

Husband to the Swarm

The Cones were going in.

The words made my stomach drop, my sphincters tighten, and my teeth clench. It was finally happening.

The Cones were the long-predicted penultimate stage of the Earth Concordat's plan to end the problem of Humanity. Humans made a mess. They tended to cough, sniff, and sneeze, and they did things like go to church or have families.

The Concordat hated everything about Humanity. I kind of wondered how they kept winning elections, but the message of free opiates in exchange for votes seemed to be a quite effective method. Now, the Council of Freaks lorded over the 'Normals' with fierce and brutal effectiveness.

Needless to say, I was not a fan of the Concordat. It's a good thing I didn't say it, as not only was it very dangerous thing to say, it was almost as dangerous to think, since the Concordat had mind reader devices hidden everywhere, seeking out those who argued Humans had the right to exist. Such people were called Humanists, and were considered lower than garbage.

Half the people arrested for Humanism were probably not really even Humanists, just called Humanists so the Hunters had something to do. And then, "All Were Guilty" as the slogan went, so anyone picked up for Humanism was guilty.

Most people went about their lives, fearful of extremist Humanists causing problems. And being mindful to consume the mandated six hours of social media telling them that they should die.

I didn't like social media much. Mostly it was shit like people finding mothers of 'excessive' babies and getting them fired, or video clips of roving gangs of Hunters breaking into people's houses and beating them, sometimes to death.

The Cones were the next phase in the plan to kill off Humanity. The next STATED phase in the plan to kill off Humanity, though if you asked most people, the Concordat didn't REALLY want to kill off Humanity, just Humanists.

Scanning social media, I looked for any sign of resistance on Fibble. Sometimes someone might spray paint "Let Humans Live" on a bridge, but such extremism did not go unpunished. Generally the offender would be caught, found, humiliated publically with brutal degradation, then fed through a woodchipper on streaming media within a few hours. Their guts would then be mixed into the bug protein which was slopped out to the people.

I was lucky, of course. I was on Hamburg Research Station on Titan, and thus the Earth Concordat's was far away. But oddly, its control was more complete, as I was at their mercy for everything. They were watching, all the time.

There were fifty people at Hamburg Research Station. Half were scientists and half were people like me: specialists, trained in the systems that kept things running.

Shaking from the news, I went to see Ed, one of the programmers. Ed was a 'friend', if such a thing could apply to anyone. The Concordat had deftly ruined friendship by offering Fibble uptwinkles for turning in Humanists. Ed and I frequently conversed about topics ranging from the weather to how much work

sucked, before Ed would settle in for a long diatribe about Sportsball, which was the amalgamation of all earlier sports into the practiced art of trying to draw fouls by faking injury. Of all the people on Titan, I suspected him of being the most likely to see how horrible all this stuff was. It wasn't too likely, but I had to talk to someone.

I rounded the corner into his section, full of funkopops of Doctor Who and his "LIVING FOR FRIDAYS" poster. Several sportsball posters also festooned the walls, showing various drug abusing athletes in homoerotic poses that would make ancient Greece uncomfortable. He was staring at his laptop, viewing the headlines from ProperGandrr.net, the leading (and only) news source.

"Hey Ed," I said, clearing my throat. "Did you see the big story?"

Ed turned. He was a thin man, clean shaven, and his shirt bore the phrase, "BOOGIE 2899" with a picture of a large gentleman holding a revolver. He stared at me with lidded eyes and a half smirk. I wondered if it was normal to mildly loathe your friends.

"Oh Hey, Gene," he said in his chipper voice. "Yeah, I saw that Buffalo won last night. That Mantrell, what a great shooter! I have him in my fantasy Bull Team. He has another game like that, I may win the Cracker this year..."

"N-no, I mean that the Council of Freaks has declared that all Normals must have Cones inserted into their eyes, so they may be punished with servile darkness."

Ed sighed and rolled his eyes. "Is this from one of your far-right sites?"

"No, it's on the monitor behind you: the big headline saying, 'Normals to be Punished with Cones Inserted in Their Eyes'."

Ed turned back to his screen and squinted at the story, then looked back at me with that stupid lidded stare. "Oh. Well, probably means for those lousy Humanists. I hate them."

"Me too," I added, necessarily. "But it says everybody is a Humanist now."

Ed shrugged. "Well, that's probably true. I mean, I catch myself doing it all the time. Anyways, what do you need eyes for?"

"What do I..." I repeated. "I kinda use them."

"That's a bit selfish. I mean, I'm sure the Cones have cameras in them," Ed said.

"Why do you think that?"

Ed laughed. "Well, they'd have to. Anyway, I'm thinking Mantrell will have a good chance at taking the Wings all the way to the World Cup..."

I turned and walked away. Ed continued blabbing to no one about Sportsball, gesticulating wildly with hand gestures. Some people put up an act to hide their true feelings, but I think Ed was just an asshole. Most everyone was an asshole nowadays, and I concluded I had to be one, too.

The Earth Concordat had made sure that family was stigmatized, and friends were a liability. Anyone could turn you in for a reward, and anyone could confess and name names to make the torture stop.

There were no clubs or memberships aside from those that were compulsory, like the Wargames group I belonged to.

That was arguably the most awful aspect of the Concordat. It took things you liked, and made them all about its overarching message that you were a dick and you deserved to be punished. Everything had to have the Concordat's messaging injected into it at all times. Your favorite thing was just another aspect of the war against you. The hatred was eternal.

No, that wasn't the worst thing. The worst thing was that people accepted it. Loved it, excused it. They wanted more of it. They ratted out Humanists, stood for Death Pledge, cheered when Sportsball players stomped on the captives before a game.

The oddest thing was how they were proving the Concordat right. Humanity wasn't evil because it was cruel; it was evil because it was blithe. Stupid and foolish. Who was I kidding? So was I. But I refused to be punished for sins I didn't commit. I wouldn't. I wouldn't. Not again...

I always got along with machines better than people. Not robots or computers, but boilers. Heaters. Motors. Turbines. Things other humans crinkled their noses at, thought of as dirty. Humans stayed away, and that was good. Humans were dangerous. Humans may think you were a Humanist. Might decide you think you don't deserve to be alive.

I rounded a corner, and came face to face with Folgier, the commander of Titan station, and two of his goony security guards, Mark and Fred. My blood froze as I saw his blonde hair and pointed nose.

Folgier loved the Concordat, because in any other society he would have had a spike rammed through his face to make sure he couldn't contact children in their nightmares. He was almost every negative quality a person could have - he raped people, he beat people, he murdered people. He bragged about doing things that made hair stand on end.

Looking down, I gasped. There were Cones, two of them, connected by a bridge of electronics, in his hand. I felt a freeze go through my blood, my heart pounded even as the icy needles wound through it. It was going to happen...

"Hey Eugene," he said in a cheery voice, his grin sadistic and playful. "Big news today, eh?"

I nodded, feeling sick. "C-can't say I'm looking forward to it."

Folgier laughed, tilting his pointed nose toward the ceiling. "That's the point. Is Ed in his office?"

"Y-yes," I said, swallowing, my eyes still on the Cones. "You have them so quickly..."

"Oh, we've been getting this ready for years," he said with a handwave. "Whelp, better go give Ed his eye-test!"

He and his goons brushed past me, and I felt a wave of relief and a lingering guilt that I was happy it wasn't me.

"Oh, hey Eugene?" Folgier said, turning around.

"Y-yes?" I responded.

"You'll be 'seeing' me this afternoon, alright?" He pointed a finger at me like a gun, and made a clicking sound with his teeth while he winked. "Ta ta, Eugene!"

I went and sat near the boilers, shaking, trying to let the hum and sound of the flames and bubbling water relax me. In a way it was surreal how the world seemed unchanged. Despite the fact that absolute horrors were about to commence on Earth, and probably to me on Titan, the boiler still hummed.

The happy life of my youth was gone. I remembered different times, when there were nice clean streets and people would get married, or go to church. Those days were gone, and people said those days were dark. They said those days were rife with oppression, and injustice. They said this even as men were imprisoned without trial and killed for thinking forbidden thoughts.

My dream had been to travel, to see the stars. I thought that going to Titan would make me feel better, but it was worse. You were so conspicuous here. The others would all insist on you attending social gatherings, but then scrutinize your every word. Every conversation was a game, a game of observing, denouncing, and reviling in the death of the thought criminal.

As I listened to the hum, and thought about some nebulous time this afternoon when metallic cones were going to be shoved in my eyes, I realized that I had three options. The first was to just go along with it, as I had always done. I had watched lines be crossed that I swore I would never allow, lines which dehumanized and diminished me, which unraveled the very society I was born into. I loathed myself for doing it, knew it was out of cowardice and a desire to live a soft and comfortable life. Men had died for muddy hills in foreign wars, and I would not risk my life to preserve Human dignity. Disgusting. At any rate, now that metal cones were going through people's eyes, I figured I couldn't just keep my head down anymore.

The second option was to fight. Oh, the glory, to see a twenty year old incel lead the charge. Charge of who, and with what, and where, was hard to say. You can't fight when you are alone, and the Concordat made sure everyone was alone. In a world where saying a single wrong word could get you torn apart, where criticizing the Freaks was impossible, how could you form a resistance? At any rate, on Titan that was going to be impossible.

The last option was to hide. On earth that was nearly impossible, with the intense amount of tracking devices which every person had injected into them, but here on Titan there was no monitoring satellite network, no elaborate tracking. It wasn't needed.

So really, my decision wasn't too hard. I reached behind the boiler and pulled out the EVA suit and backpack that I had stored there. The Remote Monitoring Outpost was fifty miles away, across the rocky and icy surface of Titan. I would be able to make it without being missed, for I had rewired the airlock nearby to always read as closed. No alarms would sound, I could leave as I wished.

The trip was not without its risks. The power level of a suit was roughly four hours, and while I was familiar with an EVA suit, at my best I would just arrive at the station in just that time. Normal procedure when heading to the RMO was to take an extended battery, but I was unable to grab one, especially with Folger starting to hoard everything.

I hadn't really thought I would ever be doing this. I always believed that somehow it would all work out.

They would see the missing EVA suit, and never in a million years assume I went to the RMO. The RMO was cramped. It was noisy. It was unmanned because it was considered too hot and toxic for someone to stay there, but in fact there were areas that were always temperate and had regulated air. But they didn't know that. They would assume I was going on a 'last walk', which wasn't especially uncommon. With the Concordat's lack of value on Human life (and surplus of EVA suits), it wasn't seen as a big deal. Fortunately I had grabbed the suit before Folgier started getting miserly.

The EVA suit was really more of a vehicle than a suit, a kind of powered exoskeleton-tractor designed for servicing equipment outside the station. After five years of repair and maintenance, I wore it like a second skin. The advantage of this over a spacesuit was that it had no need to be pressurized with anything besides air, reducing risk of the bends considerably. It also could haul a lot more back and forth, which even in low gravity was an issue.

I entered the EVA suit with difficulty, as it really is easier to close the thing up. I took up the backpack and placed it into the hip toolbox. I waddled to the airlock door and pressed the side button. As I entered, I heard a man screaming at the top of his lungs. I realized with some sadness that Ed was not going to see Mantrell break the shooting record. He was going to see nothing. I wondered if it all had finally donned on him where he had always been.

The airlock behind me closed, and the airlock at the far end of the chamber opened. All was silent in the tunnel since I had bypassed the sensors. Wind from the outside came in, a faint whistle against the EVA view shield, but still present. It was weird to feel wind and know that breathing it would mean death, even after all this time here. It made you miss earth.

I exited down the tunnel. Walking was annoying in an EVA suit, and I had a long ways to go. Yes, Titan had one seventh of Earth's gravity, but the distance was far. I would need to make a quick pace to make it in four hours, with no stops.

My booted feet crackled beneath the orange rocks and ice as I bounded in hops. In the dim sky, beyond the range of mountains in the distance, the faint outline of Saturn dominated my sight. The planet and its rings were majestic and awe-inspiring, visibly even in the dim orange haze of the frozen moon. There were people on earth, the megawealthy, who would pay a trillion dollars to make this one uncomfortable walk, just to see this dingy sight. I had made this walk so often it had become drudgery, until this time. This time I was not walking to fix a broken pipe or wiping off a periscope with a wool cloth. I was walking away from the madness of mankind toward the tranquil certain death of the cosmos.

I took a moment to reflect on the vastness of space, and found some comfort in the idea that for all the Earth Concordat's power, they couldn't harm Saturn. For all their viciousness, they couldn't change Titan's gloom, or make the distant sun even flinch. They thought they were powerful, but in truth, they were less than nothing. Of course, that was still more than me, I thought somberly. I pressed on.

I bounded in leaps and landings for miles, a sensation almost like flying but for the accumulating pain to my knees. As I moved I heard only my own breathing, and felt the heat of it against my fogging view-plate.

It was somewhat nice to open up my stride in the suit, as so often I only went a short distance, but after several hours, the leaps and lands became tiresome. Despite the intense cold outside my EVA suit, I was

sweating, thanks to the heater units which recirculated the air and kept it warm, a herculean task given the extreme cold outside. I heard a rumble of thunder in the sky, and staring up saw nothing. Rain fell here with no clouds, as the methane gas was clear. A methane storm was beginning.

I trudged along the surface, the sounds of my breathing now mixed with the howl of alien winds and the flurries of methane droplets tapping my suit. Because the gravity was less than earth, the methane rain fell more like snow, but a lot of it was falling. The wind and methane snowflakes, combined with the dim light of the sky, made visibility drop to just beyond my hand. Even the EVA's searchlights would do little more than light up the falling rain, and as I was paranoid about being seen, I ran with the lights off. Visibility was a luxury. I knew my course.

At the two hour mark, my internal display began to show yellow. My suit was at about half power, and I was about halfway to the station. I could recharge at the remote station, but I needed to make haste. Being caught outside with no power for the heater would be a death sentence.

An hour went by, an hour more of bouncing, and the storm continued. The energy display was now flashing, a good combination of annoying and nerve-wracking.

I was working my way towards the Remote Station - which I could see the dark outline of on a far hill - when I decided to turn on the search lights. Later I'd tell myself that I had a premonition, but the truth is that I was sick of running in the dark, and the rain had begun to let up. I flicked on the lights, and saw, in a shallow of rocky crags about ten minutes off my oath, a little alien.

This was not as Earth-shattering as you might think. We had discovered many alien races, most of them bacteria or fungal growths, but some animal and plant life had been observed out in other star systems. The big surprise was the arrival of the first ever Exo-Terrestrials.

These little creatures - about the size of a puppy- were called Spike Spiders, for they walked on eight spike-like legs. Their eyes were large, and set upon their round little bodies on the top. They were cute little creatures, shuffling about here or there, generally observed on every single planet beyond Mars. They lived everywhere, survived almost everything. The novelty of the creatures had worn off, and most people on the offworld bases or colonies saw them as vermin who got into things and damaged them. They were generally exterminated, declared invasive species as they spanned the Solar System.

This particular one looked miserable. It was shivering in the cold, it's eyes flittering about sadly, as one of its spiked legs looked to be stuck in a crag. The poor thing was getting blanketed with methane rain. It would probably drown in the pooling methane (which was quite a feat, as the damned thing could breathe just about anything, but not liquid).

"Too bad," I said, watching the little creature's plight. I could see the distant Remote Monitoring Station beyond a ridge and I took a deep breath. I was behind where I wanted to be. I needed to make up the time.

I bounced off once, but as I landed, I looked back at the struggling Spiker Spider. I sighed. I didn't really have time to spare for rescuing a space insect, but as I watched it struggle and despair, I felt a pang of sadness. I felt like I was failing a test.

The basic premise of the Concordat was that Humanity was worthless: it was callous and cruel, a net negative on the universe. But if I helped this tiny space traveler, if I saved its life, wouldn't that prove them wrong? Wouldn't it be a measure of victory, to risk my own life to save another for no reward?

Even if it didn't vindicate anything, I felt bad for it. It sucked to struggle against the world by yourself. It sucked to be alone. Maybe it was worth helping the creature just to keep from contemplating its suffering.

I began walking to the little creature, clenching my teeth, cursing myself. At least, I mused, freezing to death in sight of the Remote Monitoring Station would be better than having Cones shoved into my eyes. And maybe the Spiker could shelter from the methane under my frozen corpse.

I made good time reaching the Spiker, although my suit's power gauge was now in the red. I had fifty minutes left for an hour trip. It looked up at me with its big eyes and cowered, unsure if I was going to step on it as so many other people did. Instead I reached down and moved the stone, and the little Spiker took an uncertain step forward, then faltered. Its stuck leg seemed useless to walk on, and it floundered about helplessly, pelted by unforgiving methane, its big eyes despairing as it sloshed in a puddle. It would drown.

I sighed. I reached down and clutched it up in my large glove. The little creature froze with its legs out straight, its eyes wide, as I tucked it into my arm. It did not expect this.

"I guess you'll stay with me for a bit," I said. The little Spiker huddled into my arm, and after a few minutes of shivering as I walked, shut its eyes and tucked in.

I bounded as fast as I could, holding the Spiker under my arm like a Sportsball. My trip to 'rescue' the Spiker had been ill-advised, and the methane storm had intensified, making visibility low.

The EVA became a frantic dash, in which I was panting and out of breath, desperate to stop and rest but knowing that it meant death. The outline of the Remote Monitoring Station came into view, and never did a rectangular block look so damned inviting. I was only a few hundred yards out, but warnings were sounding, and my energy was one flashing bar. I had only twenty seconds left.

Taking in a deep breath, and preparing for it to hurt, I shut off the heaters. I purchased myself another minute of energy.

The suit tried to mitigate heat loss, but it was VERY cold. I would be fine for about thirty seconds, but I needed to keep the power suit moving, especially as I had one modification to make.

I put the Spiker in my other hand, fished out my wire clippers from my hip toolbox, and opened the side panel on the airlock. Fighting the low visibility I fished for the red wire. This was the alert signal for the airlock opening. If I didn't disconnect it, Folger would get a signal that the airlock had been opened, and my cover would be blown. Fortunately it was not a proper security system: after all, who would bypass an airlock signal on Titan?

As I worked at the right wire, I could start to feel my fingers getting cold. Bearably cold, like painful needles, and not death-cold, which was total numbness.

The cold continued to overwhelm my suit. My teeth were chattering, the cold traveling up my arms and my feet. The fog inside my display was beginning to freeze, and the power was still dwindling. My eyes

began to feel very cold, and I was getting a headache. Outside, the Spiker was staring at me with alarm, apparently aware enough to know I was dying.

Yet I had to focus. I snipped the wire, and even as my lungs filled with stabbing cold air, I shambled to the airlock and punched the opening button. The power on my suit died, but I kept moving. I'd just soldier on. At least the rig was at a seventh of Earth Gravity, so seven hundred pounds became a hundred, but moving one hundred pounds when you are freezing and exhausted is still hard as hell. I lunged inside and the airlock shut behind me. Even the relative warmth of the airlock was better than the outside, and I labored in the EVA suit to get to the interior airlock door, still freezing. I punched the inner handle and entered the Remote Station boiler room, shutting it behind me.

Inside the warmth of the Remote Station, I eagerly disrobed from the EVA, which was simple as pulling a handle. The back hatch opened, and warm air flooded in. The rush of warmth caused a mass tingling all over my freezing body, and I tugged off the suit, racing to the nearest heating vent, letting it hit my freezing body.

As near as I could tell, my exposure had not been long enough to cause any serious damage, but still I was shivering in front of the vent for a good ten minutes.

When I finally felt the warmth return, I surveyed my surroundings. It was brightly lit, since the fusion reactor meant power was no issue. My erstwhile companion, the Spiker Spider, had disconnected from my EVA suit and was looking about with those big eyes, blinking, taking it all in. I did the same.

The station was mostly automated experiments in soil growth. An entire ecosystem existed in an adjoining room, which I didn't have the key for. And I definitely didn't want to disturb it, as it was being monitored by not only the central station on Titan, but Earth. Yes, everyone was supposed to have Cones in their eyes, but intuition told me that "some" people were going to be exempted. I wondered what would happen if I broke the seal when everyone was gone; were the Concordat crazy enough assholes to send a mission to kill me?

This room, and the other five rooms, handled water filtration, heating, and power. The machines were all large and noisy, either blowing air, bubbling, or humming. In the course of maintaining the experiments, they could keep me warm and with a supply of water. There was plenty of water, but I would contribute to this water supply, as the restroom went into the filtration system.

"So...this is home, now," I said. I looked about with satisfaction at the whirring machines. I could do this, I told myself, unsure if that was true. The reactor was supplied for eighty years, long enough to last my lifetime. I doubted they'd ever send anyone up here again unbidden. I guessed that at some point they'd have bigger problems.

The faint beeping of the water monitor sounded, three beeps in quick succession. I would either grow accustomed to it, or go mad from it. Either way, it was better than having Cones shoved into my eyes (that was a common refrain when I encountered hardships, I'll note).

I knew exactly where I wanted to set myself up. I went into an adjoining room, behind the boiler in a secluded section. This was an area that was easy to miss and would be hard to find. I heard skittering behind me as the Spiker followed me in, and I opened my knapsack and began to unpack my things. The Spiker watched me with its big eyes, the black pupils wide. I took out a laptop, some media disks, a

heater, a first aid kit, my metal cookware and cup. I also took out my books and comic books, and the um...'special' tape I had brought, kept in a black bag.

I then fished out my nullentropy tube, which contained all my media, downloaded and stored away. This cylinder was probably the most precious thing I owned, as it was the only escape from the world of shit I lived in. It also included my most perverted and degenerate femdom porn, which would probably be necessary over the next few decades.

I only needed a few things for now - when the crew left to head back to Earth to be 'Coned', I could raid the rest of the station. I had stored a few things in some hidden places, mostly meds or electronics.

Every time I removed an item, Spiker would approach and inspect closely, walking to it and looking at it with its big eyes. When I unrolled my bedroll, the alien spider ventured onto this new locale, tapping its spiked feet on it. With narrowed eyes it took in the unusually soft surface. It circled a few times, then, realizing this was a rare soft thing, it lay down and stretched out.

"There you go, live a little, Spiker," I said with a laugh.

I pulled out four long tubes, like toothpaste but even more foul tasting. I grimaced to look at them. Bug Paste. It didn't have to be made from bugs, but they made it from bugs. The stuff lasted forever, tasted like crunchy cut grass and stink bugs, and was so awful it took willpower to eat it. I had watched men cry as they ate bug paste, grins forced on their faces as they lied about how you really couldn't tell it was made from bugs. Four tubes was food enough for a century, but what a terrible century it would be.

My stomach rumbled, almost apologetically. I whimpered internally, and opened the tube. With a squeeze a small dollop of green paste came out, and a brown chunk of some insect part (best not to dwell on what) came out with it. I smeared it onto my finger, took a deep breath, and ate.

After the gag reflex, and a feeling like I might burst into tears in despair, the green shit managed to make its way down. I was good for another twelve hours, but the terrible taste of stinkbug filled my mouth, and I wanted to wash it out. I put down the tube near the cap and wandered over to the cool water tank with my metal cup, opening the release spigot. The water droplets fell like snow, the limited gravity of the moon manifesting.

The second the water began to rap against the bottom of my metal container, Spiker raced over excitedly.

"Oh. Thirsty?" I asked.

Spiker nodded eagerly.

"Well, um..." I began. I picked up one of my soup bowls, and filled it with water. Spiker circled me like a starving cat, and when I set down the water it drank ravenously, sucking into its mouth and lowering the water rapidly.

"Wow. Guess you were thirsty! Well, your leg is looking better," I said. "Maybe I let you go back outside?"

Spiker's eyes widened, and it raced back onto my bedroll and buried itself inside, staring out.

"You...you can understand English? You can understand?" I asked, amazed.

Spiker emerged. It tapped its feet and blinked its eyes.

"Is that a yes?" I asked.

Spiker repeated its tapping. Fortunately, I had read a book on logic once.

"Did you tap your feet?" I asked.

Spiker tapped again, blinking.

"Okay, so that means yes. Interesting."

I had heard that Spiker Spiders were incredibly smart, but most would escape captivity with surprising ease. This one was the first I had ever heard which preferred to be inside.

"I guess you like being inside?" I asked.

Spiker tapped its feet, its eyes looking at the door outside fearfully.

I rubbed my chin. "You know, it would be nice to have a friend, I suppose," I said. "Alright, Roomie, make yourself at home. What do you eat, anyways?"

Spiker walked over to the open bug paste tube, squeezed, and lapped up the ugly paste. It seemed to like it a lot more than I did. Contented, it went back onto the bedroll, lay down, and shut its eyes. It was making little snoring sounds in seconds.

Poor thing probably had a pretty rough life, I mused. Before I made myself too comfortable, I decided to inspect the rest of the facility. Six rooms, all but one crowded with machines, and the large garden which I had no access to. Throughout the facility there was nothing but the hum of the equipment that kept the garden running. I exhaled. Despite the rough journey, I was safe. I was away from Humanity, in this last outpost of the science of the old world.

I went into one of the back rooms, to the subsidiary garden which was for personal experiments. The soil of the garden was thick and full of dead plants, neglected when Dr. Moreno went back to Earth. I took out the potatoes and seed packets which I had managed to snag. Potatoes, Corn, and carrots were hopefully varied enough.

Not to subside, of course. I had stored away food for a century in Bug paste. Bug protein kept the body alive, but killed the spirit. It gave you nothing, and it was purposefully chock full of chemicals to cause depression. I hoped to cut the effect by having some vegetables as well. Of course, meat would be better, but that was quite illegal, except for Human meat, but I didn't much enjoy that at all.

I put the seed packets down near the garden. There would be time enough to handle that, I knew, but for now I was too tired. I entered the last room, which was an old astronomy lab. There were stacks of tapes in here in front of a paneled wall, and what looked like equipment for communicating with probes on a desk full of inscrutable knobs and switches. I remembered that several scientists had been stationed here right when I arrived, connected to some extrasolar probe project that seemed to end rather abruptly. All of their research was still here, out in the open. At any rate, I knew I still had some housekeeping to do.

I decided to fix up my EVA suit, as if anything went wrong I may need to exit in a hurry. I went back to the shut airlock, happy to be indoors and warm. I fished out the battery from the suit and plugged it in to the recharge station, parking the EVA suit nearby in the access closet. There were two more batteries at the recharge station, fortunately, and so a return trip would go much smoother than the journey here did. I could stop and rescue a dozen Spiker Spiders and still arrive comfortably.

With everything put away, it looked as though nothing was out of place. The station looked unmanned. That was perfect. Satisfied, I let out a yawn. I needed to rest.

I went back to the hidden nook where my bedroll was set up and the Spiker was currently taking up over half of it.

I sat down on my bedroll (the section I could get to), with my laptop to my right. I sighed. "I'm free," I said.

My speech woke my new companion. The Spiker got up, seeming refreshed from its power sleep, and approached on its chittering legs, staring at me with big, inquisitive eyes.

"Things are bad where I'm from," I explained. "Everyone went crazy."

Spiker blinked, and tilted its head. It pointed back through the airlock, toward the main structure.

"Yes, it is bad at the other station, but I am from a place called Earth," I said. "And things are very, very bad there."

I turned on my laptop and brought up a picture with some keystrokes. I had downloaded an encyclopedia of knowledge to the laptop, in case I needed to do anything or just wanted to read about dead people. I had decided wisely not to rely on the internet, both because mankind was planning to blind itself, and because even if it didn't, I needed to disconnect from mankind entirely. That was the only way that I could win.

I brought up a picture of the globe.

"Here," I said. "This is Earth, where I'm from. Looks nice, right?"

Spiker stood, bathed in the light of the laptop, its eyes staring as its little mouth moved furtively.

"Yep. Earth. Not sure if you'd like it. It's got a lot of water on it, a lot of trees, a fair amount of pollution, some wildlife..." I hesitated. "And soon, a lot of blind people."

Spiker didn't register that, but walking over to the keyboard, it tried to press down a key.

"You want to see more about Earth?" I asked. "Sure, why not..."

I brought up more pictures, showing the tiny Spider more images of Earth. It sat, transfixed, watching all of them. I watched too. So many cultures, peoples, foods, things. I'd see none of them again. Worse, the people living there would be creatures of pain. I imagined it being like a Hellraiser film, with mutilated chain gangs of victims marched beneath the cracking whips of evil taskmasters.

I shut the images off. I couldn't look at pictures of smiling people anymore. Spiker touched a spike gently to my arm. I sighed.

"It was nice, wasn't it?" I asked the little creature. "They ruined it. Really bad people made it an awful place to live. They...they want to poke out everyone's eyes."

The Spiker tilted its head.

"I know, it's insane. I don't understand either, but these people just want to hurt everyone. I don't know what to make of it. From the outside, what the hell do you think of this?" I asked.

Big eyes stared into mine. So full of emotion, so expressive, yet utterly inscrutable. The Spiker walked over to the keyboard and pressed the enter key, resuming the reel of images, watching attentively.

"I suppose you ultimately don't care," I said, defeated. "To you, we are just another thing to look at. Why wouldn't we be suicidal idiots ruled by evil people? That's what you observe us as. That's all we are."

While the little Spider looked at my laptop, I laid down and turned onto my side and fell asleep. My dreams were of endlessly running, and the screams of Ed as he had cones shoved into his eyes, and of Spiker Spiders skittering over me

I awoke with a Spiker Spider sleeping inches from my nose, breathing little breaths onto my face. It was morning. I began my new routine - I cleared away the dead plants from the small garden, and planted fresh crops in the reclaimed soil. I just needed enough real food to make some flavoring to try to mask the awful bug protein. I hoped a soup with vegetables would taste a bit better. Soon, plants began to grow, and saplings rose.

Otherwise, there was little to do. Spiker and I would play hide and go seek sometimes, but eventually the spider found a place to hide where I couldn't find it, and refused to tell me where it was going. That was mildly disturbing, although it claimed it wasn't going into the main garden, at least.

Spiker continued to explore the facility, and wound up using my laptop even more than I did. It sat in front of it like an impressionable child, eyes wide, watching as much about Earth as it could. That is what Spiker Spiders did: they watched.

My laptop reserved by my roommate, I read. Some of my books, some of my old comic books, some of the old tomes on horticulture near the garden. I found a stack of tapes from the back room, stuff that was from when this facility was used for scientific research a few years ago. I began to listen through the tapes, listening to the scientists talk about various probe missions to extrasolar places. A few times they found life, most times they found nothing.

I also began to notice that, according to the outside sensors, the temperature was rising. At first it seemed a fluke, but after several days (with fluctuations) it had risen by fifteen degrees. It was still damned cold, but I could not explain this change. It was the hottest day on record, three days in a row. I wondered if perhaps a hot spring was beneath the sensor, an event which sometimes happened. At any rate there was little I could do about it.

For food we ate horrible bug paste, though Spiker enjoyed it, and I listened to old research reports on the stars and watched saplings grow in the garden. And every so often, Spiker and I would play a game

At night, after a day of gardening and reading, I would lay down on my roll, and Spiker would venture close and tuck in next to me. I was always worried about rolling onto Spiker in the night, but Spiker was

never particularly worried about that. I realized it was purely because it knew that I was worried, and assumed I would always be careful. So Spiker would fearlessly tuck in anyplace that was warm near my chest or face. Little shit.

Spiker was entertaining. It would like to get into everything, like a kitten or a puppy, and I thought of it as like a pet. Although that changed one night.

Spiker liked to make me laugh with its antics, and one way to get me to laugh was to run around and skitter at fast speeds. I called it Turbo Spikes (because I'm eloquent) and Spiker loved to get me going with them.

I had put a little bookshelf next to the bedroll, and put all my books and my tape and nullentropy tube there. The top of this bookshelf also became where my laptop was set up, and where Spiker would sit in rapt attention as the laptop showed video of elephants or some other stuff from Earth.

But in this case, Spiker decided to race along my bookshelf in a Turbo Spike. As it happened, it misjudged the sprint, and it knocked the black bag carrying my tape off the bookshelf with a crash, along with several of my comics.

My tape, Anal Sex-Tigresses of the Far East, fell out of the bag and slid across the floor. Spiker scuttled over to it, inspecting it closely, staring with big eyes at Jade Pink-It, the buxom East Asian star (and one of my favorites).

"Ah, er..." I fumbled, grabbing up the tape. I looked at Spiker, who stared up at me with those giant eyes. "Pretend you didn't see that."

Spiker walked over to one of the felled comic books, with an image also as embarrassing. This was about a villain from the Silver Age of comics, Garozella, the Blood Widow, putting her stiletto heel onto the chest of the hero Rentaard the Barbarian.

I took a moment to admire Garozella. Drawn expertly, she was a voluptuous insect woman, almost always on a throne that looked like a scorpion's carapace. Her face was obscured partly by a mask of chitin, showing the lower portion of an angelic pale face and her full, ruby red lips. But the mask hid her eyes behind a shiny and mildly reflective shield, before rising into a crown with sharp spikes.

She wore tight metallic clothes, shiny like latex. Her clothes showcasing her prodigious curves, her full hips, and her firm bosom. Her feet ended in long stiletto heels, sharpened to spikes.

Spiker took a step back, seemingly in love with the picture. It pointed feverishly and looked at me, obviously wanting an explanation.

"That is Garozella, the Blood Widow," I said. "She is a supervillainess opponent of Rentaard the Space Barbarian, probably my favorite one. She kills every husband by...well...wearing them out. Every husband except Rentaard, that is. Her own comic ran for about a year in 1973, but was pulled off the shelves after all those teenaged boys started going blind."

I picked up another comic, this one with Rentaard's other main villain, the diabolical Grasping Merchanatron.

"Now this villain is also pretty good. He was older, but he was dropped from Rentaard's Rogue's Gallery just after 1947..." I began, but I noticed that Spiker wasn't paying attention. The spider was still looking at Garozella intently.

"You...you like her?" I asked.

Spiker pointed at itself with one of its spike-legs.

"You want her? I don't blame you, every guy does..."

Spiker narrowed its eyes, and pointed again, first at Garozella, than at itself.

"You...are her?"

Spiker stamped its legs and blinked.

"She's a fake character, so that doesn't make sense. But..." I started. "Are you a lady, Spiker?" I asked.

Spiker stamped its feet.

"Huh, that's funny," I said. "With me calling you Spiker, I kinda figured you for a boy. What do you think of the name Spiker, anyway?"

Spiker narrowed her eyes. She went to my comic book and pointed at the text.

I laughed. "You want me to call you Garozella? That's kind of weird..."

She narrowed her eyes, and walked over towards my 'special' tape, pointing at Jade.

"No, no, not that one," I said, clearing my throat. "How about Roza? Good short name from Garozella. In issue eighty three she goes by it when she goes to watch Rentaard arm wrestle to get his son back."

Spiker stamped her legs happily. We had come to an agreement.

"Okay...Roza," I said with a smile. I looked at the little Spiker. I smirked to myself. "You know...Garozella wears that mask, and you shouldn't want to cover up those pretty eyes..."

Roza's big eyes widened, and she made as though to swoon, falling to her left and landing on my soft bedroll. She lidded her eyes, and stared up at me with -somehow- heart-shaped irises. I chuckled.

"You're a stitch, Roza," I said, patting her head. "I'm happy that we're friends."

I got a strong impression that was not what she wanted, however, the next morning. Water was one thing I had in good supply at the station. There was a shower there, which was more or less like a steam bath with the lower gravity. I turned on the shower and settled in, enjoying the heat and the steam, letting the slow falling droplets make me feel clean.

The steady stream meant this was an older shower, as modern showers allowed only a splash of cold water. It was never enough water either, so you wound up toweling off soap. There was no point to this conservation, either, since the ammonia-water lake nearby could easily be distilled, and the pipelines were well maintained.

Anyways, I was in a good shower. It was one of the best parts about my newfound exile. But as I let the waters hit me, I became aware that I had a visitor. Roza had entered the stall, peering up at me on the halfwall which separated the shower from the outside.

"Oh, hi Roza," I said, soaping up. Roza was kind of like a smart cat, I reasoned, so I wasn't modest. "What're you doing?"

She settled in, staring at me.

"This is a shower stall," I said, motioning with my hand. I had taken to explaining what things were to her. I had no idea if she really understood or not, but she always listened attentively. "We use these to keep clean, get dust and sweat off of us. See? Here's the nozzle..."

I noticed that for once, she wasn't staring where I pointed. She was staring at me, and specifically at my very private area. And those are very big eyes on that little spider. I suddenly began to feel a bit self-conscious.

"Uh...Roza..." I said. I covered myself, and my area. "That...that is a private spot. I can, um, bring up the entry on the encyclopedia..."

Roza frowned, and skittered over towards me along the half-wall, trying to reach up and move my hand away so she could see.

"No!" I admonished, slapping away the spike gently. I motioned her away. "Look, scoot! Scoot!"

Roza's eyes narrowed, and she shot me an evil eye. Her body shook with anger. She lifted a spike as if to speak, then skittered away making a chittering noise I had never before heard.

Sighing, I washed off the soap and toweled off the water. There comes a time in every man's life where he must tell a small insect he will not have sex with it. I just was surprised it happened to me twice.

I came out in my clothes to see Roza pacing, looking less angry now than...worried.

"Look, Roza, I am flattered you want to, um, see me, but I'm interested in members of my species."

Roza disappeared to my bookshelf, and came back with my copy of Garozella in her mouth. She dropped it and pointed at the insect bits of the buxom Blood Widow.

I sighed. "Okay, things that look at least somewhat like my species. It wouldn't be right, me being with a little spider-puppy thing. I mean, what would the point of that be for you? I like you, but as a friend."

Roza paused, her eyes searching. She pointed at my 'tape'.

I cleared my throat.

"Yes, I like that tape too. Look, nobody exactly knows where you spiders come from, how you breed, anything. Do you...breed with aliens?"

She shook her head.

"Well, then I don't see what the fascination is. Hell, Human women don't want to look at my junk, and they're nominally supposed to be interested in such things."

Roza just stared at me, and blinked. She pointed again at Garozella.

"I'm...I'm unclear what you are saying. Are you saying you are Garozella?"

She shook her head. She pointed at herself, then Garozella, then towards the shower, then my crotch.

"Are you asking if I'd let you look at my privates in the shower if you looked like Garozella?"

Feet tapping.

"Well yeah of course..." I began. I panicked, realizing what I had just said to the smitten spider. "I mean, ah..."

I paused, as I considered the easiest solution. "Actually, you know what? Sure. If you were Garozella, of course you could shower with me. But darn it, you aren't...a real shame."

This answer totally satisfied her, and she trotted off back to my laptop atop the bookshelf to watch more videos of earth. I exhaled, having quelled the unrest of my 'pet', and went back to my work on the garden. About a month passed in this way.

But then, it all ended. It started with an...incident. It was evening, and I had dimmed the lights so that we could sleep. I sat on my bedroll reading a dog-eared issue of Garozella, one of my favorites. Roza was on the top of the bookshelf, having fallen asleep during an ongoing slideshow of images of the Peloponnesian war depicted on vases.

The issue of Garozella was a good one - she was using the immense strength of Rentaard the Space Barbarian to power her death ray, allowing her to obliterate enemy fleets and conquer the galaxy. After every battle, Rentaard was drained and weakened, and Garozella would pleasure herself upon him, taunting him to use his depleted muscles to resist her. He couldn't, and instead he ejaculated inside her over and over again.

After reading pages of insect-woman on barbarian rape, I began to feel a tad...amorous. I looked over carefully at Roza, snoring away. The little bugger tended to sleep pretty deep, and it had been a LONG time for me. Months.

I surreptitiously reached under my blankets, undoing my pajamas and grasping my stiff manhood. I began to tug away, looking over the drawn pictures of Garozella's sweaty bosom, her grinning face, the way she held Rentaard's wrists...

The way she kissed him.

As one is wont to do in these cases, I began to imagine that I was a shirtless hulking barbarian, exhausted from an afternoon of having my rage channeled into obliterating King NeoPriam's battlefleet. I imagined that Garozella was astride me, grinning down at me. Grasping my face and forcing my mouth open and forcing the famed Vine Tongues into my mouth.

I began to work myself pretty excited, and soon, I was there. My heart was racing. I stared at Garozella's lips, at her breasts, and at her thighs, those wonderful creamy thighs. I took a deep breath as I got close. Her legs. I was looking at them, wanting them. I looked away a moment. I could see Roza staring at me out of the corner of my eye. I looked back. Those legs...

Wait a minute, I thought.

Roza was inches from me, eyes wide, breathing heavily as she watched me in the midst of most shameful self abuse.

I screamed, and spasmed as I hastily closed my pants, getting my nuts caught in the waistband and generating a brief soprano note from my lips. Roza jumped about six feet into the air - a foot short of the ceiling- and ran off shrieking into the darkness.

"Ro-Ow! Roza..." I said, still dealing with the after effects of my nutshot.

I went after the terrified Spiker Spider. In her haste to escape from the screaming half-naked man, she had knocked over a few items, leaving a trail of chaos into the back Astronomy Lab.

"Roza..." I said, entering the lab which had a knocked over floor lamp. "I'm sorry I startled you..."

I looked, seeing that one of the panels on the wall looked disturbed. Tugging on it, it came loose, revealing a small cut-out cubby with a tape inside, as well as a cowering Roza.

"I am sorry I frightened you, Roza. I said. You just startled me, is all. I ah, shouldn't have been doing that, either..."

Roza stared up at me, still trembling, but she looked relaxed.

"Come on out," I said. "I'm not mad or um...anything else."

She took a few steps forward, stared up at me, then skittered out.

"So this was your hiding spot, eh?" I asked.

She tapped her feet.

I looked in to where she had been hiding, at the tape inside. "I wonder what that is..." I said. "And why it's behind a panel in here."

I pulled out the tape, reading the label which said SERRA - CENTAURI VIII AUDIO JOURNAL. I remembered hearing about that planet once, and how it was thought that it had an industrial civilization similar to that on earth. I went to the terabyte cassette player on the astronomy lab desk, probably the one where this was recorded. I inserted the tape and pressed play.

"Doctor June Serra, chief Xenobiologist, Titan log date 2189.6. Our observation probe has made contact on the surface of Centauri 8, the so-called 'pink garden' world. It is an ecological paradise...at least, for the locals. The atmosphere would be instantly fatal for humans (maybe we should be sent here, heh), but there is teeming plant and animal life, as much as on Earth. We've begun cataloging species. Virtually every few inches on the planet's surface is turning up massive new data finds. "

I pressed next. Roza jumped up on the desk, staring at the cassette player as it played.

"Doctor June Serra, chief Xenobiologist, Titan log date 2191.8. We've gathered data on some 800 different species in the last forty eight hours. The life appears to be predominantly insectoid or arachnid, though some exhibit mammalian traits such as hair and warm blood, and still others are reptilian and possess cold blood. Some are invertebrates, some possess exoskeletons, some endoskeletons. Traits

seem to mix and match, the normal classifications on earth unsurprisingly don't apply here. All species here ignore ExoSpecies 1, the so-called 'Spiker Spiders'. Perhaps the Spiker Spiders are intergalactic hitch hikers on the species of Space Whales which orbit the moons and occasionally dip down to the ground to rest."

I pressed next to the next entry.

"Doctor June Serra, chief Xenobiologist, Titan log date 2192.1. A fascinating find - we found ruins of the industrial society observed by telescope. There are some buildings, and conveyances with internal combustion engines, as well as discarded goods. Our archaeologists are eager to do some sleuthing, but estimate the ruins to be at least a century old."

I hit next.

"Doctor June Serra, chief Xenobiologist, Titan log date 2196.5. This planet defies explanation, and the actions of the life here are fascinating, a collaborative ecosystem which seems harmonious. There are wide plants which function like giant solar panels, collecting energy from the nearby sun and turning it into a cotton-like energy fuzz. There is an active colony of ant-like creatures which take the large cotton masses from the solar dishes and bring them to large, block-like hive organisms which then consume the 'cotton' and produce more worker ants. It even appears that some of the hive organisms produced the 'predator' types. It is an extremely efficient system of using energy to create life."

"Well, that's interesting..." I said. I looked to Roza, who seemed more interested in the tape recorder. I pressed next.

"Doctor June Serra, chief Xenobiologist, Titan log date 2196.7. We've recovered several articles of electronic media from the alien civilization, similar to artifacts recovered on Mars. The archaeologists will labor on them, but they don't see much hope of getting the media to play remotely, let alone translating it."

"Doctor June Serra, chief Xenobiologist, Titan log date 2199.4. Life here is much more complicated - and confusing - than we thought. The bulk of the animals produced are what we would normally think of as Apex predators - highly fast, aggressive, powerful jaws, sharp claws. However, there is no sign of predation on the planet - no eaten carcasses, no fear from the warriors. The predatory creatures are created, then go through a calibration of sorts. If the workers think they are defective, the predatory creatures -voluntarily- walk into an open digestive pool to be recycled. If however the predator is acceptable to the workers, then they go into cocoons to seemingly hibernate. The ant-like workers, which toil and labor to bring material to the gastric pools, will also simply walk into them to be consumed and reconverted into matter if they become damaged or old. The life forms seem to have utterly no regard for their own life, none of them do."

"Doctor June Serra, chief Xenobiologist, Titan log date 21100.1. ExoSpecies 1 is more integrated into the alien race than first thought. It not only has free access to the digestion pits and enters them if damaged, it actually is spawned from the block organisms. The Spike Spiders seem to go with and act as scouts for the workers on mission. Rather than being ignored, they are active watchers, like roaming security cameras. Several are observing our probe at every moment. We have reason to believe...they are placing things in front of it for us to see."

"Doctor June Serra, chief Xenobiologist, Titan log date 21108.7. We have designated the entire race on Centauri 8 as ExoSpecies 1. They are all linked. We have noted that, unlike most hive insect races on earth, there is absolutely no dissension among the disparate species of ExoSpecies One. We detect no pheromones, no noise, no communication at all. In an effort to gather intelligence, we have reviewed our dissection reports from local Spiker Spider corpses. In particular, we believe we have a theory as to how they communicate. Each member has a quantum entangled particle inside of it. The particle, regardless of distance, is able to see the motions of its mate. We believe ExoSpecies One uses this method to instantaneously communicate."

I paused the recording. "They did that in Mass Effect 2. It's how the Normandy communicated with the Illusive Man," I said.

Roza looked at me attentively. I pressed "Play" again.

"Doctor June Serra, chief Xenobiologist, Titan log date 21130.33. ExoSpecies 1 appears to be governed by one vast, giant Intelligence, with differentiated sapient life forms as opposed to cells. With its quantum nervous system, this Hive Mind could exist on a light-year spanning scale. It doesn't communicate, it controls. The scope of this Intellect is awe-inspiring."

I looked at Roza, and she looked back at me with narrow eyes. A Hive Mind? What did that mean?

"Doctor June Serra, chief Xenobiologist, Titan log date 21140.1. I...I can't sleep. I need to make my entry, talk through what we've found. This has gone from fascinating to horrifying. The alien r Tapes...we can't watch them, or translate them, but the archaeologists on Mars were able to date how old they were. They...they are only thirty local years old. I almost fell out of my chair when Robert told me. This explains why the images from our telescopes didn't match what we observed upon entering the system; this all happened too recent to be seen from earth. But the planet is absolutely covered by these life forms, and the ruins look ancient. This means in the span of thirty years, these creatures -this race- were able to wipe out an industrialized society so ultimately that it looked as if they had been gone for a century or more. Several of us have come to the conclusion that what we are seeing is a conquered world, its populace turned into fuel for the spacefaring race of merciless insectoids that destroyed them. The large Space Whales that we saw in orbit, they are the troop transports. We fear that we are looking at some kind of extraterrestrial invasion force, and that we could be next."

I looked at Roza, who was very still. Staring at me. Staring. An entire alien race was looking at me through those eyes. A Hive Mind. My finger trembled as I pressed the next button.

"Doctor June Serra, chief Xenobiologist, Titan log date 21156.6. The Concordat...have decided that our research is problematic. They are closing up shop. I am going to hide this tape here, because eventually Humanity will need the knowledge on this tape. I have schematics and datasheets on everything about them, everything from before they destroyed our probe. ExoSpecies 1 utterly overwhelmed and destroyed the ecosystem of Centauri VIII, depleting it of all resources. All of the native life - animal, plant, even bacterial - has been consumed. ExoSpecies 1 is a highly invasive extraterrestrial life form. It is even strip-mining the planet for minerals to make its armored carapaces from. If it heads for the Sol System, it will utterly overwhelm all life there. I know that Humans deserve it, of course, of course, but the whole planet will be consumed, even the great animals like mosquitos or hornets."

I looked over at Roza, who was intently alternating her gaze between the ceiling and the floor, but never towards me or the recording.

"...but there is a way to stop them: the Spiker Spider is the scout. They are not innocuous. They begin the process by finding things - resources or life- for the Hive Mind to consume. Here is the worst part: if even ONE Spiker Spider sees evidence of life on Earth, the ENTIRETY of ExoSpecies 1 will know that it exists due to their quantum entangled nervous system. The Hive Mind will know. It may cost my life, but I am recommending a full evacuation of all planets where ..."

Roza quietly went over to the tape recorder, and pressed the EJECT button with her spiked foot. She then systemically stamped on the cassette with her spiked feet until it was nearly atomized. She then looked up at me and blinked.

"It's a bit late for that," I said. "Roza...are you going to kill everyone on earth?"

Roza looked about guiltily.

"Well, frankly, I'm disappointed," I said. "I mean, as it turns out, every person on Earth is either a douchebag or has Cones shoved into their brains, but what if there were some decent people there?"

Roza rolled her eyes.

"What if I were there?"

Roza walked forward and rested her head against my chest, nuzzling me.

I pushed her away. "You really think your Big Sisters are going to be nice to me? This Hive Mind of yours isn't going to give two shits about me or you-"

This seemed to really set her off, and she began frenetically tapping her legs with angry eyes.

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Roza. But frankly...I think you should leave," I said with a sigh.

Roza's eyes brimmed with tears. Shaking, she planted her feet and shook her head.

"Well what am I supposed to do? You are going to-"

In the distance, I heard the airlock open. My blood went cold.

"Oh God..." I began. Roza stared at me with big eyes.

"...alright fellows! Let's find this funny freeloader," Folgier's voice announced. "Then we can get the hell out of here before that weird alien shit outside acts up. Eugene! Eugene! It's time to take the Eye test!"

I tried to think of how they found out, and then I saw - a sensor had been in the panel. Folgier had found the tape, and for some perverse reason decided to turn it into a trap. But still, they made such good time...

My heart pounded. Roza stared at me, trembling. Despite her work as a genocidal agent of brutal insectoid domination, she was still the only friend I had. "Here..." I said to her. I pushed her into the false panel and replaced it.

"Ah, there you are!" Folgier said, coming into sight. Mark and Fred, those two lumpy goons, walked alongside him with rifles in their hands. But worst of all, I saw the horrible cones in Folgier's hand. My heart pounded and my stomach dropped. I briefly wondered why he and the two goons weren't in EVA suits, but there were more pressing matters.

"No...no, no, no..." I lamented.

"Now, now, Eugene," Folgier said, addressing me and wagging a finger. "Those eyes of yours have got to be gouged out. You must be punished."

"This is wrong!" I exclaimed. I tried to back away, but the goons were on me. A rifle butt to the stomach later and I was doubled over, staring at the hard concrete floor as I dry heaved up some bile into my mouth.

Folgier laughed and loomed over me, the cones raised in his hand. I held up my arm, but one of the guards swatted it aside. I toppled onto my back, panting.

"There isn't really a lot of time to have a debate. We need to leave immediately," Folgier said.

"Why aren't you in EVA suits?" I asked.

"That's not your concern," Folgier snapped, though he looked worried. "Suffice to say we are in a hurry. But all you need to know is that you are getting Coned, and we are all leaving for Rio de Janeiro."

"No!" I shrieked. "Anything but Brazil!"

Folgier laughed. "Oh, you are going to Brazil, my friend. The whole human race is going to Brazil! All shall be shackled in barbed wire chains, to join in the vast procession to the Cathedral of Pain, where the wailing chorus shall sound forever."

"You're evil," I said.

"We're necessary evil," Folgier replied. "Eyes are subversive. They must be removed. A gift only for those evolved enough to see ugliness as beauty and beauty as ugliness."

I laughed, which made Folgier frown. "Well," I said. "I think you are going to see true beauty on Earth soon," I said.

"We are. And you can't stop it."

"No Folgier," I said. "You can't."

"What is your nonsense? Scripture?"

"Did you listen to the tape, Folgier?"

"I did."

"And...?"

"And what? There are no aliens."

"What's outside, then?"

"Nothing that matters. Nothing's going to happen that the Concordat doesn't want, and we are leaving," Folgier snarled. He raised the Cones to my face. "Now, hold still..."

The panel burst off the wall. Roza jumped onto my chest, her eyes narrowed. Her whole body was quaking in rage, her eyes red as crimson.

While at first startled, Folgier and the guards looked at Roza more with puzzlement than anything else.

"What the-" Folgier began. It was all he was able to get out.

Snarling, Roza lunged with a quite surprising leap. She landed upon Folgier's chin and bored her clawed legs into his cheeks, sending lines of red down his neck and clothes. A long, sharp spike of chitin erupted from her mouth and penetrated into his face, sending a red spray everywhere that stained me and the two guards. Folgier's skin almost immediately began to turn pink, and erupt with dark purple tumors and lesions.

Screaming, Folgier tugged at the fierce Spike Spider uselessly. She didn't budge, and seemed to entrench deeper. Blood was pouring down him like a waterfall.

"AAAAAUGH, GET IT OFF! GET IT OFF!!!" Folgier shouted, spitting blood onto Roza and everywhere else.

People often say movies get things wrong. Whether it is swords worn on the back, or ninjas with nun chucks, they always get tooled on for making mistakes. However, when it comes to asking for help while being attacked by an eldritch nightmare, they get what happens next pretty much dead-on.

Mark and Frank- and I can't say I entirely blame them for this reaction - started shooting. Now of course they didn't hit Roza, but they did spray Folgier down pretty well, and his body was buffeted by bullets until his corpse fell to the ground. And then the room was quiet.

There was Folgier, my chief tormentor, deader than a doornail. Roza was still munching away happily on him, still converting his dead corpse into ugly looking pustules. The Cones that he had planned to shove into my eyes lay upon the ground, the electronics that bound them shattered.

We all stared at the sight of Roza eating the dead Folgier for a moment. I can't say for certain, but I think she was humming to herself.

Mark and Frank were never smart, but even they realized that they had badly screwed up, and that they should do something. To men with a hammer every problem is a nail, and so they raised their guns to shoot me.

I clenched my teeth and prepared for the end. Well, it was better than getting Cones shoved in my eyes, I told myself. But it still sucked. I didn't want to die. Life may have been rather shitty, but I wanted to carry on. Wanted it to mean something more than dying in a laboratory on some remote world. Time slowed. The gun barrels looked like a bullet could leave them at any moment. I wondered if I would hear the bang. Would dying hurt?

And then the roof was gone.

A gust of warm, breathable air flooded in. That wasn't right, and looking up through the hole, I saw that the sky was...pink, with purple clouds. There wasn't much time for any of us to dwell on that, as a very large and very frightening looking insect demon thing was looking down at us. It had narrow, red eyes in

a face with jagged teeth and an oblong skull, shielded by chitin. It was hard to gauge its exact size or composition, but this thing had legs, or tendrils, or arms, and they were fucking big. There were a lot of spiky things and horns up there on its head and torso. The Nightmare bared its fangs and roared into the room.

The guards...well, it is easy to guess what they did. They emptied their magazines up at the roaring Spike-Nightmare, but honestly they may as well have been making gun noises with their mouths at it. The bullets bounced off the Nightmare's hardened carapace with dull thuds. And yet it still reacted with intense anger, I guess at the idea that someone was trying (quite unsuccessfully) to kill it.

The Nightmare leaned over the side of the torn roof, displaying more of its horrid body, and reached in with two long spike-tipped legs. The two stakes were each sharp, and large as a man. With a stab it punctured a pipe in the wall. The steam shot out at such pressure that it cut Frank in half. He lived just long enough to let out the most horrifying scream that I had heard that month.

Mark turned to run away, which was an understandable reaction (again, I empathized with these guys) but quite futile. A spike plunged through his chest, and looking down in horror, the spike began to articulate like a drill while Mark's screams were drowned out by the sounds of his guts being blended.

I learned a very important lesson - when you see someone impaled by a bone spike, don't open your mouth in surprise. I got a good mouthful of guts, enough to make me gag, before I was aware that the gooified pieces of Mark had now been almost totally reduced to a mist which covered the room. And now, the Nightmare was staring at me.

I raced through the door, aware that the grinding and ripping sounds were the Nightmare trying to get at me for a follow up snack by tearing away more of the roof. It was doing a pretty good job, and I concluded that my efforts were like a cat trying to shelter from its owner in a grocery bag.

More roof flew off with the sounds of metal whining, and as I felt the air rush in - and heard the hiss of acidic saliva falling all around me- I didn't wait to get a visual of the Nightmare. I crawled, blindly and fearfully, towards a desk with space underneath it near my hidden cubby. There was no plan, no future, nothing. Just a desire to get away from death.

I didn't go far before a bloody drill-spike came down on my leg. Surprisingly it didn't puncture into me, but it pressed down hard enough to hold me from moving. I shut my eyes and grit my teeth, awaiting the stabbing pain. After almost being Coned, then shot, and now eaten, my adrenal glands were spent, and I went limp.

"Alright, you bastards," I said defiantly. "Let me die with honor."

Instead of a noble death, I was instead dragged backward, then lifted up on the spike out of the wreckage of the remote lab. Roza was still happily eating Folger, and the sight had somehow become even more unpleasant. The two had fused together to look like an inside-out cow with twitching human legs, and those were slowly developing pustules and tendrils.

Hovering in the very warm, breathable air, my shirt secured on the tip of a spike, I beheld the surface of Titan. For as far as I could see, the normally orange world was pink, and somehow brighter. Strange crawling insectoid things were scouring over the surface, some the size of the Nightmare, some smaller, and a few that were far, far bigger. Hornet-like beasts with giant fangs flew in swarms in the sky. Ant

Workers toiled, bringing rock back and forth to open pools of bubbling and hissing green fluid. Near the lakes of ammonia-water, several large, churning blocks of flesh sat at the edge, drinking the lake with leech-like mouths and billowing dark blue smoke into the sky. And in the sky itself were vast, vast creatures, floating like blimps, the size and shape of massive whales.

I was brought to the face of the Nightmare. With one look at its dangling split mandibles, overflowing with green saliva, I knew it could bite me in half with no effort at all. Its fierce, pure red narrow eyes looked into mine, and there was something vaguely familiar in them. It let out an unnerving set of guttural sounds, and then moved in slowly towards my face. I grimaced and braced to be consumed like a goblet of milk. Instead, it pressed its slimy and chitinous forehead against my own, and let out a deep trill, a loud kind of breathing like a roaring fire traveling down a vent.

"Um..." I said, which I viewed as appropriate under the circumstances.

The Nightmare set me down upon the formerly-icy plain, which was now a kind of alien meadow, and then stood alongside me like a warden or guard. Purple tendril-grass had taken root in the melted ground, and was sprouting quickly, wriggling up like earth worms which seemed to reach towards my feet. The air was hot and humid, like a greenhouse.

And then the swarm approached. Spike Spiders, hundreds of them, began to flock towards me, skittering amongst the flesh grass with their little heads just above the blades. The eyes stared at me, all blinking every so often, looking up at me as Roza had.

EXACTLY as Roza had.

"H-hi," I said. "One of you and I are-were friends. She's eating my old boss right now."

A thousand eyes blinked in unison.

"So...now what?" I asked. The Nightmare growled above me, dropping more acid onto the ground. I noticed that the other large creatures were all beginning to approach as well. Several of the flying hornet-beasts landed, fluttering their wings with a force that nearly toppled the spike spiders and made the tendril grass flutter.

I was at the epicenter of many weird creatures, all whom were staring intently at me. And more were coming.

A slightly larger than human creature, with four grasping arms and a saurian face with no eyes, came forward. It let out a small yowl, then grasped me and picked me up. I considered resisting, but at this point I honestly was kinda curious about how I was going to die, and just decided to go with it.

The Ant-things appeared. Up close, these were about the size of a draft horse, with grasping arms and mandibles, chittering away in some clicking babble. Several entered the ruins of the remote lab and emerged, carrying objects which I recognized as my own.

But several Spiker Spiders had entered the ruins too, and they emerged carrying grand treasures above their heads with spike legs, as they marched before me and a procession formed behind them. For while all of my things had been gathered up by the Ant-things, the Spikers had gathered my Garozella comic, my documentary on east Asian anal enthusiasts, and -perhaps most distressing of all- the nullentropy tube, where all my really nasty stuff was password protected.

And just like that, the whole group moved off, walking towards a Space Whale in its descent. As the mammoth entity grew closer, I saw how impossibly large it was, and its mournful call rattled my chest. Still the procession walked onward, bearing me and my possessions, towards the opening maw of the giant space alien.

I was aware that I was going onboard, and I would be taken somewhere, for some purpose. I had no idea what or how long, but I told myself one thing: it was better than having Cones shoved in my eyes.