

## ***Metal Mouth***

***By***

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The beads of sweat on Lars Follen's brow grew into small orbs in the lack of gravity. Several of these fat droplets took flight when he snapped his glance from a monitor to the planet-shaped floating graphic in the center of his SciPod, where remote-sensor streams compiled. Other sphericules slid along the bridge of his nose to congregate at the tip as a thick wet film. Without thought, he wiped a hand down his face and onto his flight suit. He had no time for dainty clean-ups; one-hundred percent of his attention was on the phenomenal readouts from his target planet. He was close enough now that the planet blotted out the starry backdrop beyond.

His AI whispered insights into his implant: *Atmosphere, unbreathable for humans*. He knew corporate's nano-adjusters would lever all the way down to the microscopic realms to make necessary changes. Those augmentations would affect the atmosphere and many other things about the planet. He hated the thought that this beautiful phenomenon above the surface—a deck of rainbow-hued clouds of varying-densities—would change to plain white, like his fragile home world.

The mineral-heavy vapor-condensate gave a patchwork shroud to the sphere below. He would need to get under the clouds for good visual observations. Tropical moisture was high but no readings on any chlorophyll-based flora. *Internal heat, a molten core with planetary magnetic shielding*. Flux lines appeared in the graphic. Earth-like density and diameter, but with a chem-comp that indicated an acid-H<sub>2</sub>O mix rained down on parts of the surface. His employer would handle that with some complex bindings to boost the pH to “normal.” His stomach turned at his thoughts. Normal. What was normal? His standing conflict surfaced. This world was perfect as it was. But then, each one that Lars had ever surveyed was perfect in its own way, and he battled with himself each time he reported a potentially-habitable planet.

All his prized discoveries orbited in the habitable zones of many stars of different classes. Lars was a scout on the frontier, some thousand-plus light-years out, setting markers for corporate follow-up. Planets ripe for terraforming by the Tear-N-Form Corporation. They would spend trillions of credits to prepare them for sale to the highest-bidding lesser corporations: infrastructure developers and real estate brokers for humankind's push into the stars. The inexorable outward move. It loomed. He saw it as plague-like. A sneeze into the cosmos.

It made him physically sick. Earth was a better place now, after The Obliteration. Less is more. Bloody humans. He resisted the physiological pressure in his gut. Vomit was bad for business in a one-man interstellar science pod.

Terraforming's long-term business model spanned generations. The two mega-companies hired loners like Lars to do the surveys. Solo explorations made fiscal sense—he was expendable. The Company invested only in the ship and the lease of the engine technology from the military. TNF Corporation had no interest in him as a person. That was mutual.

While Lars Follen hated his own species, as a realist he knew that he could do nothing to stem the horrid tides that would one day swarm over planet after planet. No terrologist had yet found the perfect Earth-like planet; all were still only seed worlds in early development. The galactic tidal wave of humankind would not happen in his lifetime, but the truth reviled him to the bone. In the infinite universe he had his SciPod to keep far ahead of the trampling's of man.

He waved the instruction for the artificial intelligence to set a low, high-speed orbit. Once that was established, and his in-system drive keyed down to orbit maintenance mode, full zero-g returned. His stomach threatened once more. Keep it together, Lars, you don't want that clean-up job, he griped, upset, thinking about the failure of his artificial gravity generation. Just as he had arrived in this system. He would have to make an abhorred visit to a repair post.

After nearly two weeks of puttering around this planet and its moons in minimal grav, doing system resource analytics, lunar gravitational dynamics and stability calcs, he felt pent up. He needed more than electro-stim, he wanted to stretch his legs. He dismissed the fantasy of a walk on the surface—this was no dead moon. Instead, he opted for a safer, figurative leg-stretching, though a far more exhilarating method of data-gathering.

He orbited roughly two-thousand kilometers above the planet's surface. The conditions below were right to break out his Drift-Sail for a closer look. There were rolling storm fronts and some pockets of severe turbulence that he could navigate around. Corporate would pay a higher up-front commission if Lars downplayed the intensity of conditions which moved across the surface. He had little use for the credits he accrued but every now and then they came in handy. Today was the final day of his grace period for the check-in with Tear-N-Form Corporate. He had procrastinated until the last minute as he weighed certain concerns.

Over the next hours, the AI reverse-burned his SciPod to a near-synchronous hover-orbit within the atmospheric interface. He exercised in the increased gravity to make up for the extra zero-g time

he'd had. His excitement built in intensity; he could not wait to see this planet close-up. Finally, the plaz-mini drive spit its stream toward the planet to stabilize orbital altitude, and he prepped and pressurized the cockpit of his space-equivalent of a glider.

Lars shared an important trait with the handful of others in his profession—a need to be alone. Seriously alone. Only a fellow terrologist would understand the depth of that requirement. In this work, he had clocked about ten of the last fifteen years in relative isolation; the longest stretch, a blissful two years. Were it not for the requisite return to a corporate outpost to show his face for policy reasons or repairs, he would have happily continued to drift and skip through the universe. He felt at one with the stars and planets he surveyed.

Lars Follen avoided home-system flights if possible. Too much ambush-potential. Only twice did he get that call, all the way back, and both times he'd had to dodge pirates. Fortunately, his little ship had advantages over the best scow—its faster-than-light travel capabilities. More recently, a food replicator had been installed during his last visit to a Multi-Military Patrol outpost, happily lengthening the time between resupply drops. But it was the FTL travel technology that the pirates badly wanted from his small but expensive vessel. For him, the ship was simply a tool that enabled him to enjoy his personal treasures: solitude and the planets; things for which pirates had no use.

Dressed only in his skin-contact, smart flight suit, tied to his body's full implants, he slipped feet-first through mated hatches into the confines of his Drift-Sail. Active surfaces in the one-man cocoon linked him intimately to the little ship's sensors, through his flight suit, which further tied to his implant compliment. New senses came online, overlapping his bodily feedback. The ship became his body. After his last home-system trip, Lars had visited USUCC (United Space Unrest Control Corp) to have the needle-ship fitted to the hatch of his SciPod. Completely against corporate policy. It was one of those times when his credit stockpile came in handy. With USUCC, money was the rule, before military or corporate policy. If he made a regulated return to a company outpost, Lars always left the glider stashed at a USUCC post lock-up.

He was dizzy with the prospect of exploration. A shallow glassteel blister slid from a hidden slot over his head and sealed the hatch of the coffin-like cockpit. From his head cradle he would get a supreme 180-degree view of any target environment. He could enjoy the privilege of sights never-before seen while the data poured in from craft sensors. Lars would be the first and the last human to bear witness to the unmarred beauty of these worlds: the changes wrought by terraforming rarely left a trace of the native biological environment.

His employer would use the report from Lars to design the desired environmental outcome, then send out AI-piloted barge drones, with their military FTL engines, stocked with customized restructuring nano-bots. After that, those barges would disperse tailored chemistry augmentors, then micro and macro-flora to continue atmospheric modifications. Mega-machines would prep city sites after that. In a multi-decade process, each phase of rebirth would begin as the preceding one finished. Lars held an uneasy peace with himself but he knew that if he did not find new worlds for the company, they would simply hire someone else to pilot his SciPod.

Lars woke up the cameras on the glider. More sensory input: an overlay in his heads-up, which became more opaque with the focus of his attention. These cams would create the holo-vids for his side business. Lars sent the holos back to Earth, to a fan-base amongst the space-deprived, who waited for the next installment in his series, “Follen Worlds.” He wondered if he would actually choose to send this particular documentation home. This was the crux of his ill feelings. Lars had a habit: he kept his latest finds from corporate for a time. He needed to possess these discoveries first. Take them in as his own; bear witness to their grandeur; fantasize that he would not report one planet or another. With every new discovery that he reported, his sense of betrayal grew.

Through the use of black-market transponder tech, which worked in concert with his FTL engine technology (also courtesy of USUCC), Lars arranged his check-ins to appear to originate from his previous survey location. The transponders redirected his communications, over light-year distances, with little delay. He left these miniature, helmet-sized devices behind at each survey site in decaying orbits. His faster-than-light signal bounced through these before it went to *Toroid Alpha*, and then to Corporate. If Lars wanted to save any world from “destruction,” it would be his choice. No one would discover his deception for eons. Maybe never. So far, he had not yet failed to report a planet. Lars would not admit it, but he feared the consequences for the crime of hoarding a viable world. The end of his space faring, at least—a punishment worse than death. And he knew the consequence of revealing this planet to humanity.

His corporate altruism was being tested. He was close to the commission of a potentially capitol crime. His insides were a confusion of vitriol and vomit.

Lars wriggled into the Drift-Sail accel-couch as it formed to him. A crashweb studded with additional sensor nodes slid up from the foot-cubby at the craft nose and tightened to solid contact with his flight suit. A forehead restraint snugged him into immobility for the ride into the atmosphere.

For a change, he chose a verbal interaction with the controls. “Rrrls...” His vocal cords rebelled after lengthy disuse. He coughed and tried again. “Release docking clamps. Retract particle shield.” A dull clunk and vibration came through the hull as the artificial intelligence did his bidding.

In simpatico to his choice, a woman’s voice spoke to the air instead of his implants. “You are now free to maneuver away from the ship, Lars.”

“Thank you, Mother. Set a course for eight kilometers above the planet surface.” Lars also had the USUCC mechs add a personality pack to his AI. He had programmed it with the least objectionable voice from his past. Not that memories of his childhood were pleasant; on the contrary, he chose accordingly because keeping her around provided him the perverse pleasure of ordering her about. She hardly talked back, though her instructions included occasional objections at times when conditions were not critical, so that he could argue her into compliance.

“Spin the ship for full-entry view.” The little boat moved away from the SciPod with a few thruster bursts, then rotated, head-first, face down. Encouragement from the toe-end plaz-mini thruster began a push deeper into the planet’s gravity well. The sight that rolled into view was of turquoise magnificence, the dominant color of the planet surface and cloud tops.

“Mother,” he commanded, “acid resist.”

“Yes, Lars.” A sensor-transparent nano-ceramic foam oozed from the micro-nozzle array and crawled over all exterior surfaces except the chem-proof view-blister.

Deeper into the cloud layers, stratified colors of magenta, acid green, and rust moved in chaotic patterns as various acid-oxidized metal particulates swirled in turbulent parts of the atmosphere. At a certain velocity threshold the head engines fired, obscuring part of his view. His weight pressed into the crash web as he hung suspended over the view blister. He eased into the denser air mass, pointed into an expansive space between deceptively delicate-looking atmospheric vortices. Through a thin spot in the semi-opaque clouds, light from the system star shone past him to the surface; it lit an amazing sight—a metallic landscape. Glints of light reflected from an infinity of angular surfaces, popping like mini-novae. Amongst the glitter were irregular shaped zones of yellow, cyan and red. *Lakes*. Their various shades were stunning—cerulean, chartreuse, and indigo

He reviewed the sensor read-outs. The mirrored surface was a thin coating with a variety of metals in the substrate, their concentrations varying from hectare to hectare.

His mother's voice intruded. "Lars, there's acid precipitation approaching, forty kilometers aft."

"Semi-release crashweb." The combination sensor-net-and-restraint loosened and Follen pulled his arms free to take manual control, hands wrapped around pressure grips at mid-thigh. Adrenalin fed into his blood with this action. He spun the ship vertical to the surface to watch the storm approach, and adjusted his movement so that it slowly gained on him. The looming thunderhead towered so high, as if it actually dropped from space rather than originated locally. In the speck of his craft he felt smaller than he did in space. Deep black stretched below the cloud base, but not for any length of time: lightning arced wildly beneath, as the dark vanquished the metallic surface. He saw that the flashing bolts ceased further back. He looked through an electric curtain, draped off to the left and right under the storm's leading edge, as far as he could see. What chaos does this behemoth leave in its wake? He shot up the face of the tempest for some minutes to get well above the cloud deck, up to the outmost periphery of the atmosphere, where he flipped his craft to point head-down toward the billowing tops.

"Deploy the glide wings." On either side, slots zipped open in the foam covering of the craft and fragile-looking crysteel sails extended on plasteel strut webs. The craft converted to an ultralight, ultra-tough glider. He cut engines and began to drop until he plunged downward. At the misty storm top he pulled up, the air just dense enough to drift upon. For many kilometers, looking like an oversized moth, he sailed and caught updrafts. Lars traveled until he reached the end of the storm where he found a great break in the clouds. At the edge of the cloud cliff he saw far down to the lit surface. It was dull, no longer the overall mirror-like glaze he had first seen, but his ground-sensor readings changed rapidly. The planet's surface was alive with movement. Within a kilometer of the ground he feathered the engines back to life. Transfixed, he hovered, unsure of what he watched. Life of some sort?

The flood of acid rain ran in small rivers to pool in the lowest basins, quickly leaving the raised, angular surfaces dry. The acreages furthest past the receding storm began to light up with reflections. Diamond-bright points of light stabbed his eyes as the multitude of angular surfaces once again took on the mirror sheen. The perplexing movements, he realized, were simply chimeras of this recrystallization process.

Lars squinted through narrowed eyes at the spectacle, then saw something flit across the bright surface, blocking the reflected light as it went. A chill of fear and excitement surged. Was that airborne? Planetary life? Lars knew of no reports of planetary life in the surveyed systems, beyond alien flora. He

could be the first to discover animal life. Hurriedly, he magnified his heads-up implant and used his cams' tele-optics to do a visual sweep to track the elusive movement. Nothing. Zoomed-out again, he could find no sign of movement. And nothing on the sensors distinguished itself from the metallic background. A review of the vid stream left him doubting the movement to be a shadow. Just an illusion. After-images on his light-seared optic nerve.

Disappointed, Lars rotated his probe-ship and returned his attention to the retreating storm. The acid in the downpour had destroyed the shine and left various oxide-shaded lakes. Colorful cirrus wisps tore away and trailed the backs of the thunderheads. He imagined there must be some dustbowl resource of metallic catalyst particles somewhere else on the planet to feed these colorful displays.

It was a fascinating study but he could not shake his feeling that the secondary movement he had seen was more than simple illusion. He scanned the ground again and ignored the other raw, rare data about the planetary dynamics. He floated down to thirty meters on full jets and moved toward the next lightning-gilded storm front, which came on the heels of the system just passed. Here, the metallic re-surfacing was most complete; reflections stabbed painfully at his optic nerve connection.

"Filter." The spoken thought damped his implant absorption to a comfortable level but it did not help to reveal any movements below. The next system drew nearer. He kept a careful distance as he watched the shiny ground slide under the lightning curtain. Bolts flashed and the sun's light shone through the churning edge of the cloud promoting the impression of chaotic motion at the margin of light into shadow. Illusions of angry flocks of barely perceived entities. Maybe I saw nothing. Lars was tense. He forced a deep breath and relaxed his muscles.

Cloud and shadow, sun and shine. But the rationalization was not enough for him to let it go. He needed reassurance: was there life here that Mother had not picked up on? He reviewed the sensor records for the immediate area around his Drift-Sail during the time that he had seen the first flitting suggestion of a shadow. The 3D data revealed no solid object anywhere above ground level. Okay, that's it then. I can get back to business. He set the ship to maintain a drifting distance between the two moving storms, pushed down the uneasiness, and turned his attention to the raw data.

After a few minutes, his mother's voice intoned, "Lars?"

"Yes?" Her voice now irritated. "What is it?"

"Are you still looking for shadows?" Right to the root of his irritation.

"No," he said tersely, as he flushed, "I'm all done with that," resentful that she brought it up.

“Oh, okay...” His pseudo-mother had adopted the annoying persona. A simpering tone that grated.

At least Lars knew that the AI sensed no threats, allowing itself the alternative annoying “mother” programming. He would usually let his impatience build before he snapped and put her in her place, but this was bad timing. He was preoccupied with the data. “Look, I don’t need this right now, Mother.”

“Well, okay...” she said plaintively, “it’s just...”

“What! What do you want?”

“The shadows...”

Worry assailed him. “The shadows?” Her query redirected his focus to the ground.

“What the holy hell...” Around his craft-shadow, an unclear number of indistinct entities circled. Across the shining land below, countless broken silhouettes glided. Indefinite obscurities, they alternately faded and strengthened depending on the size of the shadow. He reoriented his craft in a panic and searched for the source of the shadows. He yelled at the AI. “Why the hell are you playing this game with me when we’re under attack?” He tilted the craft left and right. He oriented toe-down and rotated. His desperate visual scan revealed as much as the sensors—zero.

“But Lars, there’s nothing there.”

“What the hell are you talking about? You were the one who pointed out the shadows...”

“My sensors detect no source for the shadows, therefore they must be an anomaly in the planet surface itself.”

He spit back, “Is there a worm eating your brain! Those are shadows!” His heart hammered in his chest while he continued a vain search for the originating objects, ears filled with the sound of his blood pounding.

There was nothing to be seen in the air. He rolled his craft sideways and spiraled upward so he had an outward encompassing view to both the ground and the sky above. With each turn, he could just make out the sharp, black silhouette of his own small craft on the planet surface. The vaporous shades faded into an amorphous gloom surrounding his ship-shadow, like an attack-swarm of ghosts. Yet still, the assault for which he braced did not come. He watched the vacillating shadow mass around him grow fainter as he rose, until only the tiny indication of his glider remained as a dark point in the glare. Other broken shadows still swooped along the surface, apparently uninterested in him.



He forced deep breaths through adrenalin saturation and studied one of the individual gliding shades. With almost a kilometer of distance, combined with the shadow's constant movement and distortion across the bright, broken surface, he could not be certain of the bogey's shape. The outline he was mentally compiling was vague but it was not comforting. Based on summary shadow comparisons, he estimated them to be about twice the size of his Drift-Sail.

Mother! You bitch! He was about to loose a string of curses toward his AI when, without transition, Lars was overcome by a feeling of supreme calm. He did not question the incongruity.

"Mother?"

"Yes, son?" Her patronizing tone did not trigger anger this time. "Run air pressure scans in the immediate area around the boat." She did. "Track and isolate independent eddy readings in a subtractive formula, then process the aggregate data to my heads-up as a single static 3D." A swirl of colors streamed and danced in his vision. At first, the image resembled nothing more than random vortices. But the data continued to compile into an architecture. It pulled strands of color inward into a more definite shape of the thing or things outside his ship. He felt a chill but the sense of calm remained. The coalescing form-in-motion began to solidify into a blue 3D model in his heads-up implant, painted with a rainbow of false coloration which the AI assigned to the varying millibars of pressure created by air-flow around the movements. It gave the object, or whatever, a surreal allure. The actual shape belied its beauty. *Dragons?*

The picture continued to clarify, fuzziness around it hardened into the shape of wings. No... not dragons. Sardonic tracery of large sharp teeth slowly sketched across a tall face. *Demons!*

Thy are almost double the size of my craft. How am I so calm? True, he had suffered no aggression from whatever flew around out there. Maybe there was nothing to fear.

Without warning, his Drift-Sail lurched then regained its stability. "Lars, I have compensated for an imbalance in the craft-load at the starboard glide wing." Again, the craft rocked, then rolled back to level. "I detect no object, Lars, but data suggests that there is something crawling on our craft."

Lars said nothing. He was completely calm. He found no reason to be upset at the information that the AI had just given him. An alarm bell sounded. The AI responded, "We are taking on additional mass, Lars. Adjusting jets to compensate."

The roar and vibration that accompanied this adjustment must have startled the newly-landed hitchhikers. In that instant, a dam-burst of fear flooded Lars, spiked with emotions he did not recognize: sense of fright that felt distinctly alien.

The calm that had settled upon Lars exploded. “Mother, get us out of here!”

“Yes, Lars. The mass gain has reversed and the boosters are lifting us toward orbit.”

Lars was thoroughly confused. His calm demeanor of the previous minutes had evaporated; his body was tense and he quivered with fear—he now felt *more fear* than he judged reasonable. He was not himself. As the craft rose through the atmosphere toward the darkness of space, he had a sense of being *chased* by the unfamiliar feeling-extremes, emotion augmentations that grasped at his psyche. These warred with his true subdued desperation to escape. These phantasms of feeling fell away after a minute but he kept going until there was no more atmosphere.

In a shaky voice, he said, “Mother, hold the current position. Invert for planet visual.” Without reply, the ship responded. The restraining web snugged his torso tighter into the pilot seat. Lars took the restriction personally and he gave a growl. “Not so tight.” He reached above and behind to retrieve a head-mounted visual enhancer to search for pursuers. An angry zeal rose up, born of his fearful flight. “Mother, confirm that you sensed nothing unusual while we were in the planet’s atmosphere.”

“I’m sorry Lars, but I can’t do that.” She went silent with that refusal, no further clarification.

“Explain,” Lars prompted curtly, expecting new information.

“I sensed a shift in the mass and balance of the craft.”

“And...” he prodded, his patience thin.

“That’s all, Lars.”

He’d had enough of the “Mother” mode. He addressed the AI differently to override. “Ship, summarize atmosphere and onboard sensor readings, beginning two minutes previous to the craft balance anomaly, up to the present moment.” The voice read-out changed to an androgynous voice and proceeded to tell Lars things he already knew, other than a single and illuminating piece of data—the weight of the unbalancing force. Adjusted earth weight was 77.32 kilograms initially, then it roughly doubled—a second creature—and finally, it shifted to a minus 24.2 kg just before the boosters fired.

Lars thought about that negative number; whatever was out there had taken hold of his craft and had tried to take flight. Long, bony-looking, sharp-tipped toes in the AI’s imaging of the creature sparked thoughts of damage to his craft’s glide wings. He shook his head and focused instead on that first number. The creature weighed no more than a human yet it was far larger than the Drift-Sail pod.

The existence of an alien creature this large and complex was an enormous discovery. As a scientist before anything else, this first-hand evidence demanded his attention. He had the shape and size from comparative data and Mother’s graphic, and now the weight. As to the intentions of these things,

he was not about to trust the momentary feelings of serenity as any kind of evidence of a peaceful nature. More likely, it was some evolutionary tactic for trapping food. The idea that these invisible creatures could reach into his mind was chilling.

Lars knew nothing of the recent divulgence of the intelligent aliens species—the Elementals and the Traveler—because he had entered this system almost two weeks earlier—the day before the ghost realm had staged their mass appearance to the human realm. Lars had been one of the individuals to whom no relative appeared. By an oversight, that appearance was not made known to him by Center or by Tear-N-Form Corporation. He was in the dark about the whole exposé of the enslaved alien that had powered his faster-than-light drive, and even now was unaware of its release from the containment in the bowels of his SciPod—Lars would not discover the loss of his FTL drive until the AI tried to engage the system. His own reticence to contact Corporate subsequently failed to reveal the fact that he was also without sub-space communications at this time—he knew nothing of the revelation of the second known alien, the Traveler. In his bubble of ignorance, Lars set to more data review. It helped to cool his anger and bury a deep shame at his fearful flight from the planet.

With the glider nose pitched to a downward view, through his visual enhancer Lars scanned this section of the planet surface in-between the storms. He was tens of kilometers higher than the “first-contact” elevation, above the outer layers of the atmosphere. “Magnify 100 times.” He blinked as magnification rushed the surface towards him, glinting and pulsing with waves of energy that flowed through the fully-metal-clad, angular surface. “Signal for movement.” An overabundance of red flashes across the image signaled real and apparent motions. “Process the data for non-random motion.” And there they were, outlined in red: hundreds of shadows slid back and forth across the brilliance.

It was largely empirical but, added to the rest, this amounted to solid data. His cheeks and forehead still burned with embarrassment that he masked from himself and his observant AI. He forced a relaxed, informal tone. “What do you think, Mother?”

The persona seemed to lash out at having been stowed. “Don’t you dare do anything rash, Lars.”

“Ha!” It was just what she would say. “Why? Are you concerned for your little boy?” The adaptive algorithm of the AI kept it silent. With the upper hand in the banter, his bruised ego was soothed. “No, I didn’t think so. You just don’t want to be left alone. That’s it, isn’t it?” Lars fell into the interaction with pent-up emotion. But he knew how to solve this mock power struggle. “Well, I’m going to go down there again, Mother. What do you think of that?” His defiance gave him a rush after his self-perceived cowardice.

The AI replied, "I advise against it, Lars."

He heard defeat in her tone. He snorted. He would do what he wanted.

He refused to engage the AI further, and pushed on his manual controls. The Drift-Sail dropped like a stone toward the planet.

He slowed as he attained a similar altitude as before. He was suddenly nervous. In an instant, he saw his bravado as rash. Foolish. Before he could reverse course, the supreme calm overtook him.

"It's fine, Mother, see?"

The craft rocked. "Lars, mass readings indicate that the same or identical influence has settled on the starboard sail wing."

"Yes, Mother, you worry too much. What's the temperature and breathability of the atmosphere here?"

"Thirty-one degrees C, though atmosphere would be damaging to human lungs and biology."

"What about pressure?"

Mother spoke without affectation, being completely logical, "Lars, EVA is not recommended, pressure is not the concerning factor."

"Well, there, you said it yourself. I've got nothing to worry about." He engaged the AI auto-pilot, retracted the crash web into its foot cubby, and prepped for the acid conditions that he would face as he walked out on the wing to meet the alien. As each moment passed, he felt more than just confidence; he felt a building desire. Desire to confront the unknown. Desire to bond with a new sentient being. More seconds ticked by and the emotion elevated to painful yearning. He could not get out there fast enough.

"What do you intend, Lars?" Mother's voice was nearly robotic in its lack of personality ticks. What Lars heard though was his mother's controlling nature, and he was lost in that game. He continued to banter, the anticipation of his impending rendezvous making a sport of the contest.

"I'm going to meet someone that you don't approve of and you can't talk me out of it." He began to fantasize about the being, just as he might an attractive date from his school days.

The 'Mother' programming caused the AI's warning to be structured as a plea. "Lars, I'm begging you not to open that hatch." New inflections of imperatives entered the AI vocals as it interpreted the back-and-forth nature of the exchange. It attempted a manipulation: "You would leave me?"

This particular sentiment fired deep into him, past external influences, only to trigger profound resentment. “Don’t you dare lay your guilt trip on me,” he snarled. “I’ve spent years denying my life. It’s my turn.” His reality was defined for him now.

His fingers flew over the last connections on his suit. With gloved hands, he pulled a full helmet from a cubby, touched the neck ring to his shipsuit collar and, with a soft sucking noise, he was sealed in.

Lars was almost mad with need by the time he opened the glass blister. Foregoing certain protocols, he hammered at it with his fist to break the foam seal at its edge. With a ripping sound, air pressure differences zeroed out. A sizzle followed instantly as the acid environment rushed in and began to damage susceptible control surfaces. He did not notice.

He pulled himself out of the cocoon-like cockpit and walked out onto the wing. Mother closed the hatch behind him. The staccato of thrusters vibrated under his boots as the AI worked to counter the additive imbalance.

Something was there. His arousal and the burning need to be close to this thing abated for a split-second. Lars froze in fear. Immediately, the warm sense of comfort returned. He stared at the place along the wing where the five-meter-tall creature must be—there was a slight distortion in the poisonous air, revealed by a wisp of cloud that trailed past.

Lars ignored Mother’s hails on his suit comm. She tried again, accessing an external suit speaker, “Lars, the acid has damaged system components. If you don’t come in now and return to the SciPod, you’ll be marooned. You will die.”

The auditory plea must have startled the imperceptible visitor; it loosened Lars from its influence once again. This time he screamed and turned back on this precarious perch to move toward the safety of his Drift-Sail enclosure.

He did not make it.

“MOTHER...” he called out in a voice laced with fear. Then, his pleasure centers fired to their limits. He groaned in ecstasy. His ears received the response from Mother but his brain could not cognize it. He did not care about Mother anymore. And his captor’s control did not falter again.

For some reason, which mattered not at all to Lars, the sail-wing of his craft suddenly dropped half-a-meter under his feet. He briefly floated, then fell. One boot came down on the edge of the unstable platform, and then he went over. As the AI corrected for shifting ballast, Lars tumbled past the hiss of jets, through free air. His comfort broke and he screamed. His empty life flashed by, smeared

with irreconcilable rainbow colors as he tumbled to his end; in mere seconds his lifetime-show wrapped up. Regret filled him. He balanced it with his last coherent thought: Well, at least the secret of this planet dies with me.

In the moment of his death resignation, something swept him out of the sky. When his vision stabilized he found his faceplate pressed into the skin of his abductor/rescuer. This contact did odd things to the alien dermis and hindered its normal see-thru-illusion display. Its skin-surface biology parroted the essence of its world: luminous rainbow patterns rippled across the membrane where his helmet lens pushed against it. It was all Lars could see for the moment and, with the return of the comfort-influence, it was heavenly.

He was saved. Relief permeated and replaced his expectation of death. Hands held him. More than just two, though exactly how many he could not sort. Grips loosened then tightened again, maneuvered him, gently rolled him over while he was still held tight against the thing's underside. He was in flight, close to the ground. A multitude of shadows congregated below; he imagined them to be all around, curious about what one of their own had found. And then, an alien ecstasy surged into him, as if injected into a vein. With it came a sense of mutual desire. Through his thin shipsuit Lars felt movement against his backside. The many hands pressed him deeper... into an expanding body cavity. Flesh walls to either side extended around him, up and down the length of his body. The colors raced over this internal membrane with the speed of nerve impulses. Lars Follen's response rocketed to an orgasmic frenzy as the body chamber walls folded over. His last glimpse of this world of rainbow light included gleaming, disembodied rows of teeth from a terrifying smile, as the creature craned its long, invisible neck to look at Lars as he disappeared.

Darkness replaced the frenetic light show. This time he felt no regret.