

The Fifth World

I was dreaming. I knew this because my wife was with me, and she was alive.

Diane sat on the porch beside me, watching the sun rise and taking the occasional sip of her coffee. The morning rays caught in her rust-colored hair, haloing her head in crimson fire. We had twenty minutes, tops, before we'd have to go inside and put the UV shields up.

"You know I have to do this, don't you?" She asked without looking at me. I'd been making her feel guilty about her decision for days.

"You don't have to do anything," I replied coldly. "You didn't even ask me before you volunteered. There are thousands of other astronauts out there, let them go risk their lives."

She turned to me then, and I could see that her eyes were wet with tears. "I *do* have to, Sean. This planet might be the one. The place that saves us all." She turned away from me and hugged her knees to her chest, turtling. She knew I would never understand. "I won't start a family on this planet. I will not."

And so she'd gone. She had left for the mission the next day, and I'd refused to speak to her. Those words on the porch were the last I'd said to her.

I opened my eyes, and knew from the clammy sensation of my boxers sticking to my thighs that I was drenched in sweat. I sat up and glanced at the individual thermostat for my room, mounted on the wall half a foot from my bed. It hadn't changed from where I'd set it the night before, but I knew that didn't matter. These days I was always waking up sweaty and feeling like something cold and slippery had crawled down my throat.

I got up and stripped, throwing the soaked underwear in a laundry hamper. The numbers on my watch read three a.m. I sighed, got dressed, and went about the routine I'd had every day since boarding this ship.

I went to the mess hall and snagged one of the muffins they always kept out in a basket after they'd closed for the night. Then I prowled the halls, shoving hunks of carrot muffin into my mouth until I came to the huge window that dominated the ship's bridge. For the past month, all there had been to see was the vast, empty blackness of space. Now, though, the cloud-covered blue-green mass of a planet filled the entire window.

We'd come out of the jump last night and had been orbiting the thing ever since. The fifth planet, they called it. The fifth in a depressingly short list of potential new home worlds within our travel capabilities. Its presence was monolithic below me, daunting. In a few more hours I'd be on it, along with a crew of scientists and a unit of private military personnel, to gather information we couldn't glean from regular old space imaging.

Diane had trained her entire life for missions like this. She'd seen them as humanity's chance at redemption; a fresh start for all of us. I've always been more of the opinion that humans don't deserve a second chance. I was doing this for her. And, if I was being honest with myself, the twelve percent survival rate for first contact teams might have something to do with it too.

A few hours later I strapped myself into one of the spartan seats on a hopper: a beetle-shaped landing craft designed specifically for atmospheric entry. The seats were divided into two

rows built into the oval walls of the craft. On my side sat the scientists—specialists from various fields that would take measurements and samples and whatever else they did—and across from me were the military men and women, armed to the teeth with every weapon they could conceivably attach to themselves. They worked for a private company and had been hired by the government to keep the scientists and me safe. While we were all being paid well for this mission, they were being paid more.

Their commander, a man named Jones, eyed me from across the hopper. “You don’t look like the other eggheads. What’re you again?”

“Journalist,” I replied over the roar of the engines. The hopper was dropping from the ship’s bay, and the resulting noise was deafening. I held up my video camera in case he hadn’t heard.

He grunted. “Don’t see why the government wants a journalist on these things.”

“Neither do I,” I said blandly.

“He’s our scribe,” another voice farther down the row of seats from me said. A man in his fifties with a shock of grey hair and horn-rimmed spectacles leaned forward. “The great recorder of this monumental occasion. He’s going to make you famous, Jones. You should thank him.”

Jones grunted again and settled back into his seat, ending the conversation. The old man who had spoken waved at me. “Arthur Burke. Physicist.”

“Sean Hanson,” I said, waving back. Of course, I already knew who he was. I knew who everyone was, thanks to the personnel files that evidently no one else had bothered to read.

Amanda Dawson

Burke was the lead scientist on the team, overseeing the biologist, Violet Johnson, the chemist, Wallace Gardiner, and the geologist, Vincent Reed. The other hired guns under Jones had names, too, but with very little to distinguish between them, I'd quickly forgotten them.

The hopper began to shake rather violently, and I knew we'd entered the atmosphere. It sounded like the ship was an empty can of soup filled with nails, and some kid had gotten a hold of it and was shaking the hell out of it. Beside me, Wallace Gardiner began to dry heave into a paper bag. Even some of the mercs looked a little green in the face.

Eventually the hopper ploughed through, and after a few more minutes we came to a sudden, thudding halt that would have thrown me out of my seat had I not been belted in. The hopper groaned, shuddered, and then the rear hatch began to slowly open, the hydraulics whining with effort. The hired guns unbuckled and were flooding out of the hatch before it even got a chance to open all the way, their weapons poised to shoot any potential threat they encountered. Most of them looked incredibly jumpy. A particularly fast-moving toad would have set them off.

"Better hope this planet doesn't have squirrels," the biologist said dryly.

I snorted and followed the military guys out, booting up my camera for a first-glimpse-of-the-new-planet shot.

We had landed in a valley ringed by mountains on all sides. The ground was flat and dotted with trees, though not thickly forested by any means. Rivers and creeks gushed all around, and in some places pooled in shallow-looking lakes and ponds. Other than the fact that this planet's sun gave of a bluish hue rather than a yellow one, it looked like we could still be on earth. The grass was green, the dirt brown. I did a slow, three-sixty degree turn with the camera. I remembered what my hiring committee had said about how I should document the landing:

Amanda Dawson

*'pretend that you're doing one of those old BBC documentaries, only you're not David Attenborough, so don't narrate. Just show us the scenery.'*

The scientists filed out of the hopper after me, carrying loads of equipment out with them. Each had their own little field laboratory, along with whatever equipment they needed to take samples or readings. The mercs had fanned out in a loose circle around the hopper, but Jones was striding toward them looking irritable.

"I tried to contact the ship, but it isn't working." He said it accusingly, as if the scientists were messing with him.

*Someone didn't read the briefing package, I thought, just as Vincent Reed said, "it's the cloud cover. This planet has more of it, and we think there's something in it that Earth's clouds doesn't have. It reflects the signal back at us instead of going out to space."*

Jones made a sound halfway between a growl and a grunt and walked back to his boys. Burke set down a black canvas bag at his feet and said, "Well, he certainly plays well with others, doesn't he?"

I looked up at the sky, trying to find the sun through the thick cloud cover. "How long are the days on this planet?"

"About twenty-one hours, give or take," Burke said, his hands settling on his hips as he followed my gaze. "We left a little late, but we should still have twelve hours of daylight."

"How long do you think it'll take your team to do everything?"

He shrugged. "The rest of today and maybe some of tomorrow morning? Not long. We'll be done before our departure time tomorrow."

I studied the landscape. It looked like a picture of Earth from half a century ago, with lush vegetation, clear blue water—just nature as it was before we’d destroyed it. “This doesn’t look dangerous,” I said, mostly to myself.

“The fifth world has been the most promising so far,” Burke agreed. “It’s hard to tell with the cloud cover—not many scans could get through—but it appears there are no self-aware creatures on this planet, no large predators, and a fairly stable environment. We’re lucky to be a part of this mission. I think we’ve finally found our new home world.” He turned, facing the military guys, and cupped his hands around his mouth.

“Mr. Jones, we’re ready to begin now.”

We split into small groups. Each scientist had a merc escort that would follow them around as they worked and watch their back. I had one, too; a young man who couldn’t be older than twenty, and who looked immensely displeased with the whole situation. For the rest of the day, I flitted from one group to another and took footage of them working. My escort followed me around like a lost puppy, his finger always hovering just on the safety of his weapon. I was surprised to find the work incredibly boring and mundane despite the fact that I was walking around on an alien planet. The scientists took samples of pretty much everything, stuck pH readers basically everywhere, and generally recorded everything within their line of sight. I was relieved when, as I made my way over to the small pond the biologist had wanted to take a look at, I noticed the light beginning to dim on the horizon.

Violet Johnson and her bodyguard were at the pond’s edge, just past a thin copse of trees. As I approached, I began to get an odd, uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach. It took

me a few minutes to get within earshot of them, but even when I could have spoken, I didn't. Something in my gut told me not to.

The two were standing at the edge of the crystal-clear water, staring down at the pond's surface. That in and of itself might not have been strange, but they were standing completely motionless. Frozen. Stiff as statues. Just staring down into the water.

I could practically feel the kid beside me going swiftly into panic mode. Before he could do anything, I said, softly, "Violet?"

It was like a spell being broken. The biologist and the merc beside her started and turned to face us. Johnson looked mildly confused. "Sorry," she said, "what did you say?"

"You looked kind of out of it," I said slowly. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." She smiled, though I thought I saw the corner of her mouth tighten slightly, almost as if she were annoyed.

"Okay." I held up my camera. "I was just going to get some footage before we pack it in for the night."

"Oh, I'm finished." She reached down and picked up the bag at her feet. She started back up from the water's edge, her escort trailing after her.

They seemed almost a little embarrassed at being caught staring at the pond, so I didn't mention it again as we made our way toward the hopper. Neither did the kid, though I could tell from his body language that he was wound tighter than a piano wire. The sun was rapidly sinking behind the thick clouds, and I could see that everyone else was already setting up the big canvas tent we'd all be sleeping in.

We broke out the bottled water and freeze-dried food packets from the hopper's storage, lit a few chemical stoves, and made our supper. Burke manned the bubbling pots of instant spaghetti like a gourmet chef, ladling the stuff into bowls and smiling and laughing like a backwoods Santa Claus. When we'd all settled down with our food, he drew a bottle of champagne and a sleeve of dainty plastic cups from one of the bags of gear.

"To our new home planet, the fifth world!" He cheered, passing around the cups and filling them with the bubbling golden liquid.

There was a smattering of applause before everyone raised the cups to their lips. I glanced at the biologist as I swallowed my champagne. She was holding her untouched cup in her lap and staring at Burke as if he were the most interesting thing in the world. Like a child who had caught an insect and didn't know what to do with it.

After supper, Jones set the boy who'd been my escort to guard the tent while everyone else prepared for sleep. I slipped into my sleeping bag and tried to ignore the sounds of a dozen other people falling asleep: grunts and sighs and gentle snores. I thought of Diane, so full of hope, dying on the cataclysmic fourth world, while I went to bed safe and sound with a belly full of champagne. It wasn't fair.

At some point, I fell into a wonderfully deep dream.

Diane and I were making love. I was tangled up in her, in the pale smoothness of her arms, the wild sun fire threads of her hair, the deep ocean brine of her green eyes. "Love you," I whispered, wishing that my words could convey the complexities of my emotions. I loved her so much it hurt. At first, I was confused about this, but then I remembered that she was leaving. That must have been why it hurt so much.

“Don’t leave me please,” I said desperately into the thick mane of her hair, the curve of her neck. “Please.”

“Sean...”

I looked at her, and suddenly her face melted, changed. I gaped in mute horror as Diane became Violet Johnson. She looked at me, and her eyes stared flat and wet and cold like a dead thing. Bone-deep fear gripped my heart, and I staggered back, desperately flailing to get away, screaming.

My eyes flew open and it took me several long heartbeats to realize that I was still lying in my sleeping bag in the tent. I relaxed, feeling as if I’d aged ten years. I’d never had a dream go from nice to horrific that quickly before. My heart was still beating at a gallop, but it was beginning to slow.

I was about to check the time on my watch when I noticed a small sound coming from the other side of the tent. It was a soft, rhythmic grunting sound, barely audible, and it was coming from somewhere across from me, closer to the tent’s entrance. I slowly shifted my weight until I was facing the direction I thought the sound was emanating from. It was dark, and my eyes had to scan the inside of the tent twice before I realized what it was.

Partially covered by a sleeping bag, I could see the top half of a man. Below him, his hips were thrusting in a universally recognized manner. He was the one making the sounds, the soft grunts timed with each inward thrust. From the well-muscled shoulders, I could tell it was one of Jones’s men, though it was too dark to see which one. The person on the bottom shifted then, lifting up slightly, and I saw that it was Johnson, the one who had just ruined my dream about

Diane. In the darkness her face looked as flat and inhospitable as it had in my dream. She made no sound at all as the man rutted on top of her.

I rolled over, slowly and quietly, hoping they wouldn't notice that I'd seen them. I closed my eyes, and for the first time in a year, I didn't check the time, and I didn't get up. I laid very still and hoped that sleep would once again find me.

The next morning, I awoke to shouting.

I rubbed at my sleep-glued eyes and sat up. Blue-tinged sunlight flooded in through the tent opening, and around me several other people were just rising as well. I checked my watch, even though I knew the time was different on this planet. Seven a.m. I hadn't slept past three for over a year.

Jones came storming into the tent. "Did one of you fuckers do it?" he was fuming, his fists clenched at his sides.

"Do what?" Gardiner asked, reaching for his glasses. Reed and one of the mercs were getting out of their sleeping bags too. I watched the hired gun stand, stretch. Had it been him, last night?

"Get out here and see," Jones hissed.

We stumbled out of the tent, into the blue, cloud-covered day. A light rain was drizzling down, not enough to soak my clothes, but enough to make everything feel humid and clingy. *Good thing the camera's waterproof*, I thought, then stopped in my tracks, halted by what I saw in front of me.

The hopper was sunk three-quarters of the way into the ground. What had been solid earth the night before was now soggy, thick mud. The hopper had gone in back-first, burying the rear hatch in several feet of mud and making it completely impossible to access.

“What the hell?” Gardiner exclaimed, emerging from the tent behind me.

“That’s not all, I’m afraid.” Burke said, gesturing to the grass nearby.

Foil packets of freeze-dried meals lay ripped open and scattered, the contents blowing away in the breeze or mucking together in a sodden heap. Water bottles, opened and drained, also drifted into tall grass or trees.

“Billy’s gone.” Jones said, his voice bitter.

“Who?” Gardiner asked.

“Billy, the fucking kid I put in charge of watch last night.” Jones said, his teeth clenched angrily. “He was supposed to wake me up at midnight to switch shifts, but he never did. I woke up and he’s just gone. Gun laying outside the tent. Can’t find him anywhere.”

“Well, obviously he did this, then.” Reed said.

“Johnson’s missing, too.” Burke said sadly. “We don’t know if it was one of them, both together, or...”

“How can people go missing? We’re alone on this planet.” One of the mercs said, holding his gun tightly. “There’s nothing else here, right?”

“There’s no other sentient life,” Reed agreed. “It has to have been them, or one of us.”

“One of us put the hopper halfway into the ground?” Gardiner said incredulously. “No fucking way.”

“Obviously it landed on an unstable crust of dirt,” Reed said. “Overnight, the weight of it, coupled with the rain, broke the crust and it sunk. I was talking about the food.”

Everyone began to argue at once. Without really knowing why, I hit the ‘audio only’ button on the camera. The government probably wouldn’t want such material released to the public, but I felt like it needed to be documented.

After a while, Burke managed to shout over everyone else. “I know we’re all very confused and upset, but right now we need to be level-headed and create a plan!”

“He’s right,” one of the mercs agreed. “Why don’t I make some coffee or something?”

Gardiner snorted. “With what? All of the water bottles are emptied out.”

“There’s a stream over there. We still have the stoves. I’ll go get some water and boil it.”

Gardiner shrugged, and the merc stooped to gather several empty bottles before walking in the direction of the stream.

When he came back, we boiled the water in one of the pots we’d cooked the spaghetti in the night before. Burke had several packets of instant coffee in his personal bag. We sat in the tent as we sipped at the hot liquid and tried to formulate a plan.

“The hopper’s out of commission, and we can’t radio out,” Jones said. His voice had lost its acrid edge from before. Now he just sounded resolved. “We’re due back this afternoon. The ship will send another party tomorrow to pick us up, so all we have to do is wait. We can boil water to drink, and we’ll be fine not eating for a day.”

“What about the boy, and Dr. Johnson?” Burke asked. “We might get rescued, but they won’t waste fuel flying around trying to find those two. They’ll leave them behind.”

Jones grunted and fell silent. I waited, but no one else said anything. “We should go look for them.” I said finally, and I knew I was only saying what was on everyone else’s minds. “We don’t have to go far from camp. We could split into groups, cover more ground.”

Everyone nodded solemnly. No one wanted to leave camp, but no one wanted the kid or the biologist’s deaths on their hands either. We would search, and if we didn’t find them, no one could say we didn’t try.

We formed three groups. I was with Jones and Burke. Reed and Gardiner each went with two of the hired guns. Each group went in a different direction, with a plan to eventually turn back toward camp in a few hours.

The rain slowed down to an occasional smattering of windblown droplets as we pushed into the trees that surrounded the camp, the forest canopy shielding us from anything more significant.

We’d been walking for nearly half an hour before Jones finally spoke up. I got the feeling he wasn’t used to the silence that enveloped us completely, and to be honest, I understood how he felt. The forest was eerily quiet. No animals, no birds, nothing. Just wind through the branches and rain pattering on the leaves.

“Do you really think this’ll be the new home planet, doc?” he asked Burke, who puffed along beside him with the good humor of a man who didn’t hike often but thought he did.

“Oh, yes. I’m certain of it. Its atmosphere is incredibly similar, the distance from this system’s sun is comparable, and as you can see, the vegetation is practically the same as Earth’s. This planet is far better than any of us could predict.”

Jones glanced up at the sky. “Except for the clouds. I can’t imagine living anywhere that looks this bleak all the time. Gives me the creeps.”

I was inclined to agree with his point. Something, though I wasn’t sure what, felt wrong to me, and it got worse the deeper we walked into the forest. To distract myself, I began to film, pointing the camera at the trees as I walked along. I told myself it was for the documentation, and not because I suddenly felt like we were being followed.

We trekked onward through the woods, Jones occasionally shouting the kid’s name and Burke doing the same for the biologist. Each time I cringed inwardly, hating the loudness that I felt was surely marking us for whatever stalked behind the cover of the trees.

We were about to crest a steep, rocky hill when the wind shifted and I smelled something putrid, laced with a sharp coppery tang. “Do you smell that?” I asked.

Jones paused and sniffed the air. “Yup.” His face immediately became a grim mask.

Burke pulled the collar of his jacket up to cover his nose. “That’s awful. What is that?”

Jones ignored him and climbed the rest of the way up the incline. I followed him, and Burke brought up the rear.

I already had a good idea of what lay on the top of the ridge, but as soon as I saw the mercenary’s shoulder slump ahead of me, I knew I’d been right. I mounted the hill and stopped beside Jones. “Ah, God,” I muttered.

Billy was hanging spread-eagled in the trees, his hands bound to thick tree limbs on either side. He'd been gutted, and his entrails pooled in a ropey mass below him. His dead eyes stared at us in glassy, congealed horror.

I didn't realize Burke had made it to the top of the hill until I heard him retching beside me. I tried to move, but it was too late. Coffee-colored vomit flecked my boots and pants.

Jones shook his head. "Poor fucking kid." He turned to me, his hand suddenly gripping the stock of his gun. "You know what this means."

I bit my lip. "Could have been Johnson."

"Could have," he agreed. "But not fucking likely. The kid was on my team for a reason. Had a ton of instinct, ton of skill too. No way could some civ scientist take him out. And even if she did, how'd she get him way the fuck up there?"

He gestured to where Billy had been placed. It was over seven feet high. I didn't think *I* could lift a body into the trees that high, let alone Johnson. There was no way.

Just then, there was a *pop*, coming from somewhere in the woods to our left. This was followed by three more: *pop, pop, pop*. It was far off, but I recognized it for what it was. Jones did, too.

"Gunfire." Jones started off in the direction the sounds had come from, not running, but moving swiftly nonetheless.

Not wanting to get left behind, I grabbed Burke by the shoulder and nudged him in front of me. "Let's go, doctor."

We followed Jones. Burke was clearly having trouble keeping up, but he chugged away anyway, his head bowed with effort. I glanced behind us often, the paranoid feeling of being watched a sharp edge on my back.

A low, keening wail drew Jones to a halt. *“Help meee,”* it sobbed. *“Please help meee!”*

The mercenary paused. The voice was coming from a different direction than the gunfire had been. He seemed to make up his mind, and changed course, heading for the voice instead. We crashed through ferns and hopped over deadfall, searching for the owner of the voice.

Jones suddenly skidded to a stop, and Burke almost collided with him. I looked and saw Reed on the ground in front of us, a hand clamped down on a neck wound that was gushing blood. His eyes and his mouth were still open, but he was obviously dead.

Burke looked like he might throw up again, but before he could, one of Jones’s mercs came hurtling through the trees, a bloodied knife clutched in his hand. *“It’s in me! It’s in me!”* he screamed, his eyes wild and bloodshot. When he opened his mouth, a trail of bloodied spittle trickled onto his chin. He leapt at Jones, knife raised.

Jones raised his gun and fired once, twice. The bullets struck the man in his chest, and he toppled over, motionless. Jones looked at the bodies in front of him. *“What the fuck is going on here?”*

Almost in reply, another sound rose from the trees farther off. This time, there were no words, just a single high-pitched scream. Jones growled and struck out after it. Since we had no other choice, Burke and I followed.

We pushed through a particularly thick stand of trees and emerged on the other side. And then all three of us stopped.

“...how?” Burke wheezed, his hands on his knees.

We were back at the camp. Somehow, we’d circled around and ended up back where we’d started.

“We were going the other way,” Jones said incredulously. He frowned then, looking confused. “Weren’t we?”

I thought for a moment and realized that I couldn’t remember what direction we’d been going. I held up a hand in front of my face. The edges of my fingers looked fuzzy, as if I were near-sighted. But I wasn’t. At least, I didn’t think I was.

“Lads,” Burke said in a quiet voice, and I turned to look at him. He had his shirt raised to expose his ample belly and was staring at it fearfully. I watched as something rose beneath his skin, pressing on it from the inside, and *moved*. Like a fetus in its mother’s womb.

“What is that?” I asked. My mouth was dry, and my tongue felt thick and swollen. Foreign.

“A...a kind of parasite, maybe?” the physicist said in a small voice. “I must have picked it up somehow.”

“How?” I asked. “We followed protocol. We didn’t eat anything, we...” I stopped in sudden realization. “The coffee.”

“We boiled it, though.” Jones protested. “Boiling water kills everything.”

Burke lowered his shirt, looking shellshocked. “It’s an alien planet. We don’t know what boiling does here.”

The sun was setting. The darkness of night was rapidly encroaching, throwing long shadows everywhere. I swallowed. “We need to warn the ship. They’re going to send a rescue craft tomorrow. We have to tell them not to.”

“How?” Jones hissed. He rubbed at his eyes as if they were suddenly bothering him. “The clouds are too thick.”

“The mountains,” Burke said, pointing at the nearest peak. “If we can get high enough, we might be able to get through the cloud cover.”

“It’s getting dark,” Jones said. “How do we know there isn’t more of—”

His words were suddenly cut off as a dark shape leapt out from the shadows and wrapped itself around Jones’s neck. The merc staggered back, off balance, and abruptly screamed as the shadow tore a chunk of his throat loose. Something hot and wet sprayed onto my face. He fell backward and rolled, dislodging the shape. Whatever it was paused only for a second before attacking Burke, dragging the physicist to the ground. It savaged him by the neck, shaking him until I heard the snap of bone breaking, and the old man went still. The shadow looked up and me then, and its face caught the dying rays of light.

It was Johnson, only it wasn’t Johnson anymore. Her jaws had elongated slightly, and as she grinned up at me, I saw her teeth were predator’s teeth, jagged and sharp. Her hands were bigger, stretched, and tipped with black claws. As I stared into her yellowed eyes, I felt time stop. Whatever had been in that pond, I knew it would be the end of the human race if it ever got out. And I knew it was in me, too.

A burst of bright light and a series of rapid concussions jolted me out of my stupor. Jones had propped himself up on an elbow and was shooting at what was left of the biologist, who shrieked and rolled off of Burke's body.

"Run!" the mercenary said, his voice wobbly and weak. "Get to the mountain!"

I dropped the camera I'd still had clutched in my hands and ran. Behind me, I heard the shooting stop, and a second later, a wet crunch. I crashed into the trees, sprinting for the mountain. I strained to hear if anything was chasing me, but there was nothing. Maybe Jones had mortally wounded it.

It was fully dark now. My breath came in painful, hitching gasps and my leg muscles burned. I stumbled on fallen logs and debris, skinning my knees, elbows, palms, and got up again. I tried to focus on which direction the mountain had been, but everything looked the same. I felt movement in my gut and tried to ignore it.

Then a blinding pain in my skull made me come to a stop. I stifled a cry and clutched at my head. Around me, everything in the woods began to blur. I felt suddenly very far away, as if my mind were drifting on the wind.

I looked up and saw Diane walking toward me. She smiled at me. Her hair looked like a wreath of red fire illuminating the darkness. "Hey you," she said. Her eyes were a fathomless green sea.

"Hi." I reached for her, and she came. I buried my head in her hair. I felt my knees buckle. "Please don't leave me," I said, my voice like a child's.

“I won’t” she said. Her mouth traced my throat, and I felt her teeth graze the skin just above my jugular vein. “We’re together now. Always.”

I closed my eyes, and fell happily into oblivion.

The hopper touched down beside the exploration team’s tent the next morning, several hours after sunrise.

The rescue team plodded out of the rear hatch, weapons and medical kits in hand. They spread out among the deserted camp, but found no trace of anyone. The tent was intact, and they couldn’t find a sign of an attack or struggle.

“Well, I think I figured out why they didn’t come back,” one of the medics said. He pointed to the submerged hopper on the other side of the tent.

“Okay, but where are they?” his partner asked. “It’s like they just disappeared.”

The medic shrugged. Some of the search team was heading into the woods that surrounded the camp. A few were making their way to a nearby pond. He spotted something reflective on the ground several feet away and went to retrieve it.

It was a video camera. He flipped the viewing box open and began to watch the footage. After a minute or so, his eyes widened, and he turned to shout a warning just as a scream went up from the edge of the woods.