



Epsilon Eridani

The lame ship navigated the remaining belt of rocks and debris on the system's outer edge. After experiencing severe damages from meteorites, the Renaissance limped into the star system of Epsilon Eridani, a slightly less massive star than the Sun (0.85 solar mass) and slightly cooler (5,180 degrees Kelvin).

The crew member; four males and six females from seven different countries, each spent ten of their twelve-year voyage in deep sleep. The rest of the time was spent in shifts of six months awake with 2.5 years of deep sleep. Time on earth would have passed at three times the rate as it did for them. People they knew would be dead or very old before they returned. Dion Range, British, was the designated Captain with Commander Esther van Korrinveld being second in command. Lt. Commander Kern Row also from Britain was the engineer. Sharon Goldberg, Jewish, a civilian was medical doctor and chief biologist from the States. Lieutenant Wake Fields, also an American, worked in Navigation. Lieutenant Fawn Ryanson, German, main job was life support. Alberto Florensa and Korah Sayith, civilian scientist from Italy, but Korah was originally from Egypt. Ingebory Martin from Norway and Quin Quaytodious from Spain, both civilian experts in several different fields.

Dion Range, a solemn person, tried to look at everything in a balanced and for most of the part optimistic perspective. They were in trouble, but his mind temporarily wandered watching the activity around the system's only known planet. but they had traveled ten light years in hope that the star system would reveal more than this. Now, on top of this disappointment they had more. And this was caused by his own complacency. He should have been prepared. That's what he was supposedly trained for and unless he found a place to put the ship down for

repairs, it would be a quick end to the mission and to his crew. His mind switched back to watching the steady stream of debris being sucked from the belt they had just finished traversing.

Again, the Captain returned to thinking about the accident that led to the loss of nearly half their oxygen supplies. It would take months to repair the ship. The crew had done everything they could to keep the ship afloat, sealing up every hole and every micro fracture. They had been going nearly twenty hours now without any sleep.

Esther stood silent beside the Captain as he contemplated on some distant thought. She knew what he was thinking. They all had nearly met their death and still might yet if they couldn't find a place to land the ship. They had come a long way and endured years of loneliness and isolation to reach this system. They had given up their lives for a hope of establishing a new home for an over crowded Earth, a Earth that would eventually die of over population and lack of resources. The hopelessness of the situation was overpowering. The Captain was strong. In spite of it all, he continued as if there was hope.

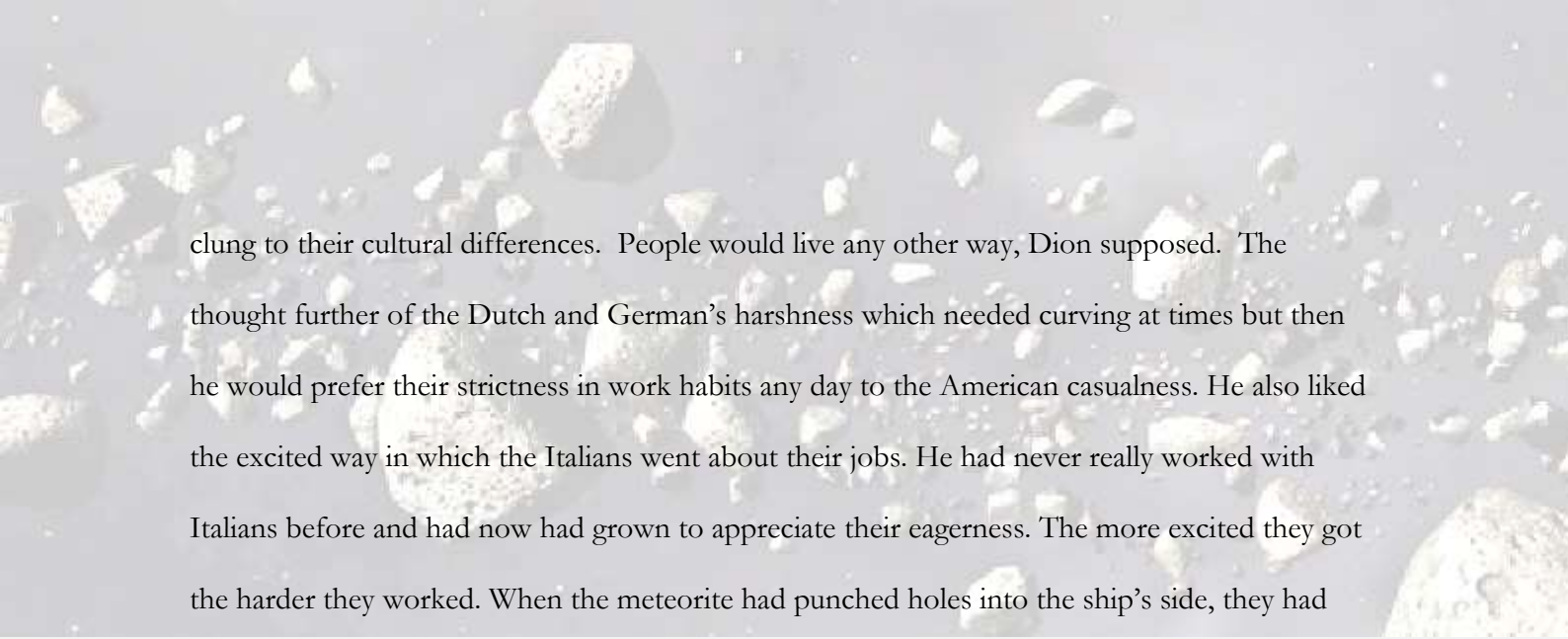
"Well, here we are and that's what we came for," Dion said pointing toward the gas planet. "It's not really what anyone imagined

"Yes, you're absolutely correct," Dion said, "Lieutenant Fields?" Dion pressed the comm button.

"Yes Sir," a strong Texan accent was heard.

"Return to navigation and make sure that we are well away from what's happening with that planet. Notify me of the slightest gravitational effect on the ship," the Captain finished off. Wake had been ordered to help Lieutenant Ryason with the life support system that had been damaged. "Yes Sir," her long drawn out words seemed to take minutes to complete.

Thinking about his crew, Dion had come to like the two Americans he had on board, especially for their sometimes informal way. Despite the over crowdedness, each country still



clung to their cultural differences. People would live any other way, Dion supposed. The thought further of the Dutch and German's harshness which needed curving at times but then he would prefer their strictness in work habits any day to the American casualness. He also liked the excited way in which the Italians went about their jobs. He had never really worked with Italians before and had now had grown to appreciate their eagerness. The more excited they got the harder they worked. When the meteorite had punched holes into the ship's side, they had actually saved the day by quickly plugging as many as they could up. They had even taken off their own clothes, stuffing them into some of the holes. With all smiles, Ingeborg, the Norwegian girl was very pleasant to be around. Interestingly, the one he worried about most was Kern, his British colleague. Over the long journey out, Dion had never really got to know Kern. He wasn't a team player as such. He had kept to himself and only entered into conversation out of necessity rather than socializing. The crew readily reacted to the emergency but Kern had actually shown signs of fear. Quinn, the Spanish chap was the comedian in the group. He seemed to always have a joke of some kind and a few jokes were good for morale, the Captain had long believed.

It seemed that the Administration goofed, big time. They would have no choice but to leave and return to Earth, a Earth that would be nearly 60 to 70 years into the future because of the light travel time lag.

Another flashing light began. Dion looked around toward Esther, "Now what?" Esther had already left the room. He pressed the comm button, "All stations report in."

"Life support is at fifty five percent," Ingeborg's said clearly, her Norwegian accent evident, "We've stopped losing oxygen."

"That certainly was favorable," Dion thought. At least they have some air left to breath.

“We’re still losing hydrogen from the secondary storage tanks,” Kern replied anxiously, his voice an obvious bundle of nerves.

“Seal it with a plate, Lt Commander, but first redirect hydrogen directly from the primary storage tank,” Dion showed his anger. Kern should have already acted, “And then check to see if there are any other leaks.” But Kern was on the verge of losing it.

“Okay, I’ll get Korah to help,” Kern said.

“No, I want Korah to keep monitoring the system,” the Captain replied showing a bit of edge on his voice.

“But she’s part of engineering,” Kern bordered on disrespect.

“Do it yourself, Lt. Commander!” the Captain said sternly then broke the comm link. He would have to deal with Kern sooner than later. Perhaps he would need to be sedated by the Doctor.

Seconds later another reported in, “Astrogation is okay,” Wake’s Texan accent was heard again. Even though the Texan’s accent got in the way of her ability to communicate, she was good at what she did.

“All science stations are being monitored and in full operation,” Alberto Florensa spoke in perfect British English.

“Commander van Korningveld, please assist Kern in Engineering,” Dion decided that he had better have someone with Kern in case he broke down sooner rather than later.

“Medical okay, “ Dr Goldberg reported in.

“Dr. Goldberg,” Dion flipped on a private comm channel.

“Yes, Captain. What can I do for you?”

“Have you been monitoring the crew’s stress levels?” Dion decided not to mention names.

“I’m following each individual closely, Captain,” Sharon replied. The crew was far to tired. Some were very explosive. Kern was her biggest worry. He could go at any minute but then the Lt. Commander had been the military a long time. She was sure that he would pull through.

“Thank you, Dr. Goldberg,” Dion switched to an open channel, “science, I hope your team is watching that planet and looking for somewhere else to land” Dion suggested.

“All cameras, x-ray, radio and visuals are on record,” Alberto replied, “we’re looking everywhere. It’s an explosive space out there!”

“I know, but keep at it,” Dion answered. He had been doing this every hour on the hour since the accident. The ship had been built into an egg-shaped ball which rotated constantly. The three hydrogen based ion engines covered the entire bottom half of the ship with part of it extending up into the central core. The rotation of the ship caused the three engines to work as a single drive providing additional boost and thus enabling the ship to obtain nearly 80% of light speed.

The core was divided up into three areas. Part of the engines and a middle section held oxygen, hydrogen, water, food, life support and equipment. The forward part of the core held a launch bay with two all purpose atmospheric craft and also an all terrain rover. There were additional forward and aft compartments built above the engines around the core. In addition, there were nooks, crannies and access tubes spread throughout the ship that connected with each space. A circular corridor separated the aft and forward compartments. There were five aft compartments containing sleeping quarters, dining, workout, entertainment and engineering whereas the three forward compartments were much larger and contained astrogation, science & research, and the Bridge. The Bridge was divided up into a forward observation lounge with two offices for himself and the Commander. Standing up right, the ship was about the size of a five-

story building and just as wide. Dion walked a circular route that separated the two sets of compartments and entered Science where Alberto, Quinn and Fawn were seen at their monitoring stations. He also noticed Korah at the electron telescope.

“Captain! Welcome to Science,” Alberto gave a half smile that hid the worry lines under his eyes.

“Thank you, Mr. Florensa,” Dion acknowledged. “Anything down there we can land on?”

“Neither do I, but it will have to do,” Dion pressed his comm badge, “All hands, The Epsilon Eridani Star has another planet. One that looks a little more inviting than what we’ve seen below. Commander, make way. Set new course and heading. Lt. Commander Kern, give us 40% of light when you can.”

“Yes Sir,” Kern acknowledged.

“Raising speed to 40% of light,” Kern’s hard voice came back on.

“How about a name, Miss Sayith?” The Captain looked down at her.

“Uh, what about Ebni-Epsilon?” she asked.

“Ebni-Epsilon?” the Captain questioned.

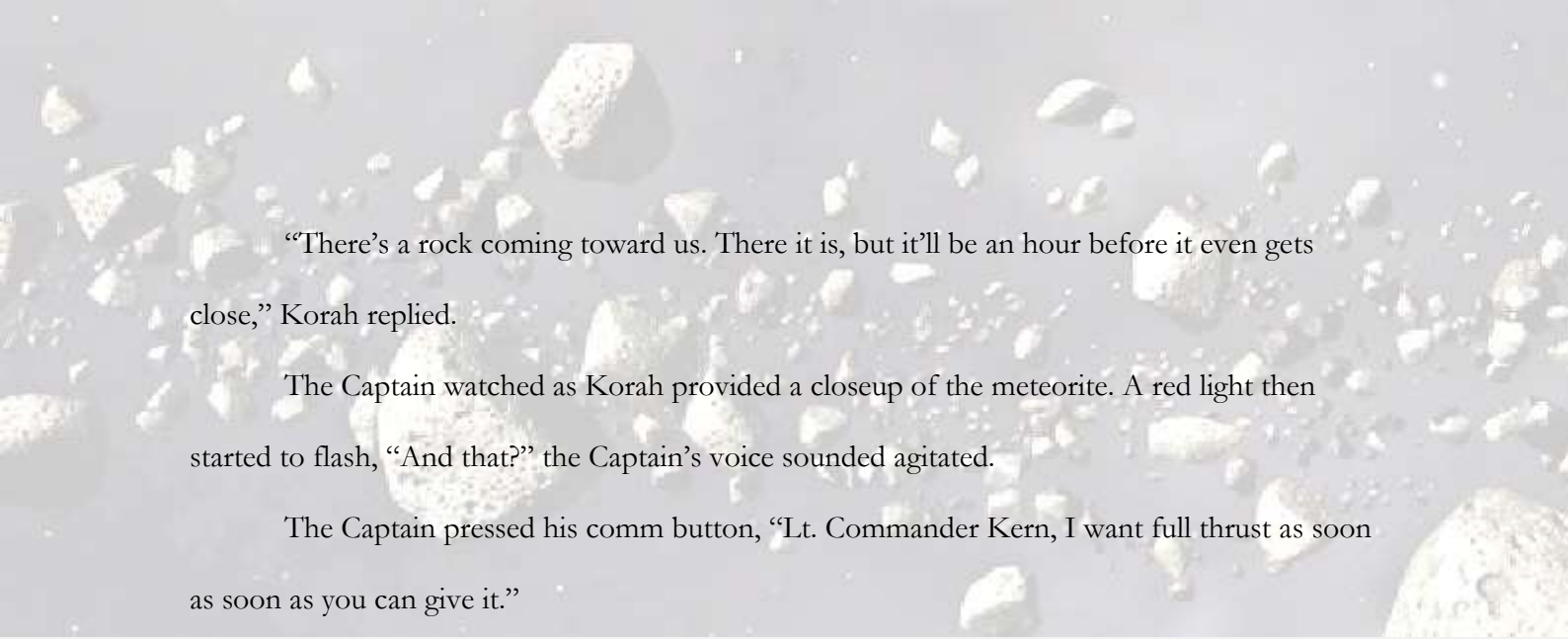
“Yes sir, Arabic name. It means Son of Epsilon.”

“Ebni-Epsilon, it is,” he smiled, “I’ll enter it into the log. Good Work.” The Captain turned to go, however, before he got through the hatchway, a yellow light started to flash throughout the ship.

“But Captain,” Korah got his attention. The Captain stuck his face back into the compartment looking concerned. “Our instruments show that its elliptical orbit is much greater than first thought. This will bring it within 8 AU’s of that gas giant within twenty years.”

Dion smiled, “We’ll be long gone before then.”

Alberto directed his voice to the Captain, “Korah, see what’s coming at us.”



“There’s a rock coming toward us. There it is, but it’ll be an hour before it even gets close,” Korah replied.

The Captain watched as Korah provided a closeup of the meteorite. A red light then started to flash, “And that?” the Captain’s voice sounded agitated.

The Captain pressed his comm button, “Lt. Commander Kern, I want full thrust as soon as soon as you can give it.”

“Yes sir,” Kern replied.

“All hands, we have a situation. We need to leave this area of space now,” the Captain said.

Taken

The ship touched down in the middle of the night several hundred meters from a narrow river valley.

Dion and Esther stood on the bank of a swift shallow river. A mixer of thick green and dead brown grasses covered the valley floor. A sulphur stink occupied the air. Some thicker green patches of vegetation dotted the valley floor as far as the eye could see. Each patch surrounded dark mounds of what appeared to be dung.

Bending down, Dion brushed his hand through the water, “well, we have plenty of water for replenishing the hydrogen and oxygen tanks,” he commented.

“Couldn’t have landed in a better place, but Korah’s correct, this planet’s orbit has kept it away from the larger rogue for nearly five hundred years and now the two will align within about twenty.” Esther said.

“Well, I think Ebni-Epsilon will be destroyed much sooner than twenty years,” Dion replied, “especially with what we saw going on back there.”

Looking down the valley they could see Quinn returning from checking out the lower end that opened upon the plains.

“I can’t understand how this place has developed to the extent it has,” Esther commented.

“Luck, perhaps. The atmosphere is thick enough for much of the junk to burn up before hitting the planet,” Dion replied.

At that very moment, they watched several fire balls descend through the atmosphere.

“Here comes Mr. Quaytodious,” Dion said.

“Miss Martin is returning also,” Esther indicating the opposite direction.

“Anything?” Dion directed his question to both of them.

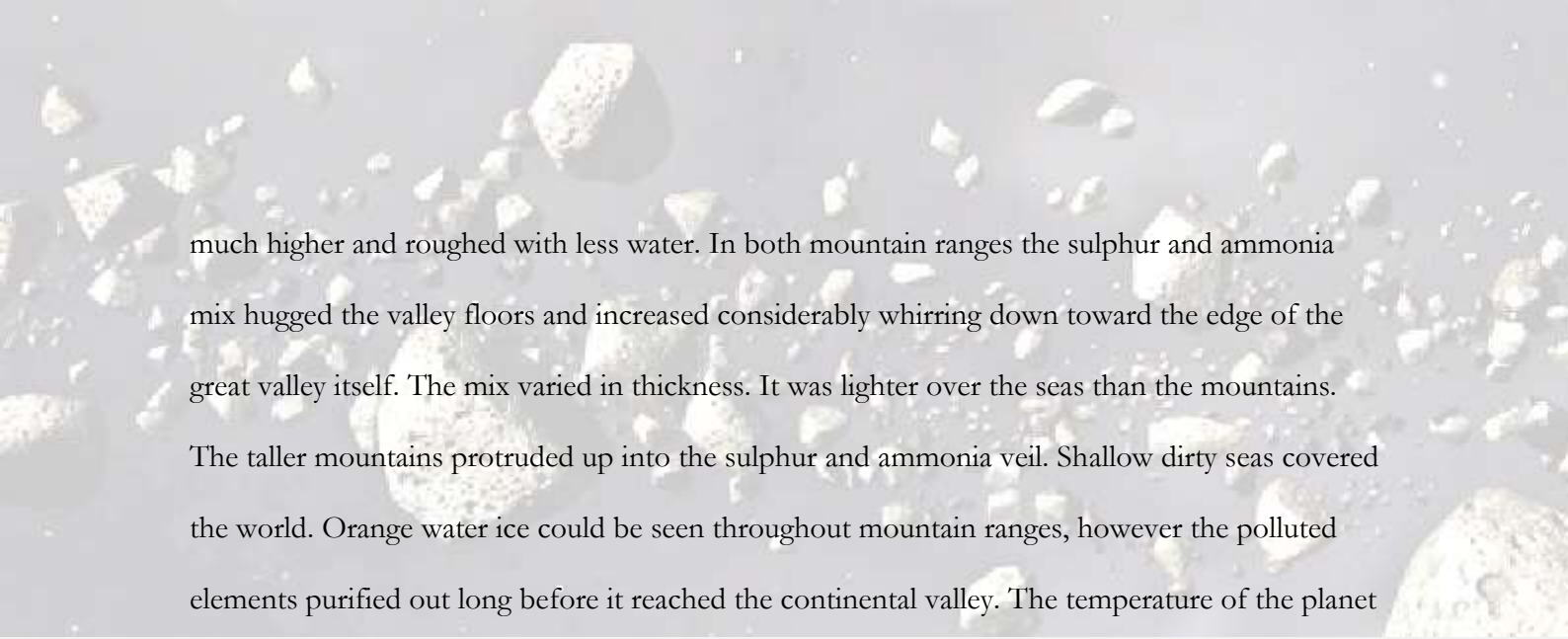
“The valley continues quite a way up,” Ingebory answered.

“I went to the sight of the plains. The grass seems extremely thick and very high in places. The stalks are like trees. The river enters and disappears,” Quinn spoke.

The plains were the beginning of a much larger valley which ran the length of the entire continent. Very little vegetation existed where they had landed except for an occasional small tree and some grasses that covered the lower parts of the cliffs and canyon floor. The cul de sac was some twenty kilometers from the plains. The main valley was five hundred kilometers wide in some places. Its center straddled the planet’s equator. Two large rivers flowed down it created jungle, lakes and swamps which were teeming with unknown life forms. The Renaissance had landed in the middle to lower end nearer the swamps.

“This is going to be home for a while. We need to make the best of it. Let’s return to the ship,” Dion started off, “We’ve got lots of work before us.”

On further study, they saw that the atmosphere was indeed blanketed with a layer of sulphur and ammonia mix, especially in the volcanic place north of the mountain ranges. The atmosphere extended for some four hundred kilometers up into space. The southern range was



much higher and roughed with less water. In both mountain ranges the sulphur and ammonia mix hugged the valley floors and increased considerably whirring down toward the edge of the great valley itself. The mix varied in thickness. It was lighter over the seas than the mountains. The taller mountains protruded up into the sulphur and ammonia veil. Shallow dirty seas covered the world. Orange water ice could be seen throughout mountain ranges, however the polluted elements purified out long before it reached the continental valley. The temperature of the planet was very much like that of Earth, or perhaps a little warmer. The swamp invested valley floor hovered around 45 degrees Celsius but decreased considerably as the land rose up toward the plains and up into the mountain areas.

Epsilon Eridani, the system's main star, looked a little larger in the sky than earth's sun. The Captain quickly thumbed through the rest of the information seeing if there was anything else that stood out. Two medium sized dead planetoids revolved around Ebni-Epsilon.

Everyone stood outside the ship waiting for the Captain and others to return. Approaching, Dion looked up at his crew. He had already had a small talk with them. They had done well. "Listen up now, even though the air stinks from all the sulphur, it is breathable, but keep your gas mask with you at all times and wear side arms while outside. This planet is full of strange life forms which I would just as soon stay away from," Dion continued, "and as I mentioned before, nothing has turned out to be what we expected. In fact, it's been disappointing to say the least. This planet will most likely be destroyed in the next ten to twenty years. So there's no reason to stay any longer than we have to. Let's get the ship repaired and return home."

There were murmurs of agreements from some while others were silent.

The morning had gone well, the 'All Terrain Rover' had been unloaded. The two atmospheric craft rested on a platform upon top of the Renaissance.

“This is great, isn’t it?” Korah indicated the surrounding mountains from the top of the platform where her and Kern were busy repairing a meteorite hole. Looking at her watch, “almost lunch time and I’m starving.”

“Let’s just keep our minds on the job, okay?” Kern said in a harsh voice.

“What’s the matter, Lt. Commander? You’ll have to admit that this is better than being inside the ship?” she said looking out over the terrain.

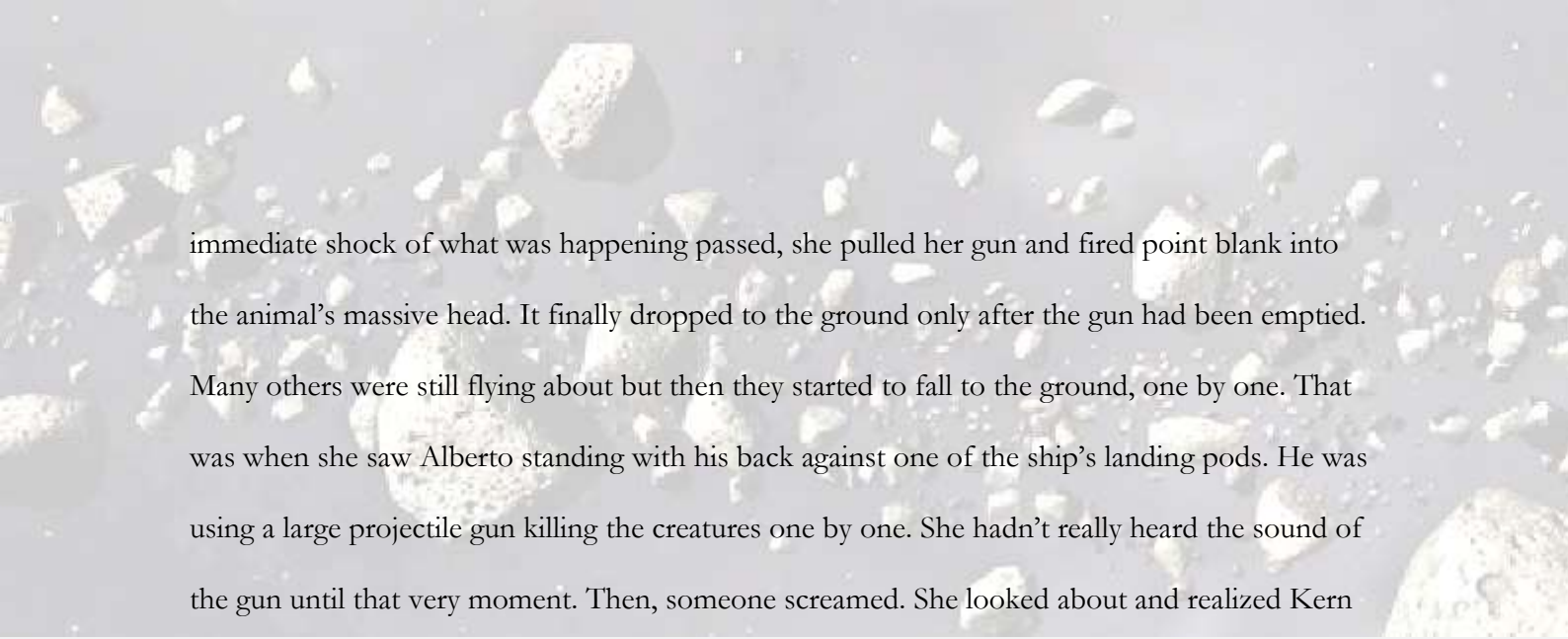
“I don’t admit anything, Miss Sayith. We were nearly destroyed coming to this place and you’re acting like you’re on holiday. This planet stinks like rotten eggs and it’s on a collision course with that rogue planet we came across which at any moment could easily throw one of those moon sized chunks of rock at us. So let’s just keep to business, Okay?”

“Yes, of course, Lt. Commander Kern,” Korah replied evenly.

“The sooner we get out of here, the better I like it. I could never understand why they allowed civilians on this trip,” Kern continued to murmur as he went down the latter and trumped off to a nearby tool bin.

Wonder what got under his skin, Korah said to herself. “It’s the Sulphur that smells like rotten eggs,” she said aloud but continued to think, you’re the egg and you’re the one that’s rotten. Her eyes followed him angrily but she was interrupted by a far off thunder. But it wasn’t exactly thunder for the sound continued to grow. Everybody poised listening to the increasing noise. It was then that they saw a swarm of green-winged creatures flying past the canyon mouth with a group of them turning and heading toward them. “They’re coming this way,” Korah yelled out at everyone from the platform.

The creatures were on them in seconds. One of them flew directly toward Korah. A gator length snout with needle sharp teeth bit at her through the bars. The movement of air from the flapping wings forced her down on her knees. The platform bars kept its large head from reaching Korah. Long Claw like hands grabbed at her from the top of its wings. As the



immediate shock of what was happening passed, she pulled her gun and fired point blank into the animal's massive head. It finally dropped to the ground only after the gun had been emptied. Many others were still flying about but then they started to fall to the ground, one by one. That was when she saw Alberto standing with his back against one of the ship's landing pods. He was using a large projectile gun killing the creatures one by one. She hadn't really heard the sound of the gun until that very moment. Then, someone screamed. She looked about and realized Kern was missing. She located the scream and saw that was Kern held by the creature's talents which was now leaving the canyon to rejoin the hord. The canyon was then empty and the bat creatures had taken all their dead with them. It lasted only a matter of minutes and Kern was now gone.

Fawn, Quinn and Ingeborg looked as if they were injured. One of the atmospheric craft had fallen to the ground.

Kern is gone," Korah yelled out at the Captain.

The Captain immediately headed into the ship, "Commander van Korningveld, see to the injured and establish a security perimeter. Lieutenant Fields, you and Mr. Florensa come with me . And Mr Florensa, bring that cannon of yours. We're going after Kern." Dion yelled. Another mistake, complacency, he should have had a security perimeter already established. What was he thinking?

Passing by Ingeborg, she quickly said, "Just follow the trail of droppings, Captain" she pointed toward the valley.

"You look after those wounds," the Captain's guilty feeling was evident in his voice to her.

He grabbed a projectile gun similar to that of Alberto's. "Lieutenant Fields, you're piloting, he said entering the entrance tube to the ship."

The Dung Trail

The craft lifted off the deck. It took Wake only seconds to reach the entrance to the river valley and head down out of the mountains. Ingeborg had been correct. The droppings covered the narrow valley floor and the path continued down toward the plains.

“Look there!” Wake said. “One of those creatures.” It was still alive jerking about by the river’s edge.

“Lieutenant Fields, increase your altitude to four hundred meters. The sulphur and ammonia seems to be thinning out a little,” the Captain ordered.

“Yes sir,” Wake replied.

The Captain glanced at her. Her eyes, protected by a clear plastic screen, had a determined look. Once her hand touched the guidance control, she became part of the craft. Every action the craft took was an extension of her own movements. They had entered the plains and the path was as clear as ever. The Captain pointed at another wounded creature laying in the middle of the dung path but there were also several four legged creatures circling it. The striped beasts stood nearly four meters tall with a hunch in their backs.

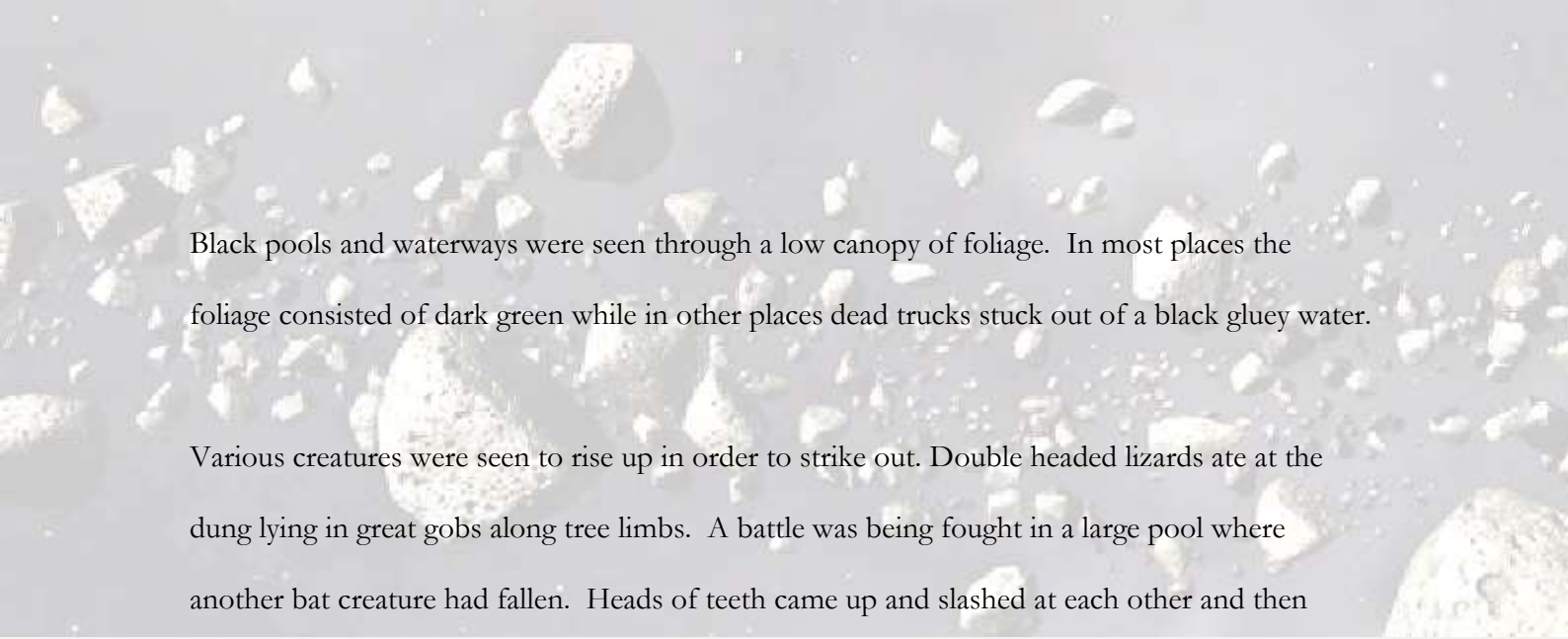
“Wooo, wouldn’t like to meet them on a dark night,” Wake said off handedly.

“Neither would I,” Alberto agreed, “just look at those teeth.”

Wake continued to follow the dung path. Later, Alberto yelled, “there they are.”

The dark swarm could just be seen in the distance. “It’ll be some time before we catch them,” Wake said above the noise of the craft.

The plains had suddenly ended and the ground descended several hundred meters to the edge of a swamp. The Captain looked over the scene. The smell of rot and deadness was evident.



Black pools and waterways were seen through a low canopy of foliage. In most places the foliage consisted of dark green while in other places dead trucks stuck out of a black gluey water.

Various creatures were seen to rise up in order to strike out. Double headed lizards ate at the dung lying in great gobs along tree limbs. A battle was being fought in a large pool where another bat creature had fallen. Heads of teeth came up and slashed at each other and then dived back into the mucky depths.

“We’re almost up to them, Captain,” Wake said making him look up at the green cloud of flying bats.

“Fly over them commander until we can see Kern. Mr. Florensa, you watch that side for any creatures that may try to approach,” the Captain ordered.

“Yes sir,” Alberto answered a bit too enthusiastically.

The green mass of flying creatures looked to be several kilometers in length. “Here comes a visitor Mr. Florensa, on your side,” the Captain yelled.

With very little effort, Alberto shot the creature out of the sky.

“There’s Lt. Commander Kern, sir!” Wake shouted while pointing her hand. “But there’s no movement.”

“Lieutenant, descend directly down over the creature, try and force it to fly lower,” the Captain ordered.

As Wake descended, the creatures began to attack. Both men fired their projectile guns as the creatures approached.

“Ok Captain, we’re coming up to some land,” Wake said.

“Do it, Lieutenant,” the Captain said.

Wake dived at the bat creature that held Kern in its winged claws. It dodged back and forth but Wake slowly forced it further down.

They were five or so meters above the canopy now. “There’s a clear spot, Alberto yelled between firing his projectile gun.”

Wake waited until they reached the clearing and then drove the creature down to the ground, they were then attacked from above. The Captain shot and hit his mark but the creature fell and got tangled in the upper blades of the craft. All four blades snapped from the weight of the creature. “We’re going down,” Wake yelled. The bat creature below then dropped Kern. The craft passed over where Kern had hit the ground and plowed into the some thick undergrowth. The craft came to a sudden stop and then there was silence.

“Everyone okay?” Dion looked around.

“No problems here, Wake replied.

“Yes, same here,” Alberto said.

“Okay, let’s see about Kern. We can check the craft out later,” the Captain said.

“I saw him fall back there. Where is he?” Wake said in a bewildering voice.

“Look!” Alberto yelled as he pointed off to the side.

Kern was being dragged down a small slope toward the water’s edge. The animal had Kern’s leg in a claw. It looked to be a mixture of crab and octopus. It pulled itself along the ground with a group of tentacles. Alberto leveled his gun and blew its large water melon sized head off.

The three of them hurried over to where Kern lie. Blood, guts and animal dung covered him.

Dion check his pulse and saw that he was breathing. “Other than the mess and smell, there doesn’t seem to be any broken bones. I’d say that Lt. Commander Row was a very lucky person.”

Wake then looked at Alberto, “Where did you learn to shoot like that?”

“My father, He loved shooting so naturally I followed suit,” he gave Wake a smile.

Dion held Kern’s head up off the ground, “Lt Commander Kern, can you hear me? Lt Commander Kern, can you hear me? Wake up?”

He opened his eyes and jerked, showing an obvious fear.

“You’re okay. You’re safe with us now,” Captain Range tried to reassure him. The

Captain quickly washed his face, “Here, drink some of this,” he held the canteen of water to his mouth.

“You came after me!” Kern said, surprised.

“Of course Lt. Commander, what else were we have done?” Dion replied knowing that Kern was obviously in shock, “Come, try and see if you can stand. We are still in a considerable amount of danger,” Dion said hoping this would bring him out of it.

He stood with the help of the Captain and Alberto. Kern managed to walk with them back up to the top of the hill.

“The craft is finished,” Alberto said.

“We’ll never get out of the swamp alive on our own,” Wake spoke aloud.

“Let me have a look,” Kern said pulling away from Alberto. Kern checked some of the gauges and tried starting the craft. A sound shuddered forth but Kern quickly shut it off.

“What do you think, Lt. Commander Kern?”

“It won’t fly, that’s for sure, but the engine is still in good working order and there’s enough fuel. The landing grids will still float. With a little rearranging, I should come up with something,” Kern answered.

“Great, Lieutenant Fields give Commander Row assistance with this while Mr. Florensa and I check out this island. Everyone, be watchful and be careful,” Dion stood quietly, moved

his head back around to stare at the craft. “Oh yes, Commander Row, try to get cleaned up a little,” at that the Captain started to walk toward the bush.

Standing there, Kern just watched the Captain leave. A sad but determined expression came on Kern’s face. He then said to Wake, “Well Lieutenant, let’s see what we can do with this junk.”

“But first, do as the Captain ordered. Try to clean up a little, please!” Wake said.

Dion and Alberto walked around the island. It was the middle of the afternoon and the heat was almost unbearable. Bugs buzzed around them the size of birds but none bothered to attack. Sometimes the two ventured near the water’s edge encouraging various denizens to rise up. The two occasionally heard and saw things scurrying off through the brushes. At one point a two headed snake reared itself up above them looking very menacing. Tiny and inefficient legs hung down just below the pair of heads. Its body was twice the thickness of a person’s leg. The rest of it wound around in loops with the end leading off into the undergrowth. Both heads moved back as one, opening their mouths they prepared to strike but before they completed the motion, Alberto pumped two quick shots into them.

“Well Mr. Florensa, we wouldn’t win any medals for the protection of local wildlife but we have managed to stay alive and I continue to be impressed with my crews many hidden talents,” Dion commented with a slight grin on his face.

Alberto, now knowing the Captain as he did, recognized that to be as much praise of his shooting abilities as the Captain could muster up. “This place seems to be full of surprises. I think the sooner we return to the ship and finish the repairs, the sooner we leave.”

“I understand what you’re saying. Nothing in this system has resembled anything close to the information we were provided with,” Dion responded.

Keepers of the Grass

Esther set up an electronic security perimeter around the ship as ordered by the Captain. Anything trying to fly, walk or run through it without stopping for permission would get a nasty surprise.“

”Commander van Korningveld, this is Lieutenant Ryanson. Do you hear me?” Fawn keyed the comm link between her and the Commander.

“You’re loud and clear Lieutenant Ryanson. What’s your situation?” the Commander asked.

“Quinn and I are located near the river at the place where the valley opens up to the plains,” Fawn replied.

“Good, keep a watchful eye out for the Captain and the others. Be very careful of any predators roaming about,” the Commander ordered.

“Yes Mam,” replied Fawn, “We’ve seen some movement out amongst the grasses, but it’s hard to know for sure. This grass is more like a forest. It’s nearly three meters, higher in some places.”

“Confirm that, just keep your eyes open and report in every thirty minutes,” Esther ended the conversation.

Fawn and Quinn had positioned the ATR just on a rise looking out over the plains. Fawn sat in the driver’s chair while Quinn operated a tracking device hoping to pick up some sign of the atmospheric craft.

“What do you think of their chances Quinn?” Fawn asked, her eyes continually scanning the grasses for signs of movement.

“Hard to say? I’ve been reassessing the whole situation. I think we need to start thinking differently. We’ve landed on this world and our minds relate everything to our own experiences. It’s not earth. There are so many unknowns, like those attacking creatures, for example. They were fiercely ugly and terrifying creatures. I tell you Fawn, I was scared to death. However, no one has yet commented on the fact that they collected up their dead. I asked Sharon about it. She’s studied animal behavior and said that wild animals just don’t do that. So, are these creatures intelligent?

“They certainly seem to have some kind of primitive intelligence,” Fawn answered. “I wonder what other surprises are in store for us.”

Quinn pointed toward the plains. “I think we have one coming now,” with a worried look he pointed to the plains. “Can you see it?”

“Noooo, I can’t see anything,” Fawn replied.

“To your left. See the movement.”

At that moment a long snout emerged. Two lower and upper tusk interlocked. The rest of the mouth was connected to a striped dog-like animal. The tall grasses easily hid the rest of its body. Quinn guessed that it measured just under three meters from the top of its head to the ground.

“Commander van Korningveld, we have company,” Fawn hurriedly spoke into the comm unit.

“What is it Lieutenant.?” Esther replied immediately.

“A dog-like animal is looking us over,” Fawn answered. But then, another snout appeared and another and then several more. “There now seems to be about six of them altogether, maybe more.”

“Stay in the ATR. If they start giving you any trouble, return to the ship,” Esther ordered.

“Will do,” Fawn replied.

“Here they come,” Quinn said just as Fawn was replacing the comm unit back.

“Maybe they’re just curious,” Fawn said.

“Yeah, right!” Quinn replied smartly.

Several of the animals surrounded the ATR while several others kept their distance. What seemed to be the leader looked down at them and growled, as yellow saliva mucous dripped from its mouth. It bit at the top of the ATR trying to investigate it. It then raised a back leg and urinated on the side where Fawn sat.

“Oh, gross!” Fawn looked disgusted, “why did it do that?”

“Maybe it’s a way of saying we belong to it now,” Quinn held back a laugh.

It was then that all of the animals got into the act. Everyone took a turn at urinating liters upon liters of piss on the vehicle.

“They must have been saving it just for this occasion,” Quinn said jokingly.

“That does it. I’m heading back,” Fawn started the ATR up and began moving. But then the dog-like animals’ attitudes changed. As the ATR moved to head back up the narrow river valley, the animals began in earnest to bite at the wheels, glass side and top of the vehicle. One of them got a tusk tangled in a small lattice on the back and soon ripped it off. That almost toppled the ATR. Several other animals ran ahead and lay down trying to block the way.

“Do you see what they’ve done?” Quinn asked excitedly.

“I’m having a hard enough time driving. Why don’t you tell me,” Fawn replied her hands jerking the steering wheel this way and that way.

“They’re blocking the way. That’s not normal animal intelligence,” Quinn answered.

Another one then rammed its snout into the backside of the vehicle breaking the glass. The ATR slid to one side. It started to gnaw at the hole trying to enlarge it. “What am I to do? Drive over them?” Fawn yelled.

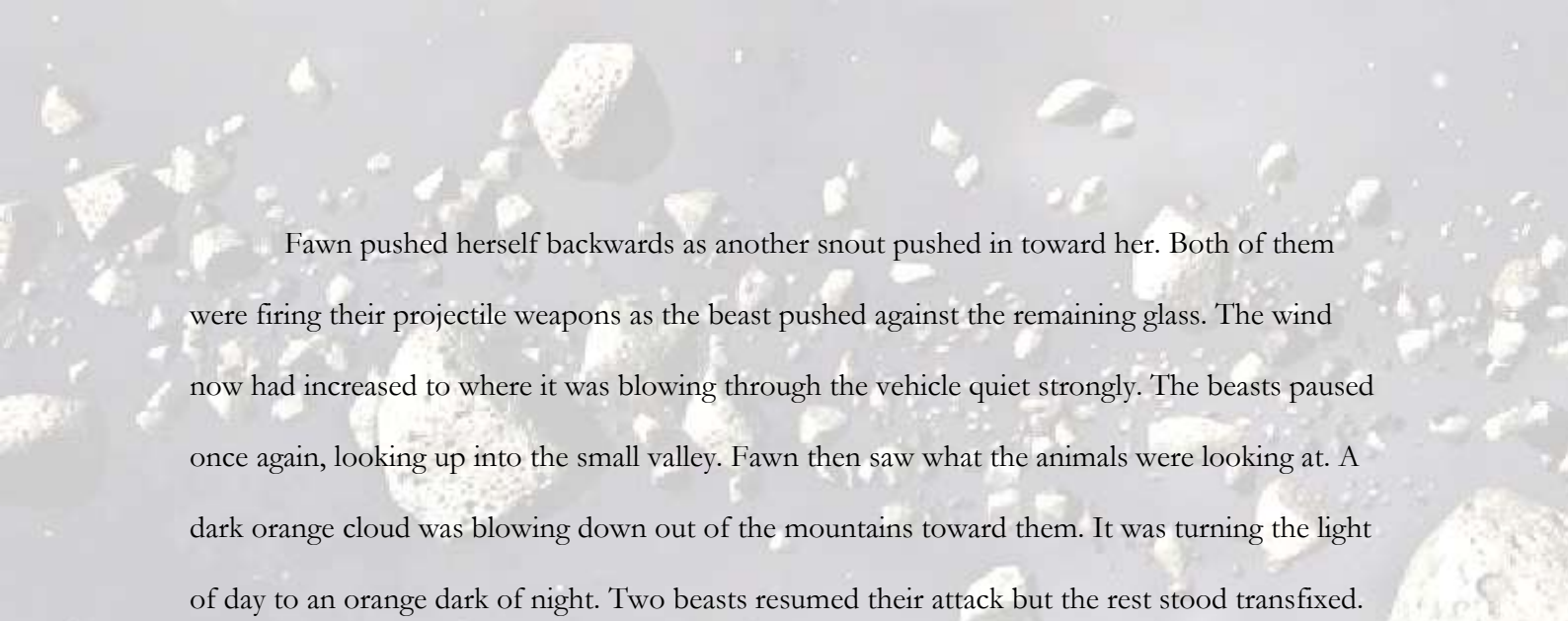
“Wait a sec,” Quinn pressed a button on the console and a projectile shot out of the front hitting one of the animals in the flank. It jumped up yelling and started to run about.

That seemed to increase their anger against the ATR and more of them were jumping about, biting into the roof and windows. The beast that had punched a hole in back was still working on enlarging it. A tusk came through the window on Quinn side pushing him over toward Fawn. The snout was just too large to reach into the vehicle but that didn’t stop it from trying. But then one of the beasts slammed itself against the front window pushing the window inward Quinn and Fawn struggled holding it while the animal snapped at them. Quinn pulled his gun and fired point blank around the glass at it. It backed off only momentarily.

“We’re not going to make it Quinn!” Fawn said with sweat now dripping down her forehead.

Quinn fired his projectile weapon every time one of the beasts came near the now opened front. But it had little or no effect. They had progressed only a few kilometers up the valley when Quinn felt a momentary breeze coming down the valley. With that he also noticed the dog-like beasts began looking up toward the wind. Several of them kept their gnawing at the vehicle but now others were distinctly hesitating. The breeze continued to increase but neither Quinn nor Fawn noticed the added sulphur smell that came with it. Another lunge from the dog beast made Fawn lose control of ATR, stalling the motor. That caused other beasts who hesitated because of the wind to return in full force.

“Quickly, back to the center of the van,” Quinn yelled, still firing his weapon at the snapping mouths.



Fawn pushed herself backwards as another snout pushed in toward her. Both of them were firing their projectile weapons as the beast pushed against the remaining glass. The wind now had increased to where it was blowing through the vehicle quiet strongly. The beasts paused once again, looking up into the small valley. Fawn then saw what the animals were looking at. A dark orange cloud was blowing down out of the mountains toward them. It was turning the light of day to an orange dark of night. Two beasts resumed their attack but the rest stood transfixed.

The wind continued to increase in strength. The closer the cloud got, the more indecisive the beasts became. Then one turned and ran, followed by another and then another. The cloud of orange was no more than several hundred meters away now. The two beasts continued their attempt to break through the slide panels, momentarily forgetting about what was coming.

“Put your breathing mask on,” Quinn spoke over the noise from the remaining beasts, the wind and the firing of the projectile weapons.

The cloud was hurling down upon them. One of the two dog-beasts turned and ran back toward the plains. The remaining beast looked up as the cloud engulfed them. Fawn and Quinn moved down toward the floorboard of the ATR. As the cloud whirled in about them, their skin started to burn slightly. The beast was no longer with them. The orange darkness soon cleared to an orange haze, enough to see by. Quinn rose up first and saw the dog-beast now lying on the ground.

“Lets go,” Quinn bent down and spoke to Fawn.

Fawn quickly moved into the drivers seat and got the ATR going. Its filters keeping the Sulphur and acid clear of the air intake, the vehicle moved slowly off.

Denizens of the Deep

“What do you think?” Kern turned to Wake.

“Interesting,” she replied. “Will it work?”

“Of course!” he said somewhat strongly. “Uh, sorry, didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

Wake didn’t respond. But that was the first time she had ever heard the officer apologize for anything.

In changing the subject, she replied, “We’ll have rain soon,” pointing toward the distant weather front.

Kern kept quite, only speaking when he needed help from Wake. After hours, he had ended up disconnecting the rotary components and chopping the jets off the main frame of the craft. He realigned the jets with the fuel tank with controls still connected to the console. All of it was delicately balanced onto the narrow pontoons. In finishing it off, he stepped back viewing the results.

Dion and Alberto had just returned. Walking up to the newly rebuilt craft, Captain Range stared at it, “Interesting looking. Will it work?” he said finally.

Wake looked at Kern and then held her breath not sure how Kern would respond.

But Kern just smiled, “let’s get it into the water,” he said.

The four managed to pull the craft down to the bank. As Kern stepped out into the water, his leg was grabbed from beneath the surface.

The other three hadn’t noticed Kern’s struggling. “Something’s got me,” Kern yelled, the fear in his voice evident. He was holding the side of the craft with all his might for whatever held him, wouldn’t let go. “Help, it’s going to take me under,” he screamed. Kern wasn’t sure whether his foot was inside something’s mouth or what.

Alberto pulled his weapon from the craft and came around the craft firing several explosive shots into the water, but making sure that he didn’t hit Kern. Each time the projectile



hit, a backlash of water came toward them. With blood and guts covering them both, Kern was no longer being pulled under.

Now assisted by Lieutenant Fields, Kern hobbled up to the bank and sat down. He hung his head down on his arms and cried, “I’m tired of this planet,” then looking at the others, “do you understand me?” There was defiance on his face. His voice held a challenge but his eyes held fear of his experiences. Tears mixed with the remains of blood on his face creating a crazed look.

No one moved and Kern hardly heard Wake’s mention of washing his face. Neither did he pay much attention as the Captain spoke softly of what Kern had faced and wished it could be all undone. As the Captain continued, “but now, more than ever we need to work together in order to get out of the danger we all face. Can you do that?” Kern heard the last of the Captain’s speech.

With an effort from deep inside, Kern responded, “Yes, I think so.”

Eventually they were able to float the craft. Once they were on their way, it cruised smoothly through the black pools. Alberto and the Captain took up positions just behind Kern, facing forward while Wake took up a position facing backward. Kern was given the job of navigation which kept him and his mind busy. Kern managed to avoid the narrow windy channel loaded with sticks and rotted trees. From time to time, tentacles, arms or claws would wrap themselves around the pontoons only to be blasted by Alberto’s deadly projectile weapon. And often, the craft was shaken by the under water denizens, especially whenever they moved into deeper water.

After some time Kern entered a much wider expanse of water but it smelled as foul if not worse than the narrow part they had just left. The air had become still, which seemed to increase the already oppressive heat. This stillness added to the already dreadful humidity. The silence made Kern watch with fearful anticipation. It had been nearly twenty minutes since

anything threatening had happened. Kern pointed toward the whirring circles of water about the craft. Everyone took a suspenseful breath, watching and waiting. They were soon rewarded as a large tooth-filled mouth appeared up from the stern. Wake started firing her clip into the creature almost immediately with little results. Alberto turned and a shot rang out causing the creature to retreat. But before Alberto could further react, a long narrow snake leg rose up grabbing the projectile gun. Two other mouth creatures appeared, this time on each side of the craft. Alberto and Wake fired their smaller weapons while the Captain fired several rounds into the creature causing it to fall back into the water. But again, before the Captain could react, another snake leg rose quickly knocking the gun out into the water.

Two more large headed creatures rose out of the depths. Kern didn't need to hear the Captain's order to increase speed, "Everyone, move toward the front of the craft," Kern yelled as the jets opened up.

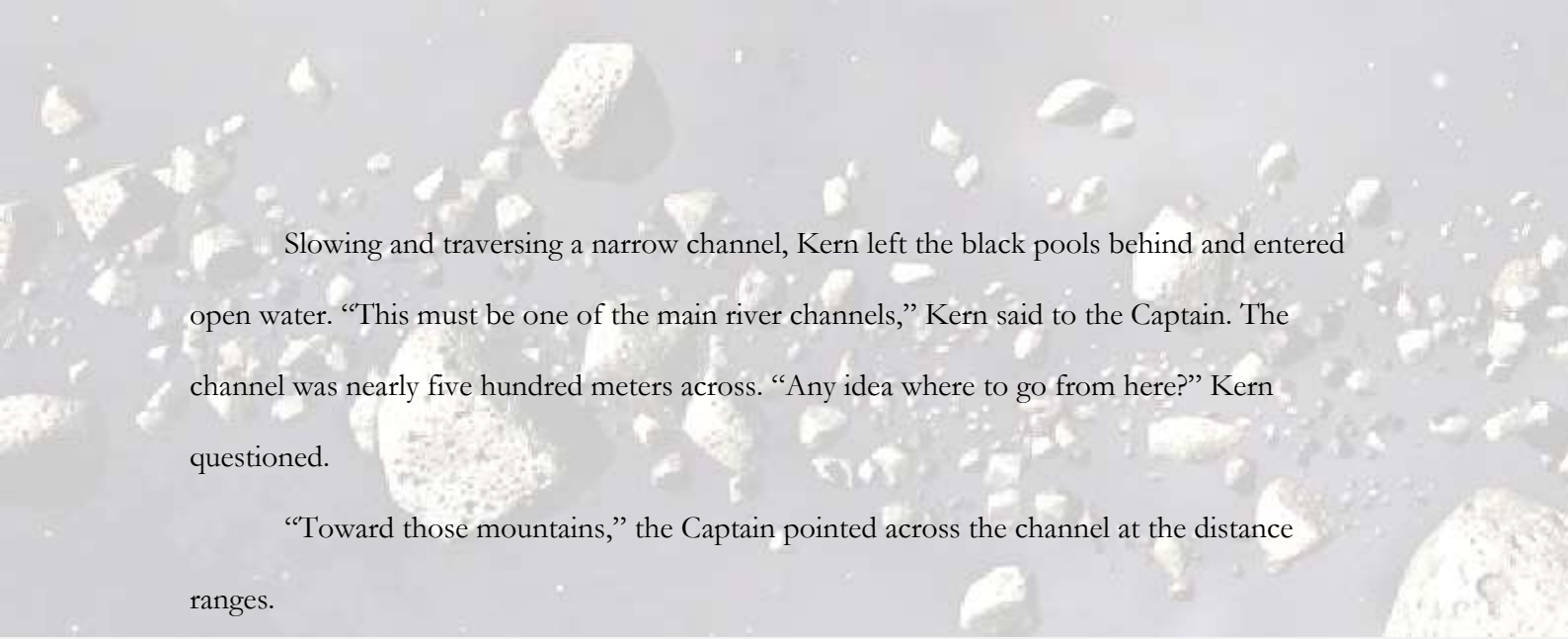
All quickly moved except for Wake. She was caught off balance, stumbled to the deck and then slide down the link to the pontoon.

"Help!" Wake yelled.

Kern and the Captain both turned.

"Help!"

"Keep up the speed, Lt. Commander," Kern heard the Captain's order. Looking ahead and glancing back, Kern saw the Captain lower himself down grabbing Wake's arm. The Captain kept trying to pull her back up from the pontoon. Kern thought about decreasing speed but one of the tooth heads then surfaced beside the craft. With the Captain's free hand he shot into its head. Alberto then joined in. Both he and the Captain easily spent their projectile clips at the water denizen only marginally slowing it. But this gave Wake enough time to hook her foot over the pontoon and with that the Captain pulled again.



Slowing and traversing a narrow channel, Kern left the black pools behind and entered open water. “This must be one of the main river channels,” Kern said to the Captain. The channel was nearly five hundred meters across. “Any idea where to go from here?” Kern questioned.

“Toward those mountains,” the Captain pointed across the channel at the distance ranges.

Dark menacing clouds had now changed the landscape of the swamp. They hung stationary over the water. An oppressive humidity remained as the clouds descended to only a few meters above the surface, a slight breeze was felt and sounds of thunder were heard from higher up.

“Captain? Something’s going to happen, look at it,” Kern pointed about the water. They saw small electrical charges’ dances about. These were interacting with the surface causing several bolts of electricity to start dancing about the craft. As the charges glided over the water’s surface, hissing sounds were heard. Some interacted together and some independently. Kern swung the craft back and forth dodging the various electrical entities. As one such charge appeared amongst them, it jumped about the deck in a frenzy. Where it had touched the deck, a burning scorched trail followed.

The wind had grown in strength. Sheets of water now hit against Kern’s face. Swells in the water caused the craft to jerk, forcing Kern to slow down.

“Captain, I think we should all sit down,” Kern yelled in the Captain’s ear.

“Okay,” The Captain pulled on Wake, motioning with his hand. Alberto followed suit. The rain cascaded down upon them. Visibility suddenly improved, a lifting of the clouds quickly followed. Kern sat with Alberto near the craft’s controls while Wake and the Captain sat as close forward as they could.

But Kern pushed himself back against the controls seeing yet another creature rise out of the water, except the creature before him now was as tall as the Renaissance and its head was even bigger around. Two crab like claws hung down below its vast head. Below the claws multiple tentacles supported the beast. The creature moved uncurling one of its legs toward the craft.

In seeing Kern's fear, the Captain quickly ordered, "Kern, increase speed."

Kern quickly jumped up and adjusted the controls. The octopus-crab started to fall toward the craft, once hitting the water, a large wake followed.

"Captain?" Kern yelled back over his shoulder.

"What?"

Kern moved his eyes to indicate the approaching jungle.

"Get into one of those inlets," the Captain directed.

The wave was nearly two meters high as Kern entered the narrow channel. He had gotten further enough in to prevent the wave from doing any damage. A quarter of an hour later the clouds began to thin out, even patches of the sky were seen. A fog began to rise off the water.

"This is really eery," Wake was heard, being overwhelmed with the silence of the swamp. The craft slowly moved along narrow confines. Visibility was down to two meters at the most, with only a few sounds heard from the bush.

"Well, at least we haven't had any more visitors," Alberto said hoping it would stay that way.

But then the craft hid something and stopped. Everyone froze and already holding their hand weapons.

"Apply a little more pressure to the jets, Lt. Commander Kern," the Captain ordered.

"It's stuck," Kern replied.

“Okay, Mr Florensa, come with me. Let’s see what’s holding us,” The Captain ordered.

Kern watched as they climbed down to the pontoons and eased themselves forward.

Near twelve minutes passed. “What do you think we should do Lt. Commander?” Wake asked.

“Give it another ten minutes, Lieutenant. I really don’t want to leave the craft unless it’s necessary,” Kern finished off.

But noises were then heard. Someone or something was approaching them. Kern and Wake readied their weapons. “Lt. Commander Kern? Lieutenant Fields? Let’s go. We’re out of the swamp,” the Captain called out. “Good work, Lt. Commander Kern, we made it.”

Kern looked at Wake and let out a sigh of relief.

Creatures of Another Kind

The ATR pulled into the orange landscape of the canyon where the ship stood. The sulphuric fumes clearly visible flowing through the valley being blown about by the still evident slight winds. No one was seen outside as Fawn forced the vehicle to a stop just outside the security perimeter.

“Everyone must be in the ship?” Fawn said, trying to open the now dented door.

“Best to crawl through the window,” Quinn said from beneath his mask.

Fawn watched as he bent over and raised himself out the windowless vehicle front. She followed suit and before both had jumped to the ground, Esther and Sharon had already left the ship heading directly for them.

“What happened to you?” Esther looked at the vehicle and then back at them.

“We had a run in with a pack of dogs,” Fawn answered.

“Commander, I think I should go over them in medical, just to make sure they’re okay,” Sharon interrupted the byplay.

“Sure, report to me later,” all four headed back into the ship.

Within an hour, the Sulfuric cloud had totally lifted. Korah, along with Esther had returned to repairing the ship. Quinn and Fawn were attempting to fix the ATR although they felt that it was a lost cause to try and repair it. Ingeborg and Korah were working on the damaged atmospheric craft. Sharon was standing guard patrolling the perimeter that circled the ship.

“Commander!” Sharon voice was heard, “we’ve got visitors.”

Looking toward the river they saw nothing, then turning to Sharon, they saw her point up toward the rim of the canyon where several winged creatures stood perched.

“Okay, rifles ready!” Esther yelled. “Those bat things have returned. Everybody slowly ease back toward the ship.”

“They’re not attacking,” Quinn said as they neared the entrance tube.

One of the creature took flight then and started circling the ship. “Get ready to fire,” Esther commanded.

“Commander, I don’t these creatures are the same as those who attacked us earlier. They are darker in color,” Sharon said loudly carefully watching the creature guide about.

“Let’s just wait and see what happens. If it touches the security screen, it will fry itself,” the Commander replied.

At that moment the creature landed outside the security perimeter and stared at the humans. Its mouth was open showing the needle sharp rows of teeth. The creature stood perhaps two and a half meters tall. The craws like hands rested at the top of its folded wings. Darkish grey fur covered its body with only slight traces of green on its feet.

“It knows not to come through the screen,” Sharon said.

“I wonder what it wants,” Ingeborg said.

“Most likely, it wants us,” Korah answered.

At that moment the creature unfolded one of its wings by extended it across in front of itself awkwardly picking up a stone. Re-folding its wing, it then heralded the stone at the security perimeter. The stone immediately burst apart as it hit the screen. It then waved its claws hand toward the group and then back toward itself, each time its leathery wing unfolding and folding.

“It certainly wants something. What do you think Sharon? You’re the biologist,” Esther asked.

“It’s showing a great deal of intelligence, that’s for sure,” Sharon answered.

“I’m going to see what it wants. Korah, you and Quinn go half way and watch my back. Sharon, you come with me. The rest of you watch those upon the ridge. Be ready to fire at any moment.” Esther slower stepped out toward the creature.

Esther and Sharon carefully approached the creature. Its month still hung open, drips of saliva fell ever so often splattering on the ground. Its large black eyes watched the two humans approached. Esther and Sharon now stood before it inside the security barrier. The bat moved startling Esther and Sharon, Korah and Quinn ran up behind them readying their rifles.

“Wait!” Esther yelled.

The creature bent its knees and lowered itself to the ground and proceeded to bow before them. It then raised itself and stood straight again.

“Well, what do you think about that?” Sharon said.

“Let’s follow suit,” Esther began kneeling down with Sharon following in turn. A great clattering of sounds was then heard from the creatures perched on the rocks above. The creature that stood before them also emitted loud screeches.

“Quinn, go and get some pictures and drawing paper and let’s see if we can communicate,” Esther said.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed but more and more visitors are arriving,” Korah’s eyes indicated the cliffs above.

She was correct, more were arriving, each one perching itself on large outcrops of rocks about the canyon walls.

“Just be ready for anything. As long as they know that the security is up, I don’t think they will attack,” Esther replied.

“Yes, but if they attack in force, the security field won’t hold all of them,” Korah finished off.

“We wait. These creatures seem to be different than the others,” Esther said.

“Maybe not,” Sharon replied. “The others could have mistook us for an easy meal and found out different. So these guys may be playing it safe.”

Quinn came walking up behind them with a large selection of pictures and paper. “I got a couple of shots approaching the planet and also a couple of shots of their cousins flying off with Kern.”

Esther started showing the creature the pictures. As each picture was held up the creature emitted the loud screeching noises to the increasing numbers of its kind about the canyon. Esther presented other pictures and drawings indicating their long trip from their own Solar System to Epsilon Eridani star. She then held up several pictures of the creatures who had attacked them and a picture of Kern being carried off. At this, the creature leaned forth almost touching the security field. After a moment a long series of sounds were emitted. Bats were arriving with others taking flight. It was as if they were patrolling the sky above the ship.

At that point the creature stepped back giving itself plenty of room and unfolded its right wing. With its hand atop its wing the creature indicated with a sweep the hundreds or so others among the rocks. Laboriously folding its wing downward it drew marks on the ground. Now

with its left wing it pointed toward the picture Esther still held and proceeded to draw separate marks on the ground.

“It’s telling us that they are a different,” Sharon said.

“Well, even though they a different color, it’s still as ugly as the other ones and I wouldn’t trust them. Not yet, at least,” Esther commented. “Rig up some lights so that we can see better. It’s getting darker. Let’s get some more pictures and see if we can find some kind of pattern of communications.”

Rescued

Dion, surprised that any of them had made it out of the swamp in one piece, wondered what was waiting amongst the grass forest above. His mind quickly flashed back at seeing the stripped beast earlier that day. He and the rest of them would need to regain their strength before continuing, but questioned whether it was even safe to sleep.

“There’s a small ridge half way up the embankment. We’ll stay there for the rest of the night,” the Captain said. “Hopefully we can get some sleep.” After climbing for some minutes they had reached the spot the Captain had referred to. “I’ll take the first watch. Try to get some sleep,” Dion had told them.

Wake and Alberto were asleep immediately but Kern just sat looking out over the swamps they had just crossed. Both moons had risen and gave off just enough light to see by. Sweat ran off his face. He got up and walked over to where the Captain was standing. Dion stood gazing out into the darkness about him.

“Can’t sleep,” Kern whispered.

“Try, you’ll need your strength tomorrow. We’ll all need our strength tomorrow,” Dion replied.

“I keep thinking about all those creatures,” Kern said.

Dion briefly glanced at him wondering how to reply. Kern had been through a lot. It was amazing that he was still sane. “You want to take the watch?” The Captain asked.

Kern held a stare for a few seconds, “Might as well, sir.”

“Wake me after two hours. I’ll take the next watch. Wake me if you hear or see anything! Understand?” the Captain stressed.

“Yes Sir.”

Each person took a turn at watch. Among the distant and not so distant noises, Kern woke the Captain several times on hearing sounds nearby but it ended up to be nothing or at least nothing that bothered them. Kern finally found sleep but only shortly before sun rise. Wake was the last to have the watch. She welcomed the new day as the sun peeked over the distance horizon. She heard the death cry of some distance creature. At that both the Captain and Alberto both woke.

“When did he go to sleep?” Dion’s head pointed toward Kern.

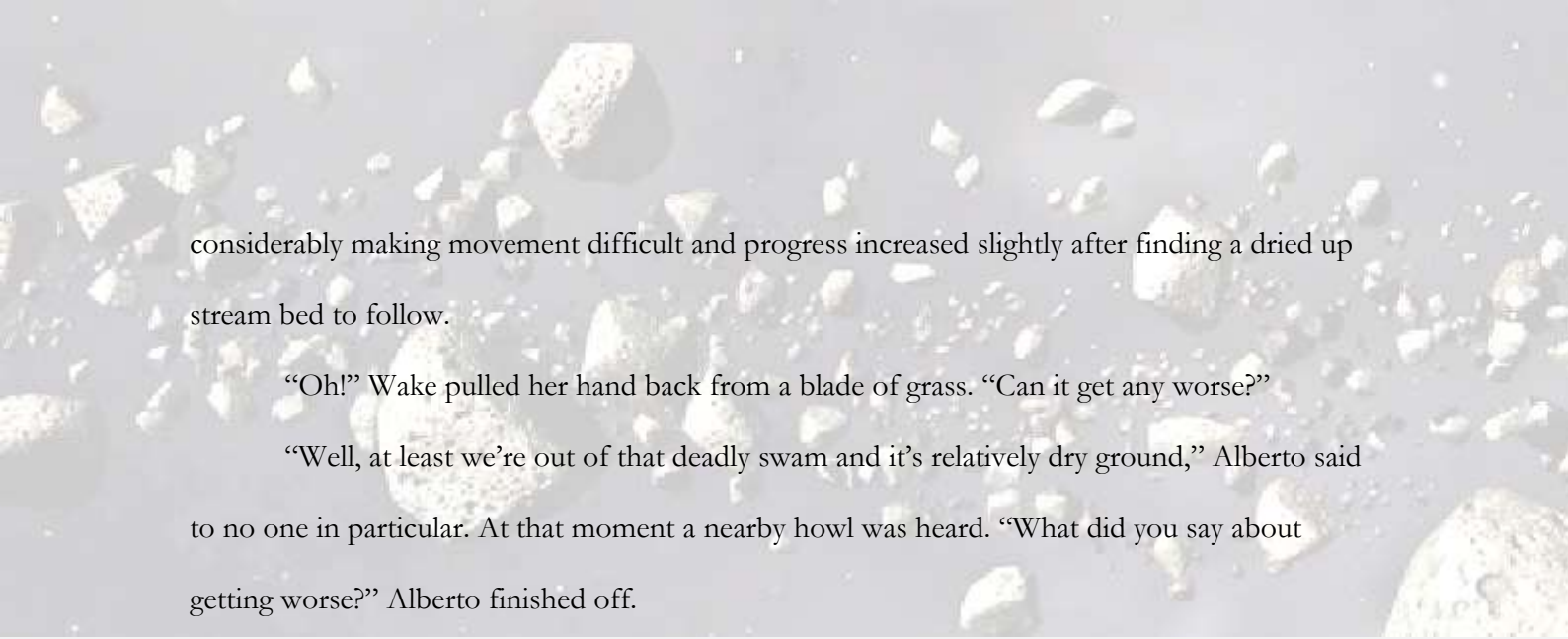
“About an hour ago,” she replied.

The Captain looked out across the swamp and the great river beyond. His head turned upwards the tall grasses above them. “Well, wake the Lt. Commander up. We need to move. We can eat as we walk,” the Captain began climbing the bank before them.

“Lt. Commander Kern? We need to leave,” Wake bent over Kern.

Kern jumped. Startled, he opened his eyes. He looked around for a moment and then stood up without saying a word.

Even though the air was warm, it was the freshness of it that made it feel cool. Within an hour the temperature would increase drastically. The foursome silently climbed the embankment and entered the forest of grass. Blades were double hand lengths in width. Some were very sharp to touch but most of it was carefully pushed back as they made their way. The thickness varied



considerably making movement difficult and progress increased slightly after finding a dried up stream bed to follow.

“Oh!” Wake pulled her hand back from a blade of grass. “Can it get any worse?”

“Well, at least we’re out of that deadly swam and it’s relatively dry ground,” Alberto said to no one in particular. At that moment a nearby howl was heard. “What did you say about getting worse?” Alberto finished off.

“Quiet,” the Captain said, motioning everyone to stop.

A distance rustle of grass was heard and it was getting louder. The Captain indicated a large outcrop of thick grass near them and moved toward it. He squatted down under the thick blades that grew out from the bottom and motioned with his hand for others to do the same. Seconds later two of the stripped four legged animals they had seen the previously day ran by. The rustle of the grasses distanced itself from the four. Then howls were heard in the direction that animals had gone.

“They may have found our scent. Let’s move,” the Captain re-entered the dry stream bed and ran trying to avoid the thick blades of grass that crossed the bed.

The howling slowly approached them from behind. “They’re definitely onto us,” Wake said jumping several blades in front of her.

“Keep at it,” the Captain replied. “I think I can see an open patch up ahead.” Entering the open space, he yelled, “Hurry, there are some rocks. We can make a stand there.”

The Captain, Wake, Alberto and Kern were now running at top speed trying to out distance themselves from the animals. The dogs had also cleared the grasses and were in pursuit.

“Captain, they’re coming,” Wake said looking back.

“Keep running,” the Dion yelled.

There were several waist high boulders. As the others reached the rocks, Dion was already firing his gun at the quickly approaching animals. Alberto and Wake started began to shoot their own projectile guns. At that the animals slowed up somewhat and hesitated.

“Captain!” Kern was heard saying. “Look!”

Quickly turning, the Captain saw other dog-like animals approaching them from the opposite direction. “Clever of them,” the Captain said. “Wake, you and Alberto keep firing to the back. Kern and I will keep these others busy.”

The others had quickly entered the clearing to join the on coming feast. The dogs had now surrounded them and were slowly moving in but then another noise was heard coming from above.

“Look!” Kern pointed.

Hundreds of bat like creatures were flying toward them.

“If it’s not one thing, it’s another,” Wake said over the noise.

“I’d rather let the dogs get me than let those flying creatures,” Kern sounded a bit hysterical.

“We will fight to the end, if necessary,” the Captain started firing at the dogs again.

“What!” Alberto said. “Either they are now friendly or they want us more than the dogs.”

They watched as the bat like creatures started attacking the dogs. They were careful not to get within biting reach of the dogs. More and more came at the dogs. Movement of air was felt from above as a great flapping of the flying creatures were now everywhere. The dogs were close now but more and more bat creatures clawed their backs and distracted them with their flapping wings.

“I think they’re trying to help us,” Alberto yelled out.

“No, they just want to get to use first,” Kern sounded more hysterical.

“I believe you are correct, Mr. Florensa,” the Captain acknowledge.

It was then that four of the bat creatures began to hover directly above the four obviously intend onto hatching onto the humans.

“Let them take us,” the Captain was heard yelling.

“Noooo!” Kern responded.

“Lt Commander Kern? That’s an order. Let the creature take you,” the Captain holstered his gun as he yelled above the howling and beating of the creature’s wings. Wake was soon grabbed by one of the creatures and it took flight. After that, Alberto was taken. More and more bat creatures were attacking the dogs. Kern screamed and fainted as the creature grabbed him and took flight.

When the creature picked up each person, its talents dug down under their arms firmly but not enough to break the skin. Dion felt himself being lifted. He proceeded to rise. Moments later the other bats stopped their attack on the dogs and were now following. They were heading for the valley. Looking down he saw the dogs following far behind, howling as they ran. The bats easily out distanced them. Dion felt like he was riding an elevator. It was quiet except for the flapping of the creature’s great wings. After what seemed to be an hour, they had returned to the valley with the small river. Dion wasn’t sure what was happening, he assumed they were tracing their route from the previous day. He saw that Kern was still out hanging limp within the creature’s claws. Wake and Alberto waved with the Captain acknowledging. Interestingly instead of continuing up the valley, the bats had just entered the canyon where their ship had put down. He saw it and thousands of others lining the canyon walls.

This was very confusing, thought Dion. After being released, the four entered the security perimeter. At the same time, the dogs arrived at the head of the canyon. Dion ordered everyone into the ship as each creature took flight carrying large stones by their feet. The battle

lasted only minutes as the bat creatures pounded the dogs causing many to limp out of the narrow valley.

The Dark Ones

Afterwards, the crew had returned to the security perimeter. Those who had been there before were still waiting. Others had returned to the nearby cliffs.

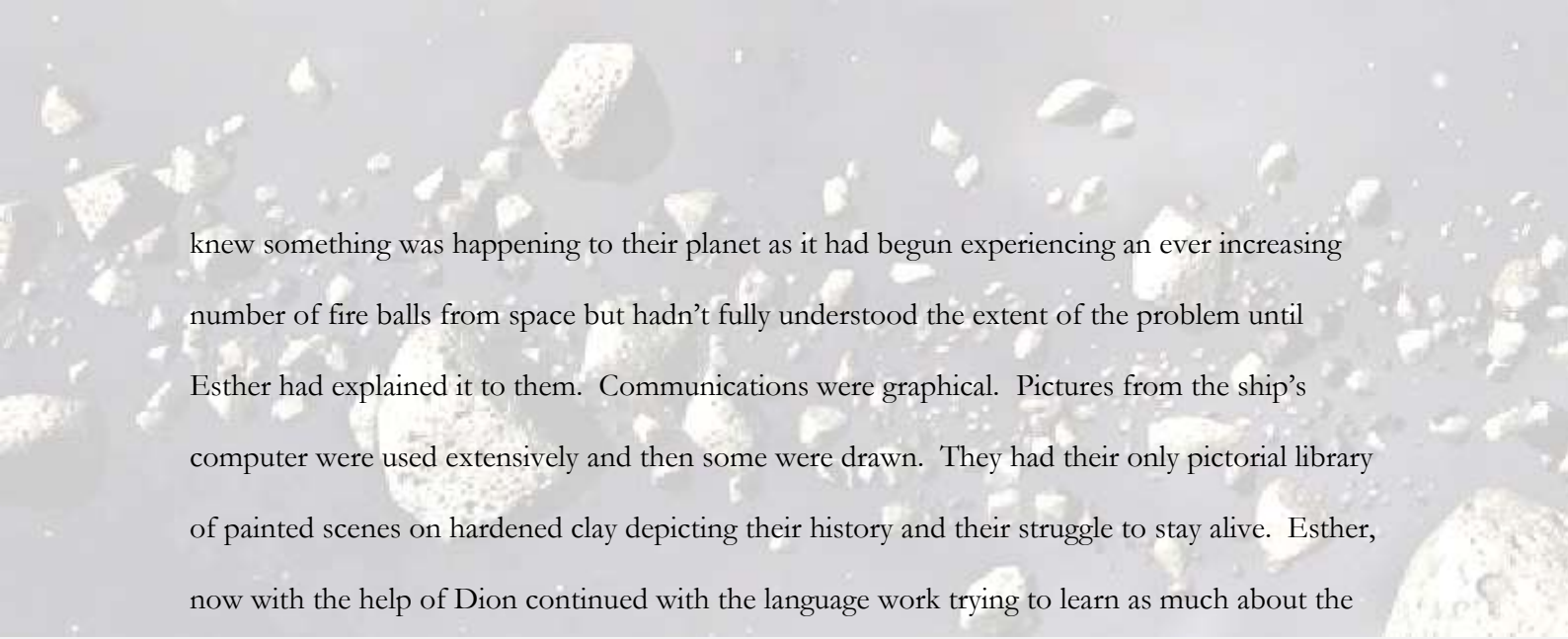
“Commander, we need these beings if we are to survive on this planet. Try to establish some form of communications with them,” Dion ordered.

“Yes sir, but it ‘ll take some time, but I think they are as eager as we are to communicate. They certainly have shown a high mark of intelligence so far,” Esther replied.

“Do what you can but we may not have a lot of time,” Dion finished off.

The Dark Ones, names given by the crew were of a different race than the Green Ones. They were similar in every way to the Green Ones except for wing colour. The gator length snout with needle sharp teeth gave the same hideous look. However, their actions had shown them to be very docile beings. Their mouths often hung when they were around you as this indicated a sign of politeness. The Green Ones, it was learned, were little more than advanced animals with a highly held pack instinct. The Dark Ones had developed a highly advanced pictorial language while the Green Ones used simple words and shouts to communicate. They also had a rudimentary technology base, whereby they created brass made products and pipes of bringing water into their homes.

Their numbers were reduced to hundreds through the constant warring with the Green Ones who numbered into the tens of thousands. In the last thirty or so years they had discovered and developed electricity and turbines with lights for their caves. However, they were forced to live as simple a life as they could, considering their circumstances. They had been in their present location nearly three years without any major conflicts from the Green Ones. They



knew something was happening to their planet as it had begun experiencing an ever increasing number of fire balls from space but hadn't fully understood the extent of the problem until Esther had explained it to them. Communications were graphical. Pictures from the ship's computer were used extensively and then some were drawn. They had their only pictorial library of painted scenes on hardened clay depicting their history and their struggle to stay alive. Esther, now with the help of Dion continued with the language work trying to learn as much about the Dark Ones as they could. It was realized now that they were highly intelligent creatures. They were all very literate in the form of pictorial writing and it only took them several minutes to produce a multi-colored picture that came alive in looking at it. Esther and Dion had learned enough within a week to know that the beings were trust worthy. Dion moved the ship to the mountain range across the great valley to the home of the Dark Ones far away from any routes the Green Ones chose to fly. This was done at night with as little fuss as possible.

Like the Green Ones, they were often forced to leave their homes due to the increased Sulphur content of the air. This was usually caused by various shifting of winds due either to seasonal changes, storms or volcanic activity. It was during these times that attacks usually occurred.

Their living spaces were clean with simple woven throw rugs on the cave floors. When it came to toiletries, they would fly over their own fields and drop their dung to help fertilize their simple crops of a corn like substance. They would go about a personal cleaning routine with each member of the family. Sleeping was accomplished by hanging upside down from logs they had positioned in slots near the cave ceiling near the back. Fires were only build at night inside where the glow was hidden from sight. The fires were used to cook bread and meat. Hunting parties fished in the many lakes and rivers and the fish were usually eaten raw, bones and all. Gatherers went in search of various fruits and as mentioned they fielded a basic crop of corn.

They usually ate in the living area of their cave using clay bowls for fruit, foods and water. Esther and Dion often observed that schooling or training also took place in the living area of the cave, not only with the younger ones but with adults. This is where she had later decided to set up her language learning center.

No further incidents had happened since meeting the Dark Ones. In moving the ship to their valley, the crew felt safe for the first time since arriving in the system. However, great fire balls were often observed lighting up the day and night. Luckily only a few ever made it to the ground or sea without burning up.

Repairs on the ship had finished. The Dark Ones knew that they were preparing to leave. It was late in the evening that one of the group's leaders came to them with a large beautiful colour print, gave it to them and backed off and sat back in what now was considered their learning position.

“Captain, look at this. This is beautiful,” Esther said.

Dion and Esther stared at the picture for ten or so minutes before they realized what it was saying.

Esther turned to Dion, “They want us to help them save their people, to help them build ships so that they can leave the planet.” Dion continued to study the picture and then looked at the being staring back at them.

Dion seized a clay tablet and began to draw using the paints they had before them. He drew the cliffs across the narrow valley from where the caves were situated in the direction of the setting sun. Dion illustrated the Sun setting once and then another setting on the same tablet. In the upper left hand corner he drew quick pictures of Esther and himself with neutral faces. He added greenery along with sandy browns and blue orange for the sky. Below that, he added his crew shown to be gathered around a living room of a cave with both Dion and Esther

in the center. After adding a few more features, he presented it to the creature. The creature looked at it, nodded its head and then flew out of the cave mouth.

“You told him that you would talk to the others and think about it? Are you serious, Captain?” Esther asked.

“I have already been considering it. Some of the other Dark Ones had asked me a week back, what was to become of them,” Dion answered. “When we first landed here, you remember that I said there was no reason to stay. But now I feel there’s no reason to return to Earth. With hard work, I think these creatures might have the mental capacity to build ships with someone to guide them. I’ll keep several computers and download as much of the library as I can then I want you to take the ship back to Earth.”

Esther looked deep into Dion’s eyes, “If you stay, I’m staying also. You’re right, the Earth we know is no longer there. The others can easily take the ship back, but I think we do need to first discuss it with the others.”

Dion watched her, “Okay, no arguments. I’d like that.”

Preparations

“You’ll certainly have need of a medical doctor here,” Sharon said firmly.

“You’ll have to teach them about navigating the ship one you build it. You’ll have to do a lot of schooling and training besides that and I can do that,” Wake getting everyone’s attention. “And besides, Earth is in the further. You’re the only people I know now.”

Each took their turn in expressing their desire to stay, Fawn Ryanson, the German; Alberto Florensa and Korah Sayith the Italians; Ingebory from Norway and Quin from Spain

“All of you have gone mad!” Kern said to them not believing what he was hearing. “I will not stay one more week on this planet.” His eyes appeared wild as he continued to speak.

“Everyone has made their decision. You could easily take the ship back by yourself. It’s can be set to total automatic Lt. Commander Kern. Once you leave the system you can set everything up and go into deep sleep through it all,” Dion said keeping his eyes fixed on the man.

The crew had unloaded as much as they could without harming any of the ship systems. They, along with all the Dark Ones, gathered on the rocks in early hours of the morning and watched the ship lift off with Kern aboard.

Feelings of sadness with the only tie they had with Earth now broken but also feelings of excitement recognizing the challenge they now had before them.

The End