

It had almost become a nightly ritual. Pepper would go to sleep shortly after nightfall. The sounds of untamed wilderness soothing to her, the bellowing of creatures prehistoric creating a symphony of sounds. It brought a smile to her face as it sang her to sleep. But something would always nag her from her dreams. A curiosity. Now, Pepper had commissioned this ship, but she hadn't fully explored it. She did know one thing about it. It was a living experiment. The ship's inhabitants lived on two spinning rings to simulate Gravity, one she affectionately called "Eden". The other was a ring left to its own devices. At the very beginning, the cells were susceptible to mutations, more so than normal. How had that Corrupted Garden fared since they started to orbit the planet.

And so, night after night, this curiosity had pulled her from her rest to where she stood now. The shimmering of the barrier in front of her did little to deter her like it did the animals. New species lay beyond. Astrodelphis and Cetus swam in the cosmic waters between the rings but even more species were dwelling in the second ring. Mutated lines from the same ancestors as the inhabitants of the Eden Ring. She grabbed a small glowing pod from her pouch, a cryochamber that let her bring anything with her really. Possibly even other Palletherians, but that was an untested concept and she didn't really have any volunteers at hand. Maybe a visit to the surface was something she should consider. Pepper shook her mind free of her wonders and focused at the task at hand. She kissed the little pod before she pushed the release and set it down. A flash of light pulse along the metal corridor, causing her to avert her eyes to protect her vision. When the light faded, a low bellow, electronic in nature met her hearing. STE-001-b (also known as Perry) was her pride and joy. A fully robotic replica of a master in defensive measures, the Stegosaurus. The same creature that inspired her own appearance. She reached out to touch the cool metal of its head, her claws making a light ting of sound. "Are you ready?" Her voice was soft and affectionate as she gave the creature a pet along the jaw before climbing on to its back. Protective restraints engulfed her legs, locking her in place unless she pulled the release as the robot started to move. It mimicked the natural step of the real thing perfectly, that long strong tail swayed gracefully side to side, deadly spikes pulsing with light akin to a heartbeat.

She took a deep breath, putting on an oxygen mask before getting Perry to breach the barrier, the lack of Gravity was felt immediately. Turning heavy steps into a sort of doggy paddle to cross the small distance between the bridges. She glanced around as the musical call of astrodelphis caught her attention. They weren't any threat to either of them, but they did make a pleasant sight. Pepper smiled, their antics were a sight to behold with the light trails they left but a soft bellow from Perry pulled her attention back to the task at hand. Right, she was going to see the results of the Corrupted Garden. Perry started to walk normally once the pair crossed the opposite side. The echos of fawna unseen for generations filled the chamberway with promise.

Though the ring didn't welcome her peacefully. Immediately as if sensing her presence, a small pack of Trodons sprinted forth from the alien landscape. Their eyes glowed in the dead of night, making their numbers hard to count but at least they were small enough that she wasn't dependant on Perry for protection. She stood, the locks on her legs releasing once they were back on solid ground. Black flooded her third eye as her short antennae glowed white. Her recessive blood flooded her body, her long tail working to bat away hopeful trodons that thought jumping on the stego was a smart idea. Perry swung his tail, three of the trodons stuck to his spikes. She focused on them all, her body trembling as her

telekenisis engulfed them. They screamed out in confusion to each other before she threw them back the way they came. She needed to arm herself before she moved forward. Pepper turned and knelt on Perry's back, unlocking a compartment between his back plates. Under the metal was a pistol, a rifle and a harpoon with plenty of rounds for all three. The pistol took a special round though, one that pulsed like Perry did. The material (Element as she called it), was one from Space itself. It was harvested from the dust and compressed into a new metal that really could do anything. In this case, it powered a pistol that could defend her by injuring or stunning a creature using a blast of energy.

It snapped into place in its holster on her hip while she slung the rifle over her shoulder. Some creatures were better dealt with at a comfortable distance away. When she was ready, Pepper click her tongue and Perry started to move into the eerie darkness. The drone of night was in full swing. Large ants marched in squadrons over the land, weaving between the legs of even larger spiders. Distant cousins of Triceratops grouped together in pairs or trios, their crests lacking the identifying horns. They must've been a species that herded together for protection. "Strength in numbers it seems." She laughed softly, before she witnessed something incredible. As the group was attacked by a small pack of Dilos, a purple haze filled the air, seemingly released from those crests. At first she thought it was a sleeping powder. But no! The dilos turned on each other, protecting the ceratopian as if it were a member of its pack. "It's an hallucinogenic agent. Incredible!" She wrote down her observations, including a photo of the creatures for the dossier. This was an incredible discovery, that not only had life continued to evolve and develop, but it had even come up with such genius ways to defend itself. She smiled in excitement, if this was what just a glimpse of this ring would produce. Imagine all the knowledge that lay beyond. Hidden among flora that she'd never seen before, carnivorous flora. Ones with fleshy "leaves" and bleeding stalks. She'd need to take samples of them for later study

The second ring was nothing like she thought it would be, full of life so different from the Eden Ring. Stegosaurus and a smaller version with half their plates being replaced by large spikes lived side by side. Small raptor like creatures, reminiscent of Demigorgons from popular culture. Her eyes widened as those very same creatures started to launch spines from a flower shaped appendage around the base of their skull. Seeing them sticking out the side of a kentrosaurus put into perspective just how large they were. At least the size of a Rex's canine. She urged Perry away from such a dangerous creature. She wasn't prepared medically if she should get hit by one of those spines. But the creature had already seen them. "Fuck fuck fuck. We have to get out of here." The spine cut across her cheek as she looked back. The creature had taken a stance similar to a gattling gun, spines whizzing by like bullets. She turned Perry to defensive mode, his plates unfolding into a solid shield on either side. Running wouldn't deter this thing. It could attack from a distance. She needed to neutralize the target. Perry's tail swung, poised to deal from heavy damage should the thing be stupid enough. It allowed Pepper a safe spot to fire from as she grabbed the pistol from her hip. This distance away, she was confident in her aim, she wouldn't waste a single round. The small piece of element that powered the weapon floated in a containment chamber that siphoned the energy off of it slowly. She set the gun to harm and started returning fire. Her empathetic heart, cried out for the creature as the rounds caused it to scream in pain. But its onslaught didn't stop. This was nature. Things attacked and killed other things for food, but her robotics confused them. It didn't know that Perry couldn't really

be killed, and it was just wasting its energy. One finally round through its chest put the creature down, leaving it safe enough once more to drop the shields and approach its body.

The creature was just as mutated as the rest of the ring. With several eyes on a mobile powerful body. She drew some of the blue blood from the wounds and took various samples. This ring was much too dangerous as she was. She'd need better preparation to explore it fully. For now. She'd return back home and analyze the samples she collected. Write down her observations and prepare. Prepare for a deeper trek through the Corrupted Garden.