spooked?”

Knotts relented. “You’ll find out in a few minutes.”

“Why don’t you just tell me?”

“Fool, he said you’d find out, okay?” Davis lashed at him. “Some things, you just have to see for yourself.”

Rubalcava glanced back at me, and shrugged his shoulders.

The two scouts stepped further ahead, continuing along the edge of the trees and getting closer to the rounded hill. Here the pineapple trees were spaced at their thickest, even though their overall formation was at their thinnest. They were tightly packed, only about two or three feet apart from one another.

“Keep your weapon ready.” Knotts stated, as he halted again. “And give it another minute or two.”

Rubalcava pulled his rifle off his shoulder. “Stop screwing around, and tell me what I’m supposed to be watching out for.”

Knotts glanced over at Davis.

“Well?” Rubalcava asked.

“Just tell this asshole what happened.” Davis made that face again.

“From the beginning,” Rubalcava said. “And no bullshit this time.”

“All right.” Knotts said, and his cheeks blushed a little. “We came out here, just like we said we did. And we saw how secluded it was, and how we didn’t have anybody around, so, we kind of started messing around. You’d better not tell anybody from the platoon about that, I swear.”

“The whole freaking platoon already knows the two of you are messing around.” Rubalcava shook his head. “Will you tell me something from today’s headlines?”

Knotts looked worried. “The whole platoon? How could they know?”

“Well, she don’t call you Numb-Nuts for nothing, to start off with.” Rubalcava replied. “Anyway, get back to the story, will you?”

Knotts gaped back in shock. It was only later that I found out he had a fiancée back on Earth.

“So, we were up here doin’ the nasty,” Davis admitted, taking up the tale. “And like we said earlier, we got the feeling we were being watched.” She pointed her weapon at the pineapples. “By these things. We didn’t know it was them at first, we thought it was something hiding in between them, and we split up, just like we said we did. Nuts when one way, and I went the other. Dead center ended up being on the opposite of this column of trees, and we both had to cross through the pineapples to get there. Their leaves weren’t standing up then, like they are now. They were all drooped down at the sides, and we ended up brushing and rubbing against a whole bunch of them. When we got to the other side, we didn’t see or hear anything, but we were feeling funny after we’d been in contact with all those leaves.”

“Numb?” Rubalcava asked.

“Yeah, at first.” Knotts nodded.

“I started seeing weird shit in my head.” Davis revealed. “Like colors and patterns, and shit.”

“Me too.” Knotts concurred. “I’ve never dropped acid in my life, but I bet I was seeing the same kinds of hallucinations.”

“But you want to hear the freakiest part?” Davis pointed her weapon at the trees again. “These plants started coming closer to us. They were moving.”

Rube glanced over at the plants, and then at me, and it was clear that he thought the

two Marines were pulling his leg. “These trees were moving? You know they don’t have little legs on them, right?”

“Why in the fuck do you think we didn’t tell Renquist?” Davis snapped. “So the whole bunch of you mother-fuckers would be laughing at us like we’re crazy?”

“The plants.” I suggested to Rubalcava. “If they can make us numb, maybe they can make us see things, too.”

“It was weird,” Knotts said. “Because I swear these plants were looking at us, and making noises at us, and even moving at us. We both ran up to the top of that round hill, and we stayed up there, until the feeling went away. When we felt normal again, we went all the way around the column, and that’s why it took us so long to get back.”

“I thought they were trying to surround us.” Davis said. “I mean, I was ready to start blasting them.”

“We’re not crazy.” Knotts tried to sound convincing. “We really did think those things were happening, to the both of us, until our heads finally cleared up. But you can see why we didn’t want to tell Renk about it, right?”

“He probably would have said you two had made the story up, as an excuse for having messed around.” Rubalcava reasoned.

“We thought the same thing.” Davis agreed, and for a brief moment, her harsh features actually softened up. “And then everybody would have known about us, but I guess they already know, according to you.”

“Well, next time, you shouldn’t start calling him Numb-Nuts in front of everybody.” Rube said, and he reached into a thigh pocket to pull out a cellular phone. It was a useless item, I thought, as Lesenia was so far from any planets with compatible satellites, but Rube wasn’t using it to attempt to make a call. Instead, he started taking a few shots of the giant pineapples. “We really should take one of these trees back for study. They have numbing properties, and possibly, hallucinogenic properties, too. Who knows what else they might have.” He paused. “You know, I don’t remember seeing any vegetation like this in any of the outpost’s info files. I’m pretty sure I would have remembered a giant pineapple.”

“Well, we came out here to send a radio message, so let’s do that.” Knotts said. “Then we can get the hell out of here, before any other weird shit happens.”

“Who’re you trying to reach, anyway?” Davis asked. “The outpost?”

“No.” Rube said, curtly. He glanced at me. “Why don’t you pull the radio out, while I pull out the coordinates?”

Simultaneously, we both shrugged off our backpacks.

“If you’re not calling the outpost direct, then you’re bouncing a signal off the satellite.” Davis guessed. “So you’re calling somebody to come pick us up, right?”

“Nope.” Rube said, and even I could see that he was being evasive. He handed me the little strip of laminated paper.

“Then, who the fuck you calling?” Davis sounded irritated now.

“The word from Renquist,” Rube explained. “Is that since we’ve only got a half-assed radio anyway, we should send a quick message. The message is; Planet Lesenia, Non-Retrieval.”

Both Davis and Knotts gaped back.

“Say again?” Knotts recovered first.

“Non-Retrieval.” Rube repeated.

“Renquist has gone motarded (motivated to the point of being retarded).” Davis growled. “The man is insane.”

“He was having one of his hunches.” Rube explained.

Knotts brought his palm up to his forehead, in both worry and resignation. “We’re going to die out here, aren’t we? Dempsey’s been acting squirrely for the last two days, and now the old man, too?”

“You do realize we’re cutting our own necks, by doing this?” Davis asked.

“Hey, Renk even gave the order to cremate Finn’s body.” Rube defended his superior. “So he really thinks some serious shit is about to go down. Now you tell me, when have any of his hunches turned out to be wrong?”

“I don’t like it.” Knotts shook his head.

“You think I do?” Rube retorted. “I don’t like being hung out to dry either, but if I have to sacrifice myself in order to keep the Roaches, or anything else, off the Links, then guess what? I’m going to do it. Better me than a whole outpost, right? Or how about a colony that doesn’t have that many defenses to begin with? You heard about Valhalla! You want another butt-load of Roaches just popping up in a place like that?”

“Get it over with.” Davis snapped. “Just get it done so we can get the hell out of here, before anything else comes along that’s weirder than these pineapples.”

Rube turned to me.

I had the radio, the coordinates, and the unwrapped battery in my hand. “Is right here good?”

I hadn’t really expected an answer, and I was surprised when both Davis and Knotts pointed at a fairly flat spot some twenty feet away. I didn’t know if they were kidding or not, until Rube motioned me to go along. He soon stopped. “Here’s good. Point the radio up in that direction of the sky. That’s near where the satellite should be right now.”

I glanced back at the two Marines, noting that they both had dropped to one knee, and were aiming their weapons at us as if they were about to use us for target practice. I gulped.

Rube and I both crouched down in the appointed spot, and I set the components on the black grass. I took the battery out of its package first, and tossed the plastic wrapping aside. Right after, I wrapped the ends of wire leading out from the coupler to the battery’s screw posts. The last thing left to do was to switch the battery on, then the radio, and lastly, to start punching in coordinates.

“Okay, we’re going to have to do this quickly.” I said, deciding to hand him the coordinates after all. “After I switch this thing on, I have to enter my Space Corps ID code. Once the code is confirmed by the satellite, I’m going to say ‘Go.’ Then you can start reading off the coordinates to me. You got me?”

“I got you.” Rube nodded.

“Here goes.” I said, clicking the battery on. A red LED light went on a moment later, and once I saw this, I switched on the coupler. I punched in my code, but in my haste, I screwed it up. I tried again a second time, slower, and succeeded.

The radio was already starting to get hot in my hand, when a confirmation from the satellite caused it to chirp. “Okay, go.”

Rubalcava started reading off the coordinates that would bounce the message to Enoria, slow enough that I entered them in correctly on one try. My hand felt as if I were holding it above a flaming burner. I finished the sequence, and while I waited for another

chirp, I snatched up the battery wrapping and placed it between my palm and the hot battery.

“Shit, this is hot!” I complained, right before the second chirp came. I was ready to broadcast now. “Enoria, Command Post Zero-Three-Four-Four, this is Harold Douglas, Spaceman on the Unilink Transport One-Twenty-Six, on planet Lesenia. We are code Non-Retrieval. Repeat, Outpost Zero-Four-Nine-One is Non-Retrieval.” I had to remove my fingertip from the coupler’s button, for a second, and pushed down with thumb instead. “I repeat, planet Lesenia is Non-Retrieval. Zero-Four-Nine-One is Non-Retrieval.”

Unable to take any more heat, I dropped the radio down into the grass, where it soon started smoking. I reached down to try to disconnect the transmitter, in the hopes of saving it.

“Leave it!” Rube ordered. “The unit’s fried, anyway.”

Needing no further motivation, I dragged myself several feet away. In awe, I watched as the radio burst into flames. In a couple of seconds, the fire had consumed everything.

“The battery is going to explode!” I warned Rube, while I quickly got to my feet. I was about to break into a run, back to where my rifle and backpack lay. “As soon as the fire melts away the outer core, it’s going to pop!”

Rube backed up a couple of steps, but he seemed mesmerized by the small blaze with the fascination of a pyromaniac.

“I’m serious, man.” I shouted, reaching out to yank at the man’s arm. “When that thing goes off, trust me when I say you don’t want to be anywhere near it!” My fingers slipped off his cammie blouse, and I was hurrying away fast.

“Rube, let’s go!” Knotts cried out.

Finally, Rubalcava got moving. He’d only gotten a few yards distance, though, when a strong flash of white light swept past me. Immediately, I recognized the glow of a Pulse, and I turned to see the Purple Haze materializing at a spot about ten feet away from where we’d transmitted the message.

### 3

My next thought was of Senior Spaceman Tennard, opening the hatch and stepping out to rescue us. Strangely, I noticed that the hatch was already open, and directly in my line of vision, I saw Rubalcava drop down onto one knee, and rapidly swing his weapon toward the small vessel.

That’s when I heard the clicking. The horrible clicking sounds that Roaches make, noises that I’d heard in recordings, but never before in person. The air was filled with the clicking sounds; they were like frantic snaps that grated into my ears with the same resonance as the sound of nails on a chalkboard.

Through the open hatch, I could see a dark, hunched form emerging. It didn’t get very far, however, as a blast of hot plasma from Rube’s rifle tore huge chunks from the creature’s midsection, and sprayed them onto the vessel’s outer wall. Black blood poured from the Roach’s gaping wound, and the animal squirmed as it fell to the ground.

That was the moment that the burning battery decided to make itself known. With its

own loud clamor, it exploded, sending corrosive bits flying all over the place. The kneeling Rubalcava was pummeled back by the acid-laden shrapnel, and as it burned into his clothing and flesh, it wrenched him into a screaming frenzy.

More loud clicks issued from the transport, and two rolled up Roaches popped out through the hatch. They leapt out a good fifteen feet, in opposing sides, and at the moment they hit the ground they unrolled themselves and stood straight up. In a growing fear and revulsion, I watched as the Roaches lifted their two pairs of thin and thorny arms up before their faces, like some kind of bizarre Egyptian dance, and into the fire position.

The projectiles they produced were invisible to the human eye, but I could see the rippling trail of steamed air that signaled they had fired upon us. Two large clumps of black grass exploded from the area where the battery had lain.

One of the dark creatures spotted me, and angled its body to fire another heat blast. Filled with panic, I ran back toward the trees, fumbling with both my backpack, and the rifle strap that I had unwittingly twisted around my forearm. In desperation, I yanked at the weapon, only to feel it slip between my fingers and land on the ground next to me.

Another gouge of dirt burst up behind me, too close, and between my forward momentum, and my awkward flailing to recover my weapon, my foot slipped and I tripped down onto my face. As I landed in a clumsy sprawl onto the grass, I felt a third wave, as if from a flamethrower, pass only a few inches over my body.

The pineapple standing only a few feet ahead of me took the full brunt of the blow. The tree shuddered visibly, and exploded, drenching me in moist bits and sticky goo, and I rolled forward and to one side, reflexively, and crawled behind the next tree over.

The sap from the pineapple started seeping into my clothing, and once it touched my skin, I began to feel that same creepy, crawly sensation I'd felt in my hand before. I tried to slap away the biggest bits, but the sap was all over me.

The soft whine of the plasma rifles prompted me to peer around the wide tree. Davis and Knotts had both taken cover behind the pineapples as well, and they'd already killed one of the Roaches. The second proved to be more elusive, as it rolled itself up again just before plasma slammed the creature to one side. This was the Roach that had taken three shots at me already, I realized, and I watched as it hopped up into the air, and landed at a place half the distance from where it had been, and my spot behind the tree.

It was after me, I thought, as the Roach unrolled and stood on its two stumpy legs, and my rifle lay just a few feet to one side of the monster, instead of being in my grip like it should have been. The Roach brought its four arms up and fired its indistinct projectile in my direction.

I shrank back behind the shrub, praying the missile wouldn't be strong enough to penetrate the small tree's thick trunk. Bracing myself for the impact by hunching forward and ducking my head toward my knees, I felt the force of the blast rip into the tree a moment later. A spear of electricity shot into my spine, where my back and the tree were still in contact, and it was strong enough to jerk an agonized scream from my body. I shook from the sharp and burning jolt, right before the front of the tree exploded.

I suddenly felt my body become drained and numb. My energy gone, I barely managed to make a half-turn back toward the transport, to see what was going on, before I crumpled to the ground uselessly. I could no longer move, believe me I tried, and from my new spot, I could see a blast of plasma rip into the second Roach, and send both it, and pieces of it, tumbling out of sight.



Incredibly, I next saw Rubalcava stagger up to his feet, and limp toward the Purple Haze, all the while firing into the open hatch. Davis and Knotts were screaming at him to get out of the way, when Davis suddenly flashed by and started firing on the rear of the transport, where the Pulse Magnifiers were mounted. She was trying to blow the ship up, I realized, and destroy whatever number of Roaches were still trapped inside by Rube's continuous volley. There was a one hundred percent chance that by blowing up the Magnifiers, we'd be toast as well, but since I could barely breathe, much less get my mouth to work and cry out to her, all I could do was lie there and watch.

The reactors sizzled wildly from the plasma blasts, and Davis was already moving back and away from the Magnifiers, when I saw Rube fall onto the ground so weakly that I thought he must have passed out, or worse.

A flash of blinding white light surrounded the damaged transport, and it took all I had left to flutter my eyelids partly closed. The Pulse flared up, and a split second later, it faded away. The small transport was gone with it.

Knotts rushed over to Rube's side, but my own line of sight was taken up by the towering figure of Davis, who marched up to me with more hate than I'd ever seen her display before, and that was really saying something. Tersely, she lashed out a long and lean arm, and snatched me up by the collar. The contact between her knuckles and my upper chest gave us both a jolt of static electricity, strong enough for her to snap her hand away.

Her hand dove at me again, and this time she clutched me hard by a backpack strap, and started dragging me out from behind the destroyed pineapple, and toward where Knotts was tending to Rubalcava. "You dumb shit-brick!" She scolded. "You're so scared you can't even move, can you? All you can do is drop your gun, and go run and hide somewhere like a chicken-shit!"

"Rube's alive." Knotts' voice called out. "He's in deep shock, though. Lots of small abrasions from the battery shrapnel, and severe acid contamination. I'll try to pull out the biggest pieces of shrapnel with my tweezers, and patch him up as best I can, but we have to get him back to Nelson right away. He'll be needing that poison treatment, as in right now."

"Flyboy's okay." Davis sarcastically commented. "He just go a little apple sauce on him, is all. But you know what, he can't even move 'cause he's so scared. How about we just leave his worthless carcass out here for whatever kind of buzzards this planet has, since all he did was turn tail and not even fire off a single shot?"

Knotts had some kind of response, but I didn't catch it, as a wrenching wave of nausea gripped my body. The use of my faculties returned, and just in time, as I was barely able to yank Davis' hand away and turn, when the contents of my stomach spewed out in a stinky waterfall. I paused, dry heaving a bit, until a second wave lurched out whatever my stomach still had left.

"Figures." Davis said.

One my revulsion subsided, I wiped the bile from my lips and gave her the most resentful countenance I could muster.

Davis actually chuckled, before she started for Knotts and Rube. She spotted my weapon in the black grass. "Don't forget your rifle this time, you dumb-ass, chicken-shit, mother-fucker."

I sat, with my arms draped over my raised knees, and my head hung low, as seven

kinds of shame and humiliation draped themselves over my shoulders. I didn't stay there very long, though, as the smell from my vomit wafted up into my nose. Sheepishly, I got up and went over to pick up the weapon.

I didn't want to step any closer to the Marines, but I didn't know where else to go, either, until I saw the hideous corpse of the Roach a few yards away. Curiosity got the better of me, because my steps were soon headed in the creature's direction. The Roach smelled even worse than my vomit, but in order to get a good look at it, I braved past the odor.

The Roach was about five feet high, with a pronounced hump just behind the helmet-shaped head. Its skin was a sinister shade of black, as dark as death, and it had a slight, polished sheen to it. On top of the head, two thick, six-inch protrusions, the antenna, sprouted out.

Its eyes were large bulbs, the size of tennis balls, and crisscrossed with thousands of little platelets like a fly's. Its mouth was almost perfectly round, and didn't open up like a human being's, in the form of a slit. Instead, it opened up in widening circle, and within this round cavern I could see one continuous row of tiny, triangular, and from all accounts, razor-sharp teeth inside. I could understand why the creatures were nicknamed Roaches, because that's what they looked like from a distance. Up close, however, it was clear that they were something else.

Gazing further down on the creature's body, I counted four long, double-jointed arms, the first pair high on the shoulders, the second about eight inches below that. A third pair of appendages, thicker and shorter than the others, served as legs for when the animal went bipedal. There were no fingers or toes visible, just a circular paw that ended in a rubbery-looking pad, with numerous wrinkles that were said to aid the creature's grip.

Looking back up at the four arms, I had to look hard to find the Roach's minimal armor. They were mere sleeves, said to be nearly indistinguishable from the rest of the limb, and the length of the last section of the arm up to an inch or two from the paw. These sleeves were some sort of bio-weaponry that was said to amplify the Roach's natural offensive capability, but since this was my first actual Roach encounter, I just couldn't figure out where they were.

I thought of asking one of the Marines to point the sleeves out to me, but I was too squeamish after my actions earlier. I did notice that Knotts had cut the arm off of Rube's cammie blouse with his field knife, and was now hurriedly applying some sort of pain relieving cream to the worst of the wounds. Rube was moaning at the vigorous movement.

"I'm moving fast, so we can get moving fast." Knotts tried to console the injured soldier. "I don't want to be hanging around when the Roaches come back for round two."

"They won't be coming back in the Purple Haze." I mentioned, still standing by the dead Roach. "The Pulse Magnifiers were too badly damaged by the weapon fire."

"Then how did the transport Pulse away from here?" The Marine asked.

"The outpost must have Pulsed it back." I guessed. "From the way those Magnifiers were sizzling when the transport left, I thought they were about to blow up. It's a good thing the vessel Pulsed out when it did, or we might not be standing here now talking about it."

"So there is no way that transport can come back?"

“Not unless the Roaches can remove the damaged reactors, and replace them with good ones.” I replied. “The outpost can send out an Emergency Pulse to recover a vessel, but it can’t Pulse one out the same way. A transport has to Pulse itself out.”

After noticing the attention I was giving the dead Roach, Davis trudged back in my direction. “You take a good look at that thing, flyboy.” She said, using her boot to tip the nasty beast onto its side. “You see that bony ridge going down this Roach’s back? That’s its spine. The entire carapace is fifteen to twenty times thicker than human bone. Regular rounds can’t penetrate that, and plasma can’t penetrate that. If the Roaches decide to ball themselves up and roll all over the place, there isn’t a damned thing our weapons can do to them. All we can do is to keep firing at them and deflect them aside, but these things have such a keen balance, that they can recover and roll themselves out wherever they want to. We have to wait for them to come to a stop and stand up, before we even have a shot at them. And the only time they stand up, is right before they shoot compressed heat at us.” The tough female allowed the Roach to slip onto its back again. “When you aim, you have to aim for their upper bodies, or their heads. Why don’t you try it?”

I didn’t quite grasp what she was getting at, so Davis made the point crystal clear.

“Go ahead, and shoot the fucking thing!” She admonished. “Don’t stand there and think about it, just squeeze the trigger. Take a good look at those teeth! A real good look! If the Roaches are running on the ground, they’re much faster than we are. We’d be doing nothing but knocking them aside by a few feet with our weapons, and in the meantime, we’ll have a couple of dozen of them moving toward us at once. Every shot that we take to push one back means the others will be three or four feet closer to our position. And if they get close enough to knock us down, guess what part of us they attack first, with those razor-sharp teeth? They will go after our faces first, or our throats, and they will kill us without giving it a second thought!

“So pretend this alien piece of crap is taking a noon-time siesta, take that freaking rifle that’s in your hands, and shoot this fucking Roach before it wakes up and starts ripping your face off!”

I did hold the weapon out, but it was more due to my fear of Davis’ hostility than anything else. I pointed it shakily towards the corpse, the tip of the rifle only about six inches from the Roach’s horrible mouth. While looking at its grotesque countenance, I tried to pull the trigger back, I tried to lash out in the same way that the Roach would have undoubtedly done to me. Believe me, I tried, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. With the whimper of a defeated man, I slowly withdrew the rifle.

“That’s the difference between you and me.” Davis berated, squeezing the trigger on her own weapon. The suddenness of the action startled me, as much as the sharp whine of the rifle, and the flying bits of alien flesh and blood that flew up into my face. “I can, and you can’t.”

“We’d better get moving.” Knotts announced, taking to his feet, and hoisting his pack on. “They may not be able to use that specific transport to come after us, but the outpost still has three other transports on this planet. If the Roaches can come out to these coordinates with one, I’m sure they can come out here with another.” He pulled a groaning Rube up on his feet, holding the weak man steady. “This might hurt a little.” Knotts said, right before he stooped, and pulled Rube onto his shoulder.

Rubalcava yelped and clamored for a few seconds, until Knotts had him more or less settled in place. The wounded man’s noise reduced to occasional whimpers. “Davis, take

point through the trees. If another transport of Roaches does pop up, we can use them for cover. The pineapples might numb the crap out of Rube, but considering his sorry state, that's probably a good thing."

Davis gave me one last glower, before she did a casual about face, and jogged toward the long line of trees. "Meet you on the other side!"

The second she moved through their folds, a large section of the pineapples around her dropped their leaves to their sides.

"What the fuck?" Davis crouched down as close to the ground as she could, but she still had several leaves draped around her head and shoulders.

The unexpected action left Knotts unnerved as well. "We have to cross through them. If we stay on this side, and a transport appears, there's no cover until we're back in the forest." He glanced down the long procession of trees, and saw that the rest of the trees were also lowering their leaves. "It's got to be some kind of natural thing, because they're all doing it. Let's just get through them."

Davis nodded, and scampered out of sight.

"All right, Rube," Knotts muttered. "Here we go." The tall Marine started through the foliage, and as I watched, I could almost swear that some of the purple leaves they were brushing against were clinging to Rubalcava's limp form.

I hung back a little, not wanting to stand near the smelly Roach carcasses, but after I'd shown myself to be such a coward, I didn't want to walk too close to the Marines either. I should have been stronger, braver, anything better than the miserable, pathetic excuse for a soldier that I had been. I was so pathetic, I couldn't even bring myself to shoot a Roach. The most vicious and hated enemy the human race had ever encountered had been standing right in front of me, and the only thing I'd done was to drop my weapon and start running for my life. I couldn't even make myself shoot a dead Roach, I lamented.

I wondered if I could bring myself to shoot anything, ever. I had the plasma rifle in my grip, and I brought it up to the firing position. I pointed it at the nearest tree, trying to convince myself that I could pull the rifle's trigger the next time I was involved in a harrowing situation.

The tree was defenseless, though. It wasn't any kind of threat, and if I shot it, its only real sin was that it had grown up right in that specific spot. In this moment of utter and unforgivable weakness, I couldn't even bring myself to shoot a fucking plant.

A slight creaking noise interrupted my thoughts. I glanced around, trying to find its source, but nothing seemed out of place. I held still, concentrating on finding the sound again. After a few moments, I did hear it. It was a low rumbling coming from the ground beneath me. It was also indefinite, as if it was coming from several directions at once.

As I took in the landscape again, I felt that my perception was becoming unclear, because it looked to me as if some objects were now blending together, when they hadn't been before, or as if things had moved, when they had no right to move.

The rumbling subsided, and I gasped incredulously at the sight that lay before me. The gray pineapples had clustered to either side, and in their midst, they'd left a path some three feet wide for me to step through.

The Marines were well on their way by now, so I couldn't turn to them for answers.

A moment later, I began to feel a chill, a fear, start moving through my body. It was telling me to run, to flee from those strange pineapple shaped trees, because there was

something unexplainably wrong with them.

I yielded to this growing dread, bolting like a rabbit with a hound at its tail, in the only direction that I was sure to find safety. Rushing through the trees, I felt the hanging leaves slapping at my face and arms, stinging me with their bizarre numbness, and all the while I imagined them closing their ranks around me. I could see them pressing tight against my body, and crushing me between their gray trunks, until I was left with only my head and one arm free as I struggled to escape their grasp.

These frightening thoughts propelled me through the foliage even faster, and I didn't slow my speed once I was through. I saw the Marines in the distance, entering the opposite end of the large swirl of pineapples, and I kept running. The rows of pineapples on this side were much wider, but they were also spread further apart, and I was soon through these as well. I didn't stop running until I was about ten feet behind the rest of the party.

Davis glanced back at me, and spit. "Well, look who's here, and showing that marathon instinct once again."

Huffing from the exertion, I tried to convey what I'd just seen. "The trees..." I started, out of breath. "They've alive!"

"Of course, they're alive, you dumb fool." Davis scolded me. "How else do you think they grow like that?"

"Not what I mean." I panted.

"Just shut your trap and keep your rifle ready." Davis growled.

"Uunn." Rubalcava moaned. "Did we get them Roaches?"

"But the trees..." I tried again.

"Spaceman, do us all a favor and be quiet." Knotts said. "Hey Rube, yeah man, we got them."

"Damn straight." Davis said. "Three on the outside, and at least a couple more on the inside, that didn't even make it past the hatch. I almost blew up the whole damn ship."

"That's no good." Rube said.

"Why not?"

"Because I was trying to get to the cargo holds." Rube explained. "I was trying to find out if maybe there were any more LRR radio parts in there, so we could warn Space Corps that the Roaches <cough> were on Lesenia now. Uunn."

"Don't talk so much." Knotts stated. "Save your energy until we catch up with the others. I'm sure Nelson has some kind of anti-battery acid medicine in his backpack."

"Oh, my chest hurts." Rube complained. "It feels like I got shot in the chest, and I'm tingling all over. Hey, Jesus! I can't feel my arm! Where's my arm?" The Marine struggled to turn his head, rubbing his face roughly against Knott's broad back. "Thank heaven, it's still there. How come I can't feel my entire arm? How much pain killer did you guys shoot me with?"

"I hope you don't think we're engaged or anything." Knotts joked. "But I rubbed Congeal cream on your arm, and on a part of your upper leg, and on your chest. I gave you two shots of painkiller, and on top of that, we went through the column of pineapples, twice."

"That explains some of it, but I'm numb all over, man. Even my neck is numb."

"Davis, listen," I tried to share my experience again. "Back there, the trees..."

“Can it, flyboy.” Davis cut me off. “Nobody wants to hear it.”

I clammed up, because if I said anything further, Davis would probably start beating me up. We were now back among the ‘regular’ trees, I noticed.

Rube sounded as if he was whimpering. “Level with me, guys. Am I going to make it, or am I a goner?”

“You idiot,” Knotts kept his steady pace up. “Of course you’re going to make it.”

Rube giggled. “I know, I know. I was just screwing with you guys. I’ve always wanted to ask somebody that, except it was never the right moment, you know?”

“Oh, you’ll be all right.” Davis commented. “Except for your leg.”

“What’s wrong with my leg?” Rube was suddenly wary. “You guys know I can’t feel my legs. I can’t even tell if they’re there or not. Douglas, tell me if I still have my legs, because I can’t trust either one of these bastards.”

Davis and Knotts both chuckled.

“Your legs are still there.” Knotts admitted. “It’s your brain that got sucked out, you dummy.”

“I really hope you guys are just pulling my nuts.” Rube grinned. “You had me going there for a minute.” He started coughing again. “Ooh! My chest hurts.”

“Stop talking, and stop squirming around so much.” Knotts told him. “You took some good shrapnel bits to the right side of your body, for being dumb enough to stand next to an LRR battery while it exploded. You’re lucky you didn’t get a bunch of acid on your face.”

“It could have ruined my good looks.”

“Trust me, you never had them.” Davis countered.

“You’ve got a lot of acid in your system right now.” Knotts stated. “I pulled out a lot of the bigger shrapnel bits out as fast as I could, but by then, the acid was already seeping into the wounds. You have to save your energy until I get you back to Neelson.”

“Gotcha, boss man.” Rube quieted down, but this only lasted about a second, as the wounded soldier glanced back in my direction. “Hey, Douglas, now you know, huh?”

“Know what?” I asked.

“What side of that white line you’re standing on.”

Another wave of shame washed over me, and I slowed my pace to distance myself further from the Marines.

“You know,” Knotts spoke up. “I don’t think those Roaches were soldiers.”

“They weren’t.” Davis agreed. “They went down way too easy, and they didn’t even have armbands on them. They were something else.”

That explained why I hadn’t seen the armbands, I thought.

“The way that one Roach was firing at Spaceman,” Knotts considered, and he started shaking his head. “I mean, it was concentrating on him even when Douglas was running away from it, even when Douglas didn’t pose a threat to it. That thing took at least four good shots at him, and it missed every single time. Any good battle Roach would have nailed him on the first try. And the other Roaches, the ones inside the transport, who knows how many of them were in there, because they didn’t even make it outside. What’s up with that? We’ve seen Roaches get cornered before, and they always start rolling themselves up and jumping out like popcorn.”

“So if they weren’t battle Roaches, what were they?” Davis asked. “Rookies?”

“Engineers.” Rube stated, lifting his head, and unexplainably, looking in much better

spirits than before. “The reason they were inside that transport was because they were trying to figure out how to work the controls. That’s why they seemed so confused when they first came out of the Pulse. They weren’t expecting to travel, because the hatch was wide open, remember? And then, when they heard the melting battery go off, they automatically assumed that was part of our arsenal, because I saw them fire heat at it. Any battle Roach would have instantly aimed at the guys holding the guns.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Knotts said. “Why would they send a bunch of engineers out to investigate the radio signal? Why not send battle Roaches who know what they’re doing?”

“They wouldn’t.” Davis replied. “Those engineers must have flipped enough switches to set the ship in motion.”

Rube looked back at me. “What do you think about that, Douglas?”

Timidly, I replied. “Knowing what we know about Roaches, it would have been extremely difficult for them to accidentally end up at the hill so quickly. The satellite would have informed the outpost of the LRR radio signal, and they would have known our location right way. But even if the Pulse Magnifiers were fully loaded, the Navigation Computer from the outpost would have had to communicate with the computer from the transport. The Roaches had about a minute to tell the transport where to go. It was too fast for their intelligence, as far as we know.”

“Maybe the people at the outpost helped them.” Rube suggested. “If they were brainwashed, or something.”

“Well, whether they had help or not, they figured that all out.” Davis reasoned. “They saw the bright red energy trace from the radio on their scanners, they got the coordinates to the shuttle, and they Pulsed their stinky butts over here on the double.”

“It makes sense, except for one detail.” Knotts reminded her. “Those weren’t battle Roaches in the transport, those were engineers.”

“That’d be a stupid move, wouldn’t it?” Davis surmised. “And the Roaches don’t make stupid moves like that. They study their shit before they make a move.”

“Things just keep getting weirder out here, don’t they?” Knotts commented.

Rubalcava said, “It’s not possible. The Roaches couldn’t have figured out how to work the transport controls, because that would mean they’ve mastered our language and our technology. And we know they’re just not that quick, because it takes them all kinds of generations just to move from one galaxy to another. They have to be a few centuries behind us, as far as technology goes.”

“How’d they get to Lesenia so fast, then?” Davis asked. “Nobody’s ever seen Roaches in this corner of space, and the outpost people have only been out here, what, three or four months?”

“Do I look like I have all the answers?” Rube shot back, after which he started struggling to escape from Knott’s strong grip. “Let me down, Numb-Nuts. I think I’m about to puke.”

“What are you doing?” Knotts asked.

“I said, off!” Rube began to pummel at the bigger man’s back, until the Marine finally relented. Once he was on the grass, Rube began to wobble around on unsteady legs for a few moments, like a newborn deer, but he quickly got his bearings and hurried over to the nearest tree, where he loudly retched. Along with the vomit, he spewed out a handful of choice expletives, and once this was all done, he strode back to the group.

“See, I just had to get my land legs working again.”

Knotts stared in disbelief at Rube, turned toward Davis briefly, and back to Rube. “Do you know how toxic that battery acid is? You should be going through convulsions and turning different colors right now!”

“Well, I’m not doing any of that, am I?” Rube replied. “You can see that I’m standing on my own two legs, and I’ll even do some dance moves if you want me to. I’ll have Neelson check me with the Med-Scan once we get back with the squad. You can count on that. I may be stubborn, but I ain’t stupid.”

Knotts looked back over at Davis.

“Like you said, things keep getting weirder.” She said.

Rube demanded to have his weapon back from Davis, who’d been carrying it, and after he took a moment to readjust his backpack, the four started moving at a faster pace. Davis and Knotts were at their customary spot in the lead, while Rubalcava and I brought up the rear.

“Hey, Douglas?” Rube asked.

“Yeah?”

“This planet is really starting to freak me out. Don’t get me wrong, because I’m glad I’m still alive, but anywhere else, I’d probably be dead by now.”

“Trust me, I’m freaked out, too.” I answered, and I was about to bring up the moving pineapples again, but Rube was already talking.

“Hey, about what happened back there, with you.” He was saying. “How you reacted. Don’t take it so hard.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“No, listen to me, man.” Rube continued. “What you did, by running away to hide behind the trees, don’t worry about that. That was just your survival instinct kicking in. Think of it as your first test. There are going to be other tests, and I know this for a fact, because we have now confirmed that there are Roaches on this planet. Anyway, each test you come to is going to help define you into the man you’re going to be down the road. But right now, at least you know where you stand, and that helps you out a heck of a lot.”

“How does being a coward help me out?” I snapped.

“Because now you’re getting an idea of what it’s going to take, to do better the next time.” Rube replied. “Look, I’m going to tell you something that I don’t like telling anybody. The first time I got caught up in a crossfire, I was so scared that I didn’t fire my weapon either, and I had to have some of the guys around me take up the slack. We all have to go through that moment, between what you were before, and what you’re about to become. Combat toughens you up that way, but that’s not what makes you a Hard Charger. That’s when you learn to put your fear aside, and you say: Fuck It, I may be about to go down for good, but I’m taking a butt-load of Roaches down with me.”

I let the words sink in. Maybe somewhere down the road, I would get the chance to make up for my cowardice.

Every ten minutes, Knotts send out a message through the short wave radio built into our helmets, to try and get in contact with the rest of the squad.

We’d been walking about a half hour when the tall Marine stiffened up. He held his arm up in a fist, causing Davis to drop into a crouch and aim her weapon, and in the back, Rube tapped me on the shoulder and motioned for me to follow suit.

Knotts motioned that he would be moving east, and he directed Davis to go west. He



glanced back at the two of us, and made the sign of two fingers walking, very slowly. Then, he tapped his helmet and pointed at Rube. Moments later, he and Davis had disappeared into the brush.

Inquisitively, I glanced at the soldier next to me.

“Tread softy, and keep your voice low.” Rube warned me with a whisper. “That’s what I was talking about earlier. These guys have like a sixth sense or something, that warns them when there’s a shit-fan up ahead. They’re doing a pincer move, by spreading out in opposite directions and trying to catch whatever threat there is between them. That means that you and I have to go right up the middle, since I’ll be coordinating their movements through the radio. It might be time for your to show what you’re made of, Spaceman.”

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Just keep your weapon steady.” Rube said. “We’ll know what’s going on in a minute or two.”

Indeed, we’d only crept up about fifteen feet, when the noisome odor hit us. It smelled so awful I wanted to throw up again; it was the scent of warm animal urine, mixed in with animal sweat and rotten vegetables.

“Roach rot.” Rube grimaced in disgust. “Usually, the stink builds up the closer we get, but this smells like we’re about to step right into one of their freaking nests.”

We moved forward, quietly and steadily, through the trees, and each step brought us closer to the nasty alien stink. The clicking could be heard again, as we reached the edge of a small clearing. Rube crouched beside a tree and pointed out, and at a distance of about thirty yards, I could see the frantic and furtive movements of dozens of Roaches.

I felt the fear rising up inside me, as I watched the creatures dodge and dive between the clearing and the trees, when I noticed that their clicking was being frequently interrupted by the whine of plasma rifles.

“Is that the rest of the squad?” I asked.

“Chances are it is.” Rube nodded. “Watch my back for a minute, while I try and get in touch with them.”

I nodded, and Rube positioned his body entirely behind the cover of a tree. He pulled a small microphone stick out from the side of his helmet, until its end was close to his mouth. “Staff Sergeant Renquist, this is the radio team. What is your situation, copy?”

A few anxious moments passed, before an answer was heard.

“Rube, this is Dempsey.” The voice announced into my ear, as well as Rube’s. “We are in fucking peril out here. We’re pinned down in a strange looking hill, and we have maybe two or three dozen Roaches zigzagging outside. Hold on.” There was a pause. “Renquist wants to know your twenty. His radio is on the fritz again.”

“Uh, thirty yards north and slightly east of your position.” Rube replied, as he turned to scan the landscape. “I can see the back of the hill from here.”

“Can you give us an enemy count?”

“I can’t see the entire field from here, but it’s at least three dozen. Tell the old man that Davis and Knotts are positioning for a pincer move from the east and west.”

We watched as the Roaches ran back and forth across the clearing, in seemingly random paths. Some stopped to fire toward the hill, while the majority dashed in spurts, either running clear to the other side of the clearing, or halting halfway and scurrying back to wherever they’d started their strange dashing.

Rube looked fascinated by their movements. “Do you see what they’re doing? By constantly being in motion, they’re giving the squad the impression that there’s a lot more of them out there, and at the same time, they’re making each individual Roach harder to target. And they won’t get tired, either. They’ll keep running around like that all day and night.”

Dempsey’s voice came back over the radio. “Renk says we’re too heavily outnumbered. He wants you guys to divert the Roaches away from the hill, so that we can get out of here and head somewhere safer.”

“East and West, do you have your ears on?” Rube asked.

Knotts answered first. “I copy the diversion. I need two minutes to plan an escape route.”

Davis chimed in next. “I copy the diversion also. Give me four minutes to find a hole, I’ve got heavy brush on this side.”

“Copy that.” Rube said.

“Copy.” Dempsey also acknowledged.

“Here’s what happens next.” Rube pushed his mike out of the way. “Davis and Knotts are going to create a diversion by tossing out some flash bombs, and since they’re going to do it simultaneously, it’s going to throw the Roaches off balance. The Roaches tend to follow herd mentality, and if they think they’re getting hit by a greater force than theirs, their first instinct will be to run deep into the forest and regroup. Once they realize that no gigantic swarm of Marines is running out after them, they’re going to split up into three groups, one after Davis, the second after Knotts, and the third group is coming right back here. We’re only going to have about five minutes to pick off any stragglers and help the squad get to safety.”

“Ready to rock and roll.” Knotts announced over the radio.

A few moments later, Davis’ unsteady voice came in. “As ready as I can be.”

Rube already had his mike out. “Diversion will commence on my count, three... two... one... zero.”

I wasn’t exactly relishing the notion of being in a pitched battle with the dark menaces, but before the fear could overwhelm me completely, the action erupted all around. The first explosion was loud enough to jar me, coming from the east and crowned by a great cloud of dirt. A second later, there was a similar explosion from the west, followed quickly by a second, and all kinds of clicking erupted from the clearing.

Suddenly, it seemed as if the entire forest was alive. The black grasses had perfectly concealed many more of the alien infestation’s troops that had been actively involved in the actual assault, and after hearing the explosions, a great number of Roaches stood up, glanced around, clicked out loud, and leapt into a run.

I shuddered as I imagined so many of the black creatures racing in my direction.

“We’re in deep shit, my friend.” Rube tensed his grip on his rifle. “That’s got to be at least a hundred fucking Roaches out there. Get ready to fire.”

From the clearing, a single Roach stumbled toward us on two feet, and moving at a much slower pace than its peers. It limped along, possibly in pain, and as it got closer, I could see that part of its left arms had been damaged by plasma.

Since the creature would be passing only a few feet from our position, Rubalcava took the opportunity to ambush it. The Marine jumped out in front of it, pointing his rifle directly at the alien, and instinctively, the Roach grabbed at it with all four limbs. Rube

had been counting on this, as he threw his weight forward and toppled the creature onto its back. While the injured Roach struggled with his rifle, and his weight, Rube made a quick grab for the field knife secured to his belt. Repeatedly, Rube plunged the polished blade at what passed for the creature's throat, even as the gaping maw aimed its serrated teeth toward his face. The animal bucked and writhed below him for a few seconds, until it finally weakened and died.

"One less Roach." Rube muttered, quickly wiping his blade on the dark grass and sheathing it. "No more flash bombs, either. That means that Davis and Knotts are on the run, or worse." He yanked his weapon from the dead Roach's grip. "It's time for us to join the party, Spaceman. Don't let me die out there."

Rube scanned the clearing one last time, and ran from the cover of the trees. Not even ten seconds later, two Roaches were standing up from the depths of the black grass, and pouncing on him from either side. The Marine managed to slam one away with the stock of his rifle, but the second dropped on his side like a sack of bricks. Rube fell over, as four arms battered at his two, and before my horrified eyes, the Roach drew its circular mouth closer to the man's head. The teeth actually stretched out, ready to clamp onto human flesh, and my rifle was the only thing standing between Rube and certain death.

I had to do something, I realized, to stop the assault on the closest thing I had to a friend on the entire planet. I shuddered, forcing the fear to the back of my mind, as I pointed the weapon at the monstrosity's back. Without thinking, I undid the safety, and tore back on the trigger, feeling the tight recoil of the rifle against my bicep. A short burst of plasma exploded from its tip, drawn like a laser toward the Roach's thick back and knocking it off the stunned Marine.

Instinctively, the Roach jumped back to its stumpy feet, lifting its arms and turning its head to ascertain where the shot had come from, but by then, I'd squeezed the trigger again and sent another blast of plasma on its way. The damn thing was too close to miss, and the bolt ripped into the creature's unprotected stomach, spewing its red and black contents onto the dark grass.

Rube rolled aside, just as an invisible beam of scorching heat burst the ground where he'd just been. For a second, I watched the tiny eruption of dirt and grass, and I swung the rifle at the same moment the second Roach turned to face me. As it repositioned the angle of its arms, I was squeezing the trigger, and my next two shots ripped into the area just below the creature's throat, and sent black and red pieces flying in all directions.

This bloody carnage, this was what war was really about, I thought grimly.

Rube rolled back to retrieve his rifle. Once it was in his grasp, he spun himself onto his stomach and aimed the weapon across the clearing. "Here they come, Spaceman!" He cried out. "Remember, aim for the eyes, and when you shoot, you roll, otherwise you're toast!"

That's when I realized that I was standing out in the open, and I ducked back a few feet to stand by the nearest tree. Half a dozen Roaches were now scrambling through the grass at us, and Rube was doing his best to drop plasma right on top of their heads. A few he hit directly, while the rest he kept shoving back with the brute force of his missiles. The Roaches were seen to scatter, regain their bearings, and angle themselves for another run.

I was blasting away randomly, but the Roaches were so fast, and my aim so clumsy, that I didn't think I was doing anything at all to them. I hoped I was at least distracting

them!

Rube finished them off. "Move forward!" He cried out, and in a low crouch, he hurried closer to the hill.

The hill was just like the one we'd seen earlier, I realized, cylinder shaped and with a perfect semi-circle for a top. As we encircled it, I could see an unusually rounded cave entrance, as if the hill was somehow yawning symmetrically to its structure.

"Give me two grenades, at ten o'clock and two o'clock!" Renquist's harsh voice battered at the air.

Mason appeared, tossing out the first, and he looked even scruffier and angrier than before. A second form appeared, only to be thrown back violently by a Roach heat wave. A good portion of this man's upper body exploded into a spray of flesh and blood.

Renquist stepped out next, crouching, firing, and moving aside so as to keep himself from being targeted. At the sound of the grenade going off, the Staff Sergeant looked to be firing randomly. "Fall out, jarheads! Back behind the hill!"

Rube was firing without aiming as well, and I raised my weapon to do the same, when I got pummeled into from behind. A big, black blur had shoved me down onto a shoulder, and I could feel it tearing away at my backpack with its limbs. It slapped a paw across my face, scratching my cheek with its rough ridges, and a second paw smacked into my temple. I tried to get my rifle up, between my head and the Roach's teeth, but it had already gotten two of its paws on the weapon, and was about to yank it from my hands. The maw opened up, and all those teeth began reaching out for me.

The business end of a rifle got inserted into that gaping saw of a mouth. "Say cheese!" Rube's voice called out, right before a plasma blast exploded the Roach's face all over my upper half. With a harsh kick, Rube kicked the flailing Roach away from me. "Always watch your back, Douglas! Didn't they teach you anything at Spaceman School?"

"They taught me how to fly a fucking transport!" I shouted back, trying to slap some of the smelly debris from my face.

"Random fire into the trees!" Rube gave me room to stand. "This makes them think we're chasing after them."

"All of you, back behind the hill!" Renquist ordered.

Mason fired a few more shots, and bolted like a hare.

I saw Brickwell stooping down to grasp the fallen soldier's tags, but he wasn't finding them among all the gore.

"Flash bomb, one minute timer!" Renquist screamed at the man, and Brickwell quickly complied.

The remnants of the squad rushed around the hill, and into the trees behind it. Rube and I caught up with them.

"On the run!" Renquist ordered, and the dwindling group rushed into the trees.

The flash bomb soon sounded off behind us, and I imagined the remainder of some unfortunate soldier's body being sent to oblivion in tiny fragments.

We slowed to a jog almost ten minutes later, and halted another five minutes after that, so the winded men, including myself, could catch our breaths. We started a double march, due south, a couple of minutes later.

"Didn't I tell you this was going to happen?" Dempsey whined, clumsily nursing a bleeding arm with a long strip of bandage.

Neelson quickly came to his aid.

“Dempsey, your girly voice is the last thing I want to hear right now.” Renquist said. “Rubalcava, report.”

Rube filled him in with the goings on while we’d been sending the satellite message. Once he was done, he asked, “But what went down here, with you guys?”

“We were ambushed.” Renquist said in disgust. “Have one of the others spell it out for you, I need a minute to think.”

Rube turned to the next closest Marine. “Well, how about it? What the hell happened to you guys?”

“We were just walking along, minding our own business.” Dobson explained. “Didn’t smell a thing, didn’t see a thing. And boom, just like that, we’re knee deep in Roaches.”

“Everywhere, man.” Brickwell added. “I mean, we were in Shit City.”

“Like Renk said, it was an ambush.” Dobson continued. “We were a bunch of assholes, just walking into that clearing as if it were a walk in the park, and all of a sudden, we’ve got Roaches popping up on all sides and firing at us as if we’re the little ducks in a shooting gallery.”

“The only reason more of us didn’t meet the reaper, was because Dempsey threw himself on the ground like two seconds earlier.” Brickwell said. “His freak sonar went off, and right after, Renquist ordered us all to hit the dirt.”

“Zachs bit the bullet.” Dobson said. “Neelson would have, too, because he was standing there frozen like a statue, until we dragged his ass down with us.”

“The old man spotted that cave, and we scrambled into it, lickety-split.” Brickwell said, and as if he was defending his pride, he added, “We were too heavily outnumbered to give them a good fight.”

“That wasn’t a cave.” Strawberry joined the conversation. “It was something else, something artificial. There were markings on the walls inside, like hieroglyphics, but they were too faded to make out.”

“I saw that, too.” Dobson nodded. “Too bad you weren’t there, Rube. Maybe you could have figured them out.”

Dempsey came closer. “It was a trap, man. It was all a Roach trap! The clearing, the cave, all of it was a fucking trap!”

“Think about it, you dumb-ass.” Dobson countered. “If the Roaches had us out in the open, why would they let us get to somewhere where we could hole up? The clearing was a trap, sure as shit, but the cave, that was an accident.”

“What if they were trying to starve us out?” Dempsey suggested. “And that’s why they led us in there?”

“Can I shoot him?” Brickwell asked Dobson.

“I just don’t get how you guys didn’t smell them.” Rube wondered. “We can usually smell Roaches coming a mile away.”

“Yeah, that was another mystery.” Dobson concurred. “Once we were in the middle of the clearing, we smelled them all right. And the inside of that cave, that place reeked of them, so we know they were inside there, too. But as far as smelling them ahead of time, that didn’t happen.”

“Divert southeast by thirty degrees.” Renquist ordered, as he consulted his own Global Mapping device. “I want to try to pick up our original heading of due south. And

let's keep the chatter down to a minimum while I try to figure out a plan.”

4

With only the soft sound of our boots audible, we traveled further into what seemed to be a never-ending forest. The trees were thicker here, tall and tidy, and although I sensed that there was something unusual about the trees, besides them being gray, or course, I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

Then, it came to me. The forest looked taken care of and maintained, as if some massive crew of landscapers had come by and trimmed all the unruly branches, and had swept up any trash from among the grass. In fact, for all of the griping that the Marines were doing about Lesenia being a rock, or a shit-hole, it was very much the opposite. It was like a manicured paradise, from every angle a reasonable person could see it from.

I was still glancing up at the long, palm-like leaves on these particular trees, when I noticed Mason had slung his rifle on his shoulder. The mean man was adjusting a thick and bloodstained bandage around one of his brawny forearms, and nearly at the same place where Dempsey's arm was wounded. “What happened to you?”

“Roach got close enough to give me a kiss.” Mason grimaced. “I gave it a kiss back, too. It was plasma flavored.”

“Marines,” Renquist paused. “Let's take a breather. Spread out in a tight circle and keep alert. We're going to brain-storm while we're at it, and maybe you jarheads can help me figure out what the X factor is on this planet.”

I took a spot beside a trunk, a single tree away from Rube, and sat down on the ground like the Marines were doing; with my back on the bark, and my line of sight split between the circle and the rest of the forest.

Before Rube took his seat on the tree next to mine, he came over and bumped knuckles with me. “Back there, man, you did good. You saved my ass.”

“Thanks.” I said, but I was too embarrassed to linger on the compliment. “What do you think is gonna happen next?”

Rube settled onto the gray dirt, facing me, as there was no black grass around this tiny section of the forest, just a small scattering of purple leaves on gray soil. “Well, we'll have ourselves a little rest stop. I've gotta tell you, I don't think I need it. I still feel like I'm at one hundred percent. I've got energy for days right now.”

“What about the Roaches?”

“Well, I hope they're pretty confused right now. They thought they had the squad cornered, right? And then all of a sudden they're getting hit from the east and the west. Most of them scattered, like they always do when they're surprised, and they had to split their forces toward not just one, but three different locations. I'm just glad we were able to confuse them long enough for the squad to get out of that hill. That was a tight spot.”

“What about the other two Marines, Davis and Knotts? You think they got away?”

“I sure hope they did. I hope they got far enough that they're out of range of these crappy radios we have in our buckets.”

I clammed up, once I noticed that Renquist was listening to our conversation. The Staff Sergeant was standing in the center of the circle and looking more haggard than usual. “Does anybody have any further observations?”

“I do, sir.” I spoke up. “This place is perfect, too perfect.”

“Explain.”

“Well, take a look around right now.” I suggested. “There’s not a single branch or leaf out of place. There’s barely any trash on the ground, anywhere. Everything looks as if somebody comes by and tends this whole area on a fixed schedule, like a landscaper at a fancy golf course.”

“We had that one area where there were all kinds of leaves scattered on the ground.” This came from Strawberry.

“Yeah, but those weren’t old and rotting leaves.” I recalled. “They were still fresh, as if they’d all fallen during the last few days. Just like the leaves on the ground here.”

“We haven’t seen any animal shit anywhere, either.” Brickwell mentioned. “Not to mention any animals. But we know there have to be some around, because the outpost people reported seeing all kinds, and the Explorer Drones took all sorts of pictures of them.”

Renquist pondered this. “By inference, you two are suggesting that we have a sentient form of life on this planet?”

“Be on the lookout for gardeners and shepherds.” Mason quipped.

“I know there’s something else involved.” Renquist agreed. “I can feel it in my gut. But until we run into it, we can’t assess how much of a threat this thing, or these things, really are.”

“Do you really think there’s something else out here?” Dempsey started to shrink away from the forest, and toward the small circle. “Something we don’t know about? What if it’s like a cloud or something, and we can’t even see it until it’s already on top of us? Or what if it comes out of the ground?”

“I don’t think so.” Mason shook his head. “If there was anything intelligent in the neighborhood, I think we would have seen it by now. There’s nothing out here except for us, the Roaches, and all these stupid trees.”

Rubalcava took up the conversation next. He started telling the others about how it was engineers, and not battle Roaches, that had attacked us when we’d sent the message. I was only giving him partial attention, as I had my own worries to tame. That’s when I remembered the way the pineapples had gotten out of the way for me.

“Hey, Rube,” I interrupted the Marine. “I saw the pineapples move. I’m willing to bet they’re the intelligent species on this planet.”

Rube glanced over quizzically, but his expression soon shifted to one of discernment. “You know, I think you’re right. These guys are saying that they saw strange symbols inside the round hill they were pinned in, and when we went out to send the radio message, the pineapples were all lined up like a marching column, around another little hill just like that one!

“And, I’m still alive, when I should have already died from acid poisoning. I kept wondering if maybe Lesenia’s environment was making the painkillers, or the Congeal Cream work better, or faster, but I also remember the pineapple leaves kept sticking to me when Knotts was taking me through the column. I think those trees did something to me when they touched me. They healed me! I mean, just look at me. Except for all these tears in my cammies, there’s nothing to show that I ever got hit by shrapnel, or poisoned by super toxic battery acid.” He held out his limb for the others to see. “Just look at my arm, it was all battered and bloody just a little while ago, and now it’s fine. I don’t even

know what happened to the shrapnel I got hit with. It's just gone!"

"Staff Sergeant, I think those trees are sentient." I concluded. "Maybe not animated in the same way we are, but alive just the same."

Renquist didn't appear fully convinced, but he was rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"We should investigate those trees." Rube insisted. "Right away, too. Before we get any closer to the outpost. They've got secrets."

"We can't go back that way." Renquist shook his head. "The forest is probably crawling with Roaches in that direction."

"You said the trees were shaped like pineapples, right?" Strawberry spoke up. "I saw some through a break in the trees, to the west and about five minutes back."

This time, Renquist appeared extra thoughtful.

"Forget the trees, man!" Dempsey cried out. "They're nothing! Our first priority has to be to reach the outpost, so we can clear up that Non-Retrieval order and get some help down here. We don't need pineapples, what we need is a Goddamned regiment!"

"The situation is a lot more complicated than what can be cleared up by a single phone call." Renquist berated the soldier. "These Roaches have the ability to appear inside a Unilink Transport, just seconds after a distress call has been issued. They also have the ability to surround us in a way they've never done before, and possibly with the aid of something native to this planet. It stands to reason that they already control the outpost, and if whatever is helping them is intelligent enough to master the Pulse System, then the entire human race may already be in jeopardy. We must find out what we're up against, or we'll end up disappearing like the personnel at the outpost did."

Like a defeated man, Dempsey said, "Yes, Staff Sergeant."

Neelson, who barely said anything at all, spoke up next. "Roach smell incoming. It's faint, but it's there. From the north."

"I'm glad we can still use their rot smell as an early warning system." Renquist mentioned. "On your feet, Marines. Strawberry, take point with a heading of west by northwest. The rest of you form up two columns."

As we lined up, I did a head count. We had nine people left, out of the original fifteen that had entered the transport earlier. The odds were not looking good.

A moment later, we were moving through the trees again, as fast as we dared while keeping our movements and our lips quiet. We all slowed at once, when the odor of Roaches infiltrated our nostrils. Renquist motioned for us to stand tight against the tree trunks, and the nervous waiting might have been the most anxious moments of my entire life. I imagined the swarm galloping toward us, surrounding us and mowing us down with heat rays until we were all dead. And from what I'd heard of the Roaches, the feasting would begin soon after.

Thankfully, the odor drifted away a few minutes later, and Renquist started us moving again.

"I hate this planet." Dempsey said, and he was frequently glancing back into the trees to make sure we weren't being followed.

"You hate everything." Dobson criticized. "Why don't you give it a rest, before you start spooking the rest of us again?"

"Staff Sergeant," Rubalcava spoke up. "I think more than one nest landed on Lesenia. There's no way that could have been a random patrol back there. I estimate a hundred Roaches were hiding in the grass around where the squad was holing up."



“I’ve been thinking the same thing.” Renquist agreed. “What ambushed us was damn near a full company. What I’m also starting to suspect is that they were here before we were.”

“You mean before the outpost was set up?” Rube asked. “Wouldn’t the Explorer Drones have seen them, when they were scouting out this planet?”

“The Drones are set up to take millions of pictures and thousands of environmental samples.” Renquist informed them. “They have an algorithm that dictates how all that information is prioritized, but it’s not perfect. They can’t tell that those round hills are artificial, for example, because the hills are covered with growing grass.

“If a Roach nest was covered up well enough to look like part of the landscape, the Drones would have put the pictures of it way back in their archives, and whoever studied those pictures might have never gotten far enough back to see them. Same thing with your pineapple beings. If the Drones assumed they were vegetation, they would have classified them as such, and collected their pictures with a hundred thousand other pictures of the trees out here. The only time the Drones would have put a subject into a higher priority bracket, is when the subject showed signs of active animation. That’s why we had an idea of what kind of wildlife to expect out here, because it was moving when the Drone flew by and snapped a shot of it.”

“But the Roaches move!” Dobson reminded them all. “And they crap all over the place! The Drones should have at least gotten one shit sample off the ground, and identified it ahead of time.”

“Unless the Roaches are already underground.” Renquist countered.

“They don’t go underground,” Rube mentioned. “They only do that when we’re already in combat with them, and when we’ve got them cornered.”

“What if they knew we were coming?” Renquist asked. “What if the Roaches are either intelligent enough, or psychic enough, to know that sometime in the near future, a bunch of Explorer Drones were going to be circling the planet. And what if they also knew that after the Drones left and reported this planet as being extremely hospitable, a human outpost was going to be set up.”

“They’d set up an ambush.” Rube extrapolated. “Say they wanted to try and figure out how the Links worked. They’d watch and wait until the outpost was fully operational. Then, when the transports were shuttling back and forth with biologists, engineers and scientists, but before a big military presence arrived, they’d come in and take possession of the outpost, and take all the time they wanted to study our technology. But it’s a big assumption to say that the Roaches could be psychic.”

“Think about Betelren Six.” Renquist replied. “The first Roach nest the human race ever encountered, and it was supposed to fly by the outpost on that planet as a near miss. The nest suddenly shifted gears and turned toward the planet, and as a result, we had the Goddamned catastrophe that took place there. Nobody can say for certain why the nest changed directions like it did, but psychic intuition is as good an explanation as any.”

“Psychic fucking Roaches?” Dempsey looked ready to cry. “No freaking way, man. We are done for. We are going to die out here!”

“Permission to put Dempsey out of his misery, Staff Sergeant.” Mason requested.

“Shut the fuck up!” Dempsey snapped at the much bigger soldier. “You’re telling me that either the Roaches do me in, or you will? You think that’s a fucking joke?”

“Keep talking, you little worm.” Mason challenged. “I’m about to stick my foot up

your ass so far, the water on my bad knee is going to quench your thirst.”

“You’re a Goddamned gorilla, you know that?” Dempsey insulted. “You and that ugly uni-brow of yours can get the hell out of my face.”

Mason feigned a lunge, which caused Dempsey to run into the trees. The big man smiled and said, “You know I’ve been looking for a new girlfriend, right? I need one with a really big mouth, and you just might fit the bill.”

“You’re an asshole.” Dempsey retorted, keeping pace from about ten feet away.

I turned back to the front of the squad, where the tallest Marine, Strawberry, was pointing a short distance ahead.

“There.” He said, simply.

Just a little further ahead, I could see another long, swirling column of pineapple shaped trees. The far end was wide and spread, the near end was narrow and tight, and as at the message site, there was an unnaturally rounded hill that the trees seemed to be traveling to. Like the hill where the squad had hidden in earlier, this new hill also had a wide, rounded opening on one side, and incredibly, a cluster of pineapples was standing within the dark mouth.

Rubalcava must have been as antsy as I was, upon seeing this. “Can you guys see that? Scientific WAG (Wild Ass Guess) here, but I will bet my payday that the hill is some kind of transport!”

The collection of soldiers continued on, and finally halted about ten feet from the mysterious vegetation.

“Well, here we are.” Brickwell announced. “What do we do now? Say hello?” He turned toward the stumpy trees. “Hello, plant. How are you?”

“Dempsey’s half potato.” Dobson teased. “Let him talk to them.”

“Fuck you, Dobs!”

“Dempsey, communicate with your people.” Renquist ordered. “Make it snappy, too. We don’t have all day here.”

Dempsey made a face at his superior, but issued no further comment.

The Staff Sergeant next glanced at Rube. “You want to give it a try?”

The Marine stepped forward, and started scrutinizing the trees. “These look exactly the same as the ones we saw at Message Hill. There was no opening in the hill there, though.” He tried peering into the mouth of the cave from a few different angles, but the plethora of pineapples barred his way. They were too tightly clustered together for him to approach any further, without rubbing leaves and trees on both sides. “There has to be some kind of switch inside there, that they’re trying to access.”

“I hate to tell you this,” Dempsey cut in. “But your trees don’t have any hands or fingers to be operating any kind of switch.”

Rube looked back and frowned. “You think I can’t see that?”

“Are you afraid to touch them or something?” Dobson asked.

“Kind of.” Rube admitted. “When I touched the ones earlier, my fingers got numb, and I guess these things helped clean up all the battery acid and shrapnel out of my system, too. Davis and Knotts said they thought they were seeing things, and hearing noises inside their head after they touched them. So, yeah, I’d say I’m afraid to touch one again. Who knows what they’ll will do to me this time?”

Several of the Marines glanced over to Brickwell.

“You guys want me to touch one?” He asked. “All right, I’ll touch one.” He stepped

right up to the nearest pineapple, opened his arms wide to embrace its scaly bark, and began dry humping it.

“Ooorah!” Mason egged him on. “That’s how we’re going to tame this planet! With our peckers!”

A loud snap caused Brickwell to jump away from the tree. “The damned thing shocked me!” He pointed an accusatory finger at the tree. “No more special attention for you.”

Recalling Rube’s miraculous recovery, I turned toward Mason and his heavily bandaged arm. “You should touch it. Rubalcava was in a lot worse shape than you are, and it healed him up pretty quick”

“No effin’ way, thank you.” Mason refused.

“So, what do we do now?” Renquist asked, throwing his hands up in the air. “We just stand around and wait until these plants sprout mouths, and tell us what’s going on?”

For the next couple of minutes, we all stood silent.

“I say we find out if these things are really alive.” Mason broke the quiet with his growl. “Permission to open fire on one, Staff Sergeant.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Renquist’s voice was faster.

“Granted. Marines, fall back by five yards.”

We all complied with the mandate.

Mason observed our retreat, after which he raised his rifle and took aim at the tree Brickwell had been humping. He squeezed the trigger, giving birth to a flash of plasma and its accompanying whine. The powerful missile exploded a full third of the tree in all directions. A second aimed shot tore a huge chunk from the top, and the fragment slowly slid away and tumbled into the black grass. Thick, amber sap began to ooze from the freshly exposed innards of the pineapple, and dripped down in several crooked rivers over the gray scales.

The trees directly surrounding the assaulted one raised their leaves high into the air, in a sort of collective shudder, and in an incredibly slow, sloth-like pace, they further collected into the mouth of the cave. The rumble they were causing reminded me of a tremor from back on Earth.

Mason took aim at a second tree.

“Stop it!” I cried out, and the soldier paused long enough for me to be able to run out to him. I grabbed the forestock of his weapon and shoved it toward the ground, and we both began wrestling for control of the rifle. “You’ve made your point! You already killed one!”

How typical of the human species, I considered, that instead of trying to peacefully communicate with a new, sentient species, they were already trying to submit it by force.

“Mason, lower your Spitfire.” Renquist stepped forward to examine the damaged tree, while the rest of them continued to rumble along. “Well, it looks like we finally found some of our elusive *Lesenia* wildlife.”

“They’re getting away, Staff Sergeant.” Dobson reminded the man.

“The way they’re gathering in that cave, I’d say they’re about to seal themselves up and head somewhere else.” Rubalcava concurred, when he glanced back at the column that might have numbered at around fifty. “Well, some of them are, anyway. They might have to make about five trips.”

“They might know the only way off this planet!” Dempsey shrieked. “We have to

stop them before they get away!”

“You might be right about that.” Renquist agreed. “Marines, hold your weapons at the ready, and each of you take a position before one of these plants.”

“They’re scared enough as it is!” I objected. “You’ve put them all in a panic!”

“Do you have a better suggestion, Douglas?” Renquist glared at me.

Since I didn’t want any more of the beings to die, I said, “Let me try to talk to them.”

“Buddy, they don’t have any ears on them.” Brickwell pointed out.

“I don’t know, maybe they can hear through their leaves or something.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Rube stated. “Maybe they send out signals with their leaves, since they started moving right after the leaves all went up. Maybe they’re telepathic, too. Davis and Knotts did mention that they were hearing things in their head.”

Renquist looked like he’d bitten into a sour lemon. “Spaceman, the floor is yours.”

Great, I thought. It was up to me to begin communication with a whole new species, one that could possibly be as lethal as the Roaches.

As if I had a purpose, I strode close to the mouth of the cave, where the pineapples were at their thickest. Holding back my own fear, I sidestepped between them, brushing against gray bark as I went, and I noticed some of the upraised purple leaves rustling overhead. I stopped in the center of the column, and with a rising dread, watched as the trees closed up the crooked path I’d just entered through. On all sides, they were closing in on me.

The best approach, I considered anxiously, was probably to put my hand on a tree. After a deep and nervous breath, I raised both hands and touched two pineapples at the same time. Tiny tingles of electricity pricked at my palms and fingers, but when this sensation deepened into numbness, I couldn’t take any more and I made the attempt to remove my hands.

I couldn’t do it. My hands were stuck to the trees, as if adhered by glue.

“We’re not here to hurt you.” I tried to explain, but the quiver in my voice announced my panic. “We’re here as friends.”

In wonder, I watched as the upraised leaves on several trees rustled again, rubbing against one another like the legs of a cricket. The noises they were making had to be their language, right?

The great, purple leaves curled downward, towards me, and I gulped as they descended onto my shoulders and back. Some of the pineapples further back stretched their own leaves through the cracks left by their brethren, and these ended up on my arms and head. An exceptionally curious leaf wrapped itself around my eyes, and as I tried to fathom what horror would befall me next, I closed my eyes and prepared for the end.

That was all it took for our communication to begin. In my mind, I began to see a cloud of black, and forms materializing within it. I saw myself come into being, my face contorted into a mad scream, and my body struggling to get away from the black, but unable to move. Soft waves of warm air began to fall over me, and the more they did, the more my fear was driven away. As my brain relaxed, my body relaxed, and I knew that the pineapples were producing the tranquilizing effect.

‘We are of the ancient void faring peoples.’ I heard a voice speaking into my head, but now, I was not afraid of it. ‘We came from the farthest reaches of the void as seeds, many, many millennia ago, to pollinate and structure worlds for those who would come

after us. We are a collective voice, and we speak all as one, and one as all, and in your tongue, the closest approximation to our name is Wehteweissell. This we do not want.'

I saw Mason's form materializing beside me, sneering and pointing his gun. He was laughing as he squeezed the trigger, and shot apart a pineapple inside my mind, exactly as he'd done in real life. In the vision, Mason was laughing at the damage he'd done.

Rubalcava appeared in the black cloud, and he looked as apprehensive as I had just a few moments earlier. "Hey, I can see you, Douglas. Can you see me?"

"Yes." I nodded. "We're in some kind of dream-state, where the trees can talk to us."

"That's fucking weird." Rube turned all the way around to gauge his surroundings. "I did what you did. I just walked into the middle of all the trees, and they covered me up with their leaves." He stepped up next to me and pushed at my shoulder. "You feel solid, too." He glanced down at the weapon still in his grip. "I wonder what'll happen if I shoot you while we're in this dream-state?"

"Don't you dare!" I warned.

This made Rube chuckle. "How do we talk to these things? I want them to let me go, so I can tell the rest of the squad to join us."

"I don't know. Just ask them, I guess."

"Okay, I'll be right back." He looked up at the blackness, then around at the rest of it, and finally gave up looking for a presence. "Hey, let me out, so I can bring the rest of the guys in here to meet you."

I saw Rube suddenly fade away.

I was alone, but only for the next couple of minutes. I saw Brickwell appear, and he gave me a fascinated look, as he started walking around and poking at the black with the tip of his rifle. "This place rocks!"

Dobson appeared next, and although he looked equally amazed, he stayed rooted to one spot. Renquist and Rubalcava came in last.

"The rest of the squad is keeping watch, or are too intimidated to join us." Renquist informed the group. "I know that leaving Dempsey and Mason unsupervised is taking a big risk that they might shoot each other, but I've asked Nelson and Strawberry to keep them apart. What's the word here?"

The other men all settled down, and a moment later, the Wehteweissell made their introduction again, followed by a repeat of Mason's murder of one of their number.

Rube went as far as touching Mason's shoulder, before the gloating man disappeared. "He felt real! He felt fucking real!"

'This we do not want.' The Wehteweissell repeated.

"We're not going to attack you anymore." I spoke up. "We fired on you because we thought you were hostile to us. We are not your enemies."

'We are a peaceful people.' The collective said, and more images began to appear in the center of our little group.

They were holographic pictures, arranged like a slideshow, and they displayed locations all around the planet. In these images, we saw beautiful, picture perfect landscapes. We saw a multitude of strange beings tending to the environment, and they were all herbivores. There were tree-top dwellers that looked like long-eared gibbons, to a grand variety of marvelously feathered and long-beaked fowl, to scurrying and colorful rodents, and finally to a couple of different types of quadrupeds that looked to be about

the size of a horse, but appeared to be a hybrid of both horse and double-humped camels.

It was the Wehtewisell who supervised the cycles of planting, watering and harvesting, they explained through the images. Each animal helped in the care of its own food source, from the large fruits that hung from the tallest trees, to the various small nuts and berries that ripened on the lower lying bushes. It was a perfect cycle, I realized, with the vegetation informing the pineapples of its needs, and the trees passing the information on to the animal caretakers, who both nurtured and cleaned after the plants whose fruit they'd be consuming later.

'For many eons, it was this way. Until the ones you call Roaches came from the void.'

The images before us shifted into that of a Roach nest falling from the stars. The combination nest and starship had crashed onto Lesenia, months before the first Explorer Drones first arrived. The hull of the nest had overheated severely during its entry into the planet's atmosphere, and fire quickly began to spread onto the heavily wooded area and grasses surrounding the crash site. They saw the Roaches fleeing the ship in droves, and letting the fire spread unhampered.

Being a peaceful and attentive bunch, the Wehtewisell did not comprehend the Roaches' imperialistic intentions, until it was too late.

The pineapples roused up the planet's wildlife, and undertook the procedure they normally used when dealing with wildfires. Smaller creatures with nimble hands hurried to pull together drying leaves and vines, forming waterproof baskets with them. Quicker animals took the baskets into the hill-transporters, and the Wehtewisell used the transporters to send the animals out to lakes and rivers all over that section of the planet. The bigger mammals were there to fill the baskets with water, and to carry the heavy bundles back to the transporters, and out to where the fires were. The makeshift fire brigade of birds, and the smaller and larger animals, all worked in concert with the Wehtewisell to subdue the fire, but they'd done so under the watchful and calculating eyes of the Roaches.

Unwittingly, the Wehtewisell had exposed their two greatest assets; their telepathic mastery of the animal kingdom, and the transport hills that allowed them to travel all around their world at will.

The Roaches wasted no time in corralling many of the Wehtewisell together, and they'd mercilessly tortured and destroyed hundreds of them before the remainder finally submitted to their demands. As a result, much of Lesenia's wildlife was now aiding the budding Roach colony, by seeking out and procuring resources such as food, water, and the precious ores and minerals that the Roaches used to enhance their bio-weaponry, and the building of their nest-ships.

On top of being subjugated and humiliated, the Wehtewisell were being exposed to bacteria and viruses that the Roaches had brought with them. Prolonged exposure to the Roaches weakened and plagued the trees, and hundreds more had died as a result. This forced the Wehtewisell to segregate themselves between those who had been exposed to the Roaches, and those who had not, and whenever the Roaches encroached upon the healthy population, they had no choice but to abandon that part of the planet and transport themselves and their dwindling pockets of uncontaminated animals elsewhere.

"They don't know anything about war." I marveled aloud. "Or about how to defend themselves."

Then came another, even more monstrous blow, the images related. The Roaches figured out how to combine their own psychic abilities with the Wehntewisell's telepathic powers. They called out to other Roach nests traveling through space, and drew them directly toward Lesenia. No less than three additional Roach nests had landed on various corners of the planet.

"I knew it!" Renquist sounded off. "I knew the Roaches were psychic!"

But this wasn't all. In reaching out with their minds to attract the other nests, the Roaches also became aware of the presence of humans in the solar system next to Lesenia's. The Roaches already knew enough of human tendencies and needs, to know that Lesenia would make as attractive a habitat for humans, as it did for the Roaches. So they carefully laid a trap. They took their entire operation underground, and they quickly dismantled their nests so that any human explorations would not reveal the Roach presence. Through threats and intimidation, the Roaches forced the Wehntewisell to direct the animals into erasing as much evidence of the Roaches as they could.

The humans would explore the planet, and set up an outpost, with eyes toward an even bigger expansion, and the Roaches knew this because it was what they were planning on doing themselves, and because in many ways, their plans for galactic domination ran parallel to those of mankind.

Birds and animals kept an eye on the newly arrived human beings, reporting their observations to the Wehntewisell, who in turn passed on the information to the Roaches. The Roaches then decided to start another fire, close enough that the personnel from the outpost would feel threatened, but not close enough that they'd consider it a real danger. The Wehntewisell were told not to interfere, and could only stand helpless as another portion of their world burned down.

The outpost personnel went out to combat the fire, and a transporter-hill near the outpost soon vomited a great volume of Roaches. They already knew the layout of the camp, information they'd garnered from the animal spies, and they quickly overwhelmed the few personnel left behind. Now in possession of the only means the colonists had to escape; three Unilink transports, and the only way the colonists had to communicate off-planet; the outpost computers, it was a simple matter to surround the humans out trying to halt the fire and subdue them.

"Not good." Dobson commented.

Ever since that moment, and with the help of the Wehntewisell, the Roaches had been working hard to unlock the secrets of the Pulse System. They understood the basics of it; how it could send a small vessel from one star system to another, but they didn't comprehend the scientific principles behind it, or how to figure out what coordinates were necessary to direct the vessel to a certain destination. If they knew these things, they would have already Pulsed out to their home worlds, and quickly started migrating wherever they pleased, all across the universe.

The advanced intelligence of the Wehntewisell, however, had fathomed all the intricate details of the Pulse system much faster.

"Not good at all." Dobson was shaking his head.

"We're in The Big Suck again." Brickwell agreed.

There was a small stir, when Dempsey appeared in the black.

"Holy shit!" He cried out. "Is this place real?"

"What are you doing here?" Dobson asked. "I thought you were scared of these

trees?”

“Mason started chasing me again.” He shrugged. “And since I know he wouldn’t follow me, I went in where you guys were.”

“Well, keep your trap shut.” Renquist said. “And let these plants keep telling their story.” The grim man looked around. “You don’t have to start from the beginning, just go on from where you left off.”

The Wehteweissell were now realizing that the Roaches were not planning to leave Lesenia, ever, and that the only chance they had to get rid of the pests was to aid the humans that were fighting against the Roaches.

Thus, when the Roaches became aware of activity on the outpost’s computer, a Wehteweissell was standing by to assist. This was the Purple Haze announcing its imminent arrival, and it was being redirected to land in a spot where its communications could be cut off, and where it would be ambushed by battle Roaches. The pineapple remotely and successfully disabled the vessel’s communications system, to give the impression that it was faithfully following orders, but at the critical juncture between one location and another, the Wehteweissell disabled the coordinates and left the transport in flux.

Suspecting the betrayal, the Roaches tormented the tree until they’d killed it, and right after, they began dispatching squads of battle Roaches into the areas where the Purple Haze had most likely Pulsed. Thanks to the efforts of Tennard, and me, we’d been able to maneuver the transport to a location the Roaches couldn’t reach right away.

This was a short-lived victory, however, as another Wehteweissell was summoned, and this one activated the Emergency Pulse that caused the Purple Haze to vanish, and to reappear next to the other three transports at the outpost. Captain Royce Tennard was still attempting to send out a warning to the satellite in orbit, when the Roaches dragged him out of the transport and killed him.

Later, the scanners at the outpost had lit up, when I’d started sending the Non-Retrieval code through the makeshift LRR radio. A transport was fully loaded with battle Roaches, but the crafty Wehteweissell overseeing the Navigation Computer tricked the Roach at the controls into Pulsing out the Purple Haze instead. The Haze had half a dozen Roach engineers inside it at the time, who were combing through the instrument panels for clues to their workings, and it was these engineers who had engaged the small contingent of Marines on Message Hill.

The Wehteweissell at the Nav-Com. was butchered, and several minutes later, yet another tree was forced to take its place. This one was also ordered to send a transport out to Message Hill, but instead, it maneuvered the Roaches into bringing the Purple Haze back to the outpost. The transport arrived with its Pulse Magnifiers sizzling, and this prompted the Roaches to flee momentarily, before the Magnifiers finally whimpered out without so much as a puff of smoke.

Ever since then, the Roaches had been forcing the Wehteweissell to teleport huge numbers of their warriors all over that side of the planet, in the hopes of running into and vanquishing the squad of Marines, and also to keep the soldiers from figuring out a way to communicate with other outposts.

“A Roach platoon exited the hill, a big bunch at a time, and these were getting ready to start patrolling for us, when we waltzed right into the clearing.” Renquist realized. “All they had to do was lie down in the black grass and backtrack far enough to let us walk



right into their trap. That explains why there was no Roach smell until we were right on top of it, and why the inside of the hill reeked as well. What happened to my two Hard Chargers? What happened to PFC Davis?"

There was a ghastly image, of the ebony soldier, stripped from the waist up, her head and arms missing, and a horde of Roaches feeding on her body.

Renquist made a noise that was half regret, half anger. In a more subdued voice, he asked, "What happened to Knotts?"

The next image showed the Marine, unconscious and bloody after a severe beating, and being dragged by a handful of Roaches straining with his weight. They'd put him on a woven mat, which one of those camel/horses pulled away and into the nearest teleport-hill. Knotts was now at the outpost, alive, and hanging upside down from a suspended cable, along with several other surviving, but unconscious outpost personnel. It was clear that the small group was being kept alive as bait, as they were right out in the open and highly visible, in the hopes that their plight would draw the rest of the Marines out.

"We have to extract that man." Renquist said.

"Are you serious?" Dempsey squealed. "We can't just march into Roach Central and pick him up! That's exactly what they want us to do!"

"I'd do it for you." Renquist replied, but he quickly reconsidered. "Well, maybe not."

"Was that a joke, Staff Sergeant?" Dempsey gulped.

"Maybe we can get to him." Rubalcava spoke up. "How close is the nearest teleport to Knott's position?"

The replying image displayed a bird's eye view of the small hill, heavily guarded by Roaches, and about two hundred yards from where Knotts and the other Space Corps personnel hung. Even worse, there were dozens of Roaches visible, either loitering or scattering about in the area.

"What are they doing?" Rube asked.

The crisscrossing looked random to me as well.

"We can't make it through all those bugs." Dempsey whined. "Man, why did I get out of bed this morning? We are going to die out here today."

"We're already dead, remember?" Dobson reminded him. "We're Non-Retrieval."

"Staff Sergeant, when you give the order," Rube volunteered. "I'm ready to go."

"Yeah, I'll second that." Brickwell nodded.

"Let's do it now." Renquist tightened the grip on his weapon. "Send us out there!"

'There is something you have not been made aware of.' The Wehntewisell said.

"What's that?" Renquist asked.

'There will be a Cleansing.'

More images appeared in our midst, but since these were based on events that hadn't happened yet, they were more indistinct than the previous ones. It was the scene of a broad plain, and shortly after sunrise. A long column of some fifty Wehntewisell were visible, spread about ten feet apart, and as the sun began to rise in the sky in fast forward, these pineapples began to wither away. The Wehntewisell were giving up their life essences, and sacrificing them for the planet they loved so much. Their bodies became empty shells, and they crumpled into yellowing, decaying masses. As the sun reached higher into the heavens, these martyrs began smoldering, and soon, flames were engulfing the entire row.

Working in concert with them, other trees and grasses also dried themselves, and the living fire from the Wehntewisell began to expand further out. The fire became a great, writhing red wall, and it started to pick up speed as it went. It was a directed fire as well, spreading out in a great outward arc, and as the group of men watched, it aimed itself at the outpost. Like a clenching fist, the wall of flames began sweeping across the transports, the tents, the Roaches and the captured humans.

Other images appeared, of other, similar fires all over the planet. They were aimed at the Roach nests, their colonies and material warehouses. Even the underground areas were going to have their entrance tunnels funneled with fire, from several points at once and until the heat burned away all the oxygen, and all the Roaches were destroyed. The Wehntewisell underground would spontaneously combust as well, burning whatever combustible material was available in an attempt to unite with the fires raging outside.

The Wehntewisell were aware that the Roaches would start mass killing their brethren, once they realized the destruction that the trees had set in motion. The Wehntewisell were also aware that it was the only option they had that would guarantee that all of the Roaches' diseases would be eradicated, and that their sinister taint would be forever eliminated from their world.

The blaze would continue still, sterilizing any and all places where Roaches had set foot, and even to surrounding places where too much of their contaminated air had reached. Thousands of hectares of fertile land were reduced into great swaths of dark ashes. The entire planet seemed to be smoldering with smoke.

"Is this happening right now?" I asked in disbelief.

'By your standards of time, zero-eight-hundred hours is when the flames will reach the outpost.' The Wehntewisell replied.

"How much of your planet are you planning on burning?" Renquist wondered.

'One of four parts.'

"One fourth of Lesenia is going to be destroyed?" Dobson gaped. "What about all the animals?"

Several images replaced the fiery ones, of massively crowded beasts and birds standing idly, some impatiently, as they waited for the Cleansing to be done with. They all realized the necessity of the fire, and they were waiting for the rebuilding and the replanting to begin once it was all over.

"Seven hours, Staff Sergeant." Rube checked his GPS. "That's how much time we have to rescue Knotts before the fire gets there."

"Show me Knotts again." Renquist requested, looking about ready to lose his cool.

A single image appeared, of the unconscious Marine, and the other personnel hanging beside him. Renquist, and a couple of the others leaned closer to consider one bizarre detail they hadn't noticed before.

"Why are all these people green?" The Staff Sergeant voiced.

I leaned forward to stare at the image closer, and sure enough, Renk was right.

The image changed, to Knotts being dragged into an underground chamber. There was a huge vat made of some kind of secretion that looked like dried mucus, and it was filled with a sickly looking green liquid. As the observers watched, the Roaches stripped the Marine of his cammies, and used a thick bowl-shaped frond to scoop up the liquid and pour it all over the soldier's body. The liquid hardened around the soldier like a shell, and somehow, the men knew that Knotts' bodily functions had been reduced to a

state of hibernation.

“What the hell is that for?” Dobson asked.

The scene shifted, to a smaller underground chamber. In it, several Roaches had an outpost woman tied down to a leisure chair with vines. Her skin was fully green, and beside the woman stood two pensive Wehteweissell. The Roaches were asking questions, and the Wehteweissell were repeating the questions into the woman’s mind. Incredibly, and even though the woman’s body was in a state of near hibernation, her mind was answering the queries.

“They’re interrogating her.” Renquist said. “This is how the Roaches are going to get onto the Links, boys, by getting into our heads and taking the information right out of us! And if they make it all the way back to Earth, you all know as well as I do, that we are as good as gone as the major players in the universe! We will be the food of choice for these fucking insects!”

The severity of the situation started to sink in.

“We cannot allow that to happen.” Renquist continued. “We will make every attempt to rescue Knotts and the others, but if we can’t, we have to make sure that our knowledge does not end being used against us! Do you get me, Marines?”

“We get you.” Rube nodded.

“So we pop out of the teleporter,” Dobson figured. “We drive the Roaches back, rescue the prisoners, and then what?”

“Can we see the transports one more time, please?” Rube asked.

The three plain Unilink Transports came into view, with the oddly colored Purple Haze sitting right beside them. They were very close to the teleport-hill.

“Douglas, I want you to tell me that at least one of those ships is Pulse worthy.”

I peered as closely at the holographic image as I could. “We know that the Pulse Magnifiers on the One-Twenty-Six are shot. Let’s take a look at the rest. Transport one has some visible damage on its side, oh, and look at the hatch, its bent beyond proper closing. Transport two doesn’t look too bad, and number three looks great.”

“One of those is going to be our ride home.” Dobson allowed himself a smile. “Hell yeah!”

“Oorah!” Brickwell gave him a high five.

“Wait.” I stopped the celebrating. “We don’t know how much Pulse energy there is in either one of those. They might be empty. Can we see the inside control panels of either one of those two transports?”

‘That is not in the collective memory.’ The Wehteweissell replied. ‘We are unable to leave the ground, and move on an artificial surface. We might send a small animal, or a bird, to enter the vessel and gaze upon it, but this entity may not understand the complexity of the controls.’

“Okay. What about the Pulse Generators? Can you show me that? It would be a big computer sitting inside the command tent.”

The large reactor, the size of two Earth refrigerators side by side, appeared next.

“It looks like its working.” I said. “As long as no Roaches shut it off, I should be able to draw power from it and into the transport. And in the case that we can’t Pulse out, I can at least send a better message to CP-1 detailing our situation.”

“And the teleport-hill is close enough that we can fall back to it, if we really have to.” Rube pointed out.

“That’s a plan.” Renquist said. “Rescue the hostages, power up the transport, and get the hell out before that fire comes knocking at our door. Let’s go tell the others.”

A few minutes later, the six men were conferring with the three sentries. All were in agreement except Dempsey, who did his usual bitching and moaning.

“A little over six and a half hours until show time.” Rube reminded the Staff Sergeant.

“Just enough time to get some shut-eye.” Renquist said. “Douglas, would you mind asking your new buddies to ship us out somewhere far away from any Roaches?”

I did, and a few minutes after, the Wehntewisell were lumbering out of the cave, except for one, and the nine of us were taking their place.

“Okay,” I explained. “They said to step as far back as you can, and to stay away from the mouth of the cave.”

“We kinda figured that one out already.” Strawberry commented dryly. “But thanks for the heads-up.”

Once everyone was inside, I looked back at the lone pineapple. “I guess we’re ready.”

I was a little surprised when I discovered that I could still hear the thoughts of the Wehntewisell. The Marines were all chatting among themselves by then, and didn’t seem to be catching the alien thoughts as I was.

I sensed as the tree reached out to the mass of hard dirt all around us, and uttered a short chant in a language I didn’t recognize. It almost sounded like a quick prayer. This made some process start, and the entire hill started to rumble lightly, as if a bunch of the pineapples were having a party on top. Some loose dirt rolled down the sides of the opening, and the mouth of the little cave started closing shut. Quickly, the hole shrunk to the size of a beach ball, and continued shrinking until we were in complete darkness.

“Like being buried alive.” Strawberry sounded anxious.

“This is weird.” Dobson said.

“Not weird, this is awesome!” Brickwell countered.

“Uh, we’re going to feel lightheaded for a moment.” I informed the crowd. “But it will pass soon.” I hope, I thought to myself.

The thought of being buried alive scared me, and I took a deep breath to try and relax my body. Looking back, I noticed that a couple of the Marines had already pulled out small flashlights, and I began to wonder what pocket or part of my backpack they were in. It was still Finn’s backpack, I had to remind myself, and not mine.

It was kind of weird, but I thought I could sense some of the fears emanating from some of the other soldiers as well.

Then, I got the sensation in my stomach, of riding down an elevator, but this only lasted for a second or two.

This had bothered some of the others, most notably Nelson, but don’t ask me how I knew that. I just kind of sensed it.

The hill started to rumble again, and the sound of scurrying dirt could be heard. It was coming from a completely unexpected direction, however, almost directly behind us. The small opening appeared, but instead of daylight, we were rewarded with moonlight.

“We must be somewhere on the other side of the planet.” Strawberry blurted out. “It looks like the middle of the night out here.”

As soon as the opening was big enough, and against the Wehntewisell’s cautious

directions, the Marines quickly exited the hill, and I followed right along with them.

5

“Platoon 10-20’s come to town,  
“Platoon 10-20’s come to town,  
tougher hombres can’t be found.  
tougher hombres can’t be found.  
We’re gonna blast some Roaches today,  
We’re gonna blast some Roaches today,  
‘cuz Platoon 10-20, we don’t play.  
‘cuz Platoon 10-20, we don’t play.  
So to any hellbugs on this rock,  
So to any hellbugs on this rock,  
Platoon 10-20 won’t be stopped.  
Platoon 10-20 won’t be stopped.  
Ten! Ten!  
Twenty! Twenty!  
Ten! Ten!  
Twenty! Twenty!  
Soldier down behind enemy lines!  
Soldier down behind enemy lines!  
Platoon 10-20’s going in double-time!  
Platoon 10-20’s going in double-time!  
We find our man, we get him out!  
We find our man, we get him out!  
That’s what 10-20’s all about!  
That’s what 10-20’s all about!  
It’s time to stand our ground and fight,  
It’s time to stand our ground and fight,  
‘cuz at 10-20 it’s do or die!  
‘cuz at 10-20 it’s do or die!  
Ten! Ten!  
Twenty! Twenty!  
Ten! Ten!”  
Twenty! Twenty!”

“Hold still a sec.” Rubalcava said. He stepped behind me, rummaged through my pack. A minute later, he handed me a small flashlight. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

The focused beams of light led us over the dark landscape, and I could see plenty of Wehnteweiss all around as we walked. Some of these were curious enough to stretch their leaves out and touch some of us, on the arms or back, but rarely on the head, as if they held some sort of respect for this portion of the body.

I hadn’t even imagined that there might be little ones, but I came across them every

so often. They were only a couple of feet tall, and they looked like perfect miniature copies of the adults. As I stopped to shine a light on one of these young ones, it reached out with a nimble leaf and surrounded my hand.

I closed my eyes to see if it communicated like the others.

Instead of being immersed in a great black cloud, however, I found myself staring at the black chalkboard of my mind. A two dimensional image came forth, it was a pretty picture of a plain where a soft breeze rustled over a stretch of black grass, overlooking a placid lake. Several small pineapples were gazing over the serene landscape. That was a time of freedom, I understood, before Roaches or humanity had claimed the planet.

The image blurred, and shifted to another, where the young pineapple that was communicating with me had been standing in a forest, and playfully lifting its leaves in trying to catch the happy and colorful young birds that were teasing it. Whenever the tree managed to catch a bird, it would wrap it within its leaves, and give it a sort of joyous blessing, before the bird was released. This was considered a form of love, I understood.

‘This happy come back?’ The young plant asked.

The question was crude, and the voice reminiscent of a little boy’s, but I got the gist of it. I answered, “Yes. Once the Roaches are gone, you will get your world back.”

The scene faded, and I sensed an ominous dread sweeping through the young plant before me. A new image rose, of planet Lesenia hosting a huge Space Corps Recruit Station. Big machines came in to level giant patches of trees, to build a colony, and later a city with roads, and soon there were several cities lighting up the black expanse of night on the planet’s surface. I saw recruits arriving by the hundreds, even thousands, marching, running, doing jumping jacks and brandishing plasma rifles. And I saw war, once these recruits graduated from their training, war among the rest of the worlds surrounding Lesenia. The Wehteweissell before me conveyed a feeling of deep regret, and slowly withdrew its contact with me.

Those last few thoughts were human, I realized, and I wondered which of us could be having them, when I heard Renquist’s sharp voice slicing through the night.

“Get away from me!” He said, apparently barking at another Wehteweissell up ahead.

Along with the rest of the squad, I stepped clear of all the pineapples.

Renk was still barking. “No grab-assin’ (horseplay), jarheads. Roll out your fart sacks (sleeping bags) and ree-tire! We are heading out to Fiddler’s Green tomorrow, and I want to be prim and proper when I get there.”

I pointed my flashlight at Rube, while he got his sleeping bag off his pack, and a minute later, he returned the favor.

“I see that Renquist is all motivated again.” I smirked.

“Yeah, that guy’s a Hard Charger.” Rube nodded, as he tried to find a good, flat patch to lay his bag on. “He prefers a straight-up battle to all this sneaking around bullshit. One he’s got the enemy in his sights, he’s a hundred percent again.”

“What did he mean when he said Fiddler’s Green?”

“Paradise.”

“Paradise? We’re heading out to paradise tomorrow?”

“He meant Heaven.” Rube explained. “Some of us may not be coming back tomorrow.”

The Marines had a morbid sense of humor sometimes, I thought. “Did you catch

what Renquist was thinking, just a couple of minutes ago?”

“No. What was it?”

I told Rube about the vision I had, of recruits running all over the planet, and wars all over the solar system.

“Damn.” Rube muttered. “I hope the trees don’t turn against us. I hope they don’t roast us like they’re planning on doing to the Roaches.”

“Do you think they might do that? We’re supposed to be the good guys here.”

Rube shrugged. “I hope they see us as the good guys, but if they want their planet back, bad enough to set a quarter of it on fire, I think we’d better play it safe just in case. The Staff Sergeant thinking about colonization and conquering, that doesn’t make the best impression of us. And what happens if the trees start getting sick from our bacteria, like they are from the Roaches?”

I dragged my sleeping bag over next to where Rube parked his.

“Three feet apart.” Rube cautioned. “I don’t want your leg draped across my thighs in the morning. Wouldn’t look right for morale, and all that shit.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

Once I’d set up my bag, I crawled in, but I left the zipper open in case I had to get up right away, as Rube suggested. Renquist was barking something about a one hour fire-watch for some of the Marines, with him volunteering to go first.

“Can you imagine, not having been in a war so long that these beings have lost the concept of what war even is?” Rube asked, and I clicked the light on briefly to see him lying down with his hands under his head. “Back on Earth, it’s been one war after another, and now we’ve succeeded in taking war into space. I’m losing the concept of what it is to have peace.”

“The pineapples have no weapons.” I concurred. “They have no defenses, they have no way to prevent an invasive species from coming in and stomping all over them.”

“Well, they do have their mental powers.”

“Which they use for nurturing animals and plants, and for maintaining ecological cycles. If they could make something’s brain explode, don’t you think they would have done that to the Roaches by now?”

“Maybe they’re waiting for the right moment.”

“No, they’re not evil beings. They’re righteous, like monks.”

“Yeah.” Rube agreed. “You get the feeling that maybe this is a sort of paradise, and that just by showing up, the Roaches and us are fucking it up?”

“I’ve been thinking that, a little.”

“Maybe human beings don’t deserve a paradise, if all we’re going to do is fuck it all up.” Rube stifled a yawn. “Try to get some sleep, man. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

Maybe Rube was right, I thought. Maybe humans didn’t deserve a paradise.

I lay there a little while, before the day’s exhaustion set in, and I too drifted off to sleep.

Early the next morning, I was awaked to the sound of a buzzsaw, but once my head focused on the grating sound, I discovered it was Renquist’s raspy voice instead.

“You heard me, ladies!” The Staff Sergeant’s shouting gave me instant irritation. “It’s show time! Get your butts out of your fart sacks before I start kicking them out. And let me tell you, having a size twelve boot jammed in between your butt cheeks is not a

good thing to have!”

A heavy hand began slapping at the side of my head. “Rise and shine, meathead.”

It was Mason, fully dressed and going around making sure everyone was roused.

“I’m awake.” I said impatiently, and to prove it, I sat up.

Mason turned away and began slapping on Rube’s head next. “Time to pack your gear, man. We’ve got us a battle to fight.”

Rube ducked his head into the sleeping bag, and said, “Mommy, the monster’s come back! It’s the one from all my nightmares!”

“Fuck you.” Mason stood up, and went to bother someone else.

Rube poked his head out at me. “Is the monster gone?”

“Yeah.” I chuckled.

“Well all right!” Rube sat up. “We’ve got a fresh set of cammies in our packs. Let’s get geared up and ready to roll!”

As I was getting dressed, I noticed that Dempsey was hounding Renquist like a lost child, but twice as loud.

“We’ve only got nine rifles, if you count that Spaceman.” Dempsey whined. “And you seriously expect us to take on four Roach nests? Are you kidding me? We should just grab a transport and head out, and once we round up enough troops, we can come back here and launch a major assault on this planet!”

“What if the Roaches aren’t here when we come back?” Renquist countered. “What if they figure out how to use the Link System before then, and they Pulse all the way out to your family’s backyard?”

“The Roaches don’t know the coordinates to my family’s house.”

“That was a hypothetical statement, you asshole.” Renk snapped. “Finish getting your gear together before I decide to put you in charge of retrieving live rounds (flying bullets) for me.”

Mason was walking past us, mumbling, “What a rat turd, what a waste of space.”

I watched as the big lout lumbered past, just to make sure he wouldn’t slap my head again, before I looked back at Dempsey. Apparently, he hadn’t gotten the hint, because he was still hounding Renquist like a dog wanting attention.

I glanced at Rubalcava. “What is it with that guy? I mean, the rest of you Marines all bring something to the table, like combat skills or versatility, and you with your theories. But what about Dempsey? What does he provide that makes him worth bringing along?”

“Long story short, he’s our good luck charm.” Rube explained. “We get ourselves in some real scrapes sometimes, and just when it looks as if our platoon is about to bite the bullet, just when things get to their absolute worst, Dempsey comes through. It’s crazy, because he can turn the tide of a battle all by himself. I’ll give you some examples.

“One time, the platoon got pinned against a ravine wall, and the Roaches were massing up right in front of us. Dempsey went freakazoid, like he’s doing now, and he makes like a mountain climber and starts up the side of the ravine. We didn’t even see what he was doing until he was three quarters of the way up. He sets off this rockslide, and a bunch of us barely had enough time to get out of the way, but the rockslide keeps on building momentum and smashes right into the wall of Roaches, scattering them all over the place. The Roaches thought we’d started the rockslide deliberately, and they fell back in case we tried to set off another one. This gave us the chance to find a better position to defend from, and some choppers came by a little later to zoom some rockets



up the Roaches' butts, and we got out of it with only minor losses.

"Another time," Rube continued. "We're under heavy fire again, and Dempsey freaks out after a heat blast sets his backpack on fire. He's jumping up and down and slapping at his back trying to put the fire out, and he trips on his own two feet and accidentally pulls the trigger on his Spitfire. It's a one in a million shot, because the plasma bolt goes right into this huge pile of brush that we hadn't been paying attention to. What we don't know, is that behind the brush is the core of a Roach nest, and this is a highly volatile piece of shit. It blows up, killing all kinds of Roaches in the process, and just like that we have more boots on the ground than they do.

"The guy may look like he's too dumb to figure out how to carry his own weight, but I'm telling you, the universe has a crush on him. It has bent over backwards to keep that guy alive, and the rest of us right along with him." Rube shook his head. "I just hope he has that mutant luck with him today, because we're going to need it."

We quickly finished gearing up.

"All eyes and ears on me." Renquist called us to attention. "This is the word. We will enter the transport-hill, and be shipped out to the location nearest the outpost. Once there, this is how we will organize ourselves. Rubalcava and myself will climb to the top of the hill, both to supervise the situation and to provide suppressing fire. Two teams of two Marines each will simultaneously round the sides of the hill. Mason and Brickwell will head toward one direction, while Strawberry and Dobson go in the other. Once we are in position by the end of the hill facing the outpost, Mason and Strawberry will attempt to extract the captured humans, while the remaining four of us will continue to fire and keep the Roaches off those two Marines' backs. If we are unable to extract the captives, we will render them unusable to the enemy."

All of us knew what that meant.

"While this is going on," Renk continued. "Dempsey and Neelson will escort and defend Spaceman Douglas to the second transport. Douglas will ascertain the condition of the transport, and if it is incapable of operating, he will move on to the third transport. Spaceman Douglas will make every attempt to load the Pulse Magnifiers on one of these transports, and have the vessel ready to Pulse out once our main objective has been achieved. We will have approximately forty-five minutes to carry this plan out, and we are under the deadline of an approaching wall of fire from beyond the transport end of the field. If you are not inside the transport with the main body of our squad... You will be left behind, to your detriment."

It was a sobering speech.

"Now, who's ready to make like a hero?" Renquist asked.

"Oorah!" Brickwell shouted.

"Oorah!" All of the others, except Dempsey and myself, followed suit.

"Then let's get this entourage underway." Renquist ordered. "To the rock elevator from Hell!"

The nine of us filed into the hill mouth, and even though the sun was already starting to rise, the innards were still very dark. Without our flashlights in hand to aid us, we kept bumping into one another.

"Move further back, Dempsey." Dobson complained, and I could hear him slap the other soldier's pack. "You've got plenty of room."

"I have to be one of the first ones out." Dempsey protested. "I have to help secure

the transport.”

“You mean you have to go hide in the transport.” Dobson pushed him further inside. “Move your ass!”

“Let’s keep it tight.” Renquist said. “Nuts to butts.”

“That’s what Mason likes.” Dempsey insulted.

“Where are you, little man?” Mason’s voice growled. “I’ll show you some nuts!”

“Mason, Strawberry, I want both of you up front.” Renquist tried to break the friction between his men. “Packs on the floor, grenades and extra plasma clips at the ready.”

“We’re all inside, Staff Sergeant.” Strawberry commented, as we dropped our bulky gear.

A solitary Wehnteweissell slowly crept into the cave mouth, laboriously pulling itself from the black grass, and onto the gray soil. It wasn’t as tall as the others, as it stood at four feet if you didn’t include the leaves, and I wondered if maybe it was an adolescent. In my mind’s eye, I could almost see the short tendrils that the creature used to propel its body along the ground.

“Do you think they’ve started that fire yet?” Rubalcava asked.

“They’d better have.” Brickwell replied. “Once the Roaches see the smoke from that thing, it’ll scare the crap out of them. I bet they’ll abandon the entire outpost trying to get away from it.”

“As long as we don’t get caught in the blaze, I’m all for it.” Dobson related.

In my head, I could already see the fire. It was a giant wall of flames, impossibly high at twenty to thirty feet, and it raced along the fertile landscape at an unbelievable speed. Gulping at its intensity, I saw the destruction, complete and unforgiving, that the flames left in their wake. Scorched, blackened ashes were all that remained of the lush landscape, and everything combustible was gone. Even the surfaces of boulders had been charred. It was as if the hand of God was sweeping across the planet.

I glanced around, but nobody else seemed to be catching the visions I was. “The fire has been started.” I said simply.

“How do you know?” Dempsey asked.

“Cut the chatter, jarhead.” Renquist said. “I think he’s right.”

It was as if the Wehnteweissell had opened up some part of my brain, and they’d forgotten to turn it off, I surmised. Wondering what else I could catch a glimpse of, I shut my eyes and allowed my mind to roam freely.

My thoughts centered on the young Wehnteweissell at the cave mouth. Emotions of anxiety and fear were exuding from the being’s mind, of the horrors of war that the naïve creature had recently been exposed to. It felt a gnawing dread that it was about to die.

The Marines around me, they were all having their own thoughts as well. These were images of their particular version of home, or the faces of their loved ones. Some of the men thought about their achievements, or their disappointments, and a few images were so strong I was able to pick out who was thinking them.

I saw Staff Sergeant Renquist, who had been obsessed with emulating his cold and heartless father, a strong military man like him. In this bitter man’s life, there was the Marine Division, and nothing else, and without this drive there would only remain an empty void. I saw Mason’s thoughts as well, past the cruel and tough exterior, and to a past when he was married, and had two children. Now, he was a divorced drunk, and

prohibited from seeing his offspring, and I could see that he'd become as bitter as Renquist. Dempsey's head was a confused tangle of knots; he wanted attention, he wanted glory, but he wasn't secure enough to push his worries away or relaxed enough to become his ideal self. His fear was strong enough to infect me, however, and when I realized this was happening, I pushed him, and the rest of the Marines, out of my thoughts.

I reached out to the Wehnteweisell again, sensing its joyful memory of how it had been assigned to watch over a tiny nest of bat-like birds. It eased the young birds' anxieties, as the parents flew off to acquire nourishment for them, and it made the Wehnteweisell happy when it sensed that the babies considered the tree to be a third parent. Then came the day when the Roaches arrived, and when this young pineapple had been torn away from its task and enslaved into the vast, living machine that now served the cruel Roach masters. It understood well why such a large portion of their planet was being sacrificed. It was also wondering if it would ever see those bat-birds again. Then, the pineapple hummed a short song, more symbolic than essential, before it moved on.

As I stood there, among the creature's innermost thoughts, I could feel it reaching out with its mind. It was scanning along the inner surface of the cave, reaching far into the hard dirt, to an ancient circuitry that lay embedded within. There were hidden, narrow circuit boards there, built untold eons ago by long forgotten space travelers, and formed from such an extremely advanced design, that the technology was able to both analyze and repair itself. The circuitry had far outlasted its original designers, and not even an ancient race like the Wehnteweisell remembered who the actual builders were, or what they even looked like.

Into these panels, the young Wehnteweisell's mind reached, to the liquid metal switches that could be activated by the electrical impulses of the tree's mere thoughts. I watched as the liquids flowed from one juncture to another, a tiny fraction of space apart, and this triggered the entire inside of the hill into trans-dimensional operation. The physical integrity of the entrance changed, becoming almost fluid, and its new properties allowed the fluid dirt to flow together and seal the entrance shut.

The circuitry switched into its next phase, and the cargo of nine humans, plus one big-ass pineapple, was instantly transported to a location several thousand miles away. The group was moved into another transporter-hill, built exactly like the one they'd left behind, and I suddenly knew that there were several hundred hills existing all over the planet.

The hard dirt wall began to disintegrate, once again from an unexpected direction, and a strong shaft of sunlight pierced in the darkness of the small cave. The sunlight was on a level plane with the hill, blinding us temporarily as the opening enlarged into its usual dimensions.

Just as our eyes finished adjusting, we saw the distortion of air from the Roaches' heat beams, heading right for us. Mason and Strawberry had been shuffling to reach the new position of the hill's mouth, as they'd been directed to, but only Strawberry managed to jump out of harm's way.

Mason grunted as the two separate heat beams jarred his body from opposing directions, and their combined fury cause the soldier's frail flesh to explode into the cave. Even as far back as I was standing, bits of muscle and bone slapped into my face, and one human fragment even made it into my mouth as I opened it up to gasp at the atrocity.

The young Wehnteweissell, unable to move that quickly to begin with, exploded a second after.

“It’s an ambush!” Rube cried out. “Everybody down!”

“No!” Renquist refuted, instantly angry at Mason’s loss. He ran up the edge of the opening. “I only see a handful of them, hiding among the transports. Move out now, before they mass up against us! I’m taking Mason’s place!”

“I’ve got you covered, Staff Sergeant!” Brickwell threw himself on the ground, in the middle of the cave opening.

They were all firing toward the transports, I saw.

Renquist was out, followed in the opposite direction by Strawberry, and both Dobson and Brickwell stepped up to take their places.

I grimaced when I heard a flash bomb going off.

Rubalcava moved forward, gauging the situation quickly. “Two Roaches left! The rest of you are going to have to deal with them. Brick, Dobson, let’s go!”

The three of them disappeared around the edges of the hill.

Dempsey took one spot, and I jumped over to the other one. The two remaining Roaches were both standing and firing at the Marines who’d just exited, and I watched as the normally uneasy and frantic soldier steadily aimed, popped off a shot, aimed, and popped off a second shot. Both Roaches were down a fraction of a moment later.

Dempsey lowered his weapon and laughed in disbelief. “Did you just see that shit? You have to tell the guys when they get back, because the aren’t gonna believe me! Two shots, two kills, man!”

I hardly believed it myself. I glanced back into the cave, noticing that Neelson hadn’t budged from his spot. “Are you ready for this?”

Neelson nodded unconvincingly.

Dempsey stepped out and quickly looked to either side. “We’re clear! Let’s go!”

He led the charge, with me following close behind, and Neelson several yards back. We cleared the thirty or so yards in record time, with Dempsey quickly jumping into the second transport ahead of me. Just as I was about follow, he jumped back out, and we both ended up on the ground.

“Sorry, man!” He scrambled to his feet. “They took out a bunch of panels and wiring and shit on this one!” He bolted past me toward the third transport.

I stuck my head in, in case the transport was still functional, but it wasn’t. A lot of its control panel had been taken apart. As I headed toward the third transport, I noticed that Neelson was just arriving, and for some reason this infuriated me. Dempsey could be labeled the chicken-shit of the outfit, or even me, but the thought that there was someone even more cowardly than the two of us pissed me the hell off.

“You have to keep up with us!” I shouted, but even so, I quickly left him behind.

Dempsey was sticking his head out of the third transport’s hatch. “This one’s good, man! You can fly us out of here!”

I went in and looked. The control panel was sound, and everything else looked in order. Then I looked up at the Plasti-Shield.

“Let’s go, man! Start this bitch up!” Dempsey urged.

I pointed at the thick window, where a bolt of plasma had very recently struck the plastic, and cracked it. “If we try Pulse off the planet, the window will collapse and we’ll die. We can only Pulse on-planet.”

“Mother-fucker!” Dempsey screamed. “What good is that gonna do? The whole fucking planet is on fire!”

“What?”

“Don’t you get it?” Dempsey cried out. “These pineapple fucks, they don’t want us here! They want to get rid of us, just like they’re getting rid of the Roaches! They’re going to burn this whole planet to shit! And not a quarter of it, either. I mean all of it!”

I thought back to that young Wehteweissell that had accompanied us into the hill, the one who had been splattered all over the place, right beside Mason. They had chosen that one, because it was a young one, and because the rest of the trees hadn’t told it the entire plan. This way, none of the humans could mentally gather information from it that it hadn’t been given. We’d been set-up by a bunch of plants, and it was only through Dempsey’s uncanny intuition that we’d found out ahead of schedule.

“You’re right.” I chuckled, and my own psychic intuition kicked in. “They’re going to burn up the entire planet.” I glanced out the window, but the angle was all wrong. I couldn’t see the flames from there. “Not only that, but they lied about the timing, too. The flames are going to reach us a lot faster than we figured.”

“Fucking great! What do we do now?”

“I guess we die like rats.” I said, but just having this thought made me angry. Angry enough to lash out at the next thing that dared to step in front of my face. “Or, we can die like Marines!”

Like a scared rabbit, Neelson stood before the hatch, timidly clutching his rifle.

“Move!” I yelled, and once he did, I jumped out, and started to run back toward the hill.

“Where are you going?” Dempsey called out after me.

My strides didn’t falter, nor did my fury, and as I reached the entrance of the hill, and witnessed the gore that was once Mason, I remembered the radio built into my helmet. I pulled the microphone end out near my mouth, knowing it would activate automatically. “Staff Sergeant Renquist, this is Spaceman Douglas.”

“Go ahead.”

“All transports are out of commission.” I said, and I felt even angrier than before. We’d tried every option, and every time, the door had been slammed right into our faces. “Repeat, all transports are a No Go! Also, the Wehteweissell are planning to burn up the entire planet, not just a fourth of it, and they will be burning all of us right along with it.”

“Ain’t that just beautiful?” Renquist sounded as if he was laughing. “You hear that, jarheads? Planet Murphy’s Law has pulled out all the stops on us! Fiddler’s Green, here we come!”

“What’s the word, Staff Sergeant?” This sounded like Dobson.

“We will proceed with the extraction.” Renquist’s voice sharpened. “And we will give these Roaches one hell of a send-off! Dempsey, Neelson, Douglas, won’t you come join the party?”

I slid the mike shut, so it would be out of my way while I cursed.

“Our goose is cooked!” Dempsey came to a stop beside me. He was panting as if he’d just run back from the transport.

“Where’s Neelson?”

Dempsey turned back, but the last Marine was nowhere in sight. He turned back to me and shrugged. “Praying, probably. What are we going to do?”

“I guess we back up the others.”

“There’s no point.” Dempsey replied. “We’re all going to die out here, anyway. What does it matter if we get Knotts and the others or not, if we’re all about to be part of the biggest barbecue the universe has ever seen?”

“You can stay here, if you want.” I said, checking the tiny readout on the plasma rifle in my hands. It was at one hundred percent.

Without another word, I left him behind.

I’d rounded about fifty feet of the hill, when I caught sight of Brickwell. He was leaning tight against and outcrop of dirt, and firing almost without taking a pause.

“Douglas here.” I announced, as I got in closer. “What’s the situation?”

“We are in the Galactic Suck of All Ages.” Brickwell cursed. “That first skirmish with the transports warned the rest of the Roaches up here, and a bunch of them were already on their way to investigate, when they ran into us. Now, there’s so many of them firing at us that we can’t budge but an inch a time.”

“Where’s Renquist?”

“About twenty feet ahead.” Brickwell informed me. “He’s hiding behind a short dirt wall, that’s part of the defenses the Roaches were setting up, but Renk got to it before they could. He’s pinned down, though, and that wall’s been getting nailed non-stop.”

A cloud of dirt exploded from the hillside, just a couple of feet above Brickwell’s head. Crumbs showered down on the two of us.

Brickwell moved back by a few inches. “They’re getting a little ballsy, now that they know there’s only about five rifles firing at them.”

“What can I do?”

“Do you know how to use a flash bomb?”

“Yeah. We threw a live one back in recruit training.”

“Well, you’re about to throw a live one again.” Brickwell replied, quickly taking off the belt around his waist. “Unless you think you can shoot better than me.”

“I’ll take the grenades.”

“Okay, set them for five seconds. Jump out, toss them, and jump back. Do it that quick or else you’re burnt toast, and if you’re still holding a live grenade, you’ll be taking me down along with you. We don’t want that, okay?”

The landscape was teeming with Roaches.

“Where do I aim? They’re everywhere!”

Another section of dirt detonated Brickwell’s refuge in half.

“We’re going to have move back, if we don’t do something right now!” Brickwell cried out. “Just aim anywhere you see a large bunch of Roaches!”

I unclipped one of the tennis ball sized grenades from the belt, and activated it. It had a good weight to it, I realized, as I set its small timer to five seconds. The timer’s countdown only began once I pressed a red button with my thumb, and I could do this while I positioned myself to throw.

I slipped back by about four feet, jumped out into the open, and pressed the button as I launched the grenade. Without waiting, I jumped aside and onto the ground, then rolled as close to the hill as I could get.

When the grenade went off, Brickwell stood up straight and fired about half a dozen shots, then crouched back to his previous position behind the crumbling outcropping.

“That was good! Toss ‘em another one! Right down their throats!”

Another grenade blast could be heard from the opposite side of the hill.

"I'm glad somebody's still alive over there." Brickwell commented.

I set the next grenade, just before mounds of dirt started erupting only a handful of feet from me. I couldn't move any closer to the hill, because my back was already on it, and the heat blasts were getting too close for comfort.

"We're going to have to pull back!" Brickwell said. "We don't have anything big enough to drive back the Roaches! We need some kind of massive diversion!"

A diversion? I thought, and I had a sudden idea. "Do you have a GPS tracker?"

"Yeah."

"Let me have it!" I took the device, and set it to act as a beacon. I hoped the device was as sturdy as it looked. "Okay, I'm tossing a grenade out to, uh, about nine o'clock, to drive back the Roaches coming in on the left. Ready?"

"Yeah."

I jumped out and tossed the grenade, then got out of the way as three heat blasts started ripping up the ground beside me. In my head, I counted down the five seconds, and once I heard the grenade go off, I jumped out again and tossed the GPS tracker directly over Brickwell's head. It landed about a third of the way between the hill and the hanging prisoners.

"Was that my tracker?" Brickwell asked. "You know those don't blow up, right?"

I didn't answer, because I was already running full throttle away from the man. As I ran, I pulled out the helmet's microphone stick, sure that everyone was listening to my heavy breaths as I fled the battle. "This is Spaceman Douglas! I have one major league diversion coming up, but you have to hold your position for about four minutes!"

"What are you up to, Douglas?" Renquist came through.

I'd already slid the mike out of the way, as I ran around the hill. I paused near the cave mouth, when I saw Dempsey standing just inside. He was pointing his weapon at me.

"Shit! I thought you were a Roach!" He said. "I almost shot you!"

"What are you doing back here?" I asked, suddenly irate that he wasn't helping.

"Waiting to die, I guess."

"Do you want to be a hero today?" I asked. "Right now?"

Dempsey's face showed confusion, but I didn't have time to wait for him to make up his mind. I started racing toward the transports.

"Wait!" He shouted, but I didn't pause. Whether or not he joined me, I was going through with my planned diversion.

I made a beeline for the third transport, and jumped into its hatch. In two more seconds, I was glancing down at the control panel, and activating switches. The Pulse Magnifiers were all at fifty percent or so, which was good enough for what I had in mind. I activated the Nav-Com, and it hooked with the outpost computer a second later, and through that, I began to scan the area for the GPS beacon.

Dempsey jumped through the hatch. "What are you doing? I thought you said this thing couldn't fly?"

"Not off-planet." I answered. "If you want to help the others, shut the hatch."

Surprisingly, he did.

The Nav-Com beeped that it had located the beacon, and I entered its coordinates as my destination. Quickly, I adjusted the transport's landing orientation, and had the

sudden thought to change the elevation to plus ten feet. In quick sequence, I activated the four Pulse Magnifiers.

I pulled my mike back out. "Diversion coming up in twenty seconds! When this happens, I want you to cease fire! Repeat, cease fire when the diversion starts, and resume once you have seen my location! Do not fire until after you've seen where I am!"

"We're the diversion, aren't we?" Dempsey asked.

"You want to get out, now's your chance."

"No." He shook his head. "We're going out in a blaze of glory, right?"

"Probably." I nodded, as I checked the transport clock. "Have a seat on the bench for a second. Diversion in five, four, three, two, one, and... zero!"

I pressed the Pulse Activate button, and we were enveloped in the familiar super-bright sheen. Since the distance was so short, one Pulse is all it took.

The transport's glow, appearing suddenly and ten feet high in the air, caused the Roaches to pause in their actions and turn away from the glare. A few had already made the instinctive decision to scatter back to a safer distance and see what the hell was going on. When the transport dropped down and smashed into about twenty of their fellows, the resultant crash and squealing from their maimed compatriots made even more of them want to take a very long step back, and they did, in droves.

Inside the transport, both Dempsey and I had neglected to use our security belts, so we got a good jarring as well. We were soon scampering for the hatch, however, and once we'd shoved it open, we were privy to a scene of five Space Corps Marines driving back at least one hundred enemy combatants.

"Good deal, Douglas!" Renquist sped past, right before Dempsey and I leapt out to join the chorus of plasma fire.

Strawberry was ahead of Renk, and nearly at the tiny grove of trees where the captured humans were strung up. With his field knife in hand, the tall soldier jumped up and hacked at the thick cord that held them aloft, causing the rope to rip and bringing the entire bunch plummeting down to the ground. Renquist was soon beside him, and the two began patting the green-dyed humans roughly enough to figure out if they were alive or not.

"They're already starting to come back!" Rubalcava's voice screamed into my ear. "Eleven o'clock and three o'clock!"

Heat rays started bombarding the small grove of trees, hampering the rescue effort briefly, before our return volley allowed Renquist and Strawberry to start back. They had a person on each arm. Dempsey and I rushed over to relieve them of their loads, although each of us was struggling to walk with the overwhelming burdens. Both Renquist and Strawberry went back for more.

In horror, I witnessed as the two rescuers propped one unfortunate up against a tree. As they moved on to the next captive, the dazed and helpless was struck by heat missiles. Just as Mason had minutes earlier, that man burst into a gruesome red and orange spray.

The vision of carnage was still vivid in my mind, as Dempsey and I hurried our heavy loads toward the transport, and dropped them right in front of the hatch. By their arms and legs, the two of us dragged them through the hatch, one at a time, and just as we were finishing up Renquist and Strawberry came by with another four. Knotts was the most coherent of these, and although much dazed, he was able to make it inside the transport by himself.



“That’s the last of them.” Strawberry said, once all of the personnel were inside the vessel. Are you sure we can’t ship out on this thing?”

“Positive.” I shook my head. “The front window’s cracked. We wouldn’t survive the trip through space.”

“Then we get all of us somewhere safe.” Renquist said. “Somewhere as far away from this outpost as possible. A place where the fire’s already gone by.”

“It’s not safe!” Dempsey protested. “This whole planet isn’t safe!”

“Why not?” Renquist asked.

“It just isn’t!”

The answer popped into my head, as soon as Dempsey had replied. “Multiple waves. The Cleansing fire is going to take place in multiple waves, because the Wehteweisell aren’t going to risk any bacteria surviving just one pass.”

Renquist took this in stride. “Where is it going to be safe? Dempsey, do you know where?”

“I have no idea.” Dempsey was whiny all over again.

“Guess, you maggot! Use your freak power!”

Dempsey threw his hands up in the air. “I don’t know, maybe the hill we just used to come out here. I can’t think of anywhere else!”

Renquist shook his head. “That’s still in the path of the fire, but it’s the best idea we’ve got. Douglas, maneuver this transport as close to the teleport-hill as you can, and get all these people inside of it!”

“That’s bullshit!” I balked. “I’d rather try to teleport between the waves of fire.”

“The Pulse Generator is going to be melted after the first wave.” Renquist said.

“You’re going to run out of Pulse power, unless it’s one wave or two. Take these people to the hill, and that’s an order. We’ll try to hold the Roaches back until the captives are all inside.”

Renquist was right, I thought. If I tried to Pulse more than a time or two, depending on the distance, I would be too low on energy to do it again, and I had no idea how many Wehteweisell would be willing to sacrifice themselves to get the Roaches, and the humans, off their planet.

## 6

Renquist and Strawberry hurried outside, while I rushed over to the controls. “Dempsey, get the hatch!”

A second later, I heard the hatch clang shut. I pulled up the coordinates where the shuttle had been parked previously, and after, I halved the distance between that spot and the teleport-hill, and shifted the coordinates slightly so that when the flames reached the transport’s Pulse Magnifiers, the resultant explosion would be buffered by the side of the hill, and not enter into the inside of the hill unhampered. It was a fairly pointless gesture, as we still had the planetary fire to worry about, but I was grasping at any straw I could grab.

The Pulse Magnifiers were low, and I quickly snapped them all awake, even though the regular procedure was to fill them up one at a time. I wasn’t going across the galaxy this time, I was only going to the opposite side of the hill, and I didn’t need as much

energy for such a short trip.

“More Roaches spotted, at one o’clock.” Rube’s voice came over the radio.

I glanced out the cracked window, and sure enough, I could see them massing. I hoped that Pulse Generator worked faster than they did.

Before I became unnerved by the threat, I turned to look at the inside of the vessel. We had seven green-skinned people lying on the floor, three women and four men, and one green Knotts sulking on the bench in a dizzy stupor. They were all stripped except for their underwear.

Dempsey was looking over the women. “I’ve never seen green tits before. You know why they left the underwear on these people, right?”

“No.”

“They can’t stand the smell of our piss.” Dempsey revealed. “We’ve caught a few Roaches before. When we pissed on them, it made them go ballistic every time.”

I was about to ask the man what had compelled them to piss on the Roaches in the first place, when something like a hammer blow smashed into the front of the transport. I ducked from the impact, as it sounded so close.

“They’re blasting us.” Dempsey said.

I turned and checked the Magnifiers, and found them to be at forty percent. “Here goes.” I said, right before I pressed the Activate button.

Another heat wave smashed into the heavy window, causing me to jerk my head back, but the heavy plastic held, and a moment later the Pulse came.

Dempsey was undoing the hatch the instant the Pulse began to subside. He pushed it open, and glanced back at the cargo we were about to unload. “We don’t have a stretcher anywhere around here, do we?”

“Probably, but we don’t have time to look for it. Where the hell is Neelson, anyway? He can probably tell us which transport it’s on!”

Dempsey shrugged, as he took the legs of the survivor closest to the hatch. “I don’t know. He disappeared right after you took off running earlier.”

Between the two of us, we lugged the heavy load out, and across the thirty or so feet to the cave entrance. We deposited the guy just inside the entrance, but if Neelson was hiding in there, neither of us could see him.

By the time we got back to the transport, Knotts was doing his best to escort his own survivor back, and since the man he was escorting was upright and slightly coherent, we didn’t take over. Instead, we grabbed the next unconscious body in line, which to Dempsey’s delight, was a female. She was a lot lighter to move than the first guy, and we were soon on our way back for the next one.

“I’m getting pressed over here.” Brickwell announced on the radio.

“Fall back a little.” Renquist answered. “Douglas, how about you get that transport back up here? Let’s give these Roaches a fireworks show they’ll never forget. Make sure the ass-end of the transport is facing toward the hill, while you’re at it.”

I scrambled inside and looked at the dashboard. The Pulse Generator at the outpost was still active, I noticed, but the Magnifiers were all at less than twenty percent. I pulled my microphone stick out. “I need at least five minutes to replenish.”

“You’ve got the time.” Renquist replied. “Now that the captives are out of the way, all we have to do is keep these Roaches busy until you get here.”

Dempsey helped me get the rest of the outpost personnel outside, and about ten feet

away from the shuttle, and by the time we'd done this, the Magnifiers were over thirty percent. It wasn't great, but once I'd rerouted the auxiliary power, I could work with it.

"Ready to launch." I announced to Renquist.

"Modify coordinates to fifteen yards southeast from your previous landing, and see if you can find me some duct tape."

"Copy." I said, and after shuffling through some metal cabinets of odds and ends, I had the item in my hand. I went to close the hatch, observing Dempsey and Knotts lugging away another unconscious man from the group lying on the ground, and I made my way back to the controls. "Transport incoming." I said into the mike.

The Pulse took me nearly to the edge of the hill, and when I opened that hatch, Renk was standing just outside. He snatched the roll of tape from my hand, and hurried to the rear of the transport, where he started taping flash grenades to the Pulse Magnifiers.

Rube's frightened voice broke through the radio. "Mass charge incoming, ten o'clock through two o'clock!"

"That's a suicide charge." Renquist said, hurriedly setting the timers on the grenades. "Now that the Roaches know we're not getting any new troops from the transport, they're going to try and roll right over us like a tidal wave. We've got five minutes to get to safety, Spaceman, before this thing blows!"

Hammer blows began smashing at the front and sides of the transport.

"Let's move!" Renquist said, and we fled using the structure of the vessel as cover.

All around me, big geysers of gray dirt and rock shot up, from the relentless attack the Roaches were perpetrating on us.

A loud groan from the radio caused the two of us to look at the top of the hill, where Rubalcava had been positioned, but all we saw was half a dozen clouds of scattered dirt.

"Rube, are you there?" Renquist barked into his mike. "Rube?"

No answer came back to us.

"One hundred yards and closing!" Dobson's voice cried out.

A second later, another distressed voice came over the radio. "This is Brickwell! I just got hit by debris! My leg's tore up! I can no longer hold my position!"

"Your proverbial shit-fan has just been turned up to full speed." Renquist growled, before he addressed the mike. "Calling all jarheads! It is time to head back to the teleport-hill! Ree-treat! Do you hear me, Marines?"

A pitifully few voices answered: Dobson's and Strawberry's.

"You're going to have to get Brickwell to safety, Douglas." Renquist told me. "I'll hold them off as long as I can."

I glanced down the field, my eyes widening when I saw the massive wall of Roaches scurrying toward us on all six legs. The ground teemed with the dark shapes.

"Are you crazy?" I asked. "You can't hold back all of them!"

Renquist made sure his plasma rifle still had a good charge on it. "I know. I'm planning on setting off the fireworks early." He looked at me evenly. "Go. I know I was meant to die out here, and believe it not, I dreamt it would happen like this. But you've got some other kind of destiny to fulfill, so get out of here!"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, but Renquist was already stepping past me, taking aim and firing away. Against the rushing wall of Roaches, he was hitting one every single time, although he was only knocking them aside by blasting at their hard shells as they galloped at us.

I stepped back, slowly with my first step, as my mind calculated how many seconds it would take for the Roaches to overwhelm me if I stayed to back up Renquist. Half a minute, I projected, and although I hated to leave the courageous man behind, I knew that if I didn't move right away, both Brickwell and I were going to suffer a similar fate.

A moment later I was running, and clods of dirt were bursting at my heels and right in front of me. I vaulted a low mud wall, just as several Roach rays struck it and exploded it up onto me. I landed hard, almost winding myself, and as I scampered away again, I couldn't help but take one last look at the Staff Sergeant.

"Come and get me, you bastard horde from Hell!" Renquist was shouting at the black mob.

He was standing up, away from any cover, and so help me, laughing out loud as the incredible Roach army surged forward to meet him. Ripples of superheated air could be seen flashing by on all sides of him, and I shuddered as one slammed into Renquist's side, and shoved him down onto his back.

I started running again, rounding the corner of the hill and spotting what little remained of the grassy outcrop Brickwell had been using as cover. The man was dragging himself back on the ground, some twenty feet back, and he had a bloody tourniquet wrapped around one thigh.

Upon seeing my approach, he asked, "Where's Renquist?"

"Back there." I replied, as I grabbed the fallen man and forced him to his feet. "Now, move!"

"Is he... is he gone?" Brickwell asked, as we started moving away from the approaching horde. His microphone was still pulled out, giving everybody wearing a helmet the bad news.

"Hell no, I'm not gone!" Renquist's grating voice came across the radio, and perhaps for the first time, I was actually glad to hear it. "I hope you jarheads are back in that little gopher hole by now, because I'm about to give these bugs a one way ticket to oblivion!"

I was dragging Brickwell, and Brickwell was hopping frantically on one leg, when I heard the worst sound I'd ever heard in my life. It was the sound of the Pulse Magnifiers detonating, followed by the wrench of screaming metal. The impact wave threw us at least ten feet forward, even though we were nearly to the other side of the hill by then, and it was followed by a wave of scorching heat and radiation that made us feel as if we were being cooked alive.

A rain of rock, dirt and shrapnel began tormenting us, but neither of us could hear it, as the blast had left us both deaf. I started bringing Brickwell back up, when the welcome forms of Dobson and Strawberry appeared and grabbed him for me. Something heavy smashed into the top of my helmet, and I fell, and when I got up I was only able to stagger forward by a couple of yards, when I big, green and nearly naked man with a plasma rifle grabbed my arm and started pulling me in the right direction.

"Move it, Spaceman!" This was Knotts, looking almost fully recovered from his ordeal with the Roaches, except for his strange green skin.

Within a couple of minutes, the bunch of us stumbled into the cave mouth.

This is all that was left, as I scanned the shadowy insides of the hill; seven rescued men and women, some of them now half awake and scared, but most still unconscious or nearly so, plus Brickwell, Dobson, Knotts, Strawberry and me.

“Where’s Dempsey?” I asked. “And Neelson?”

“Dempsey ran back out to the transports.” Knotts pointed. “No sign of Neelson.”

“Figures, huh?” The seated Brickwell managed to chuckle. “They’re the two biggest chickens in the platoon.”

Resentfully, I felt like pointing out how Dempsey had helped me load and unload all the people we’d rescued, and how he’d shot down those two Roaches earlier, when Dobson’s voice cut in. “Look! There he is!”

We all turned toward the transports, where sure enough, we could see Dempsey’s head peering out from between the first and second vessel. He ducked down, just as Roach heat beams started smashing into the frames of both transports.

“Somebody better cover me!” Dempsey sounded frantic over the radio. “You guys listening?”

“I guess the Roaches are already swarming on us.” Knotts positioned himself on one end of the hill mouth. “You’d have thought an exploding transport would have bought us a little more time.”

“They’d just started a suicide charge.” Strawberry said, as he took the opposite side. “You know how those things go. The Roaches don’t stop until they’re all dead or dying.”

“I’ve got Roaches creeping in on the left.” Knotts said, glancing around, and noticing the mess that had once been Mason. “Hey, Spaceman, would you mind getting me that grenade belt?”

Queasily, I pulled the item off what remained of the man’s lower torso, and tossed it over.

Knotts pulled off a couple of grenades. “Somebody tell Dempsey what I’m up to.”

Dobson took over the chore.

About a minute later, Knotts lobbed out a couple of grenades, one right after the other. As soon as the first blast was heard, Dempsey scurried out from between the transports, a full pack on his back and a black case in his grip. There was a tense moment, when a Roach blast lifted Dempsey up and off the ground, but luckily, it hadn’t hit the man directly, but only the ground right in front of him.

Dobson joined Knotts at the edge of the cave, and between the two of them, they held the enemy back long enough for Dempsey to right himself and make it in with the rest of them.

Looking as white as a sheet, Dempsey found a clear spot and dropped the case, then removed the backpack and dropped it as well. He removed a second rifle from his shoulder as well, and pointed down at the pack. “That’s Neelson’s pack! That son-bitch just left it, along with his helmet, and his rifle, and his freaking cammies, all back behind one of the transports! I think he stripped naked and went out to meet that fire! Didn’t I tell all of you that guy was crazy?” He glanced around the interior of the hill. “Where’s the old man?”

“He didn’t make it.” Strawberry said.

“What do you mean? I just heard him say he was all right!”

“That was before he blew up the transport, by standing right in front of it and shooting at it.”

“What?” Dempsey cried out. “Renquist is immortal, man! Nothing can touch that guy! Nothing!”

The look on Strawberry’s face told me he’d thought the very same thing, previously.

“Roaches creeping in on the left.” Knotts said. “They’re darting back and forth, trying to look into the cave.”

Strawberry crouched, and poked his head out on the right. A second later, he jerked his head back in, just as a heat wave ripped out a chunk of hard dirt from the edge of the hill. “Looks like they’re creeping in on the right, too.” He joked.

“Let’s get a grenade count.” Knotts suggested.

“For what?” Dempsey queried. “There are still like a million Roaches out there! Even if they all bunched up for you, you still wouldn’t be able to kill all of them with the grenades we have left! What we need is for Renquist to tell us what to do!”

“He’s gone.” Dobson reminded him.

“Renquist can’t be gone! He can’t be gone.” Dempsey’s voice went down to a whimper, and I could see he was crying now. “He can’t be. He’s fucking immortal.”

Not even ten seconds later, the whine of a plasma rifle could be heard nearby. Everyone tensed up, because we were all still startled when the bedraggled form of Rubalcava flopped down from the top of the cave and with a dust-raising thud landed just outside. “Friggin’ last step…” He groaned in pain.

Knotts, green skin and all, was the first Marine to react. He reached out with a long arm and grabbed Rube just past one boot, and with a might heave, he yanked the man into the shadows with us. The ground where Rubalcava had landed suddenly burst and stung our faces with dirt and pebbles.

“I got knocked loopy up on top of the hill.” Rube stammered out. “Half-buried under the dirt so the Roaches thought I was dead, and my radio broke. I thought I was the only one left, until I heard you guys tossing out grenades. Did you guys see me making like a human dive bomber right now?”

“Renquist is dead.” Dempsey informed the new arrival.

“What?” Rube asked.

Dempsey repeated the grim tidings.

“Renquist can’t be dead! That man’s a superhero!”

“I know.” Dempsey said.

“Well, let’s just do what we can, until we figure something out.” Knotts tried to keep the despair from setting in on all of them. “Hey, Strawberry, let’s push the Roaches back with a couple of grenades.”

“We won’t need them anymore.” From his spot crouched on the ground, Brickwell pointed outside. “Take a look.”

The entire group of cave dwellers turned.

Huge towers of black smoke billowed into the sky, still dozens of miles away, and they formed a dark and impenetrable blanket as they culminated into one great mass up toward the highest reaches of the planet’s atmosphere. One by one, the soldiers’ gazes followed the incredibly tall spires of death down to the ground.

A great wall of flames, writhing and swaying as if alive, spread forth like a virus. As far as the eye could see, the fire reigned supreme, climbing over mountains and stampeding over forests, all the while maintaining a steady, rapid speed as if it were being timed, or directed. Whatever was left behind, no man could say, as whatever object or terrain encountered the fire was quickly snuffed from view by both flames and smoke.

“For crying out loud!” Dempsey shouted. “Why can’t we ever get a break? Why do we always end up in shit like this?”

“Roach fodder or fried crispy.” Strawberry muttered dryly, glancing at some of the others. “Not much of a choice there, huh?”

Knotts peeked out of the cave again. “I guess we can hold on to our grenades now, seeing as how the enemy is no longer anywhere in sight. Gee, I wonder why they didn’t stick around?”

“Because they’re smarter than us, you ape-shit!” Dempsey snapped out in frustration. “That’s what we should be doing; getting the hell out of here!”

“It wouldn’t do us any good.” Strawberry replied. “That fire’s moving at a good fifty or sixty miles per hour. There is no way a human being is going to outrun that. Or a Roach for that matter.”

“We can at least try!”

“And gain what? Twenty more minutes, before the fire reaches us?”

“At least I’ll be alive for twenty more minutes!” Dempsey argued out of desperation.

“If you want to make a run for it, the door’s wide open for you.” Brickwell said. “Nobody’s going to try and stop you this time.”

Dempsey lowered his head.

“Anyway, you won’t even have that long.” Brickwell went on. “I think that fire’s moving a lot faster than sixty miles an hour. I’m guessing we have about ten minutes left.”

“Maybe less.” Knotts estimated.

“Grim Reaper’s comin’ with a flame-thrower.” Rube said, just before he grabbed at his bruised ribs. “Hey, Douglas, do you think that those pineapple chunks on the ground will heal me if I eat them?”

I shrugged.

“Doesn’t anybody have any ideas?” Dempsey asked.

“Hey, I have an idea.” Brickwell requested. “Toss me Nelson’s backpack.”

Dempsey did, and the heftier man started rummaging through it. He pulled out a package of red licorice vines. “I knew that knucklehead had some poguey bait (candy) in here. You guys want some?” After taking a couple of strips, he tossed the package over to Strawberry.

“Does anybody have any real ideas?” Dempsey repeated. “Anybody?”

“We don’t have enough time to do anything.” I said.

“What about these frog people?” Dempsey pointed. “Maybe they can think of something! They’re smart. They were smart enough to set up the outpost, right?”

I looked into the faces of the people we’d rescued. Well, the few who were conscious, anyway. Their expressions were lifeless and numb, or just plain scared. “I don’t think they’re fully awake yet. I don’t think they’ll be able to help us.”

“We’ve gotta do something!” Dempsey screamed.

Strawberry was starting to look angry. “Look, I understand how you’re feeling. I didn’t want to end up like this either, boxed in by fucking Roaches on one side, and giant fruits on the other. I think Renquist was a fool to send out that Non-Retrieval code! If he hadn’t done that, we wouldn’t be in this mess!”

“Hey, hold on, man.” Rube countered. “It was either we go Non-Retrieval, or we would have had another Betelren Six out here! And on top of that, you know how close the Roaches are to getting on the Links!”

“I’m starting to feel the heat now, from the fire.” Knotts said, but nobody seemed to be paying attention.

“Why can’t you just admit that Renk made the wrong call?” Strawberry snapped. “Why do you always have go around kissing Renk’s ass?”

“He made the right call!” Rube shouted back.

“Guys,” I tried to calm them both. “If these are our last few minutes, we shouldn’t spend them fighting with each other.”

“Why don’t you shut the hell up?” Strawberry looked ready to pounce on me.

“Maybe if you’d done a better job steering your stupid transport, we wouldn’t have ended up in the middle of nowhere like we did!”

“So, it’s his fault the Roaches landed on Lesenia?” Rube shot back.

Unable to listen to any more of the argument, I decided I needed to take a stroll. I thought to walk outside, but I didn’t want to take the risk of Strawberry taking a swing at me, so I went further into the cave instead.

As I stepped over the prone bodies of a few outpost personnel, I noticed that Dempsey had crawled back there as well. The timorous man had his flashlight on and sitting on the ground beside him, and I could hear him fumbling around in the dark with something that sounded like plastic.

“What are you doing?” I asked, clearly startling him. I reached into the pocket where I’d stashed my own flashlight, and shone it into Dempsey’s face.

He avoided the glare. “Somebody has to do something.” He said, and as I flashed the light down lower, I saw the case Dempsey had brought back from the transports. It was a case full of LRR radio parts, and he was busy putting together a Long Reach Radio. “This thing won’t turn on. What am I missing?”

“The battery’s probably off.” I said, at once remembering Dempsey’s clumsiness, and the exploding battery back at Message Hill. There was a possibility that Dempsey could manage to blow us all up before the fire reached us. “Here, let me finish it up for you.”

Sure enough, after I’d opened the battery seal, I saw that the battery switch was still set to off. I clicked it on, resealed it properly, and handed it back to Dempsey.

In his haste, Dempsey turned the radio on and set it to a high volume. This resulted in a long squeak, followed by a wall of static.

“What’s he got there?” Rube’s voice filtered over, and another flashlight beam illuminated Dempsey.

“A working LRR radio.” I answered.

“Won’t do us much good now.” Rube sighed. “I wish we’d had one of those when we first Pulsed onto this Goddamned rock.” His flashlight wavered away. “Hey, guys, what’s the ETA (Estimated Time of Arrival) on the blaze?”

“Two minutes and counting, until we’re all chicken tenders.” Brickwell replied.

“We’ve at least got to give it a try, right?” Dempsey said, refusing to see the hopelessness in the situation. “I should go outside for the better reception, but I don’t want to get myself flash-fried.”

The little assistance I could provide was to point my flashlight at the radio’s digital tuner.

I suppose I was as scared as Dempsey at that moment. Drops of sweat were now running freely down my forehead, and a huge knot was forming in my stomach.

“What the hell good is a radio going to do us now?” Strawberry’s angry voice boomed back.



Dempsey looked up at me. “We’ve gotta at least try, right?”

“Yeah.” I said.

By the cave mouth, Knotts fired a few shots of plasma. “I guess that didn’t work. The fire’s still coming.”

“Yeah, we’ve gotta at least try.” I nodded, wondering if that might be the last sentence I would ever say.

“One and a half minutes.” Brickwell called out. “Maybe less.”

Thick waves of heat began to ebb into the small cave, and these seemed to intensify as they bounced along the walls and gathered together. I found myself drawing quick breaths, and my head was quickly becoming muddled.

“Stupid radio.” Dempsey complained. “I can’t lock on to any coordinates. Whoever designed this thing, whoever put these circuits together like this, was an asshole. The scanner should have picked something up by now.”

Despite the situation, I found myself chuckling, but I had to cut this short when my head started to throb. A strong wave of dizziness came over me, and I had to reach out and place a hand against the wall to steady myself.

“Minus one minute, and counting.” Brickwell said, and all trace of hope was gone from his voice.

The circuits, I thought to myself in amusement. Whoever designed these circuits was an...

I stopped short, nearly realizing something important, and becoming more than a little frustrated when the thought didn’t stand still long enough for me to recognize it. Trying to find that lone revelation among the stifling waves of heat, I wiped at my forehead, and inadvertently took the flashlight’s glare away from Dempsey. The light was shining in a small circle on my cammies and near my bicep, I noticed.

“Hey, I can’t see anymore.” Dempsey complained. “Bring the light back!”

With the beam, I followed the cammie blouse down to the crook of my elbow, past my forearm, and over to my scraped up wrist...

“Come on! We’re running out of time!”

... and to my dirty fingertips, resting heavily on the cave wall.

“I can’t see!”

“Shut up, Dempsey.” I said, staring at my fingertips, under the glare of the flashlight. What was my brain trying to tell me?

“I can’t see!”

“I said, shut the hell up!” I yelled, so loud it disrupted the arguments, and the whining, and even Knott’s random shots outside.

Everything was silent except for the throbbing heat and our heavy breaths. As the growing steam began wringing tears from my eyes, Dempsey accidentally happened upon another burst of static.

“Shut that off, now!”

I could only imagine the bewildered look on the man’s face, as he complied, as I continued to stare at my glowing hand.

Then, it began to dawn on me. I wasn’t just staring at my fingers, but what lay behind them as well. I was looking through many thick layers of hardened mud, and behind a covering of a sheet of unknown metal that had stood there for countless centuries. With my mind, I was looking at insulated tubing, and self-repairing

mechanisms, and a maze of connectors and leads, and all that had been made of materials and substances that hadn't even been imagined by human engineers yet. I almost giggled, as I recalled Dempsey's comment.

*Whoever designed these circuits was an asshole.*

Whoever designed the radio, maybe, but not the being responsible for the inner workings of the teleport-hill. Whoever designed that had designed it to last forever.

"Hey, don't take it personal, man." Dempsey was saying behind me, and now, he sounded as if he'd given up as well. "We've got enough problems as it is. I was just trying to help."

I grinned like a madman. If only we had a Wehnteweisell pineapple around, perhaps we could persuade it to activate the teleport and seal us in from the fire. By the mere force of its will, it could save our lives. Who ever thought a pineapple could be sentient, anyway, like a human being?

A human being like me, I thought.

I became aware of some of the Marine's clothing, dried out so thoroughly by the unbearable temperatures that it was bursting into flames, while panicked voices were being hurled in all directions.

These sounds I pushed aside, concentrating instead on those circuits that held the precious and powerful liquid metal on one side, liquid that had to breach across a tiny gap of space, in order to activate the closing of the teleport. What would it take to cause that liquid to make that tiny, but monumental, leap?

And suddenly, as I gagged on strangling smoke, and squinted through tear-filled eyes, I was doing it, willing it to happen. The liquid metal stream started reaching across that bare fraction of space, setting the technology into motion, and instantly bringing about a union of circuits where there had previously been none.

Amid the cries of pain, and the chaos, my conscious mind wavered on the brink of oblivion, and as I felt the darkness inside my head began to surpass the darkness outside of it, I forced my brain to complete the process, and I mentally screamed an order for the circuitry to engage my command.

A few soldiers shouted near the cave entrance, their frantic forms appearing as fleeting shadows in a bright red furnace, even as the dirt began to ebb itself over the cave opening. The gaping mouth seemed to yawn, and quickly, determinedly, it closed up just as the wall of flames began lapping their way inside.

Becoming nauseous and disoriented, I tried to keep my faltering eyes open, only to have them blink back at me defiantly. Then, my body lost control, lost its balance, and collapsed like a rag doll to the ground. I bounced as heavily as a corpse would, and my head rolled to one side as if lifeless.

We survived the fire, of course.

I succeeded in activating the portal door and closed up the cave entrance. The Marines who weren't in flames helped put out those of us who were, and they triggered some anti-biological warfare, air-purifying chemicals, they called them AB-Vacs, to suck out the smoke from the cave before it killed the bunch of us. (These came from Neelson's backpack, I might add.) The AB-Vacs left us with a thin, yet breathable layer of oxygen, which could be replenished, with diminishing returns, as long as we had the AB-Vacs available. To preserve oxygen further, we all lay down on our backs, as we used less air

this way than if we were all standing up and jabbering away all the time.

It took hours and hours for the waves of fire to pass over us, and we counted either four or five of them, as we heard their rumble and felt their heat through the packed dirt. Too many waves for a Unilink Transport with full Pulse Magnifiers to outrun, so it turned out to be a good decision not to try and Pulse around the planet that way.

One of the women we'd rescued passed away in there, and the others feared that I'd take that route myself, but I pulled through. Maybe it was because of all those pineapples I'd brushed against during our stay on Lesenia, but I couldn't say for sure.

Once we were fairly sure that the fires were over, I tried to open the hill up with my mind. I couldn't do it. My best guess is that the repeated waves of intense fire, and its terribly high temperatures, had done what time and neglect had been unable to do, and those ancient circuits were either melted or were in some way impaired. Engineers who later excavated the site were unable to figure out exactly what kinds of devices or structuring were buried into the hill, because they were so badly melted. They couldn't identify half the metals they dug out, either.

In the end, we had to dig ourselves out. It took a few days, seeing as how the outer shell of the hill had been hardened as tough as rock by the multiple furnaces that had rolled over us. Insta-Shovels sometimes broke against the barrier, and we ended up using them as spades, which weren't any picnic to use that way. Somehow, me managed to poke through a tiny air hole on a clear and chilly night.

I'm sure you can imagine what kind of celebrating took place inside the hill, as we all took turns putting our lips up to that hole and sucked in air that was not as sweaty and grimy as what we'd been breathing ever since we'd been buried alive. It was cool, only somewhat refreshing because it was still a little ashy outside, and one of the outpost women was so happy she gave Dempsey a kiss. Her green coloring had started to fade, and I have to say, that after flashing our lights at her mostly nude body for the better part of three days, she was starting to look pretty attractive to the rest of us as well.

We got the hole wide enough to squeeze a man through, and the first one to get out was Dempsey, because he'd been thoughtful enough to grab a radio before we'd been buried alive. Rubalcava escaped next, with his GPS tracker and his laminated coordinate sheet in hand. We had another party, once the satellite relayed the message that a transport was being sent out to pick us up.

Several transports came to Lesenia, as a matter of fact. They brought with them teams of biological experts, engineers and droves of Explorer Drones, and they scoured the planet for air and soil samples. The three Roach nests had been discovered, now that the foliage around them had been burned away, and so were the underground chambers where they'd been stockpiling their ores and minerals. The Roaches were all dead, and so was the rest of the planet. It was decided that Lesenia would no longer be a suitable place for an outpost, much less a recruit training and deployment station, and it was estimated that the planet would remain inhospitable for many generations to come, if not centuries. In one fell swoop, the Wehntewisell had succeeded in getting rid of both humanity and the Roaches from their world.

I'd chosen to stay behind, long after the surviving members of platoon Ten-Twenty, and the personnel we'd rescued were gone. After some long and deep thinking, I found that I couldn't disagree with the Wehntewisell's decision to destroy their planet. It was either the Roaches taking over, or humanity, and in the end they chose neither. They did

what they had to do to preserve their integrity, and this meant they had to destroy the paradise they'd worked so many eons to create.

I supposed the pineapple people learned a lot from the clashes between humans and Roaches, like how to deceive, how to manipulate, how to subjugate, and worst of all, how to wage war. I really can't say that we taught them anything good.

The Explorer Drones reported no signs of life anywhere on the entire planet, and as everything began to wind down, and the flock of Space Corps personnel began to slowly abandon Lesenia, I had a sudden thought. They were still there, the Wehteweissell, way down in the depths of the planet with all their herds of camel-horses, their little gibbon-like mammals, their insects and their bat-birds. And they were all waiting, some with the patience of moons, some with a lot less, until humanity was gone from the surface.

I couldn't even tell you how I know this, only that I sense it's the truth. When the Wehteweissell opened my mind up, it stayed that way, and it's funny because now I can catch random thoughts from people I talk to.

Of course, I didn't admit to anybody that I thought the pineapple people were buried deep in the earth. Otherwise some high-handed military Jack might order huge drilling machines to go to Lesenia and dig them out. Then the Wehteweissell would be turned over to the biologists, and these people would work very hard to pry open all their mental secrets, just like the Roaches had done.

I've always said, it's better to live and let live, and if the Wehteweissell want their planet to be absent of humans and Roaches, then who's to say they're wrong?

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About Non-Retrieval: Influences for this story include the movie version of the science fiction epic, *Starship Troopers* by Robert Heinlein, James Cameron's film *Aliens* (for the interaction and rapport among the space marines), and the Civil War drama, Stephen Crane's *Red Badge Of Courage*, where a young man must quickly adapt to the horrors of war and emerges a hero in the end.

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About the author: Raymond M. Towers is an aspiring author of Mexican-American descent, although the term Chicano describes him much more accurately. He was born in 1970 in San Diego, California, and from an early age showed an interest in becoming a great storyteller. In fact, he was drawing and distributing his own crude comic books using pencil and blank paper, as far back as the fourth grade.

Alas, life happens, and due to both circumstance and procrastination, Raymond set his ambitions on the back burner for many years. While he did enjoy mild success in his submissions to literary markets, he felt he could improve his talents considerably by concentrating more fully on his writing, and for over a decade now, he has made every effort to produce a polished and complete product. Now in his early forties, the author finally is ready to share his vision with the world.

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