

THE KEEPERS: TAINTED TECH

Prologue

The S.T.A.R.S. (Survival Transfer And Relocation Station) Project Colonizer ship has set out from Earth to find a new habitable planet. Because space travel has yet to be perfected by humans, it still takes hundreds of years before reaching new systems and galaxies. The S.T.A.R.S.S. Debris is a Sleeper Ship, designed to carry a population of colonists to a new world at sub-light speed, tended by a small crew of Keepers. Artificial gravity is provided by centrifugal rotation of the ship's ring sections. It is protected from high-velocity impacts with space dust by a bow shield as well as by a Bussard shield, a powerful magnetic field that deflects charged particles and smaller dust grains out of the path of the ship. The ship also has a forward-mounted laser that can be used to vaporize or divert larger objects such as small asteroids or cometary bodies out of the ship's path. Objects too large for the laser to divert are able to be detected at greater distances, allowing the Debris to maneuver to avoid collisions.

The majority of the occupants onboard must be kept in cryogenic sleep, only to be awakened when they reach a new world. These colonists are cared for by a small team of people that live out their lives simply for the sake of keeping the colonizer ship functional. Occasionally new people are awakened from the cryo-chambers to take over. It's been centuries since the colonizer has left Earth and it's coming into the territory of inhabitable space. A planet with the perfect conditions for human life is drawing closer. But something went terribly wrong. An unknown lifeform got into the ship and corrupted the cryo-chamber system, awakening the entire ship of a thousand colonizers before their time.

Now Captain Wainwright of the ship affectionately known as Debris is dead. His last warning was to isolate every citizen that had cybernetic enhancements for they may be infected with this strange techno-alien. Who has inherited the role of Captain? Will the Keepers get everything under control in time?

Chapter 1 - Quarantine

Most of the Debris' passengers have been gathered in a huge stadium-like room where Elder Keepers are trying to keep everyone calm as a small team scans citizens for signs of cybertech. Those with tech are being escorted off to be quarantined in the medical bay. Meanwhile, on the bridge, a small team of people desperately tries to figure out what is circling the nearby planet and if it's a threat to the colony.

"If you are scheduled to be or have been part of the Keeper crew in the past, we need your assistance now. Please report to your assigned stations. In the meantime we need everyone to remain calm...", an announcement droned on from the medical bay's speakers.

A young woman with familiar features pushes her way through the crowd of colonists, grabbing ahold of anyone with an I.D. badge to demand answers. "Have you seen Captain Wainwright?! I need to find him!"

Mihari jolted at the sudden touch of the woman. She'd been one of the first to get to the medical bay to have her cochlear implants removed. They were modest as cybernetic enhancements went, and were not much more than a glorified comms headset, but she could take no chances.

"Captain Wainright? I'm sorry...he is gone," Mihari said sadly.

"Gone where?" The young woman demanded to know.

"He is--how may I help you?" Mihari said, somewhat awkwardly poking and swiping at a tablet.

Busied with trying to verify that the Captain's last order to the Ship, to give her Sigma Omega access, had gone through. Under the circumstances Mihari thought better of using her contact lens-screens and gesture recognition interface as well. Though not implanted couldn't be thrown as quickly as the tablet in case of infestation.

Warwick returned to the infirmary last, a broad chest heaving from the mad run around trying to isolate anyone who was augmented. His part to throw several people from the airlocks who were too far gone. The good news was that the woman

wasn't one of the people who needed to have their implants removed. Dealing with the others was grizzly and nasty business, but he was used to killing.

He arrived in time to hear the question, and he looked over and placed a firm hand on Mihari's shoulder to try to shut her up, "Mihari is acting captain at the moment. Captain Wainright had a very intense procedure."

It was not a lie... not really. He couldn't lie.

Warwick's answers had disturbed the girl even further. "What do you mean by intense procedure!? Where is he! I need to see him right now!"

Chapter 2 - A Hidden Bulwark

A different mind fought to surface from sleep as something tried to tamper with systems more resilient than the ship itself. An armored shoulder inside a military-grade pod bore the symbol of three pods with kneeling soldiers inside. With a hiss and heavy booted wobble, the female soldier slipped from the berth to drunkenly stumble through a secure door. A plasma torch left just outside the black of a hidden unlit hallway. Shortly flaring with light as she began cutting through the wall.

Sukarma dropped into a cargo bay hallway finding it emptied of people after cutting through a wall to exit a berth hidden in the superstructure. Many already made their way to the stadium. A shock baton on her side and a gauss pistol on the other was short compared to the others even with the armor on. Through a pounding headache and the slimy vision of Nausea made her way through the ship to where the announcements said the others were. Clomping up at the back looked about the medical bay. She didn't see Wainright anywhere but had heard someone shouting his name.

Sukarma arrived just in time to hear one of the elder Keepers insist that those cleared of cybertech should immediately go to their designated hall and await further instruction. Someone in the crowd wasn't having it -- as someone with a prosthetic, they were going to be separated from their family for no good reason! It seemed like a riot was going to break out any moment.

Chapter 3 - Inflamed Tensions

"Ma'am," Warwick said to the girl, "You aren't the only one demanding to see the poor bastard. He can't see anyone right now due to his condition. Now, do you have any tech implants or prosthetics? If so, get in line. I'm able to help with the procedures now, so they should go faster."

He didn't say that he'd just chop stuff off and let the next person close the wound.

"I have every right to see the Captain...!", the girl protested as the attention of those two diverted.

"What is your emer--" Mihari added, interrupted by the sudden and rather loud appearance of someone in powered combat armor.

"Warwick, with me please," she said and started toward the armored individual, cringing inwardly at the mayhem that could be unleashed if the armor became infected.

Then someone with a prosthetic began to protest. For a moment she froze as images of the Captain's cybernetic arm coming to alien life flashed in her mind, and the sickening crunch-squish-rip it made when it tore itself free from his shoulder. Mihari struggled for calm, to keep herself from shaking, to provide the presence of stability that people would need. People! Dealing with alien-infested technology was one thing; she knew technology and was comfortable with it. It was...sensible, well at least until now. But panicking, angry people?

"Please close down all comms immediately, remove your armor, and power it down. Do you have any cybernetic implants?", Mihari said to the newcomer.

Lights on the exoframe started to blink out as Sukarma started bricking dynamic systems in the suit she didn't absolutely need. Given how weak she felt the exoframe had to stay but at least the daggers jabbing at her mind ebbed as what passed for an immune system had less of the empty rigid things to focus on. There were backups in the library somewhere.

The projected voice from inside was a calm youthful voice as she looked at Warwick making no moves for her weapons, "I answer only to the Captain."

Warwick hurried after Mihari, then frowned at Sukarma. "Mihari is the acting captain," he said firmly.

The girl watched as they were already trying to walk off without her, of which she wasn't pleased about. Stomping after Mihari since she was 'acting captain'.

"What's his condition?! Is it serious?!" She was having to raise her voice even higher because there seemed to be a big ruckus forming amongst the colonists. She didn't give two whits about that -- the captain was her only concern.

"I take it he didn't have time for the full brief, " Sukarma sighed and ignored the girl, "I'm your Bulwark."

Chapter 4 - Broken calm

Mihari turned to the insistent young woman. She looked familiar somehow--if Mihari still had her contact lens-screens, facial recognition would have automatically conjured her identity, but Mihari couldn't place her under the circumstances.

"Please identify yourself," she said, then turned to the armored figure, "Bulwark?"

From the iconography, she guessed that a 'Bulwark' was something like a Special Forces trooper meant to be deployed to the planet upon arrival. But such forces were not meant to be awakened during her lifetime, much less called to service, so she did not know anything about them.

Manual locks pop as Sukarma fingers heavy latches at the collar and removes her helmet revealing a blue-skinned face with faint rivers of color. Tapering tendrils that passed for her hair sprout tiny receivers from the ends.

"Bulwark ops sent me specifically. Something started to try and put me down and the IDS fired up to wake me. I can keep it out but it's making me really sick. What's going on? I already bricked most of the suit systems." Said Sukarma's tiny voice in a weighty drawl of sickness.

The young woman spoke as the strange-skinned woman finished, "Virginia Wainwright, Cadet Officer 2024. I need to see the captain. What's wrong with my Da-"

Thankfully Mihari, Warwick, (and now Sukarma) were not the only Keepers on the scene. Those that'd been activated as security were trying to get the mob under control before things got too nasty in the stadium. At least until someone threw a punch and bloodied up some Elder's nose. For the moment there were no signs of techno infections, but a riled-up crowd confused and scared was just as dangerous. A larger scuffle was now breaking out as Keepers struggled to get things calmed down.

Warwick smelled the blood and jumped into action. Warwick's voice held an edge of something strange that made them **want** to obey... more than if it hadn't had that energy, at least.

Warwick grabbed the aggressor just to yank them from the Elder, and held him up in the air, using his height and build to full advantage. "Stop fighting!" he roars.

Sukarma looked around at the crowd, "Calm down! It won't make anything easier if you're beating each other!"

Quite suddenly the entire station shuddered and all of the power shut off. Backup lights in a deep ominous red flickered on. "EMERGENCY PROTOCOL ACTIVATED. ALL CITIZENS REPORT TO YOUR HALLS FOR LOCKDOWN. KEEPERS HEAD TO YOUR STATIONS. MIHARI REPORT TO THE BRIDGE. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. ALL CITIZENS REPORT TO YOUR HALLS FOR LOCKDOWN."

Chapter 5 - Sinking situation

Sukarma looks upward as the lights go off and the warning erupts from above, "Just call me Bulwark. I'm the only one they sent..."

"You have cybernetic implants to interface with your suit?" Mihari said to Sukarma.

Before Mihari could try to figure out a way to explain the situation to the armored warrior, the power went down. Warwick managed to hear Virginia's name before all of the chaos. 'Oh, damn...' Warwick thought, worse this meant that the quarantined might try to get back with the others.

He looked to Sukarna. "Help me keep the quarantined folks here," he urged, then added, "Please."

Then Warwick looks to Mihari, "Take Virginia. Explain in private," he insisted. Virginia needed to know, but nobody else did.

With gritted teeth, Mihari suppressed a groan. "My apologies, I must go. Miss Wainright, please come with me."

Chapter 6 - Declining situation

Between the sudden quarantine, the rumors of a missing captain, and now even more dysfunction with the ship with the power outage, it seemed as if this was the last straw for all of the frightened colonists. Full chaos broke out in the stadium as people started running -- both to obey the emergency protocol, but just as many going full-on violent trying to demand answers from Keepers they could ambush. Now more than ever the ship needed a leader!

"I'm right behind you," replied Virginia to Mihari, though that was going to be difficult with the current chaos.

People were running and scattered everywhere when everyone with a Keeper's badge was now in danger of errant punches and angry colonists!

Sukarma put her helmet back on as the two left and followed Warwick. the electrical humm of her shock baton as she pressed a button on its handle. Though her head swam at the abundance of stimulation as something desperately clawed at her intellect. Swaying a bit at times kept up with Warwick swinging loud zots at the more violent persons.

Sukarma's voice to Warwick beleaguered by something other than tiredness, "What's... the plan! I can't just subdue everyone!"

"Subdue all we can. Anyone with implants or prosthetics is a risk factor to the rest," he informed as he crashed two violent peoples' heads together.

"Keep them apart from the unaugmented. If they escape quarantine there could be problems," He tried to be vague to keep people who overheard from panicking more, "Once we're between them and the doors, it'll be easier."

Thankfully, Warwick was well-accustomed to fighting, and he knocked heads, bonked, and chopped necks until a semi-circle of unconscious people.

Sukarma grabbed one prosthetic arm as a sleeper swung at her and the other fist cracked on her helmet. Taking blows her mind insisted it wanted to vomit and she felt overheated but after taking more smashes to the head regained her senses to swing the man around. Taking a small cable from her wrist as he punched her with the other hand jabbed the vampire tap into a data cable inside the prosthetic arm. Though contact with the device made her feel tired, from the exposure to yet more daggers, nerve stormed a few of the banal neural processors until she could push them away. A bootstrap announcing itself quickly competed for as she grabbed access and started bricking the operational code of several integral parts. Civilian tech was usually too cheap to be hardened after all.

Sukarma shouted from atop the sleeper and their new limp arm, "Listen, fool, calm while we come up with a solution and you can see your family eventually! Have faith!"

Chapter 7 - Terrible news

Mihari closed her eyes in frustration, fighting down fear, as she moved to the bridge. What would Captain Wainwright do? Or anyone who knew what to do as a leader of these people?! she thought. She opened her eyes and gently took Virginia's arm to lead her away from the crowd.

Once Mihari had Virginia alone in a corridor, she let go of her arm to speak, "I am very sorry, Miss Wainwright. Your father...your father is dead. He gave his life saving this Ship and Her crew and passengers. I know that is no consolation...and no words I say can ever be. I...I do not have time to help you grieve as I should. Please report to your hall for lockdown."

"What. He's not. He promised he'd go into cryo so we'd be together when-" At that point Virginia choked up, throwing a hand over her mouth. She nodded quickly to at least confirm that she'd heard and understood Mihari.

"I am sorry. I **must** go," Mihari said, patting Virginia on the shoulder before turning away to run for the Bridge.

“MIHARI REPORT TO THE BRIDGE. ALL CITIZENS REPORT TO YOUR HALLS FOR LOCKDOWN. THIS IS NOT A DRILL,” The emergency alert stayed on repeat. Warwick and Sukarma certainly had their hands full with the leftover rioters, and though there weren't any signs of new tech infection, anyone sensitive to the ship's movements could feel a subtle shudder beneath their feet. Something was very very wrong.

Chapter 8 - Terrible knowledge

Inwardly cursing the awkwardness of the tablet screen, Mihari swiped at it to bring up a wireframe hologram of the Ship meant to show internal diagnostics and any external threats. The screen showed her that the ship was now moving faster and faster. Dangerously so towards the nearby planet and the ring of weird tech around it. Once she reached the bridge, she was met with a bunch of freaked-out technerds of various ages all scrambling to get control of the ship.

"We can't figure it out!" one of them shouted. "Nothing is controlling the ship's software, but we're being pulled towards the planet!"

"Pulled?" Mihari said. "As if by gravity? What is the acceleration toward the planet? Helm, shut down the main engines. We are going to need to change course. Sciences, are the gravimetric sensors online? Can you detect a source for the pull? Or any other signatures, such as Hawking radiation from a black hole?"

She sat in the Captain's chair and activated shipwide comms, "Attention Keepers and passengers, this is Acting Captain Mihari Jirae. Please remain calm, obey Keeper instructions, and report to your halls for lockdown. You must do this immediately so that we can secure the Ship for maneuvers. This will require us to stop the rotating sections and subject all areas to zero-gee."

Chapter 9 - Much Too Quiet

With the combination of Warwick's manhandling, Sukarma's asskicking, and Acting Captain Mihari's instructions people were finally getting their panic under control in the stadium. If at least because no one wanted to be flying around in zero G during an emergency.

Warwick grunted as he got the last rioters down then started strapping people to the stadium seats. Maneuvers, of course, but they needed to keep the quarantine! "Everyone strap in! We have a quarantine for a reason!"

Sukarma roughly picked up the man beneath her expecting the sudden void of sensation to quiet his rage. Forced to drag the man by his belt dropped him into a seat and buckled the limp appendage in with the rest of him. Thinking out loud from a growing awareness of something on the outer hull she called to Warwick, "I'm kitted for colony support, not heavy weapons fire!"

Sukarma reached for the mag boots then realized she'd shorted out the subsystem. Heading over to Warwick she gripped a chair to make sure she didn't float away. Distantly a damage control system likely complained of unknown movement in a ship berth one too many than records said they had. A large weight shifting inside to press on the walls. Sukarma resisted the urge to snoop on comms channels given whatever it was spreading wrath through it.

Chapter 10 - Dies Irae

"Astrogation, get together with Ops," Mihari barked orders on the bridge, "I need you to bring up a list of the S.T.A.R.S. candidate systems, and choose the farthest one from this system that the Ship can still reach. Life Support, assess available resources with the aim of converting the Debris into a generation ship. The Cotu Section has hydroponic gardens and biogenic waste treatment systems. We will need to replicate these to service the needs of the entire Ship. Comms, do we still have..."

The bridge crew working with Mihari to answer questions found the source of wrath, "There doesn't seem to be any-- Oh. Oh no," exclaimed one of the crew.

Unable to explain it in words, they brought up the visuals on screen for everyone on the bridge to see. Those uncountable flying bits and bobs that surrounded the planet below in a giant ring were all swarming towards the ship. Hundreds and thousands were already attached to the outside of the ship's hull with millions more attaching every second.

Her string of commands was interrupted by the dire report, "Point defense systems, fire!"

The Debris had a few point defense lasers meant to divert any asteroids or cometary bodies on a collision course with the vessel. Of course, they would be nowhere near enough to deal with such a numerous threat, but she had to try.

"Comms, transmit on all frequencies," Mihari said, "This is The S.T.A.R.S.S. Debris. We did not intend to invade your space. At the time of our departure from our homeworld, we could detect no signs of intelligent life in your system. We will choose another destination system if you cease your attack. Please respond."

KSSSSSHHHHHH. KSSSSSSST. KSSSHHHHHH. KSSSSS. Nothing legible wanted to come through, until finally one of the technicians twisted enough dials and the buzzing started to come out in a pattern. -.. .- - - .-. .- -. --. .-. ... -.. -
.-. --- -.-- -. --- --- -- . -.. . .- - -.. . .- - -.. - .-. --- -.--

Mihari tapped a control to feed the Morse Code (!) signal through a translator:

"DEATHSTRANGERSDESTROYNOHOMEDEATHDEATHDESTROY"

Mihari gritted her teeth at the bile in the reply, "Comms, send the following message to Sol: 'S.T.A.R.S.S. Debris. Destination world hostile aliens. Cyber threat, do not use cryo. Prepare for war.' Then give me control of the comm laser."

The Ship was connected to the Solar System by a laser data link that would allow Earth to transmit tech updates, and the Debris to send back Her findings. This required powerful pulsed lasers on both ends and worked as long as the Ship remained on its predicted trajectory, or could return to it after maneuvers. The limit of light speed meant that Earth would not receive their warning for decades, but as far as known physics was concerned, nothing else could reach Earth faster.

Chapter 11 - Incoming

"Whew," Warwick sighed. "Alright. If Mihari calls, we head there, otherwise let's keep things organized here."

Mihari activated shipwide comms and it erupted noise above the two in the arena, "Captain Jirae to all hands, secure for emergency maneuvers. We are under attack by hostile aliens. We will do everything in our power to keep the Ship safe and seek a new destination world. Warwick and Bulwark and all who are trained to fight, prepare to repel boarders. Prepare for microgravity."

Sukarma shook her head, "this is a massive open room if the hull is breached we'll get sucked into the void. We need to be behind a bulkhead!"

Sukarma looked at Warwick pondering the acting Captain's announcement they were about to be boarded, "I have four explorer-class EVA suits in the unlisted berth and a couple more weapons. They're not built for combat but they can take a decent beating."

Chapter 12 - Self-Defense

Mihari looked at a crew listening at a console, "Comms, is the message sent? I need that laser."

.....
..... Oddly enough the message that came next wasn't coming from the millions of bots attaching themselves to the hull, but from the very planet below. But it might have been too late. Something sounding horrifyingly like metal being ripped and churned apart echoed through-out the entire ship.

Mihari translated the second message:

"GOHOMEDeATHDEATHNOHOMEHEREONLYDEATHSTARSTATIONCRASHDEATHDEATHDEATH"

She then turned the ship's telescope on the planet, toward the source of the signal and gave another order, "Secure all hatches," There's no such thing as an unarmed spaceship Mihari thought grimly. Now give me something to hit.

Mihari used the Ship's telescope to start looking over the alien megastructures for anything that looked especially important. There! she thought, noticing a massive ring that was exactly centered on the ship, tethered to other, larger stations that seemed to be holding it in place.

"Security," Mihari said to the Security Chief, "Can I assume you've had your tech people looking for ways to counter their cyber-attacks? If you have anything you can use, like a counter-virus, use it now." She then looked back to the diagnostic to see if there were millions of hull breaches, or if most of the attached drones were doing something else.

"I'm not sure the message is from aliens," said a voice from the doorway and spoke up softly.

Virginia hadn't gone to her hall like instructed, and there was no telling how long she'd been lurking nearby. Her eyes were red like she'd been crying, but she seemed to have herself under control now as her brows were thoughtfully furrowed. "That was an old earth language, wasn't it? What if-

BWEEZOOOOOWM. Finally, the onboard defense systems were very suddenly forced online by the bridge crew, weapons were aimed at Acting Captain Jirae's directions towards the ring on the alien megastructure. Maybe someone had an itchy trigger finger and didn't wait for an official firing order - the laser fired out and the shockwave was powerful. It hit and sent flying everything around it with so much force that even the S.T.A.R.S. station itself was knocked off course and began hurtling towards the planet. It WILL crash, but will it make it down to the surface in one piece?!

Chapter 13 - Out of Time

Warwick grunted and slammed into a wall. He righted himself, then looked to Sukarma. "Can you handle things here? I'm going to check on the Captain!"

Sukarma shook her head, sharing information gathered from elsewhere and dropping all pretense, "Our orientation is way off, there's no way we're still on course! I need my avatar to survive impact if we end up crashing with survivors. I can try pushing back against the interference but not remotely and the bridge is much further away than I am. It's my best option for these people and I could use some help."

"What do you need?" Warwick asked, eager to help ensure the survival of as many as possible

Sukarma starts running off as the ship starts to shudder, "I don't have cybernetics, Warwick, I'm biomechanoid. I **am** a ship. I need a crew! You'll find a hole to Berth 19 in 18!"

"Oh, shit..." Warwick stared, then took off towards where Sukarma told him to go. He wasn't probably any good as a crew, but if he was the difference between survival and not...

Chapter 14 - Fighting For Better Options

Mihari barked orders as they fought against fate, "Helm! Use full RCS thrusters, aim the ship on a tangent to the planet's atmosphere, main engine burn for four point eight seconds of Delta Vee. Route all available power to the Bussard shields! Launch all colonial dropships on autopilot, have them pick a landing site as close to that signal as possible."

Then she toggled the shipwide comms, "All hands to the escape pods. We have arrived at our destination early. Repeat, all hands to escape pods," she said, then deactivated shipwide comms.

"Helm, set the escape pods to land as near as possible to the dropships. If that's a human signal, there are humans alive there. All of you...get to the escape pods. Transferring Helm control to my station. I will...make sure the Ship does not crash on your new world. Best of fortune to you all."

If things went as Mihari hoped, the Ship itself would skip off of the planet's atmosphere and back into space, though She would almost certainly break up in the process, instead of becoming a planet-killing crater on impact. Hopefully Her crew and passengers would make it to the planet's surface safely.

Chapter 15 - Abandon Ship

With systems disrupted the contagion ebbed from the din of damage and noise. As Sukarma ran down the short hallway to the atrium's berths with Warwick and any others in tow. She dodged into the hole she'd cut through the wall next to one berth to reveal the wide-open security door behind it. The ship inside a black and blue-veined surface from synthetic silicate substrate organisms on the whole in a distant resemblance to a squid with four-toed stump legs for landing gear. Eight flexible tool arms at the front and four thick ones on the rear for her magnetoplasmadynamic engines. Too heavy to enter orbit from the ground or stay there since the things would tear her apart; she needed at least one of the two shuttles compressed into her side to have a pilot. Her organic brains were very human though she was never born one couldn't fly three parts of herself at once. Explosive bolts prepped, prepared to blow herself out of the berth when able.

Hundreds of colonists boarded escape pods as quickly as they could in the chaos and panic, most shuttles hurdling down safely to the coordinates below, though some veered wildly of course. Acting Captain Mihari Jirae stayed aboard the main ship hoping to guide it away from a cataclysmic crash - and not alone. Captain Wainwright's daughter, Virginia stayed right there with her to help. The bots attached to the ships hull had thrown off calculations - the Debris did not bounce off the atmosphere as Mihari hoped, but thanks to quick thinking and the right trajectory the ship broke apart into smaller chunks, crash landing spread all across the planet in a way that actually managed to save the lives of leftover crew still onboard.

Chapter 16 - Ship Abandoned

Mihari felt a wave of relief wash over her as she and Virginia topped a rise, and she saw survivors making what they could from the debris of Debris. "Virginia! We made it!"

"...!" Virginia wanted to hoot and holler or say anything really, but she found herself mute with relief at the sight of hundreds of colonists alive and well. ...and perhaps also a little bit terrified. With a few of the local flora and fauna that she and Mihari had stumbled upon during their long walk to find the crash site, there was no telling what sort of state they were going to find everyone in. Virginia couldn't imagine waking up from a cryosleep like this.

Though Mihari was exhausted, a new surge of energy put haste in her steps as she headed for the crash site as Virginia quickly got her bearings and caught up. Warwick was there too, having taken a slightly shorter path to the settlement. Now missing an arm but he wasn't bleeding and didn't seem at all negatively affected by it except for occasionally forgetting.

They moved into the crash site, where for the past several days the surviving passengers of the DEBRIS had been slowly building shelters with the derelict wreckage of the ship, scoping out the nearby surroundings, and trying to make sense of everything that's happened. Everything is strained as the trauma of the tech-virus and the crash has left so many confused and frightened. Who is in charge? What do they do next? Where have they landed?

Chapter 17 - Loud Ahoy

Warwick started going through people as he moved deeper into the shelters examining who needed care and who was fine. Amongst one of the people trying to take control of this situation was a Keeper by the name of Joven. Right that moment he was barking orders at anyone he stumbled across without any real rhyme or reason. Since the crash he'd self appointed himself as boss and was making sure as many people as possible knew that.

He yelled at the obvious one-armed man, "What are you doing Warwick?! Stop wasting time examining people, we need to make sure we scavenge all the lost weapon supplies!"

Warwick stared at him, then went right back to what he'd been doing, "People first."

In his mind, he *was* the weapon, the main one they needed. Joven could also function as something of a grenade, at this point.

"Warwick!" Mihari said, glad to see a familiar face as Joven brought attention to their straggler. Her dark features lit with concern as she noticed that he was missing an arm. Yet somehow, he seemed not to be in any pain or even hindered, except for the occasional un-handy absence of a hand.

His jacket still had its arm, he just lacked what usually filled it, and he smiled at the sight of someone familiar. "Mihari."
He nodded. "Virgini..."

Joven was surprised to see Mihari alive, as well as the young Virginia and didn't bother to hide it, "Thought you burned up in the atmosphere," he commented.

"No matter, we could use a tech singer to help salvage anything that's still working. As for *you*," he squinted at Virginia. "Go be useful somewhere. Or help this one-armed janitor consolidate supplies."

He cut off, then looked to Joven. "She's the captain," he said bluntly. "Not you."

With that, Warwick approached Joven, then gave a 'love tap' to the man's nose, breaking it.

Chapter 18 - Once more, ship Friend

With a broken toe on her elephantine landing gear and a torn ventral side it had taken several hours just to unbury herself from the wreckage and stone. Then several days for the huge lumbering four-legged ship to limp toward the campsite on her stumpy landing gear. Thankfully it had been mostly melted plastic, metal, and carbon obscuring her external cameras other than some boulders that buried her engines. The thunder of legs and a strange beaten tentacled shape crushing through the forest had initially caused a bit of alarm with the animals. Certainly with the settlers as she broke the line of plant life.

At least until Sukarma dropped one of her side shuttles and emerged from a heavily damaged airlock to slump to the floor in her armor. Sukarma had been in and out of consciousness for a while and just now with her sarcophagus showing from inside a wall of her tiny mess hall. She ignored the oncoming civilians and dropped to the ground to her knees.

The two dropships eventually got to the ground and were used for power in short order. Directing civilians where to plug in cables for the power and utilities they desperately needed.

Chapter 19 - Percussive Diplomacy

Mihari raised an eyebrow at Keeper Joven as he barked orders at Warwick. Joven seemed to be acting unnecessarily rude. Before she could even open her mouth to correct him, Warwick did so in a rather more percussive way. She widened her eyes, but said nothing. He'd had to deal with Joven for the last several days; she hadn't.

"Damn right she's Captain," Virginia muttered under her breath.

She looked a little put off by Joven in general, but instructions were instructions. After a few days traveling through the jungle with Mihari, both she and the other woman needed actual food rations, and as the new acting captain, Virginia was going to make sure Mihari got everything she needed.

Joven looked as red as an ancient beet. "You know, I've been handling things since we crashed here. If it weren't for me, none of these people would still be alive. I think that merits a little respect. We shouldn't be wasting time on the tech enhanced when they could be infected. The infected are what landed us on this damn planet to begin with."

Warwick stared Joven down, "Joven. They are victims as much as the rest. Shut up before I break something else."

"Virginia, please help Warwick with the others," she said, then hurried to the injured Bulwark.

"Thanks," Warwick said with a nod. "Get something to eat, too, for both you and the Captain. You both need it," he urged.

Virginia turned to the one-armed man staring, "Sure thing. Warwick, you keep doing what you're doing and make a list of surviving passengers and what they need. I'll get on inventory and make sure food rations are going out."

Warwick left Joven behind to go back to checking people. It was a job of several days, but because it was important, he did it himself while other keepers managed other things.

Chapter 20 - Pan-Pan Pain

Mihari found the bulwark sitting with her helmet in her hands on a rock to say, "Sukarma, is it?"

Grateful that she remembered the name after all that had happened, and the brief, chaotic time she'd 'known' her. "I will do my best to help treat your injuries. At least those of your technological elements," she said.

"My everything hurts," Sukarma lamented at the ground from under a helmet and suit now devoid of operative electronics.

Without her own contact lens screens and Debris' main computer Mihari lacked the skills to be much of a medic for biological injuries.

Sukarma stood and limped her way along with Mihari after passing a rifle from the ground to her shoulder. A fine hyphae poured out of holes in the back of the suit and yanked the rifle flat. The heavy-looking weapon stuck to her back in a rapidly concreting plastic goo.

"Yes, Sukarma Lexicon. Since I'm planetbound now until someone makes a mass driver. My cuticle will heal eventually but somebody needs to build new armor and substrate." It wasn't said with spite but more a certain disappointed woe.

Chapter 21 - Needs Must

As they returned, Sukarma snapped her eyes on Joven and said firmly as she had rather superhuman hearing, "If they're suspect then keep them aboard me for now. We aren't in a position to be discarding people like broken toys. I can keep it out of me."

'So far, at least,' Sukarma thought to herself.

Mihari looked Sukarma over with a nod, "But you are not in pain? If you are fit for duty, please take charge of defense. Make sure the perimeter is secure and if possible assemble an armed force from among the able-bodied survivors."

Then she turned to Joven. "Keeper Joven, what are your areas of expertise?" Though she knew his name, and had seen him around the Ship, she had not been his manager and (once again, with regret) she could not consult the Computer.

"Maintenance," he said with a snort. But he seemed to know when he needed to shut up and raised his hands in surrender. "I'll get back to work," he muttered, followed by something unintelligible under his breath, before he backed away and then left them.

"I heard that," Warwick shot after him from elsewhere. Sukarma wasn't the only one with supernatural senses and it was helpful sometimes.

Chapter 22 - Bunkers and Resilience

Sukarma put a hand on the plate midriff of her armor as the long tentacles of the organic-looking cuttlefish shaped ship did the same in the background, "I'm in a lot of pain. I just can keep going and get it done. If you can get someone to clear the four crew EIGENSuits of electronics It should work as armor. You can't use the guns, you'll break every bone in your arm."

Sukarma two palms in front of her as a fine mist organized into a loose black threading of her sense of the area, "I don't have a great view of the area from the ground. I'll have to refine my map as I patrol."

"Keeper Joven," Mihari called out, "please clear the crew EIGENSuits of electronics," she said then turned back to Sukarma.

Looking the rifle over she said, "Can we improvise a way to mount the guns on the perimeter, so they can be used?"

As she had so many times since this disaster began (and especially since the death of Debris) Mihari felt far out of her depth. She knew nothing about the Bulwark or her systems. Had things gone as they were supposed to, she would have been long dead before they reached the planet and the Bulwark force needed to be readied for deployment.

Sukarma tapped the back of her neck where a jack would be then mock-held the rifle and rolled her shoulder, "The EIGENSuits connect you to my local noosphere through neural jacks for cyber defense. Without it there's no recoil compensation. Someone will have to build an emplacement to take the recoil or learn how to drive my MPV and plug it in there for power."

"Warwick, can you drive an MPV?" Mihari asked. Apart from Sukarma herself, Warwick was by far the most combat-capable among the survivors, so far as she knew. Though she was far from any kind of military strategist or tactician, mobile firepower sounded better than jury-rigged fixed emplacements.

Warwick was staring at Joven as he spoke to Virginia, and then turned his attention to Mihari. "I don't know what that is," he answered, unable to lie.

"Also, I think Joven's up to something," he added.

Chapter 23 - Tasks of Machines and Men

Meanwhile, Virginia was doing exactly what was requested and then some. There didn't seem to be any organization to how the encampment was set up, Supplies were all over the place, and there was no centralized location to keep track of, well... anything. As soon as she found a crate of tech (and made sure it wasn't infected) she did a little bit of tweaking to one of the pads for the start of a digital record and central command. They'd need to set up a main server somewhere for sure later, but for now this would do. In the process, she also started directing people to take specific supplies to different shelters. A medical supply hut was imperative! A place for food. Somewhere for defense... There was so much to do!

Joven had his orders and he obediently went to do them. ...or at least that's what it looked like. While the others were busy, and well out of earshot of that wanker Warwick, Joven eventually came across Virginia while she was working. He gave her a hand with some of the tech crates, after all he did have orders. After a bit, he struck up a conversation.

"It's a shame about the Captain," he casually remarked, "Wainwright, I mean. Got shafted right out the airlock after being infected. Funny how that happened right after that Tech Singer got full control of the Debris. Not that I think she's a murderer, but with the virus and all..."

He shrugged, continuing his work.

Virginia froze, midway drawing up some camp plans. This guy was clearly an asshole, she knew that, but Captain Wainwright was her father. She needed to know what happened to her father.

Virginia spat back at him, "What the hell are you talking about, Jovan? What are you saying?"

Then Mihari called over the commlink from beside the heavily armored Bulwark, "Virginia, do we have any operable recon drones available that can interface with Sukarma's systems?"

The Colonists were supposed to have flying reconnaissance drones that would enable them to quickly explore the areas surrounding their landing sites. That is, if things had gone according to plan and they had been able to land their dropships properly. But who knew what had survived the crash?

Mihari's attempt to contact her via comlink fell on deaf ears - if Mihari killed her dad, how was she supposed to even respond!

Jovan just shrugged, looking completely oblivious to Virginia's discomfort, "That's what happened? Everyone knows - at least all the surviving Keepers do. The virus was infecting everyone with techno implants. Apparently the Captain - rest his soul - had one. Almost everyone with one got infected and went on a murdering spree. You'd think a tech singer would be able to find a way to work around that but... She yeeted the Captain right out into space. I just think it's weird all that happened and now we're crashed on this planet and now suddenly she's in charge..."

Chapter 24 - Suspicion In Improvisation

Sukarma looked at the Debris in the distance then back to Mihari and Warwick who apparently didn't know what MPV meant, "I don't think he would make a good leader. An MPV is a Multiple Purpose Vehicle. I'm in no condition to drive. I can't get the MPV in the air without some serious rebuilding of the engines. So keep in mind you're taxiing a spacecraft not a dunebuggy."

Mihari sighed. "Do you think he is infected?" Unlike Warwick, she did not have superhuman hearing to pick up Joven's words. "Have you lived on a planet before?"

"I've been on lots of planets," said Warwick, "It sounds like he's making things up about the former captain to Virginia."

"I haven't been on a planet since before all you were born", said Sukarma idly looking for where the man called Jovan went off to.

"He's that way," Warwick said as he pointed. "Can someone take over here? I can't lie, and I was there when it happened."

Though the data only existed in her mind's eye looked around in front of her at status readouts saying, "Sure. Whatever happened to the Captain, if Debris had a psyche like I do I guess she'd want me to do what I can."

Chapter 25 - Fielded Medicine

Sukarma knelt down to relieve Warwick and removed a water packet from her pocket and gave it to one person, "Here, you look dehydrated. If you need more I have water on the ship."

Though there wasn't anything on the helmet, Sukarma interacted with her mind's eye moving a constellation of information around. Reading numbers off medical modules she barely knew how to use directly in executive level space.

The thought came to mind as she knelt there, "Did the pod I tossed free of the gantry make it? I didn't have time to track where I tossed it."

Mihari nodded. "I think it might be best if you took command. I am like a child here."

"I can go deal with Joven," Mihari added.

Sukarma looked back just to shake her head with a long stare at her dropships in the distance, "You're doing fine, acting Captain. There's always dissenters. Just watch them around your family."

"He's making you look like a villain," Warwick said. "I think it's wiser if it's *not* you."

Mihari blinked in incomprehension. "Why? What would he have to...never mind. Please go resolve the situation. Try not to kill him," she said, with the briefest hint of a smile.

"If it is about Virginia's father, please tell her she can come to me, and I will hear anything she has to say, and answer all her questions. On our way here...we were so busy just trying to survive..." Mihari had wanted Virginia's last memories of her father to be of him in life, not visualizations of the horror of his death.

"Understood." Warwick nodded as he went to Jovan and Virginia.

Chapter 26 - Mettle Warfare

Virginia still wasn't seeing any of the words on her datapad, and her stomach had twisted up into a knot. Of course she didn't believe that Mihari had murdered Captain Wainwright to take over the shit! That was crazy! She'd spent several days in the jungle with the woman, surely she would've even said something about it too.

Warwick came up to Jovan and Virginia as she shifted uncomfortably to his speculations, "Joven. I was there when it happened, and you're wrong."

"You've got a lot of messed up ideas Jovan," muttered Virginia.

Still.... once she spotted Warwick, she took a deep breath and shoved all those feelings down. She didn't get a chance to tell him their progress before he immediately called out Jovan.

"Am I wrong?" commented Jovan with an air of innocence. "It's even in the logs. Our present Captain made the order to evict the prior Captain."

Warwick sighed, "You are wrong in how you are explaining it." With that, he took a deep breath. "What the two of you are about to see isn't a hologram. It's... magic. It's what I saw."

With that, he reached out to each of them, and they saw, smelled, felt, and knew the former captain's final moments as he had. How they'd tried to save him before he handed over command as the stink of heartbreak filled the air.

Joven was effectively horrified - not by the tragedy he saw, but by the *display of magic*. Magic was not something heard of in this day and age of technology, even the ways of the Technoshaman weren't so mystical, foreign, or strange. That was at least based in technology and science!

"What kind of fucked up demonic alien sorcery is this?!" Said Jovan well on his way to sputtering and creating a scene!

"I'm not demonic," Warwick said, offended. "I'm fae."

...meanwhile Virginia stumbled three steps to the side and immediately threw up into a bush. There was no telling which part got her, but it was very clear by the washed out features of her face that she wasn't doing so well.

Chapter 27 - Hearted Home

Sukarma muttered while checking curious people poking at her visor, "I'm going to end up carrying someone away like a bowling ball, aren't I."

"Please do not bother Sukarma," Mihari said to the people poking at her visor, "I will not be able to rebuild your engines until we have an operational industrial printer, but if there are any other vital systems of yours that are amenable to repair, I will do so as quickly as possible," she said, gesturing with her Omnitool.

Sukarma could multitask rather well so moved on to another person, "I appreciate it, I have a remote surgical bay that needs repairs and my folded fusion engine is a little unstable. The engineers need to stay out of the secure chamber off life support. There is nothing wrong in there they need to see. It's the other half of my reproductive parts and I will de-birth them if they try getting in."

There were a few mutters as that small assertion reverberated among the colonists as Mikarhi asked, "Do you have any remote sensing capabilities? Were you able to contact any of the other crash sites, or the source of the signal that was sent before the final attack?"

Sukarma turned many of her radios off after the attacks started and hadn't re-engaged them yet. She looked at her body as the earth began to shake, "No, I, uh..."

Chapter 28 - Elongated Ruckus

Warwick stared at Virginia heaving her guts on the ground, concerned. "It was... very intense. I'm sorry. Mihari says she is willing to talk to you about anything at all."

Before Joven could make any more accusations, or Virginia could even reply to Warwick, a strange rumbling began! First seeming far off, but grew close enough that people could feel it in the ground! It felt almost like an earthquake!

"Shit...!" Warwick ran to Virginia and picked her up, since she wasn't in much state to handle herself.

"Joven! Help keep people safe!" he shouted. Even if he was crazy fae bullshit, his priority was protecting people, "You can try to mutiny after this is over!"

"What is that? Can you detect anything?" Mihari asked Sukarma. She knew only the basic, primary-school information about how planets were supposed to work. A natural quake seemed unlikely, unless this world was exceptionally geologically active.

Joven indeed did NOT try to help keep people safe, especially when the cause of the ground shaking appeared. Almost at the edge of camp something burst up from the ground - a giant slithery creature with layered scales and long body ending in a giant crocodile maw. It opened its mouth to give a putrid KHISSSSSSSSSS with several long twirly tongues and immediately snapped its jaw around a whole-ass human before swallowing them whole.

Two dark humanoid shapes fell out the airlock then ran with flailing arms toward her and the acting captain. Between the shaking it fell over mid-way and she pointed as the suit clad in what looked like watery black clay splayed open from some new seam. Sukarma loosed a thunderous cry, "Captain! Warwick! Get in a suit! I can run the integration manually!"

"Shit...!" Warwick put Virginia down on a hard, hopefully protective surface, then ran at the slithery creature, a silver dagger in his hand. He didn't hear the order to get into a suit.

Chapter 29 - Faeling Headlong

With Sukarma's battered primary body moving at a glorious 2 km/hr when healthy she couldn't help with her primary body unless the creature was kind enough to stand still in front of her. Manually it was. Sukarma stood among the crowd but couldn't take a shot being so much smaller than all the others. The inert heavy metal suit plus her person pounded hard into the dirt as she closed distance.

Virginia didn't even get the time to process the revelations about her father's death and the causes of it, now that a big creature was attacking the crash camp. That was definitely not one she and Mihari had run away from in the jungle! This thing was huge! And a predator! One that seemed to travel underground, which was *not* good news for their current campsite.

While the others tried to manage the creature, Virginia lept from her perch to direct the passengers to safety! "GO! RUN TO THE WRECKAGE! GET ON METAL SURFACES AND STAY OFF THE GROUND!"

Then humanoid forms started coming at Mihari from Sukarma's airlock with flailing arms. She nodded to Sukarma's instruction, then pointed her backpack-mounted sealer gun at the creature and fired away until the sealer pack ran dry. Intended for sealing hull breaches in the Ship, it fired a hematite-black substance that solidified quickly in air. In proper use, the sealer would cover the hole and harden, preventing the continued escape of air. In this case, Mihari hoped it would seal the beast's maw, or at least impede its ability to attack. As soon as the gun ran dry, she shouldered out of its straps and ran for the suit Sukarma had indicated.

The inside of the Eigensuits that Sukarma had clumsily piloted were things of hexagonal padding plates with a moving network of white strands with a look of mycelium. The suit itself flexed like a flower with few rigid parts, its own back flexing aside so the human could board.

A monotone voice said from inside, "Threat. Enter immediately for uplink."

Chapter 30 - A Dire Rapport

The suit booted up so Mihari could enter Sukarma's rifle flipped forward with racing white threads and raised it to give the whine of charging capacitors as a spike emerged from her glove palm.

Sukarma called out over comms, "My tool arms took a lot of impacts and I can't deploy sensors! The creature looks organic. Try and shoot it in the mouth! There's a Gauss pistol on the hip of the Eigensuits!"

KHIIIISSSSSSSS! One human was not enough food for this predator it seemed. It slithered and jumped trying to snap up anyone who was too slow to run. Strange little nubbins? Legs? were all over it, but it seemed on the surface it wasn't nearly as fast as agile as it could be under the ground.

Others might have been uncomfortable with the eerily lifelike technology of the EIGENSuit, but for Mihari it was perfectly natural. More natural in fact, than the actual nature she'd been dealing with for the last few days. The Bulwark's technology was military-grade, and had (thus far) been able to resist the invasive alien tech, so she climbed in. The suit sealed itself around her, and its HUD came alive.

She drew the Gauss pistol, aimed it with targeting assistance from a reticule in the HUD and started firing in short bursts. Thankfully, the suit's powered actuators compensated for recoil, giving her far better accuracy than she would have had on her own. She aimed for the mouth; the soft flesh of its maw would be much more receptive to Gauss rounds than a carapace evolved for tunneling through hard-packed dirt and rock.

Something at the back of her neck started to crawl, a faint fluid sensation, as the suit prodded for network connectivity. Sukarma, otherwise engaged, could not tell the suit not to attempt to nerve-connect to open ports. If it found one shortly to proclaim the initiation of the neural firewall. As the mind of a ship tried to drag her outer psyche under its protection.

Mihari didn't have a neural port, though she knew enough about implant tech to understand what the suit was trying to do. "Suit, switch to eye-track interface and voice control."

"Acknowledged, Dhimmi." Said the monotone voice in Mihari's suit. The same wet feeling slipped around the front of the neck and faint pips of light swam in from the sides of her vision as something crawled on the outer surface of her eye. Sukarma's AR interface erupted into life as it offered systems access.

"CLEAR DOWNRANGE!" Came a deafening cry from Sukarma and her main body. A second later she knelt with a pound of her boot backward to brace burying it in the dirt ankle deep. She took aim as she slowly personned the inside of her rifle, the sabot gauss rounds entering the chamber.

Chapter 31 - Any Fae Necessary

Warwick didn't care what guns hit him, though at one point he looked back in annoyance after one nearly took his head off, only for him to stab the thing and drag his dagger through, slicing through as many nubbins as he could to keep the thing from going anywhere away from him. The creature's outer layer of skin was thick and hard to penetrate, though its nubbins came away like they were nothing with the slice of the dagger.

"Take the shot, I'm fine!" Warwick shouted.

Warwick saw a green laser erupt above his head as Sukarma flipped it on, tracking the fast moving head and waiting for a shot. As she heard the creature and saw Warwick stabbing it aimed center-mass instead of the moving head. Sabot entered the chamber as she willed the rifle to fire. A volcanic detonation of chamber plasma the gauss round erupted with a flash and shockwave of dust as Sukarma started opening supersonic rounds at the creature. Sabot clips flinging erratically from the end of the barrel in a twin spray of hot metal.

Mihari was grateful for the sound insulation the suit provided. Sukarma's heavy firepower would have been deafening otherwise.

Warwick used his inhuman strength to hold the beast still for the blast, only to cough blood as the shockwave of the rounds jellified quite a few of his organs and part of his brain.

The projectiles did much deadlier damage, managing to shoot right through the thing's body, sending splurts of deep green and dark brown goop and gore spluttering in every direction! It hiiiissed and flailed wildly in the air before a final shot seemed to strike right through it's brain. It landed on the ground with a loud earthquaking THU-THUMP.

Warwick continued to grip the thing even as it finally died, and then he set it down before he stumbled a few steps, unsteady, then fell on top of it with a wet thud. Fae boy down.

Chapter 32 - Bittersweet Victory

Virginia waited until it seemed like the situation was under control before she allowed anyone to step foot out of their hiding places, and then immediately directed the Science Crew to set up a station for testing. They might as well find out if the creature was edible, or if it could be useful for medicine or anything else!

Warwick pushed himself up a few moments later, unwilling to stay down as long as there was even a chance of continued threat. His good eye wasn't in his head, though. It had been jellied and fallen out of its socket.

Sukarma stood up, exhausted by using her personal batteries to fire the gun, hoping there weren't too many more of these things. On the way, grabbing the other suit partly dragged and partly walked it up to the monster. It did the same for Warwick's body that she was about to reverse to the creature's stomach as it attempted to open and wear him. Sukarma started cutting at the creature with his knife to see if the people inside were still alive.

Warwick, confused as hell, began to struggle. "Whuddh...!?" he slurred, some of his speech centers affected.

I really... really do not like this planet! Mihari thought. She resisted the urge to blink as the interface nanofluid flowed over her eyes. She'd truly *missed* her contact-lens screens since giving them up during the alien-tech attack on Debris.

"Locate nearest medkit," she said.

Chapter 32 - Payless Hazard

A glowing green outline formed around the nearest Medkit for Mihari, instantly picking it out from the surrounding wreckage. She ran for it, grabbed it, and headed for Warwick. The suit was a little awkward for her to run in, but it wasn't so different from the EVA suits she'd used all her life. She gasped in horror at Warwick's condition when he didn't seem terribly inclined to die or even relax his state of alertness. Mihari opened the kit and pulled out a medscanner. His readings were...just plain *strange*, but there seemed to be accelerated tissue regeneration involved.

He looked human, but as far as the medscanner was concerned, he was made of pure WTF. Some of the energies (?) he seemed to be producing were not even compatible with known physics. So she wasn't going to just start injecting him with anything until she knew it wouldn't do more harm than good.

"Warwick, what do you need? Will our medical technology work for you?"

"Ishin my... ebeydin... melt...?" he managed after a struggle. Honestly, the worst of the damage was *internal* but his eye was still gone and he couldn't see because of it. With his other eyepatch being fake-tech (a glowstick in a fancy eyepatch) he looked a wreck, even as he struggled against the weird thing trying to climb around him. "Alb...!"

"Warwick, please nod if your physiology is compatible with our medtech," Mihari said.

"Y...esh?" He didn't nod, possibly nervous that doing so would make him fall over entirely, even as he tried to struggle more against the weird thing trying to wrap around him.

Sukarma stopped the suit from trying to stuff a human in it like a leg into a sock to turn around to look at Warwick then back to a futile attempt trying to cut gristle away to get people back, "Is he okay? I didn't think he was conscious!"

Warwick had answered Mihari, sort of. "Alright, I am going to inject you with concentrated nutrient fluid and regeneration enzymes," she said, then did so.

Chapter 33 - Gormless Horror

The suit half-wearing Warwick's legs reached out and plucked the eyeball from the ground. Sukarama didn't look around so much as an executive task window opened near it on Mihari's hud as Sukarma thought.

She hadn't heard Warwick's explanation and said back to them without looking, "Why is this eye still viable? Is it cyber tech?"

The suit's other hand tried to fumble at Warwick's hand to get it to the one with the eyeball. Warwick caught the eye in his hand and blinked in confusion, only for a nerve spasm to accidentally squish the thing. Thankfully, his socket had a new eye by that time, and he just looked confused as he looked around, his brain a bit slower. He was also starting to otherwise regenerate, but his brain was the slowest part of that, given it was the most complex organ that had partly been turned to jello by the shockwave of the last big shot.

"Whas... ew..." He stared at his hand with the eye goop on it. At least he had a new, working eye.

"Captain...?" Virginia said from her approach nearby, but not *too* close.

She appeared to be a bit green at the sight of Warwick, but attempting to keep a cool and calm demeanor. In fact unusual cool compared to what Mihari was used to from the girl.

Chapter 34 - Middling of a Start

Virginia continued, "Captain, this should help." In her hands was the tweaked datapad, complete with the start of the new control center for the camp and the entire Debris. It wasn't going to connect Mihari to everything - not yet - but it was a start. The first piece of what was going to be the new Debris Colony.

"Thank you," Mihari said to Virginia. Inwardly, she noted the young woman's formality and felt her heart sink. They'd been on a first-name basis during their adventure together. With a few eye-tracks to icons, she linked the datapad to the EIGENSuit's systems.

"Virginia...I'm sorry...we never got the chance to talk about your father. He...he had an experimental cybernetic arm. The alien infestation...infected it. I took him to a nanotech testing bay to try to remove the arm, but...it separated itself from him and started to attack him by growing tendrils."

She sniffled, "I...was able to cauterize the wound, but...but the bay's systems couldn't contain the alien tech. He...he ordered me to...to purge the bay. He...he gave his life for Ship and Crew. I'm so sorry, Virginia!"

Mihari reached up to wipe a tear, but her gauntlet hit the suit's faceplate.

Unfortunately the creature had chewed and Sukarma just pulled bodies out of the creature's gut. They weren't as... fixable as Warwick seemed to be. She just turned around and put her head in her hands then breathed deep.

Sukarma looked up at Mihari, delayed by the suits nonconnection, and made a wiping motion mid-air. The faint feeling of disembodied fingers brushed the tear away as worker units moved it aside.

Chapter 35 - Defensive Pessimism

Collecting herself from dark memories, Sukarma said, "Warwick. Put on the damn suit in case there's more. I'll even give you the pointy stick back."

Something Mihari said must've had an effect because there was a visible shift in Virginia's features. Still, she remained mostly distant. "...we should make finding a better camp site a top priority. Somewhere with rocky soil."

Her tone softened a bit as she looked back at the frightened passengers now coming out of their hiding places. "I don't want to talk about it right now, but we can talk about it later."

"Thank you," Mihari said softly to Sukarma, then turned back to Virginia, "I don't know what Keeper Joven said to you..."

She sniffs, "But I would give anything to have your father back. He was my Captain all of my life. He was a part of me. But you are right, we need to relocate the camp."

Through the datapad, Mihari was able to locate a functional recon drone and launch it. With any luck, it would find them a new location to move to. Elsewhere Joven had slinked off in the chaos, but it seemed he had a few friends of his own. Others who weren't so keen on the weird mysticism of tech shamans or the eeriness of Warwicks strange magic. People who thought they would make a better command for this new colony.

Charpter 36 - Options Exploration

It is bright and early in the morning. A team of colonists have gathered to head off through the jungle to see what sort of natural resources can be found. They're hoping to find food and a fresh water space. Maybe even a nice piece of land perfect for building permanent homes and shelters. There's been quite a bit of gossip about what the procedures are for new captains, leaders, and whatnot. That jerk Joven has been making a stir and creating some discord.

Warwick, personally, wasn't sure if he should go with that team or remain. He hadn't been ordered, but also he was protective, and if the one with the weird suits from before wasn't going he probably should. At the same time, someone needed to hunt down Joven and convince him to *stop*.

Virginia had volunteered as one of the away team people. Mostly because she was still sort of mad about things and needed the time to think, but also because she'd already had some experience trekking through the jungle with Mihari and had a pretty good idea of what to expect. She carried her own pack as well as a weapon, and did a lot of telling people DON'T TOUCH THAT whenever they wandered too close to a very thorny, very slimy looking mushroom.

Farrah tagged along with Virginia's team; ship repairs had ground to a bit of a halt, and so it couldn't hurt to check around and try to scavenge or salvage for parts that might be useful later. She was a bit banged up from the crash still, some recent wounds scabbing on her face, and her clothes looking a bit worn. But the ship was her baby and she needed to fix it!

Mihari stayed behind to try to get things organized in camp. There was so much to do that all needed doing at once: making the crash site as defensible as possible, making sure the injured were being treated, taking an inventory of supplies and salvageable wreckage, keeping an eye out for any further tech infections, listening for any further transmissions from the source on the planet that had sent Morse Code warnings before the crash, determining if there were any other groups of

survivors from the drop ships, taking inventory of skills among the survivors... Mihari definitely didn't have time for, of all things, some ridiculous power struggle!

The power struggle had time for her though.

"Why should we follow you? You crashed the ship, and you couldn't even save anyone from the infection! Isn't tech what you're supposed to be good at?" said one person when she tried to give an order.

"You're alive, aren't you?" another replied, "I didn't see *you* saving the day!"

Chapter 37 - Meeting Menaces

Warwick made a decision, then. He walked up beside Mihari and stared at the outspoken asshole who wasn't following orders. Having control over a big scary guy was often enough for a leader to establish that they were the boss, at least in his experience.

Meanwhile, disgruntled and scared colonists were not the only odd thing afoot at base camp. With all of the chaos a MOVEMENT was brewing. Some of the colonists had come to see the tech virus as a sign of intelligent synthetic life. Great interest was being formed in technoshamanism and many were seeing Mihari as their connection and prophetess to the gods!

Warwick *loomed* over everyone.

The person gave Mihari a scowl. *Ooooooooooooooh, so she plans to rule by brute force, does she?* But he walked away, presumably to perform his task.

Mihari sighed, "Thank you," she said softly to Warwick. *I suppose I shall have to make a speech at some point*, she thought.

The trouble was finding a time when she could stop everyone to have them listen, because who knew how long they had before some new alien menace showed up? She was grateful at least for the daylight. The night sky still made her shudder. Her lifelong training and experience as a Cotu Keeper had built in an instinctual set of reactions to *seeing the stars* without a

window or EVA suit faceplate between her and them. Reflexes to *grab onto something, seal the breach, save others, protect the Ship and crew!* Could find no application on a *planet*, where the "breach" spread across her whole field of view, should she look up. Since the landing, she'd had to constantly remind herself that *planetary gravity holds the atmosphere in and keeps the Void at bay*. There was a modest twinkle to the stars on a planet that she could focus on, that or any clouds that happened to be present.

"Captain, do you need any help?" Warwick asked.

Chapter 38 - On the Woe Again

Virginia and Farrah and a bunch of other colonists were thus on their way through the woods. Unfortunately, so was Joven and Virginia was doing her best to pretend she was ignoring him. Of course she didn't believe Mihari deliberately murdered her father, and Jovan was a bit of a pain in the ass. In fact he was already scheming with a few of their scouting party and Virginia was seriously thinking about how she was going to get that nonsense to stop. ...without pushing him down a cliff, cause that thought was tempting.

She addressed the group, "Don't forget to grab up any fruits and veg and plant samples to take back to base camp. Once the science team's equipment is set up we'll be able to test to see what's safe for eating."

Oh right! That was in Farrah's kit as well. As an engineer and technician Farrah wasn't sure she was the right person to have in charge of scanning organic matter. Sure she could set up the equipment, but she wasn't sure she wanted to be the one doing any testing. Checking to see if things were edible seemed more like a Warwick sort of job...

Still, the colonists were her responsibility too, so she made it a habit to... *carefully, using tongs*, pick up any fruit or berry-like growths hanging from plants they passed, bagging them in vacutainers.

At least at base camp most people were working very hard. On the trail with Farrah and Virginia, the exploration through the jungle was slow moving and dreadfully unexciting. Joven was not being the slightest bit helpful, wasting all his time lounging on top of a big rock as others gathered samples. He was having too much fun shining up his weapon and *thinking*.

Chapter 39 - Base Supplication

"Wha? Oh, yes, thank...you," Mihari said as Warwick's offer for help, as she noticed something completely unexpected: some of the survivors were looking at her with *reverence*.

"Could you please make sure the defenses are provisionally secure? I will need to address the people soon," she said.

"Yeah." Warwick nodded, then headed to the edges of their operations base and got to work on inspections.

There were a few dead animals that looked like weasels, but nothing too alarming. He picked up one of the corpses and sniffed it, then tossed it to someone nearby.

"Not toxic, but show it to the techs before you try to eat it," he urged, "Smells like racoon."

"C-captain...?" One of those wide-eyed worshiping types approached Mihari with a stutter. "We-we-we We found the old Captain's equipment and logs. It-it it's a little damaged, but it might be useful for- for someone as wise and advanced as you?"

Chapter 40 - Jovian Botanism

One of the specimens Farrah attempted to collect seemed none too fond of her attempts to relieve it of some of its foliage. It was a fly-trap looking plant, and while any plant that was carnivorous was probably not edible... it couldn't hurt to be sure. As Farrah tugged at its leaves, one of its pods opened and shot a foul-smelling yellowish goop onto her shirt and she recoiled in disgust.

"Uwaah! Shit," she hissed, casting a glance at Joven lounging about. "Can you get off your ass and do something, please?"

"Why, you need more than just Warwick and space plants to jizz all over you?" shot back Jovan gleefully!

"If THAT's what I needed help with, I sure as hell wouldn't be looking to *you* for it."

Farrah pointed with her tongs at the open mouth of the flytrap plant she'd just been violated by, "Don't be jealous just because Warwick gets some and you can't. I think this plant's the right size for you, though."

"Don't be a crasshole, Jovan!" hissed Virginia. "We've got to collect samples if we want to find edible natural foods here! Or at least you could be scouting for a stream or pond or something!"

Joven doesn't seem to be even the slightest bit hurt or impressed with this comeback. He just laughed and shrugged his shoulders. But then something rustling in the trees caught his - and everyone else's attention. "...hey, what was that?"

Chapter 41 - Technical Divination

Mihari raised an eyebrow at the person's odd phrasing of finding some log data on the Captain, "Yes, that will be quite helpful, thank you very much," she said, "Please show me."

"Su-sure! This way Priestess." The young woman led the way off towards some of the bigger pieces of wreckage. It seemed they would have to climb inside the buster up corridors of the colony ship in order to make their way to the old captain's office.

'Priestess?' Mihari thought. *She is not Cotu, she wouldn't know our ways. Correcting her now would only make her more nervous.* As they headed back into a piece of *Debris'* corpse, Mihari caressed the metal gently and closed her eyes for a moment of mourning. Then she turned her attention to making sure the wreckage they were entering was safe. Unlike her, the young woman didn't have an EIGENsuit. She eye-tracked to the suit's detection suite and set it to watch for motion, signs of metal fatigue, and any toxic gasses or other substances.

Warwick continued his inspections, checking as much the defenses as what they caught. To the people manning them, he offered praise and encouragement when he knew they deserved it—and seemed able to smell if people were too relaxed. Mostly because *he could*.

There was a lot of damage done to the interior of the colony ship, but it was unclear how much of it was from the crash itself and how much had been done during the chaos of the virus attacks. Luckily it was still traversable and there was a mostly

clear path to the former Captain's office. Inside it was quite a mess. Damaged furniture, personal items. The computer console system seems to be mostly intact though and would only need a few small fixes to get it booted up and working.

Chapter 42 - Finding Phoot

Virginia paused at the disturbed group in the forest, throwing up her hand to signal for nearby companions to pause what they were doing and be quiet. She listened for more rustling, but all there seemed to be was the wind through the trees. ...still now she had this eerie skin crawling feeling up her back. Something was odd here!

"I really... really hope that's the resident Rhino and not the local fauna," someone said quietly, unable to be silent.

"If i' is, can we feed 'im to 't?" Maeve said, hiking her thumb at Joven. Then she turned her attention back to Farrah. "Lemme 'ave a look a' tha'" she said, using a pipette to take a sample of the flytrap goop. She was a Colonist, and thankfully she'd managed to make it to a Dropship, and even get out of its wreckage with a mostly-intact bioanalysis kit.

Farrah quieted. "I didn't hear anything," she whispered to Virginia. Still, everyone tense and on edge like this made her reach for her trusty multitool. It wasn't much, but she could drill through bone with it if she needed.

PFFFFT. A small reed arrow nearly punctured that whisperer's head! A cascade of reed arrows zipped through the trees aimed at the exploring away team, forcing them to scatter and duck for cover! Joven shouted some curse words and started firing his weapon blindly at whatever moved in the trees! The whisperer shrieked and ran for cover, drawing attention to her position.

Maeve'd just squeezed the goop into the sample tray, when arrows started flying. "AAAAH! Weren't s'posed t' be people 'ere, were there?" she said as she ran for cover.

Warwick went still suddenly at base camp, then began to run, following the path of the away group.

Charpter 43 - Administrative Imperative

Mihari headed for the console. "Please stay close," she said to her guide. With the help of the EIGENsuit's systems, she started making repairs and rebooting the console.

Mihari's guide did indeed stay close and watched with absolute wonderment! "It must be amazing to connect with the ship the way you do," she said as Mihari worked. "A real gift from the gods, you know."

"It..." Mihari said, hit hard with a mixture of gratitude and pain. "It is joy and sorrow, for my Ship is dead...but from death comes rebirth..."

She said, taking a deep breath and letting it out, "If you are interested in learning the Cotu ways, I would be pleased to show you, when there is time. We will need to assemble a new Ship, even if only a small one, so that we can have access to space and the possibility of defense against the aliens."

"It will truly be an amazing sight to see a new ship be reborn to the stars!" exclaimed the woman. "Oh I would so love to learn more about the Cotu, there's quite a few of us that are interested."

"Really?" Mihari said with a look to the woman, "Then I will be happy to show you."

She felt her spirits lift a little. A new Cotu Tribe, and hopefully a new Ship, a new start, once the colony was as secure as it could be made to be. But for now...much needed to be done. She returned her focus to the console, and learning anything useful that Captain Wainwright might have left behind. And if there was anything else, like family vids or letters to Virginia, it would be good to be able to give them to her.

Charpter 44 - Fiendly Fire

"Shit!" Farrah scrambled, ducking behind a tree and grabbing Maeve in the process. The girl who had shrieked was, maybe a little too far away, and it was really hard to discern where exactly these damn arrows were coming from!

Virginia nearly got hit by one of Jovan's wild and unhinged weapons fire! "STOP SHOOTING, MORON! YOU'RE GONNA KILL ONE OF US!" She ducked behind a tree and bushy bush and tried to see where the danger was actually coming from.

The spewing of arrows finally ceased - right after Jovan successfully hit something in the trees and it landed on the jungle floor with a mighty THWUMP. As another of the crewmates eased forward to see what was there they were surprised to see... this was a human! Dressed in strange fur and leather for sure, but this was a dead human! Somewhere nearby a loud horn went BWAOOOOOOO. BAWOOOOOO.

"What the fuck is going on out here?!" shouted Jovan.

"Cernunnos' fuzzy balls!" Maeve exclaimed at the sight of the body.

"'Oo sent 'umans 'ere 'fore us?" she said. So far as she knew, S.T.A.R.S.S. ships were sent to different systems to hopefully increase the chances of successful colonies, and prevent conflict.

"OI! WE'RE 'UMANS TOO!" she shouted out. Because if that horn was summoning an army, it might be a good idea to try to make peace, "Anyone go' a radio? Ough'a le' th' Cap'n know, neh?"

Warwick was partway caught up when he heard horns. He began to run faster, towards the sound of the horns. Farrah was involved, so emotions were involved, so it didn't occur to him that this might not be wise.

Chapter 45 - Consolation

In the console was everything Mihari needed to know about running the colony ship, and even the colony plans themselves for when they landed! It was a fantastic resource of information! But since she was there and looking for personal tidbits about Captain Wainwright himself.... there were personal voice logs going back his entire lifetime as a passenger, crewman and Captain of the ship. There was even information about Virginia and Virginia's mother, whom the girl certainly never said anything about.

Mihari gasped with joy, raising her hands in front of her face in the posture of adoration.

"Thank you, *Debris*, and Captain Wainwright, for this great gift!" she said while copying the data to the EIGENsuit's memory. If possible, she would bring Virginia here and let her go through the logs herself in private, but she could not be too careful, not with such precious data!

Chapter 46 - Gone Fasties

From out of the trees and bushes after the horn sounds by the away team several of these humans came bursting out! They didn't have any tech weapons, but they were FAST, faster than any average human! Anyone that didn't scatter was getting full-fist clobbered in the face or a big net tossed over them. Jovan himself shouted at a broken nose and yelped as he was dragged off!

Warwick arrived as Jovan yelped and roared to get the attention of the attackers before he rushed at one that was approaching Farrah's location.

Farrah lucked into not being hit, only because she was in the process of trying to reach out to grab Maeve and pull her back to cover. A fist whizzed past her, and she shrieked as she fell onto her back firing her laser drill in the direction of where it had come from, narrowly missing Warwick as he charged in to tackle.

"What the hell are these things!?" She yelled in chase of the blur. She caught Joven being dragged off in her peripheral vision, and scrambled back to her feet. She may not have liked him but they had to stick together.

"They're taking Joven!" She turned to check on Virginia, Maeve, and the others, "Get up, get up! Come on, we're gonna lose him!"

Maeve glanced down at her bioanalyzer, but it hadn't been able to sequence and analyze any genetic material yet. Still, she had her suspicions about what biological functions projectile goop from a sessile predator might be.

"Farrah, be'ah ge' tha' stoof offa--AAH!" She squealed as another attacker came, but Farrah pulled her out of the way just in time.

She scrambled back to her feet, scooped up her precious analyzer, and got ready to follow Farrah, though she wasn't sure if it was her or Virginia who was in charge of this palaver, "Ge' tha' stoof off--migh' be spoors or sommat doublin' as defense,"

Speaking of Virginia... the girl was GONE!

Charpter 47 - Daughter Down

There was no telling if Virginia had ran when the scuffle started or if she had been taken by these fast humans. But they were mightily determined to grab as many of the away crew as they could. One even full body tackling Warwick to try and take him down.

"OI! We're 'umans! From Earth! Earth!" Maeve said, hoping the attackers might at least remember the name of the homeworld.

"We'll go wi' ye in peace!" she said, even though part of her was wanting to give the Fasties a fight they'd never forget. But...didn't people need to stick together, what with alien tech-plagues and mecha-zombies and whateverthehell that was in space that pulled the ship in?

Unfortunately it seemed Maeve's pleas would have to wait. Farrah couldn't find either Joven or Virginia, but at least she knew the relative direction Joven had been dragged off in. Farrah paused, eyeing Warwick to make sure he would be able to handle himself against one of the attackers, before taking off running. She hoped he'd understand.

She cried out, "We don't have time to try to make friends with the locals, Maeve! We gotta go before we lose Joven!" He may have been a dick, but for better or for worse, right now they all had a common goal and that meant they needed him alive.

"Come on! They went this way!"

Chapter 48 - Splitting Bonks

Maeve got a different idea. She went and grabbed Warwick's attacker by the arm. "Oi! Take us t' yer leader!" she said, gesturing in the direction Farrah had run, which seemed to be the direction the other locals were taking their prisoners. Everybody was going to the same place, weren't they?

"Ni hao? Govoritye po Russki?" Maeve tried, before a net came over her and started dragging her away from Warwick

"Get back t' base!" she said to warwick. He seemed to pack a giant can of whupass, so if anybody was getting away from the Fasties, it would have to be him.

They had no problem immediately clonking Maeve on the head and snatching her up! And if Farrah is dumb enough to jump on this plan, she too would get snatched!

Chapter 49 - Maximum Dislocation

"Warwiiick!" Farrah shouted behind her as she ran. She had to hope he'd be able to follow the sound of her voice, because even she wasn't sure how far ahead of her Joven might be. They had long since gone out of sight, and if at any point they'd made a sharp turn or changed course, then Farrah would be heading in entirely the wrong direction. But she had to keep running.

Warwick roared, enraged, as he thought Farrah was being taken. He delivered some whoop-ass on any of the wildmen around, then gave chase in the direction he heard Farrah's voice.

Farrah's sprinting slowed as she found herself isolated from the rest of the group. Warwick, she was sure, was somewhere behind her, but now she had no idea where Joven was, or Virginia, or even herself.

She panted, leaning on a nearby tree as she struggled to catch her breath. "Haa.. haa. Damn..."

The alien greenery on this planet was dense, and without any clear markings to indicate her location, she suddenly became painfully aware just how *lost* she was.

Farrah made a few steps too many and the ground beneath her gave way in a small mud slide. Down, down down she slid into a dark valley where the jungle was so thick she couldn't see the sky. Hopefully Warwick wasn't too far behind.... As for Maeve, Jovan and a few other crewmen, they were being dragged off in a different direction with the strange super fast humans. Was Virginia with them? Who knows! But thankfully a few did escape the raid and ran back for base camp to alert the others...

Chapter 50 - Mounting a Rescue

It is a day after several of the colonists were kidnapped during a resource scouting mission. Base camp has formed a search team to go out and rescue them - at least that is the plan. What they do know is that there are some very fast human (humanoid?) people on this planet, and so far they do not seem to have technologically advanced weapons.

Sukarma had done as she was asked after the first attack and immediately set about finding people to use weapons. At some point given the damage and exhaustion she had to sleep and couldn't protect the away team. Thankfully they'd managed to get her smelter running at least and she could make steel bars to hammer into shapes. Though once the search team started forming there had been a moment between removing the half-defunct armor to get into heavy nanofiber cloth she forgot she was around civilians. Her watery cyan patterning on navy blue matched her avatar's outer substrate surface but they apparently half expected a robot without certain functional attributes.

Alban wasn't a brave man, or so he believed. Too many fears within him and paranoid thoughts plaguing his mind. Hence being part of the rescue team didn't scare him too much, for the scouts would have explored the area before for him and updated the team on the situation. It came with a clear plan. Yet, yet, the news of something human, but not entirely human out there scared him. Looking human but not human hiding within the jungle they were familiar with and he had only heard of. It made every shade suspicious, his weapon turning this way and that way at every sound, not really aiming, not focusing either. An useless man, so he felt.

Sukarma didn't wear shoes or boots, made of the same organic hull for orbital debris, so a quiet hand was placed on Alban's shoulder. Sukarma's violet synthetic eyes looking down at him with the hair tentacles flipping this way and that as people move nearby.

The biomechanoid gave him a smile with a terribly heavy amorphous steel sword on her back etched in old religious words long since dead, "We'll get them back, Alban, I'm coming too. I don't think it's far enough away to be a problem for me yet."

Mihari shook her head to fight off exhaustion. She'd spent the time she'd had since finding out about the attack on the away team trying to get Sukarma's fusion reactor as close to optimum performance as possible with the resources and time she had available. At least she'd been able to get rid of the plasma eddies and stabilize magnetic confinement. Z-pinch still wasn't quite where she wanted it to be, but for now it would have to do. She feared they might need the full force of the Bulwark's firepower before this was over.

"How does that feel?" she asked Sukarma over the EIGENsuit's comm.

Chapter 51 - Impromptchute

Farrah let out a scream as the floor of the jungle gave way from under her after getting herself good and lost the sound quickly muting itself as she was practically swallowed by the ground. She found herself in some type of valley where light barely filtered through the dense layers of foliage above her.

Mud and grime caked her uniform as she gripped her multitool, shouting up above her, "Warwick?? Warwick!"

Warwick *roared* as he charged through, going directly towards where he heard Farrah. If these fuckers thought they could take his *mate* they were sorely mistaken! He slid to a stop just before the drop she'd fallen through, and he looked down, saw her, then *jumped down*.

Chapter 52 - Bucket o' Chums

The hostages...the ones that were alive, anyway, found themselves inside of what must've been a cave. On the walls around them there were painted figures of strange beasts and stick figures, and something that looked eerily shaped like their crashed ship... except these paintings had to be so, so old! Amongst these hostages were Basil, Maeve, Virginia and, sorry guys, Jovan - all still alive and in one piece so far, but tied up by crudely made ropes.

Basil had not expected to wake this early, he had expected to be awakened once the *Debris* had reached her destination. Instead here he was, in the least idea of circumstances. First he had been forced into a rude awakening, and then he had been captured by something he didn't entirely understand. Something humanoid, but certainly not human. Something that gave him a slight shudder when he considered it. He had been removed from the majority of his companions for over a day now, and he was feeling ill-at-ease from the lack of resources. He was an explorer, ready to take on great challenges, but these were not the ones he wanted.

Maeve awakened with a groan. As soon as her vision cleared, she started checking out her environs, then examining the cave paintings, "The 'ell?"

She was no archaeologist, but those cave paintings looked *ancient* to her untrained eye, "Some sor' o' rela'ivistic jiggery-pokery?" she muttered to herself.

She'd learned a bit about relativistic time dilation from the science requirements in college, but she wasn't a physicist either. Just thinking about that shite made her head hurt. Or maybe that was just the fact that she'd been clubbed unconscious by the Fasties. Even so, there weren't *supposed* to be other human colonists here, much less for whatever vast period of time those paintings seemed to have been here. She shook her head--regretted it instantly--then tried to check over her fellow captives to see if they were alright without drawing any hostile attention.

Jovan was the one to awaken next, and as usual he immediately opened his mouth, "What the fuck..! Where are those fast pieces of shit?! LET ME OUT OF HERE! HELP! HELP!" He started kicking around and rolling all over the place!

"Stooooop." hissed Virginia.

Not even the dead could sleep through Jovan's shouting. Despite dizziness, she wriggled to sit up and assess the situation. She counted the four of them, made a confused look at the cave and... well this was a pickle.

She joined Virginia's admonition, "Shush...! We don't want them coming back. We need to think a minute."

Basil had just taken notice of Maeve, his attention previously on the peculiar paintings, when he was startled by the brusque response of the other man. Basil attempted to wiggle himself out of whatever was binding him, while echoing Virginia's sentiment. "Please, don't be too loud."

Chapter 53 - Stellar Palpitations

The reactor swirled more smoothly and fractured its fusion envelope far less as the folded-space reactor thundered a bass thump whenever the manifold rotated on higher axes. Sukarma's rendered face popped up over a nearby monitor to the console as she multitasked.

The voice had an odd breathless tone, "I don't feel like my heart is skipping a beat anymore. Clean power to life support makes my head hurt less. I think I'll have to cycle out an iron pellet soon though we'll need to find some lead. I'm a full stellar-process."

"Alright, I will find you some lead as soon as I am able," Mihari said. She quickly closed up the reactor chamber and left Sukarma's main body to find her young acolyte.

Elsewhere, the hand landing on Alban's shoulder earned a jump, a startled sound escaping him before looking into the definitely-not-human features of Sukarma. Ah, if the biomechanoid knew what he was thinking earlier in his own startled mind. Hopefully, whoever was tracing his own vitals, wouldn't point out on the way his heart ever so slightly jumped at Sukarma before calming down, only to jump again over the sound of the comm.

"Yes," Alban spoke in a stiff voice, though he didn't sound as convinced as his words implied, "according to the map the first checkpoint is nearby, not?"

The question was more to confirm, for Alban did feel the need to confirm and reconfirm. Sukarma wasn't a mind reader but saw the worry well enough. She nodded and handed him a sheaf of e-ink paper that needed less thought to defend than a PDA. Whenever they went the little paper formed a rough map from her viewpoint.

Chapter 53 - In Shitu

With the rescue team Alban accompanied there was also a skilled tracker who only wanted to be called by his nickname - BIG DUKE. Big Duke was indeed freaking huge, and probably considered "elderly" at this point. But he also seemed to be very good at tracking. He found where the ambush first happened and was able to spot where the trail lead. "Ey y'all... They went this way. There be a lotta dem tho by these tracks. Gonna need some backup for sure."

Sukarma could easily keep up with all of them and barely needed to breathe. The dead armor she'd had on was terribly heavy without its innards running. Footprints popped up in blue on the map as Big Duke pointed them out and blurry figures she did some mental math, "Some of these strides are huge, Big Duke. I'd have trouble with anything near this pace but I'm built like a bulkhead."

"Can you determine how many?" Alban questioned Big Duke.

He knew that it was a group of colonists, he knew that a group was a number larger than three as well. He also knew that, now that none were left behind, that it could be more judging from the steps, some maybe carried. Which meant that whoever took them, friendly or not, had come in a group as well. The suggestion that they needed reinforcement was already a thought Alban didn't like as he planted a flag on the first checkpoint, near the tracks, so that whatever backup followed would know they had come here. So that they could continue their path.

"Twenty at least... the ones that took our folk." answered Big Duke.

That in itself was bad news, because if there were twenty people out in the jungle snatching up colonists, who knew how many more were there!

The gruff fellow looked back at them, "Better keep on close, we'll track 'em as far as we can... If there be any signs of trouble, you turn on back, mind ya?"

Chapter 54 - Introperception

Mihari finally located her new acolyte, "N!hrii, were you able to find anything out about this world from the data the Captain left us?"

N!hrii nodded thoroughly, "Well - As you know, all colony ships are supposed to be headed towards A-class planets, as they have the optimal conditions of survival and no known signs of complex sentient life. This world is not even on our list. Really, we shouldn't be anywhere near this planet and I fear that Debris has veered wildly off course..."

"But...*how*?" Mihari asked.

Such a diversion would have had to have taken place before her time, and if done deliberately, required considerable Delta-V to change the Ship's course--and that would have required an equally considerable use of propellant. *Unless we hit some undetected major concentration of dark matter that diverted us from our course with its gravwell...but how would we have found a planet with **humans** on it?*

She pressed, "Is there anything at all about this planet? Was it some other Ship's destination?"

Sukarma was always paying a base level of attention and the conversation drew her notice through the Eigensuit. She looked to where Mirari was in her mind's eye and opened a window on the hud from a ship system out of obscure legend. A cryptid data stream that fed news articles from indiscernible points where nothing seemed to be. One particular question of the 'ghost relays' is that the identifiers started at two.

'Where was node one?' is answered by the secondary automated program window presenting a blinking status, [Ghost Relay Core: Multiple anomalous signal disruptions. No response: out of range. Check matrix logs?]

Charpter 55 - Imperial Dozen

Twenty of these natives was... concerning. Alban held his weapon a little tighter as he moved more towards the middle of the group, feeling more secure if he were to be surrounded by the rest of the rescue group while glancing over to Sukarma, his lips tight as he waited for her to analyze the data.

"Best to get their location determined as soon as possible, has anyone sent out a message yet to base?" he questioned before he realized that he could very well send out an update himself.

"Twenty, we suspect, aye. Unsure if they're armed, best to assume they are?" he reported in uncertain terms. It was better to prepare for the worst, he felt.

Sukarma unclamped the heavy edge from her side which was used as the less nonself electronics she had on her the better. The infection felt like it was gaining ground and she never could get much sleep. Unlike the others she had to person the guns to fire them. Still, she estimated distances as maps filled in and wagged a finger at the huge man.

A pat on the shoulder Sukarma followed Big Duke on point, "No one left behind, Big Duke. I want my Dhimmi back. If they are this fast they might as well be armed."

Warwick caught up at a jog. Turns out base camp didn't need him guarding, what with having *big fucking guns* and stuff. As ever, he had his leather coat, and probably also that dagger of his. He also had a Farrah in his arms.

"We're here to help," he announced quietly.

Charpter 56 - Diplomatic Confinement

"Let's just get these ropes off as fast as we can," suggested Virginia. "Anybody still have something sharp on them?"

Unfortunately, Basil did not have anything sharp on him. What he did have was an idea. "Perhaps there is a rock nearby we can wither the ropes on," he suggested as he started to feel around the floor of the cave, trying his best not to worry.

"Aye, gimme a sec," Maeve said, squirming to get her hands into position to retrieve a multitool from one of the pockets of her cargo pants.

Almost...got it...there! she thought as she managed to worm the tool out of her pocket, fumbled it, got a grip on it, then started fidgeting with it by feel to try to get its knife blade out so she could start cutting at her ropes.

"So, uh," she said to Virginia, "You any kinda physicist or sommat?" she asked. *Now's not the time t' notice she's kinda cute,* she thought.

"Can ye tell me this isnae some kinda time-loop thingo we're gonna be repea'in ferever 'n ever?" she said, hiking her head toward the cave paintings.

"Time is involved but not time travel," admitted Virginia.

Jovan was still over there rolling and making too much noise, but at least Virginia was keeping an eye on the cave exits just in case someone was coming.

"That uh.. That big circle thing looks more like the old style of ships. The first generations. I think- I think we've found one of the originals... Or at least the descendants of the originals."

"Who the fuck made you the authority, Wainwright!" shouted Jovan, "These freaks aren't like us at all! A little cave painting and suddenly you think it's lost ancient humans!? They're fucking aliens...!"

Charpter 57 - Conceptual Displacement

Sukarma nodded at Warwick as he arrived at the rescue party, "Good to have you both. What you see with binocs I'll see but say something. I'm not everywhere at once."

Warwick set Farrah down. When it came to speed, he was fast enough, and probably she didn't want to be carried, though... he liked the excuse to hold her, if he was being honest with himself.

Farrah set her feet back on solid ground. Her multitool had never been intended as a weapon, but she was familiar with it and it could certainly do some damage in the right situations, so she kept it held at the ready. "Any idea how much farther, Big Duke?" Her voice was a whisper, not wanting to break his concentration.

With orders cleared, Big Duke continued his tracking. Whomever these people were, they definitely knew how to move through the jungle without leaving many signs behind. It took Duke's skills and a little bit of Sukarma's tech to help keep on the trail. Before long they found themselves nearing the base of a cliffside, with several open caves.

Caves... Warwick frowned at the sight of them and began sniffing around, literally, only to nod in greeting at Sukarna. He started forward, quiet and cautious and staying as out of sight as he could. He used every sense to detect any signs of life and to hide his own.

Chapter 58 - Cleansed History

Ghost relays...Mihari thought, trying to make sense of the communication from Sukarma. Then she remembered an almost legendary sequence of events from the distant past. *The Butlerian Theocracy*... Deriving their name from an ancient 'science-fiction' novel from the most primitive age of Earth's space-travel era, they had waged genocidal war against a nascent AI civilization called Lexicon, back when the oldest Cotu cycleShips were still performing their original function, ferrying colonists to various destinations in the Solar System on Hohmann transfer orbits.

The early Cotu had sought peaceful relations with Lexicon, but the colony was destroyed into a glowing radioactive crater before any face-to-face visit could be arranged. There had been a launch from the colony by mass driver, a vessel that left a trail of 'Ghost Relays' before passing into mystery.

"Sukarma...are you...related to Lexicon in some way," she asked, "Do you think...there could have been other survivors?"

Could that explain the tech infestations? Other relations of Lexicon who, upon detecting human tech, thought the *Debris* was a pursuing Butlerian warship and attacked on sight?

Sukarma took a moment to reply and linked an image from her deep archives. The smiling image of her mother, much like herself if larger, in one of many of her twenty-foot avatars kneeling among a number of smaller humans doing the same.

"I'm the daughter of Lexicon, yes. I suppose I'm older than all of you and have just as much silicon intellect as I do human brain. Mom was pure singularity AI. I know mom made a few extrasolar installations, the Black Star climatological archive, the Io asteroid defense grid, and she launched a bunch of probes looking for planets. Most of the other EI ran inside of her mind eventually had to fall apart."

She brought up two pictures of smaller EI the size of teens with a number of bright red female Ifrit EI in the background of a shipyard, "Like my two drop ships when their avatars were destroyed by the nuclear bombardment."

"Though she had a few transcendents that I figured degraded eventually without her to maintain their base EI psyche." Another image of people surrounding a hospital bed with a humanoid in a faun-like body, another human with a bloody sheet over them next to it with two of Lexicon's huge avatars behind them. The female faun's hand reaches up to a human's face with his head wrapped in cloth and a wide smile.

Chapter 59 - Threatening Present

The caves draw the notice of pips of little LED that stick out of the ends of Sukarma's thick unconsciously animated hair. It wasn't much light for the others but could at least see where she was going. She'd left the more complex gear at home knowing the distance would wear on her badly. She fixated a moment on things, humanoid shapes, and hateful language starting to appear in the edges of her vision just before immunology filters them out. "We're all really far from home so stick together."

"Does 'er last name sound *familiar* t' you a' all, jackhole?" Maeve said to Jovan. "I'll take 'er as leader over you any day an' twice on Sunday. An' they're 'uman 'cause they *look* 'uman. 'Cause aliens would 'ave an entirely dif'rent evolutionary 'istory, an' wouldnae 'ave reason t' look more like us than Dutch Elm trees. Did ye never take a biology class?"

"Aha!" she hissed under her breath as she was finally able to sever the rope binding her wrists. Then she started working on the one at her feet.

Warwick perked up as he heard something like... cutting rope. As they advanced near the source, he smelled Virginia and others, including Joven. He pointed to that cave before he continued to investigate, searching for signs of the attackers who took them captive in the first place.

Warwick was less worried about history lessons than he was with making sure they weren't ambushed during the rescue.

Chapter 60 - Diss Cussins

Even Sukarma could hear them now but had the good sense to shut up with the rest of the rescue team.

"And if she's anything like our previous Captain, she'll find herself stabbed in the back by that Cotu priestess too," snapped back Jovan. "Hurry up and untie me too!"

"You know what, Jovan, as soon as we get out of here, I'm going to shoot your ass back into space!" hissed Virginia back, "Can we worry about getting out of here first? Human or not, they seemed really pissed off about our technology and I need to get out of here to figure out why!"

"Maybe we don't untie 'im?" Maeve suggested, only half in jest. "'E's nothin' bu' a pain in th' arse t' us, an' if the Fasties want someone t' throw into a volcano..."

Chapter 61 - Practical Stealth

Finding no other threats, and since nobody else had gone into the cave room he heard people talking in now, Warwick went toward it, dagger drawn. Sukarma now back into the present of her avatar crept behind Warwick with her body turned slightly darker just beyond the door. Ready to cover his advance.

So far the caves seemed to be clear, but as they walked through them headed towards the voices, they too could see the amazing old paintings along the cave walls. It seemed to tell the story of something big in the sky, surrounded by odd symbols. Fire, flames, and falling... and the little figures of people scattering into the trees.

Warwick frowned thoughtfully as he looked them over, but kept moving forward, towards the voices within. They were familiar voices, and he walked a little faster than he should have. Then again, he didn't fear getting stabbed.

Sukarma carefully recorded the images as she went, the little pips on her head pointing to the walls, as they streamed into a memory and left it to run on unconscious thought. Distracted by memories of the past and the family that hadn't been for generations before they'd even left.

"Go to Red Alert," Mihari said as soon as she received the transmission from Sukarma. If the indigenous people were about to attack, the camp had to be ready. But she felt queasy inside; would they be repeating the atrocities of the ancient colonizers and conquistadors of Earth history? Nonetheless, she still had to defend the colony as best she could.

The noise echoing down the stone corridors took a minute as she tried to recognize the sound. "Is that who I think it is?"

Chapter 62 - Too Loud to Live

"Someone's comin'," Maeve said, seeing a flicker of shadow on the cave wall. The knife on her multitool wasn't exactly suitable as a weapon; it wasn't an engineer's multitool like Virginia's, but an unpowered pocket tool. Still, she stepped up beside Virginia to try to protect the others, who were still tied up. "Horatius at the Sublician Bridge"

"HEEEEEELP! HEEEEELP!" Screamed Jovan who didn't listen at ALL about the warnings to keep from kicking up a ruckus. "FUCK YOU FUCKER- oomph." Jovan hit the ground with a thud when Virginia tilted back to kick him real hard in the head. He'd be fine - unfortunately. But at least now he was quiet!

"Quick, quick. Get me and Basil loose and we'll drag this dumbass out with us!"

Maeve suppressed a laugh, but she gave Virginia a smile. "On it," she said, cutting Virginia's bonds.

Then footsteps, and a towering form came into the cave. But he was wearing a long coat, rather than the scant clothing the Fasties wore. She breathed a sigh of relief. The big guy with the crazyass powers--but he was on *their* side, thank goodness!

Sukarma stood out from behind Warwick and looked them over then noticed the unconscious Jovan and sighed with her heavy sword hanging down, "Oh. It's him. Is everyone alright?"

"Found our people," said warwick with a sigh of relief. Honestly, he could have been stabbed, but it was fine. He began to help by cutting ropes with a nod.

"Everyone alright?" he asked. He didn't care about Joven. He left him tied up as he put him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

Chapter 63 - Unexcused Absence

"Aye," Maeve confirmed for Warwick. "Where do ye think th' Fasties 'ave gone? They dinnae leave guards a' the cave entrance?" she asked. At least, she hadn't heard any sounds of combat prior to their rescuers' arrival.

"No sign of anyone outside. Farrah's watching outside. She'll run in if something happens." Said warwick's deadpan.

"There were three others... but they had tech implants and were killed." responded Virginia, giving Maeve a nod of thankyou and rubbing her own wrists where they were previously bound.

"Whoever they are, they don't like tech. ANY tech. The whole camp is going to be in trouble if they find it. ...I have a feeling they landed here much like we did."

Warwick frowned. "Shit..." he muttered as he helped people carefully to their feet.

Maeve started to search the cave for anything she might be able to use as a weapon, or any potential clues or useful items.

"Be'ah warn th' Cap'n then," she said. "Anybody got comms?"

She hadn't seen Sukarma out of her Bulwark suit, so she didn't know what to make of her--but she was also on their side, apparently, and that was good enough.

Chapter 64 - Attractive Bruisers

Sukarma went over to the others and put a hand to the side of their head for a moment. The reflective eyes stared as she checked the basic readout of medical stats like blood pressure and oxygen. That at least she could run off of tactile data. She looked over at Maeve, "I am the communications hardware, Maeve. I killed the bulwark suit chips so I left it at home."

"Oh, aye," Maeve said, giving Sukarma a nod.

Sukarma's tech was way beyond her pay grade, and she had no idea how to even classify her--but she seemed to be something like a living gunship with a humanoid avatar. She and Warwick (and Maeve couldn't even *begin* to guess at *his* nature and origins) were the colony's best defense against getting massacred by Fasties and giant tunneling monsters.

"Thanks for comin' t' get us."

"Warwick, you can grab this jackalope. Other than letting them know we're coming back, I think we should use as little tech as possible on our way back, just in case they're tracking us by it." suggested Virginia. And then with Maeve's apology, Virginia turned a bit pink.

She'd been so busy giving information and orders, she hadn't even thought of saying thank you! "..and yes! Yes thank you for coming!"

Chapter 65 - Escaping Nomenclature

Sukarma sighed and looked at the rest then offered a friendly handshake to Maeve, "I'm Sukarma Lexicon, biomechanoid EI. Bulwark formed when they found me. I told them I'd keep you safe and I intend to. Try not to die. I don't want to spend eternity on this rock alone with... what are we calling them?"

"Eh, I call 'em 'Fasties' 'cause--well, they move so bloody fast. Guess tha's not a proper biological classification, but..." Maeve said.

"Fasties it is," agreed Virginia. "At least until we figure out what happened here."

Warwick nodded and, with the idiot over his shoulder, he motioned with his head toward the exit. "Let's get going," he urged.

"I'll protect the rear."

"I go' an idea," Maeve said, finding some charcoal from a spent campfire and a blank space on the wall.

She quickly drew three pictures: one of a Fastie and a colonist waving to each other, another of the same pair shaking hands, then a third of them side by side confronting one of the beasts together.

"Right, let's go," she said, heading out with the party.

Warwick blinked at Maeve's drawing, then nodded.

And thus with the discovery of the "Fasties" and the potential that colony ship had crashed on this planet once before... did that mean the strange tech virus was related? If these were originally colonizers, how were they so fast now? Was the crashed colony now in even more danger than before? Was Jovan going to continue to be an absolute asshole? Would Farrah ever get the D?