

One Little Spacepod

By Adam Perin

Simon Atwell peered into the semi-opaque mist hugging the ground like cottony gauze and strained to listen.

"Have to go...before they come..." It was a voice like gravel, barely a whisper, tickling his ear.

Through bleary eyes, he saw two blurry silhouettes across the compound. Roughly the same height, they were loitering outside the door to the cafeteria.

His eyes had drifted shut at some point as he reposed in a rickety chair against the outer wall of the recreation center. The words, along with a deep shiver from the frigid mist, had roused his stupor. He turned his eyes upward and squinted at shades of soft blue light, reflected off the obese body of the tiny moon's parent planet as it pierced the gossamer mist.

His mind went back to his old friend, Benson Rowe, who had just yesterday died from an accidental fall from a high cliff outside the compound. Benson...gone. Just like that. He sighed heavily to himself, took a long swig from his bottle and mercifully slipped back into sweet oblivion.

#

Wenona Black sat bent over a thick stack of printouts amid piles of used tissues when Simon stepped back into the listening post's instrument room. She glanced at him over the top of her glasses, her look anything but approving.

She shook her head, blowing her nose a little too hard with a sound somewhere between a goose and a foghorn. "You look like hell." Her societal requirement for a greeting satisfied, she turn her attention went back to the papers, filled with line after line of gibberish.

"How's the cold?" he asked. She ignored him.

Simon rubbed his grey whiskers, poured himself a cup of coffee and plopped down into his chair with a crack of cartilage from his knees.

He knew he looked like hell, but he didn't care. They'd only put Benson in the ground two days ago. It wasn't enough time to drink himself back into normalcy.

He gulped the coffee and rubbed his temples. "Anything new?"

She hummed and tapped the paper with her finger.
"Transcripts. A lot of them. They're chattering away out there."

Simon absently sipped his coffee and stared at a blank terminal screen. Wenona tapped her foot impatiently and watched him. "You know, if you're just going to just sit there, you might as well go back to your hut."

"Have to run some diagnostics." Cymbals went off in his head.

She gave an exaggerated sigh, indicative of utter exasperation. "Then I'm going down to my hut. I need quiet to translate these." She gathered up the papers.

He waved his hand. "Fine, go. Pleasure being back at work."

She paused at the door, her arms full of papers. "Heard anything about the relief ship?"

He nodded. "Still coming in two weeks, far as I know."

"God, I can't wait," she said as she left, then paused.
"Sorry about Benson."

Simon refilled his cup and slurped up bitter liquid noisily. He wheeled over to a line of server racks against the

wall and started going through his checklist. His head seemed like it had a single minded objective of exploding. Grunting, he began at one end and methodically went down each rack, checking every light, every switch, every setting.

"Little details, big solutions," he muttered to himself.

Originally a privately owned research facility, the settlement had been acquired by the military years ago and made into a covert outpost. The listening post itself sat perched atop a hill overlooking rocky cliffs edging a vast, blue-purple lake. The rest of the compound sat at the foot of the hill in a wide clearing surrounded by spiny trees and thorny bushes indigenous to the suitably alien ecology of the planet. A cafeteria sat in the center, surrounded by a ring of buildings including residence huts, a research lab, a maintenance shop, a small infirmary, an armory and storage shed, and a recreation hall. All the structures were simple, prefabricated buildings. More functional than aesthetic, they resembled Quonset huts finished in dull, tacky shades of brown and green to blend into the surroundings.

The system afforded an ideal location to conduct interstellar communications intercept. The small moon was remote enough to both to keep the facility hidden from the Cnidarians and to utterly isolate it. Simon had been stationed

there almost eighteen months, the rest had come at different times after. The outpost's small complement of ten people...now nine...consisted of researchers, engineers and support staff.

Except for the relief ships, which came only once every year, they were alone. Communications, by necessity, were kept to a minimum. If the Cnidarians ever discovered their existence, nobody had delusions about the horrible events that would surely follow.

#

Simon chose a table tucked into a shadowy corner of the cafeteria and tried to meld into the wall. A heavy, oily odor hung over the room as the cook, a lanky and long faced man named Lazlo Chisholm, pulled in the steam tables for washing. At the late hour, only a few of the others were still around.

Simon had barely sat down when Dr. Rosaria Castillo, the outpost physician, rose from a table across the room and strode toward him. Simon noted that once again she was sitting with the young soldier, Pvt. Wilbur Grantham. He watched her out of the corner of his eye, her lithe shape moving all too pleasantly toward him.

She sat down next to him, a playful smile on her face. "Good evening, Simon. You look a bit pale."

"Headache, that's all."

She nodded and leaned in, putting her hand on his forehead. Simon glanced toward Wilbur and caught him staring at them.

"You're not warm," she said. "Been drinking?"

"Not a drop since last night," Simon said. That was a lie. He'd added a few drops of whiskey to his coffee up at the listening post.

Her eyes narrowed. "Have you been taking the Ricettin I gave you?"

He shifted, clearing his throat overly loud, like a sputtering lawnmower. "So you and Wilbur? Seems a little young for you." She glared at him.

"We're just friends. He's a nice guy, unlike that asshole he works for."

Simon frowned and nodded. "Fayaz isn't that bad. He just needs people skills." He knew about the animosity between those two. Everyone knew.

She stood up, putting a hand on his shoulder. "He's an asshole, Simon. You're too nice."

Simon shrugged. "Just too hung over to care."

"Hope you feel better. If you need anything, let me know."
She walked back to Wilbur and sat down, strategically flicking her long brown hair behind her.

Simon picked at his food, a pasty mush that tasted vaguely of fruit but smelled like raw fish. He motioned to Lazlo, who dropped a steam tray with a loud crash and trudged over to him, wiping his hands on a filthy apron.

"Lazlo, can I get something else to eat?"

Lazlo stared at him. The man's pointed face and small, gray eyes gave him a distinct rodent-like appearance. Lazlo's face seemed to always be pock-marked with acne scars, and his nose was red, raw and crusty around the nostrils.

"You mean I should fix something special for you?"

"Are you sick? You look-"

"Allergies," Lazlo replied. "This fucking planet."

"Maybe you could wear a mask or something when you prepare the food-"

Lazlo hacked, crossed his arms and stared at him in boredom.

Simon relented. "Have anything like a sandwich back there? Something simple?"

"I make what we have," Lazlo said, waving his arm toward the steam trays. "You don't like it, there's the kitchen. Then I can bitch about your food."

Simon couldn't stop staring at that nose. "So you're saying you aren't contagious? Or--"

Lazlo pulled off his apron and threw it at Simon. "Here, take it. I'm going to bed. You get up at four to make breakfast tomorrow. I'll sleep!"

He stormed out. Simon pulled the apron off his head and noticed Wilbur and Rosaria snickering. "Don't ever criticize his food, Simon. You know that."

"I just wanted a damn sandwich," he mumbled. Wenona's head popped into the doorway. She saw Simon and made a beeline for him.

"I need to talk to you," she said, "in private."

Simon groaned. "What, now? I'm trying to eat." He looked at the food again and winced.

She leaned in close to his ear, whispering. "No, I need to talk to you now. Meet me in the lab. Things are going to get very bad here, very soon."

#

Simon looked over the papers for a third time and finally convinced himself he could in no way read Cnidarian. "I don't know what to make of this." He looked around the lab for a chair. Seeing none, he sat on Benson's old desk. The lab was dark and cool, the only light coming from a row of lamps shining on a long table of long-vined local plants against the opposite wall that Benson had been cultivating. Against the adjacent wall, two racks of servers gently hummed.

Wenona grabbed the paper from him, pointing to a large section circled in broad, red marker. "I've gone over it five times. I'm sure about it. They're coming."

"Who's coming?" The voice came from a dark corner, and both of them jumped when they heard it.

Simon snapped. "Dammit, Andy, stop hiding!"

A figure moved out of the shadows in the far corner of the lab. A man dressed in brown overalls with flame-red hair, thin build with a square jaw. His skin, though, was tinged green and gleamed like glass. He moved a little too smoothly, like a puppet being pulled by invisible strings.

"I wasn't hiding. You came in and I didn't want to disturb your conversation."

Simon sighed. "Fine, Andy. What are you doing in here?"

Andy shrugged, a fluid up and down motion. "This is where I worked every evening with Mr. Benson. I'm not sure what to do now. Are you mad?"

There was some sadness in that artificial voice. The humanity in its programming sometimes crept Simon out. "I understand, Andy. No one's mad at you."

Andy smiled. "Can I help you at all?"

"No, Andy. Please leave us alone. We need to talk."

"About those who are coming?"

"You aren't to mention that to anyone, okay?"

Andy made a shushing motion with a finger to his mouth. "Our secret," he said.

Simon smiled. "Okay, please go, Andy. See if Michalik needs help with anything."

Andy turned toward the door. "He's a smelly little man. That's what Ms. Black says."

Wenona scowled. "You weren't to repeat that, Andy! Get out of here."

Andy left, closing the door behind him.

"It's the Cnidarians," Wenona said in a hushed voice.

"This is a command network intercept. I've gotten reliable stuff off it before. They're talking about three systems here. One of which is ours. From what I can tell, they're going to conduct a reconnaissance in force. I think they're looking for rare metals."

"So it's not a military expedition?"

"Does it matter? They don't do anything without force to back it up."

"But they're coming here for metals? They haven't found us?"

"No," she said, crossing her arms. "I don't think so. Not from what I have here."

Simon rubbed his neck. "Doesn't matter, I guess. They come to this system, they'll find us. We can't exactly hide much. How long do we have?"

She hesitated. Simon noticed the hand holding the papers was shaking. Her eyes danced behind her pupils, nervous. Or more accurately, fear. He'd never seen it in her before.

"Maybe ten days. I can't really tell. I've just got bits and pieces here. I checked it, over and over. I think I'm

translating it correctly, but sometimes there's no direct translation. Hard to say anymore."

Simon chewed his lip, then put a hand on her forearm. "I have confidence in you, Wenona. But we need a definite yes or no. What do you think?"

She looked hard at the paper again, a slight nod to her head. "Yes, I'm sure." The papers quivered even more.

Simon gently grabbed them with two fingers, steadying them. "It'll be all right."

Another lie. He felt his voice break with those last few words, but hoped she hadn't noticed. If she was correct, they were all in grave danger.

#

It was no surprise to find Michalik in the recreation hall, sitting at the bar. It was surprising, however, to see his wife, Claire, sitting with him. The place was dilapidated. Old yellow light, cheap green tile. A mangy bar stocked with cheap booze at one end, a rickety weight room at the other. A pool table gathered dust in between.

The squat man glanced at Simon as he sat down and smiled through his bristly black beard. "Little night-cap, Simon?"

Thought you'd given it up." He held up a short glass filled with vodka as if in toast.

Claire slapped her hand on the bar. "And I thought you did?"

Michalik growled. "Dammit, woman, get off my back!"

Simon sat down and poured himself a swallow of bourbon. "I won't be giving it up tonight, Michalik."

Claire's head perked up at this, blond hair framing her petite face. "Why is that?"

Simon gulped his drink down. "Michalik, what's the condition of the spacepod?"

Michalik and Claire glanced at each other, a knowing look between them. "It's still there, if that's what you mean. Why you asking?"

Simon smiled. "Just curious."

Claire scooted over next to him. "I know when someone's lying, Simon. I used to do it for a living."

Simon laughed. In her former life, Claire was a senator and known as a well-heeled politician in every sense of the word. Out here, though, in the middle of nowhere, she was just

an ordinary chemist and reluctant spouse. "You always called it nuance."

Michalik scoffed. "If you think she lied a lot in congress, you should've seen her at home."

Claire reached back and hit him hard in the arm. "Shut it, Cossack." She turned back to Simon. "Let's have it."

Simon took another slug of bourbon. Booze loosened his tongue. It always loosened his tongue.

#

Captain Fayaz Hashim opened the door to the cafeteria and felt eight sets of eyes lock onto him. He paused, tugged his long black moustache, and stepped in. "I'm guessing you all know?"

The room erupted into a cacophony of jumbled voices. Fayaz cleared his throat, held up his hands and tried to talk above the din, but panic had already sprouted among those assembled. Frustrated, he slammed his fist down onto the nearest table, sending several pieces of metal silverware clattering to the floor.

The voices faded. "I need everyone to be calm," he said, his voice a low growl.

A voice from the back blurted out. "Who gets the spacepod?"

Again the room erupted. Fayaz looked at Simon, seated off to the side, a look of severe irritation on his dark face.

"The situation as it's been told to me," Fayaz continued, pacing slowly, "is that the Cnidarians are coming here within two weeks. Given Wenona's linguistic expertise, I believe this to be true. So, then, we must look at our options."

"Who gets the spacepod?" A voice called out again.

"That will be my decision," Fayaz said after a long pause, "as military commander of this installation."

"And what will you base that decision on?" Rosaria said. "Whoever gets their nose the farthest up your ass?"

"You are welcome to run off into the wilderness and hide, Doctor," Fayaz shot back. "That is, if you aren't talking to your friends already."

Rosaria stood up, face flashing crimson. "What are you implying, you son of a bitch?" She took a step toward Fayaz.

"Restrain her, Private," Fayaz said coolly. Wilbur stood and took Rosaria by the arm, pulling her close.

"Calm down, Rosaria," he whispered in her ear. "He doesn't mean anything by it. Please." Rosaria took her seat, Wilbur rubbing her shoulders. He noticed Fayaz staring daggers at him and awkwardly withdrew his hands.

Simon spoke up. "Take it easy, everyone." He knew the hatred between Rosaria and Fayaz could ignite something much larger. "This isn't the time to panic."

"Seems like a good time," Lazlo said, laughing. "We'll all die, anyway."

"We aren't going to die." Simon actually surprised himself by saying it, almost laughing inwardly.

Claire stood up. "We aren't stupid, Simon. And with all due respect, we aren't in the military, either." She looked at Fayaz, who watched stoically. "He should not be the one to decide who gets the spacepod. As a former member of congress, I am not required to follow the orders of a clone."

"And I suppose you think as an ex-politician, you should get it?" The voice was Wenona's.

Claire flushed. "I'm not saying that at all."

"Sounded like it," Lazlo added.

Claire stared at Fayaz as she spoke, the words meant to cut him, but he was erect as a statue, his gray eyes locked on some distant point. Voices erupted again, louder than before.

Simon leaned toward Fayaz, whispered a few words, and received a short nod. He held up his hand again. "This won't be settled now," he said. "We will decide who gets the spacepod, but until that time the launch code will be put into Andy's memory. That is as secure as we can make it."

Andy, standing silently in the corner, perked up at the mention of his name. He smiled. "I can help?"

Simon beckoned him over. "Andy, you'll go to the spacepod and generate a new launch code. You'll then encrypt it and place it in your memory. You will not reveal it to anyone, not even me. Do you understand?"

He nodded, grinning. "I get to have another secret."

"You'll keep it for one week, understand? No one gets it before then." Simon turned to the others. "We'll have time to decide who will leave and who will stay, and in the meantime, no one will be able to steal the pod."

Assorted nods and grunts answered, along with cunning glances at the words "steal the pod," as if it was a forbidden, but almost universal, thought among them.

"Anyone here not trust Andy?"

No one objected. Andy's green skin flushed with pink. "I love you all, too," he cooed.

Fayaz grunted. "Well, then, I suggest we all get some rest. We'll look at this with fresh eyes tomorrow."

Amid grumbling, the crowd began to disperse. Rosaria and Claire both glared at Fayaz as they filed out.

"You have more patience than I do," Fayaz said to Simon through clenched teeth. "Those women are dangerous."

"Just scared, I think."

"Fear is a great motivator, Simon. It can make people do things. Be careful." He chuckled, and Simon couldn't tell if he was serious or not.

#

Simon was roused the next morning from a restless sleep by a loud knocking at the door to his hut. He glanced at the clock and saw he'd overslept by over an hour.

He opened the door and Wilbur greeted him, his eyes hard and the muscles in his jaw visibly clenching and unclenching.

"Can you come, sir?"

Still groggy, Simon followed Wilbur to the hut he shared with Fayaz. Inside, Wilbur shut the door behind them and nodded his head toward the hut's lavatory door. "In there."

Wilbur clearly had no intention of opening it himself, so Simon obliged. Something blocked it from opening fully. Pushing harder, he could wedge his head through the opening.

Fayaz lay sprawled on the floor, naked except for a towel wrapped around his waist. His skin was ashen, and a grimace of pain was frozen on his face.

Simon flinched, startled. "God, what happened?"

"I don't know, sir," Wilbur's voice cracked. "He went in there this morning just after six, like he always does. I heard him fall or something. I knocked and he didn't answer, so I opened the door. He was lying there. I tried to revive him, but he was gone."

Simon backed away from the door. Wilbur stared at him, his eyes pleading. "There was nothing I could do, sir. He was dead before I got in there, I swear."

The boy's eyes were pleading. Simon felt the need to comfort him. "Okay, I believe you. Take it easy. We need to get Rosaria over here. That's the first thing to do."

Wilbur didn't move, so Simon put a hand on his shoulder and gently shook him. "Wilbur! Go get the doctor, okay? Get it together."

He snapped out of it, nodded and ran out. Simon squeezed through the door into the lavatory. Fayaz must've been standing at the sink when he collapsed. The air inside was moist and humid. Moisture still beaded in the shower. Fayaz's toothpaste was open on the sink, and his toothbrush was on the floor next to his head.

Simon's first thought was that the man had a heart attack. It could happen. Fayaz wasn't a young man. But something seemed wrong about the whole thing. He picked up the toothbrush and examined it. Some dried material was still there, probably toothpaste. Simon waved it under his nose, and could discern a strange odor. Bitter and acrid, like mustard.

He put the toothbrush on the sink, careful not to touch the bristles, and washed his hands thoroughly to be sure. Coincidental, he thought, that Fayaz had just the night before warned him to be careful.

It appeared he may not have taken his own advice.

#

"Myocardial infarction," she said, nodding to herself. "No doubt about it."

Fayaz's body was laid out on the infirmary's examination table. It was a tiny place, mostly taken up by a locked cabinet of medicine and a small desk used by Rosaria. Wilbur, glassy eyed, sulked in her chair while Simon watched Rosaria examine the body.

"But the toothbrush?" Simon asked.

She sniffed it. "Smells a little strange. But poison?"

"I'd be careful with that. There's something on it."

She tossed it aside. "Given the possibilities, Simon, of a natural cause of death, or a diabolical plot to kill the man using toothpaste, I think it was just a heart attack."

"Can you at least check the toothbrush?"

She waved her hand around the room. "With what? This is what I have. It's not a forensics lab."

Simon turned to Wilbur. "You say you heard him collapse this morning?"

"Yes. Early this morning. It woke me up."

"And he was in the bathroom by himself?"

The question seemed to take Wilbur by surprise. "Yes. Who else would be in there with him?"

Simon thought a moment. "No one could be, right? There are no windows."

"You were sleeping the whole time? Did you see him the night before?"

Wilbur nodded. "Yes. He went to bed early. He always did. Fayaz always followed the same routine every day, like clockwork."

"So he was in his bed when you arrived?"

"Yes."

"And I assume he was alive then?"

Wilbur bristled. "Of course he was!"

"Just asking."

"He was. His snoring kept me up half the night."

Simon nodded. "And you heard no one else enter or leave the rest of the night, or the next morning?"

Wilbur shook his head. "No, and I'm a light sleeper."

"What about the morning?"

"He always got up at five thirty five, exactly. He'd go running down by the lake every day."

"And he did that this morning?"

"I think so, yes."

"You think so?"

"Usually he wakes me up when he leaves, but today I didn't hear him."

"And no one came in while he was gone? Maybe hid in the bathroom?"

Wilbur gave him a look like he'd asked the stupidest question he'd ever heard. "No way, sir. No one else has the keycard to our hut."

Simon nodded. The keycards. Everyone had unique biometric keycards to their huts. It was old technology, but all they had available. He believed everything Wilbur said. Still, he had to admit that there would be no way of knowing if he was lying. "Wilbur, you have the access code to the armory, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

Simon stroked his whiskers. With Fayaz gone, access to the armory, and the weapons therein, would fall to the only remaining soldier on the outpost. If Wilbur was involved with

the death, there was little anyone could do to restrict his access.

Rosaria, still bent over the body, huffed. "I see you're going to ignore my medical opinion and assume it was a murder. Still, couldn't have happened to a nicer guy, though."

Simon's head perked up at this. "Meaning?"

She shrugged. "He was an asshole, Simon. I'm sure there's several people here that won't be crying over this."

"Including you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You said it, not me. Would any of those medicines you have locked in that cabinet be able to kill a man?"

She scowled at him. "No, they wouldn't, and I resent the implication!"

He shook his head. "Then where did this poison come from? Did someone bring it with them, in their luggage, when they came here? In case they might need it? Seems unlikely. "

Rosaria stared at Fayaz's body, which took on an almost artificial veneer in the bright overhead light. "You know he tried to keep me from being assigned here?"

"Why?"

Her face grew dark. "It's no secret. I was working on an outer rim colony a few years ago. It was overrun by the Cnidaria. It was early in the war, I think we were one of the first. We were too far out for anyone to help us. They slaughtered almost everyone, including my parents. They took me, though, and held me for almost two years."

Simon raised an eyebrow. He'd never heard of anyone surviving Cnidarian captivity. "My God. I'm so sorry. How did you survive?"

She half-shrugged. "No idea. I don't remember much of it. Probably for the best. I was eventually rescued. They said I was comatose but alive when they found me. They took me back to Earth, and I spent the next year in the hospital. They had to remove some implants. The doctors said I'm blocking out the experience, or something. I just can't recall any of it. I think I probably shouldn't try to."

"Implants?"

She nodded and pulled down the neck of her shirt, turning her back toward him. There, below the shoulder blade, was the dark outline of something below her skin. "There are others, too, a bit...deeper."

Simon ran two fingers over it. Beneath the soft skin it was quite hard and sharp. "Does that hurt?"

She covered it up again. "I'm used to it."

"What are they for?"

She shrugged. "They don't know. The doctor's told me it's benign, it's just too entangled with nerves to remove, so they left it in."

Simon didn't know what to do with this information. He felt like he should hug her or try to comfort her in some insipid way, but ended up just awkwardly putting a comforting hand on her arm. "I'm sorry."

She smiled. "Not your fault. It was a long time ago. But Fayaz never let me forget it. He thought the Cnidarians brainwashed me or something. Like he thought I was a collaborator, or they'd throw a switch somewhere and I'd turn into a spy. It's all bullshit."

Wilbur stood up. "I have duties, sir. May I go?"

Simon gave a reassuring smile. "Sorry about this, Wilbur."

He seemed not to hear. "Do you have any aspirin, Doctor?"

Simon chuckled at this forced formality between them, which he knew was for his benefit.

"Headache?"

"Ever since I woke up this morning." Rosaria gave him a couple from her medicine cabinet.

He quickly thanked her and left. Simon sighed. "We have to tell the others. There's something strange going on here. They need to know."

Rosaria covered the body with a sheet. "You always exaggerate things, Simon. Talk to me when someone else dies, then I'll believe you."

"I hope that conversation never happens," he replied, but he knew it would.

#

"This is about the spacepod, isn't it?"

Wenona was always straight to the point. Then Claire spoke up. "Does that mean someone here plans to kill us all so they can take it?"

"Calm down, Sweetpea," Michalik, seated next to her, said. He put a comforting hand on hers, but she pulled away.

"Don't call me that stupid name."

There was a low chuckle from the back. "Does it occur to anyone that most people here hated Fayaz, anyway? Maybe it was just that," Lazlo said.

Wenona turned toward him. "Who hated him enough to kill him?"

Lazlo's eyes floated around the room, finally settling on Rosaria. "I could only guess. Some for old scores?" His eyes moved to Claire. "Or maybe more personal reasons."

Claire scoffed. "You're accusing me? I've hardly said two words to the man in my life."

"You hate clones, Miss. I hear things. I listen while you eat."

Claire's face grew bright red. "Of anyone, Lazlo, we should look at you. You keep to yourself, always lurking and creeping around. I'm sure you have friends in low places. How many of us even know anything about you?"

Lazlo laughed. "Careful not to insult the man who cooks your food, Miss."

Simon interjected. "Just stop, okay? Throwing wild accusations at each other is pointless."

A hand went up. "Excuse me, sir," Wilbur said. "Are we sure that we're alone here?"

Silence fell on the group. No one had considered that, Simon included. The thought of a total stranger, an outsider, lurking around the shadows of their isolated outpost, sent a chill down his spine.

"No," he said, "I seriously doubt that. We would've known if Earth had sent any more people here."

"Maybe they aren't from Earth," a soft voice said. It was Rosaria.

"The Cnidarians aren't subtle," Michalik said. "If they were here, we'd know it."

"Well, Fayaz sure as hell didn't die from brushing his teeth," Rosaria replied. "I still think it was a heart attack. Simon thinks he was poisoned. If no one else is on this planet, it had to be someone here."

Suspicious glances shot around the room.

"And what about the spacepod?" Michalik finally said.

"No one can launch while Andy has the codes in his head," Simon said.

Andy had been standing off to the side, perfectly motionless as usual. He brightened at the sound of his name and tapped his forehead with his finger. "It's all up here!"

Simon nodded. "Okay, then. I suggest we pair up for safety. Keep alert and let the group know if you see anything unusual."

"Unless you pair up with the killer," Claire said dryly.

They filed out of the cafeteria, most of them pairing up. Michalik and Claire, the married couple, left first. The rest stood around looking at each other like they were picking dancing partners at junior prom. Lazlo gravitated toward Wilbur, but Rosaria quickly pulled him to her side.

"Bitch," Lazlo hissed at her.

Wenona stood next to Andy. He smiled broadly at her. That left just Lazlo and Simon.

"Guess it's you and me, Lazlo," Simon said. Lazlo waved a dismissive hand at him.

"I'm not scared," he said, wiping his nose, still red and crusted around the nostrils. Simon noticed his eyes seemed markedly yellowed and bloodshot. "I've got things to do." He was gone before Simon could object.

"What will you do, Simon?" Andy asked.

"My job," Simon said. "I need to go check on my radios. Walk me up there?"

A thought had occurred to him. The killer could plan to kill everyone here and take the spacepod to safety after the launch codes come out of Andy's head in just under a week.

But there was another little fact no one had brought up yet, and taken together with what Simon could vaguely recall during his drunken haze a few nights before, it worried him even more.

The spacepod had room for two people.

#

The day passed slowly. There was actually little to do. Andy had been in the listening post all night performing an intermittent service on all the equipment, so everything was running flawlessly. There seemed to be very little chatter on the usual frequencies, so Simon spent most of the day sitting at his desk, leaning back in his chair and sipping coffee.

Wenona came in for a few hours in the morning, Rosaria in tow. Simon sent Andy off with Rosaria while Wenona settled into her desk to work. After a few minutes of idle chat and Wenona

staring blankly at her papers, she decided to leave, complaining that she was too flustered to concentrate.

She pushed away from her desk and stood up, stretching. "I think I'll go for a jog. I need to clear my head and maybe it'll calm me down. I missed my run this morning. Overslept for some reason."

Simon laughed. "Exercise? Why not indulge in an adult beverage instead? I hate to drink alone."

"You don't hate to drink anything alone. Lock this door when we leave, Simon." She left, the door hissing shut behind her.

Simon got up and locked it. Amid the quiet hum and monotone beeping of the equipment, he felt peculiarly safe.

Sipping from a small silver flask, his eyes wandered to Wenona's desk. The transcripts were there in a tall stack, as always. He flipped through them. Page after page of gibberish. On many, Wenona had written notes in the margins, circled some parts, underlined others in black pen. He noted the top left corners, where the date of interception for each transmission was printed. There was almost a year's worth of transmissions here. He flipped backward from a year ago to the most recent,

which was one he recognized. A portion was circled in bright, red marker. The date of the transmission was three days ago.

How things had changed in three days.

#

After a few hours, Simon was bored and tipsy enough to venture down to the outpost by himself. The afternoon was gray, damp and foggy, like every afternoon, and his feet squished softly with each step in the porous mud. Several of the others were about, following their normal routines. Most had already given up on staying in pairs. He saw Wenona, still in her running attire and slick with sweat, stretching next to her hut. Andy stood dutifully nearby.

He spied Lazlo walking out from behind the row of residence huts, stoop shouldered and glancing around. Simon greeted him and received a curt nod in return. Lazlo skulked to the cafeteria, the door clicking shut behind him.

It occurred to Simon that for all the talk, he hadn't checked on the spacepod for over a year. As far as he knew, no one had. Its launcher sat away from the outpost toward the lake's shoreline to the west. It was an isolated spot, and not somewhere he wanted to go alone.

Michalik's machine shop stank of grease and sweat. Simon found him at his workbench, hunched over a small piece of machinery under a magnified lamp.

"You should keep the door locked," Simon said from over Michalik's shoulder, which made the man flinch and teeter precariously on his stool.

"Dammit, Simon!" Michalik turned toward him, squinting. "I thought I locked it."

"What're you working on?"

"Compressor for Wenona's hut. Hot as hell in there at night." He spat on the floor. "This place is falling apart, Simon. I got no spare parts."

Simon nodded and offered Michalik his flask. The short man's eyes lit up and he took a long swig. "So what do you make of all this?" Simon asked.

Michalik inhaled deeply and stretched. "Don't know. People hated Fayaz. I don't think they needed more reason to knock him off."

Simon peered at him. "Including you?"

"I try to get along with everyone. Easier living that way," Michalik said. "But I know others who didn't care for

him. Rosaria's one. Fayaz never trusted her and wasn't shy about it. Benson couldn't stand the sight of him. And-

He stopped, seemed to swallow his words.

"And what?"

Michalik hesitated, squirming a little. It was obvious there was a debate going on behind his bristly brow. "Claire hated him, too."

Simon blinked. "Your wife? What did she have against him?"

He exhaled heavily. "The whole clone thing."

Simon nodded to himself, stroked his whiskers. Fayaz was a clone. It wasn't news to anyone, nor anything particularly unusual. A lot of veterans had cloned body parts, the originals having been left on any number of distant battlefields. Fayaz had been so severely wounded his whole body had been regrown and his mind imprinted into it. It was a serious, if not altogether rare procedure. To Fayaz, it would've been just like waking up after a long nap. He was the same person, just with a newer, slightly newer body.

It was common, though, that clones faced some prejudice. There were those that felt that the entire process of

transferring a person's consciousness, their entire being, into a new body was abhorrent. A few even said such people lacked a soul and were therefore less than human at best or an abomination at worst.

"I didn't know she felt that way," Simon said.

Michalik shook his head. "Ever since she ran for the senate. It's how she was raised, Simon. Don't get the idea I think she did it. She can be bitch, sure, but she's never hurt anyone."

Simon was about to leave when he remembered. "Michalik, have you checked on the spacepod recently?"

Michalik nodded. "Yeah, sure. I do preventative maintenance on it every month or so. Why?"

"So it's working?"

"Its tip-top. Just needs the launch codes," Michalik replied, then narrowed his eyes. "Those are still with Andy, right?"

Simon nodded. "You don't think I'd try to steal the pod?"

Michalik shrugged. "Right now, Simon, I don't trust a damn person here."

Dinner that night was a tense affair. Simon got to the cafeteria early and observed each of his colleagues as they arrived. He was a little amused by their faces as they came in, eyes clearly scanning the room and taking inventory of who was still there—and alive.

Inevitably, talk turned to more speculation. It was more muted this time, no names were thrown out. The theory that seemed to be taking root was that there might be someone else, an unknown fiend, on the planet with them.

Simon seriously doubted it. His gut feeling was that it was so improbable as to be almost unthinkable. Their instruments picked up any and every signal within half a light year, and nothing other than the usual Cnidarian chatter had ever been picked up. There was always the possibility that the Cnidarians had infiltrated the planet and were already there, undetected. But Simon couldn't bring himself to believe it. But, as an old radioman, he could admit that maybe he had too much faith in the equipment.

To satiate the others, though, it was decided that a party would scout out the surrounding area the next day and see if there was anything unusual to be found. Lazlo scoffed at the idea, insisting it was a waste of time. But it was decided that Simon, Michalik and Wilbur would go. Wilbur had become the

unhappy recipient of a field promotion and the responsibilities inherent with it. Now that Fayaz was dead, he was the new "military commander" of the outpost and had sole possession of the access codes to the armory. It held only a half dozen small arms, but it was still the only weaponry within a few light years. A tempting cache for someone seeking mischief.

#

In the morning they put Fayaz into the ground, next to Benson and just inside the tree line to the south of the outpost. Simon noted that even though the man had generated his share of animosity among those at the outpost, everyone attended the burial.

They set out shortly afterward to scout the surrounding area. Wilbur, armed with a pistol, went first. Normally, nobody else would carry a weapon, but under the circumstances Wilbur allowed Michalik to carry as well. Simon declined, although he liked the idea of being armed. The trouble was that he had never fired or held a weapon in this life and would likely kill himself as any assailant.

They went in a wide circle around the outpost. Almost immediately, it became obvious that moving through the area would be much harder than they imagined. The outpost sat on a

small outcropping of rocky land and was surrounded by water on two sides. To the west was a soft beach of dark sand that hugged the lake's expansive waters. To the north was a steep hill, the listening post perched on top, and beyond which was a cliff which plunged sharply to a rocky shoreline far below. Benson's body had been found there.

That left two sides bounded by thick forests, but the trees on this small moon seemed to be especially suited for the low light and chilly climate. They were covered in thousands of sharp, needle like cones instead of leaves. After just a few meters into the woods, the group found themselves getting stuck and cut horrendously, even through thick overalls.

To add to the difficulty, the ground was covered with a blanket of low-lying vegetation that seemed to be made up large, flat leaves but also of thousands of small but incredibly strong vines criss-crossing in every direction. The plants almost had a mind of their own, reaching out and grabbing at feet. After an hour of exhausting effort and making only a modest penetration of the morass, the group gave up and made their way back to the outpost.

The sight of the four of them trudging back, their overalls torn and soiled, faces scratched and bleeding, brought smiles of amusement from the others.

Lazlo chuckled. "Told you. No one ever listens. Maybe now you appreciate what I got to put up with."

Simon stopped. "What are you talking about?"

He pointed to their legs. Tangles of the vines were still wrapped around their lower legs, trailing behind them. "That stuff, the tanglefoot. It never lets go. Used to cover everything here, right? I was the one that had to clean it out."

Simon looked around. The ground was neatly groomed, a mixture of soft mud and some light grassy vegetation. The tanglefoot had been cut back to the treeline. "Well, thanks for that. This stuff is murder."

"And it comes back every year. Never stops growing. And old Lazlo has to cut it out. Thank God for Lazlo!"

Simon waved his hand, not really caring. He believed now they could now dismiss the possibility that an unknown assailant was here. There was no way to make it through that mess, not on the ground anyway. It only reinforced in his mind that the murderer was indeed walking among them.

#

Simon wasn't completely surprised to be looking into Lazlo's dead eyes. His body was a mottled mess of blood, bruises and broken bones. The savagery of the killing was astonishing.

It was Andy that found him. The android usually worked through the night, often by himself. He'd roused Simon from bed at five in the morning, his usually pleasant smile replaced by a mechanically grim stare. Lazlo had been killed in the lab, probably some hours earlier. The scene was jarring.

There was blood splattered everywhere. Lazlo's mangled body lay in the middle of the floor in a dark pool. He might not have been recognizable but for his distinctive yellow overalls, different from those worn by everyone else. But there was more.

The lab was destroyed. Whoever had done this, by the looks of it they had gone completely berserk. Every piece of equipment was smashed. The server racks were completely destroyed, the servers broken in half, their innards spilled out onto the floor. All the plants that Benson had so carefully tended to before his death were thrown haphazard all over the room, their planters smashed to pieces. Even the door to the lab, a sturdy metal piece like all their doors, was bent back horribly, probably to get past the lock.

Simon stood and took it all in for a moment while Andy stood silently beside him. The coppery smell of blood was heavy in the room, and it made him a little nauseous.

"You found him like this, Andy?"

Andy nodded. "Yes, Simon. At four fifty three this morning. I immediately went to your hut to tell you."

Simon glanced at him. Andy slowly moved his eyes over the whole scene. There was very little emotion in his pale green face. As if sensing being watched, Andy looked back at Simon.

"You think I did this, Simon?" he said, an almost child-like fear in his voice.

Simon thought a moment, careful to pick his words. "I believe you. I'm just a little shaken."

Seemingly relieved, Andy smiled slightly. "I'm happy to hear that, Simon."

Simon didn't really know whether he believed Andy or not, but better not to antagonize him at this point. It would have taken great strength to do what he was seeing here, and there was no question that Andy was physically capable of it. But would he? Or could someone have made him do it?

"Let's go wake Dr. Castillo," Simon said. "She'll need to see this." He was about to turn to leave when something caught his eye. Lazlo's dead hand grasped a small cloth bag. Very carefully, Simon tugged it until it came free.

It was empty, but Simon noticed a whitish residue on the inside. Between his fingers, it was extremely fine, much more so than sand. Simon nodded to himself, closed the bag and tucked it quickly in his pocket.

#

"This is absurd," Claire said, sitting erect in her chair. "Three people dead in just a week! Someone has to do something!"

Murmurs washed over the cafeteria. Michalik put his arms around Claire, trying to calm her. Simon could see her shuddering.

"By my count, that's two," Rosaria said, looking back at Claire. "Unless you're counting Benson, and that was just an accident." She looked toward Simon, seeking affirmation, but got none.

"An accident," he said under his breath.

"What? Now you think he was murdered too?"

Simon sank into his chair, rubbing his whiskers. "At some point these things are no longer coincidences. I can't rule anything out."

"Are you kidding?" Wenona asked. "He died before I even found out about the Cnidarians."

"Which would suggest that if he was murdered, there was another reason for it." Simon looked around the room. They now numbered only seven, including Andy. "I have to ask everyone where they were in the early hours of this morning."

Claire spoke up. "We were asleep in our quarters, of course! Who would be up at that hour?" Michalik nodded, agreeing with her.

Simon turned to the others. "And the rest?"

"Wenona and I were sleeping in our beds," Rosaria said.

"As were we," Simon said, looking at Wilbur. Since Fayaz's death, Wilbur had moved into Simon's hut for safety. "But that all just means that we were all asleep and can't account for each other at all."

Claire scoffed. "I can account for myself and my husband. We were asleep."

Rosaria laughed. "So you can say at four thirty this morning, you're positive you were both in your hut?"

Simon nodded. "It's clear, this was probably done at the early hour just to make it impossible to tell who may have woken up and slipped out of their huts."

"The only two who were alone were Lazlo," Michalik said, "and Andy."

There was a murmur of agreement. All eyes turned toward Andy, who stood off to the side with his hands folded bashfully before him.

"And you said it looked like whoever did it had a lot of strength," Wenona added.

Andy peeked up at them, his eyes wide with fear. "I didn't do it," he said softly.

"I'll agree it looks bad," Simon said. "But it could just as easily have been done to make it look like Andy did it."

"But who here has the strength to bend the door?" Rosaria asked aloud.

They all glanced at each other. It was assumed only the men would even conceivably have the strength to do it. That meant either Wilbur, Michalik or Simon.

"It wasn't me," Wilbur said.

"Sure as hell wasn't me, either," Michalik said. "I'm probably the only one here that kind of liked him."

"You just drank with him," Wenona shot at him.

"Because he was a good worker," Michalik said. "Not like anyone else here volunteered to help me with the machinery."

Simon put his hand up. "Anyone here, with the proper tools, could have bent that door. We can't assume it was a man."

Rosaria scoffed, elbowing Wenona. There were both very petite females. "Yeah guys, watch out. We've been working out lately."

Simon glared at her.

"Has anyone wondered why Lazlo was in the lab at four in the morning, anyway," Claire asked. "What the hell was he doing?"

Simon nodded again. "I have wondered that."

"He was always off doing God-knows-what by himself," Wenona said. "He was asking for it."

"In the meantime," Simon said, "I suggest everyone stay together. There's safety in numbers."

"Where? Here?" Claire asked. "The ship won't be here for a week! You expect us all to huddle together in the cafeteria until then?"

Simon shrugged. "The alternative is less desirable."

"Except that one of us is the murderer," Claire said, "no thanks. We'll take our chances in our hut." She got up, pulling Michalik with her. He tripped after her.

Wilbur finally spoke up. "Not to be rude, but I was wondering. Who's going to cook the food now?"

#

They buried Lazlo in a grave beside Benson and Fayaz. Simon delegated lab cleanup to Andy. He didn't want to subject anyone else to cleaning up that horrible mess, but he wanted to go back and look at the scene one more time. Something about it was tickling the back of his brain.

Blood was everywhere. Not just the floor, but the walls and even the ceiling, from one end of the room to the other. Papers, lab journals and books were scattered. Every piece of machinery or technology was smashed to varying degrees.

Benson's plants, which seemed to Simon to be the same vine ridden things that grew wild in the forest, were scattered and torn apart.

He imagined there must have been a hell of a struggle. Why would Lazlo have even been in the lab at that hour, anyway? Lazlo never spent time in the lab.

Simon walked around the room slowly, careful not to step in any blood. It wasn't easy. He sat on his haunches near the congealed pool of blood in the center of the room and stared at it until he couldn't take the smell anymore.

"What are you doing?" The voice came from the door and startled him. He saw Wenona's head peeking in.

Simon stood up, knees cracking. "Just thinking." He cringed and sneezed, then sneezed again. Taking out a small handkerchief, his eyes drifted over to the plants scattered across the floor. "You have any idea what Benson was working on in here?"

"No," Wenona replied. "I never come in here if I can help it."

"I wonder if those plants were for research or just his hobby."

She stared at him blankly. Simon thought about it a moment, then suddenly realized that maybe he should have known his friend a little better than he did. "I'm coming out."

Stepping lightly toward the door, he slipped in a small puddle of blood. Cursing, he hopped to the door and stepped outside. Leaning against the doorway, he looked at his boot. Red, congealed blood covered the bottom of it.

"I don't know how you can stand to be in there," Wenona said.

Sighing, he was about to wipe his foot off in the grass when a thought struck him. He opened the door and stuck his head in again to check.

"What is it?" Wenona asked.

Simon pulled his head out and stroked his whiskers. "I just realized something."

"What?"

He shook his head. "My boots are dirty."

#

Everyone stayed in pairs after that, paranoia spreading through the outpost like a virus. After a tense dinner where everyone decided it was best to prepare their own food, the

occupants quickly scattered to their respective huts and locked themselves up tight. After some deliberation, Simon decided that work still had to be done, and went up to the listening post.

He felt safer in the listening post than maybe anywhere else. The structure had an extra thick metal door with keycards only he and Wenona possessed.

Simon quickly found himself dozing off. He jolted awake sometime later when his chair tipped over a little too far and sent him crashing to the floor. It was almost nine in the evening. He'd been asleep for over three hours.

Outside, a cool breeze swept in from the lake. Below him, the outpost was shrouded in a cottony blanket of mist punctuated by faint dots of yellow light coming from windows in the huts.

A scream stabbed the silence.

Simon started. It was high pitched. A woman. After only a few seconds, it choked off abruptly.

Simon ran down the path toward the outpost, scrambling down the well-worn path. The mist grew thicker until he could barely see more than a few feet in front of him. Reaching the outpost, he hesitated. He had no idea where the scream came from.

A figure approached him, emerging silently from the mist. It was Andy, his face grave.

"Andy, did you hear that?"

"Yes, Simon. I think it came from over there." He motioned toward the machine shop, next to which sat Michalik's and Claire's hut.

Simon knocked on the hut's door, but there was no answer. He looked at the lock, which was still engaged. There was no way to open it without the proper keycard. They went to the machine shop, and almost ran into Michalik as he came out. His face was ashen. Wenona came out behind him, her eyes wide.

"I heard something," Michalik said. "God, if I didn't know better, it sounded like Claire."

"I just checked your hut, it's locked." Simon said, and Michalik hurried past him, pulling out his keycard. He slipped it in the lock and the door popped open. Simon heard the man gasp.

Claire lay on the floor. Michalik put his arms around her, cradling her head. He leaned in, tears in his eyes, and mumbled to himself.

"Andy, go get Rosaria and bring her here. Fast." Simon said. Andy nodded and trotted awkwardly away.

Simon stepped inside. The room was in good order, there were no signs of struggle, other than one overturned desk chair. A small tablet on a desk in the corner played a soft tune. It appeared that Claire may have been working at her desk when an attacker surprised her.

Michalik broke out into long, halting sobs. The noise brought the others to the scene. Wenona appeared at the door, covering her mouth with her hand. Simon gave her a look that encouraged her to stay put and not enter the room yet.

Simon bent down next to Michalik, putting a hand on his shoulder. Claire's neck was deeply bruised all around. The obvious conclusion was that she'd been strangled.

Rosaria arrived with Andy, Wilbur following close behind. After coaxing Michalik to release the body, she examined it for a second and told them all what Simon already knew.

"I want everyone in the cafeteria, except for Andy, Michalik and myself," Simon said. "We'll take care of Claire. Lock yourselves in there and don't open the door until we get back."

There were no arguments this time.

#

They buried Claire in a shallow grave. Michalik had become almost non-functional, so Andy and Simon had to do most of it themselves. They worked quickly, Simon very uncomfortable digging a grave alone in the dark.

The others gathered in the cafeteria. There was no idle chatter now, just paranoid islands of people watching each other with shadowed eyes.

"From now on," Simon said, "everyone stays here, together. We should have done this before."

They nodded silently. Fear clouded their eyes. Real fear. Rosaria and Wilbur sat at a table, holding each other. Wenona was in the corner, arms wrapped around her knees. Michalik slumped against the wall, head buried, weeping softly. Andy stood off to the side, hands folded placidly.

"I want to know where everyone was when this happened," Simon said.

Andy raised his hand. "Simon, I was in the lab cleaning up."

"Andy, last time I saw you, you were with Wenona. Why did you leave her?"

Andy shrank, looking at the ground. "I left her at the machine shop with Michalik. The lab has always been my responsibility, so I thought I should straighten it up."

Simon looked at Wenona. "Is that true?"

She nodded. "Yes, I wanted Michalik to look at my tablet. It's been having problems."

Simon knelt beside Michalik. "Did anyone else have a keycard to your quarters?"

Michalik shook his head. "No." His words were barely audible.

"And you and Wenona were together the whole time?"

Wenona nodded. "Yes, until we heard the scream."

Simon turned to Rosaria and Wilbur. "And where were you two?"

Rosaria glared at him. "We were in my hut. Where were you?"

"In the listening post," he replied, and stopped. He knew what was coming.

"With who?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I was alone. Andy and Wenona were there earlier, but they left together. I dozed off at my desk."

Rosaria nodded slowly. "So, of all of us, only you and Andy were by yourselves."

"I guess that's right."

"I'm just pointing it out. You question everyone else like you're above suspicion."

Simon felt the other's eyes on him. He shook his head. "It wasn't me." He knew it looked bad, but that was probably why the murderer has chosen that moment to ply his trade. Someone was planning this very carefully, playing them off one another. Paranoia is a powerful tool and could easily set them off against one another, doing the killer's job for them.

And it was working.

#

Simon drifted into and out of a light sleep, waking with a start at little sounds. Someone else shifted in their sleep. A cough. The building creaked as the wind broke against it. Each time he woke, Simon saw at least one other person awake, watching with hollow eyes. Andy sat in the corner all night,

his hands folded placidly in his lap. His serene, neutered stare was unsettling.

Morning came, mercifully. Simon fixed himself some cold cereal, metallic tasting artificial juice and a few pieces of bread. The dull quiet, punctuated by a titter-tatter of dying rain on the roof, was finally broken by Wenona's husky voice.

"Wilbur, are you carrying a weapon?"

Every head in the room simultaneously swiveled toward him.

Wilbur froze, a spoonful of oatmeal dangling before his open mouth. "Yes. I always carry my sidearm."

A collective hushed gasp. Wenona stared at him. "I think there's a problem with that."

"I'm not a killer," Wilbur said, his face hard.

"How do we know that?" Michalik asked.

"And we can't take your word for it," Wenona continued.

"Having one of us armed and the rest defenseless isn't right."

Simon swallowed a dry mouthful of bread. "I agree."

"Wilbur is the most trustworthy person here," Rosaria said, taking Wilbur's hand.

"Of course, you'd say that," Wenona shot back. "Can we ask someone who isn't currently sleeping with him?"

Rosaria glared at her.

"Okay, let's think about this." Simon rubbed his eyes, still dry with sleep. "Who would rather Wilbur not have the weapon?"

Michalik, Wenona and Simon put their hands up. Andy sheepishly abstained.

"Well, that's the majority," Simon said. Rosaria and Wilbur exchanged glances. "Come on, guys, all we're asking is that no one person be armed. We just want everyone the same."

Rosaria opened her mouth to object, but Wilbur put a hand on her arm. "It's okay. I'll give it up." He stood and walked to Simon, taking out his pistol and holding it up to him. Simon could see the man's hand shaking as he held it. Wilbur was either very scared or very nervous.

"Hold on!" Michalik said. "Who said Simon gets it?"

Simon put his hands up. "Right. No one gets it. It goes back in the armory."

He offered to escort Wilbur there, but no one was willing to trust the two of them alone. Likewise, no one wanted to be left alone in the cafeteria. They would all go together.

The mist was particularly thick and stubborn that morning, the air saturated and heavy. Stepping outside first, Simon tripped and fell headlong into the soggy ground, falling off the high concrete step under the cafeteria door. Even after almost two years, he regularly stumbled over it.

"You okay?" Wenona hurried out to help him.

"Fine," he said, glad the mist hid his mortified face.

The group huddled over to the armory, shuffling and tripping over each other. Wilbur fiddled with the door lock, his hands shaking so much he had difficulty sliding the keycard into the slot. Simon, watching, shook his head. This boy was not a murderer.

"Calm down, Wilbur," Simon said. The others stood a few steps away, watching, just dark silhouettes in the mist. Wilbur took a deep breath. "I don't know why I'm so nervous." He slid the keycard into the lock.

The lock clicked, the door slid open.

"You know, while we're out here," Wenona said, "we might as well go to our huts and get anything we need. I need my toothbrush. Maybe some lotion, too."

Rosaria nodded. "And how about a shower?"

"I'm sure as hell not going to wait outside while you take a shower," Michalik said.

"Says the person that needs one the most."

Wenona crossed her arms. "I don't know that I'd feel safe in the shower. Maybe just a sponge bath. We can use the sink in the cafeteria."

Rosaria scoffed. "I'm not stripping and getting into a sink."

Andy piped up, his grin returning. "I'll help you! I don't care about female anatomy!"

Simon had to laugh. Andy saw the reaction and smiled more broadly, pleased with himself.

A shot rang out, along with a flash so bright it blinded them. Simon almost jumped out of his skin. Rosaria and Wenona both screamed.

"What the hell?" Michalik said. He was already going for the armory door. Simon turned around, his heart hammering inside his chest. He didn't see Wilbur.

"Get back!" he yelled, motioning for the others to scatter. It dawned on him the shot came from just inside the armory!

He tried to stop Michalik, but the man shoved past him. Simon followed without thinking, almost barreling into him once inside. Michalik had stopped cold.

Wilbur lie against the far wall, his body crumpled. His head was blown apart. Simon doubled over. Michalik stared, his head slowly shaking back and forth. "What in the name of God?"

There was no one else there. The armory in its entirety was barely seven by seven feet, one wall holding a locked weapons rack, a small desk against the other. There were no windows.

Simon slowly recovered. He scanned the room. The murder weapon, a large pistol, was on the floor next to the body. There was no place to hide. No other exits. He couldn't see any way someone could get in here and out before he and Michalik had entered. Had someone slipped in and out while they were talking? The mist was thick today, but it seemed beyond belief.

"This is not optimal," he muttered, shaking his head.

Michalik looked at him, an eerie calmness in his dark eyes. "You know what I just realized, Simon? None of us is getting out of here alive."

#

Michalik and Simon sealed the armory, tossing the keycards inside and locking it. No one would have access to the weapons unless they forced the door open.

Rosaria had all but come apart at the seams with the news. Wenona cradled her like a child as she weeped all day and into the night. Simon realized they had all probably underestimated the strength of her feelings for Wilbur. Just another reminder of how little they knew about each other, despite working together for almost two years.

They locked themselves into the cafeteria. Andy positioned himself in front of the door. There were no windows, no other way to get in. The five of them huddled at separate tables, nobody willing to pry their eyes off the other. Simon sat in the corner with a steaming cup of tea, trying to calm down without the aid of copious amounts of bourbon. He knew the only way to survive at this point was to think rationally. To analyze the situation.

Wilbur's murder shook him deeply. He now had the corrosive feeling that anyone could be taken at any moment. He'd even gone back to considering that there could be someone--or something--else here. Were the Cnidarians already here? Some kind of advanced party of inhuman assassins preying on them with unblinking eyes from dark corners?

No, he thought. His was a scientific mind and he yearned to stay grounded in reality. The simplest explanation is probably the correct one. It would not be some alien predator, some unseen intruder or an ungodly avenging ghost. It was someone in this room. It had to be. For now, how they did it wasn't important. The critical question was who. Who was doing this? Everything else could wait.

After several hours of pondering, Simon's thoughts returned to the small bag he'd taken from Lazlo's hand in the lab. He examined it again. The inside was lined with a light coating of the fine white powder. He rubbed it between his fingers and put just a tiny bit on his tongue. It tasted acidic and horribly bitter. He held it a bit up to his nose and sniffed. A sharp aroma. It struck a chord. Something familiar.

The room wavered a little. Simon tried to stand, but found he couldn't keep his balance. He swayed unsteadily and his eyes

felt heavy and swollen. He plopped back down into his seat, the world swimming, when realization struck. He knew the scent.

It smelled like mustard.

#

Simon woke to a pounding head and a pasty mouth. Sounds echoed back and forth in his head like waves crashing on rock. Rosaria was shaking him.

"Wake up! What's wrong with you?"

He opened his eyes, cringing at the light. The pain in his head was exquisite. "What?"

She leaned over him, both hands on his shoulders. "Thank God. I'd thought you were in a coma."

He rubbed his eyes, his joints moving like rusted gears. "How long have I been out?"

"Fourteen hours," she said. "You wouldn't respond to anything."

He sat up. Fourteen hours? The others were still sitting around the cafeteria. "Is everyone all right?"

Rosaria looked over her shoulder at the others. "I don't know. Andy's gone."

"Gone? Since when?"

She shrugged. "No one knows. We were all asleep, and when we woke up, he was gone."

Simon looked at the others. Wenona and Michalik were huddled on opposite sides of the room, silently staring at him.

"Everyone was asleep?"

She nodded. "We all dozed off for a few hours, I guess. Nobody saw him leave."

Simon stood, steadying himself on the table. He was still a little woozy. "Then we go look for him."

Rosaria's eyes widened. "Outside? But maybe this just means he was the one doing this. Maybe he decided to run away."

Simon shook his head. "I don't think so. We were all asleep. If Andy was the killer, we'd all be dead right now. He's probably out doing his work. You know how he is."

Michalik stood up and yawned, then winced. "I'll go."

"You okay?"

Michalik nodded, cradling his left arm. "Arm's asleep is all."

Simon nodded. "I'm coming, too. I need some air."

Wenona eyed him. "And maybe a drink?"

Simon tried to ignore her, but she was right. He was intending to make his way to the recreational center to find an adult beverage. It was the only way he knew to get rid of a hangover-caliber headache like the one he was currently enjoying.

Wenona turned to Rosaria. "I'd rather stay here. Will you stay with me, Rosaria?"

"I'd rather stay with the group."

Michalik groaned. "Let's get going."

Wenona stewed and finally stood up. "Well I can't stay here by myself."

Simon stretched. He felt like hell. The stuff in that bag was strong, whatever it was. Now that his mind was clearing, though, some things were becoming apparent.

#

They checked the listening post first, but found it just as Simon had left it a couple days before, locked up tight. Simon made a quick cup of coffee while he was there, as the coffee in the cafeteria had long since run out.

The lab was also empty. Rosaria took a bottle of aspirin and gave Simon a few. Michalik also complained of a headache and gobbled down a fistful of pills. The other buildings were locked up tight. There was no indication anyone had been moving around the area at all. They even checked the spacepod, but it was still there, untouched.

The last place they checked was the recreation hall, and that's where they found him. Andy was just inside the door, his head split open like a broken cantaloupe. Milky white lubricant was still flowing from the wound, dripping down his body. A smile was frozen on his face.

Simon heard a hushed gasp come from either Wenona or Rosaria, behind him, as he went in. It seemed appropriate, though Simon had to remind himself this wasn't actually a human being sitting in a heap on the floor.

Michalik clicked his tongue, but made his way straight to the bar, rattling around bottles looking for one that still had something left in it. He was noticeably limping.

Simon put a hand up to keep Rosaria and Wenona outside. He wanted to get a look at things before the area was trampled. There were no real signs of a struggle, but Simon was sure that

whatever was used to bash in Andy's head would have to be very heavy.

His eyes scanned the rest of the recreation hall, but settled onto the exercise equipment at the far end. He walked over, running his hand along the weights until he found what he was looking for. A few tiny splashes of dried white liquid on one of the dumbbells.

"What's that?" Michalik called from the bar. He swigged a bottle of brown liquor.

"Just looking around," Simon said. The dumbbell weighed a hundred pounds. There was only one person here other than Andy that could've hefted that much weight, and that person was in the room.

He turned his back to it, pretending not to notice anything. He could feel Michalik's eyes boring into his back.

He sat down at the bar. "This whole thing gives me a headache. How about a drink?" Michalik smiled and handed him the bottle. The bourbon was unusually bitter, so Simon swished it in his mouth and spat it out.

"Think it's gone bad. What a shame." In a fluid motion, Simon swung the bottle as hard as he could, connecting with the

side of Michalik's head. The bottle exploded, and the squat man grunted and fell like a stone.

#

They'd tied Michalik's hands and feet with twine and sat him in a corner of the cafeteria.

Simon sat opposite Michalik in a chair, his legs crossed with his chin resting in one hand. He slowly stroked his whiskers as Michalik groaned. Rosaria and Wenona, visibly more relaxed since the incident, were trying to force down some sandwiches at the next table.

"Eat something, Simon," Wenona said. "You got him."

Simon laughed, but didn't take his eyes off Michalik. "It seems like it, doesn't it?"

Michalik groaned again and his eyes flittered open. The entire left side of his face was a purple mess. He squinted at Simon and smiled. "That was a nice hit."

"I had to make sure you went down. Couldn't have taken you otherwise."

Michalik laughed. "True." He squirmed and sat up, his back to the wall, and exhaled deeply. "I really got to take a piss."

Rosaria glared at him, tearing up. "How could you do it, Michalik?"

"Not to mention the launch codes," Wenona said. "You just blew our only chance to get off this planet!" She lunged at him, but Simon restrained her.

Michalik averted his eyes. "Can I use the bathroom, Simon? I really got to go."

"Let him piss his pants," Rosaria said.

Simon stood up. "I don't think I want to smell that." He pulled Michalik to his feet. "Go ahead. I'm not untying you. Good luck." He motioned toward the cafeteria bathroom. It was tiny and windowless, only big enough for one person at a time. Simon didn't feel like crowding in there with him.

Michalik hopped to the bathroom and closed the door behind him. From outside, Simon could hear him shuffling around.

"So what do we do with him?" Wenona asked.

"Doesn't matter, does it? We're all dead once the Cnidarians get here."

Simon nodded silently. He was exhausted from head to foot. His head still ached from the night before.

Ten minutes passed before Simon realized there was no longer any sound coming from the bathroom. He knocked on the door. "Come on out. That's long enough."

No answer. Simon exchanged looks with the others. He put his ear to the door, but couldn't hear anything. He pushed, and the door gave a little. It wasn't locked. Pushing harder, it swung open.

Michalik was on the floor, lying curled up in a ball. His hands and feet were still bound. A smell hit Simon's nose and he winced. Michalik had voided his bowels.

"This is not optimal," Simon remarked. He pulled his overalls up over his nose. Michalik's face was pale, his nose red and enflamed. But it was what he held that caught Simon's attention.

There was a small bag in one hand, a tiny silver flask in the other. Simon picked up the flask and waved it under his nose. An acrid tang bit his nose.

He heard a gasp from behind him. Wenona had crept up to see inside the bathroom. "What is that? Poison?"

Taking the bag and flask with him, Simon backed up and shut the door. "No. It's a narcotic of some kind."

Rosaria sat on the other side of the room, her arms crossed. "So he was a drug addict, too? I hope it was painful."

Wenona sighed and kneaded her face with her hands. "That's it, then. It's over. We're all dead."

Rosaria stood, resigned. "Well, I'm going to take a shower."

Simon nodded. "That's a good idea. We can probably all use a shower. We'll meet back here in an hour and make something to eat."

#

When Rosaria and Wenona returned to the cafeteria, they were surprised to see that Simon was well underway in preparing what appeared to be a lavish feast. He motioned the women to the large round table near the center of the room, on which sat three glasses and a bottle of wine.

Wenona cracked a smile. "Where in the world did you get the wine?"

"My private stash. We might as well drink up. Why don't you open it and pour us some?"

Wenona poured the wine and the women took their seats at the table. They watched Simon as he brought out a large serving dish heaped with steaming food.

"What is that? It smells good."

"The best rehydrated meat you've ever tasted."

Simon served up large, steaming helpings for each of them. He had just sunk his fork into it when he felt their eyes on him.

"What's wrong? I swear it's better than it looks."

Wenona gave a short, awkward laugh. "No offense, Simon, but a lot of people have died here recently. How do we know this isn't poisoned?"

Simon chuckled. They had a point. "Fine, look." He took a big fork full of the food and shoved it in his mouth, smiling.

They didn't smile back. Rosaria reached under the table and pulled something out. It was a gun. She pointed it at him.

Simon swallowed hard. "What's that for?" Rosaria didn't answer, but he could see the gun trembling in her hand. He looked to Wenona, and was surprised to see a gun had also appeared in her hand.

"Is the food really that bad?"

They didn't laugh. "It's no joke," Wenona said. "We know what's been going on. It was you."

Simon stopped, put his fork down and calmly wiped his mouth. "That's ridiculous."

"Just stay there, Simon," Rosaria said. "We don't want to hurt you."

He nodded, and with a movement that was so fast it caught both women off guard, Simon pulled out a pistol he'd hidden on his own chair and pointed it at Wenona. "I don't want to hurt you, either."

#

"I see we all took the opportunity to visit the armory," he said. "I don't know how you got in, but I suspect Fayaz's keycard made its way to you, Rosaria. Little gift from Wilbur?"

"What about your gun?"

Simon shrugged. "I pocketed it when we found Wilbur."

"We know it was you," Wenona said.

"We do," Rosaria reiterated.

"And what's your proof?" Simon asked.

Rosaria looked at Wenona, eyes searching. Finally, she said, "there's enough to convince us, and that's all that matters."

"We're going to lock you in your hut, Simon," Wenona said. "Just to be safe."

Simon watched them. Two guns to one. It was a fight he couldn't win, so the only choice was to reason his way out. "It hardly seems like ten days ago," he said, "that Benson passed away. I'm sorry we never could retrieve his body," Simon said. "I would've liked to give him a proper funeral."

The women stared at him.

"It seems so odd that Benson would pass away accidentally just two days before that intercept came in. Interesting timing."

Wenona cleared her throat. "I think maybe it's better to let the past lie, Simon."

Rosaria agreed. "Don't try to trick us, Simon."

"He was a good friend of mine. An old friend. I wouldn't think he'd have an enemy in the world. Certainly not here."

"You're saying he was murdered?" Rosaria's voice was grave.

"Given what's happened here, I don't think it's a crazy idea. Who's to say he fell off the cliff? Maybe he was pushed? Maybe he was murdered somewhere else entirely, and the body thrown over the edge." He watched their faces for reactions, but couldn't discern any.

"So you killed him?" Wenona asked.

"Anybody could have. It was late at night, no one could have seen it. Yes, it's a shame we never could get to the body."

"You have a point?"

"Just give me five minutes, that's all. Five minutes to talk. You two are right, in a way. We all know one of the murderers is dead."

Rosaria shifted in her seat. "You said one of the murderers?"

"Yes. The other is still sitting at this table."

#

Simon let the words sink in before he continued. He was also trying to calm himself.

Wenona finally spoke. "You're accusing one of us?"

"You can't be serious," Rosaria added.

"Very serious. So I'm afraid no one can leave this room."

Wenona shook her head. "Enough of this. Let's go. We're locking you up."

Simon didn't flinch. "It's not me, Wenona. If you'll have a seat I'll let you know who it is. If not, one of you can shoot me, but I'm not moving."

She glared at him, but settled back in her chair. Her gun, however, didn't waver.

"I'll start at the beginning. Benson's death was no accident. He was killed twelve days ago. I remember it very distinctly because we'd just celebrated Claire's birthday."

Rosaria nodded. "We all know that."

"That was two days before you, Wenona, informed us about the intercept from the Cnidarians. That would lead us to believe the death had nothing to do with it, right?"

Blank stares from both.

"The next death was Fayaz, four days after Benson and three days after the intercept was made public to us all. The logical conclusion being that Fayaz was the first real victim."

Simon paused, the wheels in his mind were turning. "But Benson's death is the key. My belief is that he was murdered in the lab and taken to the cliff by the killer late at night."

"How in the world can you know that?" Rosaria asked.

"Because he did it," Wenona hissed.

Simon shrugged. "A hunch."

"And why would someone want to murder him?" Wenona's arms were crossed defensively.

Simon narrowed his eyes. "That's the question, isn't it? If he was murdered before the intercept was received, then the motive for his murder could not have been to keep him from taking the spacepod. One possibility is that the intercept actually came earlier and you, Wenona, kept it to yourself longer than you claimed. You are, after all, the only person who can translate Cnidarian."

"That's a lie. I got the intercept when you gave it to me."

Simon shook his head. "I know. I see everything that goes through that listening post, and I saw your transcripts. The official date of intercept, which is stamped on the documents by

the computer, puts the transmission as being received two days after Benson's death. You couldn't have altered it, I'm sure."

"Then why kill Benson?"

Simon held up a hand. "Let me work through this in order. So Fayaz is the next victim, apparently dropping dead inside a locked bathroom with Wilbur sleeping on the other side of the only door. Wilbur says he heard nothing and was sure no one entered or left. If you remember, though, we did find residue of some substance on his toothbrush."

Rosaria nodded. "You said it was poison."

"I thought so, until I found this little bag on Michalik's body," he held up the small cloth bag. "The smell, for whatever reason, made an impression on me. Like strong mustard. Very bitter. This is the same stuff."

"Then it makes sense that Michalik would have it."

"Maybe," Simon said. "The question remained, how did someone get into Fayaz's hut, past Wilbur and into the bathroom without being seen. I had no idea until I found a similar bag in Lazlo's hand after his death. I tasted a tiny bit. Long story short, I woke up fourteen hours later with the worst hangover I've ever had. I believe Wilbur was similarly drugged

to allow the murderer to enter the bathroom that morning while Fayaz was running."

Wenona grunted. "Well who would know about drugs here?" She glanced at Rosaria.

"Me?" Rosaria gasped.

Simon chewed his lip. "The thought did cross my mind, but there was more. The next victim was Lazlo. Killed during the night in the lab, or so it seemed. The savagery of the attack stood out to me. Not only was Lazlo dead, but the entire lab was destroyed as though a great struggle had taken place.

"But there was something I noticed. While the room appeared to have been completely trashed, blood was only pooled around Lazlo's body. I'd think such a struggle would leave blood all over the lab. I noticed that I couldn't, even while being very careful, move around the lab without getting some blood on my boots. I left bloody boot prints on the floor. Yet there were no others, anywhere. How could someone have grappled with Lazlo, to the point of beating him to death, and not get any blood on themselves or anywhere else in the entire room?"

"They cleaned up after themselves?" Rosaria asked.

Simon shook his head. "No way. I doubted it before and until just about an hour ago I was sure."

"How?"

"While you and Rosaria showered, I looked in Lazlo's hut. With a little diligent searching, I found what I was looking for. Blood splatter someone had tried to clean, but missed some. Clearly, he was killed there, the body then taken to the lab. We were meant to think he died there."

"How did you get into his hut?"

Simon smiled. "The benefit of being on burial detail. I took his keycard."

"But why move him?"

Simon couldn't suppress a slight grin. "Isn't it obvious? To distract us from the destruction of the lab. It was meant to look incidental, but it was very deliberate."

Both women shift in their seats. "The next victim was Claire. Killed in her hut in the early evening."

"Strangled," Rosaria said. "I confirmed it."

"Yes. And we all know that when someone's wife is murdered, the husband is the first suspect. And so my first thought was Michalik. After all, only he and Claire had access to that hut." He stopped, stroking his whiskers. "But there was a problem. He was in the machine shop at the time of the

murder. I ran to the hut as soon as I heard Claire scream, and I got there less than two minutes later. It was locked from the inside. Michalik then came out of the machine shop, with you, Wenona, right behind him."

"Yes, we were both there when we heard the scream. I was having trouble with my personal tablet. I told you that before."

"I remember. Still, the killer would've strangled Claire, then taken her keycard and locked the door before tossing it back inside, making it look as though Claire was killed inside a locked room. On seeing Michalik's reaction to her death, I made myself doubt my own judgments. He was totally distraught."

Rosaria huffed. "The only time I've seen him show any emotion concerning his wife."

"The next victim was Wilbur, two days later." Rosaria's face darkened. "I believe his death was merely an accident."

Both their heads snapped sharply toward him.

"I don't want to be blunt, but we all knew Wilbur was timid. I noticed he was having problems with his hands shaking on that day. I think he was simply scared, or maybe just shaken, especially after seeing Fayaz pass away."

Rosaria nodded. "He was."

"I think that when he was clearing his weapon in the armory, it discharged. He was probably flustered, following improper procedure, and made a terrible mistake. I can't see any other way it happened. It may not have been planned, but it did fit nicely into the murderer's plans. It certainly scrambled my train of thought for a while."

Rosaria's head dipped. A tear ran down her face.

"Finally we come to Andy," Simon said. "By this time we were all paranoid and huddling together in the cafeteria. I was knocked out cold by the powdered substance, but it's obvious what happened. Michalik finished him, bashing his head in with one of the dumbbells in the recreation hall. He probably convinced Andy to accompany him there to get a drink while we slept, then returned before anyone woke. Andy was always naïve."

"Stupid, you mean," Wenona said. "Like a child."

"So we were all asleep," Rosaria said. "Why didn't he just kill us all then?"

Simon nodded, shaking his finger. "Maybe he planned to, but I noticed he was limping afterward and nursing his arm. I

imagine he was injured struggling with Andy. That worked to our favor."

He stroked his whiskers again. "But the crucial question is not how Andy was killed, but why he was killed. Whoever wanted the spacepod would not have had to fight Andy for it. He would've demurred. He had no fear of the approaching Cnidarians and would have gladly stayed to let one of us go. More importantly, destroying Andy also meant the launch codes for the spacepod could never be recovered. So why was it important that he be destroyed?"

He looked between the two women, searching their faces.

"Maybe the killer never intended to leave. Maybe they wanted us to be here when the Cnidarians come. Fayaz would have pointed to the one person who has a history with them. A former prisoner of war who may still be acting under their influence."

Rosaria's face drained. "That's a lie!"

Simon held up a hand. "It's a possibility, but not the right one." With a smooth movement, he produced the small bags he'd found on Lazlo and Michalik and tossed them onto the table. "There's only one answer. It was never about the spacepod. These bags are why everyone here has died."

"Michalik overdosed on the substance in these bags. The same substance was used to kill Fayaz. It was found on Lazlo's person after he died, and it knocked me out for a half a day and did likewise to Wilbur. Lazlo abused it, and so did Michalik, evidenced by red, crusty areas around their nostrils.

"There are common threads connecting these murders. The powder is one thing. The lab is another. Lazlo was killed, his body placed carefully there for discovery. The servers in the lab were deliberately smashed. Benson, who ran the lab, was the first victim. And finally Andy, who frequently aided Benson in his research at the lab, was also destroyed."

He stopped to take a breath, his heart pounding.

"These acts were meticulously planned, but there are small details that I've noticed. Benson, Lazlo and Andy killed late at night. Claire killed inside a locked room nobody should have been able to enter." Simon smiled with one side of his mouth. "But it was Fayaz's murder that gave me the key."

"Wilbur gave me the crucial clue. Fayaz was a creature of habit. Every day without fail, he woke at five in the morning to run. Anyone paying attention would know exactly when Fayaz would be away from his hut, and more importantly, away from his keycard, which he left in his jacket outside while he ran. That

is what allowed the murderer to enter the hut, sedate Wilbur, and poison the toothbrush."

Rosaria and Wenona exchanged glances.

"That gave me half of it. The other came to me from something I heard before this all started. Late one night, shortly after Benson's death, I was outside the recreation center finishing off a bottle."

Wenona huffed. "That's a shock."

He ignored her. "I admit I was drunk, but I heard something. A conversation between two people. Whispers through the fog. I couldn't see who they were, but could tell they were standing near the door to the cafeteria, and it was only two people. I distinctly heard someone say the words 'have to go...before they come.' Until recently, I thought the voice referred to us having to go before the Cnidarians came. But I realized, that was before we received the transmissions.

"To be honest, I forgot about that night for a while. I thought maybe I'd dreamed it. But it came back to me. I couldn't tell if the speaker was male or female. The voice was soft and had a strange tone to it. I tone I'd later realized was caused by sinus congestion. And I did remember that both figures were of near equal height."

The two women looked at each other, measuring themselves with their eyes.

"No, it wasn't both of you. It was one of you and Michalik. The figures looked equal in height because Michalik was standing on the step in front of the cafeteria door, a height of six inches. I remembered that when I tripped off it just before Wilbur's accident.

"The speaker wasn't referring to the Cnidarians. They were referring to the relief ship, and that we'd all 'have to go', in other words, die, before it arrived. The speaker was the only person who knew that Fayaz would be running every morning, because she ran every morning as well. The only person who could have murdered Claire, because Michalik falsely gave her an alibi. The only person here, in fact, that could have manipulated Michalik into murdering his colleagues on the false threat of a Cnidarian invasion."

Simon's eyes fixed on the killer. "Wenona."

Rosaria inhaled sharply.

Wenona shrugged, a strange half grin on her face. "Fine, Simon. You got me."

"It's true?" Rosaria stared at her in disbelief.

"Sure." Wenona stiffened.

She turned to Rosaria. "I know you need money, Rosaria. This research can make us, and our families, comfortable for the rest of our lives. Shoot him and it's ours."

"What research?"

Simon's voice cracked. "The powder. It's a narcotic derived from a plant native to this planet. The ones we got tangled up in when we tried to search the forest. It's everywhere."

Wenona nodded. "It's easy to manufacture, potent in tiny doses and highly addictive. Pretty deadly in high enough doses, too."

Simon shook his head. "The secret that killed Benson, right?"

Wenona nodded, almost in boredom.

"And so all his research, stored on the servers in the lab had to be destroyed. Just like the backups in Andy's memory. And as far as Michalik goes, I'm guessing you seduced him to convince him to play along."

"I needed a strong arm. Not my fault he and Claire had problems. I didn't even plan to kill her, that was his idea."

Rosaria shook her head. "So the Cnidarians aren't coming?"

Wenona laughed. "You need to learn how to read Cnidarian."

"She wanted to get rid of anyone who knew about the research. I suspect she was even planning to kill Michalik."

Wenona nodded. "He was lousy in bed."

Rosaria stared at her. "You're a monster."

"Doesn't your father need special care? Expensive care?"
Wenona leaned in close to her. "You can take care of him for the rest of his life. No one will know. When they arrive, we'll tell them it was Simon. We had to kill him in self defense. They'll believe us. Two women defending themselves against a psychotic man."

A bead of sweat trickled down Simon's forehead. He should've thought this through. Wenona was right. The ship, when it came, would take their words for what happened, few questions asked.

"Please, Rosaria," Simon's voice quivered. "You're not that kind of person. You're not a killer."

Rosaria was still holding the gun, trembling. Her face was pale. Simon could see deliberations going on in her head, her

eyes flicking back and forth between them. Wenona winked at Simon and leaned in closer, her voice falling to a whisper.

"Just pull the trigger."

Simon put his gun down on the table. "Rosaria, don't."

For a long moment, Rosaria didn't move, her gun fixed on Simon. Then, she deflated. "I can't do it. I can't commit murder." She lowered the gun.

Wenona's sighed. "Stupid bitch. I knew I couldn't count on you."

She swung her pistol toward Simon. He reached for his gun, but knew there was no time to pick it up and aim, not when she was already on him. His hand had just reached it when he heard a loud bang.

A look of surprise came to Wenona's face. She froze, then trembled. Her eyes went to Rosaria, whose gun was pointed at her.

The wound was in her upper chest, just below the breastbone. A gaping hole, burnt around the edges. The smell of scorched flesh filled the air. Wenona's face drained to an almost alabaster white, and the gun tumbled from her hand. She slumped and fell to the floor.

Simon's heart skipped a beat. It took a moment to realize he hadn't been shot. Rosaria put her gun down and calmly nodded to him.

#

"How do we explain this?" she asked. They'd buried Wenona and Michalik with the rest. Questions would come, there was no doubt. Of the nine people and one android that had lived at this outpost, only two remained.

"We'll tell the truth," Simon said, "and hope they believe us. It's all we can do."

Rosaria nodded thoughtfully and took his hand. He felt a wave of warmth go through his body, maybe even a little spark. "It was impressive, the way you figured it out."

He blushed. "Just trying to save my skin."

She smiled. "When we get home, what will you do?"

He thought a long moment, stroked his whiskers and sighed. "Humbly, I'll return to my radios."

END

