

Refinity

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The cabin was full of the ambient sounds of a roughworn life as the ship hurtled through slipspace. Any piece of deck plating that wasn't entirely bolted down rattled, loosely held magnetic access panels clattered and anything free hanging tapped and clicked against anything it hit. The ship was like a calico cat of mottled colors, hence its name. Everytime a piece needed to be replaced it was fabricated out of whatever metals and alloys were on hand in whatever color they came out to be, leading to the fact that every bulkhead, door hatch and panel ranged across the spectrum from bronze to copper to gunmetal gray. It may not have been aesthetic, but it was the Refinity way.

Asher lay on his bunk, his arms folded behind his head, watching dog tags swing back and forth almost hypnotically. His dusty black hair was worked into dreadlocks and his khaki cargo vest and pants contrasted the drab olive shirt beneath. He could still remember the soothing voice of the Refinity adverts on Omicron; "The resources of a solar system are finite, but the ways they can be used are infinite. The key to survival is in repurposing, and Refinity will remake that future." It hadn't been as glamorous as Asher expected, but it also wasn't all that bad. They simply... were.

Refinity was sometimes seen as a 'last resort' hiring opportunity by most people on Omicron. They were thought to hire anyone willing, which was untrue, but the skill requirements were low. More affluent worlds had shifted to using automated recycling systems. They were self-sufficient, AI-assisted and incredibly expensive. By contrast, flesh was cheap. Refinity, by contrast, were basically considered to be the garbagemen of space. Of course, one could also see their role as vital against the ever growing pollution problem in many systems, but it was a hard point to sell when your spaceships look like they're barely holding together. In truth though, the pay was rather decent, and accidents were pretty rare, compared to other jobs off-planet.

Asher heard a distant and familiar hissing noise from the hallway, the sound of the lift doors opening in the corridor. Footsteps on the walkway followed, then a knock on his door. He didn't have time to react as it had already slid open, revealing a familiar and expected face. With his bright red short hair, his earrings and tattooed arms, Orson stood out from most of the crew. It was fitting in a way given that he was the head scavenger of the Calico. The feat was somewhat less impressive when one took into account that there were only four crew members, Asher included, but Orson still felt rather proud of this position. He had joined Refinity to ditch his drug-abusing past, and he was finally beginning to see the fruits of his labor.

"Come on Asher, we should be approaching Delta-674 in thirty minutes. It's just you and me for this one," he smiled encouragingly. Asher gave a nod, grabbing the metal rail above his bunk to pull himself upright. He slipped out of bed, his feet sinking into boots that were already waiting. In moments he was a few steps behind Orson. As they walked they passed the other bunk room where their counterparts were laying down for bed. Time had little meaning in space so rather than a day and night cycle, the two pairs merely alternated jobs. The Calico was always gathering scraps, or traveling towards new scraps. Opportunity waited for no one.

"Have we had any more readings from the probes? Delta-674 was left off the automated roster for a reason. If the pretties don't want to touch it for their scrap, there must be a reason."

Asher said, giving a big mouthed yawn as he stopped long enough to open a glass case and pull out a bottle of bubbling orange liquid. He pressed a nozzle-like tip to his lips and sucked out some of the caffeinated beverage. Orson shook his head.

“No luck, we just know that it’s wreckage from a non-military ship. Barely any weaponry detected among the debris. Not sure why, but we still cannot get a precise molecular reading of the wreckage,” he shrugged as they continued on their way. “There have been solar flares in this system this past week, so it could still be blurring the scans. It’s rare, but I’ve seen that happen before.”

“Just as long as the flares don’t blur us.” Asher said, taking another long swig of his drink, “I’ll be suited up in ten. Gotta hit the refresher.” Orson chuckled.

“And that’s why I don’t drink this shit, it always messes up my stomach. Don’t be late,” he added, already heading for the preparation bay.

The view out of the front window was impressive to say the least. A lot of the worlds they visited were shades of brown and gray like the ship, but Delta-674 was something else entirely. There were seas of violet and great swirls of green that spread across the planet. It was surprising that it had never been colonized, but with frequent solar flares it might have been deemed too much of a risk.

“Approach vector calculated. Beginning landing sequence.” the automated voice of the ship announced. In another few moments the ship was rattling and shaking as if it was in slipspace, though a reddish glow was creeping up the edge of the heat shielding. With a nostalgic smile, Orson remembered the terror he felt during his first few landings, convinced that the ship wouldn’t hold and they would flash boil in a split second. But, as it turned out, what Refinity technology lacked in aesthetics was more than compensated for by reliability. In all his years of service, never once did a landing go awry. Sure, the Calico had flaws, but this wasn’t one of them.

Heat and turbulence gave way to a gliding approach vector, taking the ships across a rather mesmerizing landscape. Gray cliffs were covered with periwinkle, teal and violet moss. Blankets of crimson grass waved in the wind and toffee colored wildflowers blossomed at random to dot the landscape. The violet waters ran in rivulets and creeks, bisecting the landscape before feeding into a marsh. The vast array of colors reflected off the Calico’s windscreen.

After crossing untouched swaths of nature, they approached what appeared to be a rock quarry of sorts. The Calico slowed, hovered, and then landed with a muffled metallic thud. The errant pieces inside rattled as if someone had dropped pipes on the ground. Screens showed engines powering down and systems cooling off. After such an event, Orson approached the controls that managed the loading bay. Giving the atmosphere readings outside one last check, he crossed the deck with Asher and stepped into the cargo elevator at the side of the bridge.

The yellow and black striped doors rumbled shut and the two scavengers checked one last time that the environmental seals were good on their suits. Orson gave a silent nod before he keyed in the command. The elevator lurched and dropped, descending through the hull of the Calico until the bright and unforgiving light of an alien sun shone across their visors. Behind

them the Calico's main hold hissed and groaned as it lowered its main ramp, looking almost as if the ship was yawning.

"Welcome to Delta-674." Asher said, smiling a little despite the cramped space in his helmet after his dreads were tied back. Orson pulled out a remote link and confirmed the coordinates up ahead. At the edge of the rock quarry was a dense copse of trees, potentially the edge of a forest. The probes reported that their target had crashed there, the impact carving the only true disruption to the foliage for a couple miles in either direction. As Orson stepped foot on smooth teal grass, he tapped a little screen on his wrist and brought it up to his eyes, a holographic screen displaying the planet data.

Delta-674 revolved in a 36-hour cycle and they had been lucky to arrive in the early morning hours. Unless they modified their sleep schedules, though, both teams would be alternating both day and night shifts. The temperature seemed close to Sol norm, as if the local area was experiencing its own version of spring.

"Weather cast doesn't predict any rain." Orson reported, though their forecast so soon after landing was only good for a maximum of twelve hours. Asher looked up to confirm Orson's report. While he spotted a few violet clouds in the horizon, it didn't seem anything worrisome - at least compared to the idea of the unusual solar activity. Their suits were designed to keep them warm, but scavenging with them on was still a pain.

"Please tell me there's no alien toxin, or that the pollen for all these lovely plants won't make us swell up and pop like a balloon?" Asher asked. Orson raised an eyebrow at him.

"You just can't stand the suit, can you? I warned you, that hairstyle might let you get lucky in the station cantinas but out here it's a hindrance." Orson said. Asher nearly pouted.

"Hey, it's a matter of pride!" Asher said. Orson smirked and glanced back at his link.

"Oxygen, Nitrogen, some noble gasses... CO2 is above Sol norm though. We can take our helmets off, but we'll have to do breathing treatments on breaks." Orson said. Asher nodded at that.

"I think I can wait until we get to the site then." Asher said. Orson smirked.

"Well then, Asher, up for a stroll?" Without waiting for an answer, Orson began walking. A whirring picked up from the ramp behind them as Orson's Refinity recycling drone rolled along to catch up. This truly was Orson's favorite job perk: exploring vast untamed lands that had been forgotten or left mostly untouched by man, and cleaning them up. He had modified his suit's AI to automatically record holographic videos of his trips, and he'd frequently send his favorite ones to his family and friends back on Omicron so they could experience those in VR.

As the duo, now a quartet with the two drones, headed towards the trees, Orson couldn't help but feel how much more free and open it was here. He loved his family and friends, but he had grown to resent getting back to Omicron and its suffocating atmosphere. It was overcrowded, cramped, confined, and frankly the Calico was starting to seem cleaner. Out here it was just him, his thoughts and-

"If this planet was never settled, what do you think shattered all the rocks here?" Asher asked, looking at the veritable lake of rock chunks they were passing on the way to the trees. Orson shrugged. While he had the soul of an explorer, he was no archeologist.

"Who knows? Could be meteors, local fauna... Maybe they had a very ancient civilization that never got past the iron age and got exterminated," he paused long enough to

climb a short but steep slope. “Sadly we don’t have time to figure that out, we’re here for the shipwreck only. It’s a nice place though!”

“Yeah, better than crashing on Glassnacht.” Asher agreed. While their surroundings held many colors, the orange of their suits seemed almost out of place. They wandered like gleaming ghosts across the field of rocks until the ground softened beneath their boots and nature seemed to reassert itself. After a few more meters of walking, the cracked and splintered remains of trees led deeper into the woods before furrows of dirt lined the path like bumpers. With a crash landing like that, it was more likely that entire systems would be intact still.

For such a colorful environment, the fauna had been rather quiet. Not that it surprised the pair, in their experience, most alien creatures would tend to give them a wide berth, puzzled by their outfits and robotic companions. Maybe it would change in a few hours, once the local inhabitants accepted their presence and tried to resume their daily lives, but for now it was only the four of them, with only the occasional bip of the software powering the suits.

As they headed deeper into the trees, Orson felt almost bad introducing all this foreign technology to the local environment. It felt like they had barged into a sacred place with gaudy outfits and were trampling all over fertile ground. He knew they were there to actually remove other pollutants, but he still wished they had a way to erase all traces of their activity before leaving. The words of his ancestor echoed in his mind; ‘leave the land cleaner than you found it’. He was about to breach that topic with Asher when he suddenly heard a ping from his wrist screen. They were getting quite close now.

Asher grinned and sprinted off ahead, moving at a fair clip despite the encumbrance of his suit. The drone behind him let out a warbling series of beeps and chirps before it sped up, kicking up a little dust. The path the crashed ship had dug had become more of a trench as they neared the end. The burgundy colored tree trunks around them curved out and up, almost as if bending away from the devastation. The uneven hull of the derelict seemed completely foreign with its colorless gunmetal gray, though already a turquoise ivy-like vine had started to web out over the crash as if to claim it.

“I can’t believe it, it looks almost entirely intact!” Asher grinned. Indeed, the wreckage not only had been left untouched, but it was also in one piece, which was quite rare in their experience. They would often find wrecks that had been blasted to pieces by weaponry or explosions of various causes. But to find a vessel in this state meant they could probably cross a few reasons for the crash from their list. Half-hidden beneath the ivy, Orson could make out the name of the ship, painted in dark green letters: the Borealis.

“Alright, I’m going to send the location to the ship and set up the route for the drones. You try to find an entrance, got it?” The chief scavenger said, bringing up his holoscreen to record the data, thus officially setting up their worksite. “Remember, we still don’t know what’s inside, there could be animals nesting in it! Unless you want a repeat of the Azura Colony incident,” he added with a chuckle.

“Well, some people thought the bite marks were a fashion statement.” Asher smirked. He moved along the side of the hull, examining the ivy getting thicker and thicker as he moved. The Borealis seemed to be from the Courier’s Guild by the colors and design, meaning they would want an access at the front and rear of the ship for easy dockings and take offs. The front hatch seemed buried, but the back... Asher reached out and ran his gloved hand along the surface. The metal didn’t seem pitted or rusted in the slightest. It almost seemed too good to be true.

Finding the seams of a hatch, Asher racked his brain until he remembered the biometric security systems. Pursing his lips a little, the scavenger reached up. There was a pop-hiss as the seal of his suit was broken and he pulled his helmet off, shaking his dreadlocks loose. Taking a few breaths, his eyes widened in wonder at just how sweet the air was. He smiled, bit down on the end of his glove to tug it free. With actual skin available to him, he ran his hand around the edge of the door. After a few attempts, a portion glowed red, yellow and green with the thermal imprint of his hand.

"I found it!" Asher called out.

"Already?" Orson looked up from the screen, and couldn't help but smile as he saw Asher without his helmet. Of course the kid wanted to flash his locks while doing his work. "And hold on... Alright good, I got the camera feed from our suits set up, we can go in." Followed by the two drones, he approached his trainee and imitated him, taking his helmet off as well. Might as well take in some sunlight, he figured. "You know what, I'll let you lead on this one. You seem extra excited today," he grinned.

"Must be all the fresh air." Asher smirked, hooking up a rootkit to the door lock. It hummed and buzzed as it cycled through countless operations before there was another pop-hiss of the ship door opening. Instead of canned, stale air, however, a rush of peaty, mossy aroma wafted out of the ship. The emergency lights were on inside, each panel casting a warm creamy white glow. Asher grinned, making sure the door was all the way open before he slipped inside and started looking around.

Each step echoed through the cavernous space, announcing Asher's advance to ghosts and dust motes alike. The ship was canted forward which threatened to pull Asher deeper and faster than he wanted to go. The hallway eventually opened up into a large intersection between other halls. Rather than a lounge or a communal area, however, several bottom lit tables stood, each one overflowing with an abundance of plant life. One held wild flowers, one held succulents, one seemed to be fostering a crop of mushrooms of some sort. Above each table was a matching device that likely would have misted the plants if the ship was fully functional. As it was, it was a miracle the plants were surviving.

"I guess they were hired to transport plants... Maybe for study, or for reforestation projects maybe?" Asher called out. There was a whirring as one of the drones rolled by, navigating between the tables. It chirped and warbled in its digital language, sounding almost annoyed that it couldn't rip into the ship and start tearing it apart. It was unprecedented for them to find something so well maintained. If they could get it to break the gravity well, the finder's fee alone would make them rich beyond their wildest dreams.

"So far, it still doesn't explain what happened here..." Orson answered. There was no trace of fire, no hints of infighting or mutiny... Some of the furniture that hadn't been bolted down had been knocked over, as had some of the items from the sleek metal shelves, but that could easily be explained away by the rough landing. At this point, Orson was almost hoping to find a corpse so they could start unraveling the ship's mystery. Still, he couldn't help but share in Asher's wonder and excitement. What if there were more of these plant displays above? Perhaps he could move one of these tables to the Calico, turn it into a little mini-garden for morale.

As the pair slowly advanced through the metallic mausoleum, the crash damage became more apparent near the front of the ship. Some of the emergency lights were either flickering or

broken, a couple of wires hanging loose from holes in the ceiling left by warped bulkheads... It was business as usual for Refinity employees. As Orson and Asher advanced, their steps suddenly fell silent, muffled by a soft layer of multicolored grass that seemed to stretch out from multiple rooms at the front of the ship.

“Look at that...” Orson murmured, crouching to examine the vegetation. It seemed that different strands of various hues had coalesced and mixed harmoniously, allowing grass blades of vastly different colors to coexist and create some abstract painting. More than that, their root system had woven together into a moss-like thatch that allowed it to grow despite the inhospitable metal of the deck plating. With a gloved hand, he softly caressed them with child-like curiosity, watching the color pattern dance before his eyes in an mesmerizing way.

This was unlike anything they had seen in previous wrecks, they would usually find more intrusive vegetation around the entrance of the wrecks, not deeper inside. The air grew sweeter as he moved his hand, triggering memories of a VR arcade where he'd seen what it was like to be on Earth during summers before the Scorch.

A familiar whirring broke him out of his reverie, his drone moving in further. Orson's heart broke a little as he watched its wheels roll on the grass, unmoved by its discreet beauty. Asher held up his hand, halting the drone a few feet into its ingress. Asher bit his lips, contemplating their next move. He pulled out his link and connected it to both Orson and his own drones, bringing up the command system.

“Automate Task List.” Asher said with an authority that Orson seldom saw him use, “Excavation mode. Remove debris and materials from the bow of the ship. Ensure structural integrity during process. Document damage and add to pending queue. Deposit surplus materials at this point along the crash trajectory. Collect any valuable ores, minerals or objects. When task one is complete, exterior scan of ship for damage and inventory.” Asher concluded. The drone retreated off the grass and whirred its way back along the path, picking up its partner on the way. In moments the humans were left alone.

Asher moved past Orson, gentle in his footsteps. He leaned into one of the rooms from which the golden grass was coming from, his eyes widening a bit in wonder. The window on the room had been caked with dirt during the crash but the translucent coating still allowed dim sunlight into the room. There was a rumped bed in the corner, a desk strewn with personal possessions, but the center table was covered with a shrub-like plant that stretched all the way to the ceiling. There were large, waxy turquoise leaves and long, curved, pepper-like fruit ranging from red to yellow to orange. One end had a flared point and the other end was more bulbous.

“Wow...” Asher murmured, breathing in a slightly different aroma. There was a faint spice to the sweetness that permeated the rest of the planet, something eliciting a subconscious reaction from the young scavenger. His mouth was already starting to water. On the other side of the room, Orson had elected to follow a crop of orange grass and entered what seemed to be an officer's room. They clearly had been living quarters as he could discern a shower, the remnants of a bed and various clothing items torn half haphazardly, but most of it was covered in vegetation, mushrooms and flowers alike.

Working as a scavenger had led to a sort of second sense. Orson felt a shift in air pressure, a slight current - a clear indication of a hull breach. He moved forward, stepping up onto the headboard of the bed. Pushing the ceiling panel aside, he found one of the outer

shielding panels had been breached and led to the outside of the ship near ground level. Since the rest of the room was intact, the occupant might have survived. Would they have used this hole to squeeze through and get out? They had found no trace of activity around the wreckage and surely any survivors would have used the supplies in their own ship to survive or call for help... but they also hadn't found any sign of survivors either.

Feeling the tug of duty, Orson reminded himself It wasn't their job to figure out the cause of the damage or even to rescue survivors, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something didn't fit and it was starting to get to him. Searching around the room, he pulled open a large drawer below the bed, and found some of the former occupant's personal effects. Sentimental tokens, a bird plushie, a small stringed instrument... And a holo-journal, fully intact and with minimal security. Orson brought it to the device on his wrist, which interfaced with it quite easily and broke through the protection locks in seconds.

"Alright, who were you, mister officer..." Orson asked no one as he started reading. Between the added warmth and humidity of an occupant in the room as well as the fresh air coming through the hull breach, several of the mushrooms growing up from the room's sink began to expand slowly, almost as if blossoming. The brownish gray frills underneath constricted and released a cloud of potent spores. In moments they surrounded Orson, dusting his short red hair and settling on the back of his neck. The air smelled peatier, earthier, almost savory. It was almost as if Orson's concerns began to be numbed and muffled, replaced with a sense of contentment... well, almost contentment. His environment suit did feel a bit stifling and constricting.

Orson sat down on the moss-covered and surprisingly comfortable bed, settling down nicely for a read. Without thinking anything of it, he found himself taking off his gloves and unzipping his suit down to his plexus, enjoying the refreshing air current in the room. His browsing started to bear fruit: the previous occupant was a certain Amir Venturi, medical officer of the Borealis. It was supposed to be a simple transportation flight, gathering specimens from different planets and colonies in order to be preserved. The crew was mostly civilians, with a couple of botanists to preserve the samples.

The next entries described the various stops they made along their journey, and Orson skipped most of them, aiming for the recent records. While reading, he reclined a little, the moss almost welcoming him, the tiny grass tendrils gently caressing his form and eventually finding a path through the fibers. Corporate training should have warned him about coming in such close contact with alien flora, but the spores suppressed his worries, letting him hyperfocus on the journal instead. And on that topic, his eyes spotted one promising entry, something about crew members getting sick.

The spores had continued to settle, spreading nearly invisible mycelium across Orson's skin. Microscopic tendrils sank into his skin, forming networks, creeping and crawling until they reached his arms. The rich tapestry of his tattooed sleeves proved fascinating to the plant life as it found the same variety of colors that nature itself expressed. Beneath the cover of his suit, his tattoos grew more vibrant as if they had all been freshly inked. A faint tingling began to spread across Orson's scalp as his red hair began to grow at an increased rate. The military buzz cut became uneven in moments as the bright hair extruded out centimeter by centimeter. Likewise, a tingle spread across his exposed solar plexus as tiny wispy red curls began to push out of the skin of his chest.

According to the journal entry, crew members had started to complain about skin discolorations, light hallucinations, and a modified sense of smell. It had happened to some of the botanists first, but soon other members of the crew had begun to display these symptoms. However they were quite benign, and the patients were apparently very calm and accepting of their illness. Various treatments and tests were attempted, but Amir came up short. He'd alerted the Courier Guild, but the crew having such mild symptoms had led to a lack of urgency. The Guild had ordered the Borealis to finish their journey before seeking treatment.

Because of this, most of Amir's later entries consisted of observations on the patients. In these, he described how they would often congregate around the other plant samples, how they'd complain more than usual about the processed food rations, or even how... friendly they were getting among themselves and the rest of the crew. The final entry was a cryptic one, merely a short block of text stating that Amir knew exactly what the crew needed and where to find it. They would return to where it all began. The journal then ended with the systematic message of a catastrophic systems failure and that it had been disconnected from the Borealis.

Disappointed, Orson dropped the journal and stared at the ceiling, feeling oddly comfortable in there. The previous feelings of dread and uncertainty were gone, replaced by a deep, almost meditative calm. Almost, as the tingle on his skin had given way to a slight itch, and Orson unzipped more of his suit down to his waist, idly scratching his new chest hair. Despite the slight breeze, beads of sweat had gathered on his skin, clinging to the red hair like morning dew. He licked his lips, this throat feeling surprisingly dry - of course, Asher had sent away the drones and with them, their water supply. Still, thinking about his teammate was enough to rouse him from his stupor. It took him a surprising amount of mental strength to get up, the numerous tendrils trying their best to keep him close, but they eventually relented - they were already inside him after all. Slowly, he exited the room, not bothering to redress. He needed Asher.

It was a short walk to the other room, but just as Orson had breached protocol by disrobing and lying on the bed, Orson walked in on Asher biting into one of the plump orange peppers. The firm skin of the fruit crunched beneath his teeth but then released a gush of aloe like slime from within. Asher half laughed and half coughed before gulping it down, a serene look on his face. His dark locks seemed to have a faint turquoise dusting of pollen to them, as did his skin. His suit was still on, though there was a definite tenting to the fabric covering his groin. Asher spun around, sensing Orson.

"You have to try this, they are amazing!" Asher said enthusiastically. A small voice in Orson's brain protested, ready to deliver a sermon about their foolishness, but it was quickly shushed away by a rush of endorphins. Orson approached Asher with a grin and suddenly hugged him, enjoying his sweet youthful scent. He had never felt this way before about his trainee but the mycelium had turned his fondness for him into a need for his companionship.

"I'm so glad you're here..." he mumbled, slightly slurring his words. Asher looked up, still licking the clear goo from his lips, blushing a little.

"I'm glad you're here too..." Asher said softly. His face seemed so innocent, so serene, and yet Orson was all too familiar that the young man also held a virility that was calling out to him now. Thus he acted on his friend's suggestion and kissed him, tasting the juices on his lips in the process. It tasted fresh, sweet, a little bit spicy... just like Asher. Asher murmured in surprise, then relief, then a bit of lust. He reached up and grabbed Orson's head, his fingers

tangling in his surprisingly shaggy red hair. Their lips parted and their tongues wrestled, both lubricated by the aloe of the pepper plant.

Asher took a step forward, bringing their groins together, his urgent erection pressing and rubbing against Orson's lap as they made out. The turquoise dust on Asher's hair began to weave into tiny strings, wrapping around like the ivy vines outside the ship. Orson giggled, feeling almost high, and reached up to Asher's collar to unzip his suit, revealing a muscular torso with turquoise fuzz forming around his pectorals. The two of them grinded together without a care for their surroundings, breathing in large amounts of spores and pollen. Orson's red mycelium tendrils began to spread to Asher's skin, as he himself was sharing his turquoise pollen with his lover. They were marking each other, in a way.

There was something carnal about the way Orson was breathing around the kiss. He pushed Asher back against the bulkhead, pinning him to the metal and sending out a cloud of turquoise dust as he hit it. Their kisses became more needy and desperate. Asher clawed at Orson's open environmental suit, feeling an electric thrill at just how hairy he was. He'd always assumed that Orson was anal about such things. He drew the zipper down to the waist, then lower, drawing it down over the swollen member hidden inside. The black underwear seemed moist, dewed by the trickling slick satin that Orson was producing.

Asher broke the kiss and moaned, clawing at his own suit, drawing the zipper down. He shrugged out of it like a butterfly trying to emerge from a cocoon. The freckles on his handsome shoulders were already darkening to shades of orange and brown, a faint speckle pattern of turquoise slowly emerging from between the original dots. Asher leaned up, nipping at Orson's nose playfully, grabbing at his partner's uniform to pull it down and get him out of it. Their movements were sending vibrations through the deck plating, seemingly enough to make the pepper plant undulate with its most inviting fruits.

After some shimmying, both suits slumped to the ground, their internal sensors softly beeping in confusion. Dumping these synthetic clothes felt wonderful, and Orson wasted no time kicking his shoes off as well. His hands roamed all over Asher's body, exploring his curves and lines while covering his neck in loving kisses. His red hair kept growing, the color looking less artificial and instead gaining different shades, from scarlet to crimson. It slipped down his neck and onto his shoulders in luscious waves, contrasting with the dark green that was now creeping across his skin.

Orson drew a finger across the tip of his underwear-concealed erection, collecting a dollop of a surprisingly gel-like pre. It felt cold on his finger and looked almost aloe-like. A moment of contemplation came over him, as his subconscious tried to go past the surprise and into alarm, but the mycelium won once more, drawing from his past spent indulging in sinful pleasures and the years of withdrawal that had followed. As if a dam had burst, a steady trickle of the gel began to flow from his glans, saturating his underwear before dripping to the floor.

Orson collected some of it on his finger, the faintly green goo glistening in the dim light. With a fluid motion, Orson brought his finger up and spread the aloe on Asher's lips before leaning in for another deep kiss. The flavor that blossomed was sweet, nutritious, and fruit-like. More than that, it was intoxicating. Tasting it sent both men into a frenzy. Their kisses became more than desperate, their eyes closed with growing waves of pleasure crashing over them. The pigmentation from Orson's tattoos seemed to leak past the boundaries of the inked lines, turning

his shoulders green and his wrists in a gradient of color like a sunset sinking to red at his fingertips.

Asher humped against Orson's wet tent, smearing it over his own underwear. One hand held Orson's luxurious hair while the other combed through the rust colored mossy hair on his chest - hair that now grew out of swelling green pectoral muscles. The skin beneath felt firmer to the touch, pliant and reactive but almost as if the cell walls were a little thicker. The green coloration slipped down from Orson's underwear, spiraling down his legs that grew their own mossy coating of red hair. His toenails darkened from ivory to a brownish-purple tone, looking firmer and harder than they had before.

While Orson had been colonized by the mycelium of a fungal presence, Asher's more direct consumption of the strange pepper seemed to be having its own effects. The younger man's saliva was growing thick and syrupy, clear and sweet like the goo inside the pepper. His own underwear was now soaked with his own strange precum and even his nipples glistened, swollen and plump. As he moved his hand to hold Orson in his kiss, the hair beneath his arm had shifted from brownish-black to a rich turquoise color like his dreadlocks. In contrast, the flesh beneath the hair was growing brighter, taking on the warm orange pigmentation of the pepper he had eaten. Splotches spread out from his pits and chest like vitiligo, then further, claiming his flesh with ever more rapid transformation.

Deep moans escaped Orson, his faint Adam's apple now swelling as if to resemble its namesake. He broke the kiss to catch his breath, a drool of plant saliva connecting Asher's lips to his now green tongue. They were a frantic colored mess, two creatures embracing their new virility and filled with fertile seed. Where drops of potent juices drooled from their still covered members and onto the grass below, flowers and mushrooms grew together, sharing the moss bed in an hybrid biology. It seemed they were now emitting their own scents, announcing their presence to their other plants around and invigorating them.

Vines crept from the pepper plant to conquer whatever metal surface still remained, and it slowly, effortlessly extended its branches toward their new brethren, dangling the plump fruits right above them. They were more than ripe, almost oozing in juices, so much so that drops of it beaded on its surface. The vines snaked their way out of the hole in the officer's quarters and clung to the hull of the outer hull of the ship. Thickets of moss spread out like carpet across the floor. As if gleaning information from Orson's mind, tendrils manipulated controls on the wall and the emergency lighting grew brighter to nourish and feed the plants directly.

Asher's head fell back, his now orange face wreathed by turquoise mossy dreadlocks. His teeth had flattened with no need of predator's fangs. His nose drew in the complex aromas and he smiled with his lilac colored eyes glistening as he looked at Orson. His hair now brushed his shoulders, though soft red facial hair was blossoming from his cheeks and chin, growing out and down like a lion's mane. Asher reached up to caress it as it sprouted, eliciting a wave of pleasure that ripped through Orson as if his manhood had been squeezed and stroked. It seemed that more of his body was sensitive to pleasure now.

Orson moaned, throwing his head back and his whole body shivered. His soft hair was getting quite dense, and was starting to grow thicker in parts. Small turquoise leaves soon sprouted among his locks, spurred on by Asher's pollen, before turning violet in a marriage of both entities. A rush of seed escaped his dick as he almost came from sprouting those, and he landed now amethyst colored eyes on his lover, on his beautiful mate. He smiled through dark

green lips, and reached down to unveil Asher's package, plunging his hand in the soaked underwear to lift a thick pepper-like shaft supported by a pair of lemon-sized balls. In fact, it looked almost exactly like one of the peppers he'd eaten, only larger.

The base of Asher's new manhood had a plump, bulbous sort of double-knot while the pointed tip was flared. It graduated from orange at the base to a vibrant yellow along the length. The flesh felt heavy, the skin tension firm but it was surprisingly flexible compared to the former human anatomy it had once been. Orson tugged on Asher's dick, eliciting a sloppy flood of the gooey precum. He held it in his hand, smelling the sweet and spice before he smeared it across the orange's man torso, nourishing the turquoise hair growing on there and flicking his nipples in the process.

"Fuck! Orson!" Asher howled, his nipples swelling longer and wider, bloating and plumping until they began to squirt streams of the same clear aloe. Asher howled before he grabbed onto his dick with one hand and one of his fat teats with the other. He started to jerk off faster and harder as his chest swelled larger and fuller, his balls hanging lower and growing plumper. A turquoise flower began to blossom just above his right ear, unfurling and opening. His blood tingled, his heart fluttered and then he came.

The spurt of semen was sudden, thick, and sustained. It came out like a firehouse, splattering across Orson's face like Miracle Grow. It tasted more like energy than a flavor and Orson's face throbbed. Thick strands of rusty red hair grew out, curving down over his upper lip into a thick mustache. The impressive beard he'd already grown started to descend centimeter by centimeter, then inch by inch, growing thicker. His already long hair extruded from his scalp faster, cascading down to his perky ass. Asher grunted, grabbing Orson's head, pulling him down to pop his aching yellow cock into that orifice.

Feeling his partner's tongue and lips on his member, the flow didn't even slow down. Orson's cheeks bulged until he began to swallow, his throat undulating as his Adam's apple bobbed. Gulp by gulp, Asher fed Orson and fueled his change. The green of his skin grew more vibrant, more leaves sprouted from his hair, the mossy body fur grew thicker and what had once been bones quickly stretched. Orson's height increased, his shoulders widened, his biceps and triceps expanded, but most of all his cock began to ache. Swollen, full, throbbing in time with his heart, it was only the beginning.

While Asher's manhood had taken on the shape of his infection vector, Orson's had become something else entirely. It was long, inhumanly long, and it tapered to a relative point. Green - like the rest of Orson's body - it resembled a long, thick, prehensile vine-like tentacle. It writhed and curled, flexed and straightened, growing longer... and longer... and longer. It was being fed by Asher, nourished by his most potent mutagenic seed, and soon nothing could hold Orson back. A squirt sprayed out a pitiful pearlescent glob of human cum, the last in the channel before a hose-like eruption of minty green sperm began to hose down the moss. Everywhere it landed grew flowers and mushrooms in rapid fashion.

The copious volume they both were capable of ejaculating nearly defied physics, and yet their bodies had undergone a fundamental metamorphosis. Their digestive system had been vastly simplified, designed to mostly absorb fluids. Their cells had become more plant-like, their skin capable of processing a wide array of light into sugar and energy. Genes had been rewritten, new genes added, and with it all came the blossoming of new life. Asher smelled sweet and spicy like peppers and flowers, whereas Orson held the biting edge of a fungus,

ready to consume anything that others might cast away. They had been repurposed, salvaged from their humanity and recycled into something new, something other, something... truly organic.

The skies of Delta-674 looked as though they had been lit on fire; red clouds danced around the descending sun on a purple celestial object. The first stars had appeared, and from the observation deck of the Calico, Zeke could faintly perceive the asteroid belt surrounding this part of the solar system. A member of the second team, he had been sound asleep during the landing, and was now nursing a large pouch of energy drink. The view was lovely, but now wasn't the time to focus on the sights. Moving back to the center of the room, Zeke re-checked the information from the drone feeds as the data reflected on his glasses.

Team One had gone completely silent for hours and the reports were alarming. The suits had reported an atmosphere breach which wasn't odd enough, but then they had eventually been discarded after a biological pathogen was detected. The drones had made it clear that the pair had discovered the remnants of the Borealis but other than the short time the drones were inside there was no record of the interior. The ship was too well shielded and there seemed to be a growing natural interference.

The screen flickered as Zeke ran the footage back, bringing up pictures of Orson and Asher walking on a kaleidoscope of grasses in every hue. There were a few stills but most of the feed from inside was white noise. The log from the drones was more useful, showing their progress in digging up the front of the ship - at least for a time. Alpha One had reported a traction obstruction it was unable to recover from. Drone Alpha Two had tried to assist, cutting through biologic materials before it had been incapacitated as well.

Zeke shuddered, nervously tapping his foot on the metal. Things had taken a turn far too quickly. They had safeguards against catastrophic failure. The biological pathogen wasn't a virus or bacteria, it was macroscopic. Even then, what had happened to them? What had happened to the drones? Had they been captured by locals? Eaten by predators? Zeke double checked the sound recordings around the Calico and cross referenced it. There were no distant explosions or hints of a natural disaster. There were no artificial sounds detected at all. Even their own drones had fallen silent. The only thing of note had been bird sounds and various animal cries, and they had been especially loud around the time Asher and Orson had stopped responding.

According to the company, Zeke was third in the ranking order, with only Asher below him. That meant that despite his instincts yelling at him to flee the planet, he couldn't give the order. That choice belonged to Efrain and Efrain had worked long enough that he was a bit more cavalier. The door to the command deck opened with seconds to spare, allowing the taller man to walk over and press his thumb to the time clock. It would have taken great effort to be any more precise. Hazel eyes looked up, the thirty six year old's lips pursing a little as he sensed the concern radiating off of Zeke. His shaved head glistened in the low lights while his short stubble beard contrasted with his skin.

"What happened?" Efrain asked, his voice deep and with a bit of bass beneath it. Zeke beckoned him closer, shuffling aside to let his partner check the screens. While recapping the

situation, he did his best to stay on topic, and definitely not be bothered by his crush being so close to him. Zeke's concerns for his teammates was real and this was a serious matter, but Efrain's cologne had a way of waking up his loins. That scent evoked memories of sneaking in the showers just after him to take whiffs of his towel, or sometimes even his underwear. The chubby twenty-eight year old crossed his legs and readjusted his pants, before taking more sips of his energy drink midway through his explanation.

"A-anyway," he concluded, scratching his sidecut, "I would suggest returning to orbit. Forecast predicts rain in five local hours, which would be after sunset. Sub-optimal conditions for search and rescue. Plus," Zeke reached over to turn on the thermal readings, "activity has increased in the forest over the last hours. The animals here are likely nocturnal." Zeke explained. It was his duty to report and it was Efrain's duty to respond. There were protocols, rules, regulations.

Efrain was normally by the book, but every once in a while he'd push back. They had emergency weapons, their suits could withstand storms and they had salvaged wrecks in much worse conditions apart from the animals. Whatever Efrain ordered, Zeke knew that he couldn't go against it. Efrain was quiet for a long moment, reaching up to run a hand over his bald head. He took in a breath and exhaled, looked down at the console and then ultimately made up his mind. He nodded as if in agreement with himself.

"We're going to go out there. We're going to task our drones with a search pattern. You're going to hold at the treeline and if anything happens to me, you're going to come back to the ship and head back to Omicron with a full report. We can't leave them out there if there's a chance they're still alive." Efrain said coolly, turning immediately to prepare for the rescue mission.

Zeke slumped forward, elbows on the console and hands holding his head. That plan was sound and sensible, but he still hated it. His mind was debating between who to blame for this whole mess; Team One for getting lost in the first place, Efrain and his admirable sense of duty, or Refinity for sending such a small team into dangerous situations. For now, he settled for the latter, if only to keep his fear and nervousness in check. Zeke took a deep breath, sat up, and checked his reflection on a screen. His black sidecut was a mess, a measure of his stress level.

"If we get out of here alive, I'm definitely getting a new job..." he promised himself, getting up to follow after Efrain.

If the universe could be reduced to anything, it was mathematics. In the grand scheme of things the Calico had landed remarkably close to the Borealis, and yet the journey between the two ships filled Efrain with more caution and doubt than he'd had on the last dozen missions. His environmental suit was doing him no favors, making his strong and robust form seem baggy and misshapen. It was even less kind to Zeke. The zipper strained over his stomach while it was too roomy around his shoulders and too long in the legs. With each step, Zeke wondered if it would be possible to get the ship systems to design him a better fitting suit.

The waxy leaves of the trees were rustling as the first drops of rain started to hit them. The noise grew louder, swelling like an ocean swell as the precipitation came down harder. The

moisture beaded up on the visors of the environmental suits, doing little to mask the grimace crossing Efrain's face. The whir of the drones continued as they rolled on ahead, unbidden by rain or acid or stone. The fact that both of their counterparts had been disabled was extremely unusual. Zeke slowed as he reached the edge of the trees, his eyes peering into the darkness, trying to discern if there were animal threats looming.

"Wait here." Efrain said in his usual no nonsense way.

"Be careful," Zeke whispered over the communications channel. The leader moved forward, holding his energy rifle in an assured grip. It was one of the many times that his past military experience slipped through. After all, the rifle was not Refinity standard. The flashlights integrated into his suit increased in brightness, granting him some visibility under the dark canopy. The dense foliage was a small blessing though, as it caught most of the rain, letting it fall to the ground like scattered waterfalls rather than a constant shower. The ground felt soft under Efrain's boots, decorated with islands of lush moss.

"Team One, respond. Can you hear me?" Efrain called out clearly, "Orson, Asher? Alpha One, Alpha Two?" No answers came but the raindrops and the occasional bird cry. Efrain was about to call out again when he suddenly heard wood cracking on his right. Whipping around to face it, Efrain almost thought he saw faces among the trees, but what came out instead was a shambling, rather cubic mass of vegetation, slowly rolling in his direction. He raised his weapon, but the thing displayed no signs of aggression. In fact, it felt quite familiar to Efrain, especially once he heard it chirp.

The drone stopped a few feet away from the man, seemingly waiting for him. It had been entirely overrun by vegetation over the course of a day, now covered in ivy, mushrooms and moss. Beneath all of that, Efrain could still perceive some of the chrome overlay, and the end of the number one on the plating, but even the inner engines had been taken over by vines. Its movements were stilted, less smooth than before, and Efrain wasn't certain if it was hampered or puppeted by the plants. As for the wheels, they were now misshapen, covered by some sort of red fungal layer.

It was surreal to Efrain, as if the drone had gone native. He lowered his weapon and tapped on his suit's holoscreen, trying to connect to the machine, but the suit didn't detect anything. It was as if Alpha One was both offline and had no power, and yet it had clearly just moved with purpose. Maybe the antenna was broken and it was incapable of a link, or maybe it just needed a manual restart.

Feeling almost as if he'd found a lost pet, Efrain moved over and crouched down. He reached into the mass of vines and blossoms, his hand reaching for the power button. As he disturbed the precarious ecosystem to get to the control panel, he heard a pop. Several over-plump purple and green mushrooms burst open all over the drone, releasing a dense cloud of spores around it. Likewise a heart shaped blossom exploded, expelling a sheen of slick but entirely opaque slime that coated his visor.

Alarms went off inside his suit, warning of compromise. Efrain's brow furrowed. They would have detected if the local plant life had acid, it would have thrown off the natural PH... But as he reached up to clear the visor, it had apparently etched into it and solidified into a plastic-like coating. The display flickered on the inside, not even giving Efrain a reason why the alarms were going off. He exhaled slowly.

“Zeke, I gotta come back. I’m blind.” Efrain said with defeat. He turned back the way he had come, or at least his best approximation and began walking. Each step was a leap of faith since he couldn’t see. He felt a bit foolish and a bit betrayed by the probe. The incessant beeping was grating on his nerves as he walked, at least until his next step met with no ground beneath it and the alarms were muffled by the sound of him toppling down a slope. Efrain tried not to accidentally bite his tongue as he slipped and fell, rolling and sliding before he came to a rather unexpectedly soft landing - at least until he cracked his helmet on something and the visor broke.

A rush of the local atmosphere came in. It smelled sweet, spicy, exotic, woody... It was somewhat pleasant, and at this point there was no longer really a reason to keep the helmet on. Efrain reached up and pulled the broken helmet off, set it aside and rolled over, leaning against a boulder. He looked around and let his eyes adjust, the corners of his lips curving into a slight frown. He most certainly had not headed back towards Zeke. More than that, the slope he’d fallen down was muddy. Where it wasn’t muddy, it was covered by thick green vines with wicked looking rose-like thorns rising out of purple moss. Efrain reached over to his helmet, trying to thumb the microphone on.

“Zeke, do you read me?” he called out hopefully. The only response that came was low pitched static that climbed and fell, likely from the unusual solar activity they had detected on approach. Was that why the plant life was so out of control here? With a frustrated grunt, Efrain took stock of his situation. His suit had snagged in a couple places and the integrity was low. The lights on his helmet had cracked... and his rifle was gone, likely dropped during his fall.

“Damn it!” He yelled, slamming his fist down in the mud. Despite his anger, he was only bruised and not broken. Setting his frustration aside, he forced his large form back up. Huffing, he examined his surroundings again. The slope was too slick and muddy to attempt. The moss and vines were likely to give better traction. With any luck his gloves would be enough to protect against the thorns. “You’ve been through worse, Efrain,” he muttered to himself, walking over. He reached out, trying to grab a vine between the thorns, “This is just like the rope climbing at the academy...”

Giving it a testing tug, he began to move forward and upward. His boots pressed into the thick, lush purple moss while he pulled on the thorny vines. Step by step he ascended, feeling more and more confident. He even started to grin when he was a quarter of the way up, unaware that the thorny vines were curling and coiling behind him and the purple moss was almost throbbing with anticipation. A whip-like sound came as a long vine lashed out, curling around Efrain’s shoulder. The thorns dug into his flesh, delivering a potent mix of pain and pleasure both. He called out, moaning in the dichotomy. Another vine wrapped around his thick arm, then his leg. The purple moss soaked around his boots and they started to sizzle as the material started to dissolve.

“Zeke, go back! Get back to the ship, you gotta-” Efrain’s frenzied yell was cut off as another vine, this one thornless, shot up and into Efrain’s mouth. He felt the long, thick, slick vine push past his teeth, slither across his tongue, bump the back of his throat and slip down his esophagus. As it descended it began to pump out thick aloe that lubricated the passage. The aloe made his throat tingle and then, when it reached his stomach, his entire body began to throb. His thrashing attempts to escape lessened and then stopped. He was suspended there by the thorny vines, his eyes wide but slowly glossing over.

While it was hard to see in the darkness, Efrain's perpetual stubble turned from dark brownish-black to the same purple as the moss... and then it began to grow. It curled out from his upper lip, his cheeks, his chin, then his throat. Centimeters at a time, it grew out bushy and thick and soft and moist from the rain. Combined with his bald head, he was rapidly becoming the sort of daddy figure that Zeke had fantasized about. The vine leading up to his head was visibly pulsating as it delivered the aloe from a reservoir down below. It had so much pollination to do...

The vines that wrapped around the former soldier started to move again, shredding through his environmental suit. The cuts and gashes where the thorns had cut into him were discolored. The flesh turned green around the edges and purple within. As the scraps fell away from his bare, muscled shoulders the flesh glistened in the dim moonlight. His mustache and beard had grown so thick that they completely wrapped around the throbbing vine in his mouth and he actually started to suck and work it with his cheeks. The plant seemed to writhe a little, enjoying this development.

More of the suit fell away and Efrain's rapidly changing green skin began to form lumps. Most of them gathered at his shoulders. The skin stretched and distended, grew irritated and then the pressure released as thick boney thorns curved out and up from his shoulders. Smaller, blunter points poked out of his biceps and triceps and forearms. The thick purple mossy hair continued to drop from his chin and throat, coming down eight inches, then ten, then a full foot from his face. He reached up with a thick, powerful green hand to start stroking the vine that slid into his mouth and throat.

As the other vines pulled away, they revealed his engorged manhood. It had already swollen and stretched, pushing out to an impressive eleven inches. A stainless steel Prince Albert ring seemed out of place on the now plant-like flesh, contrasting. The aloe pumping through his blood fed into his dick and it began to push out again. Cell by cell, his body was transforming. His thick cock began to curl and straighten, flexing and bending, even pulsing like the vine that was delivering his new life to him. Tingles danced across his length, and Efrain reached a hand down to stroke his elongating shaft, discovering blunt ridges across the whole length.

The change had run its course, at least far enough to cause Efrain's conscious brain to shut down. Now he was reveling in his predicament, a slave to pure pleasure and to the world surrounding him. The mud around him seemed warmer, almost welcoming, caressing his feet and reacting to the plant cells spreading through his body. Tiny pale roots began to sprout under his soles, burrowing blindly until they made contact with a familiar presence - the purple moss - and they connected. In that moment Efrain's mind suddenly expanded far beyond his own body.

He was both suspended by the vines and lying comfortably across the whole slope, a passenger to this experience and yet communicating with the plants. He understood how hungry it was for his seed, how pleased it was to see him bloom and come into his own. And he even felt... concern from it. Did the aloe taste good? Was he enjoying this? Did the thorns hurt? They certainly looked good and would protect him against danger. This whole ecosystem felt so loving and welcoming to Efrain, and he just had to reciprocate.

The thorny man - no, no longer a man, something else... He was still suckling on that nutritious vine. He spread his powerful, trunk-like legs further, tempting the plant intent on pollinating him. Another vine rose up his green and mossy leg, caressing his strong muscles

before fiddling at his back entrance, smearing aloe across his now dark green donut. Efrain shuddered, faint memories of good lays in the army barracks flashing in his mind as the vine pushed in with barely any resistance. The intruder was fully lubricated, spreading a transformative gel with each thrust.

What had begun as a tingling came in wave after wave of sensation. His anatomy was becoming simpler. There was no need for organs to digest meat or fiber. The cells of his body produced sugar from light and transformed carbon dioxide to oxygen. Efrain wobbled and writhed slightly at such a deep and fundamental change, but he knew he would only need sunlight and fluids for now, this was good and necessary, they were making him better.

With each thrust, his changes seemed to accelerate towards their inevitable conclusion. Several rows of bumps formed along Efrain's smooth skull. The skin bunched and puckered before more thorns emerged, curving upwards into a sort of sharp mohawk. Between that and the mossy purple beard hanging down to his navel, he had fully embraced the Daddy look. Small ridges grew around his areolas, forming into woody purple rings to adorn his two moss-covered pecs. Even his penis had changed color, still writhing and wriggling but now purple graduating to a red tip, drooling steadily with a steady stream of lilac pre, atop two low hanging orange-sized balls pulsing with life.

Slowly, tenderly, the vines set Efrain down. He closed his eyes and when they opened the irises that had once been a gentle brown were now a light purple. He blinked, smiled, and then that smile grew into a grin. He left his feet in the mud, connected to the moss. He connected to the plants, to the forest, to the... other dryads... to his own kind. He visualized Zeke out there in the wilderness, his wants and desires, everything he sought and craved. He felt the forest respond by shifting, changing, maneuvering itself to prepare for him. All Zeke would have to do was seek out the warmth of the others and he would find his own paradise waiting for him.

Time seemed strangely both inflexible and relative. It marched on relentlessly, and yet no one ever perceived its precise cadence. In Zeke's case, what had only been a few minutes in reality felt like hours to him. An internal clock ticked up on his visor display, each second seeming to last far longer than the moment. It was clear that Zeke had not followed orders, but he also had not yet put himself at further risk... at least by much. The junior scavenger had moved under the trees at the edge of the forest, past the point Efrain had told him to wait, but at least he was dryer. In the distance, shadowed by the curtains of rain, the Calico stood like a bastion of safety, its bright landing spotlights a promise of comfort and warmth... but to Zeke, in this moment, it also symbolized the ultimate cowardice.

Feeling the steady thrum of anxiety, Zeke tapped a command on his wrist control and the system played back Efrain's last received communication again. Among the buzzing static, "Zeke... back ship...gotta" rang in his ears, and the shy scavenger closed his blue eyes, grimacing in turmoil. He had tried to answer him, but there had been no follow-up since then. Zeke replayed that message one more time, and he could swear he heard some genuine fear and panic in his supervisor's tone. Efrain was very likely in trouble, but he had given Zeke an order. All he needed was to head back to the Calico, activate the main security controls, and

start the launching sequence. Once up there, he would contact Refinity, and set course for Omicron, safe and sound... but alone.

Images of his home flashed into his mind, his belongings, his one-room apartment... and no one else. There wouldn't be anyone to welcome him back besides corporate - most of his social outings had been with his crew. Zeke remembered Orson inviting the four of them to a bar he knew, his VR gaming sessions with Asher, or Efrain giving him personal coaching sessions to keep up on physical missions. They had always included him, how could he give up on them? What would life be without them? Determination solidified in Zeke's soul.

"I'm coming in." Zeke said on the global communication channel. He began to advance, relying on his suit's internal displays and checking for updates. Beta Two had encountered a problem with thick ivy stopping its advances, but Beta One hadn't faced any issue so far. As for Efrain, the map display wasn't accurate in these conditions and could only give a rough two miles-wide perimeter of the last place his suit had been detected. This wasn't a lot to go on, but better than nothing, and Zeke headed in that direction.

The rain began to turn to a steady drizzle, giving Zeke's visor a respite. Across the canopy, a pair of celadon and azure moons peeked through the heavy clouds, yet it wasn't enough to clear Zeke's path. The trees had twisted into strange shapes, some blocking back, branches resembling claws. In the unreliable light of his suit's flashlights, gnarly wooden knots could look like faces, legs or other body parts.

"That's just your fear talking," he said to himself, rationalizing it away. "Plants don't have faces." As he said that, an idea sparked in Zeke's mind. The smallest smile crept across his lips as he fiddled with his wrist controls to turn on his visor's thermal vision. What had seemed like people to him were now just idle blue shapes, and with a victorious smirk, he continued on his path. As he raised his head, however, he started to see warmer colors in the distance. There were a few small, scurrying shapes that were likely birds or rodents but up ahead he saw a large, vertical blob roughly the size of a human. A little further on there were others.

Sensing a seed of hope, Zeke was propelled onward. There were no signs of native sentient life on the planet and, all worlds being considered, evolution usually led to primitive predators being quadrupedal and not standing upright most of the time. The heat source had to be one of the crew. They might be injured or lost, but Zeke could lead them back.

"Guys!" He called out as relief and victory overwhelmed him. Lunging forward and pushing through the trees, Zeke moved faster than he expected to close the gap between him and the warm orange-red blob on his visor. Nearly stumbling through the shrubs, he careened forward to crash against something large and warm, but most decidedly not a human body. Even with the protection of his environmental suit he could tell the surface was soft and sticky. As he touched it, there were clearly no bones inside as it sloshed and shifted. Looking up and turning his thermal vision off, the display cleared to reveal a bulbous, orange and yellow pitcher-like plant. His glee snapped into fear as the top of the pitcher plant lifted up and a wave of heavy ooze spilled over the lip and splattered across his helmet and down his suit.

Zeke tried his best to tear itself free from the... thing, but as he tried to unstick himself he felt a pair of tentacles wrapped around his ankles, suddenly yanking him away and into the air, dangling him upside down. Below him stood not a human, but an alarmingly large and gaping orange maw, slick with the same juices now coating his suit. The fluid inside seemed to shift and bubble. Without ceremony Zeke was dropped into the pitcher plant and the light of the moons

faded away as the top sealed shut. Alarms began bleeping and screeching in Zeke's ears. His suit display began to glitch with static. He smelled burnt rubber and plastic being passed through the tubes into his helmet and slowly, steadily there was a comforting warmth that spread around his midsection above his belly before pouring down to collect in the seat of his pants, then his feet inside his boots.

Zeke swam blindly in the goo, the thick liquid tumbling him around and robbing him of any sense of direction. It didn't help that this model of scavenging suit hadn't been designed for underwater movement and weighed him down, but it wouldn't matter for long if the plant's digestive juices burned holes in the material. His helmet was faring better for now, giving Zeke a precious oxygen bubble - at least until the ooze started to pour down one of the compromised tubes and directly into the helmet, sloshing around his face as he tried to reach the surface. It soon coated his hair, his cheeks, and it even got in his mouth and nose. And despite the liquid actively burning anything synthetic, he found the flavor... pleasant?

A lapse in judgement led Zeke to focus on his sensory receptors. The plant smelled potently sweet, wafting aromas of the ripest fruits to lure in unsuspecting prey, like himself. Unconsciously, he licked his lips. It was not a tingle, a thrum or a jolt. The sensation that swept through Zeke's mind upon tasting the plant's fluid was like a snap of reality rendering him completely at the mercy of his sweet tooth. By now, half of his suit was in tatters, his belly wobbling in the liquid, his entire body buzzing with energy. Shivers coursed down his spine, his muscles betraying him. He needed to get out of there before his helmet flooded with no air left to breathe!

Reaching up, Zeke removed his helmet and let go. Only then did he realize which direction was down as gravity took hold and dragged it along his body. Using it as a compass, Zeke pushed and paddled and finally breached the surface. He gasped for breath but even the air in the pitcher plant smelled of ripe fruit. His face was slicked with the goo. It clung to his eyelids, his nose, his lips. His hair was heavy and growing heavier as it pushed out of his scalp, growing shaggy. The slime prickled and pinpricked as an impossibly thick and dense stubble beard pushed out of Zeke's round cheeks. It lined his upper lip, it spread down his chin and throat.

While some might have assumed that Zeke was having an allergic reaction to the goo he was now floating in naked, the swelling of his body came not from a histamine reaction but instead the rapid metamorphosis of his cells. While Zeke could not see without light, or at least not yet, his skin was rapidly turning the same lilac color that dominated the planet. His belly swelled larger and his saggy pectorals grew as well. His feet ached and throbbed as they grew wider and longer to support his increased weight.

Behind and between his ample ass cheeks, Zeke felt an urge he'd always had growing stronger. As his sphincter stained a dark purple, it began to pulse and throb, contracting and retracting as if it was trying to milk something. A deep, resounding gurgle came from Zeke's stomach as the acid he held began to shift PH, becoming more and more like the fluid inside the pitcher plant with each passing moment. It was getting difficult to tell where his body truly ended in that liquid. Even Zeke's tongue seemed to flatten and widen, growing slimy and gooey, coated with ever sweeter saliva.

The aloe had also soaked into his brain, drowning him in overwhelming sensations. The repressed nerd was blossoming into a voluptuous, sensual and carnal creature, unafraid to take

up space. His slimy body felt electric, smooth and supple, and he began exploring his changes, running his hands down his large stomach and between his loins. The pitcher plant resonated with erotic moans as Zeke started tugging on his purple member, toying with his long and stretchy foreskin. Each thrust seemed to add mass to it, but not necessarily in length. It grew a bit longer but mostly thicker and heavier, like him, bending down even at full mast. His balls followed suit and put on weight, filling full of delicious fruit-smelling slime.

With a delicious, accepting sigh, Zeke leaned back in his private bath and against the plant's walls, even giving it an almost loving pat. The slime had fixed any blemishes on his lilac skin, leaving him literally glowing, as he began to emit a low, fluorescent hue, perfect to lure food and men to satiate his hunger. And as his loins rumbled once more, he realized he was starving. Licking his lips, he connected with the plant through minuscule roots emerging from his fingers, and it quickly obliged, opening its maw once more and sending down many tentacles to gently lift the lilac man from it and deposit it outside with reverence.

The rain had subsided and the forest had responded by waking up from its slumber. It was buzzing with activity. Four winged birds and bats flew around, creatures hopped from branch to branch. They were noisy and felt other compared to Zeke, but he could feel those that were like him nearby. The forest was buzzing once more, now that the storm had passed. Zeke looked radiant in the moonlight even as most of the leftover slime dripped down at his feet. With violet eyes he studied the woods around him, his home, licking the air. Ah yes, he remembered, he was trying to find his friends. Surely they'd help him feed.

Long ago, before the Earth had grown inhospitable to human life, friends and loved ones had gathered around campfires or bonfires to talk and reminisce and celebrate. Those that were one with the forest had no need for fire, but five foot tall glowing yellow-orange bioluminescent plant buds did their part. The light cast across Zeke and Efrain, Asher and Orson as well as three of the Borealis crew. Even their drones, now infested by plants of their own, waddled around like giant hermit crabs with new shells.

Laughter was lyrical on the air as they chuckled, though they had done far more than merely talked. Each of them had been given profound blessings by the nature of Delta-674 that they treasured. They drank in light, they exhaled pure oxygen, they revealed in fertility and they dripped with the aloe of their new home. Life was little more than sex and companionship, granting each of them a richer existence than they had ever dreamed possible.