

They left the Evervell flower behind with the faint scent of peaches still clinging to their suits. For a while, the world felt strangely serene. The ground shimmered with veins of glassy ichor, refracting their helmet lights into streaks of lilac and gold. Umbra found himself stopping every few steps just to stare—at translucent leaves that folded when brushed, at feathered vines that hummed faintly, at insect-like creatures with metallic shells that reflected the alien skyline.

Romeo, meanwhile, was in his element. He moved from specimen to specimen like an excited scientist on a sugar rush, camera in one hand, notepad in the other. Each click of the lens punctuated his soft running commentary.

"Unknown photosynthetic reaction... possibly symbiotic with ichor threads—oh, Umbra, look at *this one!*"

Umbra leaned over his shoulder to find a flower shaped like a teardrop lantern, its surface pulsating with soft cyan light. "You're gonna run out of storage at this rate," he muttered, but there was a warmth to his voice.

"I brought three backups," Romeo said proudly, then promptly tripped over a half-buried root, laughing at himself as Umbra helped him up.

The laughter faded only when they reached a ridge that sloped into shadow. Below, nestled between bone-white spires, was a cave mouth—wide, dark, and faintly lit from within by a trail of bioluminescent fungi. The mushrooms grew like tiny stars scattered across the ground, their glow shifting from violet to soft rose the deeper it went.

Romeo's helmet light flickered across the entrance. "Would you look at that..." he whispered. "Bioluminescent sequence patterning—and *look how it changes hue!* I bet there's a whole network of them deeper in!"

"Or something that eats them," Umbra said flatly, crossing his arms.

But Romeo was already halfway down the slope. "C'mon, Bagel, it's probably fine! Just a quick look, I promise." His voice echoed faintly against the stone, cheerful and oblivious.

Umbra sighed, muttering under his breath as he followed, one hand resting on the walkie at his belt. The deeper they went, the more the pink glow intensified, coating the jagged walls in shifting patterns of light. Droplets of ichor trickled down from the ceiling in slow, deliberate drips, each one catching the luminescence as it fell.

"See?" Romeo said over his shoulder, voice hushed but eager. "It's like a galaxy in here."

Umbra didn't answer. His helmet display was picking up faint motion signatures at the edge of its scan—distant, rhythmic, just slow enough to make his stomach knot. He glanced down at Romeo, who was crouched near the ground, brushing his fingers over the nearest mushroom, completely entranced.

"Ro," Umbra said quietly, "maybe we've seen enough."

Romeo looked up, the glow painting his faceplate in pink light. "Just a few more pictures," he said softly. "Then we'll head back. I promise."

Umbra hesitated, then nodded—but the unease gnawed deeper as the air around them seemed to shift, warmer now, pulsing faintly with life.

Something in the dark ahead exhaled.

At first, Umbra thought it was just the air—the faint hum that always seemed to hang over the Core's surface, caught somewhere between wind and vibration. But then it changed. The sound dipped lower, pulling at the edge of his thoughts like a thread.

"Ro," he murmured, scanning the shadows, "you hear that?"

Romeo, crouched over the bioluminescent mushrooms, tilted his head. "Probably just the wind. The caves carry sound weirdly, you know?"

But Umbra didn't answer. The hum twisted again—this time into something almost *human*. It brushed across his comms like a whisper caught between frequencies, making his crowns vibrate inside of his helm. Without needing to ask, he was sure that Romeo would've felt the same.

*Go...*

Umbra's spine locked. "What the hell..."

*Go away...*

It wasn't the wind. It wasn't the radio. It was *here*.

Romeo froze when he heard it too, straightening slowly. "Umbra?"

Then came the next words, clearer now, heavy with pain:

*Go away... or you'll end up... the same...*

The voice slithered around them, echoing through the stone. A thick drop of ichor fell from the ceiling and hit the ground with a wet hiss.

Romeo raised a hand cautiously, taking a step forward. "Wait, wait—we're not here to hurt you. We just want to—"

"Romeo!" Umbra barked, grabbing his arm. "Don't! We're leaving. Now."

"But—"

"Now!"

The cavern trembled faintly beneath their boots. Dust sifted from the ceiling, and in the glow of the mushrooms, the shadows began to move.

Something vast uncoiled from the darkness.

It slid forward with dreadful grace, its body glistening as though carved from the night sky itself—deep blue and violet with threads of light pulsing faintly beneath the surface. The creature's form wavered between solid and liquid, every motion leaving behind a faint trail of viscous shimmer.

Umbra's breath hitched as the shape took form—towering, serpentine, its head crowned with jagged antler-like bones that glowed faintly with inner starlight. Its head hung low, half-swallowed by folds of ichor that dripped and pooled at its feet. Its claws, pale as bleached marble, clicked in slow rhythm against the stone.

"Everything..." Romeo whispered. His voice was trembling, but not with fear—with *sorrow*. "Umbra, we have to help—"

"It's *infected*!" Umbra hissed. "That was a CCCat once—*look at it!* You think it wants a conversation?"

The creature twitched, its head turning slightly as if to listen. When it spoke again, the words came in gurgled static, like something drowning in its own voice.

*I warned you... leave... leave before it takes you too...*

Romeo stepped forward again, one hand lifted. "We can help you," he said, his voice breaking. "Please—"

"Romeo, *run!*" Umbra shouted.

The creature surged.

Umbra's comms exploded with static, then a voice —panicked, urgent, shouting over the crackle:

"—Core activity rising! Everyone back to the ship, now! Repeat—all units, back to the ship!"

"Dammit!" Umbra grabbed his brother, yanking him back as the ground trembled violently. The Core was stirring—he could feel it in the pulse beneath his boots, in the heat creeping up through the stone.

Romeo stumbled, still looking over his shoulder. "Umbra—it's—it's scared!"

"I don't care if it wants a damn pony! *Move!*"

The creature lunged again, its massive claws scraping against the walls, sending shards of bone-like crystal scattering. The air filled with the metallic tang of ichor and the low, thunderous pulse of something ancient waking beneath them.

Umbra half-dragged, half-carried Romeo up the slope, the cave behind them collapsing in slow, liquid motion as the creature's roar—half pain, half fury—chased them out into the alien light.

The last thing Umbra saw before the ship's beacon pierced the horizon was that glow—that shimmering, starlit body writhing in the cave mouth, reaching for them as if begging to be remembered.

They barely made it out.

Umbra's lungs were on fire as he shoved Romeo ahead, the cave behind them collapsing in a cacophony of howls and snapping bone. The ichor beast's roar thundered through the stone, echoing like a chorus of dying stars. Its voice cracked through the comms again—distorted, furious, *pleading*.

*LEAVE. LEAVE BEFORE IT TAKES YOU TOO!*

A final tremor ripped through the ground as they stumbled out into open air. Umbra turned just long enough to see the cavern mouth crumple inward, swallowing the creature's starlit form into shadow.

Then he looked up.

The Core's sky—normally soft in its endless twilight—had curdled into something *wrong*. Heavy violet clouds churned above, illuminated from within by veins of faint, pulsing light. It wasn't thunder they heard, but something slower, deeper, like a heartbeat echoing across the heavens.

The light from the pools of ichor scattered across the terrain had changed too. No longer the calm, glassy shimmer of before—now they *moved*. The liquid writhed and

shifted as if something beneath was stirring, pressing against the surface. Faint glows blinked open like eyes, watching.

"Umbra!" Romeo's cried. "The pools—they're—!"

"Less fucking looking, and more fucking running, Ro! Go! Go!" Umbra snapped, shoving him forward. "Don't stop. Don't *look back*."

The wind was picking up now—a strange, electric gust that carried with it a metallic tang and faint threads of purple vapor that shimmered as they fell, evaporating before they touched the ground. It wasn't rain. It was *the Core breathing*.

"Everyone, back to the ship!" A voice barked through the comms again, choked with static. "It's coming up—it's coming up fast! Move!"

Shapes were moving ahead—the rest of the expedition party, sprinting through the darkening field toward the waiting airship. The vessel's spotlights flickered through the haze, cutting across the landscape like fleeting safety.

Umbra gripped Romeo's wrist tight enough to hurt. "Run, Ro! Now!"

They bolted. Boots splashed through ichor puddles that hissed at their touch. The sky was almost black now, shot through with veins of living light. Every few seconds, Umbra could swear he saw something shift just below the surface of the pools—long, sinewed forms undulating beneath, following their every move.

Romeo tripped once, catching himself on a jagged spire of bone-like metal. Umbra hauled him up without a word, shoving him forward again. "Don't stop!"

"I'm not!" Romeo panted, clutching the sample bag tight to his chest. "Just-just a little farther!"

The ground trembled again—a slow, rolling quake that made the air itself buzz. The ichor in the largest body of water flared with light, hundreds of eyes opening all at once, watching them flee.

The ship loomed ahead now, its gangway lowering as silhouettes waved them in. Umbra's heart hammered as the first drops of vapor began to fall—not rain, but glimmering filaments of glowing mist that hissed where they touched the ground.

He could hear the beast behind them again, somewhere in the dark—a distant, broken wail that echoed through the storm.

"Go!" Umbra roared, practically throwing Romeo up the ramp before clambering after him.

The instant their boots hit the metal deck, the ship jolted, engines flaring to life. The ramp began to rise even as Umbra turned to look one last time.

The landscape below writhed like a living thing—ichor pools boiling, clouds tearing open to spill violet vapor. And at the very center of it all, barely visible through the storm, the faint silhouette of the beast lingered at the lakes, watching them ascend.

Umbra stood frozen at the window, breathing hard. For the first time since setting foot on the Core, he realized the truth—it wasn't just beautiful.

It was *alive*.

And it wanted them gone.

The airship's hull groaned as the last of the stragglers stumbled aboard—Umbra and Romeo among them, gasping for air, slick with sweat and flecks of violet vapor. The ramp clanged shut behind them with a sharp hiss, locking them in just as the ship's thrusters roared to life.

"Go, go, go!" Someone shouted over the comms. "We're the last ones up!"

Umbra barely managed to drag Romeo toward a seat before the deck lurched beneath them. The ship tilted hard, rising through the thickening clouds of purple mist that clung to its hull like static. Outside the viewport, the Core's surface seemed to boil, ichor pools rippling outward in violent concentric circles.

Then, something moved.

A low, seismic rumble tore through the ground below, and the ichor erupted like a geyser. Out of it surged a *colossus*.

It broke through the surface in a cascade of violet spray—a serpentine behemoth with the body of a mosasaur and skin made of liquid darkness, marbled with starlight. Hundreds of *eyes* blinked open along its spine and jaw, glowing like submerged suns as it threw its massive head back and roared. The sound wasn't just heard; it was felt like a sonic boom.

"Holy hell—" Umbra barely got the words out before the thing *lunged*.

The ship swerved hard, engines whining. The monster's jaws snapped shut just beneath them, the impact rattling the cabin as the deck lights flickered and alarms screamed. Its breath—if it could be called that—splashed across the viewport like molten ink, sizzling on contact before sliding back into the void below.

"Altitude increase, now!" Barked the pilot.

Thrusters flared white-hot as the airship shot upward, narrowly escaping another strike. The beast rose with them for a moment, its long neck coiling upward, eyes glowing brighter—and then, with a final, anguished wail, it fell back into the ichor sea. The surface exploded in a halo of ichor before sealing itself once more, leaving only ripples and silence behind.

Umbra sank into the nearest seat, chest heaving. His hands trembled against his thighs. Across from him, Romeo slumped down beside him, equally breathless... but wearing a fucking grin of all things.

"That—" He panted, pulling something small from his satchel, "—was incredible!"

Umbra turned to him slowly, disbelief painted across his face. "*Incredible?* We almost died, Ro!"

Romeo held up a small glass vial. Inside, nestled carefully between bits of sterilized fabric, was a faintly glowing mushroom—one of the bioluminescent species from the cave, its cap shimmering with pink-violet light.

"*But look!*" Romeo said, eye bright. "It's still intact! Can you imagine what we could learn from this? I mean, maybe it reacts to ichor exposure differently—or—or it's evolved to live symbiotically with it—"

Umbra just stared at him, dumbstruck. "You swiped a fuckin' *mushroom*. From the cave. While we were being *hunted*."

Romeo shrugged, sheepish but proud. "Well... You can't say I'm not dedicated."

Umbra pressed a hand to his face, a sound somewhere between a groan and a laugh escaping him. He couldn't even be angry anymore—not with the adrenaline still fading from his veins, not with the sight of his brother alive and talking and *breathing*.

"Next time," he muttered, "you're grounded before you even *think* of volunteering for anything like this again."

"Next time?" Romeo teased, bumping his shoulder. "So you're saying there *will* be a next time."

Umbra gave him a look that could have frozen lava. "Don't push your luck."

Romeo chuckled softly, tucking the vial safely into his pack before leaning back, his gaze drifting toward the window. The Core's surface was shrinking below them, its strange alien glow fading into distance. The clouds above were breaking apart, letting the first slivers of Skire's blue light shine through.

Umbra followed his brother's gaze, watching as the last traces of violet vapor peeled away from the ship's wings. For a long moment, neither spoke—just the hum of the engines and the faint echo of the Core's pulse below.

Then Romeo exhaled, a small, tired smile on his face. "We made it, huh?"

Umbra's ears twitched, the faintest curve of a smile tugging at his own mouth. "Yeah. We made it."

The airship cut through the clouds, breaking into open sky—violet giving way to the soft, golden shimmer of Skire's afternoon light.

And for the first time since they'd arrived on the Core, it felt like the world was breathing easy again. Just in time for lunch as Romeo promised.

-The End-