### In Charge

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#### Summary

Ampeels, a species of 'inquisitive' predators. To be inquisitive, they must have some intelligence. It turns out they have quite a bit of intelligence indeed.

#### Notes

I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Already finished this over on fanfiction, now posting it here.

Also, I started this story before Subnautica was finished, so some minor details changed when the game was fully released. Whatever.

Chapter published 6/28/17.
He groaned, and stirred awake. With a heave of effort, he turned over in his wide bed and into the spot of warmth next to him. The spot of warmth started talking. "Morning, dear," she said, giving a kiss to the top of his head.

"It's too early to be morning," he grunted. He turned away from Silvia and sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. After a few moments they adjusted to the darkness of his and his fiance's cabin. All things considered, it was a decently sized one for two people on the Aurora; a benefit of her being high up in Alterra's ranks. Two beds, a shower, coffee... he hadn't even had to pay much; Silvia Berkeley was part of the engineering crew and had brought him along on the premise he could lend his programming assistance. "What time even is it?" he mumbled.

Silvia seemed to explode out from beneath the covers, walking over to their desk and waving a hand over it. The red hologram flared to life, and Varien closed his eyes with a groan. "Six fifty, come on! We don't have to be in the engineering bay until noon."

Her hand grasped his and started tugging. "Up," she commanded simply. "I'm on the crew, remember? I've a loaded schedule today. Besides, we're passing by 4546B soon anyway and I want to get a good view before I vanish into the bowels of work. I hear it's an ocean world."

"Fiiine," he drawled, a lazy grin tugging at his lips. He got his feet under him and stood on his own. His clothes stuck to his sweaty skin after the night. He looked down at Silvia and waggled his eyebrows. "How about we shower first, then breakfast?"

Silvia hummed and shuffled up to him, pressing her chest into his and wrapping her arms around his back. "Oh, I think that sounds like a great idea," she purred.

A few minutes later they stepped out of the shower. Silvia went to go get dressed while Varien stayed in the bathroom. His hair was wild and messy, points sticking in all directions like craggy spires. "Open drawer," he said aloud. There was a little blip and sure enough, the drawer next to him opened. Varien grabbed his hair gel and got to work putting his turquoise-streaked mohawk back together. After a bit of fiddling around, he viewed himself in the mirror and grinned. "Nice," he whispered, exiting the bathroom.

Silvia was finished getting dressed, having thrown on a light blue blouse and golden pants, with her hair up in a bun. She was off in the corner, by a large gray box. Inside the box was a compartment with two cups next to each other with a dark stream of liquid pouring into each. As Varien watched, the streams cut off. "Coffee completed," the machine chirped. "Would you like cream?"

Before Silvia could open her mouth, he said, "Yes, in one of them!"

"Dispensing product," it said happily as Silvia mouthed 'wimp' at him. She took her coffee, as black as her hair, and downed it in one gulp while smiling smugly at him.

While the coffee machine took care of his cup, Varien got dressed too. He didn't pay too much mind to what he wore, just threw on a brown 'Aurora Lining Vessel' shirt and gray sweatpants. He
didn't bother with socks, just shoes.

"Come on, hurry up," Silvia said, rushing around to find her PDA. "I want to get breakfast before we pass by 4546B."

"Why are we even swinging by it?" he wondered, grabbing his sweetened coffee in one hand. "Our destination's nowhere near it."

Silvia shrugged. "I actually asked around about that. Don't tell anyone, but apparently some Mongolian ship went down there a few years back, they want to take the excuse to scan the world and see if they can find the wreckage."

Varien scoffed. "They probably crashed because they were too busy praying about the persistence of life and consciousness or something - ow!" he shouted, gripping his arm with exaggerated pain.

"Be nice," she chided. "Come on, we're gonna miss breakfast," she said, pulling her PDA - little more than a rectangular piece of plastic and electronics - off the ground and giving it a swipe. As she did, the doors to their room opened and light spilled in from the corridor beyond. Varien quickly found his own PDA, stashed it, and followed after Silvia into the Aurora's hallways.

Already, the ship's crew was up and about, scurrying through the titanic hallways he had to crane his neck back to fully appreciate. Some of the crew chattered animatedly with each other while pointing to things on their PDAs. Others operated propulsion cannons, strange mechanical devices the size of an arm with three blue prongs at the end. From the end came white streams of energy, which wrapped around titanically large metal boxes and held them aloft with ease. There was a focused air about them; they'd be in charge of scanning the water world they were flying past, after all. Once they had breakfast, Silvia would be joining them.

He and Silvia took a few turns through the Aurora, the ship's engines gently humming beneath their feet, as they told each other little jokes they'd found over the internet. They didn't pass through the Prawn bay, as they were closer to the opposite end of the ship. Eventually they found themselves in the cafeteria. After ordering from the breakfast machines - cereal and milk for Silvia, toast and a slice of orange along with some water for him - they found a table and sat there. There weren't many others there with them. A few passengers, a handful of crew members, and what he thought was a small envoy of Mongolians, keeping to themselves off in the corner.

There weren't any windows on the Aurora. Some thing about structural integrity, according to Silvia. But there were exterior cameras that could stream to their PDAs, so he and Silvia sat together and, as they ate, propped her PDA on a stand. She flicked her fingers across the glass surface and pulled up a video feed from outside the Aurora.

The screen flickered, but then displayed a bold picture of planet 4546B, the closest planet to HIP 4546. HIP 4546 was a yellow star, eleven times the size of the sun, that gave out thirty-eight times the light. 4546B was a comfortable seven-ish AU away from the enormous star, and they were coming up on it fast. They should be by closest approach in an hour or two.

Varien had to admit, it was a nice looking world. He'd never seen an ocean world before; there was something eerily beautiful about a solid blue marble, cloaked in streaks of clouds and capped on either end with ice, floating through the void. It even had two moons, one closer than the other, in the backdrop. "Sure is something," he said through a mouthful of food. "Wonder if they're still alive down there."

"Jeez, I kinda almost hope they aren't," Silvia said. "Can you imagine living alone like that, surrounded by aliens and maybe any other survivors for years on end? Nobody else to talk to but
who you have, nowhere to go if you need space, no internet, no entertainment, no relaxation. Just constant stress, day in and day out." She shivered.

Varien put an arm around her and gave her a peck on the cheek, grinning madly. "Well, I imagine if it was us then somehow I'd survive having only you around," he teased.

"Aww." She kissed him back.

They finished up their breakfast, watching the orb of 4546B rotate on its axis. Eventually they finished and got up. "Anyway," Varien said. "I have to go help with the crew logs. They still haven't found that memory leak."

"Right, you go do that," she said, pushing him off the bench as he stood. "I've gotta head off, too. Yu's been riding my ass. See you around."

"Love you, honey," he said, leaning in. "See you later."

They kissed again, and when they pulled away both of them smiled. "Love you too!" Silvia said, before heading towards the tunnel that led to the Seamoth bay. Meanwhile, he headed towards the upper levels. There were more and more crew members this high up, and the hum of the Aurora's dark matter drive was quiet. He passed a row of emergency escape pods, and headed down an elevator to the server room. It was a deceptively long walk; the Aurora was massive. Along the way, some of the other programmers greeted him.

"Hey."

"Hi there, Varien."

"Say hi to Ms. Berkeley for me!"

He returned a few greetings, then found a seat at a nearby terminal. A lightbar sat in front of him, just a glowing line in the desk. He waved a hand over it, and a hologram materialized over it. With that done, Varien got to work. He and the others had been tackling a memory leak recently. The Aurora's systems were failing to properly delete some data, but the data was still rendered inaccessible, so the junk kept building up and up and taking up their memory. The quantum computers had a lot of storage, but they were also producing junk at a relativistic pace. Finding the problem was just such a headache, even with all the crew around also working on it.

"Is it there?" he asked himself, scanning over the code onscreen. There was nothing wrong. Everything was working as it should be. But maybe it was causing a problem with the lines under ShipExhaustHandler? "Computer, bring up - "

**BOOM!**

Varien flew out of his seat, as did everyone else, and landed on the ground with an 'Oof'! For a moment all the light died, stranding him in utter blackness. A heartbeat later the auxiliary lights kicked in, rows of searing white forming along the bottoms of the walls.

"What the hell?!" someone shouted. Varien tried to stand, only to find himself standing along the walls as gravity changed around him.

"Warning!" the ship's autopilot blared, drowning out all thought with her volume. "Multiple severe hull breaches detected! Emergency evacuation in progress! All personnel, report to emergency escape pods!"
Evacuation?

Breaches?

Escape pods?!

He scrambled to his feet and made for the door. He stumbled, leaning forward with his arms flailing as he tried to catch his balance, and in his haste he accidentally shoved someone. He left the room, trying to remember where the escape pods were, and ran.

Varien's mind shut off. His brain stopped forming thoughts that could be interpreted as sentences. The only thing that went through his mind was a vague sense of 'out the door, to the left, one stair flight down, escape pods', underlined by a desperate panic that clenched his throat and made the pounding of his blood deafening. His feet moved on their own, and then gravity flipped to the right and he landed with a grunt. He was first out the server room's door. He didn't look behind him.

To the left, one stair flight down, escape pods.

His feet skidded along the ceiling as he headed to the left, or was it right? It didn't cross his mind to question it. He just knew which way the escape pods were. Behind him there was a blast of searing heat that briefly cast the metal in front of him in warm red.

One stair flight down, escape pods.

He careened down the stairs, which were now right side up as gravity spun back to normal. Varien ran into the escape pod tunnel. He caught a brief glimpse of some others getting into various pods, and he distantly heard the whoosh as they ejected. He found a door with a crimson number five over it, and grabbed the door to open it.

Then gravity cut out entirely.

"AH!" he shouted, his feet floating behind him as he struggled to open the door. Another explosion rocked the Aurora.

"Attention! Power failure imminent!" the autopilot intoned like a death knell. "All personnel - "

With a heave of effort, Varien opened the door to escape pod five, only to fall flat on his stomach when gravity returned.

"- abandon ship!" He ran through the open door, not even bothering to close it behind him. Varien found himself in a cramped room, barely large enough for him alone. The floor was made of some shiny white metal, and had a glass hatch right in the center. He threw the hatch open. A ladder, into an escape pod. He had to go.

Moving off instinct and pure adrenaline, he hopped in and slid down the ladder, the hatch closing automatically behind him. He didn't even take a moment to process the escape pod's interior, he just found a seat and bee lined towards it.

BOOM!

Another explosion rocked the Aurora, forcing him to stumble forward. Luckily, forward was still in the direction of the seat and he all but collapsed into it. The seat formed a black mass around him, plastic and yielding easily to his body. There was a lap bar above it, currently out of place, and the right arm had a bright blue control screen on it. Once he was on, he pressed the white button.
The lap-bar swung down and over him, and at the same time the escape pod spoke. "Launch in three -"

Varien breathed out uneasily, his mind still rushing to process what had happened. He felt like he was forgetting something.

" - two - "]

Silvia. Silvia! She wasn't in the pod with him. Nobody was! Where was she, was she okay, had she gotten to a -

" - one!"

A sound like a potato fired from an air cannon stole the breath from his lungs as the entire pod jolted. Varien glanced up and saw the Aurora's hull receding into the distance, blue sparks spilling from its side while crimson flame burst from the seams. There was another, colossal explosion that nearly burst his eardrums and rattled his bones, but then he had other things to worry about.

Because apparently, his pod chose that moment to hit atmosphere. Everything began to shake, his skeleton jostling about inside his body. He glanced around, inspecting the escape pod. It was a squat hemisphere with a ladder up the center. There was a fabricator, communicator, diagnostics screen, fire extinguisher, and even a medical kit shelf, all on the walls. The diagnostics screen was lit up with red letters. Varien didn't have time to read all of it, but the last line caught his attention.

*Brace for impact.*

Oh no.

Then, the fire extinguisher next to him flew out of its casing and slammed into the ladder. It clattered to the floor and then flew into the opposite wall. Another slam, and red lights began to flood the entire pod. The storage compartment opened up and a panel came loose. It exposed a field of sparking, damaged wires. Varien stared transfixed, barely even breathing, as both panel and fire extinguisher clattered haphazardly around his trembling pod. The panel sunk to the ground. Then it lifted into the air and flew right at hi -

... 

... 

... 

When the world returned, it was blurry and orange. Varien's head lolled about, sweat pouring from his light brown skin. Ugh, his head. That was going to swell up. Why was it so hot? Where even was he? And man, what was that bright light to his left? He held up a hand to try and block it, only for his hand to quickly start feeling uncomfortably warm. Something was... loud, too. Like a siren.

Exactly like a siren. Because that light was fire!

Varien's head jerked towards the fire, and once again conscious thought fled him. All of a sudden he could barely breathe from the smoke, and the seat's lap-bar was crushing his lungs. He had to get out! He brought his fingers to the control panel on his seat and pressed, but he couldn't hit any of the buttons so all he got was a 'cannot process' message.

No, no no no. He was not going to die by being roasted just because he couldn't get out of his chair! He slammed his fist on the control panel, and *that* registered. The lap bar opened up and he
all but spilled onto the searing metal floor, grunting. He backed off from the fire, shielding his eyes
from the glare, then spotted the fire extinguisher just a stone's throw from him.

He grabbed at it and -

"AH! AHKH! ACH! HRAAACH!" His shouts trailed off into hacking coughs as his fingers
touched the scorching metal. All the same he lifted the fire extinguisher and pointed the nozzle at
the grease fire engulfing his lifepod. White mist shot out, so forceful he fell back onto his ass and
the fire extinguisher tumbled from his hands.

He crawled over to it, grasped it in burning hands, and pointed it back at the fire. He held down the
lever and braced himself for the kick. White foam blew out and sealed itself over the flame before
boiling away just as fast, taking the fire with it. With the grace of a madman he drowned the fire in
retardant, until there was nothing left but smoke wafting out through the air filters. Only then did
he set his fire extinguisher down, brushing his blistering fingers on his shirt.

His PDA. He had his PDA somewhere on him when the ship started to blow up, right? Those
things were regulation, they had some sort of... emergency feature, right?

It turned out, Varien did still have his PDA, in his pants pocket. He pulled it out, brushed the soot
off of it, and pressed the power button.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, four red letters lit up the glass. Booting in emergency
mode. Meanwhile, the assistant began speaking to him through his brain implants. "PDA
initializing in emergency mode. Moderate head trauma detected," it said in a flat, feminine voice as
his PDA continued to boot, circles spinning within each other. "Your personal data assistant now
has one directive and one directive only: to keep you alive on an alien world. To this end, it - "

Just as she said that, the PDA lit up with a list of... blueprints for items? At the same time
something appeared in the corner of his vision. A large green circle, with smaller orange, red, and
blue circles beneath it. At least his brain implants could still stream data to his optic center.

" - will organize your dive suit's inventory, display currently available construction blueprints, and
hold other valuable information and programs. Please take a moment to familiarize yourself with its
various functions. Good luck."

Alright, alright. Varien did just that, taking a moment. The green circle lodged in his vision was
'Oxygen', and had a slowly rising and falling number of seconds within the circle. It seemed to stay
mostly around forty-five seconds. The orange circle had a small apple, the red one - which wasn't
filled all the way in, he noticed - a heart, and the last one a drop of water. He thought 'towards' the
red circle and it expanded, pushing away the other circles to show him a gray, 2D human body
with several red spots across its body. Light burns, blisters, head trauma... it didn't look good.

Blinking away the in-depth health report, Varien tucked his PDA away and started climbing the
ladder. They'd crashed on... what planet was this again? 4546B. What was so special about 4546B?
He couldn't quite remember, his head was still filled with cotton.

He pushed the hatch open and pulled himself on top of his hatch. The first thing that struck him
was the heat, with a blistering humidity that seemed intent on cooking him alive. The sky was blue,
and the air smelled heavily of sea salt. He couldn't see the planet's sun from where he was facing,
but he did see the Aurora, off in the distance. Its massive outline dominated the horizon, tilted at an
odd angle.

Catastrophic hull failure was right. Massive holes were carved through its engines, spilling black smoke into the cloudless sky. The entire massive vessel had sunken halfway into the water.

The water.

Varien looked around, and he suddenly remembered what was special about 4546B. Ocean planet. Almost no dry land at all, and absolutely no dry land in sight. Nothing but uniform, choppy water in all directions.

"... zero human life signs detected in one hundred meter range," the assistant continued helpfully.

His heart sank into his stomach, and his mouth hung open. No human life signs. Did... was his life pod the only one to eject? His lungs grew tight and a lump settled into his throat. Silvia! Was Silvia alright? He couldn't see any life pods by scanning the horizon, but for all he knew some of the pods had landed on the other side of the planet. Right? That could happen, right?!

Water for miles around. No humans in sight. His life pod rocked on the waves uneasily, smoke still spilling up from the damaged wires and out the open hatch. The realization didn't hit Varien all at once. It didn't come in a slowly encroaching wave of terror. It ebbed and flowed like the tides, nausea rushing over him before receding to be replaced with numbing fear, one after another.

"I am so screwed," he whispered.

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Earlier...

Volara

With a crackle of her prongs, she woke herself up from rest and stretched. She sent a few sparks down her body, then swam out of her cave into the open, inky waters of her territory. Her stomach rumbled, so that definitely meant it was time to go hunting!

The long spines of the oil vines reached upwards from the black stone, as they always did, splitting into multiple ends like a green-blaster's legs and spilling faint, light-blue light into the water. Volara took a deep gulp of water through her mouth, and began beating her tail against the water to swim, hunting for any prey.

Small prey were everywhere. Lightly nipping at the gray detritus that fell from Above, pecking at the hardened globules of oil, swimming in schools nestled between branches of the vines. She eyed them and growled hungrily, readying her prongs. The bone-fish were quick and agile, but she was a shocker, apex predator of the world!

Prongs crackling with an indistinct phrase, she swam full speed into the nearest school, her swim bladder fluctuating as she did. The bone-fish saw her coming of course, her arcs were cuttingly bright in the darkness of the water. Half of them tried swimming away. Another half went perfectly still and started sinking to the distant ocean floor. None of them would get away. Maybe playing dead would trick a crawler, or a green-blaster, but not her. She ran a charge through her prongs, and let it out into the water. Her brilliant power lit up the stone, arcing into the fish and leaving the water tingly, leaving it hot. The bone-fish twitched, but then they started to sink for real. Volara took great pleasure in snapping them up in her jaws, feeling their slimy, salty flesh sliding across her tongue and down her throat.

Ah, that felt good. That'd keep her fed for a good, long while.

With her belly full, Volara decided it'd be good to patrol the perimeter of her territory. Swimming
happily, she inspected her lands. It was good. It was right. She couldn't smell the ionized water of a recent shoker passing through. Though there were a few odd currents. Probably some summoners wandering through. She flinched guiltily; hopefully they were gone. Hopefully they'd never be back.

She reached the edge of her territory, a series of risen cliffs with deep caves leading into their depths, where she sometimes hunted crawlers and chompers. Volara came to a halt, half curled around a vинestalk, and inspected the drop from the cliff face. The black stone fell quickly, carved into canyons by the currents. Faint blue light shone down from far above, sparkling through the water and casting a tepid light upon the lands. Far to the side she could see the stone arching up to the Above. She'd been up there once or twice, when she was a fry. Mother had shown her the white stone, the feeble armored creatures swimming beyond. There was nothing up there for her.

Volara lashed her tail against the water and swam out of her territory, into the unclaimed space that green-blasters liked to frequent. She spotted a few with her emerald eyes, crawling along the stone and hunting down bone-fish, but she paid them no mind. As long as they didn't get in her way, she was happy to leave them alone.

Green-blasters tasted horrid, anyway.

She meandered aimlessly across the unclaimed lands, sending the occasional arc of power down her body. Soon, she saw more familiar tracts of land, a honeycomb of caves and canyons. The territory of Herzaron and his consort, Teslara. She peered closer, looking for any of them... aha! She saw something off in the distance, a series of undulating lights that was the telltale sign of a shoker's prongs. Even as she watched, Volara saw a crackle of azure power race down the shoker's form, the equivalent of sighing quietly.

Volara swam closer, up to the border of their territory, and lit up her series of prongs, forming the pattern of, "Hello!" Now that she was closer, she could make out the pattern of swirls along the shoker's carapace. This was Herzaron! "How is everything, Herzaron?" she asked.

He came to a stop, then swam closer. He wove between vines and chomped at the air happily. "Volara! It's been a while." He contorted about in the water to look behind him, then turned back to her, sending a happy crackle through his pair of chin prongs. "Everything's going great. Had to chase off a summoner and green-blower recently though, those two were really going at it."

Her hearts suddenly clenched. "A summoner? Fighting a green-blower? In your territory? You're sure you're alright? What about Teslara, or the fries?"

"I know, I know," Herzaron responded. "But if it had the Green Weakness, it was in the very early stages, and it's gone now anyway. Teslara's fine, she's taking the little ones out to teach them to hunt right now, on the other side of our territory actually." Volara still wasn't sure... if there was a summoner in his territory...

As if sensing her worry, Herzaron swam closer and gave her a little zap. Her prongs lit up in a giggle and she swam a little ways back. "Hey, stop worrying," he chided. "Your line is strong, my line is strong. The fries are fine. Now anyway, what does bring you by? Get lost hunting?" he asked teasingly.

She did a roll in the water. "That was one time," she groused. "But no, I just found a school of bone-fish, I'll be set for a while. I just thought I'd visit, see how our clutch is doing. I can't help but worry," she explained, glancing down at the black stone, covered in a thin film of oil. From so far away, the normally red light the oil pustules gave off was a sickly green.
"Well, I'm glad to have you," Herzaron said. "Teslara and I were actually thinking of coming to visit you, once the little ones get a hang of area shocks."

"Oh!" she said, swimming slightly higher. "Oh, of course! I'd be delighted. I'll start heading back, getting the caves ready." She swam in and bumped the side of her armored head against Herzaron's, then backed off. "Swift currents to you, Herzaron!"

"You too!" he replied, before turning back and heading deeper into his territory.

With lifted spirits, Volara made it back to her territory in record time, even considering she had to fry a green-blaster that proved too stupid to live. She wove between cliffs and caves, twisting and turning, and occasionally brushing her tail against the stalks of a vine. What was she going to do with Herzaron, Teslara, and their six fries coming over? She... she needed to smooth out a few cradle plants, smear some oil along her underside, maybe brush her prongs in the feather-plants...

Then, something far above her flooded the world with light. Volara froze, and glanced up through the water. The blueness shining down suddenly blossomed into a dull green, and then for a moment it was as if night fell because all light from above just vanished as something colossal swam through the water far, far above her. Then it was gone and the light returned to normal...

**WHUM-KABOOM!**

A distant crash, and a light pulse of pressure in the water that made Volara's swim bladder do flips inside of her. Then it was over. Volara looked left and right. She rose up a tad, then sank back to the ocean floor. "What in the world?" she muttered.

Before she could put it out of her mind, she saw something else in the water, far above. From so far it only looked like a black dot, leaving a brief trail of silver behind it. Confused, Volara swam into a nearby cluster of vines and quieted her prongs, watching as the strange thing fell deeper and deeper, into her territory.

Soon, she realized it was some sort of... egg, mostly white, and leaving a trail of bubbles behind it as it sunk. Then all at once it stopped producing bubbles, and fell the rest of the distance to the ocean floor with a muffled crash, landing right in the lowest, clearest part of Volara's territory. There was some odd red pattern on its marbled surface.

Weird. Volara had never seen anything like this. A glance up showed more pieces of blackness falling, but these weren't pearly eggs. They looked more like ravaged and distorted pieces of her home's black rock. They drifted down and settled around her territory like the gray detritus that bone-fish sometimes fed from.

Speaking of bone-fish, there weren't any, nor were there any chompers. The strange egg's crash had scared them all away. Volara was about to swim over there and smash it before it could hatch and scare more of her prey away when its top opened up and something emerged from it.

It was like nothing she'd ever seen. Four limbs, long and gangly, around a central torso. It somewhat reminded her of the crawlers, but there was no giant eye, nor was the torso circular. The legs bent in all the wrong ways, and its head wasn't a set of pincers, but instead more like some round... knob. Its skin was dark gray, blending in well with its surroundings, but with orange streaks along its limbs. What in the world was this thing? Did the egg just hatch now?

As Volara watched, silent and intrigued, it swam slowly and meticulously towards one of the black pieces that had fallen after the egg. It grabbed one, hefting it in its strange limbs, and started swimming back to its egg. She paid more attention, and when it opened its egg back up she
momentarily saw some sort of... boundary between the water and the egg. Like something inside the egg were keeping all the water out.

What was this thing?

What was it doing?

... could she eat it?

Volara watched as the creature made a few more trips. It went for the light blue crystals that grew from the surrounding rocks, grabbing them and hoisting them back inside. Around that time the bone-fish recovered their courage and swam back into the area. Then the creature returned, this time with a strange tube on its back, and started hunting the small fish.

It was... uh... it was really bad at it.

Bone-fish weren't exactly the fastest things out there. Their main form of defense was to play dead and hope whatever was hunting them didn't want to risk eating rotten flesh. But this thing could barely move at all, struggling to beat its limbs against the water, as though the surrounding liquid itself was overwhelmingly heavy. It had no prongs, so it couldn't zap them. It clearly wasn't a good swimmer; why didn't it just land on the stone and run around like the crawlers did? It struggled and flailed about, not able to grab even a single one of the fish. It was actually pretty sad to watch.

It finally gave up, and settled for grabbing a hardened pustule of oil in its hands and returning to its egg. Egg? Maybe it wasn't an egg, but rather its shelter? That would explain why it kept going back. But what was it doing in there? Maybe it was time for Volara to go and see.

Before she could, though, the shelter opened up again, and this time two of the creatures swam out!

This second one was ever so slightly smaller than the other, its limbs shorter. And it was a little hard to see, but Volara could swear this one's torso had two rounded bumps next to each other. The duo of creatures swam about, looking intensely for something, but she had no idea what.

UCK UCK UCK UCK! Oock oock oock oock!

She perked up and relaxed her swim bladder, letting herself rise slightly. That was a green-blaster. Volara scanned the area for a moment and, sure enough, there it was. It descended from the water, four lifeless eyes fixed on the shelter and the two creatures. The two creatures spun around in the water. Volara assumed they were staring at the green-blaster, but where were their eyes? At most, their knobby 'heads' had a smooth, shiny dome on one side.

"Mmr!" one of the creatures vocalized, and they both started swimming as fast as they could for their shelter. But they were terrible swimmers, their exploration had taken them far away from their shelter, and the green-blaster was descending upon them with incredible speed, pincers and mandibles ready to rend and tear.

Volara gave her prongs an agitated crackle. No. Oh damnable death, no! This was her territory and her prey. This green-blaster needed a firm lesson! She shot out from her shelter of several vines, sending their oil globules tumbling to the ground. She focused and lit up all her prongs at once, wreathing herself in an electrical barrier as she zipped right at the green-blaster.

It shrieked in panic as she approached, and tried to swim away from the little creature it'd been tormenting - the one without bumps on its torso - but there was no escape from a shocker. There was no escape from her. The currents of her tailfin tossed the strange creature away. Volara opened her jaws as she approached and bit one of its four eyes out.
Greenish-yellow ichor burst into her mouth and the water, filling her nasal cavity with the heavenly scent of blood as she tore out the eye and spat it out. The insolent creature that tried to hunt in her territory warbled once in pain, then all at once went still as her bright blue wrath crashed through the water and fried it inside and out with a sharp crack. The green-blaster slowly started to float away. There, that was good. Now, the creatures. The one the green-blaster had been tormenting was swimming away, towards the Above. She turned to other one and... oh.

Oops.

It floated mostly in place, so much smaller up close than it had seemed from far away. With a single beat of her tail, Volara came closer to it and peered into the glossy plate on its head. Now that she was closer she saw it wasn't shiny, but transparent. Inside was something far more recognizable as a head, but only barely. Two eyes and a mouth, but what was that beaky thing with two holes? Or the shiny black strands at the top?

"Mmmph! Nnnrrrr!" it warbled. Its smooth plate was cracked now. It looked like water was... rushing into the creature's headspace. Which was strange because that meant there wasn't water inside normally.

There was now, though.

The creature was still alive, but its legs jerked spasmodically and its eyes went wide in terror when Volara came into its view. It opened its mouth wide, only for bubbles to pour forth as water rushed inside. Then...

Crunch!

Its two-bumped torso went noticeably flatter, collapsing inward with a wet crunch that made Volara wince. Then the creature's struggles grew frantic, its muffled, panicked gargles pouring forth even after no more bubbles spilt from its mouth. It beat its limbs at the water with the desperate strength of the dying, but made no progress in any direction.

Alright, that was enough. Volara didn't know what this creature was, but she could tell that it was in a tremendous amount of pain. She fired up her prongs again, and zapped the creature. It choked once, then went still. Then it began to sink.

Volara circled around it, then grabbed one of its puny, puny limbs in her mouth - seriously, these things were tiny, a little smaller than even her head! - and bit down.

Dark green blood, a different shade than what she was used to, filled the water and she backed off, spitting the severed arm out as a rush of bubbles spilled from within its shell. Blech! That tasted horrible! Like old and shriveled vine-oil! A swarm of chompers could have this thing. She sure wouldn't eat it.

What about the shelter, though?

A few beats of her tail brought her down to it. It was still closed, and she didn't know how to 'open' the top like the creatures had. Though now that she was next to it, Volara could make out more details. Collapsed orange rings around the shelter's bottom, their color fading to greenish-blue where the light from nearby vines didn't penetrate. There was a series of yellow rungs along its outside, forming a duo of bands. There was another transparent thing in the top, and Volara peered in. It took some effort, since she could only manage to look with one eye at a time, but there were even more features inside the water-filled thing, things she had no way of identifying other than weirdly shaped.
Could she eat their shelter? Worth a shot.

Volara swam over to a portion of the mysterious object that was almost all white and opened her mouth wide. Then she darted her head out and chomped. Her fangs bit into the shelter, and her strong jaws tore a wide segment of the thing clean off. She backed away and tasted the white sheet with her tongue... and spat it right back out. Ugh, even worse than the creatures themselves. It was like a rock. She started swimming away, leaving the sundered 'egg' and the sunken creature to be devoured by the chompers. She still had to get ready for Herzaron and Teslara's visit, after all.

She'd probably forget all about those unfortunate creatures before long.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Montage of Misery

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Thanks to A Mage's Apprentice for editing!

Chapter published 6/29/17.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Varien

Okay, first things first. He needed to take stock of what he had.

Varien slid back into his lifepod and sealed the hatch. It was much cooler inside, but still balmy and warm, dark and smokey and filled with the sound of sparks and error beeping. Actually, no. Closing the hatch was a bad idea. He climbed back up the ladder and propped it open, letting his lifepod ventilate.

He went over to the storage container at one end and looked inside. There... wasn't much. A dive suit that would help negate decompression sickness - but not entirely - two flares, two bottles of water, and two solid brown nutrient blocks. Varien put the fire extinguisher inside, put the dive suit on over his clothes, and drank one of the bottles of water. Was he supposed to ration? He didn't think so. He needed the water eventually, what did it matter if he drank it now or later? Or did he lose more water while more hydrated?

Wait, was that an actual thing? He didn't know. "PDA, does the human body lose water faster while hydrated or dehydrated?" he asked.

For a moment there was static, then... "Human biological data corrupted. Apologies for that. Situational analysis: T-plus three hours since planetfall. Lifepod hull: secure. Communications offline." Oh great, so he'd been sitting unconscious in a burning lifepod for three hours! He didn't want to imagine what sort of brain damage he'd gotten if he'd been out for so long.

"Damn it!" he shouted. "Is there any environmental data at least?"


Something in that struck him, and he stumbled backward until he was sitting on a bench.

"Atmosphere," he muttered. "I didn't check the atmosphere before I went up. I could've died just like that," he realized. No, he couldn't afford to be careless like that again. He had to be more cautious. He had to know what to look for before it killed him.

But he had no idea what to look for. Then he glanced into the corner of his sight where the implants in his brain displayed some crucial elements of survival. Food, water, oxygen, and his health. Alright. "So get food and water, don't drown, and don't get yourself killed. I can handle that," he breathed.
There was a closed medical cabinet, and he couldn't open it. Probably busted. The panel that had
brained him still rested in the corner, and a section of the wall was broken off, exposing sparking
wires. Apparently the lifepod's life support systems were offline, which was probably terrible even
if he felt mostly fine. The communications relay was, just as his PDA said, busted, its red LED
light dark.

The fabricator! Was that at least working? Varien stumbled over to it and pressed the 'On' button...
and the fabricator opened up, lowering its table and pointing its laser constructors at it. Inside it
was a touchscreen, listing the various materials it could make. "Oh thank you, thank you," he
muttered, sifting through the fabricator. He needed a good idea of what he could and could not
make, so he could decide where to go from there. It was a little hard to focus with the way his
lifepod bobbed up and down in the water, but he persevered.

Eventually, Varien settled on an Oxygen Tank and mask, so that he could spend more time
underwater. Flippers sounded nice, but under silicone rubber the fabricator just listed 'high source
of oil required'. First things first, he needed more air than just the forty-odd seconds he could hold
in his lungs.

Varien stepped to the side and opened the lower hatch. Staring straight down he saw crystal blue
water, and some spots of color. Hopefully nothing would kill him the instant he set foot in the
water. Varien took a deep breath, pressed his nose shut with one hand, and plunged into the ocean.

Water instantly rushed into his ears and pressed at his eyes, so keeping them open was a struggle.
But he did open them, and...

Wow, he thought.

It was gorgeous. Sandy rocks stretched all around him, covered in shifting rays of sunlight.
Multicolored flora clung to the rocks, swaying in the currents. Veined blue fans, clusters of purple
mushrooms, and so many more. Alien fish chattered and swam around him like nothing he could
have ever imagined. A small blue thing with giant yellow eyes on either side, releasing carefree
childlike laughter. Transparent, membranous fish that slowly rippled through the water. Blue,
spotted rays with orange ears drifted among them. The rays were deceptively large, about as long
as he was tall.

Then his lungs started to tighten. Varien swam out from underneath his pod and broke the surface,
gasping for breath. The choppy waves threatened to send him back under, but with air in his lungs,
Varien was buoyant enough to stay above them.

Alright, he thought. Alright, back in.

With one last deep breath, Varien dove back underwater and scanned the seabed for anything
useful. In moments, he spotted it. A cluster of white-blue crystals about the size of his fist, sticking
up from the ocean floor. He dove down towards it, feet kicking at the water, and grabbed it in both
hands. A solid chunk of quartz. Would it be enough to make glass? He didn't know. His fabricator
had specified a certain amount of grams, but - air!

With the crystal in his hands, Varien swam up to the surface for another breath. He made a stop in
his lifepod to dump the quartz, then headed back in.

Already, his muscles were burning from opposing not just the water, but also the currents. This was
going to be miserable.
In the end, it took two chunks of quartz to be able to make the piece of glass an oxygen tank needed. Getting the titanium needed proved to be much, much harder.

There was metal wreckage in the area. Plenty of it, and that was no surprise given how relatively close the Aurora was. But the metal was heavy, and even the closest, smallest piece of scrap he could find took what felt like hour of struggling underwater to pull aboard. But finally, finally, Varien got it. With himself and the piece of wreckage back in his escape pod - his muscles quivering from their abuse and his stomach growling - he had his fabricator start breaking the salvage down for usable titanium. While that was ongoing, Varien sat and pulled up his PDA, scrolling through its logs.

There was only one data entry at present. A ReadMe congratulating him on his survival, assuring him that the hard part was over. Somehow, he doubted that. He wasn't sure about how useful the vital sign monitors being broadcast directly into his brain's vision center would be, though. He could feel when he was thirsty, he could feel when he was hungry, or hurt, or needed air. Though... he could expand them for more details. He practiced a bit, and soon came to decide it would, in fact, be quite useful. The nutrient monitor could also give him knowledge of any deficiencies. His oxygen meter would presumably also let him know how much air was left in his tank, and the health readout would be useful if he ever got hurt. He was feeling much better though, in regards to his burns and head wound.

It also let him know his suit could store items in a stasis inventory, rather than him having to lug it all by hand. He was not a clever man.

The next thing on his PDA was a survival checklist, one that he'd neglected to look at until now like an idiot! Stupid, stupid, stupid. He told himself he'd stop running off before making sure he had everything, and he immediately goes out into the alien ocean before looking at his survival blueprint? He'd be lucky to live long enough to dehydrate to death at that rate!

"Administer first aid if required, not required," he read aloud, leaning against a wall. "Survey environment for threats and resources - I'll do that next swim. Take inventory of supplies, and figure out rations. Well its only me, so there we go. Construct necessary survival equipment using fabrica - okay but what is necessary? Tell me these things, dammit!" he shouted.

His PDA beeped. "Due to vast variance in possible hostile worlds, this PDA was not downloaded with a specific category of what is necessary and what is not. Each planet is different, you will simply have to use your own judgement," it droned in its robotic female voice.

"Oh, thanks," he groused. "Anyway, check lifepod for damage and repair as necessary. Plenty of damage, but I'm floating. So I'll need a repair tool once I get my oxygen tank. Broadcast distress signal, well I'll have to fix my comms relay first. Locate other survivors, construct a more permanent habitat, with that habitat builder I presume, maintain physical and psychological help - err, health until rescue arrives." He closed his PDA and stood. Alright, he had a plan. Survival equipment, repair tool. Then repair his lifepod, and use the comms relay to find other survivors on the planet. Once they met up, they'd make a habitat and wait for rescue.

Survival equipment, what did he need?

"Titanium complete!" his PDA chimed.

"Oh!" he said, jumping. Sure enough, the fabricator had broken the salvage down into four fist-sized chunks of black metal. He fed the machine the chunk of glass he'd made, two of the titanium lumps, and watched in fascination as it got to work. The blue lasers spewed their materials onto the table, assembling his equipment molecule by molecule. In little over a minute, an oxygen tank with
an attached mask was ready. varien put it on, slinging it into the specially designed spot on his
dive suit's back, and fastened the mask over his mouth. a bit heavy, but he could manage.

in the corner of his vision, the oxygen counter jumped up from forty-five seconds to four thousand.
an hour's supply of air, not bad.

Alright, so he needed... fins, so swimming wouldn't tire him out. And for that he needed to locate
some oil source. also, locate local threats and resources. he needed food and water. Food he wasn't
sure about, but water needed bleach, so he'd just have to find a way to get salt and calcium
carbonate. a welder was critical, but where was he going to find sulfate and sulfurtransferase? or
make batteries for that matter? The more he thought about it, the more insurmountable his task
seemed by the second.

As if to give him even more to worry about, his PDA took that opportunity to tell him, "Detecting
increased local radiation levels. Trend is consistent with ongoing degradation of the Aurora's dark
matter drive core, due to damage sustained during collision. Continuing to monitor."

So... now he also needed to worry about being irradiated. What did a radiation suit need again?

Night was falling, and the giant blood red moon hung in the sky alongside its smaller, white
counterpart. When varien dragged himself back into his lifepod for what felt like the hundredth
time that day, he felt he'd gotten a lot done. Sure his muscles were in agony from all the swimming,
but he now sported a scanner tool, and... and, well, that was it. Figuring out how to make a battery
had taken him a lot of trial and error. Eventually he found his fabricator could use the acid of the
local mushrooms as a replacement for battery acid.

The copper necessary was even harder to find. The strange limestone chunks that grew off the side
of the walls were odd, but they looked brittle so varien wondered if maybe he could break one.
And he could, eventually. With his oxygen tank providing him an hour of air, he had all the time in
the world to punch away at a limestone chunk he'd chosen to focus on, until finally it cracked open
like an egg... and deposited a chunk of lead into his gloved hands.

Well, the radiation suit did need lead, so it wasn't a complete waste.

The next piece of limestone, however, had given him a lump of copper. And with that he could
make a battery to make a scanner tool. And then night fell, sleep tugged at his eyelids, and varien
knew he absolutely had to sleep, or he'd pass out in the middle of the ocean and drown.

Part of him worried. He'd been unconscious for three hours after the crash. How much else had
happened? Had the other survivors regrouped? Was silvia among them, worrying about him? oh
stars above, he hoped she was among them. he just had to -

His stomach growled and his throat tickled. With a sigh, varien downed the second and final bottle
of water the lifepod had come with and took a nibble of the nutrient block's corner. Just a little,
enough to last him through the night. He'd need to find food and water soon, though. Dehydration
killed quickly, but that was a problem for the next day.

settling against the lifepod's hull, varien's eyes shut and he was out like a light.

"Caution!" his PDA warned, dragging him from dreamless sleep. "Continued degradation of the
Aurora's drive core may cause a quantum detonation." A quantum what? varien rubbed his eyes
blearily; he'd made sure to clean his gloves of lead. quantum detonation? he wasn't an engineer,
damn it. "If the drive core is breached, probability of death by exposure to radioactive crash site materials increases from six percent to thirty-seven percent."

Okay, that sounded bad. He needed that radiation suit desperately. But where was he going to get fiber mesh? He liked to think himself so smart; he was a programmer fluent in C100, after all. But all his intellect was for naught here. He wasn't a survivalist. This wasn't his field of expertise. He was going to die here. Everyone was going to die. He would be forgotten and everything he'd ever done would be destroyed and everything he might've ever done would be erased...

Once he got over that bout of despair, he stood and worked the cricks out of his back. He secured his oxygen tank and mask before plunging back into the warm water, scanner tool in hand. On a whim, he pointed it at himself and held the trigger.

Pale light showered over him from the scanner's crystalline arc, cascading and pulsing across his entire body while the scanner's menu rolled upwards to one hundred percent. "Performing self scan," his PDA told him once it was done. "Vital signs normal. Detecting trace amounts of foreign bacteria. Continuing to monitor." Foreign bacteria? Probably no big deal. After all, it was bacteria on an alien world. Diseases had enough trouble crossing the species barrier on the same planet, let alone to an alien lifeform from a different planet entirely.

Varien swam around, looking for anything that could help him. Oils, fibers, food, water. But nothing. All he saw were corals, stone, and fish swimming around him in multicolored schools.

His mind backtracked. Fish. Food and water. Fish. Food and water. He nearly smacked himself. Of course, it was obvious!

Varien swam towards the closest fish, a mostly transparent one comprised of a twig-thin body with large, pulsating sacks on either side of its body. Its one visible eye, giant in proportion to its body, looked at him, but then his hand reached out and closed around it.

"New creature discovered! Labeling... Bladderfish!" his PDA helpfully mentioned. "Alien lifeforms may have unexpected characteristics," it reminded him as he struggled to keep his grip around the fish's head. "Utilizing alien resources is a proven survival strategy. Good job!"

He winced as the fish flopped around, beating at the water with its membranes, but he brought the bladderfish to his suit. A flash of light engulfed it, placing the fish in his dive suit's storage compartment and keeping it in stasis. His suit's inventory ran on solar power, so it should be fine for a while. He swam around a little while, until by some miracle he grabbed one of those quickly moving blue fish with giant eyeballs that his computerized assistant helpfully labeled as a 'Peeper'. Privately, he was amazed he'd managed to catch the slippery devil. It must not've known he was going to hurt it until it was too late.

Then, off in the distance, Varien saw a forest.

His eyes widened as he tried to figure out just what it was he was looking at. An underwater forest of some kind of seaweed, giant stalks of the stuff growing from the depths and reaching nearly to the surface. Varien glanced 'up'; in addition to monitoring his vitals his brain implant also displayed his current depth. He was at just around five meters down. But that forest might well go down to fifty!

Kelp, could kelp help him make fiber mesh for a radiation suit? Like his PDA said, alien life could have strange characteristics he didn't know about. And if he looked closely, he saw glowing yellow nodes around some of the kelp stalks. Seeds. But they were so far down. He wasn't an expert scuba diver by any means, but he was pretty sure ascending from so far down would give him the Bends.
Well... a glance to his oxygen meter told him he still had fifty minutes of air left. He could afford to ascend slowly if he had to. Varien started swimming towards the forest of kelp. His computer made mention of how it was unusual for life to develop in such distinct biomes, but he was more focused on descending into the water and not losing his nerve at the way the ocean floor just dipped away into the depths.

Within minutes, Varien was inside the forest and he hated every second of it. Dark shadows shifted about in the distance. Roars and what sounded like sinister, high pitched laughter echoed through the water around him. He was deep too, a whole twenty meters under the surface, with the water pushing heavily on his lungs. One of the kelp vines swayed about in front of him. He debated scanning it, and decided to do so; he could never know what secrets a scan would unveil.

He took out his handheld spectroscope and held the trigger. The kelp lit up with shades of light, and in seconds a new data entry was added to his PDA. He put his scanner away, took one of the kelp's stalks in his hands, and tried to tear it.

But it refused to yield.

Varien narrowed his eyes and pulled harder, his lungs expanding against the weight of the water around him as he heaved with effort. But no matter how hard he pulled, the vine was just too tough for him to tear. Oh well. Could he at least take the seed pods? He swam a little lower and came face to face with the giant, yellow clusters. They were a lot larger than they looked from afar, glowing with a soft yellow aura. He grabbed a frond and pulled. Unlike the kelp itself, the seed cluster popped off with no effort. He put it in his suit's stasis-containment, and grabbed another pod. And another, and another. Before long he'd gathered quite a few of the seeds, hopefully enough to last a while.

Alright, time to leave -

Sinister laughter, and then a sharp pain in his left arm. Varien glanced at his arm and screamed!

There.

Was.

Something.

On.

Him.

It was about the size of his forearm, pale blue and shaped like a deflated balloon, but with spikes and prongs along its orange nozzle. It wrapped itself around his arm, and a throbbing but intense pain in his skin indicated it had stabbed him. Varien shouted, his screams muffled by the water around him. He shook his hand as hard as he could, legs kicking wildly as the creature pulsated on him, its sack filling with some green fluid drawn from within him. His dive suit tightened around him, sealing off the breach its incision had made in the fabric. His right hand found his scanner, and he swung at the creature with the tool.

But underwater, he couldn't swing as hard as he could on land. His scanner moved practically in slow motion before colliding into the bloodsucker, and it only warbled quietly. He shrieked and tried again, hitting it harder, again and again until it finally let go, unwrapping from him and swimming off into the distance. For a moment, Varien saw his blood - colored green from being so far underwater - spill out into the water, but then he had nothing on his mind but getting the hell
out of there. He spun around and located the escape pod signal being transmitted onto his sight, and swam as fast as he could.

He made it back to his life pod in record time. He could've sworn it had drifted closer. Varien laid on his stomach, sobbing quietly as his suit's nano-sutures repaired its breach. Already his joints were aching; he'd definitely ascended too quickly. But he couldn't take time to rest and recover from the decompression sickness. He had to go back into the water, because that was where literally every resource in the world existed.

"I hate this planet so much," he whimpered.

"What do you mean the best weapon you can give me is a fucking knife?!"

Alright, so apparently the bladderfish could be used to make water. Kinda gross, but as far as he was concerned it was just taking the already-filtered water inside. Like how a dog's mouth was supposedly super clean, the water in these fish was drinkable. And water was water, he needed as much as he could get. But that was bladderfish. This was something else. Despite the fabricator assuring him it disposed of skeleton, fluids and organs, and rendered cooked food edible, he wasn't sure.

He stared at the cooked peeper on his fabricator's table. Its dead eye stared back at him. He wasn't going to eat this! No way! This was the body of a living animal! Not stem-cell grown meat, an actual animal that had swum around and eaten stuff. Who knew what sort of shit and piss was inside? His fabricator couldn't possibly have gotten all of it, right?

His PDA chose that moment to speak up. "While those accustomed to synthetic foods may be repulsed at the thought of eating an animal carcass, try to remember that desperate times call for desperate measures. Humans have survived this way for many millions of years. You can survive this way, too."

He wrinkled his nose distastefully, but he had to admit his computer had a point. He needed to eat, and he couldn't rely solely on nutrient blocks. They'd run out quickly. He forced himself to pick piece after piece of meat from the peeper, starting from the tail and working his way up. He had to admit, it didn't taste half bad. Kind of like... beef, oddly enough, as long as he didn't think too hard about the source. Though he had to stop a few times to pick out tiny bones, and that worried him. His fabricator said it got rid of the skeleton, right? Obviously not the whole skeleton. What else did it miss? But he had to eat, so before long Varien had picked the peeper clean of meat, leaving only its jiggling, cooked yellow eyeball on the table.

No. No way. He was not going to eat that. He wasn't that desperate, was he?

Varien backed away from the peeper, thought it over for a moment, then climbed the ladder. The hatch was still open, even though the broken wires had long ago stopped sparking. He climbed to the top of his dipping and bobbing life pod and inspected the area around him. Countless stars hung overhead, and the smoke of the distant Aurora poured into the sky. A tepid breeze ruffled his hair. Apart from the starship's colossal hull, there was nothing else around him but smooth, uninterrupted water, hanging under the light of the twin moons.

He descended back into his pod and decided that yes, yes he really was that desperate.

"Warning!"
Varien froze in his exploration of a rocky cliff face. "Warning what?" he sighed into his mask, hunger and thirst gnawing at him.

"Local radiation readings suggest a quantum detonation will occur with a probability of eight-five point five percent. Advise observing of ten kilometer safety range."

"Ten kilometer?!" he protested. "Lady, no way in HELL am I going to be able to - fine, I'll just make the radiation suit," he groused, giving his survival knife a slow-motion twirl underwater. "What's in here?" he wondered, peering into a hole carved into the rocks.

Some mushrooms, and a few growths of quartz. And a strange, round, dark brown plant. Then the plant opened four flaps to reveal a glaring, cyclopean eye, ringed with red spikes and yellow flesh. A harsh growl vibrated the water around him. Varien's eyes widened and he started to swim the other way, but it was too late.

The fish exploded out from the plant, chasing him down with a single-minded evil.

A moment later, it exploded far more literally.

He gasped, then keeled over and coughed up some blood onto the floor of his life pod. "Med kit," he wheezed, pulling himself over to the cabinet. With trembling, unfocused fingers he opened it up, overjoyed to find this time he could open it. The glorious red casing with a white cross fell out and bopped him on the head, but as long as it was within reach he was happy.

Varien's vision blurred in and out as he ripped off his dive suit and began applying the bandages to his bleeding chest, stopping now and then to dab at some horrible bodily fluid dripping from his ears. Whatever it was, it wasn't blood. The more advanced nanite treatments were next. Those just had to be sprayed into his nasal cavity, and within moments he could feel them going to work and repairing whatever terrible damage the underwater explosion had done to him.

Thank the stars for his dive suit. All the same... "Fuck this planet," he whimpered.

And he still needed to get a radiation suit! He was fairly certain where he could get fiber mesh. His scan of the 'creepvine' had revealed it might be useful for such purposes. And while he couldn't tear it, Varien was confident he could use his knife to cut pieces of it off. But he didn't want to go back there! Those little bloodsuckers made their home there!

No way he was ever going back to the kelp forest!

He couldn't believe he was actually going back to the kelp forest.

He found a stray stalk of creepvine far away from the main forest and began hacking at it with his knife, sawing back and forth across a frond. Hunger tore at him and dehydration ripped at his throat, and a glance at his HUD meters in the bottom left confirmed that, indeed, he was starving and he was dehydrated. But the dehydration circle was still two-thirds full, the hunger circle even better off. If this was how he felt with just one day's worth of famine, he could only imagine how much worse it would get.

He needed to get some bladderfish. Or maybe some bleach, but the problem of finding calcium carbonate lingered.

As he sawed, Varien kept his eyes and ears on a swivel, searching for any of that sinister, evil laughter that heralded the bloodsuckers. Off in the distance he saw what looked like some cross
between bottlenose dolphins and sharks playfully biting each other in the kelp. Big and scary, but they seemed preoccupied. He was, perhaps wrongly, more worried about the bloodsuckers. Bleeders, his PDA labeled them. The mere thought that one could sneak up on him made his heart pound in his chest.

Before long, Varien cut away a few pieces of creepvine and stored them in his dive suit’s storage. He swam away, beating the fins on his feet against the water, and found a piece of rounded purple coral on the seafloor, bubbles rising from it. Varien sat on it, half expecting the coral to come alive and swallow him whole, or for its jagged edges to cut him up. Instead, all that happened was his oxygen tank started sucking up the bubbles, filling itself with air. Before long, he’d gone from twenty minutes of oxygen back to a full hour.

Varien glanced down at the brain coral; he definitely needed to find a way to make that thing portable. For now though, he had to get back to his pod. Ascending slowly and carefully, so as not to aggravate his decompression sickness, Varien made his way back to his wandering shelter. He already had enough lead from his adventures in hitting pieces of limestone with his scanner.

He fed the pieces of kelp to his fabricator, watching anxiously as it created, seemingly from nothing, two rolls of comfortable greenish-black fiber. The lead, he had to handle carefully. It was poisonous, after all. But he fed the components into the fabricator.

Then finally, Varien made his radiation suit.

He rubbed his eyes as the fabricator slowly pieced it together. Ugh, it felt like night already. But it was still the middle of the day! He still had so much more to do. Now that he had his radiation suit, he absolutely had to go get some food and water.

The helmet was first to be complete. Varien put it on. Next were the gloves, then the suit itself. He made sure to follow the safety regulations; he did up the zipper and checked the airtight seals. He wasn’t sure about the helmet, though. He didn’t like the loss of his peripheral vision. Plus, he’d disposed of his regular clothes a while ago, so while he still wore his dive suit, underneath there was nothing.

Which was bad, because ‘nothing’ meant a bloodsucker would get at him easily. But if it meant he wouldn’t get killed by the invisible, unnoticeable danger of radiation, that was worth it.

"Emergency!" his PDA warned. "Seismic readings suggest a quantum detonation has occurred in the Aurora’s dark matter drive core!" What?! Varien hopped on the ladder and started climbing. Once on top of his pod, he glanced over to the Aurora. Was it just him or was there... more smoke than normal billowing from its interior and into the stormy clouds?

"- reactor will reach a super-critical state in T-minus ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four... three..." His PDA erupted into static. When it barely choked out a ‘two’, Varien gasped and slid back into his pod. He closed the hatch, got into his seat and, as though it would do anything, clamped his hands over the ‘ears’ of his radiation helmet.

The flash was the first thing he saw. A burst of radiant light that cast odd shadows even inside his pod. The flash ended, but spots of odd colors still stuck to Varien’s field of vision.

Then the shockwave arrived.

"Oof!" he grunted when his entire pod turned upside down. The noise burst his eardrums and turned his world inside-out, making his vision shimmer darkly. His pod did a few turns, then stopped and began to slowly right itself to the tune of howling wind and angered seas. Crackling
filled his bloody ears, his newfound radiation suit's Geiger counter going wild.

Then it was over. He was on the floor, he'd need some patching for his ears but... he was alive. Not irradiated, cooked, or permanently deafened. The suit worked. He'd done it!

For the first time since crashing onto 4546B, Varien smiled and pumped a fist. "Fuck yeah, technology!" he cheered.

He had zero success in his hunt for food. He caught a few bladderfish, but he needed every single one of those for water, not food. That night Varien ate from a nutrient block until there was only half of it left. That still left another one and a half nutrient blocks, but even so. He needed to get better at hunting for food. Maybe he could try to make a Gravsphere? He'd played around with one of those as a child, but never gave them any serious thought after. Maybe it was just the thing he needed.

At least he had enough water. He chugged the bottles one after another. He didn't even care how they were warm and tasted slightly off. The water flowing down his throat felt like manna from heaven, like his brain was lighting up. He could practically feel his body lubricating, like before he'd been a dry piece of hay. With great satisfaction, he watched the water meter in his HUD crawl up to nearly full. He stored the last bottle of water in his life pod's storage, and pondered what to do.

He still needed a repair tool. Maybe a flashlight wouldn't hurt. Or a dive reel so he wouldn't get lost in a cave and drown. Honestly, just about everything sounded appealing, but it was so hard to figure out his priorities.

Survival. Survival first. Food and water. He'd make a Gravsphere, and see if that helped out with his hunting. After that... he didn't know. Maybe a habitat. But for that he'd need a computer chip. He'd already memorized the blueprint for that. Copper was abundant, but where was he going to get gold? Or for that matter, something to hold the circuits?

Varien glanced up at the hatch in his life pod. The darkness of night stared back at him. He hated nights on this planet. Sure it was warm in his pod, but it was hard and tough to sleep. In the seas it grew too dark to do anything - maybe he would make a flashlight - even though half the fish glowed.

At the very least, the days were significantly longer than the nights. It must've been summer, which also explained the heat.

... Silvia wasn't there to sleep by him. There was nobody to reassure him, actual reassurance, not his PDA's empty shouts of 'good job'. Nobody to help him. He was left alone with his restless thoughts and worries, his 'could have been's and 'maybe this happened's. They tormented him, forcing wracking sobs from his chest at the thought of being forgotten, or of his fiance's lifeless body charred by the crash, or of her drowning slowly and painfully underwater, until he finally fell into hopeless nightmares.

The Gravsphere worked like a charm! Arcs of warped gravity lanced out and into the fish around the metal sphere. They squirmed and chirped as they were inexorably drawn in to the metal orb's pumping plates, easy pickings for Varien to grab and put into his dive suit's stasis, which worked even through his radiation suit. Sure, eating was a chore and a worry given that he had to take his helmet off but he needed to eat, even if it was disgusting live animals. He grabbed so many fish. Bladderfish, peepers, boomerangs, garryfish. He was going to be set for a while. Sure the Aurora
was busted, riddled with even more holes and with its bridge blown open like a lid, but he was fine.

"Fuck yeah," he breathed, grinning at the lightly pumping sphere. "Technology!"

He finally, finally made a welder. It had been a literal nightmare to get. The salt deposits were hard to find, hidden as they were amidst the colorful flora. It was still odd to see chunks of salt so large he needed both hands to carry them, but whatever. He had more than enough for his fabricator, and the leftover salt he used to cure a few peepers and boomerangs for a rainy day.

Given how many dark, angry clouds gathered above him, that day might come soon.

Getting the sulfate and sulfurtransferase was pure luck. He'd swam by a rocky cliff riddled with caves, and inside he saw one of those plants that launched exploding fish. But this plant was already peeled open, with a yellowish, chalky powder inside. That, apparently, had been just what he needed to make a welding tool, on top of a battery and some titanium to hold it together.

He wasn't an engineer, but the problems of his life pod were fairly obvious. He held the wires together, carefully welding them back together one at a time. Eventually, finally, the pod hummed. Varien smiled at his success and placed the metal panel back on, welding it tightly. Once done, his lifepod's lights lit up, and the floor shook beneath his feet. The screen next to him changed from red and riddled with warnings to a soothing green.

"Hull integrity okay," he read aloud, desperate to hear any human's voice, even if it was his own. "Secondary systems online, good. Flotation devices deployed, I already knew about that. Environment is an uncharted ocean... oxygen nitrogen... high water contamination, I already know. Attempting to scan emergency frequencies. Three solar power cells charging..." He smiled. "Good!" With that, he headed back out and started to explore.

When he had about half an hour left in his oxygen tank's supply, Varien let gravity carry him down onto the ocean floor. His air was buoyant, but his tank was heavy, so he sunk. He walked along the sandy floor, eager to give his muscles somewhat of a rest after all the swimming he'd done in the past... past... had it not even been five days? It felt like a lifetime already.

While walking, he came across... a box. A storage crate! With a surprised shout, Varien leaped into the water and swam over to it. He felt around the small white box, and found an open end. Inside was a mangled piece of machinery. He couldn't quite make out all of it, but it looked like a busted blue and white tube, with a propeller in the back. Varien sunk to the ground and unhooked his scanner from his radiation suit. He held it up to the piece of metal, and his brain implant showed him the message 'Seaglide (Damaged)'.

Hmm. Seaglide? He'd heard about those, some tool used for recreation and scientific study alike in water. His fabricator couldn't make one, unless...

He held down his scanner's trigger, and light engulfed the seaglide fragment. Soon his scanner was done, and the screen showed a silhouette of what he assumed was a fully intact seaglide. Various parts of it lit up blue, and a message told him to scan the remaining functional parts.

A quick glance through the new data file on his PDA made him smile. That would come in handy! Currently he couldn't go too far from his habitat, but with a seaglide he could find other survivors with no problem!

If there's even anyone left, a cold voice in his mind whispered.
Light flashed in his pod, and a moment later thunder crashed over him. Varien sat in his life pod's seat, his head against the cushion, trembling quietly. His unused seaglide rested in the corner, taking up space and clattering about. He kept one wary eye on it, lest it knock him in the head like the wall panel had. Hunger twisted at his gut, and thirst tore likewise at his throat. In the corner of his eyes, his dehydration meter flashed red. He couldn't sleep well either, thanks in part to his pod's bright lights.

He'd thought he had a lot of food and water stockpiled, but that was proven wrong the moment the thunderstorm came by. This was the second day the storm raged, making going outside suicide. His storage locker was empty of anything to drink. He didn't want to dig into his nutrient blocks yet; they were the only thing on this planet he could eat that hadn't used to pee in the ocean. The dehydration was a bigger problem than the hunger. His urine was a worrying shade of brown, a color he'd never seen it be before, and unless the storm let up soon...

Another flash of lightning. The waves tossed his pod around like a chew toy and rain pelted the hull, running off the glass hatch on top; he needed to make a habitat constructor, pronto. He couldn't afford to risk his pod being dashed upon the rocks. But he didn't have gold, nor any mysterious third substance needed to construct the computer chip necessary. Even if Varien did have all that, he couldn't go outside in the storm for fear of being electrocuted by lightning. He wasn't even sure if that was a thing that could happen, but after he could have asphyxiated by venturing out blindly into what he didn't know was a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere, he wasn't willing to chance it. To say nothing of what those wild waters might do to him. He just had to hope, dearly, that this storm let up before he had to do something reckless.

He couldn't help but sob quietly. The weight of this disaster weighed on him. He was lost, stuck on an uncharted, uninhabited planet. Everyone on the Aurora was almost certainly dead. Even if there were survivors, so many people died. He didn't know if he'd ever see home, if he'd ever sleep in a bed. If he'd ever finally wed Silvia, ever have kids. It'd be a miracle for him to even live to forty, at the moment.

He continued to weep pathetically as the storm raged around him, each crash of thunder a portent of his doomed attempts to survive.

Varien just wanted to go home. He just wanted this waking nightmare to end.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Montage of More Misery

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Thanks to A Mage's Apprentice for editing.

Chapter published 7/2/17.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Varien

Miraculously, the storm cleared up the next day. With his Gravsphere, Varien had almost no trouble at all catching fish to eat or, in the case of bladderfish, melt down into bottles of water. If he thought drinking water after one day of dehydration was amazing and thought-clearing, then after two days it was heavenly. He almost threw up, he drank so much so quickly.

Sitting atop his life pod and baking in the sun's rays, Varien tossed his latest water bottle into the ocean where it'd soon dissolve into biomatter. He sighed. How quickly he came to thinking even of water and food as miracles. All his life, food and water had been beyond abundant, beyond scarcity, produced and distributed by robots who cared nothing for turning profit or even gathering money at all. And now...?

How the mighty had fallen.

Varien slid back down the ladder into his mildly air-conditioned pod. He wanted to try out his seaglide; he needed to make a computer chip somehow so he could make a habitat, so he wouldn't be at the mercy of the weather. The habitat builder was designed to make habitats capable of withstanding everything up to the surface of Venus. It'd be able to withstand a little ocean storm. Maybe the seaglide was what he needed to find gold.

He dipped into the water with his seaglide in hand and let its weight carry him down. He inspected it, turning it left and right by the handles. There was a holographic display of the surrounding terrain, not that he saw much use in that. Maybe if it was dark, but that was what the pale blue flashlight attachment was for, wasn't it? There was a propeller on the back which would hopefully, well, propel him forward at great speed.

Varien braced himself, gripped the handles, and held down the lever on the left handle to turn his seaglide on.

"WOHA!" he shouted into his helmet. The force of the seaglide ripped it out of his grip, sending it tumbling a few meters forward before crashing into a rock formation with a thud. He winced as the seaglide tumbled onto the ocean floor, as did the few pieces of purple table coral it had impacted.

Beating his arms and legs against the water to stay in place, Varien sighed. "Stars damn it," he muttered, swimming over to his seaglide. "Better not be broken," he groused, picking it up and inspecting it. The paint was a little chipped, but other than that it looked perfectly functional.

Thud. Another chunk of table coral landed on his head before tumbling aside. He brushed it off
irately, but on a whim decided to take his scanner to it. He held down the trigger, watching as the glowing lights of his tool reflected of the jewel-like pieces of the coral as it scanned. A moment later it was done, and he read through his PDA's new data entry.

Then he smacked his palm into his helmet. "Exploitable in computer chip fabrication," he muttered. "Exploitable in computer chip fabrication! I've been swimming right by these things and - aaaaaahhh!" He swam down and grabbed a few more of them, letting his dive suit swallow them up. Four should be enough. That left just the gold.

He turned back to his seaglide and hefted it in both hands, this time pointed firmly away from anything he might crash into. "Let's try this again..."

Varien activated the seaglide.

"Hoollyyyyy shiiiiitttt!" he blubbered.

The seaglide was much faster than he'd expected. Water rushed around him deafeningly, his entire body laid out lengthwise from the sheer speed of the machine. The water coming out from the propeller tickled as it rushed along his suit, and Varien's hair - his mohawk long ago defeated by salt water - flopped around on his head. Rock formations swum in and out of his view as Varien struggled to keep the seaglide under control. Eventually, he had enough. He relaxed his iron grip on the lever and the seaglide turned off. Water resistance brought him to a halt soon after.

Deep, jolly laughter sounded around him, and Varien screamed like a little girl. No, no no no, was it a giant one of those bleeders? Was it -

He looked around. It was just some weird alien manatee, colored a grayish green. It looked like it had a gas mask on its face, with a bulbous protrusion from its back covered in glowing yellow spores.


Hesitantly, he swum closer to the thing. It beat its flippers to face him, then emitted a deep bellow. It turned its tail on Varien, swimming away. Good, good. So some of the larger fish weren't all out to get him.

Then it did what he could only describe as fart on him.

From its glowing protrusion, yellow spores burst out into the water around him, hovering in place with an eerie stillness. Varien's eyes widened and he swum down to the ocean floor. Not a moment too soon, as their glossy shells wore away and they filled the water with some unimaginable, toxic-yellow fog. Then the fog started drifting towards him on the currents. He saw a peeper get caught in the fog and its scales just melted right off.

Varien pointed his seaglide away and turned it on.

Alright, lesson learned. Even fish that weren't out to get him could still kill him. Good to know.

After some more exploring - and a break to eat and drink - Varien found himself swimming before a colossal tube of coral, embedded into the landscape and filled with irregular chunks of limestone. He checked his air; still a good thirty-five minutes left. He could get in, get out, and slowly surface without any problem. Purple light glowed from within, but a quick glance confirmed it was just some mushrooms and other flora. Nothing he hadn't seen before.
All the same, as his seaglide took Varien deeper into the enormous tube, he kept his eyes and ears open. The water was remarkably clear; he could see so far in all directions. It grew dark as he delved deeper, the local star's rays swallowed up by the water as he swiveled his head left and right.

Near the end, he saw the coral tunnel give way to a kelp forest off in the distance. The fronds of creepvine were far enough that he didn't mind going to the very edge of the cavern. He glided to a halt and looked around. To the left and right were both holes in the coral tunnel, leading into caves. He approached the one on his left and frowned. Caves were bad news. He could get lost and suffocate very easily, and he hadn't made a dive reel yet. But maybe there was gold? He'd just go in, poke his head around, and come right back. Varien even put his seaglide on the ground with its flashlight still on, just as a makeshift waypoint.

He swam forward into the cave. It was... really short. Just a narrow indentation in the surrounding rock, striped with black and tan stone. But looking closer, Varien saw that the tunnel didn't strictly end. There was a smaller tunnel, maybe three meters across, blocked by an irregular boulder.

Varien landed on the ocean floor and walked towards it, hands outstretched. He leaned up against the boulder, his palms brushing against the course texture, and pushed. He grunted and strained, but the giant rock started to roll. Slowly at first, but then faster as it hit a ramp. It slid down and fell to the floor of the neighboring cave, kicking up a cloud of sand.

Once the sand cleared, Varien took a good look. Sure enough it was another cavern room, dimly lit by his seaglide's light. Triple-tentacled shuttlebugs swam around as they clicked quietly, but he already knew they were friendly. Some more tunnels in it led off to unseen places, but he resolved that no matter what shiny thing he saw in them, he was not going to go explore them. Especially since he could've sworn he saw a few of those exploding fish traps.

In the center of the cave was a raised slab of stone. Varien swam closer, straining his eyes in the dimming blue light. On the slab were more of the stone features that he'd come to learn grew around valuable metal deposits. He didn't think much of them, though when he scanned the limestone his PDA seemed almost puzzled about them being unaffected by erosion.

These didn't seem like limestone, though. The rock was darker, grainier. More like sandstone, in fact. He took out his scanner, swum over to the trio of sandstone chunks, and brought the handle of his spectroscope onto one.

It cracked down the middle. A few more whacks and Varien cleared away the coarse rock to see... a solid chunk of a yellowish metal. "Holy shit," he whispered. "This is gold!" Nevermind computer chips. This was a chunk of gold the size of his fist!

That was right, this was an unexplored planet. It had never been mined. All its resources were still in place, untouched by man. If he ever got off this planet, he was going to be rich.

The next piece of sandstone, once it broke, didn't give him any gold. Instead he got a lump of dull gray metal, with a few chunks of rock clinging to it. "Gold based - " his PDA began as he grabbed it.

"AH!" he yelped, leaping into the water and beating his legs to stay in place.

"- computer chips are an essential component of the habitat builder."

"Alright," he muttered, gripping the silver ore tightly and placing it in his suit's stasis. "Good to know." He swam back down to the third and final piece of sandstone, broke it, and found a second
piece of gold.

With the trio of sandstone chunks broken, Varien took a moment to look around the cave. Quartz shards and more limestone, but he wasn't going to risk getting closer to the explosive fish just for some quartz. He got some gold and silver. With the silver he could upgrade his oxygen tank to a high capacity tank that could hold nearly three hours of air, not just one. With the gold he could make a computer chip, and then a habitat builder. Then he could finally, finally start phasing out his unstable, rocking, nerve-wrecking life pod.

He held the computer chip in his hands and cringed. *This* was the sort of tech his fabricator was programmed to build? He understood he was roughing it, but this thing probably wasn't even quantum!

It wasn't much. Just a foundation with a small metal tube on it with a hatch at one end, fabricated by his habitat builder's lasers. There were yellow spokes on the outside, and the end without the hatch looked like plastic. Waves of sediment beat around the foundation's legs, but they were anchored firmly into bedrock. A shame the terraforming feature seemed to be broken, but he'd chosen a flat area, far from *any* kelp forest, to make his home so it didn't really matter. If he really needed to do some landscaping - which he doubted - he could just fabricate a terraformer. The point was, he had a habitat.

Varien swam before it and stared at his shelter longingly. Finally. Stars above, *finally*. He swam in and opened the hatch, watching as the water was held out by advanced surface tension technologies. He swam in head-first, feeling the water rush off him, its weight leaving his body. Before long he was inside, his fins and feet clanging against the metal surface -

"Warning!" a feminine voice intoned around him, the chamber black as pitch. "Emergency power only! Oxygen production offline!"

... he'd forgotten the damn *solar panels*!

A little while later, Varien went back into his base. "Welcome aboard, captain!" his base told him. He chuckled a bit at that. Captain. Hah.

His legs shook like noodles, and after unhooking his oxygen tank he collapsed onto his back. Even with his seaglide, he still had to do a lot of swimming and it wore him down. His muscles had no time to rest and recuperate. Just pain stacked on pain stacked on pain. With a heave of effort Varien pulled out two rolls of fiber mesh and, after some struggling with his exhausted body, laid on them like a mattress and pillow. Sure it was a little cramped, and the ceiling was low, but it beat the lifepod. It let his muscles quiver beneath his skin in peace.

Alright, alright. So he had a shelter going, he wasn't at the mercy of the storms anymore. What was next on his list?

Find survivors. He had to find other survivors. And for that he needed to...

Varien smacked his helmet.

For that he needed to fix his communications relay, *which had totally slipped his mind even though he had a repair tool!*

Muscles straining, Varien got up and walked to his hatch, putting his oxygen tank back on. He
opened the hatch and slipped back into the warm ocean. It took him a few moments to swim up to his lifepod. He panted, sweating, but grasped the hatch on the bottom and pulled.

Nothing happened. His arms strained, but there was so little strength left in them. He pulled and pulled, but could barely make it budge. Eventually he gave up and let gravity pull him to the seabed.

After his little moment in the base, his oxygen tank was full. He still had three hours. He'd... he'd just rest a little bit.

To add insult to injury, his PDA spoke up again. "Great job, survivor. You have just exceeded your weekly exercise quota by five hundred percent. Data indicates that swimming was your favorite activity."

Oh fuck off, he thought half-deliriously.

"Be sure to vary your routine for uniform muscle development."

Once he was rested, he pulled himself back into the life pod with his welder at the ready. He approached the blinking, charred communications relay and went to work. It took some time, but he got it into working order. Mostly. The transmission was broken beyond his ability to repair, so he wouldn't be using it to talk to anyone. Still, he'd take what he could get. Varien gingerly welded the last two wires together, and...

The red LED light on its side lit up. "Captain!" it immediately intoned in a robotic woman's voice. "A new message has arrived!"

"Play message," he said instantly, his voice half muffled from his radiation helmet.

"Playing message!" it confirmed. The communicator went silent for a moment, then came to life with another monotone female voice, covered in static. "This is an automated bounceback from the Aurora Lining Vessel!" it chimed. "Your distress signal has been received."

Varien's heart soared. Received?

"An emergency relief team equipped with seaglide personal propulsion vehicles will be dispatched to your location. ETA..." Varien held his breath. "Nine, nine, nine, nine, nine, hours!" The message went silent.

He stared at the communications relay. "Shit," he said at last.

If he was ever going to find survivors, he needed better mobility. The seaglide just wouldn't cut it for long trips, its battery would run out and he was strapped for resources as it was without carrying another ten batteries with him at all times.

In his PDA's blueprint tab, there was something called a 'seamoth'. It looked like a submarine. The data was corrupted though; while he knew it could only be built from a mobile vehicle bay, none of the needed materials were listed. If he could find enough seamoth wrecks his scanner would take care of that problem. But that just left him with one problem.

What the hell was a mobile vehicle bay?
There was never any realization, like in the movies and books of survival. No sudden dawning moment of 'No, I'm not going to die here!'. Just a steady back and forth between 'It's hopeless' and 'I've got to try!' that left him drained and weary.

With his seaglide in hand, Varien found what he assumed to be the edges of the shallow region he made his base in. The ocean floor just fell away, with a few flat crevices jutting out, to a vast field of sand and red grass-like plants. It must've been a hundred meters down. Rocky pillars stuck straight up from a sea of crimson grass and enormous wedge-shaped creatures, with pulsing undersides and a trio of tentacles out their backsides, swum in pods. Even from so far away, their bellowing moans made his bones shake. He could only hope they were similar to whales, and not aggressive.

While the stomach-churning depth of the plateau before him was absolutely fascinating to absolutely no part of him, Varien was far more interested in the ledge. An enormous amount of wreckage had fallen onto it, just shy of spilling over the sides. He descended, watching his HUD's depth counter go up. Twenty meters. Thirty meters. Forty meters. The weight of the water on his chest was immense, like a crate on his lungs, but he could still breathe.

It was an impressive pile of wreckage. Metal girders the length of a corridor. Sealed crates, torn-apart maintenance corridors lined with ladders. Varien's eyes scanned over the entire thing, until it settled on a spherical piece of metal. Curious, he swam closer and began scanning it.

A moment later, his scanner's menu lit up with the image of something it labeled as a bioreactor. Seemed pretty useless; he already had solar panels, after all, and those didn't need to be maintained.

Varien continued searching through the rubbish, pushing aside metal beams and salvage. It was harder than he thought it'd be. Sure the water made everything feel lighter, but they were still monstrously heavy. Soon though, he found something that looked like... a crate? Inside his radiation helmet he raised an eyebrow, but held the scanner to it and held down the trigger. Before long and it was done...

... mobile vehicle bay! That was it, that was what he needed! Were there more pieces around?

As it turned out, there were! Something that looked almost like a magnifying glass. Another crate-looking thing, but that was a duplicate and did nothing to help him put the blueprint together. There was a console screen, and a chassis with an orange streak. There were more pieces for the bioreactor too. Just some broken, dented fan-looking devices. All the same though, his scanner finished transmitting the data. His fabricator could now build a mobile vehicle bay, and his habitat constructor could build a bioreactor.

Whatever that was good for.

Varien sat with his back up against the wall of his habitat. With one hand, he held his PDA to read. With the other, he held one of his cured boomerangs and nibbled it. Next to him were a few bottles of water made of bladderfish. Some of them were empty.

"Titanium ingots... I think I have enough to make those." He brought his food to his mouth and took a nibble around the cartilaginous fin. It was salty enough to bring tears to his eyes and the flesh tasted weird, especially now that it was cured. But over all, it was good eating.

"Lubricant..." He hummed. "I don't actually remember what I need for that." He flicked his PDA's screen and found it. "Ah, the creepvine seeds. Right."
He flipped his boomerang over and started gnawing down the other fin. The first fin was gone, there weren't any bones. The cartilage was chewy, but his teeth were up to the task. "Last one is power cell, power cell..." He read over the blueprint for a power cell. "Seems easy enough." He shuddered. He did not want to head back into the kelp forests, but he was in a survival situation. Varien just had to bite the bullet.

Finishing up the boomerang's other fin, he pulled it away and inspected it. Just the head was left, with its eyes staring back at him, de-toothed mouth hanging open. Oh god, he was eating something that had been alive. He felt his stomach churn, imagined feces and urine sliding down his throat and -

"Urk!"

He forced his bile back down. He was not going to vomit all over his PDA. He was not going to vomit all over his PDA. He...

... vomited all over his PDA.

The kelp was all around him, choking out the local star's light with their emerald aura. He pulled a frond of Creepvine seeds off its parent plant and stored it in his suit. Roars surrounded him, echoing through the water, but he wasn't worried. As long as there wasn't any of that horrible, dream-haunting laughter...

Some fish swam around him. Not like the standard ones he'd seen, either. Reptilian fish that had pads for feet. Another was almost entirely an eye. When he caught one, his PDA had stupidly labeled it an 'Eyeye'.

"That's one... and two!" he said triumphantly, placing the last of the fronds in his suit's storage. He looked around, swimming in place by kicking his legs. "Alright, where's my lifepod's ping..." He thought he saw something blue hidden amidst the gently-swaying vines, and swam a little closer to it.

It wasn't his ping. It was another fish, just a little bigger than his head! It looked his way with two yellow frog-eyes, and opened up. Varien's eyes widened as it displayed four beautiful, iridescent wings to him. The wings began to wiggle, sending wave after wave of color along their lengths.

"Ooh," he cooed, slowly swimming closer. This thing was beautiful! And that shell. Those wings! Who knew what he could make with that? "Pretty."

"It is imperative you swim closer to that amazing creature," his PDA droned.

Yes, it was imperative he swam closer to that amazing creature. It locked eyes with him, continuing to wiggle its wings.

"Closer now. Swim closer," his assistant continued.

He was closer now. He swam closer. He could make out a strange, mouth-like ridge along the front of its shell.

"It looks so friendly."

It looked so friendly.

"Everything is alright."
Everything was alright. The colors from its wings swam outward, coloring the whole world around him.

"Don't struggle."

He didn't struggle.

"Go closer."

He went closer.

Suddenly the wings folded back, taking with them the beautiful colors. The world returned into focus... just in time for the creature's head to split open four ways. It snarled and a quartet of gooey, fang-tipped arms leaped out and bit down on his torso.

Hard.

Varien screamed so hard he could've sworn his voice tore instantly. Pain flooded his senses, blinding and crippling. He couldn't move, he couldn't breathe, the pain went up his spine and shot into his brain like a plasma round.

The hypnotic fish retracted its mouth and closed its shell, before swimming away with a wiggle of its folded wings. Varien's blood, dark green from being so far underwater, spilled forth from his pair of rapidly-mending suits. Oh stars, oh stars that was his blood. He was losing blood. He was going to die. His head hurt. He couldn't breathe. Did it even matter if he could breathe? Without blood his body couldn't circulate oxygen. He was going to die here. He was going to die. He was a failure. He was -

Sinister laughter cut through his panic like a butcher knife.

Varien screamed like a little girl, grabbed his seaglide, and rocketed out of the forest. He kept screaming all the way back to his life pod. He kept screaming as he pulled out a first aid kit. He kept screaming as he changed out of his suits and bandaged his wounds. He kept screaming as he injected the nanites. He kept screaming as he returned to his habitat.

By then, he couldn't scream anymore. But when he fell asleep, he kept screaming in his nightmares as his body was drained by the bleeders as they latched onto his arms, his legs, even his face...

When he woke back up, he went about making his mobile vehicle bay. He melted down the oil in the seeds he'd collected into rubber and a bottle of lubricant, the latter of which made his inner nine year old chuckle immaturally. Turning back into an adult, he went about gathering the rest of his materials. Batteries into a power cell. Titanium into a stack of ingots. And, standing in his lifepod, he fed the fabricator all the materials it needed to construct his mobile vehicle bay. The machine went to work, twin lasers atomically assembling it piece by piece.

Varien guessed it would take about twelve or even fifteen minutes for it to finish, so while he waited he went and added a four-way intersection to his base with his habitat builder. He wanted to put a glass locker inside for storage, but he didn't have any glass so that would need to wait. Not like it'd matter; once he found any survivors he could just go share their habitat.

By the time his base was enhanced, the fabricator was done. Varien climbed up the ladder outside his escape pod and slid in through the top hatch, smiling. The vehicle bay was a huge piece of equipment, he had to admit. It was a massive box, patterned white and orange, so heavy it brought him to his knees. Varien had some trouble holding it close enough for his suit to absorb into its
stasis. When he exited back into the water and pulled it back out, it was still unwieldy. He needed both arms to carry it and even underwater the bay was heavy enough to take his breath away.

With a gasp he let it go and gave the thing a gentle shove. With the sound of grinding gears and activating electronics, it flung away from him and unfolded, releasing four orange flotation rings as it clung to the wavy surface. He swum after it and got a good look; the four flotation devices formed a square, atop which was a metal floor. Yellow handles along the floor would probably let him climb onto it, with a white panel beneath a black touchscreen.

Varien reached onto the bay's floor and started hoisting himself up. He grabbed the handles and pulled. His eyes widened when the entire thing started to lean over, and for a sickening moment he feared it would capsize. But then it righted itself, pulling him up with it. He stumbled on top of the platform, and at that moment four robots shot up from the bay's wheels.

The small drones hovered in place around him, each equipped with a fabrication laser on their bottoms. He smiled and eyed them each in turn as they waited patiently for a command. Before him, the wreckage of the Aurora lay patiently like an elder god.

"Nice," he breathed, lightly tapping the touchscreen. It showed him a picture of the simple, stylish seamoth submersible. It wasn't much more than a glass dome, around which sat a nearly-complete ring of metal that grew thicker over the back. He even had the blueprint ready; he'd found and scanned a few shattered seamoth pieces in another wreck closer to the Aurora while gathering copper for the bay's power cell. He read over the materials and couldn't decide if he wanted to sigh or grin.

On one hand, it wasn't that much. All he needed was basically the same materials for a mobile vehicle bay, plus a bit of glass. One the other hand, he'd already used up all those materials building the damn vehicle bay in the first place. And that meant he had to go...

Varien gulped.

... back into the kelp forest.

Some swimming, waiting out decompression, and mini heart attacks later, Varien had all the materials he needed to make his seamoth submersible. He climbed atop his vehicle bay, went through the touchscreen's menu until he was on the seamoth, and hit the giant button that read 'Fabricate'.

The four drones waiting around him sprung to life, and he eagerly fed them the materials needed to make his submarine. Once he'd given them everything, they flew higher into the air and a fair distance ahead of him. They shone their lasers out, forming a pale hologram of what would soon be his seamoth, vivid against the backdrop of distant storm clouds. Before his very eyes it came to life, metal and wire and glass crawling over the hologram as it took shape over the course of several minutes.

His PDA chimed in as the seamoth neared completion. "While the seamoth is a fast and safe method of travel, try to continue meeting your weekly exercise quota. Swimming is fantastic for your glutes and endorphin levels."

He rolled his eyes, but by the time his PDA was done nagging him, the sub was done. The construction drones turned their beams off, and just like that gravity grabbed his new vehicle, dragging it below the waves with a splash that left a new set of drops on his helmet's visor.

Rubbing his hands, he dove headfirst back into the choppy waters. He approached his seamoth,
which hung in place in the waters. It didn't sink. It didn't float. It perfectly balanced its buoyancy in real time!

Swimming over to his seamoth, Varien took a moment to take it all in. The smooth, reinforced glass. The power cell below its sleek white chassis. The water-vibration thruster in the back, looking like a series of black rings around a pearl. And the hatch on top. He pried it open, watching as the surface tension enhancers kept the water out. He sunk through and closed the hatch on top of him. He reclined into the seat and smiled. It was plush. Sure it was made of titanium, but if you knew how you could make even metal feel like cushions.

"Welcome aboard, captain!" it chimed in a feminine voice.

He smiled and replied, "Yeah, that's right. I'm the captain!" Varien leaned forward and gripped the steering wheel in both hands, placing his legs into comfortable positions. A glance up confirmed that his HUD's depth marker had new additions; the depth he was at was now a fraction out of two hundred. There was also even a compass addition to his HUD.

He puttered around with his seamoth for a moment, grinning widely. He felt... safe. Not even his habitat had done that. He could go places, and be safe. What were those bloodsuckers gonna do to him now, huh? This thing was made of metal!

"Fuck yeah," he whispered under his breath. "Technology!"

Varien took a few minutes to get used to the seamoth's controls. Right foot on the accelerator, left foot on the brake. Turn the wheel left or right to turn. Push it in to descend, pull it out to ascend, pull it back to go in reverse. Simple enough.

Alright, now what. He eyed the interface plastered to his eyesight's lower left, and frowned. Hunger seemed a little... depleted. Which didn't make sense, because he'd eaten a floral-flavored garryfish not long ago. His stomach felt like it was going to burst! With a flick of thought, he dismissed the other three orbs and enhanced his nutrition display.

His gut dropped. Proteins and amino acids were fine. But something called 'carnosine' was depleting, several vitamins and minerals were also going down... of course. He was only eating meat. If Varien kept that up, he was probably going to develop all sorts of deficiencies. He needed fruits and vegetables of some kind, and some way to grow them. But where was he going to find fruits and vegetables on a stars-damned ocean planet?!

As soon as he thought that, the blue symbol of his communications relay appeared in the top right of his vision. He frowned, but stepped on his seamoth's accelerator and steered towards his lifepod. He brought it up close and surfaced, then climbed out the hatch and made his way inside the pod.

"Captain!" his communicator chirped once he entered. "A new message -"

"Yeah yeah, play message."

"Playing message!" it sassed. Suddenly, it was replaced by a man's voice, hurried and excited. "This is Officer Keen in Lifepod Nineteen!" Varien's heart jumped straight into his throat. Someone was speaking! Someone was ALIVE! "I am broadcasting to all survivors. The captain is gone, and I have assumed command. Our scans have shown dry land approximately one kilometer south of the crash site. That is, almost straight back from the Aurora's engines. Stay together and regroup there. This message will now repeat." The communicator returned to its regular voice. "Rendezvous coordinates corrupted. Transmission origin coordinates downloaded." The communicator spat out a tiny chip from its side, which he could link up to his HUD. He left it
where it was.

He puts his hands on his helmet. "Dry land, dry land! Rendezvous. Other people. Holy shit." How long had it been? A week? A week since he'd last heard another person. It even explained why he hadn't seen anyone; he'd been out for three hours. In that time they'd gone to the island and had been living it up! He was ready to dance. He was ready to sob in joy. "No, no. Focus." He'd need supplies. Water and his cured food. Probably the nutrient blocks too, just in case. He rushed back down into the ocean and hurried to collect his supplies.

Scant minutes later, he was in his seamoth, with ample food and water stored in his dive suit. He looked through the round glass and spotted the Aurora, its tormented frame still as stone. "Straight back from the Aurora," he whispered giddily. He angled his seamoth as needed. He couldn't see any land, but it did get very foggy far out there. Maybe there was something hidden in that mist. Varien's foot came down on the accelerator, and his seamoth lurched forward at full speed.

The crashing waves forced him to submerge before long, as they tossed his vehicle back and forth. Underneath the water, he glanced up and smiled. "Wow." He'd never had time to appreciate it before, but the shifting lines of the waves, combined with the golden rays of the sun, were beautiful.

As he traveled on and on, hitting a few smaller fish with his windshield and watching them burst into clouds of yellow-green blood, the ocean floor dropped away beneath him. He leaned forward and looked around. There was another grassy plateau here, filled with ribbons of crimson grass and strange fish he'd never seen before. One looked like a shovel with an eye. Another had a pink mohawk. He liked those.

As he cruised by, a deep groan shook his bones. He look up and saw another pod of those gigantic creatures with coral stuck to their skin, their undersides pulsating nauseatingly. He made sure to stay away from them.

Varien traveled and traveled, sometimes dipping above the surface to see if he was making any progress. Before too long, he slid into the bank of fog. It obscured his vision for kilometers around, to the point where he wasn't even sure if he was moving. The ocean floor had long ago dropped so far beneath him he couldn't see anything. Nothing except open, empty water in all directions.

Then, from the gloom before him, a jagged spire of rock appeared.

His foot jumped off the accelerator, and the other slammed on the brake. "Oof," he grunted as he was flung forward onto his steering wheel, accidentally turning on the seamoth's headlights in the process. Once he got a hold of himself, he came up to the surface to get a good look.

Sure enough, it was an island. An actual, proper island. Suddenly he salivated. Land. He could actually stand on proper, sturdy land for a change.

It took some puttering around the island's perimeter given that it was mostly a sheer cliff face, but Varien found a sandy shore carved into a canyon between two rock walls. After making sure his seamoth wouldn't get pulled out to sea, he opened the hatch and climbed out.

The first thing that hit him was the heat. And it hit him hard. Sometimes it was easy while living in his air conditioned habitat, or surrounded by the cool water, to forget that it was forty degrees outside. He needed to find the survivors' habitat quickly, he'd be sweating up a storm until then. Varien was suddenly overjoyed he'd brought so much water with him.

The next thing that hit him was how sturdy his footing was. He laughed weakly. Land. Actual
land. Not a rocking lifepod, or a habitat supported by struts. Land! Oh he could lean down and kiss the beach.

He climbed up the slope of the sand, and, after a moment's hesitation, took his radiation helmet off and stored it in his suit's storage. His PDA didn't start blaring warnings about radiation to him, so he assumed all was fine. He took a deep breath through his nose, flooding his senses with the scents of plantlife and dirt. Waves lapped quietly at the shore. He scanned the surroundings, looking for anything of note. And sure enough, there was!

Sticking up from the island were two mountains, or maybe cliffs. Whatever they were, they were narrow rocky protrusions up into the sky and, atop the closer one, he could see the unmistakable form of an artificial habitat! There was even a narrow, sandy path towards it!

With a grin, he started towards it and dared to hope. He could go find survivors. Hold a conversation with someone again. He could find Silvia and hold her in his arms and tell her how much he missed her, how much she meant to him and how horrible the past week had been without her. He could brush away her black hair, hold her and kiss her and make love to her under the stars and even if they never got off this planet, everything would somehow be alright as long as they had each other.

With the gargantuan red moon hanging in the sky like a dumbbell, Varien started hiking. His legs burned, but it was a good burn. It wasn't swimming, and that made it alright in his book. Above him, strange white birds flapped and screeched quietly, paying him no mind. Strange trees dotted the land. Their bark was a strange metallic hue and their tops glowed blue beneath the leaves. There were other plants, too. Giant orange cups. Pink-capped mushrooms. Polka-dotted fungi that rattled dryly in the breeze. Now and then he passed beneath a stone arch and the shadows splashed their calming chill onto his dark skin.

Varien arrived at the mountain and started climbing, passing through tunnels and pushing aside vines. It was fairly precarious in some places, and more than once he thought he heard rocks tumble to the ground nauseatingly far below. The ray-birds shrieked around him like vultures and a chill wind whistled around him, teasing him with the possibility of tearing him off the side of the mountain. But finally - finally! - he reached the top of the cliff and saw that the shelter was...

... was...

... destroyed. Corroded. It was a small thing, just a pair of metal corridors with a spherical glass observatory at the end. The only way in was a half-busted bulkhead that he almost numbly scanned to add to his habitat builder's list of blueprints. Outside, resting on the ground, was a broken spotlight half covered in sand. He scanned that too, then turned his attention back to the shelter.

How could this have happened? There was no way a shelter built at most one week ago had degraded so much, especially with people here to maintain it.

Unless there aren't any people here to maintain it, whispered a traitorous thought.

No. No way. Varien pushed into the habitat and looked around. There was a crate right next to him. He opened it and found... a bottle of disinfected water. It looked about twice the size of the bladderfish-bottles he'd been living on, with a screw-on cap. He stowed it away reflexively, and kept searching.

He didn't need to search long. Next to the crate was an abandoned PDA, long ago run out of power. He brought his next to it and told it to download the data. His PDA sent a surge of battery power into the other one, lighting it up just long enough for it to transfer any information on it. A moment
later, it took the electricity back and the abandoned PDA shut off.

Varien didn't bother to sit somewhere. Standing straight up he scanned through his data entries to find what he'd just found, and frowned. "Bart Torgal's third log?" He started reading it. "I messed up, badly. Two days since... shouldn't have left the island... we're not wanted down there... I knew it and didn't say... they're stuck down there, and I'm up here. I deserve this." A light turned on in his head.

The Degasi.

The Degasi had crashed on this planet years earlier. He'd found the survivors' base. From what he could understand they eventually - for some reason! - tried to make a base underwater. The other Degasi were separated from this 'Bart', and he'd spent who-knew how long, up on the island, utterly alone.

A chill traced its way down his spine, and suddenly the thirty degree weather seemed far too cold. Varien had heard that isolation... did things to people. He'd been alone only a week. How long had this Bart Torgal been alone? Months? Years? The voice log mentioned that 'they' didn't trust the Degasi, that 'they' didn't want them down in the water. Poor guy'd clearly gone off the deep end. Given how he'd mentioned he 'deserved' to be alone, Varien felt he could guess pretty well what finally ended the man's life.

Was that going to be his fate, if he didn't find anyone? No, no that was ridiculous. There were people here. The rendezvous was set to this island. It was absurd to consider that Varien, and only Varien, survived.

He turned around and blinked. "Whoa." In the observatory was a small garden. A small tree with hanging orange fruits along with a tall fern and orange cut-up looking plants. Varien approached, and a spark of inspiration lit up in his brain. "Farm!" he said aloud, his voice quiet and small in the oppressive shelter. He scanned the growbed; apparently it was good for interior spaces only. Then he scanned the plants one at a time and reviewed their data. Of note was the so-called lantern tree. Edible staple, that was exactly what he needed! Fruit!

Varien grabbed one of the odorless fruits and took a bite. Watery flesh, tasting like mildly spicy oranges, flooded his mouth and he groaned. Oh, he'd missed fruit. So succulent and delicious, and more importantly it'd never been full of blood or shit.

He finished off the fruit and, with his stomach full, took another one to look for seeds. He unwrapped its orange flesh and searched through it until he found a collection of seeds; they were dispersed evenly throughout the fruit and he hadn't even noticed them in the one he'd eaten. They were small, like little candies, and he could hold dozens of them in the palm of his hand. He took the five from the fruit and stowed them in his suit's storage, rendering it about three-quarters full.

His scanner hadn't indicated any of the other plants were edible, so he left them. Besides, he still had to find the others. Just because he'd found an old, ruined Degasi base didn't mean there wasn't another base somewhere else made by the Aurora crew.

He got a bird's eye view, and searched. Far away, on the other mountain peak, he saw another small habitat. Probably a second Degasi base, but who knew what he'd find?

With considerably less enthusiasm than before, Varien made his way down the cliff, hiked over to the next, and started climbing it. As he walked he shouted, raising his voice and screaming into the air.
"HELLO?!

"ANYONE THERE?!

"IS THIS THE RENDEZVOUS?!

"SOMEONE, PLEASE ANSWER ME!"

But nobody answered his cries.

Before he knew it, it started getting dark. By the time he climbed the second cliff, slipping through tunnels and skirting around precarious drops, the ocean swallowed up the local sun and the stars came out in full force. Mercifully, the temperature plummeted. Just as well; he’d already gone through four of his five bottles of bladderfish water. And the giant bottle of disinfected water he wanted to save until he really needed it. Water was, ironically, worth its weight in gold on this planet.

The other base was an almost exact replica of the first. Same corroded walls, same dirty observatory that, this time, he didn’t forget to scan for his habitat builder. Not that he even knew what he’d do with an observatory.

The bulkhead for this second base was blocked by an old metal crate, which forced Varien to squeeze in through the top. A glance to the left showed there was no garden in the observatory, just a desk and a chair. Across from him were a few flower pots, in which strange plants grew. He took a moment to scan both them and their pots, and a quick read through his PDA confirmed them to be imported Chinese Potatoes. Edible vegetables. He grabbed a few spuds and stored them.

The desk had another abandoned PDA. He downloaded it just like the other, and opened it up. "Degasi voice log number one, habitat location?" he pondered. "Play recording," he instructed.

After a moment, a woman’s voice spoke up, as sharp and scornful as it was accented. A Mongolian accent, if he had to guess. "Not gonna work, chief. There's nothing left of the Degasi. There's no building materials on this island. And I can smell the weather turning. We need to get our feet wet."

A man’s voice responded, similarly accented and with that tone that spoke of old age. "This island is safe, Margeurit. No sea monsters. We can grow food. Why would we ever leave it?"

"Your kid says we just can't grow enough. Not without more growbeds which we can't build because, again, no building materials. Come on kid, speak up."

A third person's voice. He sounded young. "Dad, it's true. The natural growth rates are just too slow to support three of us. Especially if the weather gets worse."

"All I'm saying is," Margeurit cut in. ", the ocean's got us surrounded. We may as well get some use out of it."

"I don't believe it," the old man responded. "I'm the captain and I've made my decision. You two want to forfeit your commissions and go for a swim?!"

"Believe me, chief," she responded gravely. "I'm considering it."

The message ended, and Varien frowned. That didn't sound good. But it did explain why the Degasi left the island. The weather must have indeed gotten worse. Forced them underwater, where they were then separated. Bart came back up to the island and lived in isolation. The other two
must've died. It conflicted him. Did a base on this island even seem like a good idea anymore? It was susceptible to weather. But in the ocean, there were monsters that could kill him.

Alright, focus. He'd found two of the Degasi bases on this island, but still no news on the Aurora survivors. He had a good vantage point from atop the cliff, so Varien walked out of the habitat and scanned the island.

The massive wreck of the Aurora hung in the distance, its engines barely visible through the clearing fog. The treetops formed a dense canopy, dimly lit by their odd blue light. The birds weren't about anymore, but the wind still howled. His HUD showed the blue symbols of both his lifepod and seamoth in the distance. Varien spotted an oasis inside the island. He looked and looked and, just when he was about to give up, he found it. A base nestled down below, between the two cliff-top bases. It was on the opposite side of the island from the Aurora, so no wonder he'd missed it until now. Carefully, with sleep tugging at his eyes, Varien made his way down.

His heart slowly fell as he came closer and closer to the base. Sure it was much larger than the others, with a colossal circular room buried in the hillside. But...

"No," he moaned. "No!"

It was just another ruined Degasi base.

The tiny four-legged critters scuttling about the place were easy to scare off with some shouting and sudden movements. They fled into the forest with hops and chirps and squeaks. He sighed and searched about. There were a few boxes, one of which held about half of what his scanner revealed to be a stasis rifle. More importantly he saw another growbed, this one modified to support life outside. He added it to his habitat builder's collection, and gathered the seeds of the strange 'marblemelon' plants growing on it.

Inside the gigantic shelter, half buried in mud, were more abandoned PDAs that supported the story of the weather forcing the Degasi survivors into the ocean. There was a wall covered in synthetic plants for decoration. The room itself was enormous and he readily added the multipurpose room to his PDA. He couldn't wait to build one and have all that space.

But what really caught his attention was the strange purple device sitting on a table inside the shelter. He hefted it in both hands; it was heavy. It looked like some odd computer chip, with two short spiral arms sprouting off the top and bottom. It was made of a dense black metal and filled with symbolic holes. In the very center was a curious, bright purple symbol that glowed with otherworldly energy.

His PDA wasn't warning him about radiation, so he assumed it was fine and stored it away. Then he frowned at himself; was he getting too careless? Probably. But what if he needed to take risks? Sure the Degasi survivors had apparently regretted going into the water, but if they'd stayed on the island...

... well, the collapsed mud around their shelter spoke volumes. He'd take the risk and keep the strange purple thing. It was probably just some obscure Mongolian tech.

But worse than that, there was no shelter made recently here. There were no other survivors. The island wasn't that big, someone would've surely heard him. Where was everyone? Where was Silvia?

Like a zombie he traced his way back to his seamoth, thoughts alternating between a dull standstill and a frantic rush. They were all dead. They'd probably just chosen a different rendezvous. But
then why was everything so untouched? They couldn't all be dead. They couldn't! That would mean he was all alone on an alien planet with no rescue ever coming. His luck couldn't be that bad. Maybe it was. No, there had to be SOME things that hadn't gone belly-up. Surely the resourceful and knowledgeable Aurora crew had managed to do better than some nobody programmer like himself, right?

He climbed atop his seamoth, opened the hatch, then sunk into it and closed it off. He reclined into his cushioned seat and closed his eyes, twitching their lids as tiny lights danced around behind them. He'd sleep here, then head back to his base. He could *not* afford to be sleep deprived, not in a situation like this. And his vehicle's oxygen generator would keep him from suffocating despite the airtight seal the submersible had.

Loneliness clenched his heart like a cement hand, sapping what little energy he had left. He whimpered quietly, and slipped into uneasy sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Varien

His mood was substantially improved by the time he got back to his base. So what if the island trip had shown no other survivors? That just meant they were elsewhere. It was as one of the PDA entries from the Degasi survivors had said. They were *humans!* They had spent millennia doing nothing but learning how to make the environment bend to their will. They had colonized every corner of Earth. Every inch of Mars. Damn it, they'd colonized Venus! This planet would bend, too. The other survivors had probably come to the same conclusion the Degasi had; dry land was no good.

The first order of business was to make himself a proper garden. To do that, he needed a multipurpose room. He cannibalized the X-shaped corridor for metal, leaving just his single I-shaped chamber. He gathered metal, then attached the gigantic multipurpose room to the non-hatched end of his shelter.

"When constructing larger habitats," his PDA told him as he finished up the colossal, cylindrical chamber. "It is recommended to separate leisure from business to maximize productivity. Treat this space as your home, but *never* forget that it is not." Sound advice.

He entered the inside and marveled, smiling at his accomplishment. It was huge. The ceiling was so *far* above his head! He had room to jump about and laugh and dance. He selected a corner and aimed his habitat builder at it. He selected 'indoor growbed' and held down the trigger. He had to extract some lumps of material - mainly titanium - from his dive suit's storage to feed into the builder, which made holding it a tad awkward. All the same, the tool's twin fabrication lasers danced and slowly assembled the square of metal. Varien also watched uneasily as a little bar on the habitat builder drained, the blue light slowly receding. He'd need to make a new battery for this damn thing if he did too much building.

Once his growbed was done, Varien got some sand and nutrient-rich soil from around the flora outside. It took several trips to have enough to fill up the two-by-two meter bed of metal, but before long it was done and the construct converted the material into workable soil. He planted his potatoes, his melons, and his lantern trees, spaced out as evenly as his zero gardening expertise advised him. He knelt by the console and messed around with the settings a little, telling his growbed to grow these damn things as *fast* as it could, taking water and nutrients from the ocean outside. Sure it'd drain his base's power, but that was what solar panels were for.

He stepped back and nodded. Well, that was done for. It'd take a bit for his crops to grow, but when they did his food problem was good as solved. Until then, he could make trips to the island.
for fruit if his nutrition ever got dire. Things were finally starting to look up! Technically, all he
really needed to do now was wait for rescue.

And there would be rescue, he was sure of it. Alterra had sunk a lot of resources into the Aurora,
they'd notice when it went missing. Plus it'd be terrible PR not to come rescue them.

He could stand to make a bed, though. Sadly his habitat constructor was still missing a lot of
blueprints it should normally have had, as were his fabricators. So sleeping on rolls of fiber mesh
would have to do.

While he pondered where to get a bed, the top right of his vision lit up with the symbol of his
lifepod's communicator. With a long-suffering sigh, he made his way to his habitat's hatch, hooked
up his air tank, fins and radiation helmet, then exited into the waters. It was a short swim to his
lifepod, sure, but damn it he really needed to start phasing it out entirely. Currently he was still
dependent on it for fabrication, first aid kits, and communications. But he just didn't have enough
stars-damn gold to do that!

The worst part was, most of the gold was in caves. Which A) posed a drowning hazard and B)
were full of the exploding fish that had nearly killed him once before.

He pulled himself into the pod through the bottom, pushing open the hatch and climbing in. Waves
lapped gently at the hole before he sealed it back off.

"Captain, a new message has - "

"Play message," he interrupted.

"Playing message... This is a high priority automated message from Lifepod Thirteen." He
frowned. Automated message? "Coordinates attached. Lifepod contains the last known remains of
passenger - " It cut to a frustrated man's voice with a Mongolian accent. " - Emissary Jochi Khasar.
I said Jochi Khasar! Why do I have to record this anyway?!" Varien couldn't help but snort as the
communicator returned to its standard voice. "Send immediate burial detail," it requested,
producing another coordinate chip from its panel.

Burial detail. Someone was dead. His stomach twisted into knots, but he swallowed his unease.
Survival, focus on survival.

He wasn't burial detail, but maybe there'd be something he could salvage. After some dressing
maneuvers, he attached the computer chip to his dive suit's coordinate panel - above the small of
his back - and headed for his seamoth. He'd parked it just below his base, where the struts would
shelter it from most of the currents. It'd drifted up against one of the legs, but nothing too bad.
After making sure he had enough food and water for the trip, he climbed in through the top, closed
the hatch, and headed off towards the new blip of blue in his vision, the signal for the lifepod.

The shallows spun past him. He saw a pod of gasopods, laughing deeply and swimming around
near the surface. He hit a few peepers, and laughed childishly as they slid off his windshield.
Varien started to dip deeper. A kelp forest appeared in his vision, the stalks of creepvines swaying
back and forth. He shuddered; no thank you.

He detoured to the right, and the ocean floor plummeted away, down to a hundred meters below the
surface. He coasted above plains of red grass, and marveled at a pod of those gigantic, whale-like
things passing overhead. He thought he saw something shifting in the sands, but he sure wasn't
going to go check!
Varien kept steering, keeping his eyes on the prize. He wasn't entirely sure what he was searching for. Still, with the way the signal was angled so far... down, he suspected he was going to end up deeper than he'd ever gone.

Then the ground vanished.

He braked his seashot in surprise and looked around. The land just abruptly plummeted, to a downright nauseating depth. The water at his level was filled with what appeared to be giant mushrooms growing on mammoth stalks. On closer inspection, the stalks were just spires of stone, overgrown with fungi. Bright blue rays lazily swam between them, releasing ear-piercing shrieks and wails.

"Scans indicate this biome is dominated by plantlife," his PDA supplied. "Detecting faint Alterra technology signatures."

Alterra technology, huh?

He headed deeper, keeping an eye out. Those glowing jellyfish things looked harmless enough, but he wasn't about to chance getting eaten. The last pretty blue thing he'd seen had... ugh.

He continued puttering closer to the signal. He came into view of an enormous spire of stone, stretching most of the way to the surface, covered in equally enormous mushroom caps. The signal seemed to be a little bit off from the base of it, so Varien angled his seashot down and began to descend. It wasn't entirely comfortable, he had to push himself against the steering wheel to fight off gravity, but he could manage.

The mushroom forest grew closer and closer, then swallowed him up. Some of the jelly creatures took notice of him, then swam the other way with quiet cries. In the distance a quiet, bone-chilling roar passed through the water. The signal in his sight vanished, replaced by the lifepod itself.

He sighed. It'd definitely seen better days. It's sunken to the ocean floor, a small ring of disturbed sediment and plantlife around it. Schools of strange, hoop-like green fish swam in complex patterns between the mushrooms. The lifepod itself had clearly failed to deploy its flotation devices, and a massive hole had been torn in its side. The 'Lifepod 13' letters on its side seemed mocking.

Varien puttered closer with his seashot, the lights turned on to cut through the gloomy haze of the surrounding waters. He couldn't actually see any remains in the pod, or around it. Outside there was a data box, upturned on one side and half sunken into the sand like a shovel. Inside the pod itself, he thought he could see a PDA. He checked his depth meter. One hundred and seventy meters down. That was... wow. That was ridiculously deep. His dive suit would offer him some protection, but even so...

"PDA, how long can I stay out in this depth before entering my seashot will cause me decompression sickness?" he asked.

"Human biological data corrupted," it reminded him. "Apologies for that."

He cursed. Alright, he'd have to be quick about this. First, the data box. He'd come here to salvage anything he could salvage, and that looked important. He'd grab the PDA if he had time. Varien brought his vehicle closer, and angled the top hatch as close to it as he could. With the press of a button the hatch opened up, and the outside waters were held at bay by nothing more than advanced surface tension manipulating technology. He took a deep breath, then jumped out and into the ocean.
"Guh!" he grunted. The weight of the sea squeezed him like a vice, crushing around every part of his body. His legs, his arms, his head. But worst of all, his chest. Varien had to actively struggle to expand his lungs against the crushing weight. He floundered for a moment, the breath stripped from his body, before getting a hold of himself. Focus. He had to focus. The data box.

He swam at it, fins beating at the cold water surrounding him. He came to a stop next to it. The data box was a flat white rectangle, patterned with orange stripes. In its center was a gray box with a small touchscreen, the size of a finger tip. Varien pressed his finger against said touchscreen, and the gray box opened up to reveal a data chip. He grabbed it in his hand, his PDA already remotely downloading its contents, and stored it in his suit.

That left just the PDA, but that was easy. He swam into the lifepod through the hull breach and, once he got a hold of the PDA, made a beeline back to his seamoth. He boarded through the open hatch and fell right into his seat.

"Ow," he whimpered, closing the hatch with the press of a button. "Ow. Never again." At least there weren't any actual remains. The corpse had probably been eaten, though that raised the question of what ate bone.

Now that he was safe again, Varien took the opportunity to read over what he'd gotten. The PDA just detailed the Emissary's final moments. As his lifepod screamed through the atmosphere and probably smashed itself upon the water - which would be like stone at such high speeds - he'd prayed and essentially given himself to the reincarnation cycle he believed in.

Varien rolled his eyes. Mongolians.

The data box was more useful, but not by much. It was the blueprint for enhanced flippers, with a specially designed surface to help him swim faster. Unfortunately, they could only be fabricated using a modification station.

Which could only be built from his habitat builder.

And wouldn't you know it, part of his data corruption meant his habitat builder didn't have access to a mod station. So that was going to have to wait.

Well, he thought. Since I'm here, I may as well explore.

After a quick nibble of his nutrient block and downing a bottle of filtered water, he was ready to go.

One of the things he noticed, very quickly, was all the gray crystals dotted throughout the mushroom forest. They mostly grew on the ground, but a few also made their home on the rocky spires, nestled between various flora. He didn't actually grab any, as he didn't want to subject himself to that pressure more than he needed to, but he did make a mental note to come back when and if he had the tools to get at the shards without risking the Bends.

It was a beautiful biome, he had to admit. The jellyfish things swam in arcing circles above him, and while the sunlight so far down was diminished, it still filtered radiantly through the 'trees'. All sorts of small, herbivorous fish swam around him, weaving between stone spires and making sure to avoid him. He didn't see any stone outcrops, interestingly enough. Plenty of gray shards, though, and a lot of condensed deposits of salt. As he kept exploring, he saw something in the corner of his vision. It looked like a wheel.

Confused, he brought his seamoth over. Once he was close enough, he brought his scanner to the
windshield and scanned the piece of wreckage through it. His PDA marked it as part of a ‘Cyclops Bridge’. Intrigued, he opened up his data downloads and read.

As he read, he progressively smiled more and more. An industrial submarine. Five hundred meters crush. A whole fifty four meters large! The lack of emergency ballast was a little offputting, but as long as he was careful with it that wouldn't be an issue. He absolutely wanted one. His seamoth was close enough to crush depth as it was.

Varien went to work. With his seamoth, he puttered around the floor of the mushroom forest, eyes peeled for any pieces of Cyclops wreckage. If one piece had fallen here, others probably had too, just based on how he imagined trajectories to work. Eventually, he was proven right. A piece of smooth, white metal with black innards came into view. He scanned it through the glass, and found it to be a piece of the Cyclops's hull. Apparently that was enough for his scanner to reconstruct a lot of the exterior, since the Cyclops was very... uniform on the outside.

No skin off his back.

He made a few more rounds. The mushroom forest was contained by sheer cliffs, and seemed to spill deeper into the sea. He made sure to stay well above the two hundred meter mark, just in case; a hull rupture at this depth would probably kill him just on account of the force of the inrushing water. He found a few more wheel-like pieces of the bridge, which did nothing for him. But there were other parts, too. A long piece of metal patterned black and white, like half of a hoverboard. A proper steering wheel. A black lattice of plasteel. It took him the better part of the day and more than a few warnings about 'passing safe depth' but Varien finished up the blueprints for his Cyclops's hull and bridge.

... no progress on the engine, though. He couldn't find anything. Maybe that had landed elsewhere.

He went further away from his lifepod, and found the ocean floor began to dip even further. Varien let out a shaky breath, but pressed onward. Maybe he'd find something useful.

"Whoa," he breathed as the mushroom forest gave way. It petered out into a stretch of blank stone, dotted with massive deposits of what looked to be solid gold. But what really drew his attention was the chasm beyond. Like a stab wound in the earth, it extended as far as he could see. The stone was black as the void of space. He couldn't see far into the abyssal darkness of the canyon, but he could see massive plants, glowing a ghostly blue, sticking up from the ground. They were unbelievably tall, dwarfing even creepvine plants. Along their main body an occasional branch hung out. At the very top they branched out like a starfish, and for a few of the shorter ones he saw what looked like a mouth in the center of their tops.

Just staring at the canyon made his spine tingle. He didn't know if there were any creatures inside, whether it suddenly grew black as death or whether there just weren't any around at the moment. Varien leaned forward in his seamoth, his headlights on but casting no light into the gloom.

He couldn't get anything from there. Not now. It was just too deep. But deep also meant precious metals, right? As soon as he got a Cyclops, he was going to exploit the hell out of that crevice. His skin practically tingled with anticipation, the possibilities crackling in the air...

Wait, no.

Something actually was crackling.

Varien's head craned left to see whatever it was. He didn't scream, but his heart skipped a beat and he jumped hard enough to hit his head on the hatch.
It was, after the reef-things, the largest animal he'd seen so far. An eel, so horrifically large just its head was as tall as Varien himself. Its entire body was covered in a tan carapace, patterned with pale swirls and lines. Its pair of beady green eyes were half sunken into their sockets, the mouth was locked in a permanent grimace, and it was so close he could see the interlocking needle fangs. Above its mouth was a tiny hole, shaped like an arch, that must've been its nose.

But the really striking feature were its prongs. Two jutted out like tusks from the bottom of its frowning mouth, ending in luminescent white caps. More prongs traced their way down its entire body. Four more arranged like a square on its head, and more down its entire body, four per segment of exoskeleton. At the very end of the massive predator - because this was clearly a predator, Varien had no doubts about that - its tail flapped around back and forth, revealing four more prongs pointing straight back. Crackles of electricity, painfully blue, formed between the prongs' tips in wildly shifting patterns. A series of loops danced up and down the eel's body in seemingly random formations, one loop per 'square' of prongs.

He couldn't move. It was too close. His seamoth was fast, but he didn't think it could outrun something this big. Not to mention what that much electricity might do to his sub's delicate machinery. He just had to let it inspect him, hopefully it'd smell he wasn't tasty and it would leave him alone. How in the world had something so huge snuck up on him in the first place?

"New creature discovered!" his PDA announced proudly, making him jump a second time. "Naming: Ampeel."

The newly christened 'Ampeel' had also reacted when his PDA spoke up. With a motion of its powerful tail it drifted slightly further away from Varien, and its arcs of power went out. Then the electricity fired up again, moving in more shifting, circling patterns. Sometimes it stopped and swam back and forth in his field of vision before resuming.

Wait.

It wasn't just randomly crackling at him. The ampeel also didn't make any noises beyond the hum of static its prongs gave off. He wondered... did its species communicate with electricity? Was it trying to communicate with him?

On a whim, he turned his seamoth's headlights off.

The reaction was immediate. The ampeel backed off and went quiet, then circled around his seamoth with its electricity arcing back and forth along its body. Mercifully, it kept far enough away to avoid frying his submarine's circuits.

When it finally came back to Varien's field of view, he turned the lights on. It went quiet.

Then he turned them off, waited a second, and blinked them twice. Waited a moment, then blinked them thrice. Then four times.

After a moment, the ampeel responded. It flashed every one of its prongs five times, then six, seven, eight times. Varien's jaw dropped.

Holy shit.

"You can count," he said aloud. "Alright... can you do math?" He flashed his lights twice, then three times, but then five times. Could it add?

The ampeel considered that for a moment. Then it relayed to him the pattern of two, three, five. That didn't prove anything though, just that it could repea -
Then it gave him a series of three, four, and seven.

Varien's mouth went dry as he eyed the megafauna before him. He reached for his lights, already thinking of another pattern, but then the ampeel started making patterns to him.

It flashed its prongs three times. Then it flashed them twice. After another pause, it flashed them six times. Multiplication. Varien could do that. With his seamoth's light he flashed three times, three times again, then nine times.

The ampeel did a strange twirl in the water, its prongs crackling with a strange, stuttering rhythm.

Varien and the fish did a few more tests. He obviously couldn't do anything overly complex, like fractions, exponents, or algebra with just his lights, but the basic functions were easy. Sometimes he posed a pattern for the ampeel to repeat. Sometimes it did the same to him. They continued for what felt like hours. Tense, nervewracking, galvanizing hours. The tests just about confirmed it; ampeels were intelligent. Intelligent enough to add and subtract. Multiply and divide.

Actual intelligent, alien life. Not some insectoid hive mind, but actual individuals that could think and reason. He didn't know how to react.

His body, however, did; his stomach growled. The ampeel must've heard, because it lurched about in the water, looking straight at him. It 'spoke' to him in more crackles of electricity, then opened its mouth to chomp the water quietly. Was it... giving him permission to go eat?

He had food with him. Food and water. But he was so far over his head, he couldn't stand to be here any longer. He needed to go back to his base and think over what the fuck he was going to do with a giant electrical intelligent fish. He waved goodbye to the ampeel, as though it'd know what the gesture meant, and started ascending rapidly through the water. He glanced down and saw it turn tail, swimming back into the dark ravine.

Once his seamoth broke the surface, he ripped off his radiation helmet, brought his gloved hands to his face, and screamed. What the fuck was he going to do about this?! He obviously couldn't just let this go. This was the discovery of a life time. But oh stars, he was so woefully unqualified. He could barely even keep himself alive on this planet, let alone establish first contact with an alien species that spoke, not with sound, but in patterns of electricity. He should just focus on survival, get off 4546B, then alert the authorities and let it be their problem.

But at the same time, he was lonely. So lonely. In the week or so he'd spent on 4546B, he'd seen not a single soul. The creeping dread that maybe he really was the only one to make it tugged at the back of his mind every day, and the idea of having someone, anyone to speak with, even a giant carnivorous fish, made his heart feel light and fluffy.

He came out of his thoughts to realize he was back at his base. He must've zoned out and piloted his seamoth back without paying attention. Not good; he needed to be attentive at all times.

Varien climbed out and got into his lifepod. He wanted to go open up the fabricator and see if maybe he could make something to help communicate with the ampeel -

"Captain! A new message has arrived!"

"Holy - !" He spun around to face the relay. "Damn it, now what?! Play message."

Static, and then a man's deep voice. "This is Avery Quinn of trading ship Sunbeam." Varien's eyes widened. "Aurora, do you read? Over." A pause, and Avery Quinn sighed. "Still nothing. I swear, these Alterra ships. They so much as run out of engine grease, they send an SOS. Offer to help?"
Radio silence," he groused, to Varien's growing horror. "Aurora, we're out on the far side of the system. It's going to take more than a week to reach your location. Do you still need our assistance? Over."

"Yes!" Varien shouted, grabbing the relay with both hands. "Yes, yes I do need help! Transmit! Help me! Don't - "

Avery sighed. "I'll try them again tomorrow." His voice grew more distant, as if talking to people in the background. "Let's get that long range scanner up in the meantime. Damn charter's gonna have us wasting our credits chasing Alterra's tail." And the message ended.

Raw, numbing horror flooded Varien from head to toe. "No! No don't leave us here, you asshole!" he shouted. But the relay didn't respond. "DAMN IT!" He moved off to the side and collapsed in the pod's chair. "What do I do?" he moaned.

Focus. Forget the Sunbeam. He had survivors to find, and an alien species to open a dialogue with. He needed to get to work and get that going. That was priority.

He just wanted anyone, anything, to talk to.

Volara

What a strange day! Volara honestly thought she'd never see another of those strange creatures, but she had!

The day had started like any other. She got up from her rest, and went on a patrol of her territory. Once that was done she hunted down a chomper or two to fill her belly, then want out to wander the unclaimed territories. She swam far and high, so high up her swim bladder tickled and she could see the strange, bright rocks outside her home. On a whim she'd gone, because honestly. What out there could possibly hurt her?

She swam around, looking at the far-off stalks of rock and the odd, glowing things swimming between them. She didn't go far at first, but then she saw it. And more importantly, she'd sensed it.

A white shape, mostly round, with what looked like a bubble held in its grip. And inside that bubble had been something almost identical to the creatures she'd accidentally killed a few days earlier. And she had sensed it using language, in a thrumming beat so fast she could barely sense anything but a hum. So she'd approached it, and tried to speak with it.

Results were... mixed.

It was smart. It couldn't speak quite like her kind, but using the strange lights on its front, they'd managed. It could do things with numbers. And what a thought that was! Something that wasn't a shocker, but was still as smart as one. Eventually she'd heard its stomach growl, and they both left to get food. She didn't know when it would be back; she couldn't exactly communicate the passage of time with the thing. So, the only thing left to do was check back routinely to see if it ever returned.

But in the meantime, Volara pondered what it even was.

This creature was one of the smoother types; it didn't have the pair of bumps on its body. Its skin was different, too. Gray and white with spots of blue, instead of dark gray and orange like the others had been. It moved around freely inside the white-bubble thing, and obviously controlled it. Was it the adult stage of the things she'd seen earlier? They must have lived in the Above.
It all made too much sense. Their egg - not shelter like she'd come to think, but egg - landed in her territory by mistake, probably from whatever enormous thing had shook the world just before they'd arrived. The two things hatched from it, in their larval forms. They went about gathering materials from the environment to try and create a shelter for themselves, like the one she'd seen recently. Or maybe not shelter, but rather shell. They were young, they didn't know how to speak, and so she had sensed nothing from them. But the new one, she could sense it. And she didn't like the implication of that.

Because the implication was that she had murdered a child. No better than the summoners. And the thought made her swim bladder tighten up so much she momentarily sunk to the rocks. Sure the other one had gotten away, but it too probably died. It was too much to hope the one that had gotten away had since grown up and was the one she'd just seen.

She made her way back to her territory, beating her tailfin against the waters. Volara passed by Ohmaron's territory, but he wasn't around. She swam further in, and was surprised to see a few shockers in her territory, too. She could see it was an adult and several fries a fraction of their size, crackling to each other as they inspected her resting caves from outside.

Volara swam closer and saw it was Herzaron, along with four of his children. He spotted her and swam closer. "Volara, we were just looking for you!"

She dipped her head and gave a polite crackle. One of Herzaron's clutch, Chargaron, approached. "Yeah, where were you, Miss Volara?" he asked with wide green eyes.

She regarded the fry with a happy arc of power, then turned to Herzaron. "I actually wanted to talk to you about that," she said warily. "Could we speak? Privately?"

Herzaron looked confused, but lit up his tusk prongs in confirmation. He turned to his children. "Why don't you go inside and swim around in Miss Volara's cave? Just don't touch anything." They chattered a little but obeyed, swimming into her home. Herzaron watched as they did, then turned back to her. "What is it?"

"So you've seen that egg that fell into my shelter," she began. "I think I met one of the creatures today, just outside the unclaimed lands. And get this! It can talk!"

Herzaron swam back in surprise, coiling up. "Talk?" he asked, baffled. "How?"

"I could sense it," she explained. "It can talk just like us." She glanced sideways. "Well not just like us. It doesn't know our language. But I think I can teach it how!"

"Really," he deadpanned. "Are you sure it was talking? You weren't just imagining things?"

She bit the water next to him. "Of course I'm sure! It was there, I saw it come and return to the Above." She glowered. "Why are you even doubting me?! I showed you the other two's egg! You and Teslara both saw it, so why are you - !"

"Hey, hey," he soothed, swimming closer. "Relax. I believe you, alright?" he said, giving her a nuzzle behind her first row of prongs. Volara sighed and relaxed as his fangs gently scraped her carapace. "So this strange fish showed up and, what, talked to you?"

"We did numbers," she said, pulling away. "It could count, it could add and subtract. That sort of thing. Then it got hungry, and we both left. I'm trying to figure out how to teach it our language."

He nodded. "I'm sure you'll figure something out. Oh, but I forgot, I wanted to talk to you anyway."
"What's on your mind?" Worry lanced through her hearts. "Is it the fries?" Her gills tightened in worry. "Is it - are they - don't tell me they have the Green - " No, no. Not again. It couldn't be happening again, already, to her friends -

"They're not sick," he reassured her. "It's Ohmaron. He's been holed up in his territory. He doesn't speak to anyone, barely hunts. I was thinking maybe you could go talk to him? Teslara and I are worried," he explained.

She dipped her head. "I'll see what's bothering him." Though she had an idea. Ohmaron had been like that last season, too. "In the meantime, any suggestions? About the creature?"

Herzaron chomped at the water thoughtfully. "Well, Teslara and I didn't strictly 'teach' the fries to talk," he explained. "We simply spoke around them a lot, and they picked it up from there. Probably your best bet." He swam closer to her. "If you're really serious about this, then wait for this creature to return and speak to each other. I'm sure you'll be able to teach it something, if it's as smart as you say."

Volara gave an appreciate arc of her prongs. "Right, thank you. And, I'll try to speak with Ohmaron," she reassured.

"Thank you," he said. "We owe you." With a flick of his tailfin he spun around. "I should probably get the fries and be on our way, we've taken up enough of your time," he apologized.

"Oh no it's fine, it's fine," she reassured, undulating to swim beside him as they headed for her caves. "I should get to hunting anyway, I've only had a few chompers."

"I spotted a few crawlers while coming over," he supplied.

"Right." An idea lit up her prongs. "Oh! That's a thought. Maybe I could bring the creature one, give it food so it comes around more often."

But first, she'd have to go see what was with Ohmaron.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Varien

"Unable to deconstruct lifepod components," his PDA informed him.

"No, I don't care!" he complained, pointing his habitat builder at the fabricator and holding down the 'Deconstruct' button. "Deconstruct! Reduce! Break! Undo!" he ordered. He glared down at his tool. "Don't make me hack you!" Nothing.

He frowned in disgust and sighed. "Fine. I needed to go check on my crops anyhow." He walked over to his lifepod's hatch, fixed his oxygen tank and helmet, and plunged through. The swim back to his habitat was as short as ever, and before long Varien was inside the metal walls, the humid but cool air blowing around him.

Maybe he could stand to add a window, though. It was pretty claustrophobic, even with all the space the multipurpose room gave him.

Varien made his way over to his indoor growbed and, after taking off his helmet, knelt next to it to inspect the crops. He grinned; there was a little green shoot sprouting from where he'd planted the Chinese potatoes! If he looked even closer, he could see the marblemelon and lantern tree starting to poke through as well. It'd be a while before they were fully grown, so he'd need another trip to the island for fruits and vegetables so he wouldn't suffer deficiencies, but fairly soon he'd have a good farm up and running.

He frowned and stood from his growbed. That just left one problem. The ampeels.

Alright, he had to think. What could he do to let him speak with the eels more easily? Fabricating something was right out; the fabricator would only build things it was programmed to, and nothing else. For his 'safety', of course. So if he was going to design something, it'd have to be by hand.

He went over to his rolls of fiber mesh and sat, bringing up his PDA and looking through his blueprints. So. How did ampeels seem to communicate? Through the patterns of electricity they generated. Varien could get his PDA to record and translate the patterns for him, but that still left the issue of how he could talk to them.

... he could make a flashlight. Wouldn't take that many materials, though he'd need to go scavenging for them; he really need to get on making storage lockers. But what would a flashlight even do for him? All it would be is another seamoth headlight. Unless he wanted to create one flashlight for each prong an ampeel had, then somehow hold them into a formation that the fish would recognize and operate them manually...
Wait. Idea. Maybe he could do just that!

Maybe he didn't need the flashlight itself. Maybe he just needed the LED lights inside the flashlight. Make a frame of copper wire, attach the lights so it resembled an ampeel, and operate it with battery power. But then how would he actually operate it? Have a ton of switches attached and flip them on and off one at a time, by hand?

What if he could make his PDA operate it? Well, then that would take some electronics. And wireless communicators. He'd also have to find a way to hook it all up, without the help of a fabricator. The more he thought about it, the more herculean the task appeared.

Varien snapped himself out of it. "First, flashlights," he told himself. "Flashlights and wire. Build the frame, and worry about it from there."

Affixing his gear again, he headed out the hatch and back into the chilly ocean. A blue ray with orange ears, almost the size of Varien himself, swam by languidly. There was something odd about the rabbit ray, though. Massive green pustules covered its body, veins like cracks covering its body. Eugh. Must've been sick or something. The hooting laughter of gasopods sounded from far off in the distance. He cracked his neck, and started searching.

After gathering what felt like a metric ton of copper, titanium wreckage, quartz crystals, and purple acidic mushrooms, Varien climbed back into his pod. He made an adhesive by taking the slime from inside a blue palm plant and put it into an empty water bottle.

First, he made a roll of copper wire. It wasn't cheap wiring either. It was sturdy and wouldn't bend unless he bent it. Next, he made a single flashlight. He held it in his hands, pointing it around his well-lit lifepod, turning it off and on. Then Varien dug his knife into the ridges along it and began to pry the damn thing open. After some effort, Varien managed to extract both the battery and the tiny, droplike LEDs.

Now came the hard part. Putting it all together.

He bent and twisted the copper wire over and over, shifting it back and forth. He made himself a short titanium pipe for the main body, began wrapping the wire 'spokes' around it, then used his glue to keep it in place. Bit by bit, piece by piece, his creation took form. A white rod about the length of his forearm, with small wheels of copper wire spaced throughout it, replicating the prongs he'd seen on the ampeel. There were more jutting from the 'head' and the flattened 'tail'. Now he just had to attach the lights.

That part was easy. He had to dip back into the ocean to get more adhesive, but he placed the small lights on the tips of his creation and glued them in place. He had enough LEDs to complete eight prongs, for a total of two rings. That left seven more rings, four prongs on the tail, and two more on the jaw 'tusks'.

It took him a good long while, especially since he had to stop to eat and drink, but soon Varien had everything. He put it all together, and he was done! He had a miniature ampeel that could light up. It was even better since the pipe was hollow, which made putting in - and gluing in place - a single battery easy, though it did mean he had to run a little more wiring.

Alright, now the moment of truth. Could his PDA control the LEDs remotely?

"Computer," he said, setting his mini eel on the fabricator's table. "Remotely activate all the lights on this construct."
"Accessing... failure!" Varien screamed. "Identification codes required."

ID codes. Right, that was easy. He shuffled around his pod for the empty flashlight husks and grabbed one. "Access code, uh..." He found the code printed along its bottom. "J532P25! Access and light up for two seconds."

"Accessing. Code confirmed!" The eight lights from that flashlight lit up brilliant white.

Varien leaped and put his hands over his open mouth. "YES!" he shouted. "YES!"

He went back to the empty flashlights. Varien fed his PDA their access codes, tested them, and assigned different lights to different groups so he could command his PDA to light up individual prongs separately. He ran a ring of light down the fake eel's body, and sighed in relief. Perfect. This was perfect! He could have his computer write a translation program, he'd find an ampeel, and start working on a dictionary.

Of course he had to find one, first. That dark rift in the ocean floor went well below two hundred meters. All he could do was hope he'd go there at the same time as an ampeel ventured to a level he could, like one had just now.

He did some thinking. It'd be unlikely for it to return so soon after leaving, and he hadn't seen any other ampeels. So... what else could he do until then?

As if to answer his unspoken question... "Captain! A new message has arrived!" his communicator chirped.

He glanced up from his fake ampeel and at the relay. "Play message," he ordered.

"Playing message!" A woman's voice came in. "This is Lifepod Seventeen, coordinates attached! From what I can tell, the forward seamoth bay collapsed around me. Do not attempt rescue without a laser cutter, you'll just add to the death total! Please hurry, there's something out here. Seventeen out." The relay ejected a coordinate chip, which he frantically took in his hand. Buried, someone was buried under a bay. He didn't recognize the voice, and he didn't have a laser cutter, but he could surely do something!

He installed the coordinate chip and slid out from his lifepod. He found his seamoth and dove in. Varien took a moment to get comfortable on the seat, then searched for Seventeen's signal. Once he did, he floored it.

Who knew how long she had left to live?

The shallow regions he made his habitat in flew by, and soon he found himself in another grassy plateau. Pillars of stone stuck up from all around, and ribbons of crimson plantlife waved about beneath him. As he neared the lifepod's location, a dark shape began to materialize before him. When it came into focus, he swallowed nervously.

Varien beheld a colossal wreck, the largest he'd seen yet. It leaned up against an ocean shelf, scraps of metal and peeled-open sheets littering the area around it. It vaguely looked like a colossal letter C, patterned white and dark gray.

Between him and the wreck was Lifepod Seventeen. Like the last one he'd seen, its flotation devices failed; they were punctured through with scraps of metal. It rested on the ocean floor amidst a pile of upturned sand and shattered seamoths. Strangely though, it didn't look like it had fallen there. Streaks through the grass suggested something had pushed it there. It wasn't buried under a seamoth bay either, so Varien guessed it had been shoved free as the wreckage settled.
He turned on his headlights and puttered closer, leaning forward to look for any hints of a survivor. She had to be around somewhere, right? Varien went closer to the Lifepod, circling around it with his eyes peeled.

In seconds, he spotted a gaping hole in its side. The breach was jagged, like it'd been bashed open with rocks. He peeked in, dreading the worst...

No corpse to make him throw up. No bones to send chills down his spine. Only the ruined interior of a lifepod, with a still-glowing PDA on the floor. Varien checked his depth; close to one hundred meters down. He could handle that much, if he hurried. He parked his seamoth close, then hopped out into the ocean.

Like before, the weight of the ocean came crashing around his radiation suit. He sucked in a breath, feeling like he'd been punched in the gut, but breathed out and relaxed. It was tough, but not as bad as in the mushroom forest. Varien swam closer to the lifepod -

The ground exploded.

Sand flew into the water, obscuring his vision. In the midst of the sandstorm a grublike shark appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. It was slightly smaller than the stalkers of the kelp forests, with dark blue armor plates along its back and four - four! - orange eyes fixated on him. A dorsal fin stuck up from the top of its head like a Roman crest, and nublike feet covered its bottom. It launched itself at him with its momentum, maw opened hideously wide to reveal a gullet ringed with teeth all the way down, large enough to swallow him whole.

No thought crossed through his mind. His heart stuttered and his blood froze, his entire body tingled with some cross between panic and shock. He tried to swim up and away through the sand, but it was like swimming through jello. It seemed like it went in slow motion, but all the same the shark's mouth closed on his waist far too fast.

Through sheer dumb luck, he punched one of its eyes out.

It keened in pain, the mouth opening up again. It lurched backwards with a deft movement of its squat body, allowing Varien a moment of freedom. His other arm lashed out to his left, feeling for something in the sand. He found something hard and sharp, so he gripped hard and pulled himself in. Sand clattered against his helmet's visor as he pulled himself through the water and out of the cloud of falling sand.

Darkness closed in on him, with only a sharp blue light to pierce it. Varien glanced at it and noticed it was a PDA; he'd pulled himself into the lifepod through its hull breach. The shark outside warbled and, as the cloud of sediment fell back to the ocean floor, it glared at him. Then it charged, and Varien realized the hole was large enough for it to fit through.

Luckily, the shark didn't come and corner him in the lifepod. It came close, then cut itself on the jagged edge of the pod's metal. It snarled again, then dove under the ocean floor. A cloud of sand burst up, and Varien watched as said cloud of sand rippled off into the distance.

He breathed a staccato sigh of relief, then noticed a warm pain in his left hand. He glanced to it and startled. His suits were cut through by a narrow gash, from which dark green blood flowed into the surrounding water. His clothes tightened down around the wrist, preventing the ocean from flooding in, and the fabrics were already repairing themselves. Had he cut himself on the lifepod? He hadn't even felt it.

... well, while he was already there, he inspected the lifepod. There were no resources and
everything was, predictably, busted. He downloaded the PDA's data, and swam back out for his seamoth.

Once back inside, he grimaced. His joints didn't... *ache* per-se, but there was an uncomfortable tension in his lower legs and upper arms. He'd been out in the pressure too long. Varien reclined in the seat and tapped on his PDA, pulling up the new entry he'd downloaded, written by one 'LaFette'.

"Lifepod made contact... shadows shifting... something trying to get in." Varien shuddered. He had a fairly good idea of what that might've been. Still, reading further something interesting occurred to him. The Aurora, that was right. Their mission was to create a phase gate, and they'd brought some aquatic tools just in case they needed to land on 4546B to rescue anyone. He'd been scavenging through what had fallen into the oceans, but what about the Aurora itself?

... he wondered what happened to LaFette. Had she escaped? If so, where was she? Where was her habitat? *Where was everyone?!*

Well, that was something for later. He still needed to make a laser cutter and a dive reel, he wanted to be fully prepared when he headed into the irradiated starship wreck. For the time being, there was something else to grab his attention. He puttered the seamoth over to the wreck, scanning the seafloor around its towering frame. Salmon-colored piranha creatures snapped and snarled around him, beating uselessly on his seamoth's glass.

Ha, idiots.

Supply crates, busted and broken, littered the sea floor around the wreck, crushing the plantlife underneath their frames. There wasn't much Varien could use, most of them were empty, but he *did* find a few plates of metal with holes drilled through them, so he scanned them through his seamoth and added a 'Battery Charger' to his list of habitat modules.

... he needed to find more gold, though.

After a few more minutes of searching Varien reclined in his seat and let a weary sigh escape him. It'd been a bust. There'd been nobody at Lifepod Seventeen in need of aid. He'd hurried over for *nothing!* Nothing but some pretty little blueprint for his habitat that he didn't strictly *need*; the planet was overflowing with copper, and acid mushrooms were as common as saltwater.

Maybe go inside the wreck itself? No, bad idea without a dive reel. He'd get lost and drown. What next, then? Food and water? He had plenty of cured fish and bladderfish water.

He wanted to go back to the dark canyon. Test out his translator. It was as good a time as any, given he still had the coordinate chip for Lifepod Thirteen. Varien swapped it in, found the new signal in his vision, and angled himself for the lifepod.

He remembered the way to the chasm, vaguely. Go to the mushroom forest, then keep going to the canyon. Simple enough. Once there, look for an ampeel. It didn't even need to be the same one.

In minutes, Varien arrived in the mushroom forest, above Thirteen's resting place. He yawned, then angled himself so that his lifepod was right behind, and he went straight forward, weaving between the mushrooms. The shrieks of the glowing rays echoed around him, and once or twice he thought he saw something massive and bony in the corner of his vision, but whenever he glanced there it was gone. The hairs stood up on his neck; he didn't like that. Was he hallucinating already? Was something hunting him? Both?
Soon the forest cleared away, revealing the black trench filled with eerily glowing vines. He took a deep breath to calm his tingling nerves as he stared into the crevice, and slowly approached. There was something around the base of the vine, he wondered what it wa -

"Caution! Passing safe depth!" his seamothen protested.

Varien jolted in fright and pulled back on the wheel, slowing to a stop. Alright, fine. No going closer. All the same, he could still make out quite a bit from where he was. Strange globules of red oil clung to the vines, spreading what looked like veins through their bodies. Some kind of parasite, perhaps? There were also white dots scattered around it, mushrooms perhaps. In the distance he could see schools of pale gray fish swimming languidly among the many haunted vines.

He couldn't see any ampeel around. Or... any megafauna, for that matter. Thank goodness. Varien didn't want to picture what horrible fish lived in the canyon.

His PDA spoke up. "This ecological biome matches seven of the nine preconditions for being objectively creepy."

Varien glanced from it back at the vines as they swayed in a chill current. Goosebumps peppered his arms. "No kidding." It didn't seem there was anything around. Well, he had some food and water with him, he could wait. "Guess I'm camping," he joked to himself with a light laugh, letting go of the wheel and relaxing into the submarine's seat.

Lazing about, he hummed to himself and tried to acclimate to the dark hell of the abyss. The already dark waters around him grew black as pitch, and sleep tugged at his eyes. The only sources of light were the buttons on his seamothen and the glowing plants within the ravine. Between the two of them, he still couldn't see his hand in front of his face. He'd... notice if something came by, right? He could just rest his eyes -

No, no, he had to stay awake. Who knew what horrible beasts would come out at night and tear open his seamothen like a can of food? He had to...  

... had to...

Maybe just a moment.

The next thing he knew, something tapped on the glass of his seamothen. He jolted back awake with a shout, kicking his legs and stubbing a toe. In front of him a massive black creature with glowing dots ringing it lit up brilliant blue and backed away from his sub. Crackles of electricity lanced between the points of light, surrounding the creature in a barrier of energy. In the light he saw it was an ampeel, in the middle of jolting back in surprise.

It coiled up and opened its mouth in surprise. Varien noticed some dark shape falling out of its jaws, and it turned off its electric barrier. He realized the points of light were the bio-luminescent tips of its prongs, and he watched transfixed as it dove down, showing off row and row of its massive body and its powerful tailfin as it dove after whatever it had dropped. He made sure to turn the headlights back on, then took his helmet off to start rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Mmrr, uh? Damn it," he grunted, working out a kink in his back. "The thing, where did I put the thing?" he murmured, taking out his PDA and pulling up his suit's stasis inventory. He tapped a few buttons, and his miniature ampeel burst into his hands. By then the real ampeel swam back up, holding some crab thing in its jaws. The lights from his submarine poured over it, showing off every swirl and pattern in its exoskeleton.
"PDA," he said. "Begin new program Ampeel Translation. It's for, uh, survival purposes to relieve psychological discomfort as well as crucial research into alien resources. Analyze electrical patterns of ampeel in attempt to put together a language." He rattled off a few more instructions so his PDA would translate known words for him while also lighting up his mini-eel when he spoke.

A few arcs went up and down the ampeel, but then it paused. It showed him a pattern of two, four, then eight flashes. So this was the same one! He responded with one, one, and one blinks from his headlights.

It did a twist in the water, then approached gingerly. It pushed the crab-thing in its jaws at his seamoth, thumping into the glass dome. It pulled back and gave another crackle, then stared at him expectantly.

Was it giving him... a gift?

Well it looked dead enough. What was the harm? Varien pushed a button and opened his seamoth's hatch. The ampeel swam up and dropped the creature through the hole.

"Yah!" he shouted as it fell through, jumping out of his seat to avoid being skewered by its legs as it crumpled inside. It was much bigger than it'd looked outside. In fact, it looked rather like the cave crawlers he'd scared away on the Degasi island. But the skin was dark blue, fading to red at the tips, and the eye on its back was blood red. It also had four smaller eyes clustered around its pincers. The legs were far longer too, taller than Varien himself by a time and a half, with inward facing spikes. The creature barely fit inside his seamoth, and he had to grasp the legs and fold them together off to the side before he could sit back down. Even then, one kept poking at his right leg.

He closed the hatch. "Um, thank you?" he wondered. He held up his toy, making sure to show off all its prongs, and showed it to the ampeel. "PDA, light up prongs in sequence."

It did just that. The first row of lights lit up. Then they went out, and the next row illuminated, on and on down the length of the entire thing. The real ampeel stared at him intensely, and when it was done it burst into motion, crackling in a rapid, fluctuating pattern as it swam circles in front of him.

Then he hit a block. How to progress? He thought about pointing to himself and saying his name, then pointing at the eel, but how would it know it was thinking about names of people, not names of species?

Varien looked at the creature next to him, which his PDA labeled as a 'Blood Crawler'. He grabbed one of its long, spiked legs and showed the creature to the electric eel. "Blood crawler," he said, pointing at it vigorously.

It inspected him intently, then nudged its head in the crab's direction and sent a brief pattern of crackles along its body.

Alright, alright that was good. Progress. Hopefully his PDA was recording it for translation. He pointed again. "Blood crawler." To his delight, the small ampeel he held lit up in a short pattern. Hopefully it was the right one.

The ampeel crackled its prongs. "Translating... determining voice," his PDA announced to him. Then a woman's voice, slightly older than Varien, spoke up in his ears. "Blood crawler," it said, emotionless but with not a hint of computerization.

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Holy shit, it's actually working," he muttered. "Um, don't translate
that!" he said quickly. What next, what next? So they could say 'blood crawler' to each other forever. That wasn't exactly much.

A stupid idea came to him. He took out his knife, removed his radiation gloves, and showed his open palm to the ampeel. It swam a touch closer, inspecting him curiously. He brought his knife to his palm, braced himself, flinched, and cut a narrow gash.

"Ah, aaaaah," he breathed as hot pain spread to his fingertips. He dropped the knife, where it clattered around the seamoth's insides, and showed the red fluid to the ampeel. "Blood," he explained.

It sent a few more arcs along its body, then went quiet. The ampeel turned tail and shot into the darkness, visible only by its glowing prongs. "Hey wait, no come back, I can't follow!" he shouted.

CRACK!

A nova of azure light filled the water. Every hair on his body stood on end as the electric burst washed over him, and he shivered. Then the ampeel returned, holding a limp fish in its giant maw. It opened its mouth and pushed it into his sight. His PDA identified it as a 'spinefish', which was entirely appropriate. It had a ghoulish appearance, patterned with a skull and ribs and wide, watery eyes.

Then with a snap of its jaws, the ampeel tore it in half and swallowed the head.

Varien jumped back in shock, watching the limp back end of the spinefish float away, spilling yellow-green blood into the water. The ampeel nudged at the ichor and flashed a pattern across its body. "Blood," he breathed.

The ampeel ate the other half of the fish it'd brought, then swam back down. He leaned forward, pushing one of the blood crawler's legs out of his face, to look at it as it descended. It swam back up, this time something black and round in its mouth. It swam up and dangerously close, filling his vision with its frowning, fang-riddled jaws. It spat whatever it held onto his seamoth's metal ring, then backed away and gave him a different pattern.

It'd given him a rock. Dark gray and speckled with lighter streaks. "Rock," he said, amazed. His ampeel toy repeated the pattern to the ampeel, and it spun around in what he hoped was joy. Its prongs lit up, and he heard the word repeated to him in the voice his PDA had chosen.

Time passed, and he continued to be amazed. They eventually figured out how to say Yes and No. It'd actually been the ampeel's idea; it called the blood crawler a rock, then said something else after that. Then it called it a blood crawler properly, and said something else. From there, things went much faster. Their range of items was limited, with his depth restraints, but before he knew it his PDA could translate spinefish, eye, mouth, teeth, water, and more. They'd even gotten some verbs, like bite, or move. Though he wasn't sure if it was 'move' or 'swim', but that was his PDA's job to sort out.

A faint trickle of light began to seep through the water again; it must've been morning. Already? How time flew. He figured it'd be about time to get back, but before that, he remembered something.

Varien fished out his scanner, and showed it off to the ampeel. "Scanner," he said, pointing it at himself. He held down the trigger, showering himself in pulsing waves of prismatic light. The giant fish backed off in shock at the light pouring from it, then swam closer, mystified as he scanned himself.
In seconds, the scan was complete. Its panel lit up with the angry red words 'Infected'. "The bacterial count in your system has increased to statistically significant levels," the scanner warned. "Be vigilant for symptoms."

He bared his teeth and sucked in a breath. Well that was... to be expected, right? After eating so much of the planet's food, no wonder he had some bacteria in him. It was nothing to worry about. He still had an ampeel staring at him, so he pushed the thought aside for later and pointed the scanner's arc at it.

It swam closer, close enough to bop his seamoth gently. He held down the trigger, bathing the enormous fish in ribbons of light. It twitched lightly in surprise, but held still through the process until it was done.

His PDA notified him it had a new entry for ampeels. He'd read it later. The electric megafauna backed off, and he decided it was time to go. "Me, move away," he said, the ampeel doll translating for him.

It looked back at him and gave a few more crackles. "Light moves to dark, you move here," he heard.

Right, so when it was night, come back. That was... tricky. "Guess I'll just have to get used to sleeping at noon," he groused. "Yes," he said aloud, which his toy translated for the fish's benefit. Varien ascended through the water and pointed his seamoth back towards where his lifepod was. He glanced down at the ampeel and waved goodbye even though it was already vanishing into the gloom, leaving ribbons of light in its wake.

Once he was back at a nice five meters underwater, he put his helmet and glove back on. The rest of the trip back to his habitat went without event, but Varien tingled with nervous energy while his stomach did flips. This was actually happening. He was actually speaking with an alien. Stars above, what had his life become? He couldn't help but smile at how Silvia would react when he told her what he'd been doing before finding her.

He parked his submarine between the habitat's struts and climbed out the top. After a moment's indecision, he glanced at the blood crawler still in his seamoth. With a long-suffering sigh he scanned it and put it in his suit's storage; it took up a lot of space but it beat trying to pull it out by hand.

Varien entered his habitat and collapsed on his bed of fiber mesh. He pulled off his oxygen mask and outer suit - there was no radiation and even if there were his habitat was shielded - to read his PDA's entry.

First, the one on ampeels. It was mostly things he already knew; inquisitive, electrical shocks. Territorial though, he wasn't sure. Maybe his PDA was reading too much into it.

The one on the blood crawler was more interesting. Apparently the large red eye wasn't an eye at all, but its equivalent of gills.

His stomach rumbled. He pulled the dead blood crawler from his suit and watched it crumple to the metal floor with a clatter. Varien stared at the enormous crab that was nearly twice his height, glanced at the hunger meter projected into his vision, and had an idea.

A few minutes later, he had four fabricator-cooked legs around him, salted to preserve them. The creature's head was tossed out to the sea, and he took one of the legs in his lap. He brought the handle of his knife down on it, cracking the blue shell and exposing the meat inside. He'd never
had crab legs before, and his PDA didn't mention the blood crawler to be toxic. He opened up the leg with a dozen light cracks of exoskeleton, exposing the greenish meat inside, and began picking away with his fingers. It wasn't that bad. Salty and a bit sweet. As long as he pretended it was farm-grown meat, he could've very well been eating a delicacy.

"So," he said to himself, to hear his voice if nothing else. "What's the plan? I start sleeping in the day." He ate another piece of slimy green flesh. "At night, I go back and talk to the ampeel. Rest of the day I... what?" He glanced at his farms; it'd be a few days more, but the fruits and vegetables were almost ready. Hadn't there been something he wanted to do? "Oh, right. Find tools for exploring wrecks and the Aurora. So I'll need a laser cutter and a dive reel." A blue symbol appeared in the upper right of his vision. "I'll check that message tomorrow," he reasoned. "I'm tired, I can't save anyone like this." He'd survived for over a week now, on his own, after having been unconscious for hours in a burning pod. The others were fine.

They were just... hiding. In the deepest, most distant parts of the ocean. They'd probably just found and refurbished the Degasi's own underwater base. He'd find Silvia there, no doubt.

He finished the first of the crawler legs and tossed the shattered pieces of exoskeleton to the side. He'd clean it up later. Besides, he was filled to bursting; it was a big creature, and there were still three legs left for tomorrow.

... right, the crawler! He'd have to see about getting something for the ampeel when he went back.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
"Aurora, this is Sunbeam again," Avery Quinn said. There wasn't as much vigor in his voice, or irritation. He sounded like a man who'd gone a week without sleep.

Varien sat in his lifepod, listening to the message. It was the first thing he'd done since waking up. He'd been expecting another lifepod's distress signal, and was pleasantly surprised. He'd thought for sure the Sunbeam had left him to rot on this hell-world!

"Our scanners just picked up an enormous debris field at your last known location." Avery sucked in a breath. "I'm sorry, I... I didn't know you'd - how many of you - " He cut himself off and sighed heavily. "I didn't know."

A lengthy pause.

"It's not your fault," he thought.

"We are now headed to 4546B at full speed. We're coming to bring you folks home. Sunbeam out."

He paced along the floor of his rocking lifepod, hands clasped to his face. Varien couldn't believe his luck.

Rescue. Rescue was coming! Aside from the worrisome end of the message, he was being rescued! So what if the pilot was inexperienced? Autopilots existed. So what if the ship was small? They could make multiple rounds! Varien was getting off 4546B sooner than he expected! The Sunbeam would have scanners too, they could find Silvia's habitat!

Focus. Focus. He couldn't get sloppy just because rescue was coming. He still needed to treat it like he was in a survival situation. Maybe the Sunbeam would be attacked by pirates, or something.

He scoffed. Yeah, pirates out by HIP 4546.

Well anyway, he could always go by the Aurora, see what he could salvage from there. Probably a bunch of stuff worth a lot of credits. And there was also the Degasi island; he hadn't explored beneath it yet. He needed to start thinking of the future!
So it was settled. Explore around and inside the Aurora today, beneath the Degasi island tomorrow. He climbed up the ladder and stood on top of his lifepod. A light breeze rustled his suit and chopped up the waves. The skies were dark and heavy with rain. He dove into the waters and headed for his modest habitat.

After a breakfast of blood crawler leg and bladderfish water, Varien hopped in his seamoth. He pointed himself at the Aurora's back engines and slammed his foot on the accelerator.

He yawned more times than he cared to admit on the way there. The 'sleep at noon' thing was rough. Still, he slapped himself out of his apathy and traveled on.

As he approached the Aurora the ship towered over him, taller and taller. His skin tingled; he could imagine all the radiation showering around him, invisible and undetectable death engulfing every inch around him. The plantlife around him turned brittle; while not exactly discolored, they took on the texture of a thin sheet of sugar-glass. The boomerangs and peepers and whatnot swam slower, and half of them didn't even seem to notice him as he plowed through their schools.

He pulled left, skirting the titanic length of the Aurora. From so close Varien had to crane his neck all the way up to see the top of the ship, from which fires still raged, fueled by some long-lasting synthetic oils. Varien puttered over a few trenches, and lowered himself to one to check inside.

Strangely enough there were some plants here, plants he hadn't seen before. They were big, too, twice Varien's own size. They were dark gray hemispheres clinging to the canyon walls, cratered with holes that held purple slime. He briefly popped from his seamoth to scrape some of the spore-filled gel into his suit with his knife, but then he continued to the Aurora.

Closer still, the land was desolate and bare. Sand pilled up around the metal monolith in towering dunes, covered in ripples of sunlight from the waves above. Boxes and scraps of metal littered the surrounding area, more than a few upturned, equally as many buried in the sand. Jagged clumps of lead and quartz five times his size stuck out of the bedrock like sore thumbs. No peepers laughed. No garryfish chirped. No gasopods hooted.

It was absolutely silent.

He glanced left and right, then puttered close to one of the boxes that looked like it had something in it. Once closer, he realized it was the broken back half of a propulsion cannon. Varien scanned it through the windshield, and moved on.

In the distance, a mound of sand erupted. A shark wriggled its way free, then came to a stop. It vomited up greenish-yellow blood and swam off into the distance.

The propulsion cannon's actual arm, the glowing blue sticks at the end that exerted a gravitational field on objects, weren't far from the box. He scanned those too, and just like that his fabricator could build one. Probably wouldn't be a bad idea to do so.

Varien investigated the side of the Aurora a while longer. There was a bent and broken stick with a ball at the end that his PDA labeled as a power transmitter. There were also shredded chunks of both a pedestal and a dark blue touchscreen which, when added together, gave him the blueprints for a vehicle mod bay on top of a metric ton of various modules for both his seamoth and a PRAWN exoskeleton.

Beyond those useless scraps though, he didn't find anything of note. Not to mention how his skin prickled and stomach churned from being so close to the irradiated ship. Was his suit done up right? Was he dying? Or was it all just in his head? Maybe -
A quiet roar filled the water.

He went stock still, letting his seamoth coast to a halt. There, far off in the gloomy waters. A crescent tailfin, pale as death, tipped with bloody crimson. It beat against the water, vanishing into the abyss as soon as he caught sight of it. Varien couldn't make out exactly how big the tail was, or the creature it'd be attached to, but it was big. Bigger than a sand shark. Bigger than an ampeel.

Cold sweat coated his skin. Maybe... maybe he'd head back to his habitat now. Venture into the Aurora another day.

Volara

Like every season, Ohmaron was determined to be miserable.

She'd tried speaking to him, again and again, but he didn't say anything and instead sulked about his caverns. Even Zaparon, his consort, couldn't get a word from him.

Fine. He could be that way. She had a creature to teach anyway.

She swam about her resting caverns, fussing and thinking. Teaching the creature the names of things was all well and good, but that wasn't enough! How could she teach it concepts? Like saying thanks, or how to show anger? The small metal-shocker it'd seemingly designed was wonderful for her purposes, but in order for her creature to use it she had to actually teach the strange fish first! But how? Maybe she was in over her gills.

The Above was darkening, so her creature friend would hopefully be back soon. She had to put her doubts aside.

Volara left her cave and entered the open waters of her territory. She beat her tailfin and undulated her body, relaxing her swim bladder to swim up and up to where they'd already met twice before. Once there she did a few loops in the water, chasing her tail as she waited. Eventually, she saw something piercingly bright coming down to her level. Volara turned to face it, and released a happy arc of power as it engulfed her in light. It was her creature, back like she'd told it to!

In moments its shell-covered body approached, spewing lights from two spots on its front, and descended to her level. Suddenly, Volara's gills stilled. She'd forgotten a gift! Stupid, stupid, stupid! Already she had ruined her chances -

The creature opened the top of its shell and tossed out a... something. It looked like a bonefish but... all wrong. The body structure was off, the scales were blue, and instead of a pair of tiny green eyes, there were two gargantuan yellow eyes. It began to sink in the water, dead as a rock.

... oh! Was it giving her a gift?

She swam over to the strange fish and swallowed it whole. It tasted... strange. Heavier, meatier than the bonefish. There was a certain sharpness to the taste too, something that shot across her tongue like an arc of speech. She liked it. Volara wanted more.

"Thank you," she told the creature, swimming back to its front. "Alright, let's begin."

The two of them began speaking back and forth, miming out words and guessing what the other meant. It was slow, arduous work, but the two of them began figuring things out.

Please, thank you, name, more and more concepts. The fake shocker it used to speak with her still
had a lot of holes; the language was broken and many times it would interject 'Unknown!' into its sentences. The creature itself didn't speak using power like she'd originally thought. She still sensed the rapid-hum pulse, but it must've been for something else. The lights it released, perhaps. Instead it spoke with sound, in a sing-song language that was a delight to hear chattered and chirped to her earholes.

Eventually, she told it her name, and it told her its own. 'Varien'. And Varien wasn't an it, but a he! It baffled her; how was Varien a 'he' without a name ending in 'aron'?

He learned fast, too. He explained to her something was helping him, but didn't have the words to go into detail.

"What brought you here the first time?" she asked. "I haven't seen any of your kind down here before," she lied.


Curious. What kind of people were these, that could make rocks into tools? Then again, he did have those grasping arms, making tools would be easy with those. And maybe 'tools' was the wrong word; maybe it just meant 'thing to help', like his shell. More interesting was that his people suffered some form of catastrophe, and... sent him to gather supplies? "Your people sent you here?"

"Sent, what mean?"

Oh for goodness sake.

Volara quickly showed him the meaning of the word, which had him nodding and chirping out a word of song repeatedly. "No. Home hurt, other Variens - uh, other people gone. Don't know where. Trying find them." He moved his arms up. "Still looking."

His people were gone? Varien was alone? The gloomy waters were becoming clear to her; Varien's people lived far in the Above. Whatever massive thing had passed through so long ago, it caused a calamity to them. It knocked the egg into her territory, and it left Varien all alone to scavenge for a living and look for a way back to his people. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Not you fault," he said, his song-voice quiet.

"So, these special rocks," she said. "Anything I can help with?"

She had to repeat it a few more times with differing words before he understood, but then he nodded his tiny head up and down rapidly. "Yes, looking for unknown." He frowned. "Um, hard special rock, white."

A hard, white rock. She had an idea. "Wait there," she told Varien. "I'll go look." Volara curled over and swam straight down, tightening her swim bladder to sink faster. She found a small black rock almost instantly and whirled her tailfin into it. With a sharp crack it exploded into pebbles, and from it began falling a smaller gray rock, with white shards jutting out from it. It didn't look like anything special to her. Just another rock. A pretty rock, but still just a rock. How could anything useful be done with it?
Still, Varien wanted something like it, so she grabbed it in her mouth and swam back up. She deposited it on his shell's ring and swam back. "Like this one?"

"Inside, please," he said, opening the shell's top.

"Oh, right. Sorry," she said, grabbing it again and dropping it into his waiting 'hand'. Privately, her hearts relaxed. She'd gotten him a gift in the end, everything was fine.

Varien turned it over in his hands for a moment longer - now that it was next to him she realized the chunk was the size of his head. He was small - and bared his teeth in a strange, sickening motion that had his mouth changing shape. "This is unknown! Unknown I unknown!"

"Wait, wait. I don't understand. Slower," she insisted.

He blinked, then hummed the single note again. "This is yes special rock. Thank you, Volara."

She did a roll in the water, crackling happily. She'd done right by him! It wouldn't make up for murdering one of his kind's children, but she could at least try.

Was this how Ohmaron felt?

"You're welcome," she replied. Volara glanced up, at where the Above was. Light was starting to filter through, and she'd come to learn it meant Varien would need to go. "Are you leaving so soon?"

"Need check home," he explained. "Home hurt, tools inside, use those."

So... he was going back to the place of calamity, to see what of his people's creations he could salvage. She dipped her head solemnly. "Swift currents, Varien."

He tilted his head to the side. It was adorable. "No understand," he said.

She did a sarcastic roll sideways. "Be okay," she explained.

"Thank you, Volara," he replied, turning off and ascending up and away to the Above. Varien left a trail of bubbles behind him as he went, and Volara stared as the churned waters lingered behind him.

She returned home and went about her business. She hoped he'd come back.

And he did.

Varien came back the next darkening. And the next, and the next. He brought her gifts of the strange fish he had in his home. She brought him crawlers; he apparently quite liked them. They spent most of their time just working on speaking with each other. She asked if he'd been back to his ruined home yet, but he said he was putting it off. Whenever he did, a horrific 'smile' appeared on his face.

What a coward. Then again, he was very small.

After their latest meeting, Volara swam around the caves of her territory, humming arcs traveling down the length of her aching body. She looped through an arch of stone, and twirled down a canyon that burrowed deep into the earth. She dipped and ducked around the colossal vines that sprouted from ceiling to floor, and soon she was in her resting burrow. She swam over to a collection of feather-plants and, one by one, brushed her prongs and shell through them to clean
herself of any detritus. Once that was done, she curled up over a collection of cradle plants, which she'd torn open with her jaws and strewn about in a thick mat, and let herself sink.

Her mouth opened and a quiet rush of water escaped from her in relief. Back first, she sunk into the soft red plants, feeling them curl around her body. She was tired. She'd hunted, she'd patrolled, and soon the Above would darken so she'd have to go teach Varien... maybe it wouldn't hurt for her to rest. Her emerald eyes slid shut, the beating of her hearts slowed, and the world began to drift.

Volara's prongs tingled numbly as she lowered into rest. Her awareness sunk and her thoughts slowed to a nonsensical crawl. She pumped her gills languidly, letting her worries over Ohmaron and the season and her efforts to teach Varien all simply fade away.

But all too soon, it came to an end.

Awareness returned. Water pumped with renewed strength over her gills. Volara lit up her prongs, tensed, and released a shock into the black waters. With a twitch of her swim bladder she ascended above her bedding and spun over onto her front, opening and closing her mouth to work out the kinks in it. With that done, she began to swim.

Guided only by the light of her prongs and memory, Volara soon left the caves. She eyed a few chompers, and a school of bone-fish under attack by said chompers, but decided she wasn't hungry. Besides, the dark blue of the Above was fading away fast; she had to go meet Varien.

Up and up she swam, while also moving off to the side. Soon she was out of her territory, past Zaparon and Ohmaron's, and in the unclaimed waters. One or two green-blasters crossed her path, but they went running when they saw her.

Smart.

Varien was already there when she arrived, his smaller body limp within his shell. Volara crackled with wicked glee, then silenced her prongs and swam closer. The tiny creature didn't move to react as she approached, so he must've been resting. She moved closer and closer, then lightly tapped the transparent shell with her nasal arch.

A light clang filled the dark waters. Varien startled awake with a sudden, frantic tune. He fixed his gaze on her and sighed, taking up the metal-shocker in his grasp. "Volara! Don't do that!" he complained.

She laughed, sending stuttering lances of energy across her tailfin. "Sorry. You should've been resting somewhere else then, if it's so dangerous down here."

He rubbed his eyes. "You're telling me. It's just so hard trying to sleep in the day."

"... if you say so," she accepted. She wasn't one of his kind. It was very likely his kind weren't active in the dark. "When I requested we have these meetings during a darkening, I didn't know it'd be hard for you," she said. "If you want, we could do this some other time?"

Varien opened his mouth wide and brought a hand to it, releasing a long spell of sound that he called a 'yawn'. "Can we? That'd be great. Survival's hard enough. Oh! I brought you another looker," he said. Varien leaned over in his shell, scooped up a blue fish, and tossed it out of his shell into the waters.

Volara chomped her maw eagerly. With a smooth motion she lashed out and swallowed it whole, relishing in the sharp flavors. "Thanks," she said, returning to Varien's sight. "Sorry I didn't get you a crawler, I've been pretty tired too. One of my friends is being ridiculous, and I've been wasting all
"Is he alright?" he asked angrily. That was one problem; whatever was translating had yet to figure out emotions.

She shifted her lower body, looking down from Varien. "I hope so." She shook her head, crackling irately. "Well, forget me. What about you? Have you gone back to your home yet? Found any others?"

He sighed. "No, and no. I thought I found others a few times, but the unknown's always -"

"Wait, that word," she said. "Right before 'always', what is it?"

"Um," he hummed. "So it's, um... when my home was hurt, we had ways to get away from it before we got hurt too. It was these things that we got into, and shot us far away in all directions. I was in one. The others I've seen had nobody in them."

Wait. Things they were in?

"What did they look like?" she asked tiredly, hiding her interest.

Varien fiddled his hands, making round shapes with his fingers. "Sort of like the shell I'm in. And uh, made of the same thing, but larger. Maybe a bit smaller than you, uh, half as wide across as you are long? Life pod. Those words together."

Something wasn't adding up. "Wait. So it's like your shell, but made for escape? I don't understand, how would you use it while in that shell?"

Varien stared at her blankly for a moment before his eyes widened. "You... oh! Oh! Volara, the unknown - err, shell isn't part of me. It's a tool. I can't come so far down without it."

She wound her body side to side, inspecting it closely. "A tool?" she asked. "Don't you grow these while still -"

Wait.

Oh.

Oh.

It wasn't an egg of Varien's kind that had landed in her territory. It was one of these 'lifepods'. The people inside it were not children, they were desperate survivors trying to get by, just like Varien himself. But that didn't make sense! What about their colors? Varien was light gray and blue, those two had been dark gray and orange. "What about your skin?" she asked.

"My ski - oh, my unknown you mean," he said. Then Varien reached for one of his hands with the other and tore his skin off. Her mouth gaped open as he ripped the black skin off, revealing hideous pink muscle. Her stomach churned nauseatingly. Varien did the same to his other hand, wriggling skinned fingers at her. "That wasn't my skin. That was an unknown, um, uh, coverings I made to put over myself." He paused. "Are you okay? You look -"

Volara turned away and threw up. A splatter of prey, the prey's blood, and her stomach's fluids burst into the water. Her prongs crackled out a groan, and she swam away from the vomit queasily.

Varien sang loudly. A moment later his magical device translated, "Volara!"
"What kind of thing are you?!" she bemoaned, swimming backward. "Some... unnatural... not even alive... just ripped off your own - "

"Volara, hold on. It's not a part of me. Don't you every put stuff on your body?"

She thought for a moment, struggling to calm her disgusted thoughts. "Oil, sometimes," she groaned. "When I have guests over, that is."

"Well it's like that," he explained. "This is just something I have on myself. I can take it off and put it back on whenever." To demonstrate, he put his hand-coverings back on, then showed her his teeny-tiny palms. "See? Good as new."

Right. Right, it was just a covering. "Warn me next time," she complained, swallowing her bile. "How do your people make these things?" she wondered. "This... metal shell, or that suit. Is there some special oil where you're from? Why even? I don't understand."

Varien's mouth, with the strange pinkish 'lips' around it, pressed tight. "It's, uh, hard to explain. My unknowns, err, my coverings are to block out unknown." He blinked. "Okay. So when my home was hurt, it started releasing a special sickness into the water around it. I can't get close unless I'm wearing this," he explained. "I can take parts of it off out here, since we're so far, but if I go closer I want to be safe."

She couldn't help but release a teasing arc. "Is that why you're putting it off going there? It's been, what? Three, four days since you told me about it?" He rubbed the back of his head... sheepishly? His body language was odd. "What's stopping you?"

"I'm scared," he complained, his song soft. "There's some giant... thing around my home, if I go there it'll kill me!"

Hmm. "If you'd like, I could go with you." She swam a distance away and let a nova of her power fill the water. "Nothing messes with shockers, not even the spirits of the damned!" she boasted proudly.

"Wait, slow down," he said. "That last part was all unknown to me. And, thanks for the offer, but you can't come. For starters I don't think you could handle being so far up, and second, you'd get sick too."

"What about those giant fish you're worried about?" she countered. "Don't they get sick?"

"Different things get sick differently," he explained. "They might be immune. I don't want to risk your health, Volara."

She eyed him. "I-i-i-f you say so. But my offer still stands." She thought it over. "How about this. We cut today's meeting short. Go back, finish your rest, then go back to your home already," she insisted.

"But - "

"No buts!" she interrupted, raising her upper body above Varien to glare down at him. "Are you a fry?!" She softened her voice. "Varien, honestly. If this catastrophe was as disastrous as you say, and if surviving outside your home is so hard, then go do something about it. I will still be here when you return." She thought it over. "Well, not here, but - you understand," she clarified, looking down awkwardly.

He nodded. "Right. Thanks, Volara." He started to turn and ascend, but she swam in front of him to
"One more thing! Large things, we have a harder time turning. If this giant fish you're so scared of comes for you, just swim in circles," she explained. "Now go, get going!"

"Alright, I'm going, I'm going," he said, backing off. Once his shell - not a shell? A tool? How would you even make something like that? - faced away she couldn't see the metal-shocker anymore. However she still heard Varien speaking his own musical language as he puttered off towards the dark surface.

Volara sighed, then turned to look at the meal she'd thrown up when Varien tore the skin off his own hand. Suddenly she was hungry.

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Varien

Before he went off to the Aurora, he wanted to check the area under the island. No more stalling, he was going right away.

Volara's message still rang in his head. Hurry up, and stop being a coward. And now that he thought about it...

A dark matter drive core didn't irradiate things like uranium might. But the radiation emitted would continue to slowly expand outward unless contained. It'd wash over his habitat. And, long after the Sunbeam arrived and took him home, it'd engulf the canyon where Volara lived and kill her.

Volara. The ampeel had a name. She was a giant electrical alien fish and she could speak to him. And she responded hilariously when she learned about clothing. His PDA's translator still had many gaps, but he could hold a conversation quite well. After going on two weeks of hideous silence, the translator's voice was music to his ears. Someone's thoughts, someone's feelings, communicated to him! He hadn't even noticed the stone hand grasping his heart until it relaxed.

Though it was easy for her to say 'just go, ignore the giant fish'. She was a giant fish. With electricity.

He steered his seamoth up and away, headlights on to cast light into the waters. In no time at all Varien left the mushroom forest behind and soared over the grassy plateaus, listening to the 'reefback' pods bellow and moan above him.

There was a certain beauty to the ocean at night. Almost everything was bioluminescent, after all. Swarms of glowing fish swum between fronds of glowing plants, forming a dazzling display of color for him to enjoy as he puttered on through.

It took some surfacing to get his bearings, but soon Varien found the Degasi island, sunk to the ocean floor, and headed towards it. He skimmed over the red grass, ran over a few fish, and swerved between stone spires as he did. Soon the land rose up, giving way to another forest of creepvine. The water was shallow enough he could see the raging surface, whipped into a frenzy by a hurricane.

Good thing he'd made a habitat.

He slowed down, weaving between the towering plants. Horrible laughter surrounded him, making his gut turn to ice and his muscles tense, but he was safe in his seamoth. He was safe. A fact that was doubly reinforced when one of the resident stalkers tried to take a bite out of his seamoth and
instead lost a tooth. It roared quietly in displeasure and left him alone.

But then Varien reached the end of the forest. The kelp cleared away and the emerald tint in the nighttime water gave way to dark blue. A stone ledge rose up ahead of him, leading down into the deeps. Varien took a deep breath, swallowed his fear, and moved his seamoth past the ledge.

His stomach dropped.

It was like his first time staring into the ampeel canyon. But instead of a clearly visible trench in the land, here the earth just vanished away into the murky waters, unknowably deep. Worse still he could see things inside. Enormous, glowing blue spheres the size of a large auto floated in the water, held to the land beneath by thin vines of plantlife. They lined up, one after another, into the void like rows of tombstones. The ground was made of dark brown rock on the slope leading in, but that was soon overtaken by a mat of purplish, moss-like flora. He could make out luminous plants, looking like squat trees, far below.

Nervously, he skirted the slopes and descended. Fifty meters. One hundred meters. One-fifty. Filthy black nodes of basalt clung to the walls, as did strange brown crystals, as well as chunks of white granite covered in ruby growths.

"Caution!" his seamoth advised. "Passing safe depth."

Passing safe depth? He wasn't even close to the land! This place was *ridiculously* deep. Maybe even on par with the ampeel chasm.

Maybe deeper.

He brought his seamoth over to one of the white stones overgrown with crimson crystals. He angled it straight down and opened the hatch, pushing his submarine as close as he could. The idea was he'd just reach out, grab it, and pull it back in. He didn't even need to get out.

Unfortunately, having his seamoth vertical meant he couldn't properly sit in the seat. He had to awkwardly stand with his feet on the steering wheel, meaning the slightest motion had him twirling about, and then reach out. Still, he managed to collect the chunk of rock. His PDA informed him the pinkish crystals sprouting from it were aluminum oxide.

"Not bad," he said, storing it in his suit.

Varien collected a handful more shards of aluminum oxide, his stomach threatening to void itself every time he looked at the dizzying slope into the reef's depths. Some smaller herbivores swam around in schools. What was *wrong* with them? Didn't they see the black hole beneath them? Didn't they care?

As he traveled around, Varien took notice of something far below. Something blue and sparking. He wanted to get closer, but his seamoth simply couldn't go so deep without imploding around him. He squinted against the dark water...

... a wreck. It was a wreck! Huge and broken and torn, leaning against the slope of the land. Judging by the trail of girders and scraps leading down to it like a trail of crumbs, it'd fallen further up and tumbled down to its current resting spot. He judged it was maybe two-fifty, three hundred meters down. As it was, he had no way of getting to it.

The seed of a yawn grew in his lungs, then made its way up and opened his mouth wide.

Maybe Volara was right. Go to bed, go to the Aurora. With all the gold and silver he'd gotten from
the grassy plateau, along with the diamond she'd gifted him, he'd made everything he could've imagined he'd need; a laser cutter, welder, scanner, dive reel, knife, propulsion cannon, seaglide, flashlight, and air bladder. He was never going to be more prepared than at that moment.

With great relief, he pulled up and out of the terrible reef, until he skirted beneath the titanic waves of the surface. The trip back to his habitat was short, though once he was in the shallows the hurricane did move his seamoth around more than he liked. He parked it under his habitat, where the struts would keep it in place, and got out into the freezing waters.

Swimming against the tide would've been impossible, if not for his seaglide. With some effort he entered his habitat and took a deep breath of the salty, humid air, then let it out through his nose. Varien ate a quick dinner, curled up on his rolls of fiber mesh, and was out like a light.

After a short nonsense dream that he forgot within seconds of awakening, he was back up. Clinks and rustling sounds reached him as sediment battered his habitat, and clanks indicated his seamoth was being tossed around beneath the struts.

Curiously though, his lifepod's signature had moved... down. Then even as he watched, the signal died.

With a start, Varien got up. He dressed, ate one of his potatoes raw - ew - and with seaglide in hand exited his habitat.

Despite being day, the waters were dark. A glance up revealed the churning surface, contorted under the force of the hurricane. Sand blew around Varien in shifting streams of yellow, battering his radiation suit's visor with a deceptively lighthearted dink-dink-dink.

The shallows were silent, all the fish hiding from the storm in burrows, but he could make out a large, orange form ahead of him.

His lifepod, bashed open by rocks and sunken to the ground, filled with sand.

Varien frowned, and headed back inside his habitat. So his lifepod was gone. Well. Well! He knew it was going to happen eventually. Good thing he'd already made a fabricator and communications relay in his habitat, just by the farm.

When he went to check, he even realized he'd gotten a message during the night. His relay's LED blinked harshly. "Play message," he said. Was it another empty lifepod?

"Aurora!" Avery Quinn's voice said excitedly. "It's Sunbeam. We've finally made orbit. Our scans show a strip of dry land close to your crash site. It's only labeled as being 'hazardous', it's our best bet. It'll take us two days to catch up with the planet's rotation, and by then the storm should clear up. We've sent you the coordinates; do not keep us waiting. We hope to see you there. Sunbeam out." The message ended.

His PDA spoke up. "Marking landing site coordinates. Message was received approximately seven hours ago; forty-one hours until Sunbeam arrival."

He went numb and smiled. It was happening. It was actually happening. Rescue was on the way! If he was receiving the message then no doubt everyone else was too. He'd meet Silvia at the landing site, and go home together, wed her, live with her, start a family and a long life with her.

But then his thoughts turned to Volara, and the Aurora. He had less than two days to get inside the ship, find some way to contain the radiation, and get back. Failing that, he needed to warn Volara of the danger so she could swim far, far away; the radiation leak would have a maximum range,
after all.

No more stalling. Varien collected his tools, as well as all his nutrient blocks and water. He even brought the one bottle of disinfected water he'd gotten from the Degasi island.

It was time to explore the wreckage of the Aurora.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
No Place Like Home

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Thanks to A Mage's Apprentice for editing.

Chapter published 7/19/17.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Varien

"Scanner?" He held it up to his eyes. "Check. Welder? Check. Seaglide? Check. Laser cutter?" He pulled it out from his suit's inventory and grasped it in both hands. The laser cutter was a long tool, almost like a musket of olden times, with a tipped red end. "Check. Propulsion cannon?" He fished that one out. The propulsion cannon was short and squat, little more than a vaguely-cylindrical block of metal with a trigger/handle on the side. The business end consisted of a trio of blue prongs. "Check. Gravsphere? Check. Beacon to find my way back here? Check. Radiation suit?" He checked over his suit one more time to make sure everything was sealed. "Check." Varien took a breath to calm his nerves. "That's everything. Aurora, here I come!"

He stashed his tools away and, sitting in his seamoth, piloted out from underneath his habitat. Varien glanced at the power reading; about a quarter left. It'd have to do. Varien gave his base one more look. The multipurpose room, the corridor leading off it, and the small exterior growbed fastened to the foundation with some 'gel sacks' growing in it. It was too claustrophobic to be homey, but still.

All things considered, he'd done well on this hell-planet.

Varien pointed his submarine at the Aurora's side and stomped on the accelerator. In no time he was cruising through the storm-wracked shallows, dodging left and right between rocky formations and fighting off the currents. Goosebumps broke out over his skin as he approached the Aurora, deep inside its aura of radiation. He angled himself parallel and continued flooring it, headed for the burst nose of the ship.

As he traveled, Varien kept his eyes and ears open. A few sick sandsharks passed him, but they were of no concern. He was looking for the big fish. The gigantic creature that roared, of which he'd only seen the tail. But even as he continued, passing by small shattered wrecks as the land to his left dropped off sharply to who-knew-where, Varien saw nothing.

Maybe it'd left?

The towering structure of the Aurora loomed over his right. It was hard to see through the frothy waves of the surface, but the metal frame was impossible to miss. Below the surface, there was clear evidence of it having shifted; the ground it had carved out in the crash was open, leaving a small amount of space for Varien to swim beneath the ship, if he wanted.

Something sounded to his left. Varien whipped his head around, staring through the windshield of
his seath. There was... nothing. Just churning sand and frothing water. His muscles clenched so hard he wondered if they'd shatter his bones. Best to keep moving.

Soon Varien arrived at the blown-up front of the Aurora. Its skeletal girders plunged through the water, forming a light maze for him to weave through. It took him some tries, and once he banged the seath with a teeth-grinding sound, but he made his way through to the inside of the Aurora's nose. It took the form of a bowl, tipped into the water. While the metal skeleton would never fly again, it did provide minimal shelter from the hurricane. At the very least, the waves didn't seem as intense to him.

He surfaced, letting the storm toss his submarine around so he could see. Rain tore down from the skies in wave after wave, flattened into sheets midair by the shifting winds. The metal frame around him was dull, cooled and extinguished by the downpour. From the inside of the Aurora metal slabs stuck out, the remains of what used to be different floors in the ship. A great many of them were broken in half, bent out of shape. One or two looked vaguely usable, but they were also high up. Varien steered around a few minutes, searching for a way in, nervously fidgeting all the while. He needed to hurry, after all.

As if to confirm it, his PDA spoke up. "Detecting incredibly sparse lifeform readings in the area. The radioactive fallout will have devastating effects on the alien ecosystem if not contained within twenty-four hours."

Eventually, Varien found a ramp. It went high up into the Aurora, but also dipped into the waters, shallow enough he could walk across its surface. He drove his seath as close as he could, then wracked his head for a way to park it without the vessel being pulled out to sea.

Varien got an idea. A pretty bad one, though.

He opened the hatch of his seath and hopped out into the crashing waves of the ocean. He fished his propulsion cannon out from his suit and, when it manifested in front of him, he grabbed the back end of the lump of metal... and was promptly weighed down.

"Oof!" he grunted as he was dragged to the metal ramp. His feet slid out from under him and he began to slide, so he hastily put the cannon back into storage. "Damn it," he growled, getting his bearings and swimming back up the ramp. He soon came up to the surface, and was battered by the waves so hard he fell onto all fours. Another wave crashed over him, battering him into the ground. "Oof!" Another wave. He needed to start moving. Varien crawled forward like a dog, forced down over and over by seething battering rams of water.

But at long last, he climbed far enough along the ramp that he was free of the pounding waves. Shaking, Varien got to his feet and turned around to face his seath. The rain and spray was enormous and the wind threatened to tear him off his feet, but for the time being he was in a good enough spot where he thought he could use his cannon. He pulled the tool out again, this time ready for the weight, and aimed it at his seath. He grabbed the handle on the side and held it down.

A stream of flowing white energy burst from his propulsion cannon's end, wrapping around his submarine like chains. The seath lifted, slowly and arduously, from the water while his propulsion cannon shook, the extra weight trying to tear it from his grasp. Definitely over the twenty-five kilogram limit, but it held. With rain pelting the now-exposed submarine Varien turned. But he had to turn slowly, because it felt like his cannon was stuck in place, and was fighting to move even the slightest bit. Over time, he finally managed to pull his seath inland and deposit it under a sheet of metal, where hopefully it'd be safe from the storm.
Once done, he released his cannon's trigger and eagerly stored it back in his suit. He rubbed his sore arms and started climbing the ramp. As he climbed he saw more of those small crawlers like on the Degasi island. They weren't out and about though, but rather hiding under debris to seek shelter from the storm.

"Caution," his PDA advised, making him jump in fright. "Scans show nearby lifeforms have trace amounts of human remains in digestive tracts."

He gulped. That was... oh. But they were hiding right now, so Varien continued to plow through the storm.

And what a storm it was! Rain crashed around him, and buffets of wind knocked him back and forth. He never knew how fierce hurricanes were; he'd never lived through one! No self-respecting planet let hurricanes form. But now he was tossed around and pelted with so much water it made it hard to stand.

Varien made his way up the ramp, mountains of metal surrounding him on all ends. The Aurora's hull shook and groaned under the onslaught of wind, sending a few distant lumps of metal free to fall into the wild waters along with clouds of mud and dust from crevices. His breath stuttered as the ramp shook, and his PDA took that moment to remind him the Aurora was structurally unsound and exploration was unwise. He knew that! He would've come back on a different day, when there wasn't a hurricane, but he was on a time limit.

Then he ran into a dead end. The walkway ended, and while he could see what looked to be doors behind grids of collapsed metal, they were melted down into narrow spaces he didn't think he could squeeze through.

Was... was that it? Was that all there was? No, there had to be more. Varien looked for a way forward, squinting through the downpour. There were no bridges, no ladders. But there was a massive metal arc laid across the platform he stood on, and it led to another floor. The problem was it had no support.

"This is a terrible idea," he told himself as he approached the titanic piece of wreckage. He nervously stepped onto it with one foot. It held. Then the next foot. Still held. Varien dropped to all fours and slowly crawled his way across the sleek surface, pounded by sheets of rain and wind all the while. Not soon enough, he arrived at the end and hopped to the platform.

His foot slipped.

Varien screamed as his right leg swept out from under him. He fell flat on his face and began sliding down the incline. He scrabbled for purchase with his gloved hands, but everything was slippery and wet. Horrible vertigo took hold of him as he slipped over the edge and tumbled down to the furious ocean. The waves came up to him with a surreal speed, leaving him no time to brace himself.

Splash!

He shot straight into the water with a flurry of bubbles, pain flaring along his chest and limbs. A weak moan escaped his lips, but then life came back to him and he floundered around, gaining a hold of himself.

"Caution," his PDA helpfully reminded again. "Structural integrity low. Exploration is ill-advised."

With a long-suffering sigh, and bruised ribs, Varien pulled out his seaglide and started to retrace
his steps. The second attempt at climbing the girder went far smoother, even if every motion made his body ache and pull like a spring stretched too far.

Once on solid ground, he saw a way in up ahead. A doorway, only a little collapsed, that led into the Aurora. A few vac-packs littered the floor outside it. While everything was still drenched in rain, the howling winds didn't reach so far. He came by an open vac-pack and took the fire extinguisher inside; it might come in handy. With that done, Varien limped through the damaged doorway and into the Aurora itself.

The rain outside left a splash mark into the halls, but soon the tortured floors were dry as a bone and a wave of heat barrelled into Varien. He was in an intersection. A sign next to him showed that the torn, ruined area he'd just come from used to be the airlocks. More signs along a two-way intersection - well, three way if he counted the corridor he was coming from - pointed to the cargo bay and admin office.

It was startlingly dark. Aside from crackling grease fires that were too bright to look at, all the lights were either off or so pathetically weak they may as well have been. Wires and plates of metal skulked on the black floor, waiting to trip him. Which wouldn't be hard, given the odd angle the floor tiled at.

He took out his flashlight, gave it a quick on-off, and pointed the cone of light around to see. It fell upon a box with both a shattered propulsion cannon and a broken terraformer, next to a long-unpowered PDA. He scanned the terraformer, and downloaded the contents of the PDA. He found nothing useful on it. With that settled he headed towards the cargo bay, sliding down the long ramp to the bottom. The way forward was blocked off with empty boxes and deformed benches, but his propulsion cannon made short work of those. It was comical, and more than a little exhilarating, to levitate the titanic metal frames with something that fit in his hands.

Once the path was clear, he strode forward, stumbling as the gale winds shook the Aurora. He walked down a long tunnel, pipes and such bursting from the walls around him. At the end was another door. He palmed it to open it...

The door didn't open.

He frowned. Right, the indicator lights were red; it was locked. He brought his hand up to the holographic number pad at the side, froze, and lowered his hand.

Damn it. Silvia had always told him what the codes were. He didn't know any himself. Varien cursed his stupidity and headed back out for the admin office. Privately, he started to nurse some doubts about fixing the radiation leak. His fiance was an engineer and had impressed upon him how indestructible a dark matter reactor was. But now he doubted if the paths leading to said reactor were as indestructible.

*Doesn't matter, I have to fix it*, he told himself. Ampeels might not be able to live anywhere but that trench. *Volara dies if I don't.*

With that morbid thought in mind he approached the admin office. A massive grease fire completely blocked it off, so he hefted the fire extinguisher and put it out. Inside, the admin office had seen better days. A quiet blaze burned peacefully in the corner, and the shelf had all its containers knocked to the ground. The garbage can in the corner was similarly upturned.

However, the data terminal was still running on auxiliary power, so Varien went to it. On it was a simple public document on the Aurora, and the screen was cracked so he couldn't navigate off so he was stuck downloading that. While he was there he grabbed the abandoned PDA on the
countertop and uploaded its contents. Varien took a look at the file.

He didn't know whose it was, but it complained about building the phasegate, and also reminded the owner of important things. CTO Yu's birthday, a complaint about the trip feeling like it took forever, and another complaint about not being paid enough credits for this.

Varien grunted. *You're telling me*, he thought.

The last entry was, miracle of miracles, the code for the cargo bay doors. He also removed the poster from the wall, rolled it up, and stored it. It was just a simple PRAWN Mk. III promotional poster, but it was wasted on the Aurora anyway.

He made his way back to the cargo bay's door and entered the code, slowly to make sure he got it right. With a weak, abused beep, the door lit up green. He palmed it and it slid open halfway before being stuck, but that was enough for Varien to squeeze through into the cargo bay.

On the other side of the door was a perfect picture of ruin. Fire blossomed from torn-open walls, marched up to the ceiling, and crawled along it to provide him flickering, bloody light. Molten metal dripped from especially weak points on the ceiling, forming stalagmites of slag. Dozens, even hundreds of boxes littered the scene, half of them broken open by the crash. There were forklifts too, and a floodlight, and more. A ramp in the middle of the bay led down to a lower floor, and a sealed hangar door loomed to the left.

"Damage patterns do not match the signature of any known weapon," his PDA chirped meekly. Good to know. But then *what* had taken down the Aurora?

Varien stepped forward, standing on a walkway above the main cargo bay. He went down the stairs, careful to both avoid the dripping metal from above and avoid aggravating his chest, and hopped to the ground floor. With a cautious stride, he investigated the surroundings. The floodlight, he scanned so he could build one later if he ever needed to. Another box held a massive metal turbine that, it turned out, was one-third of a Cyclops's engine. Beyond that, though, there wasn't much of use. A few batteries in the vac-packs, and a single power cell. He took them, but what for?

... though come to think of it, the power cell would come in handy. His seamoth was almost out of power as it was.

The hangar door was sealed, so that just left one way for Varien to go; down the ramp. He slid down its smooth surface, yelping when a piece of slag nearly scorched him. It grew dark too, so dark he had to pull out his flashlight.

The ramp terminated in a platform, lined with guardrails and filled with boxes. Ladders led down to a loading area, but to Varien's displeasure it'd been flooded with water, so the forklifts and boxes were utterly waterlogged. Still, the hangar doors from down there, to the left, were half open. Enough that, if he leaned out, he could see into the hallway.

One sign pointed towards the seamoth bay. Not important, he already had one. The other, however, pointed to the *drive room!*

Jackpot.

Varien made sure he had his welder, then prepared to jump into the oddly-green waters. If he looked closely, he could see the path to the drive core rose out of the water, so he'd be able to do it.

Then something laughed.
He screamed and jumped back, landing on his ass. His flashlight clattered away, sending its beam of light flailing about the room. He scrambled for it and stood, then leaned over the rail to point his flashlight into the murky water. Something moved. Something the size of his arm. Something blue, and balloon shaped.

A bleeder.

The moment that realization came to mind Varien recoiled as if he'd looked at the sun, the image of the horrible parasite burned into his mind. Stars above, why a bleeder? Why here? Why now? How was it even handling the radiation? How could this get any worse?

He soon found out how it could get worse. He stood on the platform, shining his flashlight into the waters while his body trembled in a cold sweat. There wasn't just the one bleeder but several, swimming about the platform, cackling lightly to themselves. As if they were mocking him, laughing about how they'd soon dry his veins.

Varien looked left. Drive core. He had to get there and fix it. That was the only thing that mattered. But stars above why did it have to be bleeders?!

Think, think. What could he do to get past them?

... idea.

Varien set his flashlight down and, from his suit, retrieved his gravsphere. He grunted and nearly fell over when it materialized in his arms, but with great effort he stood, lugging the ball in his arms. He waddled over to the edge of the platform, on the other end from the hangar door, and tossed the gravsphere into the water.

With a splash and a clang, it sunk right to the bottom. A few drops splattered his radiation helmet's glass, but otherwise Varien was unaffected. For a moment the sphere was inert and he feared it'd broke, but then its panels extended and it began pumping. Lances of warped gravity shot out from it, wrapping around one, two, three, four bleeders and drawing them close. The little fuckers shrieked and hissed, but were helpless. Still, the noises were so horrible Varien stumbled away, his goosebumps doubling in size.

It was fine, right? The bleeders were indisposed, and he could just swim past them to the drive room. But what if there were more bleeders out there in the corridor? Ones beyond his gravsphere's range?

He waited, staring with his flashlight out the hangar door. Nothing.

... alright maybe they were just hiding! Maybe...

... maybe he was being ridiculous.

With a scream, Varien ran and jumped off the platform, landing in the waters close to the hangar door. With panicked and crazed thoughts he swam towards the dive core, where a spot of fire gave him plenty of light -

Something-touched-his-leg-oh-stars-this-was-it-he-was-going-to-die-this-was-his-end-

It was just a loose cable.

Soon Varien waded out of the water, and was forced to bring up an arm to shield himself from the light of another fire. He doused it with his fire extinguisher and moved on through the door into the
dark matter drive core's room.

He burst in and his eyes widened. It was absolutely flooded! He'd come in on what once would have been a balcony observatory, but was now the only thing not completely submerged. The room itself was a massive cube, parts of it smashed to rubble and most of the ceiling crawling with fire, the only source of light. From the balcony rail, a ladder led down into the inky waters.

The drive core itself took the form of four massive pillars, stretching from the ceiling down into the waters, presumably to the floor. Varien walked forward, across a catwalk that led to the two closer reactors. If he squinted he thought he saw a similar balcony for the two more distant pillars, but the way the room slanted meant it was underwater. There was another fire extinguisher on the walls, which he appropriated.

"Warning," his PDA chimed as he approached a terminal between the two reactor pillars. "Local radiation readings are at maximum tolerable level for Alterra brand radiation suit." It beeped. "Multiple breaches detected in reactors. Core repair should only be handled by an experienced technician."

"Well too bad," he muttered. "All you have is me." He noticed that, of the terminal's four slots, one was filled. While the terminal itself had no signal, the slot had a metal tube in it that he nabbed. An efficiency module for a Cyclops submarine; probably useless to him, given the rescue coming in a day or so, but nice to have.

He glanced at the two reactors next to him. The problem was obvious; there were gaping holes in their sides. The damage spewed sickly yellow sparks as it struggled to continue working, and from within he could hear the reactor thrumming. Varien gulped, picturing a river of radiation spewing out from the gaps and washing over him.

Varien took out his welder and, carefully, did his best to repair the damage. First was the interior damage, the broken wires and girders, and then the hull itself. Eventually his PDA blipped that the damage was fixed, but there were still just shy of a dozen more breaches altogether. Confused, Varien repaired the hole on the other generator beside him. Where were the other holes, though? He couldn't see any -

He glanced at the water, and sighed. "Of course," he grumbled to himself. But the moment he prepared to leap into the waters, something else caught his attention. Something moving in the water.

Bleeders. Here too.

Welp, too bad for Volara! She was just going to have to move out of her home to somewhere else before the radiation engulfed it!

... no, he was just going to have to bite the bullet.

But it was a terrible idea! Nevermind how horrible the mere thought of those things latching on to his arms and legs and face were, they weren't just some annoyance to detach from himself. With so much radiation, the hole bleeders made in his suit would kill him. If he was to do this, he had to do it without getting caught even once. But how?

He thought it over some more. Then, inspiration struck. Setting his flashlight aside, Varien pulled out his propulsion cannon. The weight was a bit much, but he was ready and only grunted as it appeared in his grip. He aimed it at a patch of water, illuminated by his flashlight, and waited.
And waited.

And waited.

There! He held down the trigger, and with a splash his cannon pulled a bleeder out of the water. He gagged at the sight of the ugly little creature as it squirmed in the warped gravity, tendrils flailing about. But then he pointed it at one of the nearby reactor columns and launched the bleeder at it, full speed. It shrieked, but then went silent with a burst of yellowish blood. It dropped to the floor, blood seeping into the waters.

Then came more laughter as the other bleeders flocked to their fellow's body.

Varien continued grabbing bleeders, killing them in the same spot over and over to attract yet more bleeders. The 'launch' function of his cannon took enough power that he had to replace its battery more than once, and he kept cringing away from the bleeders as though, even while held in his grip, they'd somehow lash out and grab him. The pile of dead, bleeding bleeders grew taller and taller. Soon his pickings grew scarce. Varien waited a while longer, stirred the waters, even dropped some of the dead bleeders in other places, but nothing came.

All the bleeders were dead.

He put away his propulsion cannon and, under his helmet, smiled. "Fuck yeah, technology!" he breathed.

With that done, Varien submerged into the water - still a little apprehensive of sharing the same water bleeders had just been in - and began fixing the four reactors, swimming about the poisoned waters with repair tool in hand. Nine breaches left. Seven. Four. Three. Two. One left.

The last one gave him a lot of trouble; where was it? He swam high and low, searched the back end of every pillar. Or maybe he hadn't? Was this the first or second one? Had he been by this pile of rubble before? Maybe he just needed his flashlight; the waters were fairly dark, after all. Varien pulled his flashlight out from his suit and switched it on.

The light fell upon a live bleeder, heading towards him.

He screamed like a little girl, whipped out his propulsion cannon, and throttled the bleeder into a nearby wall. Then he gripped it and slammed it back in, and again and again, until the battery ran out and he had to replace it. By then the bleeder wasn't even recognizable as anything but a horrendous blob of mangled flesh and teeth.

With a shudder, Varien went back to searching for the final breach.

It turned out he had gotten turned around. There was one breach midway along one of the core's pillars, and he patched it up in no time at all. With that done he headed to a ladder and eagerly climbed onto the dry catwalk.

A hum filled the air. Quiet at first, but steadily growing louder and louder. A sudden clank followed it, and it continued on evenly. "High energy particle containment field restored," his PDA offered. "Radiation levels are expected to return to operable limits in three days, ten hours."

He breathed a sigh of relief. Good, good. He did what he set out to do. With weak and fear-addled limbs Varien trudged out of the drive room, swimming back to the corridor. His gravsphere still pumped in the distance, shackling bleeders to itself. To the left was the seamoth bay, useless to him. To his right was another door, one he'd yet to explore.
He swam towards it, ducking under the water to read the two signs pointing to it. "PRAWN bay? Locker room?" he wondered. Must've been something for the robotics crew. The door was jammed shut, with no number pad in sight. But when Varien knocked on it, it echoed hollowly.

Alright. Time to test out his laser cutter. He brought the tool out, put one finger on the trigger, and held it to the door. Once he was satisfied with how firm his grip was he turned it on.

Searing, blinding light exploded from its tip, boiling the water around it and sending waves of heat along Varien's body. The laser cutter shook in his grip, but he held firm and moved it in a slow and steady circle, carving a glowing hole into the door. Once it was done he turned the laser cutter off and put it away. With the edges of the hole he'd cut still glowing, Varien raised a flippered foot and kicked it in. The circular bit he'd cut out went tumbling in, and he smiled. Success!

He waited a moment longer, both to make sure the edges of the door cooled down and to make sure there weren't *more* bleeders on the other side, and then he went in.

Varien arrived in the locker room, rather than the PRAWN bay. He swam around a bit, collecting a battery and a first aid kit, while also downloading what data downloads he could.

One in particular stood out. An offer to a 'Wilson' to go to someone's living quarters so he could get his hands on a PRAWN suit.

Beyond the locker room was a ramp straight up, still underwater. It ended with a dry section covered in a grease fire. His first extinguisher was empty, so Varien took out the second and put the fire out. With that done he got to repairing the damaged wires keeping the door shut, and in minutes he was through.

"Whoa," he whispered, looking about the PRAWN bay. Exosuits, missing arms and legs, dangled from the ceiling on clamps. Broken boxes littered the area, and a massive section of the floor was simply *gone*, revealing a labyrinth of underwater pipes. Stairs to the right led up to the living quarters, the door for which was absolutely gone. Above him, there was an unreachable observatory with its window blown out. Light was plentiful, provided by the roaring flames around a series of stacked exosuits by the wall.

He went for those suits first, scanning them one at a time and, in the case of one, putting out the fire around it. None of them were enough for a full blueprint, owing to their missing limbs. It took standing on his toes and scanning an elevated suit to put the blueprint together. Maybe something to make for when he got on the Sunbeam; imagine the look on Silvia's face when he strode up to the evac point in an exosuit!

In all honesty though, he was done with the Aurora. He'd fixed the radiation leak, after all. The particle containment field ran on auxiliary power, the nuclear source of which would last *more* than long enough for the dark matter drive's radiation to subside naturally. He was just looting through to see if he could take anything with him.

... well that, and the hopes of finding a way to leave the ship that did *not* involve passing a gravsphere covered in bleeders.

He'd leave the maze of pipes for last. After using his propulsion cannon to clear the walkway of boxes, Varien made his way up to the living quarters and started rummaging through them, one at a time, putting out their fires as he did.

The first one was a dining room. He scanned the tables, counter-tops and lone vending machine, but the only thing he really cared about was the poster in the corner. It was a silly thing, a kitten
wearing a glass dome 'space helmet' over its head on a blue background, with the words KEEP CALM under it in a cute font.

He'd take it.

The other thing was the menu. It had him salivating for the corn, for the stem-cell grown pork.

His salivation was rewarded when the next room revealed itself to be a storage room. He eagerly stole all the bottles of water, as well as the nutrient blocks. He'd have to treat himself to a block after this; while Silvia always hated them, he never knew what was with her. They were crunchy, dry, like cereal. Or rice cakes. Maybe sprinkle some of his salt on one.

Further on were actual, proper living quarters for the crew. Varien cringed as he passed through each one in turn. Who'd lived in this one? Or that one? If he hadn't come, would Silvia have lived in one of these rooms? Probably not, she was pretty high up the corporate ladder, but he still wondered. He left their posters, their arcade toys, caps and belongings where they were; Varien simply scanned their shelves and beds and moved on.

One door in particular, however, drew his attention. He hadn't found any code to open it, so he was left to either guess... or take out his laser cutter.

That door wasn't as thin as the one leading to the locker room had been, so cutting it open took longer. As Varien cut and cut, the smell of burnt metal wafted through his suit and into his nose. It took, to his disgusted awe, the entire rest of his battery to cut open the door, but once he did he kicked the ring of metal in and, carefully, entered.

It was a small chamber, probably for one person. Despite that the bed was sized for two people, so he wondered if maybe whoever had this room often entertained company. A poster of the Aurora laid by the bed, and on the shelves was a plush toy of the ship. He ignored the PDA on the bed in favor of the glowing green data terminal. With a touch, he started downloading it.

He read over the entry in his PDA, and had to sit down in shock.

It was data on emergency communications. The last recorded transmissions of the Aurora. "Alterra headquarters, eight hours after crash. This may be our only communications window. To..." He swallowed. "To all survivors of the Aurora, we have received your distress signal and will do everything in our power to get you home." They... they were? Even without the Sunbeam, they were coming? They hadn't been forgotten? Well, he knew they wouldn't, Alterra would look terrible not to come - "A rescue ship would take too long to reach you out there so Aurora, you'll have to meet us... halfway?" he wondered, raising an eyebrow. "We've sent blueprints to the captain's quarters for an escape ship we think will be able to break orbit and get you to the nearest phase gate." A ship. They wanted him to build a rocket. It... wasn't the craziest idea. A meek beep on his PDA indicated it had already received the blueprints.

"The environmental data you sent indicates you can find all the materials you need on 4546B," the message continued. "However, you're going to need one hell of a... power source," he trailed off. "You may need to salvage parts from the Aurora's reactor or come up with a creative solution. We'll continue communicating as long as we - " And then the message cut off as the communications relay went offline.

They hadn't been forgotten. Alterra really had sent them a way. Even if the Sunbeam had never come by, Varien would still have been able to leave, and so would've Silvia when she eventually came to explore the Aurora, provided they didn't meet up first.
With numb limbs, he stumbled out what he now knew to be Captain Hollister's quarters. He made his way back to the PRAWN bay, and fished out his dive reel. After confirming the torn-up, flooded section of floor was bleeder free, he stuck the end of the dive reel into the bay's floor. The metal bit drilled in and anchored itself, leaving Varien to hold the dive reel as it unwound, leaving a spool of white rope behind him.

He dove into the labyrinth of pipes, making sure to avoid the sparking bits; salt water was a fairly good conductor, but his suit wasn't. He'd be fine as long as he didn't get too close. After a few false starts and dead ends he found a way forward, and eventually the pipes gave him a way out. He burst from a piece of ruined floor in another hallway. One end of the hall way blocked off by dense, interlocking debris, but the other opened up into the almost entirely underwater... well, he didn't know what room it was.

It was large, and deep. Round nodes clung to the walls and fire eeked out a living in the small air pocket above the water. Now and then a strand of molten metal dripped into the water and hissed fiercely. Varien dove deeper and found another data terminal, which he accessed.

The entry he got informed him he was at the Aurora's black box. He read it aloud to himself. "Initiating slingshot maneuver, warning high velocity energy pu - " Had he read that right? "High velocity energy pulse detected from planet surface? Distress signal sent, impact detected, lifepods on starboard side compromised, evacuating, piloting given to Captain Hollister, impact registered, drive core shielding damaged." It went on to analyze what had happened. Some sort of energy pulse, sent from the... planet? Was there some Chinese super-weapon hidden on 4546B? Or maybe Mongolian, and the Degasi crew's loss was a cover-up for them to install it? No, that made no sense.

Weird.

At the very least, it had the coordinate chip for the energy pulse. Varien stored it in his suit, but didn't activate it yet. He recalled his dive reel's anchor and stored it in his suit.

Time to get out of the Aurora.

From the black box chamber's lower end there was a hallway that lead out. It led him to another door, so he had to pop a fresh battery into his laser cutter to get through. On the other side were a few locked doors, sparking wires and data coils, but it was straightforward to find dry land again. A patch of fire blocked off a way out, and he used the last of his fire extinguisher foam on it. Once it was gone he stepped onto the ramp and, looking up, he saw the cloudy sky!

With renewed strength he climbed. Some debris blocked the final door out, but he made short work of it with his propulsion cannon. Hungry and tired, he stepped outside.

Rain still fell and wind still blew. The waters before him were frothy and angry, but it was all to a much lesser degree; the hurricane must've been moving on. He sauntered down the ramp and into the waters. With his seaglide he found where he'd stashed his seamoth, pulled it back into the water. He swapped out the power cell for the one he'd looted from the Aurora, and hopped in.

With a tired groan, Varien reclined into the vessel's seat. "Oh goodness, finally," he moaned. "How long was I in there?" Between killing off bleeders, getting lost, trying to fix the core, playing a firefighter, it might've been hours. His stomach certainly complained as though he'd missed lunch.

He couldn't eat yet, though. He had to get clear of the radiation field so he could take off his suit and eat. Varien grabbed the wheel and floored the accelerator, turning away from the burning wreckage of the Aurora while also submerging beneath the waves. He eyed his habitat's signal and
made for it. He dodged between the rods forming the Aurora's skeleton and slipped clear of the ship into the open waters.

"Alright," he told himself as he skirted the edge of the ship, making his way back. "PDA, how long do I have until the Sunbeam's arrival? And uh, where is the rendezvous?"

"Sunbeam arrival will occur in approximately thirty-five hours. Coordinates... to the right."

The right? That wasn't where the Degasi island was. Had there been a second island all this time? "Huh, good to know," he said, continuing. All in all, his outing had been quite productive. He'd definitely treat himself to a nutrient block once he got back to his habitat. He'd need to make another gravsphere though, not to mention use his recently-constructed battery charger. Still, if that was all he had to do, that was an easy day. Maybe he'd spend some time looking up the ingredients for the exosui -

Roar!

His heart stopped.

Slowly, Varien turned his seamoth to the right, where the echoing roar had sounded from.

But there was nothing there.

ROAR!

Behind him! Varien didn't turn to look, he just slammed his foot on the accelerator and drove as fast as he could, straight forward, as close to the surface as the waves would allow. He had to go, he had to go, had to go -

A horrible clang heralded a massive black claw wrapping itself around his seamoth's windshield. He grunted and was knocked around as something pulled his seamoth around, bringing Varien face to face with death.

It was huge, with a mouth large enough to swallow him whole, lined with teeth pushed so close together he couldn't tell if they were cutting fangs or grinding molars. Four dead green eyes glared at him with an unbelievable malice. The face was white, with crimson protrusions out the top and bottom, and four blood-red mandibles - two on each side - that wrapped around his seamoth, squeezing like a vice. Behind the face he saw a colossal white body stretching out impossible far before ending in a tailfin.

The beast roared, opening its jaws and splattering his vessel with its spit. A flash of pain exploded in Varien's ears and quieted the rest of the world.

"New creature discovered!" his PDA interjected.

The creature thrashed him around, knocking him around his seamoth as it shook it back and forth as easily as Varien could shake a tin can, left and right and upside-down. His hands tightened on the wheel so hard he wondered how he didn't snap it. He floored the accelerator, pulled back to reverse, turned it left and right, ascended and descended, even flickered the headlights, but he was trapped in the monster's grip.

"Labeling..."

The creature's mandibles continued to squeeze, and it eyed him hungrily. Varien saw the insides of his seamoth crumple inward, and cracks grew like fungus across the windshield. He was dimly
aware of a terrible high-pitched siren wailing in his ears. He was also dimly aware that the noise was him screaming like a little girl.

"... Reaper Leviathan!"

Finally, Varien's haywire steering got somewhere. His seamoth pointed up out of the Reaper's grip and popped from the death grip like a cork, but not before the expanding cracks left several fist-sized holes in the windshield. Varien struggled and gasped as water rushed in to flood his seamoth. He had his oxygen mask on so he wasn't worried about drowning, but the force of the water pinned him and the frothing bubbles blinded him.

When at last his seamoth was full of water and he could see again, the Reaper Leviathan was right in front of him, curling its body to charge him head on. He watched, transfixed, as its sinuous form cut through the water like a scythe. It chomped its teeth as though fantasizing about eating him and charged. Varien screamed and did the first thing he could think of.

He went straight down.

The Reaper went above him and nearly crashed into the rocky cliffs. It roared again, but his eardrums were already burst. The titanic predator rounded on him, showing off the full length of its body, as long as three ampeels end to end. Varien, however, wasn't waiting for it to grab his vessel again. He backed off, moving in haphazard angles. It charged again, mandibles clawing for him, and he took Volara's advice to go in a circle. For a second it looked like it'd work.

Then, with impossible agility, the leviathan turned to meet him head on.

"AH!" he yelped, ascending above its jaws at the last second. Shelter, he needed shelter! Where could he go that this thing couldn't follow?!

... the shallows! But they were so far away!

He gunned it in reverse, glancing behind himself to see where he was and then back ahead to see where the Reaper was so he could dodge it, back and forth so fast it was a wonder he didn't snap his neck. After a half dozen more hair-raising charges that he had to evade, he arrived at a massive coral tube. Hurriedly he brought his flooded submarine behind one, taking shelter from the Reaper.

ROAR!

The Reaper didn't go around the tube. It didn't go above or below. It plowed through it, shattering coral and tossing his seamoth aside like a rag doll. Varien screamed as the Reaper rounded on him, and this time he had to pull up and to the right to avoid its hideous mandibles.

Where else could he hide, where else could he hide?!

Out of the corner of his eyes, Varien spotted a narrow crevice in the land. That was his only shot! Dodging the Reaper Leviathan one more time, Varien popped his seamoth into the canyon. The gargantuan predator roared again and tried to charge him, ramming into the narrow rocks. His heart stuttered as it sent some boulders tumbling down, but then the leviathan roared and pulled back, shaking its head and blinking four eyes one after another. It raised its head and roared furiously to the surface, then turned to swim away. Its head passed. The first part of its body passed, then the next, and the next, until finally the entirety of the monster was gone, and Varien was left to watch its crescent tailfin vanish into the gloom.

Then he took in a breath he hadn't noticed he was holding. Something wet dribbled from his ears, too.
Whimpering, he slowly removed his seamoth from the ravine and pointed it to his habitat. New things on his to-do list; repair his seamoth. Then use a first aid kit on himself. Mainly his ears. Ow.

"I hate this planet so much," he sobbed as he made his way across the ocean.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Volara

She had an idea.

She wanted to go find Varien's territory.

Not the ravaged home he had fled, but whatever territory he claimed now, in the world Above. After all, he'd been coming to her people's home, skewing his own rest cycle to do so. It was only fair she go to him instead of making him do all the work. Besides, she had some questions that had been bothering her ever since he'd inundated her in that strange, flowing light.

There was just one tiny problem with her plan to see the tiny fish; she had no idea where he lived. Oh sure, she knew the general direction he came from and left to, but he always vanished into the distance. For all she knew, he had to take a great many turns to reach her. And what if he made his home in a complex cavern system? One too small for her to squeeze into?

But she had questions. So many questions that she'd been able to ignore with the novelty of speaking with something that wasn't a shocker. Questions like how, even with his hands, did he make rock and shiny rocks into those things? How did he construct the tiny metal-shocker that helped her understand him? What was it that helped him understand her? And so many more!

She grumbled quietly to herself, killing a nearby chomper as she did. Volara absentmindedly chomped it up and continued on her way, swimming about the various canyons and twists of her territory, brushing her prongs against the vines. She was just trying to talk herself out of it. After all, Volara had no way of knowing what was up there. What sort of poisonous plants, or creatures. After all, there was one large fish that had Varien quite worried...

So what? she snapped at herself. He's the size of your prongs, a green-blaster would be huge to him! You're a shocker, what could possibly be stronger than you?

Right, that settled that. Volara whipped her long body around and relaxed her swim bladder, floating up. She coasted out of the canyons of her territory as she swam towards her meeting point with Varien. Once there she wracked her memory for where he came from. That oil vine, taller than the others, was there. And the towering pillar of white rock was to her left... so straight ahead, where the spires and glowing things were. She eyed the place warily, then flicked her tail irately.

What was she, a bone-fish? That whenever she saw something worrisome she froze up?
Before she could move though, she heard the water behind her crackling. She wheeled around to see another shocker coming up to her, with triangular markings on his head... ah! "Ohmaron," she said, blinking. "You surprised me!" She tilted her head, and sent the tilt down her body so her prongs rotated to match her. "I thought you were with Zaparon?"

"He's out doing patrols," he said, swimming closer. "We've seen you up here a few times and I thought I'd ask."

"Ask?" she responded warily. He'd seen her here? Had he seen her with Varien?

"That creature that comes down," he explained. That confirmed it. "You always talk with it. Why aren't you eating it? Are you lonely?" He crackled teasingly. "You know you should find a consort if that's the case, instead of talking with food."

She zapped the water unamusedly. "His name is Varien," she explained. "He can talk. I've had a lot of fun teaching him to understand us. And were you spying on me?" she asked hotly.

He looked at her strangely, but spoke lowly. "Well, yes. But I just want to make sure nothing's happening to you! Like, if he's poisonous or something and hurts you."

She swam a little circle around him. "Ohmaron, I'm flattered you're so worried about me, but I'm fine. We're shockers, remember?"

He deflated, sinking slightly. "I know, but I've already hurt you enough and if you got hurt again when I could've done something - "

"You didn't hurt me," she said sadly, sinking to his level. "You need to stop biting yourself over this."

"But I did hurt you!" he protested. "Your eggs - "

"You bring this up every season!" she shot back, grinding her fangs together. "Would you just drop it? The Green Weakness is a thing! It happens!" She quieted down. "It's not your fault," she crackled quietly, nudging him with the side of her head. "Listen, Varien's done nothing to hurt me, and given he's smaller than a crawler I doubt he even could."

He chomped quietly, but relented and pulled away. "Alright. Sorry for hovering," he grumbled. "I just worry. What are you even doing here? Waiting for him?"

She shook her head. "Actually, I was thinking I'd go find him. Goodness knows it'd be safer for me to find him than the other way around."

Ohmaron blinked, and looked to where she'd been looking. "You mean up there? What if you get hurt?"

Volara turned to him. "Then I assume you'll go find me in the underworld to say you told me so," she deadpanned. "I think I'll head off now."

The other shocker looked at her, arcing unease across his body, but relented. "Volara, stay safe," he called, before turning around and heading back for his territory.

She sighed, sending an arc down her entire body. Her guts twisted at being so snappish with Ohmaron; he meant well. And if she were honest with herself...

Forget it. She had a strange fish to track down. With a swing of her body Volara began to swim,
higher and higher. She shot forward, clearing the dark stone beneath her until she swam above pristine white... what was that? She lowered herself to the white sheet and dragged the prongs jutting beneath her mouth through it. It wasn't one solid rock but something fluid, like blood. But made of... she peered closer. Many smaller rocks?

Volara put it out of her mind and continued, heading for the stalks of stone. As she got closer she saw they were overgrown by strange, disk-like plants with grey tops and orange undersides. The light from Above shone down, inundating her and casting everything in brilliant, oversaturated colors.

It was also a lot tighter than it had seemed from far away. She had to twist and turn carefully through the fungal stalks, but despite her efforts Volara's body kept bumping and scraping against the rocks, making her crackle angrily. She took her aggression out on the prey-fish swimming around, fish like she'd never seen before. Some were green bone-fish, green like her eyes and with no bone pattern. Others were flat triangles with a single eye on top. Still others were pale sacks.

The blue shrieking things were much larger from so close. Their main bodies were about the size of a crawler, but their tails stretched far behind their bodies. They warbled and wailed, painfully bright against her eyes. Volara made sure to stay away from them; they looked alarmingly similar to how her mother had described a conglomerate.

As she swam, she spotted a few gray rock nubs sticking up from the grainy-rocks. She eyed them curiously and twitched her tail. Well, she did need a gift for Varien. She scooped up three of them in her jaws and continued on. As she did, Volara saw other things. A strangely circular piece of white rock, with orange protrusions. Orange, like the 'lifepod' that landed in her territory. And looking about, there were more of those things. White plates, black lattices, all with the distinctive, impossibly smooth texture of Varien's tools.

How did his people make these things? More and more, Volara felt like she was in over her gills. Something growled and hissed. She spun around to face it, making sure to keep from accidentally swallowing the rocks. A strange creature swam towards her. It had a large, wedge-shaped head with malicious green eyes. Its entire body was covered in a gray-orange shell, the least colorful thing she'd seen so far. The shell was segmented along its back, and grew over its head to form teeth in its jaws. It had a pair of protrusions from underneath its body, and its tailfin curved backwards in two directions. Instead of a nasal arch, on either side of its head were three nostrils carved into its carapace.

It came at her, chomping and showing off its pink tongue. It wasn't that small, either. Obviously puny compared to her, but it could certainly bite Varien in half without much difficulty. She turned to face it, lighting up all her prongs to wreath herself in a barrier of azure power. As it came close she swept her sinuous body to the side and bit at its side, in one of the 'fins' of its underbelly.

She tore the fin straight off, the scent of delicious blood flooding her nasal cavity. The would-be predator roared and squirmed around. It tried to swim away, beating its tail up and down, but without its fin it veered off to the side and smashed into a rocky spire. Volara relaxed her barrier, laughed at its misfortune, and continued.

Soon, she came to an end of the forest. The light was brighter still and the water strangely warm; she'd been steadily moving upwards as she explored. She hadn't found Varien here, though. Nor had she found the looker fish he sometimes brought, so she wasn't in the right place yet.

She had a good idea where to go next, though; from the grainy white before her grew another cliff of stone, climbing up. It was hardly the largest cliff she'd ever seen, but still; Volara didn't feel so
good about going that high up. Already her swim bladder tingled and swelled within her painfully and her entire body felt like it'd burst outward and shatter her carapace. So she resigned herself to waiting at the bottom of the cliff, staring back into the forest and enjoying the too-colorful fish moving around.

Slowly but surely, the discomfort faded and Volara felt more comfortable with the Above waters. Now if only it could be less bright, it'd be perfect.

Volara couldn't just swim straight up the cliff; the rocks in her mouth would slide down her gullet. She had to take it slow, swimming in a spiraling circle to go higher and higher. As she did the nausea and tightness soon returned, even as she left the fungal forest far beneath her. By the time she climbed the top of the cliff the world spun around her, and -

She vomited.

A mass of half-digested food, their blood, and the three rocks she'd been holding in her mouth spilled from her. Volara twitched weakly and let herself sink to the grainy rock. She'd... she'd just rest here a little.

While she waited for her body to stop thrumming painfully, she inspected the area. It was brighter and even hotter than the forest had been, much to her displeasure. Crimson grass grew along the flat plains, duller than the oil of vines, but incredibly thick. Tiny black creatures ambushed their prey from the grain-rocks. A pack of small creatures, like chompers but red, came by so she killed them. Massive stone spires dotted the land, reaching up to -

- what was that?! Far above her, there was some sort of membrane stretched across the water. It rippled, rising and falling in various spots as though subjected to incredibly powerful currents. Beyond it was something she couldn't quite make out. Something light grey, with one part of it horrendously, unbearably bright, like staring into the core of a green-blaster's eruption.

Volara glanced away, and focused on adapting to the Above's waters. Soon her discomfort lessened and faded entirely. She ate the food she'd thrown up, then closed her mouth around the three rocks to keep them with her. With a flick of her tailfin she took off and explored, looking for anything that might lead her to Varien's territory. She passed over a few honeycomb caves leading down, but decided that wasn't what she was looking for.

There wasn't much, but she did spot another area even further up, framed by what looked like dense forests of vine. But the vines weren't oil vines. Rather they were strange green things, with yellow seeds growing from them. They grew so close to each other Volara couldn't see well inside, and the plants grew all the way up to the strange, warping membrane. It was closer to her than the other area, and it made sense if Varien lived in a place with lots of life. Volara headed for it.

Of course, that involved her having to go further up, which made her stomach do flips, but it wasn't as bad. She was getting used to being so deep in the bizarre world of the Above.

When she entered the forest, she immediately realized she'd underestimated how thick it was. Every time she slithered through the water, the plants brushed up against her. While she wasn't complaining about the plants themselves, their seeds were hard! To make matters worse she, owing to the density of the forest, could barely see through the thick green water. At the very least the hideously bright lights were dimmer in the thicket. Some of the local predators saw her irately crackling and, wisely, fled. A couple tiny things tried to attack her, to latch onto her and bite her, so she fried them.

But Volara wasn't finding anything, so she swam further up, close to the odd membrane. She left
the forest and entered a hellish region.

Such burning water! So much color! So much light! It felt like her eyes were going to burn out of their sockets! She had to squint to see and even then they stung!

*The things I do for you, Varien,* she grumbled to herself, lashing out with an irate nova of energy. Alright, look around for anything. Hooting prey-creatures that swam in pods, not important. Prey-fish of strange colors and shapes. There were lookers among them, so she knew she was in the right place.

Finally!

The area was densely detailed with tube-shaped plants as hard as rock, clusters of painfully colorful flora, and towering mesas with minuscule cave systems boring through them.

Maybe he was past the membrane? Volara angled herself and, still careful not to swallow the rocks, began to rise further still. Then, her head touched the membrane.

She'd expected resistance. She'd expected it to stretch and tear like old vine-oil. But instead her head slid through the membrane into the waters beyond -

Volara had no words to describe what she felt next. She'd never learned them. It was the gills around her head going limp. It was her prongs being cut off from each other, only able to crackle quietly and unable to form loops and arcs. It was the water, the water she'd taken for granted all her life, with all its currents and swells and thickness, sliding off and revealing to her how unbearably heavy her body was, exposing her to something horrible, something unnatural, something stinging and cold. Her mouth gaped open out of shock, dropping the three rocks beneath her, and to her horror the water in her jaws seeped out and the awful stinging not-water flooded in.

With a cry Volara submerged beneath the membrane, letting the world return to normal. The not-water bubbled up from her nasal arch and from between her fangs. She scooped up the three rocks and shuddered; never again.

But then, she spotted something out of the corner of her eye. Volara coiled through the shallow waters to it, forced to keep low by the strange membrane. There ahead of her, in a relatively deep and flat part of the area, was metal. Smooth metal, shaped into squares and circles with the same texture as the shell Varien used to visit her. It took the form of a squat cylinder, with a long, smaller cylinder sticking out from its side. Strange blue panels grew from the top, and at the end of the small cylinder was a series of concentric circles. The entire thing rested on a square of metal patterned light and dark, under which rods shot into the grainy surface and vanished into its depths.

This was it, this had to be Varien's territory! It was small, barely the size of Volara herself, but that wasn't surprising. Small territory for a small creature, made sense. And... oh! Varien's shell rested beneath the square, confined by the struts. But there was no Varien inside, and it had clearly seen better days; the metal ring was dented and broken, and the clear dome had massive white cracks around it, cracks which surrounded holes.

Was Varien inside the structure, then? Moved forward and tapped the side of the large cylinder-structure with her armored head, clanging in a way she didn't know she could.

She pulled away and waited, then waited some more. Maybe... maybe she'd made a mistake? Maybe he was still out at his massive home, struggling to fix the sickness pouring from it? But then she heard something opening behind her, and then a sharp note of Varien's song reached her earholes.
She spun around happily, coming face to face with him. Now that he wasn't in his shell, she was reminded of how tiny and gangly his people were. "Varien, there you are!"

In response he sung something else, then held up his hands and showed both palms to her, singing something frantically. She realized he didn't have the metal-shocker with him; oh. That made things harder.

He swam back into his structure, and she stared in confusion. Was he going to find it, or...?

Her suspicions proved correct when he swam back out with the translation tool in one hand. He turned to face her, and Volara backpedaled slightly to put more distance between them. She had to be careful now that he wasn't in his shell; Volara could kill Varien just by talking to him.

The little creature sang a confused song, which his device translated. "Volara?! What are you doing here? How did you even find me?"

"I thought I'd come visit you," she explained. "It's unfair to make you always come find me, and I had some questions. As for how, I just kept going up until I found lookers, then I searched until I found this!" She tilted her head. "How are you? Did you visit the home?" She glanced at his damaged, ruined shell. "Are you hurt?"

"Hang on, one thing at a time," he urged, kicking his legs at the water to stay in place. "I'm fine, thanks for asking. I did visit it, and my ears were pretty hurt but I'm better now."

"Alright, good. Oh, I brought something for you! I know you like your special rocks," she teased. "So on the way here I got some." She opened her mouth and let the three chunks she'd gotten from the fungal forest drift to the ground. With a motion of her powerful body she swam back to give him space.

He approached it, then held up a chunk in his hands. Then he sang something startled and happy. "Volara, this is unknown! I was just looking for the unknown I misplaced! Now I can unknown an unknown!"

"Slow down!" she said. "I didn't understand half of that."

"Oh, right. Sorry. So you said you had questions?" he asked, gathering the gray rocks and holding them to his chest where they... vanished in flashes of blue light. Calm down Volara, calm down.

"Yes, I did. It's about your tools." He stiffened. "I understand you use special rocks, and it's easier for you since you have hands, but I still don't get it! How do you make that little-shocker? Or that shell which moves but isn't part of you? Or the skin you can take off? It makes no sense!" she ranted, smashing her tailfin against a rock. The rock broke.

He sighed heavily. "Alright um, oh unknown above, I don't know how to even begin." He seemed to realize something, sinking to the grainy surface and kicking up a cloud of the stuff. "Actually, I could just show you."

Volara tilted her head curiously. "Show me?"

"Yeah! When in the unknown - uh, my old home, I found unknown - damn it! I found plans for a special type of shell I could walk in, and could go deeper than the old one. I was actually getting together everything I need for it, I was just missing the unknown, but you brought some! Hang on an unknown - uh, a moment." Varien dove back into his territory. Curiously, Volara swam around to look at the end of the tube more closely.
Her eyes widened in shock. Now that she was paying attention, the very center of it was transparent! Through it she could see the interior of Varien's structure, lined with tall black rectangles against the walls, or one against the floor. Varien himself went off to the side and out of her sight, though. After a few minutes he started coming back, and Volara backed off from the tube.

Varien exited with a white and orange box in his hands. He let go of it and, to her surprise, it started unfolding and going up! With a splash it pierced the membrane, and remained above. "Had to make a new one," he explained to her. "The unknown destroyed the last one so - "

"Wait, that word? Before destroyed?"

"The, um. So it's like there's a lot of unknown and strong unknown. Um, falling-water and not-water-currents and unknown above of course you don't have words for that..." he grumbled in a dark song. "Whatever, I'll just show you." He started swimming up... towards the membrane!

Volara released a loud crack of energy to startle him. "Wait! Don't go up there," she warned. "It's not pleasant."

He blinked. "Right. Volara, my home was originally up there. It's safer for me than it is down here," he explained. "You're welcome to watch from down here, but I think it'll be easier to see if you just poke your eyes out." His song and voice turned worried. "I mean, if that's not too painful for you." Without a further word, Varien swam up and broke through the membrane. From below, she saw the distorted image of him climbing atop the opened up box.

With a huff, Volara reached for the membrane. "Never again, sure held onto that for long," she groused. Carefully, she poked the very tip of her head out, enough for her eyes to see past the distorting features. It still tingled, cold and prickling in contrast to the scorching hot waters below, and it was so bright!

But now that she knew what to expect and could brace for it, Volara saw something else. Far off in the distance was an absolutely gargantuan construct, shaped like a cone with the nose broken off. It had the same colors and texture as Varien's tools, but with holes and black marks covering it. It sat motionless and silent against the backdrop of a mottled grey shell. Was that the home that had been hurt?

"Killed was more like it."

Varien sang something to her right, and Volara turned to face him. But she turned too far; he wasn't that far to the right! But - but he sounded like he was further - what was this hellish above-water world?!

She watched as the tiny creature pressed something glowing blue on the unfolded box. Four tiny, swimming metal things she hadn't seen before responded, and swam out a fair distance in front of Varien, far up. Volara watched in awe as brilliant blue lights shone from each of the quartet, onto the pale blue outline of a... thing. It looked something like Varien, with two arms and two legs, but it was larger and had no head, but rather a bulbous chest. But the surprises didn't end there.

Before her very eyes, metal grew over the outline, crunching and cracking as the four things around it hummed and whined. In minutes the construct was complete. The lights shut off and the four things returned to their box. The construct stopped floating and sunk, splashing through the surface.

With great relief, Volara sank back below the membrane, unable to process what she'd just seen. She went over to inspect the thing Varien had made. Metal, with a clear dome like his other shell. Arms with three fingers at the end, and a circular flat bit on top. On either end of the circular bit
were two tubes seemingly stuck inside it. Twice the height of a crawler, she guessed weakly, mind still reeling from what she'd seen.

Varien came back down, box in hand. He tossed it quickly into his territory and swam over to her and the construct, so she backed off. He opened the circular top, slid in, and gripped the handles. He moved, and the construct moved around him, turning around. It lashed out with its hands, forming fists to punch the water. A musical, gasping rhythm reached her earholes and she realized it was Varien laughing, a charming sound that had her hearts fluttering.

"Yeah," Varien said, making his creation leap and then land. "This is more like it!"

She stared at him. "Varien," she began slowly, putting the pieces together. His people lived in a monstrously large home of metal, taken from the earth and reshaped into unknowable shapes. Could make metal dance and create it with light, and move it around from within like it weighed nothing. "I want you to be honest with me," she said, tingling nervously. "Your people, are you gods?"

"The last word was unknown, what does it mean?" he asked.

Of course. "A powerful being, that plays an important role in how the world works," she clarified.

His eyes went wide underneath his head-covering. "What?! No! Nonononono!" he stammered, waving his arms. "No, forget that. Not gods, put it out of your mind."

"Well then how do you explain all this?!" she retorted. "You can make metal out of light, and shells of earth to bring you where you want, and wall off your territory with the stuff! You're obviously rock gods!"

"Alright, I can explain it!" he retorted. Varien grew quiet. "Alright, how do I want to put it. Um, so you know there are laws of how the world works, right?"

"Laws?" she asked, confused. While talking she accidentally zapped a strange, arc-looking fish. Idiot.

"Stuff like, if you let go of a rock it moves down. You get hungry if you don't eat. That sort of stuff?" She gave an affirmative crackle. "Well, it turns out that if you're very, very clever, like a genius, you can find ways to use these laws to make things do what you want. And if you're especially clever, you can use these tools to discover new laws you didn't even know about, laws that were invisible, and then make tools out of those. And you keep going, using more and more hidden laws to make more and more powerful tools, until eventually you get - " He gestured at his metal shell, then at his territory. " - to this point."

She blinked. "But, how? I mean you can do all this! Why can't we?"

"Well it's not exactly quick," he grumbled. "It takes geniuses to figure out the laws and make tools with them. I have no idea how this thing works, I just know how to use it," he explained, giving a punch to prove his point. "And even then, it takes a long time. Like, it took my people, um." He trailed off for a moment. "Four? Four thousand or so generations to get from where you are to where we are now. And we had the advantage of having hands, and not living underwater."

Volara sunk to the ocean floor, thinking it over. All his talk of metal and gods and laws and geniuses and tools. It was so far beyond anything she'd known. She'd been right; she was way in over her gills. But something stuck out to her. "You said you didn't live underwater," she said. "That huge thing, it was your home, right?"
He sighed. "Home isn't really the right word. It's like my unknown. Um, the shell I came to you in. But it's much bigger, designed to hold food, places to rest, and places to work for hundreds of us while it brings us to somewhere. But while it was bringing us there something went wrong, and we fell here."

Fell? "So it can swim through the not-water? Like those four things that made that suit you're in?"

"Through the not-water? Oh, you mean unknown. No, it can't. Um, give me a second to think it over." She did, waiting patiently. Her head hurt. "So you're in the water. You just found out that above it is this not-water, right? My people live in the not-water. But far, far above the not-water is nothing at all, which kills us if we touch it. The thing we came in, the, um..." He spent a moment trying to translate the word. "The ship can move really fast, but only when it's in nothing. So we get into it while in the not-water, it goes into the nothing, and travels far. But something, I don't really know what, hit it, and that something made it come into the not-water, and then it stopped working and fell down."

Volara's eyes widened as a memory rose within her. "Wait, I think I saw your ship!" she recalled. "Back before we met, I saw something enormous swim through the Above, and then some kind of wave jostled me."

"That would've been the crash. The ship is called the Aurora," he explained, sounding it out in a long, drawn-out song. "So, that's it. You're pretty much up to speed. We're not gods, we just had a lot of time and geniuses who figured out how the world works, and then gave the rest of us tools based on that knowledge."

She crackled a 'yes' across her mouth prongs, still resting on the grainy rocks. "Alright. I'm going to need to rest on this later, but another question." She gestured with her head to the suit he was in. "Why did you make that? I understand your old shell is broken, but couldn't you just make a new one?"

"It's not completely broken," he protested. "I can fix it when I have the time. But, um. Okay. So water is heavy, right? It's why I can't go down to you without the shell, all the water above me would hurt me." Made sense. "But too much water would also crush that shell," he explained. "This one, however, can go much deeper than the other." He hummed a single note. "Actually, there is a place I want to look at. It's a piece of the Aurora, it broke off from the main bit and fell deeper than I was able to go. I want to see if there's anything useful there."

She rose into the water. "If you'd like, I could come," she offered.

Volara followed after him as he walked, sometimes jumping above an obstruction. She watched him carefully. This stomping motion, was that how his people normally walked? On two legs, instead of four like the crawlers? So strange. And she kept stealing glances at the suit itself, the metal and clear-stuff molded into a perfect form by the four things that could create metal out of blue light. What sort of 'law' let them do that?
Well, apparently she couldn't ask Varien, since he 'only knew how to use them'.

Not soon enough they left behind the horrendously bright and colorful shallows and entered the grassy plains. One of the ambush sharks tried to leap up and bite Varien through his shell, but before he even needed to punch it Volara swooped down, grabbed its dorsal fin in her jaws, and bit it off. The creature shrieked and left them alone after that.

"So," she asked as they walked across the plateau. "This sickness from your home, what was it?"

He hummed a ponderous note. "Well, um. Okay, so you know how you need food to have energy to do things, right? Well the tools I make need food too, but not food like you and I eat. Our home does too. Something called dark matter. And we make, uh. Waste, right?" She crackled her prongs in an affirmative. "Well the Aurora using dark matter made waste in the form of radiating out sickness. Normally we have tools around it to keep the sickness from reaching anyone but when we crashed, it broke and let the sickness spread outward. It basically messes with your insides, kills you from the inside out, and you can't even see it as it does kills you." He shuddered. "Horrible stuff."

"So not the Green Weakness, then," she confirmed.

"Green Weakness, what is that?"

Right, of course he wouldn't know. "Another sickness," she explained. "First your shell feels too tight, then green spots form along your body and trail from your eyes, you feel weak and awful all the time. And then you die," she finished sadly, swim bladder tight as she explained the symptoms. "It usually takes twenty days from when you first notice it."

"I think I've seen some creatures with that," he wondered. "They have green spots all along their bodies and they move pretty slow. Is it that common?" he asked worriedly.

"It is," she whispered, her prongs quiet. "It's a curse that came from the underground ages ago, it finds everyone sooner or later. It got my mother, it got all but one of my siblings." She grew more quiet. "And it got my eggs."

"Your eggs - oh. Oh, Volara. I'm so sorry," he said, turning to face her. He reached out and placed a palm on the clear dome of his suit. "That's horrible."

"Thanks," she muttered, mood utterly deflated.

Soon they came across a cliff, leading straight down into the darkness. She sighed in relief; it was so much darker down here, so much less colorful, so much cooler, and her swim bladder didn't feel as bloated. The rocks turned from grainy white to solid black, and floating azure orbs clung to the ground, held only by a few strands of plantlife. She saw Varien's suit had lights, showering the local prey-fish in bleaching rays.

"What is this place?" she marveled. She swam above Varien as he made his way down a narrow canyon, deeper and deeper into the refreshing darkness. The rocks were soon overgrown by a thick mat of yellowish purple moss. Small trees with glowing purple fronds concealed in a transparent membrane doted the landscape, providing beacons of light in the darkness.

"I don't know," Varien replied. "Some kind of reef. It goes far down." He stopped and pointed his suit's right arm at something. "See that?" She followed his arm to a long piece of dark metal. But this wasn't as smooth and perfect like she was used to seeing. It was bent out of shape, and twisted along its length. "That's part of the unknown, um, the piece that fell down here. It should be just up
She looked down the canyon, across the flat piece of land jutting above it. Sure enough, there was something down there, colossal and on top of that she sensed a thrum of electricity from it. "Like that?" she asked, gesturing to it.

Varien sucked in a breath of what she now knew to be not-water. "Exactly like that," he said, half walking and half falling down the ledge to reach it. She followed him, and watched as he took his head off - no, took the covering on his head off. It revealed a strangely angular face, with a small mouth, tiny multicolored eyes, and a beakish nasal orifice. There were black strands on his head too, streaked with blue-green, that fell loosely across the side of his head. He fixed something else on his face, something that went over his nose and mouth, then something over that too. "Alright, I'm coming out," he said, grabbing the metal-shocker.

The top of his suit opened up. She looked down at it as something kept the water from rushing in, and then Varien emerged.

He bent over and wheezed painfully, clutching his chest and dropping the metal-shocker. "What's wrong?" she shouted, swimming around him.

"Remember how I said... I need the shell to go far enough down to meet you?" he asked after recovering his translator. She crackled yes. "Well I'm a little... too far down. Oh unknown above that hurts."

"Are you going to be alright?"

"Yeah," he croaked, his song weak and strained. "Yeah, I'm fine. Gonna be sore tomorrow, though." He swam to the side of the wreckage, to a little pocket of stone filled with beams and plates of ruined metal. Among the ruins Volara spotted a tiny, glowing box. Varien noticed it too, because he swam over to it. With a touch of his hand its middle opened up, and he removed something grey. "Alright, an unknown's repair unknown. Better than nothing."

She decided not to question it; she'd had enough world shattering revelations already.

He made his way back to the chunk of metal, swimming up to its top. "Alright, I see an opening," he said.

Volara blinked and, with a flick of her body, came a little closer. "Wait, you're going in there?"

He nodded. "Yep. Most of the stuff's going to be inside." A flash of light, and then there was something new in his hands. He unwound a length of thin plantlife from it and tied it around one of the ruined metal spikes around him. At her confused stare, he answered, "To keep me from getting lost inside," he explained. "Remember, I live above the water. I have some not-water with me, but not an infinite amount."

"I can't exactly go inside and keep you safe," she pointed out. "It's kind of small. I'll just patrol around the outside, alright? Keep your rock-suit safe."

He nodded. "Alright, thanks. See you soon," he said, diving into the wreck's hole.

Volara sighed and looked around the dark reef. Protect him? Protect him from what? There was nothing here.
This was a mistake.

Not bringing Volara, no. He still needed to tell her goodbye, given the Sunbeam was coming tomorrow night, and it was a relief to know that when he left the wreckage he wouldn't come face to face with a Reaper or something.

No, the mistake was coming so far down to begin with. Two hundred and fifty meters and counting! The water squeezed in on him like a vice, crushing him from every single angle, pressing on every square inch of his body. The worst part was, as always, his airways. Every breath was shallow, the slightest exhale a struggle. If it wasn't for his newly made rebreather enriching his air with recycled oxygen, he felt for sure he'd suffocate!

Well, as long as he was out here, he had a wreck to explore.

With flashlight in one hand and dive reel in another, Varien slipped into what once would've been a maintenance shaft. He climbed through, using the ladders as footholds as he ventured deeper and deeper. His dive reel unwound behind him with light resistance, the line tugging now and then as a current swept over it. Soon, Varien exited the shaft and entered a larger room.

He recognized it. It'd been an office once, next to the Aurora's long-range scanners. A few scattered chairs sat around, as did a bench. He idly scanned all of them and looked around. There was a bent and shattered piece of wall, revealing the metal lattice behind it as it sparked and crackled with deadly electricity, the only light in the area apart from his flashlight. There was a hallway on its side, leading straight down, as well as something large and white, like a deformed egg shell, with a black screen on one end.

It turned out that was half of a thermal power generator. Neat.

Further down was a giant heater in the walls, utterly useless. Staring at it made Varien shiver, firmly reminded of how bitterly cold the waters were. Thank goodness for his suit. There was another data box down there, for something called the 'reinforced dive suit'. He'd read up on it later, but just on face value it sounded useful. On top of that were some shattered mechanical arms that belonged to a 'moonpool' whatever that was. In his mind Varien pictured a primitive bowl of stone with glowing, magical blue water in it. The other piece of wreckage he found was a white crescent of metal with a grid on one end, the last bit he needed for a thermal plant's blueprints.

... yay? Still seemed fairly useless to him, given he had solar power.

Lower still was what looked like a surfboard of metal, which turned out to be a shattered piece of a scanner room. Beyond that the wreckage ended, spilling out to the bottom of the ocean floor.

Varien continued to swim around the wreck, struggling to breathe while making sure to keep using his dive reel. He had to cut open two doors with his laser cutter to explore the entire thing, and even then he didn't find much. More parts for a moonpool, enough to get him the complete blueprint, at least. There was also the diamond-studded tip of a PRAWN drill-arm module, but without the actual arm it wasn't enough to let him build one.

The highlight was a vac-pack that came with another nutrient block.

At length, Varien swam out the top of the wreck, recalled his dive reel, and looked around. It was as inky black as ever, and in the darkness Volara's bioluminescence stood out sharply, a shifting and twisting row of lights as she swam patrol around the wreck.

Pulling out his miniature ampeel toy, he waved it and called to her. "Hey, I'm done." He would've
shouted, but he didn't have the air in his lungs to do that.

All the same she stopped and spun around to face him, arcing a pattern of electricity across her body. "Find anything?" she asked.

"Not much," he croaked, swimming over to his exosuit. "But more than I was expecting. I should - hmm, wait," he pondered, looking over at one of the strange plants in the reef. "Hang on one second." He swam over to the plant, or 'Membrane Tree' as his PDA called it. So creative. He took his knife out and approached its clear membrane, and began lightly scraping through it to reach the inner purple flora.

Before too long, he had one of its seeds in the palm of his hand. It was the size of a finger, oblong with pointed ends and with the color of a peanut. He stored it and turned back to Volara. "Alright, I'm good."

"Why did you need that?" she asked.

"Nobody's seen these type of plants before," he reasoned. "I figure once I - " He cut himself off, his heart going heavy. With a sigh he swam over to his towering exosuit and sat on it, facing the giant eel. "Volara, there's something I need to tell you."

She tilted her head. "What is it? Are you unwell? The sickness in your home, did it affect you?" she worried.

He shook his head. "No no, nothing like that. So I told you the Aurora was the ship I was on, and how it crashed?" She gave him the ampeel equivalent of a nod, running a charge between the prongs protruding like tusks from her mouth. "Well when it did, another ship noticed. The Sunbeam." Wait, that wouldn't translate. "Don't worry about its name. The point is, they're on their way here to rescue me and other survivors, and then we leave."

"Other survivors?" she asked. "There are others?"

Varien drew his mouth into a line. "Well, I haven't seen anyone, but probably. I mean, what are the odds that I'm the only one? That everyone else is dead?" He laughed nervously. "Point is, by tomorrow night they'll be here, and I leave. Probably forever. So what I'm trying to say is thank you, and goodbye, Volara."

Her mouth opened wide, revealing the needle fangs. "So you're leaving? Already? Why?"

"Volara, I told you. Humans, uh, that's the name for my people, we don't live under water. It's hard, it's exhausting. There's none of the comforts of home. I have a home out there, a place to go to. I have a fiance, Silvia, and I'd like to start a family with her one day, which I can't do if I'm constantly looking over my shoulder for something to kill me. I had a life before the Aurora crashed here, Volara, and it's still waiting for me out there."

She 'nodded'. Her voice's translation was low and solemn. "No, no I understand. This isn't where you're supposed to be. You're small and slow, you can't swim well. You're right, this isn't your home. And this Silvia you have waiting for you, too." An arc of power went down the whole length of her body; a sigh. "Varien, I'm going to miss you."

He sighed in return and looked down at his PRAWN. Suddenly he remembered something and smacked himself in the face. "Aw, crap."

"What is it?" she asked, swimming worriedly towards him.
"I forgot, we're so far down. Volara um, when you came up to see me, did you feel unwell?"

She hummed. "I did, actually. I had to stop more than once to get used to it."

"Well it's the same for me. If I go up too fast, I get sick." He pointed down at his suit. "If I get in this thing, it'll be like I suddenly go from down here, all the way to the surface. And that - "

"- would kill you," she finished. "Alright, so you swim up slowly, I'll carry your suit."

He blinked. Not the solution he was thinking of, but okay. "Really? That's pretty generous of you."

She shook her head. "Hey, forget it. You need to go home, right? With your unknown, and to have fries of your own." The ampeel's tailfin flicked against the water. "I'm going to help you. You uh, should swim away from it. Don't want to zap you."

Huh? "Oh, right." He kicked into the water and swam through the freezing ocean until he was a fair distance from Volara. She swam over and grabbed one of the exosuit's arms in her jaws, then began slithering through the water like a snake, bringing it higher and higher.

Over the next two hours, he and Volara slowly made their way up. He kept glancing at his oxygen meter nervously all the while; he'd spent nearly an hour in the wreck, after all, and he only had a total of three hours of air. But they made their way higher and higher until they found a rocky shelf a handful of meters beneath the surface, where Volara deposited his exosuit. He still had five minutes to spare.


"Wonder why?" he joked, even as he climbed in. Once in the seat he pulled off his rebreather and oxygen mask with a relieved gasp. "Finally." His cheek started itching, so he took his glove off and scratched at it; that felt good. Though his nails were getting long; he'd have to find a way to trim them. Varien glanced up to the surface; it was getting pretty dark. So much that even in the shallows, Volara's natural lighting was still intense. As if summoned by the thought, he had to stifle a yawn. "It's getting pretty late, I should get going."

Volara nodded. "Right. I'll try and come by tomorrow, too. You leave at night, right?" He nodded. "Then I'll come by once the darkening ends."

He returned her nod. "Right. Thanks for the help. I'll see you tomorrow, Volara." With that he turned his exosuit for his habitat's beacon and headed towards it. Behind him, he heard Volara beat at the water and swim off at an incredible speed.

Slowly, Varien made his way back to the habitat. He needed to get his things in order. After all, he had a big day tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
He couldn't sleep.

As much as he tossed and turned in his newly made bed, as much as he flipped the pillow so he could get the cooler bottom, sleep never came for him. He rolled onto his back, looking up at the extinguished lights. He rolled to his side, staring at his farm of fruit. He rolled onto his other side, staring out the window at the dark shallows.

Come on, he told himself. I need to be rested. Sleep. Sleep!

Try as he might, though, sleep never came. It didn't help that as the hours stretched on his stomach rumbled and throat scratched, prompting him to get a late-night snack. Simmering, restless energy boiled in his gut, and when the early sun started to shine through the waters he gave up on having any sleep that night. He sat up from his bed, stretched, and got up. The skin around his eyes felt a bit tight, but other than that Varien didn't feel any symptoms of sleep depression.

Which obviously meant he'd randomly pass out sometime during the day.

He got up and decided to forgo eating the fish, or even from his garden. He picked out a nutrient block, sprinkled some salt over it, and dug in. And why shouldn't he eat a block? Today he was going to be rescued, it was time to celebrate!

Well, a quarter of a block. They had a lot of calories in them.

Varien reclined in a swivel chair, looking out his window at the shallows. All kinds of fish, from bladderfish to garryfish and more swam around in dense schools, diving through the stone structures. Peepers leaped up and through the surface, and in the distance a pod of gasopods hooted and laughed to themselves. One dumb boomerang swam into the window, bumping itself hilariously against the glass. The local star shone its rays through the water, casting the world in shimmering golden light as he munched away at his meal.

It was a beautiful day. A beautiful day for a beautiful occasion.

He popped open the large bottle of disinfected water he got from the Degasi island and washed his breakfast down. With good food and good water in him, Varien set to work. What would he need to bring with himself onto the Sunbeam? His radiation suit could stay; while the Aurora's radiation hadn't completely faded yet, the landing site was nowhere near the field. What about his fish and stuff? No, his one or two cured fish could stay. If he had time he'd swing by the black chasm and
toss them out for an ampeel to eat. He'd bring his nutrient blocks and water onto the ship. His tools too, just in case.

Seeds! Right, the few seeds he'd gathered. He had one from a membrane tree. He needed to collect more from the various flora. The blue palm plants, or the purplish veiny fans. Maybe bring an acid mushroom with himself, too.

He opened his hatch and stripped out of his dive suit. Varien washed himself by scooping up the water and pulling it in through the surface tension barrier; slow and arduous, but doable. He was pretty itchy, though. He must've sweated while trying to sleep.

Once done he put the dive suit back on and headed out, knife in hand.

The fish scurried away from him, having apparently learned he was a predator. He approached the glowing plants and scraped samples of them. Blue palm, veined nettle, writhing weed and more. He got some of the jeweled table coral too, as well pieces from a tube coral.

In no time at all, Varien got all he needed and swam back into his habitat to organize himself. "Tools, check. Samples, check. Nutrient blocks, check. Water, check." He hefted the strange piece of Mongolian tech he'd found in the Degasi base with both hands. "Weird glowing thing? Check." What else? What else was he forgetting?

Right, getting to the area. "PDA, display coordinates for Sunbeam landing site." A tiny blip appeared in his vision, an arrow far off in the distance. That was his goal. "Thank you."

Varien popped out and checked the position of the local sun. He still had a long way to go before nightfall, so he got to work on repairing his seamoth. He didn't really need it for anything, but seeing it broken and battered bothered him. But it was no easy task; the Reaper had done a number on it. Bent hull, holes in the windshield, fried circuits. He wasn't an engineer, he was a programmer. Still, he tried his best.

The sun crept across the sky as he worked, trying to repair wires and unbend the hull. Honestly, it felt like his repair tool knew more than he did. It could swap between welding, soldering, shaping, and more as he needed. It couldn't fix the glass, though.

Once he was done with the seamoth's metal, he wracked his head for a way to fix the windshield. He eventually figured out he could use his habitat builder to construct a 'window' on the submarine, which shaped itself appropriately. Once done, his vessel was entirely repaired.

He was out of glass, though. Oh well.

By then it was a little past noon. He headed back into his habitat for lunch, and pondered what to do next. He should head on over to the island, really. Find the others, find a good spot to wait for the Sunbeam, and catch up with Silvia because she was going to be there. He'd take his exosuit instead of the seamoth, too.

He checked everything he was bringing once, twice, three times. Once satisfied, he swam out and hopped into the exosuit he'd left leaned up against a rocky shelf. He sat in the seat, shifted comfortably, and found the controls. Varien stepped away from the cliff, stomping about the shallows and kicking up clouds of sand.

In the distance, something brilliant blue crackled in the middle of a kelp forest. He leaned forward, eyes narrowed. What was...?

From the forest, a massive figure appeared. An ampeel, seeming disproportionately large in the
shallow waters with a dead blood crawler in her jaws. He quickly fished his ampeel toy from his suit and held it out. "Volara, what are you doing here?" he asked as she came closer... and bumped into a rock. She recoiled with a flutter of her tailfin, and it was then he realized she'd been keeping her emerald, hand-sized eyes closed. She opened them a crack to look at him, then closed them again to begin crackling.

His PDA, like always, translated. "I figured since it was your last day here, I'd see you off," she explained, sinking to the sandy floor. "It's a big day. You get to go home," she said happily. "I brought you this as a going away gift," she said, dropping the blood crawler onto the sand.

Varien couldn't help but smile. "Thank you for coming, then. It means a lot to me. And thanks for the crawler." Volara had to crack open her eyes to see his miniature translate for him. "You've really made this whole adventure bearable. You're the only thing I've talked with in weeks and I feel, hah." The memory of Bart Torgal's log returned to him, how the Mongolian chastised himself for 'deserving' to be alone. He'd avoided that fate. "Thanks for not eating me when we first met," he half-joked.

She laughed. "I bet you wouldn't have tasted good anyhow."

Suddenly, he remembered something. "Oh, wait. I still have some cured food. I'm not going to be needing it, so let me just..." He pressed a button over on the side, prompting his PRAWN's hatch to open. He jumped up and into the waters and started swimming over to Volara, far enough to avoid getting zapped by accident. "I was going to swing by and give them to you, but this makes it a lot simpler." First he pulled out a cured garyfish, and then a cured holefish. He didn't like those two; the salted, yellow garyfish was the saltiest thing he'd ever eaten and the holefish was hideously creamy, like mousse.

Volara, of course, snapped them up one after another with a loud *chomp* of her thin fangs. "I like those. What are they called?"

"Garyfish and holefish," he said, storing the dead blood crawler in his suit before swimming back to, and sitting on top of, his exosuit.

Volara hummed, sending a single arc down her body. "I got holefish, but that first one didn't go through."

Right. "Gary-fish. Garry's an old human name. Nobody's used it decades, though. Did you like them?"

"I did," she said. "But that first one tasted weird. Kind of... sharp."

"Salty," he said. He gestured to his right. "There's a deposit right there if you want to lick it, the big grayish-white thing. Um, don't actually just eat it whole."

Volara turned to where he pointed and rotated her body back and forth. With a light sway of her body she swam over to the salt deposit and nibbled a part of it. Instantly the giant eel recoiled, splashing two of her prongs against the surface. "Bleh! Is *that* what it is?"

"Well not *that* much," he said. "I put it on the food, makes it taste a lot better if you don't use too much."

She gave him a deadpan look, then closed her eyes again. "I'll take your word for it." A tense silence passed between them. The shallows were eerily quiet, all the fish having fled in the wake of Volara's arrival. "So, you're really going?"
He nodded. "Yeah. I was just about to head off, I want to get to the site early. Any other survivors are going to be headed there, too."

*If there are any*, a treasonous thought said.

Volara 'nodded'. "Right. So, I guess this is goodbye."

He kicked off his PRAWN to swim in front of the ampeel. "Yeah. Hey, don't zap me?"

"Don't zap you? What do you mean?" she asked confusedly, tilting her head left and right. "Of course I wouldn't what, oh - " she said, cutting herself off as Varien swam closer.

Now that he was in range of her prongs, the full scale of her body came crashing back into his awareness. A nasal arch the size of his forehead. Prongs as long as his body with glowing tips bigger than his head. Her colossal mouth, fixed in a permanent frown with needle teeth the size of his fingers. As he grew closer he could make out more and more minute details. The subtle grain of her carapace, or the fleshy texture where her prongs sprouted from her body, or the slimy red of the flesh inside her mouth.

Varien wrapped his arms around the front of her gargantuan head and, holding his breath, took off his oxygen mask. Lukewarm water rushed at his face, pressing at his eyes and nose. Quickly, he pressed his mouth against either side of her head and pulled away. Varien put his bubbling mask back on, took a deep breath, and swam back to his exosuit.

Volara blinked owlishly at him, quietly swaying in the currents. "... what was that?"

"Human thing," he explained. "It's how we say goodbye." He thought about it some more. "Well, also how we greet family and close friends, but that's not important."

She nodded again. "Right. Varien, you should get going. Thanks for getting me to come up to the Above. It's hot and bright, but it has its charms. It was nice getting to know you."

She coiled up in the water, glancing down at him. "Goodbye, and swift currents." Like a bullet she shot away, her tailfin swinging behind her like a pendulum as she vanished into the nearby kelp forest.

He sighed as the electric eel swam away, his heart tight. Aside from the hopes of being rescued and reunited with the love of his life, his talks with Volara had been the only thing making his stay on 4546B bearable. He owed her more than a few salted fish. Oh well.

Varien climbed back into his exosuit and turned to face the landing site's coordinates. Time to get off this rock.

The trip to the landing site was fairly long, about as long as to the entrance of the Aurora. He left the shallows in no time, landing himself in a kelp forest. Navigating it with his exosuit was nightmarish. The thrusters helped, but using them made Varien's stomach flip under the G-forces. Not to mention the unpleasant tingle in his lower body whenever his suit began to fall. Stalkers swam about, half hidden by all the plants, roaring to each other as they played with metal salvage. More than a few times haunting laughter filled his ears and engulfed his world, but it always ended when the bleeders in question launched themselves at his PRAWN so hard they killed themselves on its metal surface.

He would've gotten himself hopelessly lost, tripping over shelves and canyons, if it weren't for the signal perpetually seared into his eyesight. As it was, he still spent an hour tangled in the creepvine; Varien wasn't exactly a 'professional' PRAWN operator. Still, there was a certain charm to literally walking on the ocean floor, to being up close to the fan-shaped plants and the green
Eventually the forest reached a plateau at sixty meters down, flattening and thinning as he neared the landing site. Shadows lightened, the green tint of algae in the water cleared away, and Varien's jaw dropped.

It was, indeed, another island. Hills rose up from the land in front of him, towering to and beyond the surface. Chunks of basalt and lithium peppered the sides, all the way up as far as he could see. A school of boomerangs swam in front of him, chased by piranha-like biters. A chesire grin split his face and Varien began to climb, thrusting his exosuit up out of the deeps until he landed on a shallow crevice in the island. He stomped further up, out of the ocean, and looked around the mountain.

Above him, the spire of stone reached towards the cloudless skies. White skyrays flapped and cawed above him. A shelf laden with emerald foliage sat above him. He glanced up at it, and brought his PRAWN as close as possible. Once there he climbed out and onto his exosuit's top. Fresh air slammed into him, a comfortably warm thirty degrees, humid and salty and laced with the sweet scent of plantlife.

With a hop, he jumped from his suit out onto the ledge, scrabbling for purchase. He pulled himself up and brushed the dense brown dirt from his palms. He stood on a mountainside cliff, looking over the vast blue ocean with the shattered, extinguished Aurora sitting in the distance, shrouded in fog. Above him, the mountainous spire reached to dizzying heights. Next to him a round opening led into a cave system. Some cave crawlers scuttled around him, but shouting and sudden movements, like always, scared them off.

To his surprise, there was another purple glowing... thing laying on the ground, half buried in the dirt. He pulled it out and brushed it off, turning it left and right in his grip as it hummed quietly. Weird. The Degasi must've been to this island too.

He looked around. There wasn't much. Somewhat worryingly he couldn't see anyone else, but maybe they were on the other side of the island, or even in the caves. Idly he grabbed one of the basalt outcroppings and started chipping away at it with the handle of his knife. Flakes of black stone came off one at a time, eventually revealing another chunk of rock covered in fist-sized diamonds. He smiled and stored it away.

Then his PDA spoke up. "Remember, all materials you salvage are legally property of the Alterra Corporation," it chastised him. "While use of these materials is sanctioned for survival, you will be liable to reimburse the full price upon rescue. Your current bill stands at one million, three hundred fifty-two thousand, seven hundred and eighty credits."

His eyes bugged out. Seriously? No, no no no, screw that. Alterra was not getting a single credit out of him. The moment the Sunbeam picked him up, he was going to get the best lawyer he could get his hands on. One of those AI-lawyers! What did Alterra think it was doing anyway, staking claim on a planet it had never been to? It even had intelli -

It had intelligent life. The ampeels. Stars above, what was going to happen to them? He wasn't exactly worried; while indigenous tribes had often suffered from contact with the outside world on Earth, that was centuries ago. There were laws preventing those sort of thing now, and while he himself was no lawyer he was fairly certain the existence of intelligent life on 4546B would revoke any and all claim Alterra had.

He stored that away for future use; probably a good way to get out of being bankrupted.
But even if Alterra would be forced by the Federation to back off from 4546B, that still left the matter of making contact with an intelligent, albeit stone-aged, species. What would happen to them? Would they be left alone? Uplifted? Forgotten? Raided by pirates and slavers? He didn't know, and he worried.

Varien sighed and scratched his itching neck. Whatever. He needed to go find the other survivors. Silvia'd know what to do with the ampeels.

He made his way back to his exosuit, hopped onto it, and climbed in. He continued stomping along the shore of the island, looking for any survivor encampment. For a few minutes he just treaded water along a sharp cliff face, but soon the waters grew shallow again and he stepped out onto a beautiful beach. Once there he took off both his oxygen tank and flippers. He climbed out of his PRAWN and hopped onto the sandy beach, letting the hot grains of sand spill around his feet. Ferns and grasses and strange yellow trees that leaked sap from their holes sprouted around him, numerous but not as overgrown as the Degasi island had been. Along the sand were thick sheets of salt and nodes of lithium by the dozens.

Varien didn't see any sign of any survivors. No metal tubes of habitats. No fires, or smoke in the sky. No footprints, no sharpened sticks, no nothing. No clue that any other human had ever set foot on the beach.

But something else dominated the land. It was like nothing he'd ever seen before. A structure of blackish-gray metal, jutting out from one of the rocky cliffs at sea level. Its base was long and rectangular, reaching out to the ocean. At its end was some form of tower, blocky and irregular, reaching up to half the height of the mountain at his back. No moss or ferns or any plantlife at all grew on the monolithic building. Some kind of massive cable ran from the structure into the stone of the island. All along its exterior were strange, inscrutable patterns carved into the metal. The beach Varien was on ran up to the base of the thing, where it encountered something that looked like a triangular doorway. But the doorway was closed, walled off by a flickering wall of sickly green energy.

"I have a bad feeling about this," he murmured, cautiously approaching the towering device.

"Picking up massive energy signature," his PDA warned. "Unable to identify."

He paused mid-step to frown. "I have a really bad feeling about this."

As he grew closer, his eyes picked up two more things. One was some kind of block of the dark gray metal just outside the force field, along with one of the purple glowing things. But this one didn't glow, and was broken in half down the middle. He leaned down to inspect the sandy device; the black metal along the outside was the exact same shade as the tower. Which meant...

"The Degasi didn't build or bring these things," he realized. This wasn't some obscure Mongolian tech. It was alien technology.

His breaths came faster and faster as he inspected the tower's entrance. Aliens. Not stone-age megafauna like Volara, but aliens with technology, advanced enough that he couldn't place its function on sight. Holy fuck, what was with this planet?!

Varien began to approach the device, but then stopped. What if the aliens were still in there? They wouldn't take kindly to him snooping around their stuff. Carefully, Varien removed the two purple artifacts he had stored, gingerly placed them on the beach, then turned around and ran for his life.

A few minutes later, he was back on the beach, but this time sitting in his PRAWN suit. He
pondered what to do. After all, he still had seven hours until the Sunbeam came by. He'd thought he could spend that time with the other survivors, with Silvia, but there was nothing and no one. He passed the time sitting in his air-conditioned mech, daydreaming, napping once or twice, and wondering what was taking everyone?! Maybe he was early, right? That was it. He'd showed up to the rescue site way ahead of time and all the others were still en-route.

Or maybe they were having difficulty. After all, only two lifepods had landed in the shallows; his own and one that, by the time he reached, was splintered and broken on the edge of a geothermal geyser. All the others had landed in the more hellish regions of 4546B. In the grassy plateau with the biters and sandsharks. In the creepvine forests with the fierce stalkers and awful, nightmarish bleeders. Another, Lifepod Four, had coordinates that led straight into Reaper Leviathan territory. He hadn't gone to inspect it for obvious reasons, but he didn't hold high hopes for Lifepod Four.

What if the others were in similarly wretched spots? Deep beneath the sea where crushing pressure forced them to take everything slow? Or where food was scarce and they could barely eek out a living? His mind flashed to Silvia, sitting huddled in a sunken lifepod while dark shadows battered at the windows, her frame gaunt and hair lifeless as she nibbled on a boomerang. He shivered.

No. No, that was ridiculous. She was fine. He was just early.

Five hours left. Suddenly it grew dark for no reason. It couldn't be night already, could it? Varien scrambled along the beach to look for the sun, only to see the massive red moon moving to swallow it whole. Night didn't 'fall' so much as 'crash', revealing a rich tapestry of stars and nebula for a few brief minutes. Then the eclipse ended and he was back to waiting around.

As the hours stretched on to horrible lengths, he grew stir crazy. Varien put his oxygen tanks and fins back on, climbed out, and dove into the chilly ocean just off the beach. The waters were shallow, laden with enough basalt and lithium that he'd be set for life if he could sell them all. To his surprise he found scraps of metal too, circular and silvery, or cylindrical and tubed. His scanner revealed them to be the last pieces he'd need for a Cyclops submarine's engine. Good?

Three hours left until the Sunbeam arrived. The local star headed for the horizon on the other side of the mountain, so Varien climbed over to the cliffs facing the Aurora and watched the sunset. The blinding disk turned from radiant yellow to dusky orange. The sun kissed the horizon, setting sea and sky aflame while casting the Aurora in molten copper. He kept glancing to the waves far below, eyes peeled for anyone swimming, or for seamoths coming to the island. But nobody came.

Two hours left. Night fell for real, the red and white moons dancing across the sky. The symbols all along the alien structure began to glow neon green. Still no sign of anyone. Where were they? They were going to miss the ship! Varien ate a quick dinner, caught a moment of sleep in his suit, and continued lounging on the beach, staring up at the black skies.

Then, with one hour left, something loud reached his ears. Varien startled and sat up, looking around for whatever was causing the noise. It sounded like rocks grinding against each other, or an avalanche. He checked behind himself to make sure that wasn't the case, and it wasn't. So what...?

Varien then looked at the alien structure. Slowly but surely, the tower was expanding. No, not expanding. Telescoping upward, nearly doubling its height over the course of many painstaking minutes. Then it stopped growing, and a tense heartbeat later it began to rotate. The entire structure spun and shifted, angling itself until the tower wasn't pointing straight up, but rather at some seemingly random star on the night sky. It froze in place, and began to emit a deep, blaring siren that shook Varien to his bones. He could actually see some grains of sand bouncing around the beach.
The siren ended, and his PDA spoke up. "Attention. A local broadcast from the Sunbeam has been detected. Patching in." The assistant's voice was replaced by Avery's. "I can't believe it. Someone's actually down there on the beach! Ahem, attention Aurora survivor! Varien... Stelisk, is it? We have your PDA signature. I've no idea how you survived a ship that large going down, let alone kept yourself alive since then, but we'll be happy to bring you and anyone else on board and back to Federation space."

The tower began to groan again, shifting in place to subtly adjust its posture.

*To adjust its aim,* he realized in sudden horror. It wasn't a tower.

It was a gun.

"WAIT!" he shouted into his PDA. He dropped it and started jumping around, waving his arms up at the sky. "Transmit! Transmit to the Sunbeam now! You have to get out of here, there's a giant -"

"Stand back," Avery warned, deaf to his pleas. One of the stars grew brighter, and the alien gun continued to turn. "We're coming up on the landing site shortly. Breaking atmosphere in five, four -" Something beeped over the PDA's transmission. "Wait, what's that on the scanners? No not that, the red dot!"

The alien gun powered up. Varien's jaw dropped as brilliant green energy surrounded the gun like a shroud, swirling inward to it as it howled and roared like a dragon. A corona of eldritch power flared around its tip.

" - from the surface?!"

The transmission cut out. The gun gave out one last rush of static. Then it fired.

Night turned to day.

A laser brighter and hotter than the surface of the Sun shot from the end of the cannon, so fast it appeared to cross the distance up to space in a literal instant. He screamed and slammed his eyes shut, but the crimson afterimage was still burned into his eyelids. A wall of searing, scorching wind blasted over him, walls of upturned water and sheets of blown sand covering him head to toe, all to the tune of a deafening roar.

It ended. Varien peeled his hands off his blistered face, half expecting to see the beach cooked to glass. The burning afterimage of the gun's firing still plastered itself everywhere he looked, and tinnitus sang in his ears. Wet sand covered him head to toe.

The bright star in the sky was gone, replaced by an expanding halo of fire and crackling veridian lightning. Rolls of thunder continued to pour down upon him from the sky above. The burning air slowly cooled. The alien gun released its uncaring sirens again, then impartially slid back into its tower position.

Varien's breath came in strained heaves as he stared at the ring of debris that was once the Sunbeam. He kept closing his eyes and opening them, hoping to see the approaching ship back in the sky. He fumbled with his PDA, trying to get it to patch in Avery's voice again. It didn't happen. He let it fall to the ground. With a desperate, animal noise he scrambled onto all fours and ran for the broken artifact, kicking up clods of sand as he did. He picked up one half and, with a scream from his ragged and parched throat, threw it into the shimmering force field as hard as he could.

It bounced off.
He didn't scream as he ran at the gate. Varien brought up his fists and started pounding into it, flashes of hot pain washing over his knuckles and fingers as he struck and punched the the barrier over and over, slowly sliding down as his legs went limp until he was leaned up against it, slapping it weakly with an open palm. Only then did he make a noise, blubbering as a sob rose in his lungs and out his mouth. His breaths were fast, his eyes burning and wet, and snot trailed disgustingly from his nose as he feebly pounded on the force field to no avail.

Finally he stopped. He laid at the humming barrier's feet, crying mutely to himself.

They were gone. The Sunbeam was gone. Everyone on it was gone. Nobody was coming for him. The Aurora hadn't malfunctioned. It had been shot down. The Degasi, earlier, had also been shot down. And now the Sunbeam, tiny ship it was, was erased from existence. There was no way off this planet. Alterra wanted him to build a ship but what good would that do? He'd just get blown back out of the sky.

And he was the only one here. Nobody else had come to the rescue-that-never-was. He'd landed in the safest, most welcoming part of the planet and even then had to struggle day and night to survive. Nobody else had been as lucky. Everyone else was dead, either burned up in reentry, or eaten alive by sandsharks and biters and bleeders, or slowly drowned in their own lifepods, or crushed beneath hundreds of meters of water pressure, and Silvia was among them.

"Warning, endorphin levels low!" his PDA chimed. "Consider taking a walk, or playing a game. Remember your problems only exist in your head and you - "

"SHUT UP!" he screamed, turning and throwing his little sheet of plastic into the sand. It landed with one corner submerged, and he panted. Finally he sighed and trudged over to it. He wrenched the PDA out of the beach, brushed the sand off, and sat.

His eyes wandered to the blocky piece of metal next to the terminal. Varien was right up next to it, and at some point when he hadn't been paying attention it'd opened up in response to his presence. The metal on its flat face had slid aside to reveal a purple symbol engraved on it. The exact same symbol as on the purple artifacts.

Varien glanced at the terminal, sneezed suddenly, then at the two artifacts he'd left in the sand, then up at the titanic cannon that had shot down his only hope of rescue. He tightened his fists and nodded. Time to give those aliens a piece of his mind. He'd go knock some sense into them, find Silvia wherever she was hiding - because she wasn't dead, he didn't truly believe that, h-he'd just been in despair! - and go home.

He grabbed both the artifacts and stored one in his suit. The other he held in his hands as he trudged to the terminal. He held it out to the alien construct, lining up their purple symbols. As he brought it closer a magnetic force grabbed hold of it, pulling it away. He let go and wrenched his hands clear as the artifact flew in and stuck to the terminal, which closed up around it.

The everpresent hum of the energy field dimmed and faded as the barrier powered down. It revealed the interior corridors of the alien structure, a staggering ten meters tall and all made of the same dark metal, patterned with alternating smooth sheets and engraved swirls. Bands of green light traced their ways along the walls and floor, urging him to walk down the only path.

Nervously, Varien put a foot inside. No blast of energy turned him to cinders, so he stepped in all the way. His PDA noted how the metal was an unknown alloy of unknown composition, but with structural integrity like nothing that had ever been seen.

Carefully, he walked down the eerie path, head swiveling left and right. Ramps smoothly led
down, and at one point the path split in two but both paths led back together moments later.
Strange architecture surrounded him. Beams formed crosses and cubes above his head, jutting
down to meet raised platforms. Glowing squares sat above him, filling the building with
unnaturally steady green light.

Before long the hallway opened up into a cavernous room. He'd come out on the balcony, and two
ramps led down to a single point on the bottom. On the balcony was a strange terminal, and its
keyboard had nothing recognizable as a keyboard, buttons or touchscreen. Above it hovered an
acidic green hologram, made of a massive symbol surrounded by fluctuating static.

"Um..." He held his PDA up to the terminal, and it went to work.

"Unknown language," it said. "Attempting translation..." One minute passed. Two minutes. Uh,
three minutes... "New data discovered."

Varien opened up the entry and scanned through it. "Began emitting radio frequency, made of
offworld materials, solid state computer, no recognizable user interface. Aliens probably
_genetically modified to hear the data, probably to the point of telepathy-like transmitters in their
brains. Wow."

"Attention, the alien facility is broadcasting a message." His heart jumped. A message?! Had they
found him already? "Partial translation: Warning: Unidentified craft in orbit of this planet will be
destroyed - unknown - prevent the - unknown."

Varien narrowed his eyes. So they sent the Sunbeam - and probably the Aurora - a warning, but
didn't think maybe they weren't able to receive it?! Some super-advanced aliens these were.

He headed down the ramps, past the glowing symbols until he was two or three meters
below sea-level. But everything was dry, the air wasn't humid, not a speck of dust coated the walls. It was a
temperate fifteen-ish degrees.

Something glowed to his right. It was a green cube, with one or two smaller cubes growing from it
like a crystal. It sat on a lavish podium at eye level. As he approached he saw it was textured with
smaller squares, constantly brightening and darkening like slow-motion static. He held his scanner
up to the cube, twice the size of his head, and held down the trigger. "Ion crystals," he read to
himself. "Alien cube contains the energy of a - small nuclear detonation?!" He glanced back at the
simmering cube and gulped nervously. "Stored atoms permanently stable, likely used as batteries,
hmm. Possible source of escape velocity energy for my rocket..." he read.

He looked left. No aliens. He looked right. No aliens. He'd have thought they'd come when he
stepped inside; surely he'd tripped all sorts of alarms. But he was alone, so maybe the facility was
automated? It wouldn't surprise him. He hefted the ion crystal in both hands and nearly dropped it
in shock. Despite its size and rocky texture, it was cold and as light as foam. Varien turned it over
and over in his hands, then gingerly put it in his suit. The podium it'd rested on went dark and sank
into the floor.

He ventured on, staring at the patterns. Were they just decorations or actually used for something?
Neither he nor his scanner could figure it out. The room narrowed into a hall, which after a few
turns widened and sloped past a second ion crystal, which he pocketed. Varien found himself
facing yet another alien terminal, and held his PDA up to the hologram.

"Unknown language, attempting translation..." This time it only took half a minute for it to
translate. "Partial translation complete. Data available."
Great, he thought, giving his itchy right cheek a scratch. "A multidimensional schematic of the building! That's good. No indication the structure can be damaged by any known means. Wait, seriously? Not even nukes? Or nanites? What kind of stuff is this?" He read on. "Upper engineering where I am, lower control room where I can hopefully interface with it and... multiple other facilities around the planet? So several guns all around the planet, this is the main one that controls them. No information on security measures..."

So in other words, he had no way of knowing if he'd get blasted by alien-built robots in the lower section.

Varien went deeper into the facility, unease rising with each second he spent around the humming lights. It was all so still and quiet. He could barely hear his own thoughts over his breathing. In moments he came up to a shaft that led straight down, from which green-tinted mist billowed up. Cautiously, he stuck out a hand and wafted it through the steam.

The steam came alive, wrapping around his arm and pulling him in. He screamed and flailed as he was drawn into the open shaft, and looking down had him staring at a hundred meter drop. But he wasn't falling. Varien hovered for a moment, and then the mist started moving him down at a brisk but gentle pace. It deposited him in the next hallway, ninety meters below sea level. The air pressure popped his ears, but beyond the scare he was fine.

There was another terminal there, hooked up to a second force field. Luckily he had a second artifact; Varien gave the terminal its 'key' and the door powered down. He stepped through and beheld the largest room yet, dozens of meters across.

For such a mammoth room, it was quite featureless. Alien marks and lights riddled the walls and ceiling, but the one and only dominating feature was the pool of water that spanned nearly the entire room like a swimming pool, leaving only a narrow walkway around it. If he looked closely into the pool, he thought he saw it exit out into the ocean beyond.

He skirted around it, and headed into the dry doorway along the perimeter. It led him to another colossal chamber, with multiple floors connected by open-air ramps and a vaulting ceiling high above his head. He could go up the ramps, or across to another doorway. Varien chose to go up, but not before nabbing a third ion crystal.

After two ramps, he saw something glowing out of the corner of his vision, something strangely purple and out of place among all the sinister black and green. It was a third purple artifact, laying on a closed terminal. He grabbed it and held it in his left hand by one of the handles. Two more ramps brought him face to face with a third and hopefully final wall of emerald power.

"Scans indicate the facility's control panel lies beyond this doorway," his electronic assistant said.

"Then let's get through," he replied, placing his newest artifact in the nearby terminal. The field rippled and faded like a bad dream, and he stepped through. His heart pounded and palms sweated. This was it. Control panel for the facility. He was going to... to... do something. Something that'd make this right. Somehow.

This time he was on a barely-elevated walkway, with a handful of ramps leading into the floor around it. There was a single turn, which led him face to face with what could only be the main control for the alien gun.

It sat atop a massive podium, with a proud and steep ramp leading up to it. It took the form of a pillar of metal reaching from floor to ceiling, with the center of it cut away by glass to reveal a painfully bright, green-shaped core of power. As he climbed, pillars extended from above and
gloved. He stepped forward, and a seemingly innocent plate of metal at eye level slid open, revealing a vertical panel. On it were only two things. The first was a glowing green circle on top, and the second bright red square in the middle.

"Scans indicate the big red button will disable the facility."

He looked at the button, then looked around. No turrets. No aliens charging in. Was it really that easy? Just... push the button?

Wincing and prepared for the worst, Varien reached out to the panel and hesitantly laid his left hand against the button. It yielded to him and compressed.

A sheet of metal sprung up around his hand and he shouted in surprise. Before he could do anything it trapped his hand in a field of energy. "No, no!" he shouted. The green circle came to life, revealing itself to be the end of a long snake-like tube that sprouted out from its place in the metal. It eyed him curiously, swaying back and forth, then sprouted a metal needle from its center. With him helpless and trapped, it slammed right into his left forearm with a bite of pain.

As quickly as it started, it ended. The snake pulled out and sunk into its wall. His hand was let go and he stumbled back. The terminal locked up, hiding the button, and slid into the floor. "Ow, ow ow," he whimpered, rubbing his sore forearm.

"Alien broadcast detected," his PDA warned. "Translation: Infected individual attempted interface with Prime Quarantine Enforcement Platform. Warning: Infected individuals may not disable the weapon. This planet is under quarantine by order of unknown."

"Infected?" he breathed, clutching the place where the machine had stabbed him and sampled his blood. "Quarantine?"

"Scans of available alien data," it continued. "indicates the presence of a second alien facility on this planet, approximately eight-hundred meters below sea level and one kilometer to the southwest of this installation."

"What facility? A second one? Eight hundred?! What does it do?!" he demanded his PDA, shouting at its clear face.

"Disease research facility," it informed him. "Registered personnel: seven. Function is synthesis of antidote for highly infectious bacterium. Closest translation is 'Carar' bacterium."

Infected, quarantine. Horror dawned on him. Varien fished out his scanner and pointed it at his chest. He held down the trigger to bathe himself in pure, clean ribbons of light. He pulled it away and looked at its panel; a bright red INFECTED insulted him. "Warning. Self scan reveals the bacterial infection has progressed. Detecting skin irritation and immune system response. Bacterium scan reveals it is a pathogen unlike any other ever recorded."

"Unlike any other," he parroted helplessly.

"It is currently multiplying in your bloodstream. Observed incubation time; two weeks. Projected symptoms include itchiness, sneezing, fever, chills, and aches, followed by immune system suppression and lethal genetic structure damage. Running calculations..."

Varien leaned forward with baited breath. It couldn't be that bad, could it?

"Estimated time to death: five weeks, two hours."
Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
That night, he was besieged by nightmares.

He slept in the seat of his PRAWN, eyes twitching beneath their lids. His dreams were mostly nonsense, but the shifting and blurry images of fire and death and water and death were overlaid by a tense pressure, his hammering heart, a backdrop of fear.

Varien shifted and moaned, watching the Sunbeam explode from several perspectives, or a Reaper-sized bleeder eat him, or Silvia melt from the inside out. Once or twice he thought he woke up. His eyelids fluttered open and he blearily saw the beach, the massive alien gun, but then they shut again and he sunk back into the terror.

Then all at once, it stopped. The pack of stalkers chasing him vanished, the creepvines and water and even the ground vanished until Varien simply swam in endless blue water. His thoughts cleared up and he grew increasingly lucid.

Then something appeared in front of him. It clicked and warbled deafeningly as it came into focus, blurring the edges of his vision. It was brown, so dark as to be almost black, made of black smoke so diffuse he could see right through it. It seemed to be some kind of enormous head, with horns sprouting to the side. Four blue eyes as bright as the sun stared right at him, flooding the edges of his vision with rainbow colors.

Its voice boomed into his head, like a middle-aged woman, curious and strained and loud enough to shatter his eardrums had he not been dreaming.

"What... are... you?" she asked.

Then, with a strangled yell, Varien woke up in a cold sweat.

He felt like shit.

He'd scratched his itching skin until red marks appeared all over his arms, ribs, face and legs. His nose was stuffed but didn't run, his head buzzed, and every one of his joints, from his knees to his elbows to the vertebrae in his neck, ached fiercely. There was no doubt about it; he was sick.

Sick, and if his PDA was to be believed, dying.
Dying. The thought bounced around his head and brought tears to his eyes. Doom hung over him like a cloud, dense and choking and tight in his stomach. Even sitting still, he felt lead weights attached to his every muscle and joint, enfeebling him to the point he felt as though he were encased in stone.

Five weeks. He had five weeks to live. Five weeks of slowly worsening quality of life. Five weeks before the disease killed him. The disease that had the super-advanced alien race quarantine an entire planet.

It'd been useless. All his efforts had been in vain. Escaping the Aurora, putting out the fire, scrounging food and water, building a habitat, all of it was for nothing. He was dead. He'd been dead the moment he touched the water. He was still breathing and pumping blood but he was dead.

Varien glanced down at the floor of his PRAWN, where he'd dropped his survival knife. Dark thoughts flickered in his eyes.

Before he even knew it, he had it in his hands. The rising sun glinted off the metal blade. His hands shook as it sat in his palm, shook and shook until it fell back to the floor and he released a tense breath.

What was he going to do? What even could he do? Was there even any point in doing anything? Maybe he should just stay here, just sit in his exosuit until the end came. Stay and rot away. Let himself starve and dehydrate, because that'd surely be a quicker end.

A tear traced its way down his cheek.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair! He didn't deserve this. He should've found a way. He... he...

He wanted to follow Silvia as she helped build the phase gate. He wanted them to move into that house he'd picked out. He wanted to marry her in a lavish ceremony with all their friends. He wanted to have kids, wanted to grow old, wanted to finish that game he'd said he'd get started on but never did...

Something twisted in him. So far it'd eluded him. Throughout his survival efforts he'd teetered between hopeless and a desperate 'I have to try!'. But now something else grew in his gut. Something hot. He'd read it in some adventure novels, but now it came to him. A burning, boiling thought.

No, he thought. I'm not going to die.

He sat up straight, narrowed his eyes, and opened his PDA. He flicked to one of the data entries he'd gotten from his tour of the alien gun. "Disease research facility," he growled through a parched throat. "Eight hundred meters down, one kilometer southwest from here. Designed to study and synthesize vaccine for Carar bacterium." Carar, undoubtedly the same disease killing him. If it wasn't, then why would the gun have rejected him? He was infected with the thing these aliens wanted to cure, the thing that scared them enough to blow up ships that even tried to slingshot around the planet.

That meant he needed to find this facility.

"Let's get back home," he snarled, latching his hands around the exosuit's controls. His fingers ached, as did his elbows, but he found the beacon below his base. With newfound fire he stomped off towards it, sinking beneath the waves and walking across the ocean floor to get there with a single-minded focus. In minutes he was back at his habitat and he climbed inside.
Varien stormed over to his fabricator and opened it. "Personal," he muttered, pressing through the buttons. "Equipment. Reinforced dive suit." He brought his PDA and read up on it. That was exactly what he needed. The reinforced dive suit would prevent any amount of water pressure from crushing him, completely prevent the Bends. It was cut-resistant, thermal resistant, the whole nine yards. With it he could swim anywhere with impunity, including to the disease research facility. Maybe he would've been able to take his PRAWN down there, but maybe not.

After all, eight-hundred meters sounded like it'd be in a cave of some sort.

To make the reinforced dive suit he needed a fair amount of synthetic fibers. Those could, in turn, be made with benzene and fiber mesh. Fiber mesh was easy. Benzene was... hard.

Varien had no idea how to make benzene. He'd tried before, with creepvine seeds. But their oil wasn't good. Maybe he needed some other plant? Varien headed out into the ocean to look.

But despite his efforts, despite ruffling through every plant in the shallows, none of them could be processed into benzene. He needed something else.

Think, think. It was hard with the pounding in his head, but he tried. Benzene, that was a type of oil, right? He was fairly certain of that. Oil was made by organic remains being compressed over a long time. So... he needed pressure. Lots of pressure. That left him with either the deep area with the floating blue orbs or the chasm with ghostly kelp and ampeels.

That settled it. He'd go to the chasm where Volara lived. Maybe he'd find a plant there that could help him.

Find a source of benzene, make the suit, find the alien research facility, get a cure. Once cured turn off the gun, build a ship, find Silvia, and leave. That was the plan.

With newfound strength, Varien swam to his exosuit and climbed into its titanic frame. He scratched his itching skin, then turned to where he remembered the canyon to be and headed off. In minutes he was trudging across the floor of the grassy plateau, craning his head back to look at a pod of reefbacks as they bellowed far above him. The local star shone through the water, forming shimmering sheets of light so far down.

Varien came up on a ridge of stone, which fell away to show him the mushroom forest. Smiling, he let himself plummet. Then he realized that was a bad idea so he made sure he didn't fall too fast by using the PRAWN's thrusters to slow his descent.

Once inside he continued to stomp forward, weaving between the mushroom caps and brushing the serene, if noisy, jellyrays aside. Schools of green hoopfish swam around him, so dense they were akin to a wall he had to storm through. Varien kept walking forward, slowly making his way into deeper and deeper waters. One-eighty meters. One-ninety. Two hundred. Two-ten. He passed under a stony arch and marveled at the blue grue clusters and purple tree leeches growing on the stone. He scanned them to see if they'd be any help in getting benzene, but no such luck.

Two hundred thirty meters down, he reached the end of the mushroom forest.

The rock trees gave way to a vast expanse of sandy dunes that sloped away beneath him, down into the darkness. If he squinted he could see the faintly glowing dots of fish living down there, and once or twice he thought he saw a black shape erupt from the sands and devour them.

This wasn't the chasm. That could mean only one thing; Varien had gotten lost.

With a long-suffering sigh that made his throat ache, he turned to his right and continued walking,
making his way across the forest's perimeter while keeping an eye on sloping land to his left. At one point he thought he saw something down there, a colossal bowl of stone buried in the sand, but on closer inspection it wasn't the black canyon either.

Lucky for him though, the crevice wasn't far from the crater. It stuck out like a sore thumb, a gaping wound in the ocean floor. He left the mushroom forest and stomped across the white sand as it sloped down and down, forming cliffs of black stone before all at once spilling into the desolate region. Varien stopped himself at the edge and peered down, his PRAWN's lights cutting through the blackness like a knife. A dizzying drop loomed before him, so with a weak breath to steady himself, Varien jumped over the edge.

His breath went short and his lower body tingled as he descended into the darkness, using the exosuit's thrusters to feather the drop. Three hundred meters. Three-ten. Three-thirty.

At three hundred and fifty meters he slammed onto the black stone, kicking up a cloud of gray detritus. He'd arrived.

Now that he was actually in the area, not just hovering above it in a seamoth, Varien could see far more detail than before. The black rocks were mottled with white streaks of some strange mineral, like veins in flesh. From the rocks grew small ferns, dull gray with duller red jewels growing in them, swaying in the chilly currents as they eked out a living.

The massive kelps were taller than they'd first appeared. One sprouted from the stone next to Varien, towering so far above him he had to crane his neck back all the way to see its top. Looking up, he couldn't see any hint of the surface. Just an even darkness everywhere he looked. According to his PRAWN's thermometer, it was a frigid thirteen degrees.

Something *bopped* his PRAWN. He looked towards it; it was a fish. It looked like a skeleton that'd come to life, with glowing green eyes. On closer inspection the spinefish - as his PDA labeled it - had a pair of tendrils just like hoopfish. It must've been related, and adapted to look like it was dead. It bumped into his windshield, backed off, then bumped him again. Finally it turned and swam in another direction.

Varien turned to face the vine, or 'blood vine' as his PDA labeled it. Along the base were massive glowing red orbs, branching their parasitic tendrils across the spectral blue plant. *Around* the base, the blood kelp unraveled into white streaks that grew across the stone like fungus, and between the lines were mushrooms. On first glance he thought they were the acid mushrooms like in the shallows, but that wasn't right. Those were bright purple and red, but these were bleached white.

He walked closer and held his scanner to the towering vine, showering it in blazing light. He repeated the process for the 'deep shrooms'. He didn't read over their data entries right then, though. He wanted to explore.

Walking around the 'blood kelp' zone was like entering an even more alien world than he'd been in already. Ghostly weeds sprouted from the stone. Towering kelp reached for the surface like grasping claws. Strange fish swam about him, like color-drained biters - blighters - with milky white eyes and a sinister chuckle. The crimson red of the parasitic red orbs turned sickly green after what felt like a handful of steps away from them.

No light reached so far down. Wherever his PRAWN shone its headlights the world came into being, but everywhere else it was like the world abruptly ceased to exist, pierced by only a few spots of bioluminescence. Chunks of basalt, quartz, and even dull uraninite clung to the walls by the dozens as he explored, so awestruck that even the awful sickness faded into the back of his mind. So far down, with over three hundred meters of water bearing down on him, every step was
nerve wracking. He knew his PRAWN was good for another six hundred meters down, but he still feared every step would make his exosuit fail and crumple under the pressure. Everything around him was equal parts amazing and terrifying.

As he explored, something flickered in the corner of his vision. He turned his head to look; it was a series of undulating white dots, crackling with blue electricity. An ampeel. Was it Volara? Maybe, but probably not. Supporting the idea that it wasn't her was a pair of smaller ampeels next to the larger one, maybe a third of its size.

All three ampeels were coming right for him.

His thoughts were sluggish under the haze of sickness, but he thought fast enough to summon forth his ampeel toy, dim his lights, and turn to face the trio of electric fish. "Hello!" he said, and his mini-eel translated.

All three of them recoiled. The larger one spoke first, his PDA translating it as an androgynous voice. "You can talk?! What sort of creature are you?"

Well, that confirmed it wasn't Volara. "Uh, it's uh, kind of hard to explain," he told the larger ampeel.

"Is it?" they asked, glancing a Varien with an acidic green eyeball. "Wait. You wouldn't be the creature Volara was training, are you?"

"Um, yes?" he stammered. "You know Volara? Wait, who are you?" And did they think Volara was training him like a dog?

"Herzaron," the ampeel said, the translator shifting to a handsomely masculine voice. He began to swim circles around Varien's exosuit, glancing down at him. The crackles of electricity were hair-raising from so close. Close enough that the eel could lash out with fang and lightning and he could do nothing about it. "Would you look at that. She actually trained you." He snapped his jaws behind Varien, and he nervously turned his suit around to face the megafauna. "And now you're here, in my territory."

"Um, sorry about that? I got lost." Territory. The data download mentioned something about being territorial, didn't it? Was he even going to live five weeks at all?

"Lost." Herzaron stopped and turned to face him head on, his head lowered to look Varien in the eye. "You got lost and just so happened to end up here, and not in the unclaimed lands."

He held up his hands in surrender. What could he say to make this giant fish back off? "I did, it was an honest mistake. I've never actually been down here before."

The ampeel stared at him for a good long while, the children-fish swimming silently by his side. "Hmm. Makes sense. But then what brings you down now? What are you looking for?"

"Just some kind of plant," he said. "Or oil."

Herzaron tilted his head. "And not to hunt my food, right?"

Was that what this was about?

"No, no no no!" he babbled, shaking his head frantically. "I've got plenty of food with me back home."
The ampeel's face didn't change, but the translator's voice lightened up dramatically. "Oh! Sorry about that, then."

"I-It's fine," he stammered. "So, you know Volara?"

He 'nodded'. "I do, she's a family friend. We met two seasons go." He tilted his head to the two smaller ampeels. "These are two of my fries, Chargaron and Posara. Say hello, you two."

"Hi!" one said.

"Hello," the other replied, hiding meekly behind her - he assumed - father.

Herzaron rounded on her. "Posara, come out. What's he going to do, hurt you?" he scoffed. He turned back to him. "Sorry, she's shy. Also, I never got your name." He blinked. "You do have a name, right?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm Varien, nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Terribly sorry about the hostility..." Herzaron said, trailing off. "So what do you need these plants for? You're not some despicable plant-eating prey, are you?"

"What? No no, I eat fish." Maybe best to leave out the 'omnivore' part. And oh stars above, how to explain this without giving the whole 'technology' speech again? "So I recently got some bad news, and uh." One of the two ampeel fries, Chargaron, came closer. "Uh..." The smaller ampeel - still larger than a stalker - nudged around his PRAWN, nibbling the left arm. "Stop that!" he protested.

"You haven't seen it yet," he finished. "So let me get this straight. You're here, looking for something, but not for food.""I have plenty of food with me right now," Varien said.

Herzaron shook his head. "Chargaron, leave the talking thing alone."

Posara spoke up, sounding like a little girl in his head. "You know Miss Volara?" she asked.

"Um, yes, I do," he repeated. "Do you know where she is?"

"She," Herzaron injected. ", came back from the Above not long ago, went to her territory to hunt. So what kind of plant do you need?"

He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, wincing as the soreness in his spine flared up. "Well that's the problem. I'm looking for something, but I don't even know what it is. I'll know it if I see it, but..."

"But you haven't seen it yet," he finished. "So let me get this straight. You're here, looking for something, but not for food."

"I have plenty of food with me right now," Varien said.

Herzaron and his children stared at him for a moment longer. Then he gave the ampeel equivalent of a nod, zapping the tusk-like prongs on his head. "Alright, welcome to my territory, Varien." He looked over at one of the ampeel children. "Posara, could you go find Volara? Tell her I want to speak with her?"

Posara glanced at Varien, then back at her father. "Um, uh, sure dad!" She turned tail and swam away, swaying her body and beating her tail fin against the water until the tiny glowing eel vanished into the blackness.

He glanced up at the remaining two ampeels. "So... um, do you mind if I...?" he asked, pointing
awkwardly to a cluster of deep shrooms.

"No no, go ahead," Herzaron said.

"Thanks." He stomped his exosuit over to one and, carefully, reached out with its left arm. Eyes narrowed in focus, he worked the PRAWN's buttons to open its fingers, move it over the mushroom, and close them down. The mechanical claws clamped hard on the mushroom, tearing into its flaky white flesh and releasing a light shimmer of fluid from within.

He noticed that both Herzaron and Chargaron swam a little further when he did that.

He pulled the arm up, tearing the mushroom up from its roots. It jostled back and forth as he lifted it. He carefully moved his suit's arm over the back, opened the storage, and dumped the mushroom inside. Varien repeated the process for a few more of the deep shrooms until he had five of them, then stepped closer to one of the blood vines.

"What are these?" he wondered, poking one of the red parasites with an arm. It squished lightly.

The fry Chargaron swam into his view, laughing. "You mean you don't know?! It's just oil! The bone-fish eat it all the time."

"Oil?" he asked hopefully. "You mean it's not a parasite growing on these vines?"

"No, it's not," Herzaron added. "The vines make it. Eventually hardens and falls off, carrying their seeds."

Really? It was a long shot, but he reached out with his suit's right arm and pushed it at one of the oil globs. The claw sunk in like the oil was made of syrup, and when Varien withdrew it the egg-shaped node of red oil came with it. It left a small crater in the kelp filled with crimson veins, and the goo itself immediately began to slide off his suit's arm. Before it could drip off he opened the storage hatch and dropped the blood oil in there.

Alright, time to see if any of that was good for anything. Varien shut the storage hatch, drained the water, and turned around in his seat. He opened the PRAWN's compartment from inside.

The mushrooms were in bad shape, already shriveling up and flaking apart, but the acid in them was apparently good for making hydrochloric acid. He'd just need to add salt, which was everywhere. The massive chunk of ruby oil, however, was far more interesting. According to his scanner, it was just what he needed. Enough oil, and he could make benzene. The reinforced dive suit, and the freedom of mobility it'd provide, was closer than he thought!

People to speak with, oil to make his suit... this chasm wasn't so bad.

With a few quiet moans as his head throbbed, Varien collected more blood oil from the ethereal vine. The oily goop kept trying to slide out of his exosuit's grasp, and more than once he had to 'catch' it with the other, but before long he'd filled his storage up with the glowing crimson slime while Chargaron and Herzaron watched.

"Alright," he said at last. "That should be enough." He turned to face Herzaron. "Thank you for letting me take this stuff."

The ampeel 'shrugged'. "There's plenty for the bone-fish to eat, and I only really ever use it when I have company over. Speaking of which!" He turned to his child, who was busy chasing a 'blighter'. "Chargaron! Leave the unknown alone, let's go find your mother."
The smaller ampeel undulated the middle of his body down. "Daaaad! Can't I watch the strange talking fish some more?"

"You weren't watching him all this time." He swam to the fry's side. "Now come along."

"Fine," Chargaron huffed.

"Well," Herzaron said, glancing back at Varien. "If that'll be all, I think you should get going."

Rude. But Varien bit his tongue and nodded. "Probably. I still have to process all this stuff. Thanks again." He turned around and started stomping for a cliff. He heard the two ampeels crackling a while longer, but soon they faded into the distance.

Only then did Varien finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Getting up out of the chasm was a chore. The cliffs were tall and numerous, and controlling his fall while using the thrusters was impossible. More than once he overshot a cliff and fell back down on the other side. It certainly didn't help that the alien disease kept wracking him with nausea, joint pain, and itchiness. But slowly but surely, he did make his way out of the black gorge and began stomping back to his habitat.

In a few hours he was back in the shallows, parked by his simple shelter. He popped out of the PRAWN and opened up its storage from outside.

Varien frowned. The blood oil had melted together, filling the container with a soupy red slop filled with tiny seeds and a half-dozen deep shrooms. How we he supposed to scoop that out?! He wracked his brain, trying to think through the fog surrounding his thoughts, for a solution.

... bott... bottles!

He made a few bottles of water from bladderfish, drank them - he was especially thirsty with his sore throat - and used those to begin transferring the blood oil from his habitat to inside. Unfortunately he didn't really have anywhere to put the blood oil, so he just dumped it under his fabricator in a semi-solid pile of goo. That still left a handful of slime-covered deep-shrooms, but those could hang out in the storage compartment for the time being.

As it turned out, he needed all of the blood oil he'd harvested to make enough benzene for a reinforced suit. He'd also needed to go harvest more quartz for the glass bottles, but that wasn't a big concern. He fed the fabricator his materials, and in a few minutes he had two bottles of benzene ready to go.

... though the benzene inside was a bizarre shade of red. Wasn't it supposed to be clear?

Oh well. Before making a bed, he'd been using two rolls of fiber mesh as a bed. Now, he cannibalized them for the synthetic fibers. His fabricator mixed them together with the benzene to produce massive rolls of tough, flexible yellow mesh, and then those went together to form a reinforced dive suit.

He stripped out of his regular suit and put it on, zipping it up over his body. It was perfect! Dark gray with orange veins and a faint scaly texture. It even came with gloves and a helmet.
Varien flexed his arms, bent his knees. He liked this. He liked this a lot! The suit was cool and comforting on his itching skin, as though the inside was coated with a soothing gel. It wasn't too tight, but nor was it too lax.

Alright, so he had the reinforced dive suit. He could swim anywhere on the planet with no fear of the pressure, ascend however fast he wanted without getting sick. He had everything he needed to go to the alien disease research facility -

His thoughts crashed to a halt.

... he had everything he needed except for one thing. He didn't know where it was. For all he knew it was in a cavern, a cavern with an entrance on the other side of the planet.

"Fuck," he said simply.

Volara

She sighed, swimming laps around her territory. A green-blaster skuttled about the stone beneath her, screaming and eating a few bone-fish, but she wasn't in the mood to chase it off.

Varien was gone. She'd heard some massive blast tear through the water not long ago, that must've been him leaving. She hoped that wherever he was, whatever strange place his godlike kind called home, he was happy there with his consort. As for her, going back to her old life seemed so... empty, now. She'd gotten a taste of the world Above, of what could be if she could harness natural laws. In the wake of that, doing patrol rounds and talking to her friends about how they were raising their fries just seemed so shallow.

But it was a moot point. Like Varien had said, it took generations upon generations to progress their ability to manipulate technology. She'd never see anything as fantastical ever again. At most she could go back to the Above and explore it, but the most exciting part of her life was behind her. Sure, part of her selfishly hoped Varien would come back to dazzle her, but his kind didn't live well underwater. He'd made that clear.

She sighed again. Volara wanted to kill something. That green-blaster was looking awfully irritating now...

But before she could, she spotted another shocker swimming out of the darkness to her. She turned her head towards them to look. They were small; a fry. As they grew closer, she made out the swirls and beautiful arcing patterns across their shell. That was Posara, one of Herzaron and Teslara's fries. With a flick of her tail fin she swam over to her. "Posara, what are you doing here?" she asked, tilting her head curiously as the fry came to a halt.

The little fry looked down and away. "Um, Miss Volara? Dad said he wanted to speak to you, he's over in our territory by the cracked ground."

She zapped her mouth prongs. "Right, I know where that is. Let's go."

The two of them began swimming. Volara had to stay slow so Posara could keep up with her, especially since the still-growing fry kept stopping to chomp up some bone-fish, giggling bashfully whenever she successfully zapped multiple prey at a time. Not that she minded; sure the fish were in her territory, but Posara was the fry of a friend and needed the food.

Before long they found Herzaron swimming in place, Chargaron practicing stunts between the fronds of nearby vines. Volara swam over to him. "You wanted to see me?" she asked worriedly.
He'd seen a summoner in his territory a while ago. Had it come back? Had the Green Weakness set its sights on his family?

"It's about your little creature friend," he said. "He got lost and ended up here."

She blinked.

Volara tried to think over what he'd said.

"Herzaron..." she began warily, lowering the front of her body to stare up at him. " when exactly was this?"

He glanced at her just as warily, pausing to nuzzle his daughter when she swam underneath him. "He just left, why?"

After a moment's confusion burning heat flashed in her mind. She stretched her body rigid, swirling about angrily. "That little - stupid liar!" she shouted, prongs crackling and filling the water with bursts of energy. Her hearts pounded furiously, blood rushing in her earholes. "He said he was - we had this giant goodbye - I went to the Above to tell him goodbye and it's horrible up there! And he even - what about that bang then?! Did he just make that up to make me think he was gone? I should go and eat him," Volara ranted. "Little stupid can't even swim - !"

Herzaron's tail fin swatted her snout. She recoiled and, startled, swam away from him. "Is... something wrong?" he asked worriedly.

She sighed, calming her crackles. "Varien told me earlier today he was leaving, forever, with the rest of his people. I brought him a farewell gift and everything. And he didn't leave?! Oh!" Volara chomped the water angrily. "I could just blast him!"

"Blasting?" Chargaron injected, stopping his stunts to join them. "I like blasting things!" the fry chirped excitedly.

Herzaron swam forward and nudged the fry behind him. "Not now," he chided before turning back to Volara. "He lied to you?"

"Apparently," she groused, relaxing her swim bladder to float above him. "Thank you for telling me, Herzaron. I need to go give him a piece of my mind."

"Swift currents!" he called out. His fries echoed him a moment later.

"Same," she returned, still sore and already swimming up and out of Herzaron's territory.

Time to teach that human some manners.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Grounded

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Thanks to DevoutRelic for editing.

Chapter published 8/16/17.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Estimated Time to Death: 34 days, 4 hours, 38 minutes**

*Volara*

The fungal stalks passed by her, so dense she was forced to scrape her body against the stone spires more than once. She zapped angrily, wrenching herself free from them until she was up against the stone cliff that led to Varien's territory. She took a moment to get used to the lower pressure, then swam up.

Once she was up, her body prickled and her swim bladder was painfully swollen. Volara let herself sink to the strange 'sand' on the ground, her lower prongs digging into the stuff, to wait out the nausea. While she did, she debated what she was going to do once she got to Varien's territory.

Now that the angry yellowish-green tint in her vision had faded, she didn't want to *kill* him per-say. Maybe startle him, chase him about while snapping menacingly and sending arcs of power into the surrounding fish. Or maybe stalk him silently. Maybe thrash one of those shells he liked to climb in.

The illness faded and she lifted herself into the water, swimming across the bright plateau of grass to where she remembered him to be.

She still couldn't *believe* him! She did so much to help him with his troubles, gave him that special rock he needed, gave him the courage to fix his old home, even guarded him as he explored the insides of the metal thing that had broken off the 'Aurora'. And instead he lied to her about leaving? What, was he *sick* of her or something?!! The thought that such a tiny little creature, so out of his element, could decide *'Oh, I just don't need her anymore'* and throw her away like food wracked by the Green Weakness, it just made her blood *churn*!

Great, she'd riled herself up again.

Before long she made her way back to the shallow region. Strangely enough it wasn't *quite* as bright as it had been last time. Apparently even the darkening could reach into the blinding Above. Past the membrane that separated the water from the not-water she could see a vast dome of blackness, speckled with white dots in addition to something massive and red. The local prey were languid and slow, hiding in small burrows in the stone.

Now, where was his territory? She knew it'd be around somewhere, and she'd visited twice before, but everything looked the same no matter where she looked. All she could do was swim around and hope to find it, so that was exactly what she did.
After some time spiraling through the shallow water, weaving between the rock faces, she found his territory. It was the same squat cylinder with a tube leading off it as it'd been before. The small shell hung out beneath it, while the walking-shell he'd made recently stood on top of the structure. But there was a new addition to the territory itself; part of it was open. All along one of the sides of the squat cylinder the metal was peeled away, letting Volara look inside once she drifted closer.

Inside Varien's territory, the lights were dim. Along the inner walls were multiple structures of stone that she couldn't make heads or tail fins out of, but there were two she could guess the use of. One was a square of metal flat against the floor, filled with brown sand from which sprouted strange and colorful plants. the other was a large elevated thing, and it was on that, that Varien rested. He was curled up under a white sheet, his head resting on a cushion.

Her anger flared again and she flicked her tail fin, propelling herself forward. She was going to get in there and -

Thunk!

Volara's entire body bunched up as her head stopped, rammed into... into something. She blinked harshly and focused on what she'd hit. She looked and saw - wait, another shocker?!

It stared at her from inside Varien's shelter, but it was nearly impossible to see. The other shocker was transparent, growing more so along its body as it faded away into the distance. How was it in his shelter? Why hadn't she seen it before?

"Hello?" she asked.

"Hello?" the other replied.

She blinked, and it blinked. Volara narrowed her eyes, and so did it. She swayed her head right, and it followed.

... oh! This was that clear substance, like he had on his shells. She didn't know it could 'reflect' her appearance. Was that what she looked like? Not bad.

No, focus. She had a human to snap at. He was still resting, even though her impact with his shelter had him stirring and quietly groaning. Volara drew her head up and bashed it against the clear stuff again. It rattled her slightly, but her hard carapace kept her from getting hurt.

Thunk!

Thunk!

Thunk!

Varien stirred again, rolling over in his bedding until he was face to face with her. His eyes were still closed, though.

Thunk!

His eyes flickered open, then he seemed to notice her because they flew wide open. With a startled scream of song he leaped from his bed, bringing the sheets with him onto the floor.

Volara tilted her head. Huh, was that what he looked like without those coverings? His skin was that strange brown all over, and he had more of that 'hair' in the strangest places. Between his legs, even under his arms. Strangest of all, even his feet had fingers like his hands! They were shorter compared to the hand-fingers, though.
He flailed about with his sheets until he was mostly covered, sprawled on the ground and facing her. "Hello Varien," she growled. "Fancy seeing you here."

Varien's response was a staccato burst of hurried song, scrambling back from her in his sheets. She saw him go for a crumpled mass of dark grey and orange and tap something next to it. A flash of blue heralded the mini-shocker he used to talk with her. He held it up to her, arms shaking, and sung again. "V-Volara?! What are you doing?! Scared the life from me!"

"Oh shut up!" she hissed, pressing herself against the clear stuff. "You lied to me!"

He had the nerve to look confused, his face shifting and contorting. "What? When?"

"You said you were leaving," she snarled. "You told me you were going back to your people, but here you are. Herzaron saw you in his territory, he told me everything! So, what was it?" she asked, backing off. "I heard the bang of you leaving, why did you lie?!"

"What?! No, you have it all wrong!" he sung desperately. His voice sounded strange, though. Like he wasn't able to sing quite right. "The ship coming to rescue me was destroyed, Volara! That was what you heard!"

She blinked, her heated anger cooling all at once. "Destroyed?" she repeated weakly. All the strength fled her body and her muscles went limp. "What do you mean, destroyed? What could do that?"

"So you know how my people, we can do these things because we know a lot of natural laws and how to manipulate them?" He looked down. "It turns out we aren't the only ones. On the place where I was supposed to be rescued, there was this giant, uh." He moved his hands around. "Weapon. None of the creators were around, but it wasn't made by my people. When the unknown, uh, the ship came, the weapon destroyed it. They're all dead," he said, his song low and hopeless and his head hanging.

Chilling, numb horror enveloped her. "Varien," she whispered, drifting closer to the clear stuff. "I'm sorry, I came here angry enough to fry you and you'd just... they'd... I'm sorry." And in her anger, she could easily have forgotten how fragile he was. She may have killed him.

Varien shook his head. "You couldn't have known. And it gets worse, too. So you know the weapon? I'm certain it's the same one that shot down my ship in the first place, and the unknown before us. When I went back to the Aurora, I got the instructions on how to build a ship that'll get me back home. But it doesn't matter, because even if I make it and try to leave, I'll just get shot again by the weapon."

"So can't you destroy it?" she asked. "That's the first thing I'd try."

He laughed, a bitter barking note. "You'd think. But whoever these people that came before us were, they're way ahead of where my people are. Can't destroy their weapon. I could go inside, and I found a way to turn it off, but it gets worse! The reason they have that weapon at all is an unknown."

"Wait, that word, the last one?" she interrupted.

"Oh." He sounded it out. "Qua-ran-tine. It's when there's something incredibly bad somewhere, so you make it so nothing gets in and nothing gets out. They quarantined this entire world because of some disease they were afraid of. And I can't turn off the weapon, because I'm sick with it. I'm sick with whatever had these super-advanced people scared enough to quarantine an entire unknown."
"Sick?" she pondered, worry clenching her hearts. "Sick with what?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. Their name for it was 'Carar'. I have about thirty days to live." Her eyes widened in shock. "It's not that bad right now. Kind of like an unknown. Itchy, sore, my -"

"- nasal arch is clogged," she finished, her horror redoubling enough to make her sink to the ground. "Varien... I'm - oh damnable death I'm so sorry. It got you," she mourned, locking her gaze onto the ground beneath his territory.

"Got me? What got me?" he asked.

"The Green Weakness, that sounds exactly like it. First you feel like, well, exactly how you described. As it gets worse you feel weaker and weaker, and the itchy shell, err, skin will erupt into boils, and then you just... die. I'm so sorry. You don't deserve to have it set its eyes on you," she bemoaned. Damn it. It'd taken her mother, her siblings, her unhatched children, and more. And now it was going to take Varien, her friend who'd shown her the world Above, the world that could be.

"You think this Green-whatever's the Carar?" he asked, sitting and placing an open palm on the clear material.

"If there's any disease that would be deserving of a quar-an-tine, it's that," she growled. "Nothing else in the world compares to that curse." Volara glanced at his hand, envisioning it erupting with oozing, emerald sores. The mere thought made her upper heart tremble. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, you didn't deserve this. I shouldn't have been angry, you lost your only hope at leaving and now you're going to die," she whined. It wouldn't even be quick. It would hurt the entire time he was dying.

Varien pulled his hand off and clenched it into a fist. "I'm not going to die," he growled. "I have a plan."

"A plan! What kind of plan do you have?" she said sardonically.

"These aliens, whoever they were, are gone now," he explained. "But they did leave a lot of their work laying around. They were trying to figure out an unknown for the Carar before they seemingly vanished."

"A what for the Green Weakness?" she asked.

"Cure," he sounded out. "A way to remove the sickness. Humans have cures for lots of things. Unknown, unknown, even unknown." She blinked slowly. Okay. "These people were trying to find a cure for Carar. I know, from what I found in the weapon, that they had a place where they were testing to make one. It's located deep underwater, probably in some cave. I'm going to find it; the only hope I have of finding a cure is in that place. I find the building, find the cure, and I'm good," he said resolutely, something hot in his eyes.

She eyed him sideways. "So your plan is to find this place you don't know where it is, for a 'cure' that may not even exist, to destroy a curse that nobody can survive," Volara summarized. "How do you plan to do this?"

He deflated, but only for a moment. "I actually have an idea. I have the signal for another lifepod, but I haven't checked it out yet. I'm going to take my unknown, uh, my suit there and see if there's anything around."

Volara stared back at the tiny human. She thought it over, then zapped her front prongs 'yes'. "Then
I'm coming with you." He opened his mouth to begin singing, but she cut him off. "No buts, Varien. You're dying. You were frail enough already, and you don't know what's over there that might try to kill you. I'm a shocker, there's no better protection," she crowed proudly. She quieted down. "And anyway, I feel rotten about getting mad at you for something like this. Let me make it up to you? Please?" she pleaded, tilting her head.

"... alright. Just let me get dressed, I'll meet you outside."

"Okay," she said.

They stared at each other for a moment.

"Could you, uh, turn around?" Varien asked at last. "I can't do it when you're watching."

She tilted her head curiously. "Is this a 'human' thing?"

"Yes, just please turn away!" he snapped.

Volara sighed. "I-i-if you say so." With a motion of her body she turned, her back to Varien's territory. "Is this good?"

He sang something behind her. She narrowed her eyes. "You know, I can't understand you with my back turned." But beyond that she didn't voice any complaints and waited dutifully for Varien to finish up whatever ritual he was so shy about. Before too long the end of his territory opened up, and she spun around to see Varien struggling to swim to his walking-suit.

Her eyes widened. He'd... changed. Before his clothing had been pale gray and streaked with light, glowing blue. Now, though, Varien's coverings were the same dark gray, streaked with orange, that the pair of humans that fell into her territory had worn. "What are you wearing?" she asked, confounded.

Varien settled on the top of his territory, and pinched his not-skin. "This? It's my reinforced dive suit. You know the problem I had with going deep before?" He crossed his arms and uncrossed them in an alien gesture. "Gone. This solves that problem completely."

"Oh! That's good," she said simply.

He bobbed his head up and down, the human symbol for 'yes'. "I need it, really. No way I can get down far enough to get the cure without it." With that said he climbed up onto and down into his suit. Once sitting in it, he gripped strips of metal and leaped off his territory. Varien landed on the ground, kicking up a cloud of sand.

She eyed him worriedly. "Do you even know where this lifepod is?"

He nodded again. "Sure do. It's over there," he said, waving in a seemingly random direction. "I have the signal, I can see it."

"Okay, if you insist," she drawled, taking up a place next to him. "Let's go."

"Let's." Varien began stomping off on his chosen path, leaving Volara to follow from above. But even in the suit, he was painfully slow. She could've rested with how slowly she needed to undulate her body and beat her tail fin. The colorful shallows passed by, the shadows deep and long.

Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!
Before long, another forest of thick green plants approached. Volara chomped unhappily as Varien stumbled, tripping on a ledge that he hadn't seen and tumbling into a cave system. It took tremendous effort on his part, as well as Volara scaring away the local, minuscule predators, but eventually he got his feet back under him. It took an embarrassingly long time, but eventually Varien made his way out of the tangle of kelp.

In front of them, the ground dropped away into another plain of crimson grass, all of which grew increasingly green the further away they were. The ground wasn't flat, but instead formed rolling hills away into the distance. A couple of stone pillars reached for the surface of the water, covered in all sorts of hideously colorful plants. Similarly colored prey swarmed around them, always safely in the distance.

Or so they thought. When Varien stopped to eat a meal, she shot into a school of one-eyed triangle fish at incredible speed, lighting up her prongs and filling the water with her power. Volara chomped happily and proudly as the fish twitched and spasmed before going still. That was good and right. These fish up here had never encountered a shocker before. The most powerful predator they'd seen was, what? The tiny black things that hid beneath the ground? Ha!

As they finished wrapping up their meal, Varien groaned and pressed a palm to his head. "Headache?" she asked sadly, swallowing the last of her food.

He nodded. "Terrible one. What I wouldn't give for some painkillers." At her blank stare, he added, "A substance that reduces any pain you're feeling."

Oh. Right. That was obvious.

"Anyway, let's keep going." He opened his mouth and sung a long yawn. "It's still pretty far."

**Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!**

As they continued to cross the grassy hills, Volara caught sight of something above her. It was a pod of wedge-like creatures, drifting slowly in the currents. Three thick tendrils waved behind them, green lights shone from their pulsing undersides, and even as she watched a deep, bellowing groan filled the world and shook her to her core. If she hadn't just eaten, and wasn't escorting Varien, she would've gone to see what they tasted like.

"Oh, those are just unknown-backs," Varien said casually when he caught her looking. "They're harmless. Pretty loud, though."

Loud and big. She couldn't quite make out the scale from so far down, but if Volara didn't know better she'd say they were bigger than **her**!

Which was obviously ridiculous.

The hills started to slope upward. Off to the right, both she and her human caught sight of a colossal chunk of impossibly-shaped metal, resting silently against the stone as red-chompers swarmed in and around it. Another 'wreck' from Varien's ship, apparently, but he ignored it in favor of their task.

By then, light began filtering down from the not-air, blinding in its intensity and scorching in its heat. They climbed up the last of the hills, chunks of rusty orange metal and salt sprouting from the ground as the red grass thinned out. Once they reached the top, the ground spilled deeper still into murky gloom. Volara could make out massive spikes and spires erupting from the ground, as though she'd stumbled back into the mushroom forest but all the vegetation had vanished.
Varien took the descent slowly, his suit shooting jets of water from itself to slow its fall. She followed after him, sighing in relief as the waters cooled and darkened. Her swim bladder gradually felt less and less bloated as they descended.

The path of stone spikes was long and tricky for Varien to navigate in his suit. While he struggled, Volara took the opportunity to look around and admire the new sights. It was desolately beautiful. Not black and gray like her home was, but it had its own quaint little rocky charm. Tiny prey swam around, utterly at ease around her despite her power. They must not have had many predators. Easy pickings, if she weren't well fed.

Eventually the ground flattened out in more ways than one; it both stopped going deeper and the rock pillars vanished. Stretching around them was a beautifully empty space of gently rolling dunes, sparsely dotted with brittle grasses and spiky plants.

"It should be just up ahead," Varien said, marveling at the region along with her.

*Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!* 

When he wasn't looking at her, Volara stole an occasional glance at the sick human and her hearts clenched. He was so confident he could find this 'cure' and save himself. Part of her wanted to believe he could, believe that just as he could conjure forth metal with blue light and control rocks from the inside, he could save himself from the Green Weakness. But she'd seen it wreak so much havoc in her life. So many people had been cursed and withered away.

If she was honest with herself, she knew Varien was a dead man swimming. *Especially if the summoners found him.*

The dark waters swirled around her, and before she knew it the ground opened up beneath them. A trench, carved into the ground, spread in front of the two of them. Deep within were a variety of plants she'd never seen before, glowing yellow bright enough to hurt her eyes even from so far up.

Varien hummed, then began to sing to her. "Well it's a trench, and I think I see some caves. But the signal's just a bit up ahead, let's get over there and see." Without further word he jumped across the ravine, and she dutifully followed.

Ahead of them was a squat, rocky hill covered in sparse tufts of vegetation. Interestingly enough, there was a hole in front that lead straight down. Both of them came to a stop, and Volara swam ahead to turn back and face Varien. "Well?"

He nodded. "It's right beneath us." He leaned forward and glanced down, eyes narrowed. "I think... yes!" he cheered, song jumping loudly. "That's the lifepod, right there!" Volara snaked her head forward to look. Sure enough, there it was! Another lifepod, just like the one that had landed in her territory so long ago. The cave was deep and sharp, with sandy floors and comforting black walls. The lifepod rested on a slope, next to a cluster of glowing stalk-plants. Mats of grey-green circular plants clung to the stone in rare patches, as though the ground was sick.

The two of them made their way inside, Volara spiraling down while Varien used his suit's jets to slow the fall. Why was he even doing that? With a light thud he landed, casting blinding light on the cave. She came down next to him and adjusted herself, looking at the lifepod, the nearby plants, the prey.

Something laughed around them, high-pitched and raspy.

The human *screamed*, leaping from the seat and tumbling to the bottom of his suit while babbling a
frantic series of notes that weren't even translated.

Volara looked around. The source of the laughter was some of those parasites she'd seen in the kelp forests. One swam to the underside of her jaw and unfurled its tendrils, trying pathetically to wrap around her head and pierce her shell with its teeth. More were trying to bite her in other parts of her body, with similar success.

Unimpressed, she killed them with a single word.

"Seriously?" she asked Varien, drifting over to him with the front of her body lower than her back. He was still curled into a ball, 'breathing' fast. "That's what scares you?" She crackled teasingly. "Were those the 'giant things' around your ship that you were so afraid of?"

"Shut up," he managed at last, uncurling and dragging himself back into his seat. He sneezed, and all at once Volara herself felt sick for teasing him like that. "Those... things were the first thing on the planet that ever attacked me. They're horrible! Anyway, the pod." He looked over at the nearby lifepod. Now that they were closer, Volara could see it wasn't quite like the one that she'd found. While the hole in its side was similar to the one she'd torn in hers, the reddish symbol on its side was entirely different. It certainly held some sort of significance for Varien, maybe a symbol of how important the people inside had been, but she didn't pry.

There were two things scattered around it; one box like he'd opened up by the first wreckage, and a dark sheet of godlike substance identical to the tool she'd seen Varien tap his fingers on sometimes. If she looked closely, she could see a second such thing inside the pod itself.

"Alright," the human whimpered. "There they are. I just need to get out and grab them. With... with all the bleeders around."

She looked at him, torn between teasing and helping. "Do you want me to carry them over to you?"

"No, but thanks. But um. Could you maybe stick by me?" he asked with a quiet, embarrassed song.

"Of course!" she said. "Just stick by my head, I'll bite any that come for you."

"Great!" He began to climb out of his walking-shell, but stopped halfway. "And please don't zap me."

"I won't zap you," she reassured, her upper heart throbbing at the accusation. "I know you're small and weak and naturally terrified of anything bigger than you - "

"Hey!"

" - but have some faith. You'll be fine."

"Right, right. Thanks again for doing this." He finished climbing out, the mini-shocker still in his suit.

Volara held still and let him swim up to the side of her head, close enough to brush up against her armor like he had when he'd hugged her and said goodbye. It struck her again how puny he was, shorter than her prongs. She could, with some difficulty, swallow him whole if she wished.

Slowly but carefully, she guided him over to the flat thing resting in the sand, making sure to go at his painfully slow pace. Volara couldn't be impatient with him. He was dying. She owed him all the patience in the world and then some.
Once he had the first, he made his way to the lifepod and dipped inside. She couldn't follow him, so she dutifully guarded the hole as he explored inside. She had to bite and kill another parasite, but it was otherwise uneventful. He came out and settled to her side like before and she led him to the last of the technological marvels, the sealed box resting up against the cavern walls. Varien opened it, removed a small gray bit from it, and approached her. He sang something she didn't understand, then pointed his hands at the suit.

Volara almost zapped her front prongs in agreement, but stopped herself at the last second. Just as slowly, she helped him back inside his suit, as safe and sound as a dead person could be.

"Thanks," he said once he was in. "Let me just sift through all this real quick."

"Take your time, I guess," she said, settling for swimming around as Varien did whatever he needed to do with the things he'd gotten. She went over to inspect the cluster of glowing plants. Now that she was closer, she could see growths on them. They looked like... eyeballs, oddly enough. Weird. What kind of plant grew to look like it had eyeballs?

Between the stalks was some other plant, though. It grew in threes, shaped like a tube striped orange and yellow. She tilted her head curiously as she swam around them, then floundered in shock when they swiveled to her, pulsated, and shot spines at her.

"Ah!" she shouted, more from surprise than pain when the barbs hit her tan underbelly and bounced off. Volara hastily relaxed her swim bladder and floated away from them. What sort of plants shot spines?

Varien called from behind her, so she swam over to him. "It wasn't anything that important," he said once she arrived. "Just one of the unknown - um, important people in the Aurora telling people where to go once their lifepods landed. I've already been there. There was nobody there." His voice had grown sadder and sadder as he spoke. "Well, we got the lifepod, want to look for a way deeper?"

She hummed. "How deep?" she asked eagerly.

"Eight hundred unknown." Volara stared at him blankly. He sighed, placed his hand in his palms, and looked back up at her. "Alright, so the distance from here to the surface is about two hundred and fifty. I need to get to eight hundred unknown beneath the surface."

"Fair enough. Let's start looking around this cave, then," she said, lifting her head to look around.

That was exactly what they did, then, moving throughout the caverns to search for a way down. They looked up and down, left and right. Varien led the way, stomping his suit and kicking up clouds of sand as she slowly followed him, making sure to dart out and kill any of the parasites he feared so much. They found massive rooms filled with plants and strange rocks - a few of which Varien collected - that branched off in a hundred different passages. They moved up ledges, down into tunnels, over and over.

But it wasn't at all deep enough. According to Varien, not once did they get more than three hundred 'meters' down. They looked and looked, but there was simply no way down. Eventually they had to give up; Volara could hunt endlessly, but Varien only had so much food with him. He couldn't hunt because his food needed preparation so he could safely eat it. The water, too.

He smacked his lips as they ended up by the destroyed lifepod again. "Unknown, forgot how much water you need when you're sick. I should start heading back." He cut himself off with another yawn.
"Let's get going, then," she said, looking at him worriedly. "I'm sorry we couldn't find it."

"It's fine," he said. Then he laughed. "I mean hey, worst comes to worst I can just build an unknown and dig down to it!" He laughed again, then trailed off nervously. "That uh, wouldn't actually work." He fiddled with his suit and began thrusting up, barely making it out to land on the surface. She swam up next to him. "Home's that way, you can find your way back from there, right?"

"I can," she confirmed, doing a casual loop in the water.

They crossed the flat areas and climbed up through the stone spikes. Varien groaned and murmured a quiet song to himself, making her keep throwing worried glances his way. They reached the grassy hills and continued back. They stopped so Varien could check the nearby wreckage quickly, but according to him there was nothing useful there.

Without further incident, they arrived back at Varien's territory. With a groan, he pulled himself up out of his suit and into the burning water. "Right, I'm gonna take a nap." He yawned again. "You can get back okay, right?"

"I can," she confirmed.

The human nodded. "Good. Volara, thank you for your help, even if we didn't find it. We'll try again tomorrow, right?"

"Tomorrow, yes. I'll be by when it brightens. In the meantime, I'll try to look for anything that might be good."

He held up a hand and waved it. "Oh, you don't need to do that."

"Yes, I do!" she insisted, eyes wide. "You are dying. And if there's any chance this 'cure' you're looking for can help others, too, then we need it." She quieted. "So many people die, Varien." She shook her head and brightened. "Go inside, get some rest. I'll be back tomorrow."

"Thanks again, Volara!" he called after her.

"Anytime!" She turned and swum away. She heard him sing something, but without the mini-shocker in sight it was just noise. Volara beat her tail fin against the water and headed home.

Think, think. What was there that might go deep enough for Varien's goal?

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Unanticipated Threats

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Thanks to DevoutRelic for editing.

Chapter published 8/18/17.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Estimated Time to Death: 32 days, 17 hours, 47 minutes

Varien

"Four bottles of lubricant, got the advanced wiring kit, the wiring, the rubber, nine titanium ingots." He nabbed three more ingots as the fabricator finished them up. "Twelve ingots! That should be enough." He stored them away, pulled out his habitat builder, and slipped into the ocean. He had something to build.

Once in the cool morning waters, he swam around his base until he was at an open side over a deep, sandy plain. He flicked through the buttons on his builder tool until he arrived on 'Moonpool'. Apparently it was supposed to be some kind of docking bay for vehicles. He selected a good spot for it, then held his thumb down on the 'build' button.

A pair of teal lasers shone from his tool, tracing the outline of a massive structure. It was even bigger than the multipurpose room, like a wide and squat rectangular prism connected to the rest of his base by a corridor. As he kept the button down, the fabrication beams went to work. Titanium, painted in shades of white and blue and black, crawled over the hologram. Glowing antennae formed on the top. Legs appeared on the moonpool's bottom, reaching down to anchor the structure into the bedrock. The metal spread, crackling as it fused with wire until finally, it was done. The lasers shut off.

Varien swam beneath the moonpool. On its underside was a hole leading in, with surface tension enhancers making a pool on the inside. He nodded; not bad. He climbed into his seamoth and steered it toward the moonpool's underside. He glanced up through the glass; he couldn't see much, but he thought he could see something like suction pads.

Sure enough, that was what they were. When he drew close enough they moved down, latching onto the top of his seamoth and pulling him up out of the water. With a jolt, he came to a rest and the hatch opened up on its own. He didn't get out right away, though. First, Varien leaned over and looked down. Sure enough, he was high and dry. The moonpool kept the ocean at bay right beneath him. Varien clambered out of the seamoth and onto one of two bridges on either end of the submarine. He gripped the handrails and stepped down to admire the moonpool from the inside.

It was a magnificent thing. He would've thought it something military if he didn't know better. Yellow rails surrounded the pair of bridges that led to his docked seamoth, and a pair of yellow ladders on the far ends of the structure led down into the water. The ceiling was black and patterned with glowing lights, on top of a series of black tube-like arms that held his seamoth aloft.
and charged its power cell. He liked it, he liked it a lot.

There was one more thing to do with it, though.

After a few more minutes of gathering copper, gold, and jeweled coral, he had all he needed to make a mod bay for his vehicles. He decided to put it facing his seamoth, so that if he were inside he could see the bay. It took the form of an indent in the walls, with a black screen. There was a miniature fabricator off to the side, and a console facing the seamoth itself. The screen read 'Seamoth docked. Fully charged.'

He slid to the fabricator and inspected it. Unlike the other one, this one was small and sunken into the walls. He waved a hand over it and it opened up, revealing a familiar pair of fabrication lasers, a table, and a touchscreen in the back with his options. Varien grinned; he could make so many things! Two of them drew his attention right away; a pressure compensator so his seamoth could go deeper before getting crushed, and a perimeter defense so it could zap anything nearby.

Zapping. He wondered what Volara was up to. He pictured her swimming through the trenches of the blood kelp area, her rows of glowing prongs undulating like a serpent as she did.

Anyway, the fabricator was useless right now. But the console was another story. He spun to face it and tapped its touchscreen. It displayed the name and color of his submarine. He could name it? Color it? He thought about the latter first. Maybe something to camouflage it, making it harder for predators to see. He'd always be able to find it with the signal, but he didn't want to stand out to Reapers and such. He decided to color the seamoth's insides and outsides in shades of blue, green, and teal.

What about the name? He wracked his head for anything to call it. Poseidon, Neptune, no, too grand. Bubbles, Currents, no, too simple. He drew a blank and decided the name 'Seamoth' could stay.

Varien walked to his seamoth and clambered over its side, sliding in through the open hatch. He closed it behind himself and sat in the seat. "Eject!" he ordered. And the moonpool obeyed, lowering his seamoth into the water before letting go with a wet shlorp of its suction cups. He grunted as he suddenly flew downward, but then it was alright. He piloted the submarine to his P.R.A.W.N. and entered it, docked the exosuit in his moonpool, and went back to the bay's console. There he repeated the same process; camouflaging shades of blue and green, and the name 'Prawn'. Good enough for him.

Though according to the bay, his exosuit was only at seventy-five percent charge. It'd take a while to fully power it.

Well, that was fine. He busied himself by going to get lunch. Today he cut a slice of marblemelon and a salt-cured 'hoverfish'. The marblemelon was striped orange on the outside and had a bizarre blue flesh. The hoverfish was something that lived in the kelp forests. It looked sort of like a yellow frog with blue dots on its back, but it had six legs that ended in leafy yellow pads.

The marblemelon's dense flesh was incredibly sweet, and filled with an outrageous amount of juice to the point where it dribbled down his chin in a waterfall with every bite. The hoverfish's crispy, salty legs were the best part. He ate them, then washed it all down with a bottle of water while sitting in a swivel chair, staring out the window at the beautiful sea. Peepers and boomerangs swam about in rushing schools, chirping and laughing happily. The local star's rays filtered through the shallow's waters and cast shifting waves of light on the sand.

But then his meal was over, and the illusion was broken. The Carar's symptoms flared up again,
wracking him with aches and dizziness like the worst flu he'd ever had. Varien winced and rubbed his knees as they throbbed. Damn it, he needed to find that facility.

As if summoned by his thoughts, an arc of electricity crackled in the distance. He sat up and quickly fished out his ampeel translator, holding it out to the side for Volara to see. Before long the titanic ampeel arrived, slithering between rock formations to his base. "Volara, good morning," he greeted.

"Hello, Varien." She looked to the side. "Your territory's... changed. What's the big rectangle?"

"That is my moonpool." That probably wouldn't translate. She wouldn't know the word 'moon', or the word 'pool' now that he thought about it. "I'll show you." He got up from his seat, winced as something popped, and went to his lockers. He fished out some food and water for the trip, plucked out a first aid kit, and headed over to the moonpool. His exosuit was suspended low, its feet sticking into the ocean. He walked onto its top, opened the hatch, and slid in. "Eject!" he called, placing his ampeel toy to the side.

The suction cups lowered him, then released. He dropped a few meters, crashing to the seafloor in a cloud of sand. He turned to face Volara and gave her a smile. "It's to hold one of my vehicles, keeps it safe. I'd like to make two, but you know." The timer hovering over his head, counting down to when the Carar would murder him.

"Right," Volara replied morosely, head lowered. "So, where to?"

"I - " His thoughts blanked. He raised a hand, then lowered it awkwardly. "I don't actually know where. Any ideas?"

She brightened up, looking up at him through squinted eyes. "I do, actually! When coming here I found these cave systems in the grass plains. I'd say it's worth a look."

He shrugged. "Alright, lead the way." Varien reached up and slid his hands into the exosuit's controls.

"Right, follow me," she said, turning tail and swimming off. Varien stomped after the ampeel, following as quickly as he could. They passed coral tubes, cave systems, and skirted the edges of a kelp forest. Before long, they were dropping down to the grassy plateaus. The shallows stood sharply off to his left, a series of wide cliffs leading almost straight up.

"We're here," he said. "Where's this cave?"

Volara swung her massive body left, then right. Then left again. "This way," she concluded, taking off. Varien followed after her, his exosuit pushing through the thick crimson grass around him.

The ampeel ended up leading him back to a cliff, nestled between the shallows, the grassy plains, and a forest of creepvine. There was even a fair bit of wreckage sitting on top of the rocks. Drilled into the cliff was a circular cave, which went in a few dozen meters before abruptly bending straight down. "This is it?"

"This is it," she confirmed, coiling up above the tunnel that went down. "I haven't been down there yet, though."

"Well, no time like the present." He walked to the ledge and peered down. Beneath him the tunnel became a honeycomb, multiple tunnels branching off, branching back together, over and over as it went down. "Let's go." He stepped forward, making sure to use the thrusters not to fall too quick. Volara followed above him, the relaxing hum of her electricity surrounding him.
He jumped to the next honeycomb of stone, again feathering his drop. "Why do you keep doing that?" Volara asked above him. "Why not just... drop?"

"I can't," he said. "If I fall too fast, I could get hurt."

She blinked. "You're scared of tiny parasites. You can't generate electricity. You can't swim, can't hunt, can't smell, can barely see or hear, can't go too deep, and can't even go down too fast. Varien, how do your people not die just hatching from your eggs?" she wondered.

"I'm going to ignore the insults," he deadpanned. "And humans don't hatch from eggs." He looked around for another relatively small drop and took it.

Volara followed. "Wait, don't hatch from eggs? Then what? Do you come into existence fully formed?"

A memory tingled in the back of his mind. "I remember there was a story about an old human god that did that, but that's just a story. No, um, humans give live birth."

"Live... birth?" she repeated with an oddly adorable tilt of her head. "You'll have to explain this for me."

Oh, joy. He got to teach a fish the birds and the bees. He could feel himself blushing already. "I don't know how you do it, but humans reproduce with uh, internal fertilization. The child forms inside the mother, grows for a few months, and then is pushed out of the mother. There's no egg surrounding them once that happens."

"Only the mother?" she wondered. "So, say, what about a father?"

Huh? What sort of question was that? "What? Alright then, how do your people do it?" he asked, gesturing to her.

She spun upside down, then rightside up again. "We have seasons now and again," she explained. "During those we have two or three eggs start growing inside us. After a few weeks we lay them, unfertilized. Usually we just eat them afterward," she explained. "No sense in wasting. But if we want them to hatch we go find someone else with a good lineage and fertilize each other's eggs. Then?" She shrugged in a weird, ripple-down-her-body way. "It depends. Either one side gets all the eggs to raise, or they split the eggs between them, or they give all their eggs to someone - or someones - that want fries."

Varien took a moment to process that. "Wait, so - hang on. You both fertilize each other's eggs?"

Volara eyed him sideways. "... yes? Is that strange?"

"No, no no no," he said, waving his hands. Apparently ampeels were hermaphroditic, like sea horses. Or... was that right for sea horses? Damn it, I'm not a biologist, he thought. "It's um, nevermind. When's this season occur?"

"Right now," she said. Volara shifted the lower half of her body from side to side. "I started feeling my eggs not long ago."

"Oh!" He blinked, stunned. What did he even say to that? "Um, congratulations!"

"Hmm," she grunted. "I don't know. I think I'll just keep them unfertilized again. Leave them out as bait for blighters or something." She sighed. "I'm sorry you won't be able to see them, though. It takes fifty-ish days to lay, and you'll be dead by then," she mourned.
"Don't say that," he snapped. "I'm not going to die. Let's get down there." He stepped over the last passage, and dropped.

The tunnel opened up into a titanic cavern, eclipsing the tunnels of the sparse reef he'd been to yesterday. It was dozens of meters tall and stretched off further than he could see. Stalactites grew over the ceiling like fungus. Coincidentally, actual fungus was what covered the floor. There were rock-hard mats of dull-violet, there were lichens, there was glowing indigo algae. But the centerpiece was the mushrooms. Titanic mushrooms, larger than his multipurpose room, with thick, veiny gray stalks and swaying pink caps that glowed bright enough to light up the entire cave. Around their bases were countless smaller versions of the mushrooms sprinkled like salt around the floor.

"Whoa," he breathed, taking in the sights. Row after row of the 'jellyshrooms' stretched off into the distance. Purple ferns grew between the fungi, as did pale gray shale rocks. Something clicked and warbled around him, similar to a peeper's laughter but deeper and more animalistic. On closer inspection he saw that it was from a strange type of fish. On first glance he would've thought it was a peeper, but the flesh was dark gray instead of blue, the eyes were brilliant purple, and the pupils looked like shattered pieces of glass held close together.

His PDA called it an 'oculus'. It looked at him with one eye, spun around to look at him with the other, then swum away quickly to play with a school of its kind.

Volara finished spiraling down after him. "Whoa," she echoed. "This place is beautiful!"

"I know!" he cheered, looking at her. "Alright, we're about two hundred fifty meters down. Let's look for a way deeper. Left, right, or forward?"

She swiveled about in the water, looking around the glowing caverns. "I say... right, let's go right."

"Right it is," he said, turning his exosuit around. He stomped forward, then held down the thrusters to jump up a tiny hill.

The two of them made their way through the caves, eyes on a swivel for any way deeper down. Small fish swarmed around them cautiously. Not just oculi, but eyeyes too. Biters hunted and chomped at the prey, but gave both him and Volara a wide berth. Now and then a faint boom filled the water, louder and louder as they kept searching. He thought he heard something snap its jaws behind them, but it must've just been a biter.

They squeezed single file between jellyshrooms, heads swiveling around. The source of the booms came into sight. They came from a pair of underwater geysers, which spewed steam and bubbles from beneath a ledge. He made out twin pools of magma, churning and freezing and re-melting in the frigid waters as they belched steam and anger up to the both of them. He didn't feel any heat, given he was in an environmentally sealed exosuit, but the ampeel with him...

"Blech!" Volara spat when a rush of hot water engulfed her. She flicked her tail fin and swam away. "What is that stuff?"

"Magma, it's molten rock," he explained.

"Wait, that word, before 'rock', what was it?" she asked, glancing back at him and straightening her body.

"Molten?" he asked, surprised. "What do you mean, have you never seen anything - " She'd never seen anything melt. Of course. " - oh. Um, alright. So if something is solid, and gets too hot, it can..."
melt and turn into a liquid version. Magma, is - "

"WHAT?!” she shouted, her prongs filling the water with her power. "It can - is that going to happen to us?!"

"What?! No, no no no!" he reassured, waving his aching hands at her. "We're fine, it takes more heat than we'll encounter to melt us. Just um. Magma is molten rock, and rocks are harder to melt than us. That stuff down there," he said, pointing to the lakes of brilliant orange, ", will kill us if we touch it. So let's not go down there. I don't see any caves around them anyway."

"Good riddance," Volara spat, already swimming ahead. Soon enough, he joined her.

There were more resources in the caves than he thought. Nodes of gold, copper, even silver. Some were small and easy for his P.R.A.W.N. to grab. Others were titanic chunks sticking out of the walls, and he'd need a drill arm to even think about harvesting them. He nabbed gray crystals of magnetite, and one or two pebbles of lithium. The waters continued to click and clack with a few warbling oculi, chomping biters, booming magma, and... something else. Something like a wail or roar, something that sent shivers down his back. Whatever it was, it was loud, but he hadn't seen anything that could make that noise.

So what was it?

Eventually, he and Volara stopped for dinner. He nibbled from a salted nutrient block for comfort food, whereas she zapped and snapped up the oculi. "They taste good," she said. "Meaty, and has some kind of aftertaste."

"I'll have to come back here and catch one later, then," he said. As they ate, he looked around at the fish. He noticed some of the oculi gathering near one of the larger jellyshroom's edge. One by one, some of them swam up to nip at the glowing pink cap, then swam away as though it burned to the touch. "Huh, weird," he said, pointing to them. "Think those mushrooms are edible?"

Volara looked back at him. "What do you mean edible? It's a plant."

"I can eat plants," he supplied. "I kinda have to. If I just eat meat all the time, I get sick." And who knew? Maybe it'd have some antibacterial properties to slow down the Carar. Penicillin was a fungus, right?

"Huh. Wait, is that what those plants growing in your territory are for?" He nodded, prompting her to flash him a mocking look. "Wow. You eat plants, too. Humans sound wimpier by the second."

"Oh, shut up." He opened the suit's hatch and climbed out, ampeel translator resting in the exosuit. "I'm going to scan it, maybe scrape off a sample if it's edible."

"If you insist..." the ampeel trailed off, backing away to give him clear passage to the nearest jellyshroom. It wouldn't be good if she zapped him while trying to talk, anyway.

He started swimming towards the nearest jellyshroom, and his PDA took that moment to chime in. "Scanning... conditions in this cave suggest it might support a unique microcosm of predatory life. Try to counter unanticipated threats by anticipating them."

"Useless advice as always," he muttered, beating his flippered feet to approach the mushroom. Halfway there he summoned forth his scanner and seaglide, holding each in one hand. The oculi and eyeyes scattered as he approached the edge of the jellyshroom, where he swam in place. From so close its bioluminescence was actually pretty bright, even painful to look at as it took up his entire field of vision. "Alright, lets see what you've got for me," he muttered, holding his scanner to
it and pressing the trigger. Silver light cascaded upon the fungus.

Something snarled and growled. It sounded close. But what could be causing it? There was nothing nearby. Varien looked around, catching Volara's eyes.

"I don't like this," she crackled as he continued to scan. "Something's not right."

He agreed. Where was this snarling, wailing predator? Was it invisible or something? Some kind of chameleon shark?

His scan ended and the shimmering lights around and inside the mushroom faded. He planted his feet against the fungus's membrane and kicked off -

**ROAR!**

Something popped up and *out* of the center of the mushroom, glaring at him with a faceless face. It was some kind of hideous serpent, colored bright pink with mottled purple spots on its back. Its underbelly was bright, glowing white and its head was entirely dominated by the kind of revolting, horror-inspiring face he'd only seen on zoomed-in bugs. Two black-tipped pincers stood out on the edges of its face, and between them was a cavernous maw with snapping, telescoping yellow fangs on top and bottom. He couldn't see any eyes, but it still turned to face him and sprang at him like a lightning bolt.

"AH!" Varien screamed. Several things happened at once.

One, he reflexively held down his seaglide's handle. Since he only held it with one hand he was pulled a few meters away before the propulsion device wrenched itself from his grip.

Two, the hideous snake lunged for where he'd just been.

Three, Volara charged it.

He was safely away, but his heart pounded so hard the world seemed to go in slow motion. The snake had popped from a hollow in the jellyshroom's trunk like a demented Jack-in-the-box. It'd seemed giant before, but then Volara clamped her jaws around its midsection and he got an idea for the true scale of what his PDA was calling a 'crabsnake'.

It was the size of an ampeel. Thinner, but just as long. Volara's jaws carved into its flesh and it roared hideously, but then swerved its sinuous body around to grab Volara's neck with its hook-shaped mandibles. She reared back in shock, her lower prongs stuttering, and then -

**Chomp! Chomp!**

A bone-crunching sound made his blood freeze as the crabsnake's hideous teeth reached out and snapped at her shell, spraying yellowish blood into the water. Then Volara opened her jaws in shock. Every one of her prongs lit up all at once, casting sky-blue lights upon the crabsnake. It hissed in response as she tore her fangs from its body, and then a discharge of electricity fried it. It screamed again and let go of her, and that was all the opening Volara needed. She lashed out and clamped her jaws on its wriggling body, filling it with jolt after jolt of energy. He didn't see lightning crackle along the crabsnake, but it thrashed and spasmed wildly before abruptly going still.

She released it and languidly swam over to his exosuit, staring at the translator inside. "Ow, ow," she whined, extinguishing her barrier of electricity and sinking to the floor.
"Volara!" he shouted, shocking himself back into action. "You're hurt!" He swam down to her level, staring at the wounded ampeel head-on. Off-yellow blood streamed from a wide cut in the side of her carapace.

"I'm fine," she groused. "What was that thing! It was - it was as big as me!" she exclaimed.

"I don't know, I guess it lives in the mushrooms and protects them from plant-eaters. Hang on, I have a first aid kit." He looked at his PDA, tapped along it for a second, and dropped the kit into his hands. He put his seaglide and scanner away. "Hold on, I'll stitch you up."

"Varien - "

"No, Volara!" he insisted, blood pounding in his ears. "You're bleeding! Just hold still, and don't zap me." Without waiting for a response, he swam towards the colossal eel.

"No, I'm fine, I oh for - !" she stammered, cutting herself off when he came close. Varien swam along her left side, to the second armor plate down from her head. He winced when he saw the wound; the crabsnake had bitten a solid chunk of her grainy exoskeleton off, leaving a vertical gash as wide as his open hand deep in her flesh. Even as he watched, her blood oozed out and was carried away by the waters.

He gulped and opened the first aid kit. Spray bottle of nanites, no good. Those were designed for humans and would almost certainly kill her. Disinfectants, maybe or maybe not. But he could use the wadding and bandages. He stuffed the wound with the absorbent white wads, which soaked through in seconds and turned bitter, rotten-apple green.

Once the bleeding was stemmed, he removed the wad and tossed it to the ground. Volara shifted her body slightly, but then held still as he pondered what to do. Finally, he decided he'd risk the disinfectant. Maybe it'd help keep her from contracting Carar via the open wound, maybe it wouldn't. It was worth a shot. He placed the bottle next to her open wound.

"Now this might sting, so please don't zap me in surprise," he warned. Volara's response was to smack her tail fin against a fungal mat. Good enough. He spritzed the disinfectant into her, the stuff taking on a shimmering quality when surrounded by water. He heard her jaws chomp angrily as it seeped into her body, but the titanic prongs jutting around him didn't light up. He sprayed until the bottle was empty, then tossed it back into the kit. She wasn't bleeding anymore, that was good.

"Alright, just the bandages left," he said, pulling out the lengths of white fabric. He wasn't wrapping an arm, where he could just wind the bandage all the way around. He had to get creative, so he just sort of... stuffed the bandage into Volara's wound, sealing up the canyon-esque hole in her body. Once satisfied the bandages were secure, he backed off. "I'm done."

"Finally!" she shouted, floating up into the water. "So... what do we do now?" she asked. "Those glowing things have the predators in them."

"And the path to further down might be in the middle of them," he finished, swimming over to his P.R.A.W.N. suit. "We, uh, should be okay as long as we don't bother the mushrooms themselves. And if you need to zap them, I'll be safe while in here," he brainstormed, climbing into the exosuit. "I mean, if you're okay with that? You're the one who'll be fighting them if they come out."

She huffed, flicking her tail fin irately. "Please. That one just surprised me is all. I can handle them."

Varien shrugged, then winced when his sore shoulders ached. "Alright, if you say so."
"By the way, can you eat those things? The mushrooms?"

Hmm. "Let me check," he said, pulling out his PDA. He flicked through the data entry he'd gotten... "No, inedible to me. Good thing I went to scan it," he groused. "Anyway, let's get looking?"

"Right!" she asserted. "I'll follow your lead."

So that was what they did for the next few hours. Tense, nervewracking hours as they peeled away from the cavern walls and stomped around the main body of the cave. Now that he knew crabsnakes lurked inside the mushrooms, poised to spring out at any second with jaws snapping, he was much more tense. Every pillar they looked around, every drop to the ground, made him wonder if that would upset a serpent and have it attack. The illuminated caves weren't beautiful anymore. Varien seemed to see crabsnakes everywhere, springing out of their mushrooms to mutilate the oculi that nibbled just a little too much on their homes.

There was howling everywhere.

But nowhere was there any passage deeper down. Nothing came snapping at them, but they weren't getting what they came for.

"Varien," Volara said suddenly, her electricity filling the water. "You said other people ejected from your ship in pods, right?"

What brought this up? "Um, yeah? What about it?"

"Because I think I see another human territory up ahead."

His eyes bugged out of their sockets. Every ache and pain in his body vanished instantly. "WHAT?! Where?!" he demanded, leaning forward and peering into the caverns.

"Up ahead, follow me." She put on a burst of speed, and dutifully Varien followed.

In seconds, he saw it. She was right, it was a manmade shelter, tucked in the back of the caverns with only a single towering jellyshroom next to it. This one was far more impressive than the one he'd seen on the Degasi island. It had two multipurpose rooms connected together by a series of corridors, and said corridors led up to a second floor that held the glass dome of an observatory.

But it was in horrible disrepair. The metal was corroded and covered in little starfish-shaped plants. One of the corridors, leading into the first of the multipurpose rooms, had broken off and rolled against a group of stalagmites. Strange, glowing plants hung from the outside and even inside of the shelter, which was filled to the brim with water.


"The what?" Volara wondered, rounding on him.

"The reason my ship, the Aurora, even came so close to here is because before us, there was a ship called the De-Ga-Si. It came here, and just vanished. The survivors had a few bases. I've already found one above the water. Guess this was their second." Another thought came to him. The Carar. Had that been what finished them off? He sighed. "May as well take a look inside."

"I'll stand guard," she offered.

He dipped his head. "Thanks." Varien climbed from his exosuit and pulled out his scanner. He
eyed the nearby jellyshroom warily, then kicked off to the seabase. He spotted a few shreds of metal around the base, so he decided to visit those first. Maybe get some technology out of it.

The first was the piece of a power cell charger, looking almost like a pair of giant metal goggles. Not bad, if a little redundant now that he had a moonpool. The second piece of scrap was the remainder of the same charger; once he scanned it, he could fabricate one with his builder tool.

The other pieces were what caught his interest. One was a round piece of corroded titanium, with wires and such sticking out of it. It was a piece for a nuclear fission reactor. His breath caught in his throat and he brought his hand over his mask. A nuclear reactor! Were there more? He looked around.

... there they were! Eyes wide, he swam around and scanned the scrap littering the outside of the Degasi base. There, he had the blueprints for a nuclear reactor! Short of finding a fusion reactor, that was the end-all be-all of power.

He calmed himself. It didn't matter, really. He was making do with solar power. He couldn't waste his time building a nuclear reactor, not with doom hanging over his head.

As if to reinforce the notion, his stuffy nose ached.

Right, well that was enough of that. He needed to go inside. Most of the hatches were rusted shut, but the corridor that had snapped off made it all too easy to get inside.

The snapped-off piece of the corridor, staggering enough, had a PDA in it, resting against the ocean floor. Varien swam into the tube, transferred the contents to his databank, and sat down to read it.

It was a series of voice recordings. He opened it up and listened to the first, labeled Pecking Order. "Son," came the voice of Paul Torgal. "There's always a pecking order. For us humans, money is what decides it. I pay Maida less than half of what I pay you, and you less than what I pay me. Whatever delusions she has, I'm the top of the pack."

"If that's true," responded his son Bart. "then why is she making the decisions?"

Paul scoffed. "All that education and I still have things to teach you. Maida is useful to us. Let her think what she wants, as long as she does as she's told."

"Aaand if she doesn't?"

Paul laughed. "For enough money, everyone does."

Varien rolled his eyes. Right, in a life or death situation, the size of her paycheck of imaginary money mattered. The next entry started, Curious Discovery. "What... is this thing?" Paul asked.

"Beats me," came Maida's voice. Something heavy clattered. "I found it outside, in the mud."

"Part of another ship?" the elder Torgal asked.

"Beats me."

"It glows..." Bart swooned. "It's not even scratched!"

A smack. "Don't touch it," Paul hissed. "It might be valuable."

"Please, chief," Maida sassed. "If it were gonna turn to dust, it would've when I hauled it here."
"This technology... we're not the first people on this world. I thought it was uncharted," Paul wondered. Something scraped; was someone scratching their head?

"Call it aliens then," Maida said. "Maybe the damn seamonsters made this thing. But I know this: we won't find the answer in this cave."

The entry ended. Right, Varien had found an alien artifact in the first Degasi base, hadn't he? Had Bart brought it back with him when he retreated to the island? Regardless, he didn't have much time to think. The next entry started, labeled 'Deeper?!'.

"We're two HUNDRED meters down!" Paul shouted, astounded. "And you want us to go even deeper?!

"Look around us, chief!" Maida countered. "I see water above us, water below us, water around us. We're drowning real slow, and rescue's never gonna come. Whatever shot us down will shoot down any rescue that comes. Do you see an off switch around here? Do ya?"

"No, but you think it'll be deeper into the ocean?"

"Well I sure didn't find this alien doohicky up top, did I? Call it a hunch. I've got an idea and I think you two will follow me down there. But watch it, chief. You don't have any authority down here," she snarled.

Above him, he heard Volara crackling in boredom. Varien blinked. Wow, that was a lot to take in. Ironically, Maida was wrong. The weapon was up top, as was its deactivation switch. It was true that the disease research facility was deeper, but she couldn't have known that.

"Alright," he muttered to himself. "What's inside, then?"

The entrance to the Degasi base was shared by some sort of drooping plant, a glowing cross between a jellyfish and a vine. A quick scan confirmed his fears; touching it was bad news for him. He had to squeeze in around it, eying the 'drooping stinger' as though it might spring to life and wrap itself around him any second. But it didn't, and he was in.

The multipurpose room was filled with plantlife, wrapping around a few shelves along the edges. More drooping stingers clung to the ceiling. One of them, he saw, had a dead eyeye wrapped in its tendrils. Its eye was a horrible shade of corroded white. A corridor led to the other room, and pressed against the wall was some sort of massive filter that went from floor to ceiling. It had two broken nodes on either side, and a divot in the middle that looked like it'd hold a water bottle. A quick scan confirmed that it was, indeed, a desalination water filter, which he could now build.

Yay.

Varien found another PDA underneath a table. He fell to his stomach and crawled to it, downloaded it, and opened the entry. "Those conniving, corporate, bourgeois, inbred, incompetent, self-absorbed MORONS!" Maida's voice screamed at him.

He recoiled, hit his head on the table, and grunted.

Maida sighed. "Alright, that's not fair to the kid. He's fine, he gets the situation, he's even useful. But his stupid, stupid father! I swear every word that comes out of his mouth is some narcissistic lie! He thinks that because he writes my paycheck - a paycheck, mind you, that doesn't exist down here! - he calls the shots. Well I'm doing the heavy lifting. I say jump, he's the one who asks how high. We're being hunted by seamonsters. What you do then is not hide in some dingy purple cave. You hunt them back. Then you build a boat from their bones and use it to hunt bigger seamonsters."
Repeat until you're the only one left."

Varien swallowed and looked out the hatch. Volara still swam around, her sinuous form crackling with stray arcs of energy.

"Whether or not they come, I'm going deeper," she continued. "I'll find whatever shot us, and make it wish it was never born. I've already started the prep work. Kid's taught me how to make glass, I've stockpiled ores. I'm going to make my own seamoth, raid the growbeds before I leave, and end this. Marguerit Maida, out." The recording ended.

He let out a tense breath. Wow. Well, he'd thought he heard tension between Maida and Paul Torgal, but damn. Varien crawled out from under the table and kept searching.

The corridor to the other multipurpose room had ladders that led up. He decided to save those for later. The next room was some kind of bedroom, with empty bottles of wine in the corner and an elaborate, two-person bed pressed against the wall. Tables and lockers lined the walls, and another hatch led out to next to a fully grown jellyshroom. The light from the fungi shone in, casting the walls in eerie pinks and shadows.

On one of the tables, there was a data box. He downloaded it; just the blueprint for a Cyclops pressure compensator. Whatever.

There was, however, one more PDA, in a locker. Varien nabbed it, downloaded it, and open the entry. It was Paul Torgal's personal log, labeled 'Dilemma'. "You know what Maida told me today?" he read aloud. "She wants to build another habitat half a kilometer below sea level, more than a kilometer east of here. And she wants the two of us to help her. She seems to think that if she acts enough like some foolhardy caveman she'll save us. But all she is is a mercenary, she punches people for money. Me? I've hauled starwhals to Neptune, plasteel to the Federation, my family operates nine different mining colonies in the Ariadne Arm alone. She thinks she's better suited to lead? Her contract and résumé both say otherwise.

"But... I have to admit, it may be my only hope. I had my eightieth birthday last week. I thought I might have another eighty in me. But down here there's no organ replacements for when I grow old. Down here, I'm mortal. Dying."

Varien rolled his eyes. "Yeah, you're the one dying."

"So we can either go back to the island and pray that whatever swatted the Degasi out of the sky won't do the same to our rescue, or go deeper and hope we find this off switch before either old age or the seamonsters get me. And... Maida's been right before. These caverns have enough lithium for a damn fleet of Cyclops submarines, for mountains of plasteel. I was right to order the detour to this world; when we get off this planet they'll be talking about the Torgal Corporation for generations to come." And the log ended.

Varien didn't know whether to be revolted at the short-sightedness of Paul's attitude, or impressed that he was so optimistic he considered escaping 4546B to be a foregone conclusion. He decided to be impressed.

But aside from the log, there was nothing useful in the room. Varien had one last place to check; the glass observatory on the second floor. He swam to the corridor, still making sure not to brush up against a stinger in the tight spaces, and climbed the ladder. Sure enough, there was another PDA in the observatory. Paul's son Bart if he had to guess.

He downloaded it and sure enough, it was his. He sat cross-legged on the dirty observatory and
read through the pair of entries. The first was labeled This World. "I thought it'd be claustrophobic, living underwater. And sure, Father seems to think it is, but I stare out the window and sometimes think I'm lucky to have the chance to see this world up close. The creatures that live down here, you wouldn't believe it. The fish, they glow. Snakes the length of a corridor section. There's one fish that's like, ninety-percent eyeball.

"... okay, so ninety-nine percent of the plants are toxic. Learned that the hard way." Varien chuckled. "But I've got some marbelmelons growing indoors, and even on the days they don't cut it we can eat the live specimens. Grosses me out, but it's survival." Oh, he could understand that. "Father approves of my research, says we need to use this world if we're to survive it. Personally, I'm just doing it for fun. We don't have any high-tech equipment, but old-fashioned observation and note-taking has its own charm. Like the snakes! They live in the mushrooms. When herbivores prey on the mushroom, they leap out and eat the herbivores. Their remains fall to the ocean floor and fertilize the fungi. Blows my mind; this world's amazing."

He looked up from the PDA and out the window. Glowing pink mushrooms as far as the eye could see, swaying gently in the breeze. Volara's massive dark form, zapping out sighs as she did rounds about the seabase. Varien smiled. "Yeah, it kinda is amazing," Varien agreed. He scrolled to the next entry, then raised an eyebrow at it. "Stalker Teeth?"

"Something amazing happened! So, we ran out of enamel for glass. We can make normal glass sure, but that won't cut it so far down. So, I started looking for a natural substitute, and I found one. The teeth of the stalkers we found earlier contain traces of titanium and other metals, just what we need. It got Marguerit real interested. I told her some of my other findings on stalker behavior patterns, then she just gets this... funny look on her face and goes out.

"Next thing I know, she's coming back with a whole bag full of stalker teeth! She had this huge cut on her forearm, but that's it. She told us that stalkers are next to harmless when fed, and after roughing some up with her thermoblade she had one literally eating out of her hand. And she just brushes it off, like it's no big deal!

"Now on the one hand, it's the most badass story I've ever heard and I'm sitting in a glass observatory writing this because of it, looking at biters tap uselessly on the glass. But on the other hand, I hope she didn't kill too many of them. What's the point of surviving this world if we destroy the things that make it beautiful? Ugh. Maybe I'm overthinking this. I just wish I knew more about these animals. Maybe if we had a containment unit..." And the log ended. Interesting. So that was how he could make the glass for his Cyclops? With stalker teeth? Weird.

Well, if nothing else the logs shed some more light on the fate of the Mongolian survivors. Varien wondered where this third seabase was. Surely that was where Silvia and the others were, right? Five hundred meters down, maybe some of the lifepods had come equipped with reinforced suits?

It didn't matter; he'd gotten everything he could out of the base. Time to head on back. He shimmied down the ladder, carefully crept past the drooping stingers, and out of the base.

Volara came to a halt and looked down at him. Her bandages had come off, but that was probably for the best. "You're back! Did you find anything?"

He climbed into his exosuit and briefly hefted the translator. Then he scratched his itching right arm. "A few things," he said. "One thing that might help is another place, five hundred meters down, to the east." He looked at his P.R.A.W.N.'s inbuilt compass. "Uh, that way," he said, pointing east. "It's our best shot."

"Hmm," the ampeel hummed. "Strange, my territory's the other way. Anyway, should we keep
looking around here, or...?"

Varien shook his head, then shuddered as a crabsnake roared in the distance. "No, I don't think there's any path down here. Let's head back."

"Great!" She looked up. "While you were inside, I found another exit. Right on top of us." Varien craned his neck back and looked up. Sure enough, there was a honeycomb of tunnels in the ceiling. "Ready when you are."

He shrugged. "Let's go." He leaped, and held the thrusters to head up while Volara swam after him.

Going up was almost as hard as going down. His suit's thrusters were barely enough to get from each platform of stone to the next. More than once he thought he'd start falling and land on Volara's head.

But it was enough. Slowly but surely, they made it. The terrible cavern and its equally terrible crabsnakes slid out of view until they erupted from the ground next to a kelp forest. He blinked to adjust his eyes to the fading sunlight, and his stomach growled. Then he yawned; stars above, that was tiring. "I think I'll call it a day," he murmured. "See you again?"

"Of course," Volara said. "I'm sorry this place didn't pan out. But if you want to come back to where we met, I think I have an idea for another place to go. Come by tomorrow?"

He thought about it. "Maybe, uh, the day after tomorrow," he suggested. "I have another device to build, and it's gonna take me a while to get all the stuff for it. I'll meet you then?"

She dipped her head, mimicking a human nod. "Day after," she said, turning sideways. "Be safe, Varien."

"I will," he said. "And thanks again for everything."

Varien turned away. He heard Volara crackle, but without her in his sight he didn't get a translation. It probably wasn't anything important.

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Volara

Stupid, stupid, stupid! How could she be so stupid?!

"I think I have an idea for another place to go?!" she chastised herself, swimming across the mushroom forest. "What were you thinking?!"

The answer was, simply, that she wasn't. How could she even consider offering the Underworld as an option? It was no place for the living. It was no place for her. It was certainly no place for tiny, dying Varien. Her friend was going to go down there and it was her fault, all because she couldn't keep her stupid prongs quiet!

Volara reached the end of the mushroom forest and bent her body downward, swimming deeper. She chomped angrily when the cut she'd received - from an ambush predator no less, how embarrassing - pulled and stung against her chitin. She knew the damage would heal and the armor would regrow, but ow. Volara hadn't been hurt like that since she was a fry.

Whatever. She'd still killed it. It'd gotten the jump on her was all.

The familiar, comforting darkness of her home's stone rose up around her. Vines stretched in all
directions. She wasn't quite in her territory yet, rather in the unclaimed lands, but she still felt no
shame in finding a feather-plant within a cave and cleaning her prongs with it. Volara flicked her
tail fin, swam out of the cave, and -

"Oh!" she yelped, coming to a halt before she rammed into the other shocker.

- ran right into Ohmaron. He blinked and curled up, swimming back. "Volara! I didn't know it was
you."

"Ohmaron," she greeted with a tilt of her head. "You startled me."

"Right, same. There wouldn't happen to be any feather-plants in there, are there?"

She zapped her front prongs. "There are, I just got done using some. Have fun."

"Thanks!" He straightened out and started to swim, but glanced towards her and stopped. "Wait,
what's this?" He turned around to look at her, and his green eyes widened. "Volara, you're hurt!"

She rolled her eyes and rose above him. "It's fine," she insisted. "You should see what happened to
the one that caused it."

"The one that - Volara, what causes cuts like this? A green-blaster? No!"

Volara sighed. He wasn't going to let this go, was he? "Fine. I was trying to help Varien find
something. We ended up in this cave, and one of the local predators took a bite out of me before I
killed it."

He narrowed his eyes. "Volara, this is exactly what I was worried about!" he protested. "You're
running around, in the Above of all things, for some little creature that'll get eaten any day, and
you're getting hurt because of him." Ohmaron swam closer, his face close to hers. "You should just
leave it alone," he pleaded.

Volara chomped at Ohmaron, flicked her body, and swam past him. "Thanks but no thanks,
Ohmaron. I'm not a bone-fish, I can take care of myself," she groused. "Now if you'll excuse me, I
need to head home to rest." And think about how to talk Varien out of going to the Underworld.

As she swam, she felt Ohmaron's eyes boring a hole into her back.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
I am an idiot, he thought.

Varien swam at the outskirts of a kelp forest, a dead peeper in each hand. His flippered feet kicked at the water. Above him the surface was grainy and disturbed as rain fell. Within the dense creepvine, roaring shadows danced about. He gulped nervously, feeling a painful lump of illness in his throat as he did. "Come out come out," he muttered, glancing left and right. "I've got something for you."

This was a dumb idea. Retarded, even. There was no reason for him to try hand-feeding a stalker to get at its teeth. Sure the Degasi crew had done that, but there were better ways! He could take his exosuit and punch them, then get their teeth that way. But no. He'd gotten the idea of 'feed the stalkers to get their teeth' in his head and now he was out here.

To add insult to injury, none of the stalkers were coming for him. What, was he not appetizing enough? Maybe if he drew closer?

The image of a bleeder latched onto his arm flickered through his mind. His body chilled at the thought. No, maybe he wouldn't go closer.

Did he even need stalker teeth? He needed them if he wanted to make the Cyclops submarine, but did he need that? Varien wasn't sure. Maybe it was too large and clunky. Or maybe better safe than sorry.

Speaking of 'sorry', one of the stalkers finally noticed him. The creature, a cross between a bottlenose dolphin and a shark, roared and swam towards him, jaws wide open to show off its impressive dentistry. Varien's heart pounded, and he prepared to call out his seaglide and make a break for it at any second. But then, to his amazement, the stalker began to slow down.

It closed its mouth and growled, eying him with a tiny pupil. He held out his dead peparers and let go, letting them float in the water. Alright, would -

CHOMP!

"Ah!" he yelped, jerking away when the stalker's long mouth opened wide and snapped down just as hard, swallowing both peparers at once with a blood-curdling crunch. Varien's voice came in
strained gasps, his heart pounding hard enough to send numbing chills through his chest.

The stalker eyed him again, hissed quietly in its throat, then turned off. Its tail beat up and down against the water, not at all like Volara's side-to-side swaying. The fish vanished into the gloomy kelp, and just when Varien was wondering if that was it, it came back with something in its mouth.

A massive piece of titanium salvage. The metal hung lopsided in its jaws, but sure enough the stalker was bringing him a piece of metal. It slowed to a stop next to him and opened its maw, dropping the wreckage at his feet. A pair of its teeth were wrenched out, stuck in the metal, and a third tooth fell to the side. The stalker eyed him expectantly.

"Uh, good boy?" he stammered, summoning a cooked boomerang from his suit. Varien presented the fish to the stalker. It gave a quiet keening roar and moved forward, opening its jaws. His breath skipped as it took the boomerang out of his hand with uncanny gentleness and swallowed it whole. Then it turned tail and headed back into the forest.

With the shark-like thing gone, Varien pulled the teeth out of the salvage. They were massive, nearly as large as his forearm and pearly white. The teeth looked like curved cones with points sharp enough to cut diamond. He put the three away into his suit, and as an afterthought pocketed the metal salvage too. Just then, the stalker came back with another piece of salvage in its jaws.

The ritual repeated itself. It gave him the salvage, this time dropping only a pair of its pearly teeth. Varien pulled out his last piece of food - a dead holefish - and presented it to the stalker. If it'd been gentle last time, it was downright adorable this time, nibbling the fish out of his hand and then even nuzzling him with the side of its lengthy mouth. He could easily imagine someone keeping a stalker as a pet, with some effort.

But he wasn't going to. He took the two teeth and, when the stalker vanished back into the forests, got away as quick as he could. He didn't want to find out what it would do when it returned with metal and he had no fish to give.

Once back in his base, he got to work. A quick scan confirmed that, sure enough, they were exactly what he needed to make enameled glass. The next few hours he worked hard, dancing around his fabricator and storage lockers. Copper ore into copper wire, into computer chips, into wiring kits. Mushrooms into batteries into power cells. Titanium into ingots, ingots into - after a trip to the mushroom forest for lithium - the super-strong alloy plasteel. Varien worked and worked, wracked with illness all the while. He hoped he wasn't keeping Volara waiting.

At long last, he swam to the surface and unleashed his mobile vehicle bay. He hopped on, rain battering him, and tapped on the console, bringing up Cyclops Submarine. It was supposed to be a vehicle famed for being able to be piloted solo. Which was good, because 'solo' was his middle name.

The quartet of drones flew up, shining their lights to form the holographic sketch of the Cyclops.

His jaw dropped. It was huge, stretching all across his vision from left to right. It was bigger than an ampeel, maybe even bigger than a Reaper Leviathan. He couldn't make out many details with the hologram's shimmering lights, but there was a dome at the front, and some array of sensors on top of the center.

Piece by piece, the drones went to work. Metal and glass and wiring took form, cracking and creaking as the Cyclops took form over the course of half an hour. When it was finally done, the fabrication robots flew to a safe distance and gravity took hold of the submarine. With a titanic splash, it slammed into the water and sent a tidal wave over him, knocking Varien off his vehicle.
bay and into the ocean.

There, beneath the waves, he saw it sink a short distance before coming to a stop. "The Cyclops," his PDA spoke. ", is designed to be operated by a three-person crew. Only experienced helmspeople should attempt to pilot this vehicle solo."

... right, he should've known. The Cyclops could be piloted solo, but it wasn't recommended. Well, he'd just have to make do.

Rubbing his hands together giddily, Varien swam to the underside of the plasteel behemoth. He swam along its long body until he found a hatch near the front, leading straight into the water. He tapped a gloved fist against the hatch, which opened up automatically. Varien gripped the inside and pulled himself in.

A computerized man's voice greeted his ears. "Welcome aboard, Captain! All systems are online."

"Yeah," he said happily. "That's right. I'm the captain."

He'd arrived in a cramped, claustrophobic room. The hatch closed itself beneath him, leaving him looking around the brightly lit white room. A single hatch on one side was the only way forward. He opened it, pushing his weight into the heavy metal door to open it up and stumble into the next room.

"Oh stars above," he said, awed. The ceiling was tall and broad. A ladder to his left lead up to a second floor, and to his right were five lockers sunken into the hull of the submarine. Varien walked forward to the end of the room, where there was a door that led further. On the other side of it was another room, with a checkerboard gray floor, glass ceiling, and what looked like moonpool arms hanging from it. After that room was a ramp that sloped upward, with two ladders on either side of him at the end.

Breathless, he climbed the ladder to his left and arrived in what was surely the engine room. Sticking out from the far end of the room and into the other was a colossal cylindrical turbine, sitting still and slicing the room in half. On either half were three receptacles, each holding a power cell for a grand total of six. In the wall next to him was a tiny fabricator sunken into the wall. He opened it up and examined its options.

"Power efficiency module, docking repair module, cyclops pressure compensator," he read aloud. Didn't he have a power efficiency module? He thought he did, from his journey in the Aurora's ruins. Eh, he'd get it later. The pressure compensator was more important.

He brought up his PDA and released more materials from his suit. A red shard of aluminum oxide, a computer chip, so on. He fed them into the Cyclops fabricator and, after a few minutes of him staring excitedly at it, the lasers finished making a tiny metal tube with an orange cap. He grabbed it and headed out the engine room's right door.

Now, he stood above the loading station. There was a hatch in the glass floor, and behind him was another hatch in the wall where he could load decoys. Another door led him back to the engine room, on the other side. There was no fabricator there, but rather a small console with a readout of his Cyclops. How much energy it had left, current crush depth, menus upon menus with charts upon charts. Beneath the console was a station with six empty holes. He plugged one with the pressure compensator. A subtle shift indicated his Cyclops's material rearranged itself to be better suited for deep diving.

He left the engine room for good, and strode past the hatch in the glass floor. Fire extinguishers
clung from the walls. There was another small room after that, and beyond that a hatch led to the bridge of his staggeringly large submersible.

The first thing that got his attention was the massive glass dome at the far side of the bridge. It gave him a perfect view of the shallows, inundated by floodlights. Right before it was the steering wheel, and beside it a holographic display of the submarine itself. All around the room were charts and scans with wildly flashing lights, but a certain few drew his attention. The first was a second hologram of the Cyclops, with the words 'damage readout' beneath it in orange. The second was a hardlight touchscreen to turn the interior and exterior lights on or off.

Last was a customization panel. Varien grinned and slid the color sliders around, setting his Cyclops to be camouflaging green and blue, with the name 'Cyclops' on the side in pale teal.

With shaking hands and short breath, he excitedly stepped to the steering wheel and gripped it in both hands. There was a glowing white compass in front, and he sounded the horn giddily.

Now that he was at the... helm? Now that he was at the helm, symbols appeared on the inside of the glass dome. Battery life, a bar on the side showing a way to reduce the noise made by the engines in addition to camera feed. He flicked his right hand at the camera feed. Just like that, the entire glass dome shifted to show him the signal from one of three mounted cameras on the submarine's outside. He flicked his hand again, changing the glass back to normal.

On the left was another button to power on the engines. Varien glanced at it, but stepped away. First things first.

He slid down the ladder, stumbled at the bottom, and dropped out the hatch. Varien swam away from the Cyclops, marveling at the way its newly-colored form dominated the shallow waters. In record time he was back in his shelter, fishing out the power module. He also grabbed a first aid kit, in addition to the purple alien artifact his fabricator had spent twenty hours making yesterday. With all those in store he climbed in his exosuit.

Varien stomped his way under the Cyclops with his suit, and the submarine's bottom opened right up, flooding the lower floor with water. He pressed on the thrusters to soar up, where he was picked up by the arms and suspended just like in the moonpool. The hatch beneath him closed and the water drained. He opened the top hatch and got out.

Right. Now he was ready.

After another quick check to make sure he had food and water, as well as putting in the efficiency module, he was ready. He turned on the engine, giving him even more data on his sub. Engine temperature, his current speed, ways to change the speed, he felt like his head was going to explode!

Focus. Stick to the basics. He flicked his hand to the option for normal speed -

"Engine: Powering up!" the Cyclops boomed, making him cringe under the volume.

Anyway. Normal speed, turn the wheel left. He had a good idea of which way the blood kelp was after being there so often, so it shouldn't be too hard to find his way -

CLANG!

The entire submarine jerked to the side, sending him spilling onto the floor. "Ow," he groaned, pulling himself back to the wheel. An ear-grating siren beeped in his ears, and on the holographic Cyclops to his right were red, flashing lights around the back end.
He'd hit a rock.

"Alright, alright." He turned the wheel back, ending the sirens. "Let's try it again. Forward..." The Cyclops lurched, making him nearly lose his footing again. He stopped after a moment, then tried to turn. This time, no rocks slammed into the hull. "Better, better. Alright, forward again - "

CLANG! "Damn it!" Now a rock underneath him. He rose up slightly. "Forward again, take two."

That time it went much better. But it wasn't long before, while piloting his submarine -

CLANG!

SLAM!

SMASH!

"I'm starting to see why they suggest three people for this thing," he muttered. A glance back at the damage display hologram showed a clean bill of health, thankfully. Plasteel was something, alright.

Varien's difficulties mostly ended once he got out of the shallows and into open waters. There, he was free to let his mind black out while he drove to the chasm. Sometimes a spadefish or a school of biters would slam into the glass dome and slide off in a shower of gore. He wondered, idly, what place Volara had found. So far the sparse reef and jellyshroom caverns were both busts.

Third time's the charm? He hoped so. He'd only been sick five days and he felt ready to keel over.

Before long the Cyclops cast its shadow over the mushroom forest, and then the chasm itself. He looked closely and saw a flare of blue light above the plains of black rock; Volara, waiting for him.

He hoped he hadn't kept her waiting.

Volara

It seemed her human had no end of surprises in store for her.

While she swam in circles, worrying herself green, she'd expected him to come along the sandy floor in his suit. What she hadn't expected was for a rock thrice her size to descend from the Above. It was long and round, with a bubble of clear material taking the place of a head. She could see inside through the dome, and standing there was Varien, holding something in his hands.

She relaxed her swim bladder and rose to his height, staring at him incredulously. "Varien," she said, all thoughts of talking him down gone from her head. What was this? When had he made it? What was it for? What magical things could it do? "What is this?" she asked, giving him a moment to retrieve his translating mini-shocker.

"This is my unknown submarine," he said proudly, puffing out his chest with not-water. "Uh, unknown. Cy-clops. It's named after a mythical creature that looks like a human, but with just one eye in the middle of its head."

"This is what you needed all that time to build, isn't it?" she wondered, circling away from the clear dome. She went a lap around the construct of rock and metal, taking in its scale. It was large, larger than her. Maybe with this he could... no. She had to stall him. Volara went back to Varien's field of view. "So, what can it do?"

He shrugged. "I'm still learning myself. I've got my Prawn docked inside, I know that much. Lots
of food and water, too. I should be good for a week or something. So, where - 

"How did you make it? I understand making something large takes longer, but was that all?" she interrupted, hearts pounding within her body.

"Well I had to get some stalker teeth, that was a real pain. But - wait, no. We're getting off track. Volara, you said you thought you knew a way down?"

No, no no no, he was being too direct! "Um, Varien, about that," she started. "I was thinking about that." She shook her head, swaying her entire body from side to side. "I don't think we should go down the way I was thinking. It's a bad idea. It's, uh." Um, um, think of something! She'd had an entire day to think of excuses! "It's caved in, no way past it!" No no no, stupid! That was the best she could come up with?!

"Really?" He raised one of the furry ridges over his eyes. "That's okay, I have my Prawn and you're super strong, right? We can just move them out of the way."

Aaaaaahh! "No, I mean it's really caved in! In fact there's no cave left! It's all gone!" she said, coiling up.

"Wait," he said, leaning in. He pressed his face against the glass dome. "Volara, you're not scared of going down there, are you?"

"Yes! No! Of course not!" She raised her head proudly, but her swim bladder tightened up involuntarily and she sank a bit. "I'm a shocker, we're not scared of anything!"

"Alright, so can you just lead me there then? We can figure out a way past. We need to get there, Volara!"

"Let's look for another way, then!" she begged. "We don't need to go that way, i-i-it's probably not even that deep!" she insisted frantically.

His voice turned still. "Volara, show me where it is." She whined, arcs of electricity flashing and zapping around her. "Please," he pleaded, contorting his face into a pathetically adorable form.

She trembled, tensed up, then released a cry into the water. "Fine! Just." She sighed and turned tail. "Follow me," she muttered, leading him into the unclaimed lands. Volara heard his massive construct of metal humming and beating at the water as it followed her. They passed around vines and rocky cliffs, deeper and deeper until they neared her territory. But instead of swimming forward, where they'd come across the lifepod that had landed in her home, she lead him straight down and turned him around to face the way they'd come.

They came face to face with a gargantuan tunnel carved into the cliffs; they'd swum right above it on the way over. Stalactites hung from the roof of the cavern, like the teeth of a massive predator. Nodes of strangely colored rocks decorated the insides, and a mouthful of bone-fish swarmed the inside. "Well, there it is," she said at last.

"It's not caved in." He turned to face her and she cringed away. "Volara, what's gotten into you?"

"It's! We can't! Ah! Don't you get it?! That's the entrance to the Underworld! The cursed land of the dead! We don't belong there!" she insisted. "If we go in we won't come back!" she explained, leveling her head at him. "We have to find some other way because if we go in we're both dead! Or worse!"

"The... Underworld?" he repeated dumbly.
"Yes! I don't know where you humans go when you die, but when we die it's down there. It's no place for us so we have to leave here and have to find another way to your facility or whatever because we won't find anything of value down there! Nope, nothing! Just the spirits of the dead!"

"Spirits of the - Volara, are you serious?" he asked incredulously. "Ghosts aren't real. It's probably just a bunch of predators down there. Let's get going." His Cyclops started moving forward, past her. Volara did the only thing she could think of.

She attacked it.

Her jaws clamped down on the metal just above the clear dome, crunching and tearing with a horrific grinding noise. She pulled away, leaving a shower of sparking wires behind. Varien screamed something in song, but while she couldn't see the translation he did stop moving. Something clanged inside the Cyclops for a moment, and a moment later the human was in the water with her, swimming up with a tiny bit of metal in his hands.

He sang something lowly and angrily, and she backed off to let him approach the spot where she'd bit his vehicle. He held the tool to it and its end sparked to life. Over long minutes, he welded it back together and the damage was fixed. He looked her way, glaring lightly. "Varien, look, I'm sorry but we cannot go down there!" He didn't have his translator with him, but that didn't matter. He didn't need it to understand her. "It was a mistake for me to even bring it up, I wasn't thinking. Please, let's just go look for it somewhere else!"

The human looked her way, then sighed and rested his tool on the ground. He kicked off and swam towards her, closer and closer until she couldn't talk without hurting him. Varien came up to her mouth and wrapped his arms around her head, looking down at her and singing quietly and reassuringly. She knew he was trying to calm her, but he didn't get it! Going down there was suicide!

He kept singing, rubbing his hands around the outside of her shell hard enough for her to feel it. Slowly but surely, she relaxed and let herself lay on his Cyclops, eyes closed and heartbeats slow.

Eventually he let go and went a safe distance from her. She rose up from the metal floor. "Alright," she muttered. "Let's at least try it."

Varien nodded and swam back inside his vessel. She headed around to the clear dome, where he used the metal-shocker to speak. "Thank you, Volara. Look, if you're so scared we'll just poke our heads in, and if we see anything we can't handle we'll head right back out. I mean, what in there could hurt you? You said it yourself, you're a shocker. What are you scared of?"

"Shockers," she said simply. "That's what I'm scared of."

He tilted his head. "Uh, there are shockers down there?"

"Their spirits are," she explained, swimming back and forth in front of him. "The wicked and vile of our kind, their souls are not content down there. Slowly but surely they coalesce until dozens, hundreds of spirits come together in a soul conglomerate, which rises from the Underworld to wreak terrible havoc upon the living. A body clear as water, a head with blades each as long as one of our kind, countless eyes! That's what I'm scared of. Multiple, murderous shockers at once."

"Volara, you're being silly. There's no such thing as this 'soul conglomerate' you're talking about!" he said, leaning forward.

She raised her head up and sparked angrily, glaring at the stupid human. Didn't he hear anything
she just said?! "Of course there is! I have a fryhood friend, Ohmaron. His parents killed the most recent one! They fought the conglomerate for days on end, just the two of them, and destroyed it all on their own! They're as real as you and I!" she insisted.

"Riiight," he drawled. "Did you see it?"

Her head flushed with blood and she looked away, embarrassed. "Well... no. I was a fry, my mother had us hide in a cave while it was active. But it's real!" she insisted, turning back to him. "Ohmaron saw it!"

Varien took a big breath of not-water and let it out. "Alright, whatever you say. Let's just go. You can stick by my ship if you're that scared," he teased, moving forward.

"You'd be scared too if you had any sense," she muttered, swimming alongside him. Volara sunk and swam in the shadow of his Cyclops, trembling quietly. She hated herself for this. She was a shocker, she wasn't supposed to ever know fear! Green-blasters, crawlers, chompers, everything cowered before her kind. But this was something different. This was the realm of the dead. The cursed darkness from which the Green Weakness came bubbling forth. She didn't want to go down there, this was suicide!

But there was nothing she could do. Varien just kept sliding down, the tunnel dipping away beneath them. The feeble light from outside vanished. They went deeper and deeper, the water around her cooling rapidly until every current was a refreshing chill. She looked around carefully, her gills pumping shallowly. Trickles of something thick and green oozed out of the walls, tumbling down to the ground and forming a stream, thicker and thicker the deeper they went.

She didn't want to think what it might've been.

A colossal vine-root heralded the end of the land of the living. Beyond it the tunnel opened up into a titanic cave, with a column of stone letting them choose to go left or right. Varien turned his machine right, swimming above the ever-thickening stream of green... stuff. Then the two of them entered the cave, the Underworld.

Volara's eyes flicked left and right as she tried to take in as many details as possible. It was dark, with the only light coming from what looked like gnarled black strands that sprouted from the ground, twisting and turning and ending in glowing white spots. They filled the cavern halfway to the brim. The green fluid was everywhere, forming 'puddles' on the flat ground. Any place free of the fluid was dotted with rock-hard plants, shaped like squat white domes with smaller domes within them. Bone-fish filled the water, either swimming around alone or in thin schools.

A deep wail sounded. Volara screamed, swimming up into the water. It was then that she saw them, the spirits of dead shockers.

Some of them were flat and blue, with transparent skin that let her see structures within them. They flapped wings through the water, moaning and wailing deeply. She couldn't see any mouths on them, let alone any teeth. Their eyes were simply two glowing blue orbs at their fronts. They filled the water above the twisted black vines, swimming about in small packs without a care in the world.

The others were more predatory. Shorter than her, but not by much. They had red faces with wide open mouths filled with jagged fangs. Four pale white tendrils sprouted from their heads and whipped around. The bodies were spiny and bony, like a bone-fish inflated to immense size. They patrolled the cavern in groups, sometimes lashing out with a tendril to snag a bone-fish, or teaming up and tearing apart one of the glowing blue souls as they warbled and hissed.
Volara trembled. This was it. Dead shockers. She was the first person to see the souls of the Underworld. Or maybe others had, but never lived to tell the tale. She could feel the chilling water creeping around her prongs like grasping hands, as though the very water itself was urging her to stay and join them. The cut in her side stung painfully, as though none of the armor had regrown.

Varien's vehicle lowered itself and came to a shuddering halt. He vanished from his place at the clear dome and, a moment later, the underbelly of his Cyclops opened up. His suit, with him in it, dropped and the Cyclops closed back up. He landed with a slam, deafeningly loud in the eerie silence of the Underworld. "Alright, let's take a look around," he told her.

Frantically, she swam closer to him and coiled up near his suit. "I don't like this," she whimpered. "Look!" Volara gestured to the flapping blue spirits. "There's so many of them. I didn't know there were so many wicked shockers, but there's so many more of them compared to the noble ones!"

Varien looked at her and sighed. "Volara, they're not spirits. They're just fish."

She swatted his suit with her tail fin. "Shows what you know - hey, where are you going?!" she hissed, following after him.

"There's some new metals here," he said, stopping his suit on a small hill. An oddly shaped gray rock clung to the floor. "Just let me see if I can..." His suit reached out an arm, opening its trio of fingers to grasp the stone. Slowly but surely Varien tried to put it in the suit's storage -

Awoooooo! a wicked soul screamed.

"AH!" she screamed, shooting away. Even Varien jumped, his suit losing its grip. Volara crashed into one of the black stalks and crumpled up. A flash of pain engulfed her head and she groaned, her body piling up on itself. Her eyes rolled in their sockets. "Ugh," she moaned, mouth open listlessly. "Ow."

"Are you alright?" he asked, leaning forward in his suit.

She righted herself, shook her head, and swam back to him. "Y-Yeah, I am." She looked around, catching sight of the wicked spirit flapping around. She could only wonder what they had done to have their predatory forms stripped. "Let's keep going."

Varien eyed her curiously, but then shrugged and finished picking up the gray rock.

The two of them stomped about the Underworld a little while longer, spiraling out from Varien's vessel. He stopped to collect shards of red crystal, gray stone, and white-blue shards. Volara, for her part, did nothing. Like she was just weighing him down. What could she possibly do to help him here? Protect him? From what?! The spirits of the dead? She was worthless, useless. Worse than useless, because he was worrying about her and not focusing on his task.

At length, he decided to go back to his Cyclops. Varien, suit and all, was swallowed by the machine. Moments later, he stood at the clear dome and piloted it, with Volara nervously following in his wake.

SMASH!

He ran the Cyclops into the black, twisted vines. They snapped and tore, tumbling down to the putrid green fluid. "My bad!" he shouted. A nearby pack of predator spirits hissed and warbled at him, but swam away and left them alone. She wondered if they were anyone she knew. Insulara? Chiralaron? Her mother? Would they attack her, or would they recognize her? Would they attack her even if they did?
Ignorant of her musings, Varien continued to pilot his Cyclops among the twisted souls of dead vines. More than once, he smashed them to bits while trying to turn, even with her assistance. All around them, rivers of green sludge poured from the vaulting ceiling. The stony floor sunk down multiple times in sudden cliffs, causing the trailing emerald liquid to form falls as it tumbled down.

At one point, Volara saw a skeleton.

Not like a bone-fish, or the noble spirits who were remade into the spiny predators, but an actual skeleton. It was just a skull resting among the black vine-souls, but was still twice her size. Had there once been a creature so much larger than her?

N-No. That was ridiculous. She was just unnerved, was all.

It wasn't just bone-fish and spirits, either. There were crawlers too, scuttling about the rocky floor, jumping and yipping. Whenever Varien dropped to inspect the area, she could at least kill those. She even gave one of the bodies to him to eat later.

The two of them searched high and low, up and down, in the Underworld. They didn't find anything immediately useful, though according to her stupid human they were over six hundred meters down. Closer than they'd ever been to his futile goal.

The Underworld continued on and on. Soon they found a tunnel that led straight down, just like the tunnel that led to the cavern of giant mushrooms and ambush-snakes. By then her eyes were drooping, and even Varien continuously sang long yawns from within his vehicle. He steered the Cyclops forward, past a growth of vine-souls. She followed after him and looked down; the green slime poured straight down into the deeps, further than she could see in the unusually murky waters. Varien wedged his machine right up against the stone corridor and sighed.

"Alright, I'm getting pretty tired," he muttered. "I think I'm gonna make a bed and go to rest in here. Continue this tomorrow. What about you?"

She looked around nervously. The wicked and noble souls warbled and wailed in the distance, but miraculously none had tried to make her like them yet. "I... I think I'll rest too. Mind if I lay on your machine?" she asked, gesturing with her tail to the wide metal sides.

"Go for it," he said. "Night, Volara."

"And to you too, Varien," she said, glancing around the Underworld one more time. Satisfied nothing was coming to get her right away, she found the side of his Cyclops closest to the stone walls and let herself sink onto it. The metal was cold and hard, nothing like the nest of plants she was used to, but shelter was shelter, especially with the rocks forming a ceiling above her. Volara closed her eyes, shifted her tail fin briefly, and rested.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, she'd convince Varien this was foolish.

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Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Sleep was restless, with him tossing and turning. It didn't help that his nose was clogged to the point where he could only breathe through his mouth.

But eventually, exhaustion took over and he found himself in dreamless sleep. In what felt like an instant Varien stirred back into consciousness, hands clutching at the sheets. Like every day for the past week, everything hurt.

With a herculean effort he pulled himself out of the bed he'd made in his Cyclops and stretched. He slid down the ladder to the lower deck and, after making sure all his gear was in place, slid out the hatch and into the water. He cringed as the bitterly cold water nipped at him through his suit, like thousands of tiny needles all over his itching skin.

Outside, the river prowlers and ghost rays continued to warble and wail in the distance. Green strands of something like moss hung from the ceiling. Beneath his Cyclops the ground fell into a tunnel hundreds of meters deep, a waterfall of brine spilling into the inky depths. So far away from the ghostly trees, there was almost no light at all. His Cyclops was black, and the only real light was given off by Volara.

Speaking of which, the ampeel was still asleep on his sub, still as stone. They needed to get going. He considered swimming to her and shaking her head to wake her up, but then thought better of it. Instead, he found a safe distance and took a deep breath.

"Volara!" he shouted. The megafauna stirred. "Volara, wake up!" One of her emerald eyes cracked open. After a moment of staring at each other, her eyes flew open and she shot off from his Cyclops, coiling down beneath it to stare up at him.

"Varien!" she stammered. She looked around at the oppressive stone walls and brinefall. "We're... we're still alive!" she said, amazed.

"We are," he reassured. "Come on, let's get something to eat and start heading down." He glanced into the depths of the vertical tunnel, his head buzzing with light nausea. He'd gotten used to seeing deep places since the crash, but with his Cyclops floating above the tunnel, it almost felt like he was flying.

Flying, with wings that were about to stop working.
"Eat?!" she hissed. "Eat what?"

He gestured to the ghost forest. "The... spinefish? You eat those all the time, don't you?"

"Yes but that's in my territory! Not here!" the ampeel whined.

"Volara..."

She chomped her mouth angrily. "Fine. You go inside and eat your food, or whatever. I'll be back soon." Without further word she swam away to the forest of ghostly trees, hesitated, and began meekly hunting. Varien cringed. There was something so... wrong about Volara being so visibly terrified. Something deeply indignifying about powerful, confident, apex-predator Volara whimpering like a child scared of the dark. He'd have to find a way to make it up to her.

For the time being though, he needed to eat. Varien slipped back into his warm, air-conditioned Cyclops and ate a meal of salted nutrient block and water. Ugh, water day in and day out. What he wouldn't give for some milk. Or coffee.

Before long he was done, and Volara had returned from her hunt and swam around the front of his sub. "Ready?" he asked. "I'm going to start going down. This thing has a 'camera' on the bottom. It lets me see what's below me," he explained. "but when I do I can't see out of this glass dome, so I'll be blind from here."

"I'll make sure to stay out of the way," Volara zapped, looking about fearfully. "Just be careful."

"Right. Here I go." He flicked his hand at one of the buttons, and his field of vision was taken up by the keel camera's feed. The tunnel yawned beneath him, wide and unknowable. Varien pushed the steering wheel in to descend, then turned left -

**SMASH!**

He slammed the tail of his ship into the rocks. "My bad!" He turned right and continued to descend -

**CLANG!**

He'd hit the ghostly plants. He saw in his camera as they came lose and tumbled into the abyss. "Argh, I hit that!" he whined. "Focus!"

After that, thank goodness, the tunnel widened and he stopped hitting everything. The rest of the descent went smoothly. He heard Volara's electricity somewhere above him, but he was more focused on the camera feed. Slowly but surely, as he went deeper and deeper, the bottom of the void came into view. The brinefall ended in a puddle, which overflowed into another shorter brinefall, which then terminated in another open cave. Varien stopped descending and ended the camera feed.

Volara swam back into view, and he got a good look at the cave. It had several exits to it, unlike the previous cave. There was a series of stepping cliffs up ahead, leading up and out of sight. There was a titanic hole in the walls to the right, and some kind of narrow ravine far to the left. The floor was shrouded in misty green brine, with a few islands of black stone sticking up. One of the larger such islands was covered in a handful of geothermal vents, spewing dense smoke into the water. River prowlers and ghost rays swam about in sparse packs, and a handful of ghostly trees sprouted from the brine lake.

It was fiendishly dark, too. The blue dome-plants barely pierced the gloom at all. But there was
another source of dim light far more important. Not his sub's headlights, not Volara's natural glow, but a set of metal pillars far to the left, sitting at the opening of a narrow ravine. He gasped and leaned up against the glass, looking closer. "That's it!" he shouted, heart leaping into his throat from excitement. "It has to be! Look!" he bubbled, pointing at the pillars. He was just over eight hundred meters down, too. Perfect!

Volara turned, then reared back and opened her mouth in shock. "Varien, I've seen something like that before."

He blinked. "Wait, you have?" he asked dumbly.

She turned to him. "Yes. Just outside my territory are short glowing rocks that look just like those. Why, have you seen them before?" A pause. "Wait. The weapon that destroyed your rescue, was it made of the same stuff as those?"

"It was," he said, gripping the steering wheel tightly. "Eight hundred meters down, and alien technology. We've found it! Let me just park my Cyclops over this island, and I'll get out."

"Alright," she said, moving out of his path.

Varien slid the Cyclops over to the island with thermal vents. As he did, his headlights fell upon an enormous skeleton, laying on the stone amidst a patch of sparse blue grass. He blinked at the size and structure. It looked to have four eyes, a reptilian head, it even had arms. But it didn't have a lower body. It was like the skeleton below the ribcage simply ceased to exist. The size was more worrying; it was as large as a Reaper.

With translation tool in hand and alien artifact in his pack, Varien got into his docked exosuit and ordered it to eject. The Cyclops's docking bay opened and out he fell, gliding to the stone. He stomped over to the skeleton with Volara trembling quietly by his side. "What is that?" she asked.

"I don't know." He glanced at the P.R.A.W.N.'s thermometer. Twenty degrees, that was fairly warm. Thank goodness for black smokers. He climbed out of his suit and into the waters, scanner tool in hand. "Let me get a quick look."

Swimming to the skeleton's head made it all the more horrifyingly apparent how big it was. The eye sockets were the size of his torso, the claws as long as his body. If it were alive, it could snap him up like a bite-sized snack. It could slurp up Volara like a strand of spaghetti. A quick scan confirmed his fears; it was some kind of leviathan class predator. Not a Reaper, obviously. Apparently the pattern on top of its skull wasn't natural, but enormous head trauma; this creature had tried to headbutt a wall, and the wall won.

His PDA estimated the time of death to one thousand years ago. Varien held out hope that whatever this thing was, it was extinct.

"So, what is it?" Volara asked.

"Some kind of leviathan, died by hitting its head long ago." He got back into his exosuit and shivered at the thought that something that big once swam the oceans.

"Wait, that word. Some kind of... what?"

"Leviathan," he said, sounding it out. "It's a class of giant predator at the top of its food chain."

"Oh!" Volara's fear melted away for a second as she posed proudly. "So like me?"
Um. "No, actually. You're not big enough to be classed a leviathan." The ampeel glared at him and he held up his hands innocently. "Hey, I'm not the one who decides it! If it helps, you're a leviathan to me."

She considered that for a moment with a cute tilt of her head. "Alright. So now let's just..." She turned to the alien pillars and gulped. "...um, are you sure we need to go there?"

Varien turned to face the pillars too. There wasn't enough light to see into the ravine, but there was something there. He was sure of it. The Disease Research Facility lay just behind that section of stone, and there he could find the cure for this horrible disease.

A river prowler warbled around him. There was a metallic edge to its voice.

He steeled himself and gripped the suit's controls. "We do," he said. "Come on, Volara. We're so close. Nothing's happened to us, right?"

She gave a worried look at the ghost rays. "Yet." Then she sighed, sending a ripple of energy down her body. "Let's just get it over with."

That was that, then. Varien stomped his way across the black stone, using his thrusters to cross above the rivers of brine. Volara swam after him, eerily quiet. Before long he arrived at one of the towering metal pillars, a dull green light in its center. It was utterly untouched, as was the next one and the next one. They crossed the ravine, which had a river of brine for a floor, occasionally stopping for him to pick up a piece of silver or nickel. A few shattered skeletons, yellow with age, littered the land and he had to step over them.

Before long the ravine ended, opening into yet another cavern. His heart both flew and sunk as he took in the sights. There it was, his ultimate goal. The alien Disease Research Facility.

The good news was obvious. There was the facility, the place where the super-advanced aliens worked to develop a cure for the disease currently killing him. He'd spent a week looking for it and now here it was, dominating the scene like a titan of ancient myth. It was shaped like a cube of strange alien metal, with multiple cables running up into the ceiling. He could even see what looked like a few openings.

The bad news was that the place was utterly trashed. Panels on the outside were peeled open, walls were smashed in. The structure had -

"This alien structure appears to have collapsed to the seafloor. Calculating possible causes," his PDA interjected.

- yes, that. It'd collapsed to the ocean floor, lopsided with green plants growing over the outside. A few stray cables still connected it to the stone, but most of them had come loose and hung limply in the water with chunks of the structure attached to them. More alien debris littered the walls of the surrounding cave, crushing the local plants beneath their frames.

"Oh fuck," he swore, placing his hands on his head. "Damn it! What?! HOW?! Didn't - wasn't there - what?!"

Volara swam up next to him. "Is this it? It looks dead."

"Yeah," he panted. "Something destroyed it, but what? What could possibly do this to aliens that advanced? I mean stars above, their batteries hold the energy of a nuke! But we're here and it's... this." He gestured to it. His heart began sinking deeper and deeper. If it was so ruined, what were the odds of him finding a cure at all? He sighed. "Let's just go in and check."
He stepped his exosuit forward, but Volara swam forward and stopped him. "Varien wait!" He did. "I think I hear..." She looked up and around, and he did the same. There were a handful of river prowlers swimming near the top of the cave. One of them was covered in the green cysts of the Carar, but the ampeel by his side didn't look at it. What was Volara looking for...?

Then he saw it. Something brilliant cut through the gloom. It was a blazing whirlpool of blue light, shoving the water away from it. The flash ended and in its place was a creature like nothing he'd ever seen, hovering by the bottom of the ruined alien base. It was purple, with a bizarre head with mandibles and a quartet of violet eyes. Between the mandibles was something like buck teeth. Its chest had a colossal portion that looked like glass, exposing pumping inner organs, veins, and what looked like wires. It had no legs or tail, but rather its lower half separated into multiple tentacles that pumped languidly behind it. Most alarmingly were its two arms, ending not in claws or fingers but each in an icy blue sickle the length of his torso.

"Them," Volara whispered, tensing up. "It's them!" she spat, her voice a black growl.

"Them?" he parroted.

"Summoners," she said, at the same time as which his PDA labeled them 'warpers'. "But why here?! Why now? Why would anything bring them... to..." She trailed off and looked his way, locking eyes with him.

At the same time, more warpers appeared from glowing portals, floating all around the ruined facility. One of them made a beeline for the infected river prowler, clicking and screaming entirely too much like a machine. The fish turned to hiss at it and snapped its jaws, and the two fought.

Well. 'Fought'.

In mere seconds, the warper's scythes tore the river prowler to bloody ribbons. It shot something at the corpse, and both warper and its victim vanished in twin vortexes.

His throat went dry at the sight. Oh, that wasn't good.

Finally, Volara seemed to come to a conclusion. She tore her gaze away and her voice lowered from a frightened tenor to dangerously black. "No!" she snarled, before shooting away like a cannonball. He jerked back in his seat as the ampeel closed in on the nearest warper, alight with electricity. The thing was slow to turn and face her, and she closed her jaws around one of its arms and bit down hard while simultaneously frying the water around her.

Whoosh! Another vortex lit up the waters, and then the warper was gone. Volara turned back to him and swam closer, mouth open angrily. "Um, wanna explain what that was about?" he asked.

"Summoners," she repeated. "The Green Weakness doesn't always just kill on its own, Varien. I don't know what these... things are. Unknown or unknown, nobody knows. What we do know is they can smell the Green Weakness in people. They hunt down the afflicted and kill them. When we're infected, we can fight them off at first. But the illness progresses and we get weaker and weaker, and half the time they find us and kill us before the Green Weakness itself can finish the job." She looked down morosely. "They followed you here," she bemoaned. "They'll hunt you down every waking moment until they get you."

"Wait," he said, reclining in his chair and holding up his hands. "So let me see if I understand this. These 'summoners', which can teleport themselves and other things, can detect the Carar. They hunt down and kill anything that has it. There's dozens of them around this alien facility which was set up to study the Carar. Volara, I think they're robots," he said, putting the pieces together.
"They're what?" she asked.

"Ro-bots. Basically, machines made to act on their own. Like, if my suit here could go around picking up metal without me needing to control it, then it'd be a robot. If what you're saying is right then these aliens made robots to kill anything infected," he said, looking up at the handful of warpers patrolling the water. He didn't like the implications. If they could affix teleportation devices to robots that small...

"Maybe," the ampeel muttered.

"We still need to go in," he said at last. "If there's even a chance there's still a cure inside, we need to look. Let's find an entrance."

"Right behind you," she said warily, eyes flicking between the river prowlers and warpers.

Varien walked a vast perimeter around the ruined facility, stepping over skeletons and alien cables. Volara didn't make any motion when the river prowlers were near, but if a warper so much as glanced in his general direction she ravaged it with breathtaking, animalistic ferocity. He soon found that the cave was not really a cave, but the end of a long and wide tunnel that stretched away into the darkness.

Soon, they found an entrance that wasn't collapsed with rubble. On one of the sides of the facility, high up on its structure, was an open way in. With his thrusters Varien soared up to it and landed inside the facility.

The slanted angle meant his exosuit had trouble finding its footing, leaving Varien lopsided. The inside of the ruined structure showed all the signs of damage the outside did; burst walls, moss growing from the ceiling, and dome-plants from the floor. Unlike the alien gun, everything was completely flooded. Pillars and support struts were gnarled and wrinkled, like some titanic hand had crushed them. An ion crystal sat on a nearby pedestal, and down a tilted ramp was a force field closing off a small room. Varien walked his suit inside, nabbing the ion crystal and examining the energy wall.

"Detecting an alien broadcast," his PDA said. "Translation reads: Warning, hazardous materials and lifeforms contained within."

Well, that made sense, if it was a research facility. He turned from the force field, resolving to open it later, and swam down a ramp. There was another ion crystal resting there, so he grabbed it. Then Varien turned around and saw Volara swimming in.

"Whoa," she whispered, looking about the place. Her titanic body dominated the cramped corridors. "Is this like the weapon you were talking about?"

"Exactly like it," he said. "But smaller, and destroyed. I see a ramp down here," he said, heading further down. At the end of it was an arching doorway, but black metal rods had collapsed across it, leaving barely any room past. He tried moving the debris out of the way with his exosuit, but it was stuck fast. Varien sighed and got out, leaving his P.R.A.W.N. to the side. "I'm going to have to go on my own from here," he said, turning to face the ampeel with his translator in hand.

"What?!" she shouted, her upper body rearing back. "Varien you can't be serious. Don't leave me alone out here with all the dead!"

Oh stars above, this again. "Volara, you'll be fine." He swam to the debris, squeezed through, and came out in the next room. It was as overgrown as everything else, with a shattered table and dim
lights. In the middle was -

Awoooo! a ghost ray howled.

"AH!" Volara shouted, then came swimming towards him. Varien yelped in shock as her massive, grimacing face shoved itself into the collapsed doorway. He backed up as Volara continued beating her body against the metal outside, slowly but surely squeezing fifty tonnes of terrified fish into the suddenly crowded room.

He looked at her. She looked back at him. He sighed. "Damn it, Volara. Alright, just stay far enough away so we can talk. I need to look around."

She gave him a meek 'yes', and he got to exploring.

It was silent as the grave, unnervingly still and bitterly cold. The centerpiece of the room was the glass container in the center, holding some kind of egg. It was staggering in its size, as long as Varien was tall and colored like basalt. On one end it has a series of spikes like teeth crowning it, including one set of massive spikes in the center of all the others. He quickly scanned it.

"Analyzing data," his PDA said. "Genetic analysis indicates this is the egg of a massive, deep-dwelling predator of the leviathan class. Egg exhibits no signs of life." He let out a breath of relief. No signs of life. It wouldn't hatch on him.

To the right of the leviathan egg was a glass case with pinned creatures in it, like an insect display in a museum. One of the creatures was a rabbit ray from the shallows, a ghost ray from the underground cavern he was in right now, a spadefish and a hoopfish. The two other creatures he didn't recognize. One was a ray, but opaque and deep, blood red. The other was some kind of grub with crimson circles on its dusky skin. He tried to scan them, but the casing's glass interfered with his scanner. It must've been thicker than the leviathan egg's casing.

"Another egg," he told Volara, spinning around to see her pressed against the walls. "And a display of dead animals."

"They killed one of the wicked," she breathed, staring at the pinned ghost ray. "Good, good."

He shook his head, but said nothing and instead swam deeper. A series of ramps, useless with the flooding, terminated in a third ion crystal that he stored in his suit. His PDA spoke up again.

"Interior walls are substantially reinforced. Unable to identify whether the purpose was to keep something out, or in. Whatever the intention of the designers, it failed." Reinforced?

Ahead of him was a data terminal with a flickering, acidic green hologram above it. Past it was a glass window, tarnished to near opacity. He held his PDA up to the hologram and let it transfer the information. Once done, and with Volara at his back, he opened it up.

"Damage report," he read aloud. "Damage report, so what, is this about what trashed this place?" He read on. "Leviathan detected at facility perimeter, closing at high speed. Exterior wall impacted with massive force. Leviathan egg containment breached, structural integrity compromised, specimen destruction protocol initiated. Three hundred and fourteen terminated, one unaccounted for. Evacuating staff, initiating planetary quarantine procedures."

"So... what does that mean?" Volara asked, hovering above him.

"Leviathan closing," he said, awe and horror and disbelief battling for dominance. "Leviathan
closing. Holy shit, Volara that skeleton we saw outside. It died from head trauma, right?" He spread his arms out and gestured to the facility around them. "It tried to get here because the aliens were studying its eggs. That skeleton did this to this place!" Volara could bite through solid plasteel like it was butter. A leviathan could mutilate super-advanced alien alloys. What kind of planet was this?!

Further on there was a hallway, and despite the dim lighting he could see a data terminal at the end. Before that, however, there was a shattered window to the left that revealed what must've been an aquarium. Laying on a slab of stone in the middle was a titanic skeleton shaped like a biter with nubby hands. Green moss grew from the inside of its jaws.

He swam in, and Volara followed him.

"Oh, wow," she whispered. "It's as big as me."

"Yeah." He scanned the skeleton and looked over the data. "I'm guessing this 'specimen destruction' protocol killed it." He looked around the aquarium, at the many overgrown plants and few shattered ribcages. "Looks kinda like a biter, or blighter, doesn't it?"

Volara nodded. "It does. But they don't grow that big. I'd know if they did."

"Maybe they used to," he supplied. "I mean, considering the leviathan skeleton outside, this would've been a thousand years ago. Come on, I saw another terminal." He swam for the shattered glass and back into the flooded hallway. "I want to see what - "

Volara chomped at the water. He yelped and turned to face her. "Varien! I just! I figured it out!"

"Figured what out?" he asked, the ampeel swimming in circles in front of him, above the skeleton.

"The Green Weakness is said to be a curse that came from the Underworld. You said these aliens were trying to study it, to find a way to destroy it, right? But they were attacked, this place was ruined - "

"- and the Carar escaped," he finished. "It all fits."

Volara growled. Not actually, but the translation of her stuttering arcs was a growl. "It's their fault. If they'd been more careful, or if they'd brought weapons to fend off that leviathan. Damnable death, my people existed back then! If they'd just asked us to guard this place for them, none of this would've ever happened! My family wouldn't... my eggs wouldn't - " She sunk, draping herself along the skeleton.

Something bitter coated his tongue at her words. His eyes softened and Varien swam over to the upset megalafauna and wrapped his hands around her head. "Hey, hey, shh. It's in the past. If it makes you feel better, I'm pretty sure all the aliens working here died when the Carar was unleashed. Come on, let's keep looking. There has to be something."

He let go and backed off, letting her speak. "Right, you're right. Let's keep looking. There was something in the next room, right? One of those glowing things you can do stuff with."

"Data terminal, right." The two of them swam out of the aquarium and into the next chamber. There was still the glowing holographic terminal, and to the left a tarnished window that once would've looked into the aquarium, but to the right was what he could only describe as dissected warpers.

Purple guts and arms with scythes hung from the walls. Organs laid on tables with robotic arms
poised above them, shelves contained purple body parts, and one of the shelves was knocked over. The centerpiece was a half built warper, with no betentacled lower half. It was suspended from the ceiling by a maze of green wires, which plugged into its open chest cavity. Its face looked straight up in a silent, unknowable expression.

"Biological evidence," his assistant chimed. ", suggests indigenous lifeforms were brought here to be subjected to intensive genetic manipulation."

Cyborgs, then. These 'precursor' aliens hadn't just built robots. They took some kind of native life and turned them into cyborgs. He wondered if he could scan the warper -

"NO!" Volara shouted, springing at the half-built cyborg. Her prongs flared to life and nearly blinded him as she crashed into the warper, tearing it from its place with her jaws. She thrashed her head around, smashing the robot into the walls, floor, and tables until it was little more than a mangled piece of purple fabric and metal. She opened her mouth and let its ruined corpse fall to the ground.

"Um, Volara, it wasn't active," he said. "What's with the hatred for warpers?"

Still facing away from him, Volara's head lowered. "Varien, I told you how I lost my eggs to the Green Weakness, right? That's only a half truth." What? Oh no, she didn't mean what he thought she did, did she? "While waiting for my eggs to hatch, I kept them in this small cave. I could close off its entrance with rocks easily, keep any chompers from getting in and eating them. Once, while I was out hunting, I came back and opened up the cave." Her voice grew tight and strained, and her body sunk to the floor.

"Volara, you don't need to - "

"There was a summoner in there with them. Their shells had green spots on them. It raised its arms and - all three of them - I could recognize them once the eggs broke I couldn't, and then it just left like it hadn't..." She trailed off, prongs quiet.

Varien let himself sink to the floor and sat cross-legged. "Oh stars, Volara that's awful. I'm so sorry you had to go through that." He couldn't even imagine. What if he and Silvia had been expecting, and he one day came home to find her... he wanted to give Volara a hug.

"It wasn't your fault," she muttered. "Just do your thing with that light and let's go."

He nodded. "Alright." Varien wasn't going to just drop it, though. He resolved to do something for Volara in the future.

Downloading the terminal's information didn't take long. He pulled up the entry and read through it; it was a profile of the Carar, describing the bacterium in excruciating detail. Luckily, his PDA gave him the important bits.

The precursor aliens had first discovered it during a routine expansion, and technology errors meant their quarantines failed. It got to their core worlds and ravaged them. At the time of the entry's creation it'd killed -

He nearly threw up.

One hundred and forty-three billion people.

Carar's symptoms were mostly in line with what his PDA had predicted. A symptomless incubation, then flu symptoms, immune system destruction, then wild genetic changes that caused
The aliens didn't know how to cure it. Damn it, damn it, *damn it!* This was a bust! They didn't have a cure, how was he supposed to save himself now?

Varien caught himself and took a deep breath through his mouth. No, no. Calm down. That was quitter talk. Looking around the room showed no other hallways, but he still had one last chance. "Volara," he said, grabbing the downtrodden eel's attention. "There's one last place in this building I want to check. Are you good to follow?"

She zapped her tusk prongs 'yes'. "Let's go," she muttered. "Lead the way."

After giving her another worried look, he did just that. They passed the aquarium, the first terminal, and the egg room. He and Volara both squeezed through the collapsed door and into the initial chamber, where his exosuit still leaned against the abused walls. As they swam, he kept glancing worriedly at the ampeel behind him. He didn't want to be here anymore. This place was clearly bringing up unpleasant memories for her, and that made his stomach churn. After all she'd done for him, given him food, protection and company, she deserved more than to have those kind of memories dug up.

In the main foyer, the force field still hummed, blindingly bright in the otherwise dark halls. Varien approached its terminal, summoned the purple artifact he'd spent a literal day fabricating, and held it out. The terminal opened and wrenched the artifact from his grip, then closed itself. With a quiet whir, the barrier faded. Volara gave an amazed hum of static behind him.

Inside was just a tiny room, a broom closet compared to the normally gigantic architecture in precursor bases. There was only a single terminal inside, and nothing more. Frowning, he waved his PDA through the hologram and waited for it to process the gigantic stores of data.

"Specimen research data," he read aloud, turning to face Volara. "Apparently they were injecting animals here with the Carar to see how they held up, if any of them had some kind of resistance they could then take advantage of. Um, lets see. Garryfish, dead in three days. Unidentified deep-sea leviathan, dead in three weeks. Wait. Eggs kept for high-priority leviathan egg hatching research?"

"They were trying to learn how eggs hatch?" Volara wondered.

"Apparently. Anyway, uh, peepers, no immunity but some capacity for learned behavior." He read another entry that chilled him. Ampeels, dead in five weeks. These precursors had captured, experimented on, and indirectly *killed* Volara's kind. He didn't read that aloud to her. "Hm. Unidentified leviathan. Symbol translates to 'sea emperor' leviathan. Bone marrow suggests - " His breath caught in his throat. " - suggests potential immunity to Carar! Single specimen captured for study at purpose-built habitat in volcanic region, depths of twelve hundred plus meters. Assessment, while it is unlikely the emperor specimen is still alive, it may be possible to acquire further information on the aliens' attempts to create a vaccine. A signal for an alien power generator was found in the data, adding to PDA."

He flicked through the tabs on his data assistant and turned on the signal for this 'power generator'. His eye implants lit up with the mark, a blue symbol located right beneath him, over five hundred meters deeper from where he was.

"What does this mean?" Volara asked, glancing at the exit where ghost rays and warpers swam. "Is it good?"
Varien narrowed his eyes, struggling to decide how to feel. "Well, uh, good and bad. There's no
cure here. Apparently they found something here that could resist the Carar, and kept it
somewhere else. It's about four, five hundred meters down from here. This 'sea emperor' probably
died, but maybe they have information down there about a cure."

Volara nudged her head at him. "But?"

"But, I can't go that far down. My P.R.A.W.N. can't go much more than nine hundred meters
down. Even if I built a pressure compensator, that'll only make it good for a kilometer and that's
nowhere near enough. And apparently it's in a volcanic place, so I can't just swim. I just, I can't get
that far down!" he said, exasperated.

"What?" she asked, undulating around the cramped space. "But... you can do all these things! You
can make metal speak like my kind. You can turn rocks into shells. Isn't there some way to make
this 'pressure whatever' good enough to let you go that far down?"

Well... "There is one thing. A pressure compensator mark two, or mark three, would be enough."

"What's the problem then?" she asked. "Make one!"

"The problem is I can't!" he retorted, throwing his hands into the water above him. "I'd need a
modification station to make the mark two and three, and my builder tool can't make one! I'm
stuck, this is about as far as I can go!"

No modification station meant no advanced pressure compensators. Without those, no going to this
'sea emperor' facility. Without that, no cure. No cure, he died. Stars above, was he really going to
die to something like databank corruption?

The two of them swam in silence for a few moments, staring at each other. Volara was the one who
broke the silence.

"Well... can't you do something? Teach your builder-thing how to make one?"

He considered it. "My scanner," he said, summoning said spectroscope and showing it off. "The
Aurora was carrying modification stations on it, they're pretty standard equipment. If I find a
modification station it'll almost certainly be broken, but if I scan it then I'll be able to build one.
The problem is, I don't know where the modification stations are. For all I knew, they were all
destroyed when the Aurora's drive core blew up!"

"Oh," she said dumbly.

"Yeah, oh," he parroted dumbly. He brought his hands to the glass dome of his helmet and dragged
them down. "I don't know what to do."

A ghost ray moaned in the distance, prompting Volara to jerk in fright. "Maybe, uh, we could start
by getting out of the Underworld?" she pleaded.

"Alright." He swam over to his exosuit and climbed in. "Let's go. I'll lead."

The two of them made their way out of the titanic, ruined facility. He dropped to the ground far
below, Volara swimming after him and mutilating any warpers even remotely in their path. Now
that he knew what they'd done, he could hardly blame her.

They left the tunnel and passed through the ravine to the main chamber. Resting there, just like
he'd left it, was his Cyclops. Even with the lights turned off it dominated the scene, with only the
leviathan skeleton beneath to challenge its size. None of the river prowlers even came close to it. Strange. Did they know it was unappetizing metal? Or was it the size that put them off?

While he went to dock his exosuit, Volara swam next to its glass dome. Once Varien was inside, he headed to the bridge and came face to face with his fish friend. "Alright, we should be able to get back out before nightfall," he said, turning the engine and lights back on. His Cyclops shuddered to life. "Let's go."

"Please, let's," she insisted, glancing about at the local fauna. He rolled his eyes at her superstition. Varien knew that if Silvia were here with him she'd punch him for being rude, but he couldn't help it! It was so silly! They obviously weren't undead spirits or souls or whatever.

But she didn't like it down here, and they did need to leave, so Varien piloted his Cyclops back up the brinefall - carefully, so as not to hit anything - and across the forest of ghostly trees. After a few hours, and a break to eat, they left the underground river behind and were back in the blood kelp zone.

Volara sighed in relief once they were out, with open waters above them instead of crushing stone. "We did it," she stammered, amazed. "We actually did it! We're alive!" she cheered, doing loops and spirals in the water.

"Told you," he muttered, rubbing at his clogged sinuses. "Damn it. So... any plans?"

Volara hesitated. "I'm not sure. You said your modifying whatever might not be anywhere. Are you sure you can't get to this deeper place without it?"

"Confident." He had a terraformer sitting in his base, sure, but digging five hundred meters into a volcano would both take forever and probably kill him. "If I don't find a mod station, then..." He didn't want to say it.

"We'll find it," Volara growled. "I didn't believe you, but that building, it was real!" she said. "There must be a cure somewhere, we just need to make your powers even stronger. Go back to your home and get some rest, Varien. I'll ask around if anyone has seen any of your machines. What does this modifier look like?"

He struggled to recall. He hadn't exactly used a mod station often. "A... box. About this large," he said, holding out his hands. "Orange and white, with some black. It might be in pieces."

"Box, orange and white with black, probably broken," she recited. "Got it. I'll meet you tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," he agreed, gripping the steering wheel tight.

"Good! And Varien." She swam closer and bopped his windshield with her snout. "Stay strong, alright? You'll get through this." With that said, she did another spiral and swam away, her serpentine body undulating back and forth as her bioluminescence faded into the inky waters.

He sighed and slumped against the wheel. All of a sudden he felt exhausted. His limbs ached and trembled, everything felt awful, especially with the revelation that the cure he thought was so close was really so terribly far.

Four weeks. He had four weeks to find the blueprints for a mod station, make the pressure compensators, then get down to the lower alien structures, which might not even have a vaccine at all.
Four weeks to get everything. It was so much time, but also just so much space to cover.

For the first time since crashing on 4546B Varien genuinely, truly thought he might die.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Estimated Time to Death: 27 days, 12 hours, 54 minutes

On the plus side, his nose wasn't clogged anymore.

But at the same time -

"AAACHOO!" he thundered. Volara fluttered away in the water, startled. "Sorry," he managed, reaching for one of his makeshift tissues. They were just pieces of fiber mesh cut up by his knife, but it was better than nothing. He wiped his nose and tossed the cloth into the pile forming at the bottom of his exosuit.

"It's fine. Anyway, they're right up here!" she said, swimming higher into the black waters until she reached the top of the current cliff. Varien followed after her, walking through the darkness of the blood kelp zone. Glowing, ghostly vines sprouted all around, shedding their paltry light into the waters. There weren't many fish around, but given his guide that wasn't shocking.

Heh. Shocking.

As he arrived on top of the cliff, his eyes widened. There, sitting in front of him, was a piece of precursor construction. Compared to everything else he'd seen by the aliens, it wasn't much. Just a small pyramid of metal jutting up from the black stone, giving off a faint green light. If anything, it seemed more like a fancy lamp than anything else. But there was no doubt about it, this was made by the precursor aliens.

"Is that it?" he asked.

Volara shook her head. "There's more up ahead, can't you see them?" she asked, pointing her head off into the gloom.

"Uh..." He'd turned his exosuit's headlights off so as not to blind her. "Not really. I can't see in the dark as well as you."

The ampeel rolled her eyes. "Of course you can't. This way." She swam ahead, her rows of glowing prongs standing out sharply in the darkness. Varien followed after her, dropping down a series of cliffs while Volara just angled herself downward. Soon they came across a second precursor lamp, then a third. The two of them arrived in what he could only describe as a basin in the stone, a series of rings embedded in one another, each deeper than the last.
But then his heart froze and his stomach surged up into his throat. There was something there, something nightmarish. His first thought was to call it a squid, with its bulbous head and too-wide eyes, but the head was just a transparent membrane with its hideous brain pulsing inside. The abomination scuttled about on a dozen or more insectoid legs, among which its mouthpieces flexed and rubbed against each other horrifically. Its eyes were lidless and blue, and more importantly there were four of them, arranged like the corners of a square. And it was huge, too, towering twice the height of his mechanical suit. It clicked and warbled, filling the water around him with its chirring calls.

Varien's stomach churned and his jaw dropped. His limbs were like ice. Oh stars above, he was going to throw up.

The alien squid - crabsquid, his PDA labeled it - turned towards him. It threw itself into the water with a deathly scream and he cowered back into his chair.

"No!" Volara insisted, putting herself between him and the squid. She lashed out with her head, biting near the crabsquid and forcing it back. "Back off! Scram!" she shouted, punctuating it by filling the water with a light crackle. It twitched and roared angrily as the electricity washed over its body, but got the message and floated out of sight.

Varien, still breathing heavily with a hand over his heart, slumped in his chair. "What was that?!
he shouted.

"Green-blaster," Volara said simply, turning to face him. "They're all over the unclaimed lands. Mostly know better than to cross our paths, but now and then one of them gets too stupid to live." She opened and closed her mouth slowly. "Taste awful, too."

He blinked. Green-blaster? "Why do you call it that?"

"It's how they fight off summoners," she explained. "Their heads light up green, and they release a wave of energy in all directions. Summoners really don't like it."

Huh. Sounded like more superstitious bullshit, but he'd have to keep an eye out. If warpers were cyborgs then maybe the crabsquids had evolved some kind of EMP, like how ampeels had electricity. "Right. So anyway, are we here?
His nose tickled, burned, and he raised his head. "Ah, ah, AAACHOO!"

"We're here," she said while he wiped his nose, turning to one of the basin walls. "You should bring your lights back, we're going into a small tunnel."

"Lights on," he said, turning them to the dimmest setting. Even that small amount, though, was enough to shower the area before him with light, illuminating the black stone, glinting gems, and the rippling texture of Volara's shell. She recoiled at the light, but he instead turned to where she'd been facing. As she'd said it was a tunnel, overgrown with dimly glowing lichens. "Lead the way."

"On it," she replied, flicking her body to sail into the tunnel. He followed after her, head turning this way and that to marvel at the passage. It wasn't much, but it dipped quickly into the depths.

Something glowed in the distance.

Eyes narrowed, he followed Volara to the source of light. In mere minutes, it came into focus; a precursor force field! The tunnel came up to an archway, with a bleach white vine covered in red pustules tunneling through the ceiling, and beyond the archway's energy barrier the tunnel continued. A terminal sat next to the precursor door, ready to accept a key.
He turned to Volara. "This thing was just sitting here all along?" he asked.

She zapped her tusk prongs 'yes'. "Nobody's willing to claim the territory, for obvious reasons. But you can make those green walls vanish, can't you?"

Varien rubbed the back of his neck. It was sore and itchy. "Well... sort of. It needs a special device to go in that block there," he said, pointing at the terminal. "I can make one, but I don't have enough diamonds. Plus, it takes almost an entire day for my fabricators to make one."

"Oh." Volara glanced down. "So we'll just have to come back here later."

"Guess so." He sighed, sneezed again and wiped his nose, then turned to head back up to the tunnel. He lead the way out, and once they were topside he turned back to the giant eel. "So, any luck on the mod station?"

She lowered the front half of her body and blinked sadly. "No. I spoke to Ohmaron and Zaparon, Herzaron and Teslara. I even tracked down Conducara," she scowled. "Nobody's seen anything. Any ideas where to look?"

"There's a ton of places to look," he murmured, reclining in his chair. He wiped at his nose. "Most of the grass plains, that deep dark reef, the area around the precursor gun, and that's just off the top of my head." He pondered it some, then held up a finger. "Mm! The kelp forests. I think there's wrecks in a, ah, ah - " He sneezed again. " - sorry. Anyway, I think there's wrecks in there, but I've never checked because, you know."

"The 'giant' predators inside?" Volara teased.

He blushed and looked away shamefully. "It's the bleeders, actually."

"Ha!" she mocked, raising her head above him. "Those little things, of course it'd be those. Let's get you your die-monds and go."

"Got it," he said, steering his P.R.A.W.N. suit to look out the tunnel. "Shouldn't be too hard, you found a diamond in no time at all back when we were still working out the language."

"Those white rocks? No, they're everywhere. Look!" With a deft motion, Volara's sinuous body whipped around and her tail fin smacked into a black rock on the ceiling. It shattered, and a lump of gold fell into his headlights. "... okay so that wasn't it, but you get the idea," she grumbled.

He had his suit put the fist-sized chunk of metal in his storage. "Eh, I need gold too."

It took a few more whacks of her tail, but soon Varien had enough diamonds to make a purple alien relic. Lots of gold, too. It always amazed him how much wealth was in 4546B's rocks, with nobody having ever mined anything. He placed the last one into his exosuit's storage and returned the robotic arm to its resting position. "Can we swing by my base first?" he asked. "I want to take the seamoth for this, if we're just going into kelp forests."

Volara zapped her tusk prongs. "Right, you keep getting tangled in plants with this walking-shell. I haven't seen the other one in a while, too. It'll be nice, like old times!" she chirped.

"Old times when we could barely talk to each other," he said, winding up for a sneeze.

The ampeel nudged his suit with her snout, cutting off his sneeze but leaving his nose itching. "Shut up," she chided.
With that said, they made their way back to Varien's base. The two of them walked and swam out of the blood kelp crevice where Volara made her home, and across the dense mushroom forest. They reached the cliff that went to the grass plains, and had to wait at both the bottom and the top for the massive eel to decompress safely, all without incident beyond him sneezing up a storm. He caught Volara glancing at him more than once as he sneezed and scratched, her massive emerald eyes worried. His stomach clenched at what she must've been thinking. She'd lost her entire family to this disease, right? Was her faith from yesterday gone so soon?

The two of them had to wait again in the shallows. While waiting, Volara glanced up at the surface of the water, then closed her eyes and looked away. "Alright, what is that?" she asked, cracking her eyes open to look at his translator.

"What is what?"

"That bright thing, up past the water," she said. "Hurts to look at."

Bright thing... oh! "That's the local sun," he explained. The giant fish looked at him blankly. "Okay, so have you been here at night and looked up?"

"I have, but that's when it's dark! There is no 'sun' then."

"Right, right. Did you see little white dots in the sky then?" he continued, waving his hands sluggishly while glancing around the vibrant, happy shallows.

"I did, they were okay I guess. What about them?" she asked, digging her lower prongs into the soft sand.

"Well, that bright light is the same thing, just much closer," he explained. "When it's up, it's so bright you can't see the others. When it's gone, you can."

"What makes it go away, then?" she asked, weaving around a tube of coral.

Uh. "Let's table that for later."

"Let's what?!"

The looming features of Varien's habitat came into view. "Oh look, we're here," he said, hurriedly changing the subject.

With the addition of his Cyclops submarine, his shelter dominated its little corner of the shallows. Even with his multipurpose room and moonpool linked together, the titanic blue-green submarine was the defining feature as it hovered silently in the water with its lights off. Peepers and bladderfish inspected it curiously, sometimes bumping stupidly into its glass dome.

"Well, we're here," he said. "Let me just get some things set, I might be a few minutes."

Volara shrugged, sending a ripple down her long body. She seemed so much larger in the shallows than in the chasm she called home. "Do whatever you need to, I'll just see what those clear fish taste like."

He gave her a thumbs up and parked his exosuit right beneath the moonpool. He clambered out and swam straight up, into the pocket of air that was his docking station. The seamoth's sea-blue frame was suspended like a pearl in the middle, hovering in the corner of his vision as he climbed up the ladder. With water dripping from his frame, Varien went to investigate the vehicle mod console in front of the moonpool.
There were two modules he wanted to build. One was a solar cell charger for his seamoth, and the other was a perimeter defense in case he ever got grabbed by another Reaper. He thought he had everything needed. For the charger, computer chips were easy to make and quartz was bountiful. For the electrical defense, he could use the deep shrooms he’d gotten in Herzaron’s territory.

Varien got to work, heading to his multipurpose room and sorting through his lockers. The fabricator buzzed and lit up, creating one piece of machinery after another. Through the window, he could see Volara idly swimming around the rocky dips and swells of the shallows, sometimes closing her mouth around an unfortunate fish.

Copper wire, computer chip, done. The fungi, some salt, and glass made him a vial of crystal clear hydrochloric acid, which with gold made sticky green stuff called ‘polyaniline’. It took a few minutes, so while waiting he fished out some water bottles and drained them.

Once those were done, he carefully retrieved one of the crackling, humming ion crystals from storage and fed it to his fabricator. He gave it several chunks of diamond, then pressed the ‘alien artifact’ button on the console. The twin lasers came to life again, beginning the long and slow process of creating the alien device. It’d be done in a day or so.

With that going, Varien headed back to his moonpool. In the several minutes that he’d spent fabricating Volara stopped hunting and came by the moonpool, staring up through the surface of the water but not sticking her head into the air. He waved at her, then went back to waiting for the vehicle mod's fabricator to finish up his two requests.

A couple minutes later he took a pair of metal tubes from the fabricator's table. They were both tiny enough to fit in his hand, patterned with circuits and moving flaps along their sides with an orange cap on one end. He walked up to the side of his seamoth and opened a metal panel on its side. Underneath was a square sheet with four circular holes. He took one of the modules - he didn't know which - and placed it snugly into the first hole. He gave it a firm push and twist, causing it to click in place. He repeated the process with the second, causing his seamoth to briefly shudder as its insides were rearranged atomically.

"Alright," he told the spectating ampeel, holding up his translator. "You might want to back away, I'm coming down." Volara dipped her head and swam away from the moonpool. Varien climbed over his seamoth, opened the hatch, and sat inside. It closed behind him and he gripped the steering wheel, giving it a few experimental tugs. He hadn't used his seamoth in a while, now that he thought about it. Not since he'd made his exosuit.

"Eject!" The moonpool obeyed, lowering him carefully into the waters before letting go. He turned around to face Volara, making sure the translator was somewhere she could see. Once the bubbles cleared, he looked at her. "Alright, let me just dock my P.R.A.W.N. and I'll be good to go," he said, standing up and exiting the hatch. In no time at all his exosuit was in the moonpool charging and he was in the seamoth.

"What were you making that took so long?" she asked, tilting her head like a lost puppy.

"Solar charger - don't worry about that - and a perimeter defense." He eyed the new button to the right of his steering wheel. It was black plastic, with the light blue picture of a seamoth releasing lightning bolts on its surface. "I think you're gonna like this!" Varien held a finger to the button, hesitated, then pressed it. The seamoth begin whirring and shuddering for a brief moment. Then he took his finger off the button.

WHOOM!
The water around him was overtaken by crackling, racing arcs of azure. Every single hair on Varien's body, including his hair beneath the helmet, stood straight up and his skin tingled as though every inch of his skin had fallen asleep. The electricity shot outward so fast it seemed to happen in an instant, blasting the waters and washing over Volara.

The ampeel recoiled, blinking rapidly but otherwise unharmed by the megajolt of energy. "Whoa!" she shouted. "Is that - it can do that?!"

"It can now!" he said proudly. "Oh, and watch, apparently I can hold the button down longer to make the blast bigger." He pressed the button again, but this time held it down firmly. The whirring began to rise and fall in pitch, faster and faster, until the button popped out by itself and forced his finger off.

KRA-WHOOM!

The entire shallows lit up sky blue. Lightning crackled between everything. Between the distant boomerang and garryfish, between the two pointed rocks, anything it could latch onto as the smaller fish twitched and went still. It passed over Volara, making her close her eyes as the blindingly bright light burned itself into his eyeballs.

Reflexively his hands flew up and clawed the glass plate of his helmet. Varien blinked furiously, trying to get the red and green spots out of his vision. When he could somewhat see again, he fixed Volara a grin. "So? What did you think?" Chewed through the power cell, but that was what the solar charger was for.

She stared at him for a long minute. "Varien, when I lay my eggs, can I take that shell with me? I'd like it to fertilize them. If you don't mind." She swam closer and gently nudged the side of his seamoth with her snout, then dipped beneath it and coiled her long body until she was looking down at him from above.

It took him a moment to process that. Then he choked on his own breath. "Vol - what?! No you can't!" Where had that come from?! "Volara, it's made of metal!" he protested.

The giant eel uncoiled from around his sub and looked away bashfully. "Oh, right. I knew that. So um." She shifted her rows of prongs left and right. "Should we... get going?"

Varien flashed a grin at her. Embarrassed fish. "We should. You said kelp forests, right?" He glanced right. There was one that way, at the base of a 'ramp' of stone. The thick stalks stood out in the sunlight like a shadow come to life.

"It was your idea," she reminded.

Was it? He thought back, struggling to think through the cotton in his head. It was his idea, wasn't it? "Oh." Now it was his turn to look away in shame. "Right. So, there's one over there, I'll lead the wa - ah, ah, AAACHOO!" He sniffled and wiped his nose. "Sorry." Once he finished wiping, he floored the accelerator and his seamoth began putting into the kelp forests. Volara swam next to him, her head even with his submersible.

The creepvines grew closer and closer, before engulfing him entirely. Their brilliant yellow seeds cut through the sudden gloom, and thick algae turned the water sickly green. Six-legged hoverfish and spherical eyeyes swam about, dipping between the swaying plant fronds. Down below the ground was carved into a haphazard mess of ledges, caves, and hills, as though a god had taken an enormous shovel to the terrain with wild abandon. Shadowy stalkers flitted about in the distance, and in the dense tangle Volara's dark body seemed even more titanic than in the shallows.
They were in, so they started looking. They went in a spiral pattern, starting on the outside of the kelp forest and slowly circling to the inside, scanning for any wreckage. Varien's heart hammered eagerly. It was unlikely that every mod station had blown up in the Aurora. And the odds that he'd have to scour the entire crash site before finding one was minuscule. For all he knew, he might discover the blueprints in the first wreck he found! That'd leave him a comfortable almost-four weeks to get everything prepared and head down.

Right. There was nothing preventing him from finding it right away.

A flicker of blackness in the edge of his vision made him stop. "Over there!" he said, pointing. Varien instantly regretted that, grimacing when the aching bones in his arm protested the motion. He steered the seamoth to face what he'd seen so as to get a better look.

Sure enough, it was a piece of wreckage! It'd collapsed onto a slab of rock next to a stone arch, and several flattened creepvine stuck out from its bottom. After so long there was no sparking electricity, leaving the scene eerily still. "Well," he said, turning to face his fish friend. ", this is it. Let me just fry everything first." He held the electrical defense button down until it released on its own, lighting up the dark waters. There, any bleeders in the vicinity would be dead. He could imagine them overwhelmed by the lightning, going still and floating away.

He cracked a grin. *Take that, you little fuckers.*

"Go on in," Volara said, turning to face him with her permanent grimace. "I'll keep watch."

Varien dipped his head respectfully and opened his submarine's hatch. "Thaank you." He pulled himself up, grimacing when he was left short of breath. Stars above, was just that enough to wind him? And he still had four weeks to go!

That was something he'd failed to consider. It wasn't that he had four weeks and then he'd just drop dead. He'd be getting weaker and weaker the closer his literal deadline approached. How long did he have until he could do nothing but lay in bed and die?

Varien approached the wreck. It wasn't that big, all things considered. Maybe half the size of the one he found in the deep dark reef. All the same, he made sure to tether one end of his dive reel on its twisted metal spikes. He found the broken end of a ventilation shaft and, flashlight in hand, clambered in.

Climbing the ladders along the shaft was tricky, with one hand holding a flashlight and the other his dive reel. Mostly, he just kicked with his feet. He passed a turn, and ended up in a pitch black room. Some holo-screens stood out on the walls, utterly black. Chairs of all kinds were scattered around like rubble, as was a desk and a few vac-packs. There was a single, intact mobile vehicle bay, but he already had one.

Beyond that, the only thing of interest was a dead PDA on the ground. A quick transfer of data later and he found himself reading the Search and Rescue logs for Bart Torgal, son of Paul Torgal. Varien grimaced. Bart had only been nineteen when he crashed, a decade younger than Varien. Stars above, and he thought he'd had it rough.

Outside, something crackled and roared.

Varien gave the wreck another once-over, his flashlight shining a brilliant white circle everywhere he could think. But he was forced to conclude that no, there was no modification station anywhere to be found. With a long-suffering sigh he swam back out, panting heavily at the exertion.
Compared to the pitch-black interior, the dreary kelp forest was blinding. He glanced around to see where Volara was, then promptly sighed.

"So that's what you zapped," he said, staring up at the ampeel. She had a dead stalker in her jaws and was busy tearing off a chunk of its white flesh to eat. Stalkers were nearly thrice his size, but in Volara's grip it looked like a child's toy.

She glanced back at him. "What?" she crackled while still chewing. "I was hungry. Did you find anything?"

He shook his head and made his way back to the seamoth, panting as he beat his limbs against the water. All of sudden, his body felt as heavy as lead and it took him a major effort to get back inside his sub. Once in, he collapsed and took heaving breaths of air. "Nothing," he panted. "It wasn't here." Varien couldn't help but feel disappointed. Sure, he knew it was unlikely he'd find it in the first place he looked, but couldn't one thing go right on this planet? Just one?

Volara glanced down. "I'm sorry," she muttered, letting the rest of the stalker sink to the ocean floor.

He waved it off, taking another ragged breath. "It's fine. Let's just keep looking."

And... that was what they did for the rest of the day. They went among the various kelp forests Varien know of, looking through each of them for a wreck. They got turned around once, and he just kept sneezing. One or two forests had nothing, but all in all they found two more wrecks.

The day's second wreck was about as small as the one they'd left behind. There was no mod station in that one, just a data box holding the blueprints for a special suit that'd 'recycle his lost water'. He wrinkled his nose. Gross.

The third wreck of the day was twice the size of the others, and took Varien the better part of an hour to explore. It was leaned up against a large cliff among the creepvine, sheltering a small cave of drooping stingers. It was equally useless; just had the blueprints for a compass chip. Worse, it felt like the exhaustion of illness filled him from head to toe. Even the act of steering his wheel and keeping his foot on the accelerator was enough to leave him gasping.

When night finally fell and they puttered back to his base, Varien was half asleep at the wheel. "I think... I think I'm gonna call it a day," he muttered, glancing at Volara through drooping eyes.

She glanced at him with one eye. "It is getting dark. How are you feeling? You don't look good."

"Exhausted," he grumbled. "This suuucks," he groaned, tilting his head back to look up at the frothing waves. "And we didn't get anything done." He shook his head and brought his seamoth to a halt. "Whatever. Whatever. That just means we know where there isn't one. We can..." He thought it over and drew a blank. "Uh, where are we going to look tomorrow?"

Volara tilted her head for a moment. "What about the grassy plains? There's lots of those. Wide open too, so it shouldn't be hard to find anything."

He nodded. "Grassy plateaus, got it." He clambered out of his seamoth and, with great effort, entered his moonpool. After a minute of swapping, his seamoth was docked and his exosuit stood on the ground outside. He popped out of the hatch and sat on it, knees crossed, to face Volara. "I'll meet you here tomorrow?"

The massive eel dipped her head. "Tomorrow." She started to turn, but stopped. "Varien... you can
make your territory with your tools, right? Can you also take it apart?"

"Deconstruct? Uh, yeah. Why?" he asked, glancing over at his habitat.

"I was thinking," she said with dim crackles, glancing away. ", maybe it'd be better if you took it apart and moved it to my territory? I have a lot of caves you could put it in, and it'd save us the time to meet with each other." She glanced up at him and, with a flick of her tail, came closer. "I wouldn't mind, really! You're good company." Her translated voice grew teasing and her eyes lidded. "Even if you are a plant eating wimp."

Varien brought his hand to his chin and hummed. Move his habitat into Volara's home. It made sense. There'd be no confusion about when and where to meet, and he doubted there was better security on this planet than an ampeel's house. But...

He shook his head. "Volara, thank you, but I don't think I can right now. I mean." He gestured to his docked seamoth. "For starters, my seamoth can't even go that far down without being crushed. And it'd take so much time to deconstruct everything, find a place to put everything in your territory, and move it all over. And I mean, I guess I can farm and hunt down those bony fish for food, but what about water?" He gestured to the salty ocean around him. "I live in the air, unlike you I need to go out of my way to drink water and the water here is poisonous to me." He thought about it. "I... I could make one of those water filters, I found one in the crabsnake caves, but then I'd need a nuclear reactor to power it, and I'd need to find the resources to make that, and make the reactor rods..."

"Oh," she said. "So... it'd take too long, since you're dying."

He sighed, then yawned. "Basically. I guess I'm stuck in the shallows for now. Thanks for the offer, though. I like having you around, too." He kicked off and swam closer to her, rubbing his hand along the top of her head. Her armored shell was hard and grainy to the touch. "See you tomorrow, Volara." He let go and swam back to his moonpool, but before he pulled himself up by the ladder he turned back to her.

"Right," she said. "I'll come get you when I'm ready, Varien. Stay safe." With a flicker of her incredibly powerful body, she turned around and spiraled away into the depths.

He sighed tiredly as the alien eel vanished. Really, it was touching she even offered. She'd basically invited him to live in her house while he was dying. But he just wasn't able to take up the offer.

Varien pulled himself into his habitat and, like a zombie, stumbled to his bed. He took off his helmet and oxygen mask, but didn't have the strength to remove his suit before collapsing face first into the pillow.

He tried to remind himself what else he still needed to do, but before he could form another thought he was out like a light.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Estimated Time to Death: 25 days, 14 hours, 19 minutes

Volara

She looked left and right, up and down, drifting beside the wreckage Varien had vanished into. Volara opened her mouth and let a drowsy yawn crackle down her prongs. Next to her was his enormous Cyclops, with his walking shell docked inside, showering light upon the metal structure.

It was one of the larger pieces of wreckage she'd seen while hunting with the human, shaped like a massive arc that leaned up against a shelf of stone. Varien had found an entrance near the top and slipped in, saying that he'd been to this wreck before but, at the time, didn't have the tools to explore it. So once again, in he went, and out she stayed to guard.

The water all around her churned, currents washing around her as the 'surface' undulated wildly above her. Grains of sand drifted furiously around her in shifting sheets and lines, plinking harmlessly against her hard eyes. Apparently something in the not-water was making the Above turbulent. Not that she minded. In fact, she was grateful for it, because it meant those little red-chompers would be hiding in their burrows.

Volara wasn't scared of the red-chompers. Certainly not! But they were numerous and agile and, more importantly, they were small. Small enough that they could fit into the human wrecks where she couldn't. If she didn't guard the entrance they could swim right past and she'd be able to do nothing but swim impotently outside as they hunted down Varien. Her human friend was already so small and slow and weak, with the Green Weakness on top of that he stood no chance of being able to defend himself.

The thought of Varien being torn to ribbons by the red-chompers made her hearts clench tightly. Her upper heart especially. So, she remained at the wreckage's entrance despite the ongoing storm of sand, vigilant for anything trying to get inside.

She opened her mouth again, tiredly lighting up her prongs by reflex. Her eyelids blinked heavily. She really should've gotten more rest...

Before too long, she heard Varien plodding along the inside of the metal structure. She jolted herself back into wakefulness and spun around to look inside the hole. Sure enough there was her little human, walking instead of swimming, making his way back to her. "Did you find it?" she asked hopefully. Varien looked up at her and shook his head left and right. He didn't have his translator out, but Volara still knew what it meant; another bust. She huffed as he crawled out of
the wreckage to swim next to her. "We'll just keep looking, then. Come on, let's get you back."

Volara reached out and bumped the human with her snout, pushing him onto her head and right into her blind spot. He flailed about for a moment, then went still and gripped the sides of her head. She slowly swam through the water, pushing him back to the bottom of his Cyclops. The hatch opened up by some unseen force and she nudged him inside. Varien gripped the inside and pulled himself in, prompting the hatch to close behind him.

With him inside, she swam up to the metal shell's clear dome. There was a new addition to it that hadn't been there on their voyage into the Underworld. When Varien climbed up the inside of his structure, he quickly made use of it; a seat next to the steering wheel, allowing him to pilot the Cyclops while sitting.

Once he pulled out his translator, Varien shook his head. "That's it, then. Nothing in the grass plains."

"Nothing at all?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I got some arm modules for my Prawn, a grapple and an unknown launcher, but that's it. Any ideas?"

Volara chuckled. "Well lucky for you, I spent the entire darkening looking for another place just in case this didn't work. It's actually next to the place my territory's in. It's..." She struggled to find the words to describe it. "It's... there's floating rocks."

He blinked oddly. "Come again?"

It took her a moment to understand what the expression meant. "Floating rocks, big ones. Just... hovering in the water. There's these tiny shark things that swim around them, covered in armor."

"Floating. Rocks. There's no precursor tech or anything there?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Just these pink balls in their sides."

"Pink - you mean floaters? Floaters are like." He held his hands out. "They fit in my hands. There's no way floaters can do that."

The size of his... what? What were these 'floaters' he was talking about? She leveled a flat look at him. "Varien, I'll just lead you to it. You'll see then. I even found some of your people's wreckage holding two of the islands together."

Varien sighed. "Volara, I'm glad you found the wreck, but you must've been seeing things. There is no way there were floating islands."

"I can't believe there are floating islands."

She turned to face the human and shot him an ugly look. "Told you!" The two of them swam above a ledge, which dropped almost vertically straight down. Above them, the 'hurricane' still raged, whipping the water into wild currents, but they were deep enough to be unaffected. Before them were the floating islands she had mentioned. They came in a wide variety of sizes, from the size of Varien's 'seamoth' to larger than his Cyclops. They hovered at all depths, from up above them to so far down even her eyesight could barely make them out.

Their surfaces were as varied as their sizes. Some had small pillars and plant life like the grass
plains, others were smooth misshapen lumps of brown. The one thing they all had in common were the pink spheres embedded into their sides, which were covered in a sticky blue membrane. Small prey fish swam around, as did the armored sharks. It wasn't the first time she'd seen them; Volara'd maimed one in the mushroom forest when it foolishly tried to attack her.

"But... those floaters are huge!" he protested. "How do they form? What do they eat?! And what's with all the bonesharks?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Volara explained.

The human sighed, pinching the top of his nose between two fingers. "Right, right. So, you said there was a wreck here?"

"Yep! Follow me, I'll lead you there." She took up a position in front of his glass dome and slowly led him forward and down. She had to keep glancing back and wait to ensure he could keep up; his Cyclops was almost as slow in the water as Varien himself. Several times the howling and roaring bonesharks tried to take a bite out of her, and every time she brutalized them. Stupid little things hadn't lived with shockers, thought they were the strongest things around.

Volara was delighted to educate them.

When she electrocuted another pair of victims, a quiet song reached her. She turned backward to look at Varien and cocked her head. "I'm sorry, say that again?" she asked, now that she could see his translator.

"I was just wondering," he said. ", what do you usually do? I mean, before I came along. You didn't just spend all your time hunting and resting, did you?"

She blinked. "Well, no. I usually did patrols of my territory. Looking for green-blasters and summoners to chase away, or to see if I had any visitors. Sometimes I'd go help Herzaron and Teslara with their fries, or talk with them. Or invite them to my territory instead." She'd used to go with Ohmaron and his consort, but things between them had been tense for several seasons, to say the least. She tilted her head. "Why, what did you use to do on your ship?"

He sneezed, then shrugged. "Well I was an unknown, but when I - " He caught her expression. "Uh, I helped tell our machines what to do. They'll do whatever you tell them, but that doesn't mean they do what you want them to do, and my job was to make sure they were told the right things. I guess outside of that, uh." His face visibly fell, a shadow falling across his gaunt features. "I told you about Silvia, right?"

Volara thought back. "You mentioned her once. Your consort, right?"

"I... think that's the word?" he half said, half asked. "The translator's kinda rough there. But yeah." His song turned wistful and quiet. "We'd play unknown games with each other, against other people. We ate together, lived together, we'd snuggle up in bed and watch unknown together. We were supposed to be unknown once the Aurora got to its destination." His song turned mournful. "I haven't seen her since the crash. I... and she probably has the Carar too."

Her upper heart twisted. Oh great, she'd made her friend sad again. She'd only been curious about what his life had been like around other humans, and now she'd - !

Volara extended her body and bopped the clear dome of his Cyclops. "Don't worry about it, I'm sure your consort's fine," she lied. "Now come on, it's just up ahead." She twisted her body around and, with a powerful flick of her tail fin, headed forward and deeper. The wreck was close, if she
remembered correctly.

And remember correctly she did. In minutes it came into her view, and not long after Varien saw it too.

It was shaped similar to the wreck they'd just left; a massive arc of metal, its tortured frame patterned in too-dark blacks and too-bright whites. But unlike the other wreckage, which had stood straight up, this one was collapsed on its side, resting between two massive islands of rock and holding them together with its sheer weight. The islands were lush with vegetation and covered in stone protrusions, but littered about them were rods of human-rock in addition to boxes. Bonesharks were scarce, and a pod of reefbacks bellowed distantly above them.

Volara yawned again, then turned to face Varien. "Here it is."

He nodded. "I can see an entrance, but there's also a data box on the opposite side from it. I think I'll just take my seaglide for this." Varien leaned over in his seat, looking down into the murky depths. "How deep does that go?"

"Not as deep as the Underworld," she muttered. "I checked. There's some more of your people's technology down there, but not that modify thing you need. Lots of those 'magma geysers' too."

Varien looked at her worriedly. "Volara, did you get any rest last night?"

Night. That was one of the new additions of the translator, apparently it was what he called the darkening. "No, not really. How could I?" She lowered her head. "You're dying, Varien, and I'm more than strong enough to kill these idiots even if I'm a little tired."

The human frowned. "Volara..." he warned, letting go of the wheel and letting his hands fall into his lap.

"Fine, fine! I'll rest today." She batted his Cyclops with her tail fin, releasing a deafening clang. "Come on out already."

"I'll hold you to that," he warned, as if he could force the issue even if he weren't sick. But obediently, he got from his seat and shuffled down his Cyclops. Soon he slipped out its bottom, with his 'seaglide' machine in hand to let him move quickly. "Alright, data box first." He pointed towards the glowing thing on one of the islands and sped towards it, his body trailing limply behind his machine. Volara shot ahead and chased away a pair of bonesharks, giving him ample space to land and do whatever it was he did with his technology.

"Anything useful?" she asked, curling her body around to look down at him.

He shrugged. "I guess. Blueprint for a creature decoy, I can fire it from my Cyclops if it ever gets attacked by something big." Varien glanced over at her. "Buuut I get the impression that's not going to be needed with you around," he said slyly.

Volara raised her head proudly. No, no it would not be needed.

With the 'data box' dealt with, Varien swam his way over to the other end of the wreck, to one of the ends of its colossal arch that'd been torn wide enough for him to get inside. "Well, here I go," he said, looking up at where she swam. "Wish me luck."

Quietly, she zapped her tusk prongs, and he entered. After he vanished from sight, Volara swung her head left and right; the bonesharks had mostly fled by then, cowering before her awe-inspiring strength.
Something in the wreckage hummed. He must've been cutting something. Blockage, probably.

Volara dutifully kept up her guard, just like every other time Varien had to crawl through the tight metal and rock of his people. There weren't any red-chompers around, but she still couldn't afford to relax. They might just not be around at the moment, and even the bonesharks could, perhaps, squeeze their way inside. So, she found herself once more making languid patrols around the tortured frame of human technology, listening to the quiet sounds of Varien doing his work within. Now and then there was a twinge of stiffness in her lower body, where her eggs were forming.

Her thoughts turned to what Varien had said recently, his consort 'Silvia' and how dearly they loved each other. It made her swim bladder clench hard enough to sink her. She'd seen how frail humans were, how utterly helpless they were in the water. Maybe he still held out hope, but she wasn't as confident. It'd been over twenty days since Varien's people arrived from the Above, and aside from the unfortunate two that landed in her territory - she had no faith in the one who'd swam away - she'd seen nobody but Varien.

How was she going to help him once he learned? It couldn't even be like when Ohmaron comforted her after the loss of Insulara; she'd at least seen her die, injured and bleeding out.

A chilling thought occurred to her, that perhaps she had seen his consort die, but she squashed it. It didn't matter, anyway. All that mattered now was increasing her friend's powers. She could worry later about him discovering his consort was dead.

Sounds continued on and off from inside the wreckage, alternating as Varien swam around searching for something, then found it and manipulated it with his magical tools.

At length, angry songs came from within. Volara blinked and swam over to the hole Varien had climbed in, just in time to watch him glide out. He looked her way and shook his head. His face molded itself into a frown.

"Nothing?!" she asked incredulously.

Varien summoned his metal-shocker. "No mod station, anyway. I mean, I finished up the stasis rifle blueprint, but everything else is stuff I already have."

She narrowed her eyes. "Didn't you say these mod stations were common? Why is it so hard to find one?!"

He sighed. "I don't know. They were usually only used by, like, engineers and stuff. I never worked with them. Guess the parts of the Aurora that had them got scattered pretty bad. Whatever. We had to try. Anyway, I have the precursor key with me, let's head back to the... the ah, ah, AAACHOO!"

He sniffled. "Ugh. The force field."

The puny human climbed back into his metal shell and piloted it. Volara floated in front of it. "Right, let's head on over," she said, taking a moment to get her bearings before heading off to where the precursor technology was.

This time, both she and Varien knew mostly where they were going, so she was able to swim next to his Cyclops and steal glances at him. There were always so many questions. How did this work? What was this untranslated word? What did he do then? What, why, who, when, why?

She sent a sigh down her entire body. Whatever. Varien had more important things to do than indulge her questions about his godlike people. He probably thought they'd be stupid, simple questions that even human fries could answer.
Before long, they started to leave the floating islands behind, and came up to the dark chasm where her kind made their homes. One or two of the floating islands had strayed close, and were rewarded by having vines growing through them, anchoring them to the stone far below. It'd still be some time to reach the unclaimed lands that held the precursor technology, so -

A flash and whirlpool of light far below her. Volara snapped her head down as a summoner emerged from the portal, screeching quietly as it patrolled the area. All tiredness fled her body in an instant. Her vision went green and she chomped angrily, all thoughts erased from her mind. She shot downward, prongs lighting up and surrounding herself in deadly energy. Water streamed around her as she descended, jaws wide open and ready to chomp down on the foul creature beneath her.

The summoner looked up as she approached and screeched. Just an instant before Volara could mutilate it, an explosion of light and sound cut through the gloom. Her jaws closed around empty water; the summoner was gone.

A second later, Volara crashed head first into the stone. Her barrier of energy flickered out in shock as her body crumpled up on itself. A moment later she relaxed her swim bladder, willing herself to float higher, and shook her head. Ugh. That didn't hurt, but it had rattled her carapace.

Bah. Stupid things always got away before she could seriously hurt them. Whatever. It was gone now. She swam back up to join Varien, who stared at her with wide eyes.

"Uh, you okay?" he asked carefully.

She huffed. "Never better. Anyway, it was this way," she groused, swimming ahead.

The rest of their journey passed without incident. A few green-blasters scuttled about the ground far below, but were of no consequence. She and her human friend descended deeper and deeper into the comforting darkness until they found themselves above the bowl-shaped rings of stone. He used his powers to stop his Cyclops, then got into his 'Prawn' and dropped out.

Hmm. Actually. "What does it mean?" she asked, fluttering down to his level once he landed.

Varien turned to her and sniffled. "What does what mean?"

"Prawn, you call this walking shell that. Does it mean anything?"

He blinked, his face cast in an eerie blue light by the surrounding vines. "Oh! Uh, a prawn is a type of creature from my unknown, uh, my home. It's tiny and lives underwater, tastes good."

She zapped her tusk prongs. "Huh. So, the Aurora, anything there?"

Varien laughed, a chiming rise-and-fall sound that was music to her earholes. "Uh, an aurora is a special type of light you can see in the unknown." His smile fell. "Uh, in the... sk-y. The, uh, oh how do I explain this, um..."

She lightly nudged his suit with her head. "Forget it, let's just go to that precursor thing," she said, finding the tunnel and swimming after it. Varien stomped after her as she delved underground. Before long they were at the green barrier again, with a single vine's roots going from ceiling to floor. She relaxed her swim bladder enough to float near the ceiling, while Varien stomped up to the metal box. With great effort, he pulled himself out and swam to it. In his hands he held one of the strange purple things, like he'd used in the Underworld. Volara's gills tightened nervously. This was it, he was going to open up the ancient cave. Her mother had thought it belonged to the gods. She'd thought it belonged to demons. What was inside? For the first time in generations, someone
would be able to see what was within.

Just like in the Underworld, the dark box opened up to reveal the same symbol as on the construct in the human's grip. He held it out, and it was pulled into the device. It closed up, and with a deep whirl the green wall vanished from sight.

Varien panted and swam feebly towards his Prawn, translator barely in his grip. She shook her head and swam closer. "Don't worry about it," she told him. "I'll handle it." Like before, she nudged her head underneath Varien's tiny, spindly body and pushed him inward. The tunnel tightened up, almost too small for her to move as it wound back and forth in the dark stone, but she managed. It wasn't that dark, either. Far ahead, her eyes could make out another green glow. More of those precursor tools?

Soon enough, she was proven right. They emerged into a dark cave riddled with green mosses and, more importantly, black and green metal. It hung from the ceiling in pillars, it crawled across the floor. It shone an eerie, sickly light all too similar to the cysts that emerged in the final stages of the Green Weakness. On the ground were four of these green cubes Varien had gathered, and in the back of the cavern was another one of those green lights that he could use to learn about the precursors. The water tasted weird.

As she swam in, Varien stirred to life on her snout. She pushed him, one at a time, to the green cubes and let him pick them up, hiding them in his invisible 'stasis storage'. Last was bringing him to the painfully bright pattern of lights so he could wave his clear square thingy through them. She set the human down with his back - and translator - up against the walls and swam a short distance from him.

"Well?" she asked, swaying from side to side as he read over what he learned. "What is it?"

He furrowed his eyebrows. It never ceased to amaze her how flexible his face was. "It's some kind of, uh, sanctuary I want to say? Apparently the precursors unknown themselves." He blinked awkwardly. "They put themselves into that machine there," he said, pointing towards the metal box with the green symbol hovering over it. "Some kind of long rest, or something."

She blinked and suppressed a yawn. Goodness, it was getting close to resting time. She ignored it and look at the metal box. "So, these people, they put themselves into this tool?"

"Apparently they did. Guess they were hoping the Carar would blow over, and then their people would come pull them back out." He frowned. "Weird, if they can unknown themselves into this then why not unknown into unknown bodies? Totally immune that way. Maybe unknown reasons? But -"

Volara screamed and swam at the box, mouth wide open. Varien, startled, swam out of her way as she approached it and closed her jaws around the top. She bit down hard, squeezing her sharp, narrow fangs into the metal. To her surprise, it resisted her. She blinked hard, and clenched her mouth harder. Varien was singing something in squawks and chirps, but she only had eyes for destroying this thing. Her teeth ached and pressed back into her gums, but she didn't relent. Slowly but surely the metal dented, cracked, and the green light above died out.

Once it was gone, she let go and swam back, spitting out a half dozen fangs. Whatever, she'd grow new ones. What mattered was this precursor-storage was ruined.

"Volara, what was that about?!" the human shouted.

"They retreated in there, so I destroyed it," she snapped. "They killed everyone! All of this is their
fault and they get to just get to rest in safety while you're here dying?" she argued, her body rigid. She kept glaring at the damaged precursor tool.

"You know you probably just the destroyed the part that lets them - forget it." He sighed. "Let's just get out of here, it's al... ah... AAACHOO!" He sniffled. "Sorry."

"It's fine. I'll get you back to your shells," she said, swimming towards him with her head lowered.

This time Varien didn't protest and allowed her to carry him. She made her way back across the tunnel, shooting a glare at the metal frame that had previously held a door. Volara nudged the human back into his Prawn shell, where he stifled a sing-song yawn. "Well, nothing useful in there," he muttered.

"At least we looked," she said. Then her mood dropped. "I'm sorry the place I found wasn't useful. Any ideas for tomorrow?"

"Ugh, nothing. Hang on, let me just get back inside," he murmured. He thrusted up into the water, where his Cyclops opened up and consumed him, Prawn and all. Moments later he was sitting by his Cyclops's controls, staring out the clear dome at her. "Worst headache," he muttered, rubbing between his eyes. "Hey, I know I said I don't have the time to move my shelter into your caves, but you think maybe I can crash - um, rest - there tonight?" He blinked, as if he suddenly thought he'd said something horrible. "I mean, if you're okay with it, I don't want to intrude on your territory or anything -"

"Varien," she said, cutting him off with a little twist of her body. "It's fine. Follow me, I'll show you to it."

He grinned. She thought that meant he was happy. "Thanks," he said simply.

She relaxed her swim bladder, guiding both herself and Varien up out of the basin. She angled herself to where her cave was and started swimming, leading the way. In no time at all they crossed over the invisible boundary of her territory, with its familiar vines and caves and deposits of shining metal. There was one particular cave she had in mind and, after a moment of swimming, she found it. It only had a single entrance, but that entrance was wide and large to the point where even Varien's Cyclops could fit in.

And, to her surprise, she had a visitor.

Both she and Ohmaron blinked at each other and swam closer. "Volara!" he shouted, then looked around her at Varien's massive metal shell. "Is that, oh." He swirled. "I was looking for you, but I guess that explains it," he snarled.

I've been running into Ohmaron a lot recently, she thought, bemused. "And what were you looking for?"

He sighed, opening his mouth slightly. "Zaparon and I wanted to invite you over," he said. "He said things between us have been so strained for so long and thinks he can fix what happened with a sleepover," he muttered.

Volara blinked hard and looked away, her hearts heavy. Oh.

Then, in a desperate attempt to change the subject, her eyes and prongs both lit up. "Oh! Ohmaron, this is Varien, you probably guessed that," she said, swimming over to Ohmaron and looking back at Varien for a moment. He waved a hand up at them. "Help me settle something. Varien here doesn't think soul conglomerates exist," she said, drifting away from her fryhood friend.
She couldn't see Varien's translator, but his burst of song sounded incredulous.

Ohmaron blinked. "What? That's ridiculous, of course they're real! I saw one when I was a fry."

This time she could see his translator. "Oh stars above, there's no such thing! It was probably just some giant animal you saw." He yawned again.

"Riiight, an animal bigger than us shockers." He chuckled, curling his body up. Volara laughed too, but not as hard; she'd seen the leviathan skeleton in the Underworld. "Ridiculous."

"Ridiculous?! I was attacked by something bigger than both of you put together!" he protested, waving his arms around.

He turned to her and tilted his head. "Volara, this is the creature you're wasting your time on?"

She chomped next to him. "Be nice. He's been separated from everyone he knows and..." She swam to the top of the Cyclops so Varien couldn't see what she said. "... and his consort's probably dead. And he has the Green Weakness."

He huffed. "And? He has you running around with him, in the Above, on whatever little quest he has. He doesn't even think soul conglomerates exist, even though one, you know." Her upper heart clenched. She did indeed know. Ohmaron's parents had killed it, but not before it decimated the living.

Ohmaron swam around with a deft motion and flicked his tail fin at Varien. "Whatever. I'm going back to Zaparon. Feel free to swim by whenever. Without your little food friend." With that said he swam off, so frighteningly fast he left a trail of bubbles in his wake as he vanished into the distance.

Slowly, she swam down to face Varien. "Well... that went well," she said weakly, a chill running down her body. "Um, my cave's right here."

"Right," he whispered. "I'm looking forward to seeing it." Was he? Varien's people had the power of rock gods and could make metal bend to their will. He probably thought using a cave as a house was pathetic.

Volara zapped her tusk prongs and led him in. The cave opened up inside, leading to a honeycomb of other chambers at varying depths. There was one she usually reserved to sleep in, another for guests, and so on. A pair of vine roots burst from the floor and disappeared into the ceiling, sporting several globules of oil. A school of bone-fish, pecking away at the oil, saw her enter and hurriedly swam out. Other plants were more common. Mostly cradle plants, but also some feather plants to clean her prongs and several others for decor. Stalactites hung from above, but Volara had long ago gotten rid of the stalagmites. She didn't like them.

"Well, here it is," she said, fluttering forward and turning back to look at Varien.

His head swiveled around, taking in everything he could see. "Um, wow. When you said you lived in a cave I thought it'd be like, just a one-chamber thing. This place is huge," he breathed, before yawning again. "Can I just park this in the middle?"

"Sure," she said, swimming off hurriedly. While Varien got himself settled, she swam down to her resting chambers, matted with a torn up cradle plant, and closed her mouth around the fronds. Working fast, she brought her bedding up piece by piece to the main cavern Varien would be resting in, setting it down. In a few short minutes she was done, and her bed was up by Varien.
By then his Cyclops's lights, both inside and out, had gone dark. She saw him moving around inside, the translator resting against the clear dome. Volara crackled happily when she saw him crawl into his bed, glance at her, and sing something too quiet for the metal-shocker toy to translate.

Volara 'nodded' back to him, and swam down to rest in her bedding.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow they'd find his modifying tool. It couldn't hide forever. Not from her kind.

As she was closing her emerald eyes, though, she thought she saw another shocker just outside her cave, staring intently inside. But when she blinked, they were gone with only a rush of bubbles to tell of their presence.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Thanks to DevoutRelic for editing.

Chapter published 9/24/17.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Estimated Time to Death: 24 days, 20 hours, 48 minutes

Volara

"So, your people know all sorts of rules of nature, right?" she asked as they ate.

Varien looked up from his Prawn as he ate a salted looker. He chewed and swallowed, scratched his arm, and nodded. "Yeah, why?"

She turned to the last bone-fish she'd stunned and snapped it up in a spray of yellow-green blood. "I was thinking then, you probably know a lot of secrets. I want to hear some."

He gave her a smile and tapped his chin. "Alright. Hmm... alright, how about this. The world," he said, gesturing all around them. ", is round, like a ball."

Volara recoiled and blinked several times, trying to process what he'd just said. "Round? Like - " She swam in a circle. "That kind of round?" She lowered her eyelids accusingly. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying!" he insisted, throwing his hands into the air. "It really is. It's just so big that it looks flat to us."

"But things go downward," she protested. She thought back to when she'd been to the Above and stuck her head into the not-water, and the water in her mouth had spilled out from her jaws. "Then why doesn't all the water just flow off?" she countered, tilting her body.

Varien snorted a laughter, placing a hand over his mouth. "F-F-Flow - Volara that's, pfft. That's not how it works. There's this thing called unknown." He frowned and tried to sound it out. "Gra-vity. Gravity. Basically, uh, things with mass pull other stuff to them. Things like you and me aren't big enough to have noticeable gravity. But the world is big enough so that when you're on the 'bottom', its gravity pulls you into the center and you consider that down."

"Consider that down," she echoed. "So what, if I were on the other side of this 'ball' then the ground would be above me, and if I smashed a rock its pieces would float up?" She tried picturing it and got a headache for her efforts. Volara shook her head to clear it. "That's ridiculous."

"What? No, if you were on the other side of the world you'd see it the same way as now. Ground beneath you, sky above you, and stuff falls down."

"So, this 'gravity' makes it so if I go to the bottom of this ball world I magically see things upside
down?" She rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say, Varien."

"It's true! I saw your world before the Aurora crashed, it's round!" he said, picking pieces of meat from his fish and dropping them into his mouth.

Wait. What? "My world? Aren't you just from far away?" she asked, drifting closer. "That doesn't make any sense. The world is the world, it's all there is. If someone existed outside the world, then that means the world is just bigger than you think. And it's not round," she finished with a light laugh. "Tell me something else."

His hand went up to his face. "You know, if my PDA wasn't stuck on emergency mode I could show you my pictures..." He sighed. "Alright, fine. Um... alright, your body is made up of tiny things called unknown." He sounded it out. "Cells. They're so small you can't see them. Every living thing is made of lots of cells stuck together. They make up both our bodies, and there's lots of different types. Uh, blood cells, stomach cells, that kind of stuff."

Hmm. That was marginally easier to believe. So many things were already smaller than her, it wasn't ridiculous that some things were so puny that she couldn't even see them. But that she was made of them? "How would that even work? Wouldn't I feel it? And if they're so small, how do you know of them?"

"You wouldn't feel it. They're so small they sort of 'blend' together from our perspective. As for seeing them?" He shrugged and finished off his meal. "We have tools that can make small things look bigger, or make distant things look closer. Get a strong enough one of those, and you can see them."

Really?

She swam closer to Varien, close enough to bump her snout against the clear dome of his Prawn. She narrowed her eyes, looking close at his skin... aha!

Volara, with a flex of her body, moved away from him. "I think I see them! On your skin, they make this sort of pattern. Are those your skin cells?"

Varien shook his head, the human gesture for 'no'. "No, that's just my skin. Trust me, you cannot see cells. There's just no way."

She rolled her eyes. Sure sure, whatever he said.

"Anyway," he said, grasping the controls of his Prawn. "Let's start heading out. I think we should explore on the far side of my lifepod, past the more distant grass plain."

"It's as good an idea as any," she said, watching as Varien sailed up into his Cyclops and, not long after, appeared at its front. "Let's - "

Suddenly, Varien jolted and blinked. "Um, hang on. I got a signal. One sec," he said, leaving to go deeper into his metal shell, vanishing out of sight around a turn. Volara thought she heard something singing.

She tilted her head. What was her human doing?

A moment later he was back. "Um, I just got a distress signal from lifepod twelve. I have the coordinates, they're about where we were headed anyway."

Volara's body stiffened. "A lifepod? Like the one that brought you? Shouldn't we hurry?"
Varien sighed and leaned forward against the wheel. "No," he groused. "The lifepods give out a distress signal on a loop. This one must be pretty damaged if it's only looping now, but anyone who was there is long gone. I mean, this was over three weeks ago." He waved a hand at the not-water. "They're probably by the third Degasi base, wherever it is. That's where they're hiding, I'm sure of it."

She didn't want to say anything to that.

"Welp," he said, gripping the wheel. "Let's go, I guess."

With a zap of her tusk prongs, Volara swam to his side as he piloted his way out of her caverns and into her territory. He oriented himself towards his home, and sailed forwards over the vines and stone.

For a while, their trip was in silence. They entered the mushroom forest and passed it just as uneventfully. They got up to the grassy plateaus and, while waiting for Volara to get used to the pressure, Varien sneezed a few times. It was a painful reminder that despite all their efforts, they still weren't any closer to saving Varien's life as when they started the hunt.

It was on the trip across the plateau that he spoke up. "So, that other shocker, Ohmaron. What's his problem?"

Volara shook her head. "Him," she groaned. She swam forward and looked into his Cyclops's clear dome. Varien came to a stop before hitting her. Good thing too; who knew how much hitting her would damage his vessel? "So I told you Ohmaron and I were fryhood friends, his parents killed a soul conglomerate." Varien rolled his eyes. "Shut up. So, my mother and his parents knew each other, so I obviously saw a lot of him while we were growing up. When I felt ready to start a family, I went to him and we gave each other our eggs to fertilize."

"Oooh?" Varien cooed, raising an eyebrow. "So you liked him, huh?" he teased. She didn't really understand what he was teasing about, though.

Volara eyed him sideways. "He's a good friend, but no. He actually has a consort, Zaparon, they live together." Volara thought back and hummed. "Though I did court his sister Insulara when we were fries, but that never went anywhere."

"What happened?" he asked, leaning forward.

She flicked her tail fin. Her swim bladder tightened and hearts clenched with the memories. "Green Weakness found her. And before that could finish the job, the soul conglomerate emerged and murdered her," she spat.

The tone and timbre of her human's song dropped sharply, his face molding itself into a frown. "Oh stars above, I didn't want to pry. I'm sorry."

"Don't be, it was long ago." She looked up, at the too-bright surface of the water. Far above, a lone reefback bellowed. "Where was I?"

"You gave your eggs to Ohmaron," he filled in.

"Right! So the problem is that Ohmaron's lineage has always been vulnerable to the Green Weakness. He's the only survivor of his clutch, and his line-bearers of theirs, and so on. My eggs got sick, and so did the ones he planned to raise with Zaparon." She opened her mouth and did an irate flip. "Since then he's got it into his head that he needs to make things up to me, that it was his fault. And of course, when we came back from the fungus caves he saw I was hurt." She turned to
show him the scar. It was just a thin white line in her armor, but definitely noticeable if he looked.

"Right, and I guess that's my fault, then," he mumbled.

"As far as he's concerned, yes." She sighed, glancing down. "So, yes. That's Ohmaron's problem with you." Volara looked back up at him. "You should really stay away from him." The stupid shocker didn't seem to get that humans were friends, not food. Volara huffed and spiraled away from his Cyclops. "Whatever. I've bored you enough with my fryhood. Let's keep going. You're not getting any healthier."

To emphasize that, Varien sneezed thunderously, hard enough to buckle his knees. "Ugh," he groaned, pulling himself back up. "Right. And Volara, it's not boring to me."

If he said so.

Before long they reached the shallow areas, so bright and colorful it nearly blinded her and her stomach did flips each time she beat her tail fin. The 'hurricane' was closer now, so the currents jostled her back and forth while sheets of sand slid harmlessly around her muscular body. Much to her confusion, instead of continuing past it Varien brought them back to his territory and came to a stop.

"This thing's almost out of power," he said, pointing to one of the incomprehensible light symbols on the clear dome. "I'm going to park it here and take my Prawn the rest of the way."

She tilted her head. "You're the human, I sure don't know how to keep your shells working. But what about the hurricane? Won't that break it?"

He waved it off. "This thing's made of unknown, it can handle being tossed into a few rocks. It's tough."

Volara leveled an unamused look at him. "It's not so tough, I know that from experience."

The poor human threw his hands up in what she'd learned meant exasperation. "Biting through its hull doesn't count, you have freaky super strength."

She closed her eyes and preened. Yes, shockers were rather super, weren't they?

The Cyclops's insides went dark, and a moment later its underbelly opened up lengthwise and out dropped Varien's walking shell. It crashed to the ground hard, and the sick human inside jostled around in a way that she worried would hurt him. Grains of sand continued to plink plink on his metal shells and her impervious body.

After a moment of wincing, Varien recovered from the drop and pointed to a seemingly random direction. "Signal's this way, let's head off," he said before sneezing again. Volara remained still for a moment, staring at him through the sand, then flicked her body and followed him.

The remaining trek through the shallows was slow going, with all the moving water pushing Varien's shell around. Still, with some effort they got through and descended to the grassy plains on the far side of his territory. The hurricane still had some effect so far down, but it was weak enough to not impede their progress. They passed one of the wreckages of his people; it was a relatively small one that took the form of cluttered metal resting on the seabed. It was already half covered in sand.

But unlike before, they didn't stop. Instead they kept walking forward until the grassy plains dipped further down, the crimson plants fading into the distance behind them. Out of the waters
before them appeared spires of stone.

*Wait,* she thought. *Are those - ?*

They were! But - how could - they were - she turned to Varien. "Did we get turned around?" she asked.

He stopped walking his suit and turned to her, one of his fuzzy eyebrows raised. "Why do you ask?"

For a moment she was confused, but understanding dawned on her before long; Varien's eyesight wasn't as good as hers so he hadn't seen it yet. "We're next to the mushroom forest again," she explained. "Go a little further, you'll see."

Varien shrugged, but wordlessly did as she said and trudged ahead, his footprints soon covered up by the shifting sand. The fungal stalks came closer and closer, and among them she saw the smaller, glowing plants and heard the screaming, bright blue 'jellyrays'. Her human's eyes stayed narrowed as they approached, before suddenly relaxing. "Oh, I see it. Weird. Must be more than one of them."

She blinked, then looked away as blood rushed to her head. Right. More than one mushroom forest. She should've thought of that. Wisely, she kept her prongs quiet.

"This is good," he continued, walking into the thick forest. "We can look around here once we find the lifepod."

Was that good? The more places there were to explore, the more places where his modifying tool could be hidden.

The ground was uneven, rising and falling in hills that forced Varien to walk awkwardly. Volara just relaxed and tightened her swim bladder as needed. Though it was a tight squeeze sometimes and she scraped herself more than once. Some of the bonesharks howled in the distance, but never close enough that she needed to protect her human. Light streamed down from above in thin streamers even as small clouds of sand blew about. Both of them kept their eyes and earholes open, turning back and forth as they hunted.

"Do you see that?" Varien asked abruptly, shattering the silence.

She turned to him. "See what?"

He pointed slightly to the left, past a throng of mushroom spires. "I think I see something like metal!" he said excitedly. "Come on, let's go!" As quick as he could he ran off, with Volara easily keeping pace above him. As they wound between the mushroom spires, she soon caught sight of what he'd been so excited by.

Both their moods dropped mildly. It wasn't metal manipulated by Varien's people, but rather the precursors who'd doomed her friend and family. It took the form of a flat rectangle embedded in the stone, and it was doing... *something* to the water around it. On closer inspection, the frame had two holes in it that led down into unknown depths, and a lattice of metal kept anything much larger than a bone-fish from being sucked down. Lookers chirped and squawked densely, swimming around the black metal. Even as she watched, one swam towards a grid and was sucked down hard. At the same time, the other grid shot a looker straight out.

From the safety of his Prawn, Varien scanned the structure and looked at his flat rectangle thing. "Weird, it's some kind of unknown system." He looked up and caught her confused look. "Um, a
device that moves liquids from one place to another. Weird. What are the lookers doing?"

Another one deliberately swam over to get sucked in. "Your guess is better than mine," she said, floating higher above the precursor construct. She flicked her tail fin, wincing when she felt the stiffness of her growing eggs. "Whatever. It's not useful to you, let's keep looking."

He tore his eyes away. "Right, the lifepod. It's not that far."

"Anything special about it?" she asked as he turned away and started walking.

"Well, according to the signal it sank beyond safe depth, two hundred and fifty meters down. We can reach it easily, but anyone who was there..." He laughed nervously. "Well, they'd have a hard time getting out unless the pod came with a suit like mine. And it's been a long time since we crashed."

So, probably dead. From the way he made it sound, the dark gray suit that allowed him to swim as deep as her was a rarity among his people. And humans were so very, very fragile.

The mushroom forest behind them began to clear away. Varien continued to sneeze and scratch his limbs, though once or twice he made a new song, a sharp and rough note he called a 'cough'. A sandy plain stretched in front, steadily sloping down into cooler, darker waters. Thank goodness.

A sharp but small drop came and went, and once it was behind them they both saw a new field of weirdness.

The inky water was tinted with, of all things, purple. Dominating the scene were strange plants. They were almost perfect indigo spheres that sprouted up from the ground on squat gray stalks, and overgrown with light blue nodes as if they'd been infected by a plant version of the Green Weakness. They came in all sizes, from as wide across as Volara's body to smaller than her human friend. They absolutely infested the land. Clusters and strands stretched as far as the eye could see.

And they weren't the only plants! Smaller things grew between the giant orbs, from blue corals to pale fans to green weeds to strange purple grasses with thick nodes along their lengths. Tiny prey fish swam around, nibbling the taller bushes and leaving pieces of plantlife to fall to the ground. Quiet shrieks and whistled echoed in the distance.

There was something else, too. A subtle thrumming of power, faint and distant. Not the rapid pulsing of Varien's tools. It was almost like a shocker. Multiple shockers.

Volara looked down to her right where Varien was, just as spellbound as her. "Whoa," he said at last. "This is new."

"Very," she whispered, taking in the scene. She'd never seen anything like this. It had a sort of homely beauty, with the faint light the purple bushes gave off. Her upper heart tingled warmly; if it hadn't been for Varien's arrival, she may never have explored the Above and seen these wondrous sights.

"Hmm, wonder what these things are?" he asked, walking his shell to one of the smaller purple orbs. He held his scanning tool to the clear dome of his shell, bathing a dome-plant in painfully bright light. When he was done, his eyes lit up. She could see it even through his head coverings. "Bulb bush, edible!" he cheered. "Hang on, I'm gonna get a sample. I should be able to grow this outside my base."

His Prawn opened and he climbed out the top. Once out he swam to one of the smaller bulb bushes. In his hands was a tiny sliver of metal shaped into the form of a fang, which he held to one of the
blue nodes growing on the plant. A slick *squelch* later he'd torn it off, and placed the glowing growth into his suit's magical storage. He cut off a second slice and held it in his hand. With that done, he swam back into his Prawn and closed it.

"Alright, let's see if this is worthwhile," he said, taking off his head coverings and raising the glowing blue plant to his mouth. Volara cringed as he ate the plant, a stream of plant-blood flowing down his chin. "Hmm, not bad. Tastes like unknown." He chewed and swallowed, and Volara turned away to retch. Ugh. She could understand bone-fish eating plants, but *him*?

"Let's just keep going," she insisted, cringing when he wiped away the plant-blood that had covered his face. "The lifepod? Remember?"

"I remember, I remember," he assured. "This way."

They delved into the area, bulb bushes surrounding them on all ends. The source of the shrieks made itself readily apparent; bonesharks, here too. They swarmed around, nipping and biting anything they could come across. But unlike the ones at the floating islands, *these* ones made sure to stay far away from her. Odd, but smart.

Soon, they descended into a narrow canyon in the ground, rocky and filled with caves that lead deep into the earth. It was too tight a squeeze for her to be comfortable, and especially for Varien since his Prawn suit was taller than her head was wide. So they ignored the caves and instead walked about the bottom of the canyon.

"Do you think there'll even be anything left?" she asked at last.

He turned to her. "Hmm?"

"Of this lifepod," she clarified. "It fell long ago, and these things," she said, gesturing with her head to the bonesharks. ", like to tear things apart."

He shrugged and hopped over a stone ledge. "Maybe, but they're not attacking the rocks. Maybe they'll think the lifepod is just a big rock and leave it alone. I mean." Varien blinked, and coughed. "It technically *is* just a big rock."

Volara zapped her tusk prongs and looked around, floating above him. It never ceased to surprise her just how colorful the Above was. How did the creatures stand it? There were the bright green versions of bone-fish, the dark arc-shaped fish. Tiny, glowing green dots scuttled along the stone and fish that were almost entirely just an eye, like in the mushroom caves, swam around warily.

Another fish in particular drew her attention. Its colors were intense and it shone in the dim light. It was slightly bigger than Varien's head, and moved by wiggling four iridescent wings along its tiny purple body. Weird.

She swam a little closer, eyes narrowed. Its eyes were weird, too. Yellow, and with sideways, misshapen pupils. How did it see anything?

Apparently it saw just fine; it turned to face her and opened its four wings wide. The strange fish came to a stop and began to wiggle its wings, sending beautiful, rippling colors down their lengths that bored into Volara's eyes and flooded the edges of her vision. Her muscles relaxed and she began to sway lazily.

*I absolutely have to swim closer to that beautiful fish,*' she saw herself think in her mind's eye.

She absolutely had to swim closer to that beautiful fish.
'I have to get closer,' she thought.

She had to get closer. There seemed to be something else, some urgent song in the background. It didn't matter.

'It looks so tasty.'

It looked so tasty.

'Do not resist.'

She must not resist.

'Don't struggle.'

A metal fist shot out of nowhere and slammed into the beautiful fish. With a wet crunch, its shell bent inward and spurted yellowish blood. Just like that the spell was broken and the colors receded from her vision. Terror flooded her hearts and she jerked back from the floating fish's corpse.

"What was that?!" she shouted, rounding on Varien with wide eyes.

"Mesmer," he said simply. "One got me before we met, didn't know they existed this far out. They do some kind of... thing with their wings to pull you in, then open their bodies and bite you." He held up his hands placatingly. "I mean, I'm sure you would've been fine, but I didn't want it to hurt you. So I hit it."

Right. Right. "T-Thanks for that," she stammered, her long body cold and numb. Volara glanced up at the drifting corpse of the Mesmer, then tore her eyes away. Who knew if it could affect her even in death? Who knew if it could make her hurt Varien? She trembled quietly, making sure Varien couldn't see her moment of weakness.

How had it gotten her like that? She was a shocker! But it just - it just looked at her and she couldn't think, her world consumed by its orders and thoughts. She still remembered the terrible numbing of her mind, the absolute and overwhelming urge to do whatever it said, anything at all! And there was nothing she could've done. Volara had been utterly powerless against it, and the very thought that something had so easily overpowered her made her want to swim back to her territory and hide in a hole.

Next to her, Varien sneezed. "Well, let's get out of here, we still -"

"Yes! Please, let's go!" she insisted, swimming forward hastily with her eyes fixed to the ground and gills pumping furiously. She turned around to watch Varien climb out of the canyons. He caught up to her and she let him take the lead. Hopefully this place wouldn't have any more surprises for her.

And not ten seconds later, there was another surprise for her.

The source of the humming power came into view. It was a row of glowing dots, spiraling and flexing through the water. The string of lights was connected to a long and dark form that was covered in plates of patterned armor. The eyes were brilliant green, the mouth filled with needle fangs, and arcs of electricity ran down its form. It was another shocker.

At the same time, they noticed her too and swam over. Varien squawked something, a rapid-fire song of shock, but she was more engrossed with the other shocker. Besides, she was floating right
by him. If this one tried to hurt him, they'd have to go through her first.

"Hello?" she said. "What are you doing here? I thought I was the only one who went into the Above."

They reared back, blinking as if she'd said something surprising. Then their prongs lit up, arcing and flickering, but it was all gibberish. It made as much sense to her as a newly hatched fry's wild crackles.

It was her turn to rear back in shock. "I'm... sorry? Say that again?"

They crackled again, incessantly but just as nonsensically. In the distance she saw another pair of shockers, and they saw her talking with this new one. They joined, and they were nonsense too.

Her swim bladder tightened. Three shockers talking nonsense around her, with Varien there, and she obviously couldn't explain to them that he wasn't for eating. She looked back and forth, trying to get in a word. "No, I don't know what - one at a - damnable death, talk normally!" she pleaded, sinking until her underbelly was pressed against Varien's shell. She couldn't understand anything! This was like when she first met with Varien -

Wait. That was it.

Volara straightened herself, floated off the Prawn, and flashed her prongs. Then twice, then thrice, then four times.

The other shockers stared at her for a moment, then turned to each other and crackled rapidly. After a moment two of them broke off and one faced her. It flashed five, six, and seven. Beneath her, Varien sung something in amazement.

"Alright, good, you know that much." They were shockers, she didn't need to know if they could put things together, take them apart, or do it with groups. She leaned down to a loose rock. "Rock," she said, backing off.

The one shocker they'd chosen to speak with her leaned down and bopped it with their snout, flashing a pattern. Her stomach twisted; in a matter of moments she'd forgotten their word for it. She'd been used to Varien's tools handling the work of translation for her; they both just needed to speak, and his devices would do the rest.

Something knocked, and she coiled her body around to see Varien tapping a fist on the clear dome of his Prawn. "Volara, I think they're speaking a different language."

She glared at him. "Yes, I know that! I didn't even know there are shockers here, I thought I was the only one leaving the Above! And why do they need a new language?"

"I think they live here," he pointed out. Volara backed off from him in surprise. "Must've been for a long time, and they learn different words for different things than you. And eventually you meet up with them and don't know what they're saying." He shrugged. "It happened for humans. I think at one time there were dozens of different languages in common use."

Shockers that lived in the Above. Well, maybe not 'Above'. This place was deep enough. But the idea of a different language was hard enough. She wracked her thoughts for a way out of this, gut clenching. She pictured all three of them lunging for Varien, and her having to fight off three shockers at the same time.

The trio were looking back and forth at each other, crackling nonsensically. Idly, she wondered if
her words looked as stupid to them. When Varien wasn't dying anymore, she'd need him to help teach these shockers how to speak normally. But for now...

Hmm.

"Maybe try drawing?" Varien suggested.

Right, she should've thought of that. The sand was soft enough. Volara lowered herself to the ground and dug one of her tusk prongs into the yielding grains. The strange shockers stopped talking to each other and locked eyes with her. After a moment to think what she was going to draw, Volara began moving her body around.

Too much, she moved too much! She wiped the sand clean and tried again.

Her second attempt was easier. It was hard to move her head carefully enough, but sure enough her picture began to take form. It showed a deep divot in the land with herself and Varien - well, simple lines that represented them - and one of the 'arrows' Varien liked so much, pointing to this strange place of bulb bushes. Lastly, she drew a lifepod, drawing from her memory, and indicated that they wanted to find it.

With that done, she backed off and let the three shockers inspect it. Worriedly, she watched and waited as they spoke to one another in their nonsense words. One of them snapped at the others and came closer to Varien, wreathing themselves in energy.

Her eyes narrowed and her vision heated up. She put herself in the other shocker's path and tried to bite them. They withdrew at the last moment. Volara kept ready to bite again, but they seemed to get the idea and backed off. Internally she relaxed. Good, good. They were shockers. They didn't know how to speak, but they weren't stupid things like bonesharks.

At length, one of the shockers looked at her and zapped their tusk prongs. That at least seemed to be universal. They gestured to her and Varien with their head, then deeper into the bulb bush zone. The trio of foreign shockers crackled some more, then swam away.

Volara went limp, sighing in relief. Varien did the same.

"So," he said. "Shockers live here, too. Language divergence or..." He waved a hand. "Something. I'm not an unknown. Whatever, so do you think they'll leave us alone?"

She noticed his face was pale. Right, she wasn't the one a shocker had just tried to kill. "Well they left, so I'd imagine. As long as we don't run into any more Mesmers... ugh." Cold fear traced its way down her body, horrible and unfamiliar. "Let's keep going."

And that was what they did. The water steadily grew warmer as they traveled on, and at one point they stopped to eat. Varien ate a salted fish from his territory, and she found a cluster of boneshark eggs. A few other shockers came by them, but none were as curious as the first trio and they were left alone.

Good. Let them try to hurt her human, she dared them.

The land sloped up and down, then up again, and lastly down. The source of the warm waters came into view; more of those 'lava geysers' like in the mushroom caves and below the floating islands. There were easily four of them in sight, rumbling and belching superheated water into the area. Volara opened her mouth slowly and groaned. Ugh, this was already giving her a headache.

"There it is!" Varien shouted, point ahead. Volara focused and followed his finger. Sure enough,
there it was. A second lifepod, an almost perfect replica of the one still laying dead in her territory. It laid next to the burrow of a lava geyser, burning in the heat. All around them were smaller caves in a perfect ring, as if they didn't dare get too close to the molten rocks. She couldn't blame them; it was horrid! But the bulb bushes showed no such fear, clustering around the geysers fearlessly.

"I'll just watch from over here," she said, shaking her head to clear it. "You go do your thing, Varien."

He looked over at her worriedly. "Right, the heat. I'll try to be quick." He leaped off a bridge of stone and slowly dropped forward. Volara watched, waving her tail back and forth slowly, as he stomped towards the lifepod.

She let her thoughts wander. There was Ohmaron who'd all but threatened Varien's life, the Mesmer that had so easily overpowered her and made her need Varien to save her, and the shockers that lived here and spoke a different, nonsense language. What was with the world? It should've been so simple; she was a shocker, she had friends, and she'd live a happy life until the Green Weakness claimed her. And now with Varien's arrival everything had been turned so upside down; her friend was threatening her friends, she'd been overpowered, and shockers did not just live in the lovely dark chasm.

She couldn't hold it against him, though. None of this was his fault. It was the precursors' fault. Had it not been for them, the Green Weakness would never have escaped the Underworld. Varien's people would not have been blown out of the sky and he wouldn't be without his consort. Everything could be traced back to their damnable kind, and the mere thought made her stomach knot up sickeningly.

Before she knew it Varien was heading back, his face molding into what she thought was a 'dejected' look. "No luck?" she asked sadly.

"It's... well, the databox there was for a repulsion cannon, no good. And the PDA. It's uh. I'll read it." He held his square up to his face, tapped his fingers along it, and began to speak. "I'm not really an unknown - uh, a doc-tor, it's a human who knows a lot about how to heal other humans - even though it says that on my eye-dee. I cheated the exams. What does a doctor need to know about resetting bones, or cutting people open? Robots do all that for us! Doctors these days read a diagnosis off a screen. I can do that.

"I can't believe it's actually caught up to me. I'm so far down I can't get out of my lifepod. Small miracle the oxygen recycler works, but damn it I need a reinforced suit! I can't just keep luring in fish to eat. But if that weren't enough, my entire body is covered in these green sores and it feels like I have the super-flu. My scanner doesn't tell me anything I don't know. I don't know the first thing about curing an alien disease. I think I'm going to die down here."

"So, he was infected too," she said when he finished. "That's the late stages. You've seen it."

Varien nodded. "I have. But, then how did he develop it so fast? I've been infected for weeks and I don't have anything growing out of me." The word 'yet' stretched between them.

"Maybe he ate something infected?" she guessed. "That always accelerates it; my mother made sure to teach us how to avoid infected food."

"That might be it." He put the PDA away and looked up at her. "Wait. Volara, when you were drawing with those other ampeels, you drew a lifepod."

She tilted her head. "... yes, what about it?"
"You've never seen a lifepod."

Her hearts stopped. *I just guessed, just say you guessed.* "One landed in my territory." No no! Wait, she could still salvage it! "By the time I found it, everyone was gone." Good, good. No need to tell Varien how she'd killed one of his people. "Actually, I thought it was an egg of some kind at first," she joked nervously.

"Huh," he grunted. Then he gave her a wide, beaming smile. "Well, you'll have to show me one day. While we're here, we may as well look around. I think we're close to the Aurora so there should be some wrecks."

She opened her mouth in relief. Thank goodness. "Right, let's get to exploring. This place is huge, we'll find your tool soon."

Volara hoped so, anyway. The bulb zone was a bad place.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Estimate Time to Death: 21 days, 17 hours, 35 minutes

Varien

Shallows, nothing.

Kelp forests, nothing.

Grass plains, nothing.

Blood kelp zone, nothing.

Floating islands, nothing.

Bulb zone, nothing.

Mushroom forests, nothing.

Varien's stomach churned queasily. He was running out of places to look, both for the mod station and for wherever his fiance had taken up residence. To make it worse, his skin was itching like crazy! He could barely keep his hands off himself.

He sighed, looking down at the fabricator's table. At least he had a grappling arm for his exosuit; it'd make getting around easier than just relying on the thrusters. The new stasis rifle by his feet would be useful, too. If he ever learned to aim worth a damn, he wouldn't need to keep relying entirely on Volara as a bodyguard. She'd already done so much for him.

The twin lasers stopped their work, leaving the grappling arm ready. He reached out to hold it, then tried to lift it. All he managed to do was push himself into the ground, so he put the arm into his suit's stasis and crawled over to where his P.R.A.W.N. was docked. It took some effort, but after climbing in and pressing a few buttons the left arm came off and he could screw the grappling arm in its place.

Panting, he stepped back and admired his work. The grappling arm was quite different from the regular one. The forearm was thicker to contain the rope, and instead of three fingers at the end there was a circular anchor with three bright lights on it.

He scratched his left leg.

Varien glanced into the bottom left of his vision, where his biometric readouts were still burned
into his retinal implants. Food and water were just fine, but his overall health was mocking him. The red circle surrounding the stylish white heart had receded to three-quarters, maybe even just two-thirds full. If he focused on it and brought up the detailed analysis, he was insulted with more warning signs than he could count. Reduced white blood cell count, skin irritation, lymph node swelling. The bronchitis making him cough wasn't even the Carar itself, but an opportunistic infection taking advantage of his weakened immune system. His head constantly spun at various speeds. Right now it was tolerable.

Worst of all was the back of his left hand, right around where his thumb and index finger met. It throbbed with warm pain and, if he looked closely, he could've sworn the skin was swollen. The veins were easier to see, too.

Damn it.

Thunk!

He looked down into the moonpool at where Volara had tapped the underside, and smiled. Oh good, she'd arrived. "I'm coming, I'm coming," he said, holding his translator in one hand. He sat on the edge, dangling his flippers into the water, and slid in. He came face to face with Volara, patted above her nasal arch, then swam backward so she could talk without zapping him.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I brought you something," she said eagerly, her tail fin waving about behind her. "I know how much you like your rocks, so I made sure to get some on the way over here." She leaned her head down and opened her jaws, letting a stream of fist-sized metal tumble to the ocean floor.

Varien dove after them, eyes wide. Every last one of the misshaped lumps were dull, metallic orange. He grabbed one in his gloved hands and turned it over. "This is copper!" He sighed in relief and quickly put it all away. "Thank goodness, I've been running so low on this stuff!" He swam over to the ampeel's head. He lowered his hands and began to scratch her underside furiously. He didn't know how much she could feel it through her carapace, but she leaned into it and parted her jaws, so she must've felt something.

At length, he pulled away and, with aching joints, climbed back into his moonpool. He dumped her gift of copper onto the ground - he'd clean it up later - and got into his exosuit. He ejected, gently thrustered down to the ground, and faced her. "So, I was thinking we go back to that sparse reef place again."

Volara blinked, swimming backward. "Again? But weren't we already there?"

He shrugged. Ow, his shoulder. "Sure, but we were looking for the alien facility, not wrecks. We probably missed a bunch of stuff." He reached up to scratch his shoulder, then coughed hideously once, twice, thrice.

The alien megafauna zapped her front pair of prongs. "Makes sense, lead the way."

He stomped around until he was past his moonpool. Quickly, Varien did a mental check of what he had. Cured fish for food, check. Giant bottles of water from his newly built water filter, check. First aid kit, check. Cyclops power cells charging... not check. He didn't have a power cell charger for them, but with the copper Volara had brought him he could fix that.

Varien didn't know the way to the sparse reef, so instead he tapped along his PDA until the signal for lifepod seventeen was burned into his vision. Lifepod seventeen was in the reef, that much he
knew for certain, and once he found it he pointed at it. "That way," he said, scratching himself one last time before grabbing the P.R.A.W.N.'s controls.

"Right behind you," Volara said, taking up position above him. With everything check, he set off into the alien oceans.

The sky above him, past the water, was black as concrete. The hurricane may have passed, but that didn't stop heavy clouds from covering the sky and flashing with lightning. The darkness didn't bother him, though. It reminded him of the dark chasm Volara lived in, with its ghostly beauty.

Before long they once again left the shallows in exchange for the grass plains. He routinely coughed up a lung as they traveled, drawing worried looks from his fish friend. Eventually the red fields of grass gave way to spires of stone and sparse, yellowish plants.

They'd arrived.

He took a moment to rest his arms, since even the effort of holding his exosuit's controls was getting to be unbearable, but then he turned off the signal in his eyes and the hunt began.

With the two of them, they made good time. He practiced a little with the grapple, shooting it into rocky cliffs and letting the it latch into the solid stone. It was unwieldy and clumsy to flail around with. More often than not, he shot the grapple at something too far away and missed entirely. Varien didn't remember why he thought it'd be a good idea to have the grapple arm, but he was stuck using it in the reef.

The first time he'd been to the sparse reef, he'd never really gotten a chance to appreciate it. But it was quiet and peaceful, not a predator in sight except for Volara, and she didn't count. The plants were rare and often blended right into the yellowish water. The exceptions were the odd purple brain coral that stood out like a sore thumb, leaking bubbles of air into the surrounding water. Spadefish swam about lazily, shuttlebugs clicked and clacked near the caves, and puny rockgrubs crawled across the stone.

One wreck was easy to find. It rested near the canyons, a monolithic square of black metal and dead wires. But there was nothing of value for him there, just shattered pieces of a moonpool.

As they kept searching, another wreck came out of the gloom while he was coughing. This one was gargantuan, shaped like an arch. Through some impossible feat of balance, its white and black shell stood tall and proud amidst the sand without leaning against anything. At a 'mere' one hundred and sixty meters beneath the surface, there was plenty of light for him to see by even with the cloudy skies. All around the main body of the wreck, blocks and sheets of metal were strewn about like a toddler had tossed them around in a tantrum.

Volara swam in front of him, looking up at the tip of the monolith. "Alright, here we are," she said, turning back around to him. "I'll - wait."

He froze. She froze. They both looked around the dreary, empty waters.

A burst of light nearly blinded him. He held up his hands but the damage was done, and his night vision was gone in a literal flash. Through the black waters all he could see was Volara's bioluminescence, and the lights of the new creature.

It was a warper, like in the underground river. Its sickle arms were as hideously pointed as ever, and its revolting face clicked and screeched mechanically. The cyborg drifted around at one of the legs of the wreckage, patrolling a small area. Varien held his breath when it turned to face him, but
Volara was already there. Like a bullet she launched herself at the creature many times smaller than her and closed her jaws around its head.

Flash! Another portal of light, and the warper was gone.

Volara turned to him, her luminous eyes wide. "Are you alright?"

He waved it off, but fell into a fit of coughing despite himself. When it eventually passed, his chest ached from inside. "Never better," he croaked. "Thanks for taking care of it."

"I'll be back," she growled. "You should be quick."

He nodded, rubbing over the sore growth on his left hand with the other. "Right, one second." He pushed a button inside his exosuit to open its top and climbed out. The waters were, like always, chilly and thick. It was a familiar, comforting weight, but at the same time it was so heavy. Part of him wished Volara would push him around with her head; he was just so tired, all the time.

Once outside he blinked a few times to get his eyes adapted to the darkness again. Maybe I should wear an eyepatch for this reason, he thought. Like the old timey pirates. I've already got the ocean part down. Varien summoned his flashlight from within his suit, gave it a quick test, and nodded. "Alright, I'm going in," he told the ampeel. He locked eyes with a section of pried-open doors and swam to the wreck.

He'd gotten a good system down for exploring wrecks. Keep his dive reel out so he could always find his way back, and then explore each room bit by bit. It was slow and unbearably tedious, but he had three hours of oxygen strapped to his back so he powered through the boredom.

The wreck's strange orientation kept making him dizzy. At one point he had to go 'down' a ladder horizontally, and likewise all the doors were vertical. It was pitch black too, and the only sounds were his own breaths and coughs as he swung the flashlight around, casting its gaze on the prizes. A piece of a nuclear reactor, useless. Chairs and benches littered the 'floor' like trash. Shelves filled with rotten plantlife clung to the walls. He explored up one 'leg' of the arching wreckage and down the other, using his tools to cut or weld as needed. The only thing he found that was even mildly of interest was a data box, which contained blueprints to let his Cyclops be able to hold more than a single decoy at once.

The disappointment ate away at his gut like acid. Damn it, he was so sick of looking for the modification station! He wanted to go back down, find this volcanic region that held the cure, and finally stop feeling so stars-damned awful!

When he emerged, Volara caught his attention as she swam around the area, undulating and swaying fluidly. There was a certain beauty to her despite, or perhaps because of, the whole 'giant deep-sea fish' thing. Something awe inspiring, powerful and majestic. If he had the time, he could've easily sat there and watched her swim for hours.

But he didn't have the time, so he kicked off the metal beneath him and swam a ways out. She noticed him and turned to face him. "Anything?" she asked, strained and hopeful. Apparently his face was all the answer she needed, because she looked away. "Oh. Well, we'll get it next time," she tried to encourage.

Yeah. Next time.

Varien climbed back into his exosuit and the two of them had lunch. He dug into a cooked bladderfish he'd made that morning. It'd gone cold, but was still good. Gritty and odorless. Volara,
of course, had plenty of fish to hunt, zap, and eat. He bit off his food's head, chewed and swallowed, then grunted.

Volara turned to him in an instant. "What is it?"

He waved it off. "Oh, nothing." He'd just realized, it'd been a while since he gagged at the thought of eating a dead animal. Was he going native so fast?

Before he could think about that too much, a bright blue symbol appeared in the upper right of his vision. He blinked hurriedly and swallowed. "Huh, I got a new message." He eyed the useless wreckage. "I think we should head back anyway, there's nothing here," he said, finishing up his meal.

The ampeel with him zapped her tusk prongs. "Yeah, no point staying here if there's nothing that can help you." She swam down next to his suit, looking at him with giant eyes. "Lead the way."

He nodded and gripped his P.R.A.W.N.'s controls, turning back to his habitat and stomping ahead. He repeatedly coughed and drew pitying looks from Volara, but the trip was largely uneventful. The most exciting thing was Volara murdering a sandshark that got too close for her liking. They arrived back at his habitat and he docked his exosuit. After stretching a moment inside the cockpit, he climbed out -

"WHOA!" he shouted, his left foot vanishing from beneath him. He stumbled forward with his hands out, but still fell to his knees. Varien glanced at what had tripped him; it was one of the chunks of copper he'd tossed into the moonpool. "I'm fine!" he shouted for the ampeel to hear. He stumbled out of the moonpool, pulling his helmet and gloves off as he did.

The communications relay's light was lit up bright red, flashing annoyingly. "Captain, a new message has arrived!" it chirped blankly.

He waved a hand, then frowned. Eugh, that spot on it was really swelling up. "Play message."

"Playing message..." The relay's voice was replaced by a familiar man's voice, panicked and frantic. In the background, he could hear water sloshing about. "This is CTO Yu, coordinates attached! I'm in lifepod two, but we're way past our safe depth and bleeding air! Our only chance is to make a swim for it, but it's half a kilometer straight up! We'll keep you posted! Yu out!" The message ended, and the relay spat out a coordinate chip.

Holy shit. CTO Yu! He was Silvia's boss. For a moment Varien's stomach flipped and his heart raced; he had to get to this lifepod, rescue Yu before...

And then he remembered that this was a month-old message. His mood dropped sharply. Right. They'd landed five hundred meters down, which would explain why the loop took so long. Whether or not Yu was still alive, he was long gone.

Thunk!

"AH!" He whipped around to the source of the noise, which was Volara tapping her snout against the window. "Don't do that!" he shouted.

His translator was out of sight, but Volara must've gotten the message because she said, "Sorry. What is it?"

Varien reached out and yanked the coordinate chip out, then walked back to his moonpool and got inside the exosuit, where his translator was. Volara was already there, staring at him. "It's another
signal for a lifepod, like in the bulb zone." Volara's tail fin twitched at the mention of the bulb zone. "It's, uh..." He looked for where the signal was in his vision, turning around. Eventually, he found it and pointed. "That way."

Volara turned to look where he'd gestured. Then she went still, her serpentine body drifting limply in the waters. "That way?" she whispered at last.

He raised an eyebrow and walked out from under his base, standing to the ampeel's left. "Yes, that way. Why?"

She rotated to look at him. "That's the way to where my people live."

"Oh." Understanding dawned on him. "Oh. The one that fell in your home, you think?"

"... let's just go to it," she said, head lowered like a kicked puppy.

Varien's brow furrowed. What was with her?

If the trip back from the sparse reef had been without incident, then the journey back to Volara's territory was dead silent. The entire trip she didn't say anything; through the creepvine, the grass plains, the mushroom forest. Not a single arc of energy danced along her prongs.

As they grew closer it grew darker and darker until, when he entered the black chasm that ampeels lived in, the world was made of pitch anywhere his headlights didn't fall. Even the ground beneath his exosuit's feet was seemingly nonexistent. Volara's natural light hovered above him, and he headed forward.

Blighters tried to bite his plasteel chassis, and Volara snapped them up with a quick motion of her jaws. No electricity. Varien's gut twisted. What was she so worried about? What was with this lifepod that had her so quiet? His brain filled up with various ideas, ranging from the mundane to the ludicrous.

They dropped sharply, and the depth skyrocketed. Three hundred meters. Four hundred. Four-fifty. Five hundred meters beneath the surface, and there it was.

Lifepod two.

Like the others, this one had seen better days. Its flotation pads were deflated, as though they'd never deployed to begin with. It rested on its side at the mouth of a titanic cavern, with its ladders and markings dulled by natural detritus. The bright 'Lifepod 2' was faded orange whenever he shone his lights on it. When he didn't, the inky water swallowed the lifepod as though it didn't even exist. A massive hole had been torn into the top of the pod, like some massive creature had taken a bite out of the metal.

Varien brought his exosuit to a stop next to it, and Volara swam quietly outside. "You can know what happened to these, right?" she asked, speaking for the first time since they arrived. "Those things you find inside tell you the story. Just... go learn what happened."

His mind jumped back to some of the more horrible scenarios he'd dreamed up. His hands shook. What had her so spooked?

He climbed into the oily sea.

Varien had missed it at first, but there was a data box lying next to the lifepod, its lights dim. He investigated it, but only got the blueprints for a Cyclops hull module, which he already had.
Worthless. With that out of the way he climbed up the ladder to the massive hole in the lifepod, and lowered himself inside.

It was dark, and a fine layer of gray dirt coated everything. The fabricator was still. The storage container was open and empty. Even the first aid kit fabricator was useless. The only thing of any interest was the PDA leaned up against the ladder. Varien swam closer and wiped it clear of grime. Then he swam out, carrying it in his hands until he was back inside his exosuit.

Once inside, Varien took his helmet off and held his own pad next to the one he'd pilfered. A quick tap of fingers later, and he had the data download. Volara floated silently, staring at him with unblinking emeralds while her lower body coiled up behind her. "Alright, I have it," he said warily. "I'm going to see what it recorded."

His PDA crackled to life. Yu's voice was the first thing he heard, along with the rushing of water outside the hull and a woman's panicked breathing. He sat straight up, his entire body colder than the waters outside. That person's breathing, was it -

"Flotation devices failed! We're going down!" Yu shouted.

"We have to evacuate! We can't stay in here if we go any deeper!" the woman shouted. Varien stopped breathing. That was Silvia. Her smooth as honey voice, as charming and heavenly as he remembered, came to his ears. After a month, even the sound of her so terrified and scared for her life made his heart warm.

"It's too late to evacuate!" Yu retorted. "I think I can config the oh-two system to act as a pump!"

The sound of wires sparking. Metal being hit. Touchscreens being pressed. Water rushing into somewhere.

Then the water stopped. "It worked!" Silvia shouted.

SLAM! The sound of the lifepod crashing into stone, along with both Silvia and Yu being submerged. A moment later he heard them come up for air, gasping wetly. Varien himself was hardly breathing, leaning intently over the PDA. "Holy shit," Silvia whimpered. "Holy shit we're so far down. Yu, I can't see anything outside!"

"Alright, okay," Yu stammered at last. "Calm down. So the good news is we're not sinking anymore, and we're not dead."

"And the bad?"

"We're five hundred meters down, and in half an hour this lifepod will be flooded. Our only saving grace are these reinforced suits. Quick, let's put them on."

Clothes zipping and stretching.

"So what do we do?!" Silvia shouted. "We're still flooding! Oh shit, my feet aren't touching the floor - "

"Calm down!" Yu shouted back, sounding anything but calm. "Just - don't panic. What we do is run the math. We're engineers, we can do that. I think we can make some air tanks and a rebreather, there have to be some materials around here. We get a dive reel, and we make our way out of this chasm and back to the surface."

"What if it's still too far, though?" Silvia retorted.
"Then we think of something else! And we keep doing that, over and over, until it's either not too far to swim or the alien fish figure out we're tasty."

The recording ended. His PDA dropped to the ground. He dimly noticed that it fell because of how hard his hands trembled. With herculean effort, he looked up at Volara. "That was her," he stammered. "That was her! That was - and Yu, her boss! That was Silvia! Volara, what happened?! Didn't you see anyone when you came by here?!"

For a horrifyingly long moment, she was silent. "I was swimming around, doing a patrol, when your ship crashed. I saw the lifepod fall into my territory, so I hid in some vines to watch. Someone came out. I didn't know it was a human. I thought they were just some fish from the Above. I was curious, so I stayed quiet and watched.

"They collected the metal scraps that fell with them, and some of the blue rocks that grow here. After a while it wasn't just one person, but two, swimming around and trying to do something. I didn't know what. I guess they were trying to reach the surface." She lowered her head and drew closer to his windshield. "I didn't attack them! I swear it! But a green-blaster came down - you call it a crabsquid, I think? - and attacked them. So, so I surrounded myself in electricity and charged. I killed it, but - " She cut herself off and looked away shamefully.

His heart wasn't beating. His lungs weren't expanding. Varien leaned forward and tried to speak around the egg suddenly lodged in his throat. "What happened?! You killed it but what?!! That was Yu and Silvia! The love of my life!" His voice cracked. "What happened?!"

She whimpered. "I killed the green-blaster by biting its eye out and electrocuting it, but one of the humans was too close to me. The other swam up and away. But the other, they - "

"Which was it?!!" he demanded. "Describe them!" Stars above, it was happening. He could feel it. He was going up a roller coaster of despair, he was climbing up and up. Just the thought of what was coming made him want to vomit.

Volara shook her head. "They were wearing the suit you are, it was hard to tell them apart. One had these two bumps on their chest, the other didn't." One had breasts, one didn't. Silvia and Yu, it fit perfectly.

"Which one?!!" he demanded, deafened by his rushing blood.

"They were too close, I didn't know!" she protested. "It was an accident, really! Whatever it was with the suit I damaged it, so they were being crushed and they were in so much pain so I - I zapped them again and killed them! It was the one with the bumps. Varien, I'm so sorry. I didn't know, I thought they were fish! I would've been more careful, I never..."

Whatever else she said, he didn't hear. Varien's jaw hung open and trembled. Dead. Silvia was dead. Her suit was damaged and she was crushed by the pressure, then fried with electricity. She hadn't gotten away. She wasn't been sitting around somewhere, waiting to see him. She wasn't in the third Degasi base, trying to find a back to him. She was dead. She was dead, her body shredded and devoured by the local predators. Everything that made her who she was, was gone. Her voice. Her like for black coffee. Her schooling. Her taste in books and movies and games. All of it was gone.

He looked back up. All around him was a trench as black as night. He couldn't see well - there was something in his eyes and he didn't know what - but he could tell that there was someone in front of him. She'd killed Silvia. She'd made her choke and gasp as the water crushed her lungs, then burned her nerves from the inside out as she died alone and afraid and in pain, without him by her
Varien barely even realized what was happening. He gripped the exosuit controls and -

"AAAHHHHHHH!"

A metal fist flew out and crashed into the sea monster before him. It recoiled in shock as yellowish blood burst from its cracked shell. He spun around. The grapple arm latched on to something. A rock, probably. He was pulled forward so fast it hurt. Everything was a blur. He jumped with thrusters. He crashed through mushroom forests. He ran through red grass.

Eventually, he fell in a hole. Varien grunted and screamed as his exosuit tumbled head over heels before coming to a rest on its side, in the middle of a deep circular depression in the grass plateaus. Everything hurt. His lungs, his hands, his legs, but worst was that spot where his heart was. It was cold and hollow and it felt like it was a black hole sucking the rest of himself inside. He breathed in and screamed raggedly, covering his face with his hands, sobbing hideously.

She was dead. For the past month he'd been holding out hope, denying any thought that said she wasn't alive, refusing to believe that strong, capable, beautiful Silvia was dead when he was alive. But she was gone, and that sea monster had murdered her! He was never going to be with her, never purchase a house or raise a family or anything ever again. She was gone. He was alone, and all he could do was blubber helplessly on the ocean floor.

Above him, the uncaring, thieving ocean continued to turn.

Volara

Her face hurt. She dimly knew that she deserved it.

It was so much worse than she had feared. Volara hadn't just murdered a random human that happened to be on the Aurora with Varien. She'd killed his consort, his companion for life. She thought back to how the human had screamed and bubbled, losing the not-water that was so precious to humans, thrashing in pain as her chest was crushed beneath the weight of the sea. And that had been her friend's consort, the one he loved and wanted to be with. She'd took her from him. What was a little punch to the face?

Her swim bladder continued to tighten and clench. She sunk until she laid on the stone, bleeding through the cracks in her face. Volara flexed her tail fin, but only managed to scrape herself slightly along the ground. Eventually she stopped trying to move; why bother? What for? Varien was gone. She doubted he'd ever come back.

The bleeding slowed and stopped. Her head still hurt, and she could feel the cracks in her carapace grinding against each other. Who cared? It didn't matter.

While she moped about, Volara eventually heard more shockers crackling. She glanced at the source of the noise. Oh. Herzaron, Teslara, and their six fries. What were they doing here? She didn't want them to see her like this.

Her tail fin beat weakly against the lifepod.

"Vosara!" Teslara shouted, swimming down quickly. Like always, Teslara spoke with a lisp since she was missing a prong on her fourth row. "What happened?! You're hurt!"

"I'm fine," she mumbled as the other shockers crowded around her. "It's fine."
"Here, get up," Herzaron said, pushing at her side and urging her to float. "Let's get you back into your cave."

Wordlessly she obeyed, relaxing her swim bladder to rise from the ground. Herzaron and Teslara both took up position next to her, nudging her with their heads and encouraging her to swim. Slowly, she did. Their fries swam around them, chattering quietly to themselves. Volara could see them, though. They were wondering what was wrong with her.

That was a good question. What was wrong with her? She wasn't the one told her consort was dead.

Her friends led her back to her cave, into her resting chamber, and down onto her bedding. Once she nestled into it, Herzaron and Teslara swam in front of her to look down at her, their fries poking around from behind. "Now, what happened?" Herzaron began quietly. "What could do this to you?"

"Varien hit me with one of his shells." All eight shockers looking at her blinked and coiled their bodies in varying types of surprise. "I deserved it."

"What?" their daughter Posara asked, peeking her head out from behind her mother. "But he's so small!"

"His tools are made of rocks," she muttered. "They can hit hard."

"He hit you?!" another fry shouted incredulously. "I hurt him," she moaned, rolling upside down in her bedding. "It's my fault."

"Vosara, dearie," Teslara said, leaning in to nuzzle her underbelly. "What exactly happened out there?"

"We went to the lifepod that landed in my territory." They looked at her strangely. "Uh, the lifepods are what humans used to escape a disaster. But the one that landed here had something go wrong with it. I told you what happened to the humans." She closed her eyes. "The one I killed was his consort. He wasn't happy about that."

Someone crackled around her, so she cracked open her eyes again to see the other upside down. "Oh Volara," Herzaron said lowly. "You couldn't have known."

She turned back over. "I could've guessed. I could've looked at them gathering rocks and metals and figured they weren't just prey. But I didn't, and now he hates me."

"Where is he now?" another fry, Chargaron, asked. Where indeed. "I don't know. Probably back in his territory." She sighed. "Thank you for coming by, but I think I really just want to be alone right now," she told them morosely.

Herzaron and Teslara shared a look, and then she spoke. "As right, Vosara." She gestured her head towards her consort. "We should probably go, give her some space."

"Please do," she interrupted.

Herzaron and Teslara gave her another worried look, but then gathered their fries and swam for the exit. A few of them kept looking back at her, and she just stared listlessly at them as they vanished into the distance. Once done, she curled up on her bedding until her tail fin tickled her nasal arch.
Damnable death, she'd really messed this up.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Electrocution

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Thanks to DevoutRelic for editing.

Chapter published 10/14/17.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Estimated Time to Death: 18 days, 0 hours, 8 minutes**

**Varien**

It was eerily quiet. The chirping and squeaking fish outside seemed quieter than a gnat. Which made sense; it was night.

He hadn't slept, though.

In his bed, Varien lay despondent. He was on top of the sheets, his head bonelessly turned to watch his water filter. The massive structure, built into the walls, hummed and buzzed. Its two water tanks bubbled. The twin fabrication lasers slowly put together the natural debris it'd filtered out into a water bottle. Then the bottle was finished, and clean water spilled in like a waterfall.

He watched it silently as it filled up. As a finishing touch, a cap was fabricated for the bottle's neck. Once that was done, noise ceased again. His throat tickled; he should probably get up and drink the water.

Varien seriously considered not getting up. It wasn't as if anyone was around to stop him. But as the minutes ticked by, the tickle grew into a burning in his throat, made only worse when he had an occasional coughing fit. With a heave of effort, he lifted his cement-encased limbs and got up from the bed. With plodding steps, he slid over to the filter, snatched the bottle of water, and headed back to bed.

Once there, he sat, unscrewed the cap and drank deep. He had to admit, it was good water. Cold and clean, as fresh as could be. It felt heavenly going down his tortured throat, but his heart still felt like a sucking void while he drank.

Eventually he'd chugged the entire thing and tossed the bottle aside. When he did, Varien caught sight of the green blisters on his hands, along with the spiderweb of dark veins. They itched fiercely. He scratched them. He didn't feel better.

He ate breakfast, just fruits and vegetables. No meat. It soothed the pit in his stomach, but he still didn't feel better. His skin felt tight; he hadn't been bathing. His mouth tasted rotten; he hadn't been brushing his teeth with the habitat's toiletries.

Vaguely he knew he shouldn't be just moping about his habitat. He should've been out in the ocean, looking for the mod station. Without it he couldn't go deep enough to reach the alien facilities, and without those he was dead. But who cared?
So what if he cured himself? So what if he turned off the alien gun, built a rocket with Alterra's blueprints, and got off this rock? What was he going back to? To endless work at one of Alterra's subsidiary companies, with nobody to return home to at the end of a long day? To a mountain of debt? Stars above, what would he tell his parents? Silvia's parents?

If he told them anything at all. It wasn't an accident they'd planned to marry while working in the Ariadne Arm, far away from civilization.

He didn't want to think about it. If it was up to him, he would just lay in bed all day and stare blankly into the distance. But thinking about it was just one thing. Whenever he actually did lay there listlessly the seconds stretched into minutes, the minutes into hours, the hours into days. And he just couldn't stand to live in such a stupor. Especially not when he could feel himself melting from the inside out.

So... he'd kept busy. He built a second multipurpose room on top of the old one, and expanded his farms there. He gathered the materials for a second moonpool so he could keep both his seamoth and P.R.A.W.N. docked at the same time. He made a water filter. He made power cell chargers for his Cyclops. Additional solar panels to power it all. He even planted the bulb bush sample he'd gotten. It was all just busy work. None of it would make a difference.

He coughed again. He listlessly meandered about his shelter, arms limp and legs dragging. His thoughts were dim and defeatist. And it was all her fault. He just hoped that wherever she was, Volara was as miserable as him.

Volara

She was miserable, and rightly so.

She was a killer. A murderer. The kind of person her mother had always warned her about. When she died and entered the Underworld, her soul would be stripped of its predatory form and made into that of the glowing prey-souls. One day, she'd be swept up as part of a soul conglomerate.

Volara opened her mouth, letting water flow in and out, then closed it and sighed. Her hearts were heavy, and her tight swim bladder weighed her down onto her bedding. She stared into the walls of her cavern, her gaze unfocused. Her own thoughts restlessly tormented her, stuck in the same cycle for the past three days. A nonstop whirl of How could I do that to him? and He showed me so much and this is how I repay him? and He's already dying and now this too? Day after day, her soul-rending thoughts tore into her hearts.

She should've been more careful. She should've been smarter. It was so obvious that the humans who landed in her territory were people instead of dumb prey. Why hadn't she seen that? Furthermore, why hadn't she seen the green-blaster until it was right on top of them? She could've been faster, smarter, more observant. But she wasn't. Volara had done what she'd done, and now her dear human was paying the price.

Her stomach rumbled. Bone-fish swam meekly above her. It'd be so easy to rise from her bedding, zap them, and down them. But she didn't.

Crackling reached her earholes. She glanced up at the entrance to her cave to see a shocker swimming in. Even if the swirling patterns on their carapace wasn't enough, the missing prong was a dead giveaway.

"Vosara," Teslara cooed, swimming in. "I hope you don't mind me intruding on your territory like
this, but Herzy and I were worried."

She grunted and curled up tighter in her nest. Her tail fin nearly tickled her snout. "Don't be. I'm fine." Her stomach growled again.

Teslara swam in closer. "Dearie, when's the last time you've eaten?" She tilted her head. "You sook famished!"

"I don't know. Don't care." So what if she starved to death? That seemed like punishment enough.

The other shocker sighed, then shot over to a school of brave bone-fish and blasted them with a nova of light. She grabbed one gently in her jaws and swam down to Volara's level. "Here you go," she said, letting go of the dead bone-fish. It drifted listlessly, delicious blood wafting into her nasal arch. "Eat."

Reluctantly, she did. Volara cracked open her jaws and let the other shocker push the prey into her mouth. Once inside she closed it and swallowed the bone-fish whole. The barest sliver of its meaty flavor coasted over her tongue. "Thanks," she muttered, glancing away from Teslara.

She set down next to her, regarding Volara with sorrowful eyes. _Stop it_, she wanted to say. _I'm not worth your pity._

"It's not good for you to just stay here constantsy, my dear," she chided. "You need to go see him. You ss never get csosure sike this."

"Closure? Closure?!" she ranted. "I murdered his love! If anything he's the one who needs help." She curled up tighter. "I'm the one at fault." She closed her eyes; they stung.

Teslara sighed again. "That's why you should go talk to him. It isn't healthy for you to beat yourself up like this." She nudged another dead fish down. "Eat."

She did. Volara didn't feel any better, though.

"Has he been by? Since he attacked you?"

"Obviously not," she muttered. "If someone murdered Herzaron, would you want to go visit them?"

"Vosara," she cooed, nudging her with her snout again. "It was an accident. You can't keep shocking yoursf over this. Everybody thinks you're overreacting."

She stiffened. "Everybody?"

Teslara looked away in shame. "... my darsing Ferraron may have tosd some other fries, and from there the gossip spread. Zaparon and Ohmaron know, your sister knows..." She groaned. Great. Just great. Conducara would never let this go.

_Not like she should_, she taunted herself. "Good. They know. Whatever. Just go."

A pause. Then, Teslara zapped her tusk prongs. "Sisten dearie, Herzaron wiss be by sater to check on you. I think I ss go check on your tiny friend. See if I can't speak some sense to him." Her expression softened. "It breaks my hearts to see you like this, my dear." She fluttered away, but then turned back to her. "Where does he sive?"

She sighed. "In the Above. Close to a membrane in the water - don't touch it - where it's bright and hot. In a metal territory. Don't go up too fast." Why was she even telling her? It wouldn't fix
Teslara zapped her tusks again. "Got it. And Vosara." Her emerald eyes softened. "Psease, take care of yourselves." And with that Teslara swam out, vanishing into the distance.

Volara sighed and lowered her head back into her bedding. So. Aside from Teslara going to try and cheer Varien up or something, everyone knew. Everyone knew what kind of awful person she was. A distant part of her knew it was paranoid, but it wouldn't surprise her if she got some other visitors soon, for far less friendly reasons. She couldn't blame them.

A selfish part of her wished that this had happened later. That they'd found his devices, ventured deeper than anyone had ever gone, and found the way to free Varien from the curse. She selfishly wished that she'd had more time with him. With his language of song, his malleable face, his scratching hands. The way his voice rose and fell, or his face lit up whenever she displayed her strength in front of him. She just wanted more time. But murderers didn't get what they wanted. She deserved this.

Ohmaron

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair!

He swam irately above his and Zaparon's territory. A half-dozen vines stretched upwards beneath him. The waters were dark and quiet, empty of prey. None of that mattered as he swam angry circles. He only occasionally felt the stiffness of his eggs.

It'd hurt her. That disgusting little creature had hurt her again. He hadn't heard how, and it boggled the mind to hear that the tiny little creature his friend called 'Varien' had somehow managed to hurt her.

He'd told her this would happen. He'd told her it'd just get her hurt but she hadn't listened. This was his fault. He shouldn't have let it go. He should've been more convincing. Volara had already been hurt so, so dearly because of him and now because of him she'd been hurt again! The unfairness of it all made him want to scream! Why hadn't she listened to him?!

... no, he knew why. She hated him. Hated him so utterly and completely. Her hatred surrounded his prongs, stuffed his mouth, coated his shell. It made his hearts clench and his swim bladder leaden. It was his fault her fries were dead, his fault that her dreams of motherhood were destroyed. She had trusted him to give her a strong clutch, but he and his tainted blood had ruined everything.

It just wasn't right! She shouldn't have been hurt. She shouldn't be in her territory, hearts-broken and despondent. But the fact that she was weighed on him like rocks, constricting around him and freezing his gills until he suffocated. The unfairness of it all was going to kill him!

Blue lights crackled beneath him. Ohmaron froze, then swam down to the shocker coming up to meet him. "Zaparon, I thought you were redecorating?" he asked his consort with a tilt of his head.

"I saw you muttering," he replied. His eyes lowered in concern. "Ohmaron, are you okay?"

He expelled a burst of water from his mouth, then did a spiral in the water. "It just... it just makes me so angry! She never should've been hurt. It's not fair."

"Is this about Volara?" Zaparon asked. His voice grew quiet and he swam in. Ohmaron gratefully leaned in and they nuzzled each other. Already he could feel his hearts relaxing and his swim
bladder unwinding. They kept their heads pressed together a while longer before Zappy pulled away. "Oh damnable death, you're not shocking yourself over that, are you?" Ohmaron couldn't meet his gaze. Zaparon sighed. "Ohma, there's nothing you could've done. Nobody else was there."

"I should've done something," he whispered, closing his eyes. "I knew that little prey was trouble but I didn't do anything." He lashed his tailfin angrily and opened his eyes. "Probably ambushed her like some little coward when it betrayed her," he grumbled. That must've been it. There was no other way something so small could've ever hurt a shocker, let alone hurt Volara.

"Didn't Volara say she'd murdered its consort?" his love asked.

"So what if she did?!" he shouted, floating above Zaparon. "We're shockers, it's prey. We can do what we want to them, we're not supposed to start swimming around like we're their friends, we - "

Zaparon cut him off with another nuzzle. "Calm down. Volara will be fine, you know that."

He sighed and leaned deeper into the nuzzle, relishing in the feel of hard shell against his own carapace. "I know," he muttered, his prongs crackling harmlessly against Zaparon with how close they were. "You're right, I shouldn't be thinking about this."

"Good," his love said, pulling away. "Now come on, let's head on back. I need your eye with something."

He sighed again and gave his gills a vigorous pump. "Right. Sure. Lead the way. And Zappy?" His consort looked back at him. "Thanks."

Together, they swam back down until they were surrounded by vines on all sides. They entered a narrow opening in the stone which opened up into their caverns, where they'd been getting ready for the season. A small alcove, with a boulder that could be rolled in to seal it off, was matted with torn cradle plants. Zaparon had painstakingly encouraged several ringshells to grow in a circle in the main chamber, with an intact cradle in the center. Many more plants were strewn about in various patterns, carefully grown there by his wonderful partner.

Zaparon asked him about some ideas for new decorations, and Ohmaron answered as best he could. He did! But before long, he found his thoughts wandering. First to the upcoming season, where Zaparon decided he'd go find someone to fertilize his eggs, and he and Ohmaron could raise the fries together. It'd been such a long time coming, and Ohmaron's stomach twisted itself into knots worrying; would he be a good father? Would they hate him too? How many of his fries would he watch die, slowly and painfully, to the Green Weakness while he swam by unable to help? They wouldn't be doomed by his lineage, but the Green Weakness was everywhere and cared not if someone was an adult or a new-hatched.

From there his thoughts wandered to the catastrophe several seasons ago, when his foul lineage killed both their and Volara's eggs.

And, of course, from there his mind went to that 'human', Varien. It lived in the Above, apparently. It must've been swimming about so cheerfully, so confident in having attacked a shocker and lived to tell the tale. The mere thought made his stomach churn bitterly. Volara shouldn't have been hurt. It was the creature that needed to be hurt.

He ground his needle fangs together. He needed to go destroy that creature. Volara'd been there for him as his family died around him, one by one, and the human had hurt her. Ohmaron was going to kill it.
"Gently, gently," Zaparon said, both their jaws full of feather plant. They carefully swam backward, towards a slight mound of rock. A crawler had stupidly come to rest on it, so they killed it and Zaparon flicked the body away with his muscular tail. "And... there!" They lowered the plants into place. They'd torn up the roots, of course, but those would be quick to regrow. "That should be good."

Ohmaron zapped his tusks distantly, his thoughts occupied. "Yeah... good," he echoed. He glanced to the exit of their cave, then back at his consort. He swam over and nudged his side. "I'm going to go for a quick patrol." He leaned in and playfully bit one of Zappy's prongs. "Be back soon."

*After all, this won't take long,* he thought murderously.

"Alright," Zaparon chuckled. "Go have fun."

He dipped his head, twisted his body and, with a flurry of bubbles, zipped out the cave. Once out in the open ocean, he spun around to orient himself. Alright, so the Above. Which way was the Above? He tried to think back to where Volara had met that creature. After some swimming around to look for landmarks he decided he had a good idea of which way to go and headed off.

Before long, the black stone gave way to strange, grainy white stuff. Spires of stone shrouded in bright orange mushrooms sprouted up around him, and pale blue things shrieked and warbled around him. Ohmaron's stomach prickled. He was doing it. He was going into the Above.

... Zappy was going to kill him when he got back.

He made great time zipping and winding between the fungal stocks, crackling with angry power as he did. Soon he came to the base of a titanic cliff that rose up, far into the Above. The prickling in his stomach had gotten worse, though. It'd risen to a nauseous churning. Ohmaron decided to wait for it to settle down.

Once he felt better, he shot straight up, leaving a flurry of rising bubbles behind his sinuous body. The water streamed around him, growing warmer and warmer. It got noticeably brighter, too. If Ohmaron looked closely, he thought he saw something twinkling in the blackness far above.

Soon the cliff leveled off, and Ohmaron took a moment to be in awe. Red grass - green when far from his natural light - spread all around him. He'd never seen so much plantlife before! Strange red-chompers swam around in packs, and black ambush predators leaped up from the grainy white rocks. Spires of stone dotted the land, and far above him pods of strange, groaning creatures swam languidly. *Was this* the place Volara had been coming to so often? He couldn't blame her. Despite the heat and light and his bloated swim bladder, it was beautiful.

While waiting to get over his sudden bout of sickness, a problem made itself known to Ohmaron; he had no idea where Varien's territory was. And if looks were anything to go by, the Above was enormous.

He huffed. In that case, time to start looking. Once he felt better he undulated his body hard and surged ahead.

The ground sped past him as he swayed through the warm sea. Strange and colorful prey zipped past in rainbow streaks. Ohmaron made great time exploring the alien landforms of the Above. It was why he and Volara had tried to join their lineages; she was tough, he was fast.

Eventually he found himself even higher up, and was forced to slow down when it felt like his swim bladder would burst within him. This new place was even more colorful than the grassy
plains, with coral tubes and shelves, veiny plants and bright purple mushroom clusters. The few prey fish out and about were just as colorful and bizarre as the flora; a blue fish with giant yellow eyes, or a green one shaped like an arch. On top of it all was a strange membrane in the water, close enough to touch.

It was too cramped to keep swimming at the pace he preferred, so he had to slow down. Just as well, it let him scan the area for a human's territory with greater precision. He had no idea what it looked like, though. For all he knew, Varien lived in the cavern tunnels he wasn't able to squeeze into. If that was the case he'd just have to go home, get chewed out by Zappy, and wait for the human to reveal itself.

But as fortune would have it, he didn't need to.

The human's territory appeared before him, in one of the lower, flatter regions of the Above. It was made seemingly entirely of metal, shaped like a tall cylinder with two rectangles sprouting from its side, covered in all manner of colors and tiny structures Ohmaron couldn't figure out the purpose of. Drifting next to it was a colossal metal shell, colored in purples and blues. Plants grew on a small rectangle on the outside. One side of the cylinder was seemingly open, but on closer inspection it was just a clear material. Such a small territory. Then again, small territory for a small fish.

Ohmaron swam to the free-floating thing and peered into the clear dome on its front. No human inside, he must've been in the metal territory anchored into the ground. He retreated a fair distance from it, flexed his body side to side, then charged.

The structure zoomed towards him. He aimed for the upper part of the rounded cylinder, opened his mouth, and smashed into it full force.

**CRUNCH!**

"Ow!" he recoiled, snapping at empty water. He shook his head to clear the bright lights in his vision. But even if he hadn't bitten the habitat, the damage was done; a massive welt tore open in the metal shell and he both saw and felt water rushing in, bubbles of not-water spilling out in a torrent. Then, Ohmaron heard the human shout something in its nonsense sing-song language as water crashed around it.

Ohmaron backed off and sank. He looked through the clear pane of material to see the human struggling and floundering, putting something on its head and rushing around while frothing white water spilled from the holes in the ceiling. Already the water was rising, and the sheer weight of the water kept pushing Varien around. He growled happily, but that wasn't enough. He wasn't here to make Varien miserable. He was here to kill him.

He backed off and went for the open wound he'd left. He clamped his jaws around it, wincing as the pulling water rushed along his nasal arch, and **tugged.** His needle teeth tore through the grey metal without any resistance, and a massive piece of the human's territory peeled open like a plant. The surging water turned into a deafening roar, so strong it threatened to pull Ohmaron inside.

Backing off, he went down and noted, with no small satisfaction, that the shelter was flooding rapidly. The strange plants growing inside were underwater, and the thick plumes of water descending from on high pummeled the ground. Varien was nowhere to be seen, though.

**Ka-chunk**

With a flick of his body he sped away from the base and towards the sound. The rectangle
attachments. Stupid, he'd forgotten about those!

He arrived just in time to see Varien fall from his shelter, sitting in the walking shell. Its left arm had changed; instead of a grasping hand on its end it now sported some glowing thing. Through the strange coverings on the human's head, Ohmaron could make out bright green blisters. "YOU!" Ohmaron roared, his vision yellow with rage.

Varien blinked and the shell took a step back. The creature sang something, and a shocker-shaped device at its feet translated. "Ohmaron?!

"RAAAAH!" He charged, wreathing himself in a barrier of energy. He got to watch Varien's eyes go widen in slow realization, and then Ohmaron crashed into it. The walking shell was cool and hard to the touch. He lifted it up, off the ground and his momentum threw it back, so hard it crashed into a coral tube and shattered it into splinters. He didn't let up for a moment; he charged again, prongs flashing furiously as he closed back in. There was a white blur and -

Something thunked him in the side of the head. His charge fell off to the side and his shell scraped against a wall of stone. His stiff lower body caught up and wrapped around him. What just happened?

It took him a moment to realize. That white blur. The human had hit him! The nerve!

Ohmaron shook off his daze, then winced when he felt cracks in his head shift against each other. Was that greenish fluid in the water his blood? This human had made him bleed. Something cold, a mix between fury and fear, settled in his gut. So, the human had some muscle to him. He'd have to be more careful.

Just get Varien away from his toys, and the human would be helpless.

He swam back to where the creature was. Varien had walked away from the coral tube and stood in a relatively flat, open area of the Above. The human's eyes tracked Ohmaron nervously. For his part, he circled around the human carefully, his prongs quiet for the moment.

Then, he lit them up and darted his head out. Varien yelped and the shell's right fist flew out, but Ohmaron was already retreating. The human struck water.

They circled again. This time, when he was ready to attack, Ohmaron changed the direction he swam and charged. This time, he favored the human's left side.

He half expected the altered left arm to punch him. Instead the suit stepped to turn and the right arm flew out again. There was no time to move to the side to avoid it, and he was swimming too fast this time to retreat, so he relaxed his swim bladder and floated above it. He soared past Varien, and lit up his prongs to bathe the human in his power. Panicked shouts sounded behind him, so once he passed by Ohmaron turned and faced Varien again.

The shell didn't look that damaged, and it turned to face him fast enough. Varien didn't look hurt either, despite shouting. But that didn't matter, Ohmaron had learned what he needed.

The walking shell's left arm couldn't punch.

Varien moved left and right, trying to keep up as Ohmaron wiggled around him. His arcs lit up the dark waters and cast shadows along the stone. The glowing lights from Varien's shell did the same. "What the hell are you - " Varien cut himself off, releasing a strange coughing sound. Ohmaron took that moment to charge. He pretended to hold to the human's right. Then, at the last moment, he swerved around the punch and into the path of the useless left arm. He opened his mouth and
clamped his jaws on the arm, right where it met the rest of Varien's shell.

The human made a loud noise. Ohmaron didn't bite the arm off, but rather he swam forward with Varien in his grip. The metal shell was heavy so he had to undulate hard, but the ocean floor fell out from underneath them and made it so he dangled the human in his grip. Then he lit up his prongs and zapped. He cackled in satisfaction as flickers of bright blue surged along the shell. Something popped within the metal frame. He wound up for another blast.

But then pain erupted in his side and he dropped the human. "Damn it!" he shouted, floundering in the water. What happened? Had the other arm hit him anyway?! Damn thing had more flexibility than he thought.

Time to rip the arms off.

In the time it took him to decide that, the disgusting creature had landed on the surface and turned to one of the thick forests filled with green plants. He was about to charge down and cut it off then the human's walking shell did something that had Ohmaron's jaw drop in response.

The left arm extended. Its glowing bit flew out, leaving behind a dark blue strand of stringy material, and latched onto a distant rock. Transfixed, he watched as the human used it to pull himself forward at great speed. Varien even detached the anchor and jumped over the rock, sailing into the middle of the kelp forest.

He growled, his bleeding already stemmed. "Trying to run away, huh? I can't blame you," he whispered. Ohmaron wiggled his body and shot forward, so fast he carved a tunnel through the ocean. The kelp forest, dense and dimly lit by yellow seeds, enveloped him in seconds. Varien thought he'd gotten away, but the human had neglected something; his walking shell gave off light.

Stalks of plantlife waved about him, smacking into his face. Parasites tried to take advantage of the cracks in his shell, so he killed them. One or two of the local predators saw him coming and hastily swam away. Ohmaron tracked Varien through the forest, always coming closer and closer to the glowing white light that gave away the human's location.

There! The forest opened up to reveal the human trying to climb up a set of cliffs. But he wasn't going to get up, not while Ohmaron had anything to say about it.

_Certainly_ not while the human's back was turned.

He rammed into it hard, and crackled in delight when he heard Varien smash into his own machine. The walking shell lost its footing and fell deeper, and Ohmaron followed it down while frying it inside and out with his electric barrier. He pulled back and wrapped his jaws around the right arm. His tongue cringed away at the bitter taste of metal, but he ignored it and chomped. There was a screech of metal and a sprinkle of hot sparks in his mouth as his teeth tore through the arm, and when he opened his mouth back up the twisted, mangled limb fell from the walking shell's side.

The human screamed something again, and turned his shell around. The useless arm pointed at him and **OW**!

Something bit him beneath his head. A glance down revealed a long blue rope disappearing underneath his field of view. That stupid extending-arm! Its edge had bitten into his shell deep, and even now it was pulling hard. "Let - me - go!" he snarled, trying to rise and swim away, showing his underbelly to the human while he wriggled about.

Varien shouted something in shock when Ohmaron's struggles began pulling him forward. The
human dug the shell's feet in and began pulling back, tugging Ohmaron lower.

"No, no no no!" he growled, lighting up the kelp fronds with his power. With his long, flexible body, Ohmaron brought his tail fin up and smashed it into the rope connecting him to the disgusting human. It didn't snap as he'd hoped; he just bent it out of place and both drew himself lower and the human up.

Then of course the human sank, dragging him down with it. And he couldn't bite the anchor off either because it was right beneath his head!

Hmm, or could he?

Ohmaron undulated himself back and forth, still tethered. Varien shouted, shifting controls around with his hands. Then all at once, Ohmaron stopped trying to swim away, and instead charged. The coil of rope slackened as he approached, just enough for him to dip his head down and clamp his needle fangs into the rope. He easily bit through it and, now that it was separated from the main shell, the thing hooked into his jaw fell out.

"Ah, ow," he moaned, opening and closing his mouth. He was bleeding again, wasn't he? High pitched laughter sounded around him as parasites tried to latch onto him, so he must've been bleeding. It was fine, it was fine. He was a shocker. No matter how many fancy tricks this human pulled out, Ohmaron would prevail.

... ugh. Were his gills stiffer than he remembered? No way he was getting tired already! Though if he thought about it, he had been hunting the human for a while.

Varien, with his crippled metal shell, had escaped. Ohmaron swam forward to follow the human, pushing past fronds of dense plantlife. Soon he broke out of the kelp forest and the land sloped down sharply, down to a vast grassy plain. The waters were open. There were no caves. Varien walked along the bottom of the ocean, blasting out a cone of light. The human was utterly in the open.

He chuckled. No place to hide, now! He charged again, closing in on the little creature so fast the rushing water stung his eyes. Varien must've heard him coming, because he turned around to face Ohmaron as he closed in.

SMASH! Ohmaron's head slammed into the clear dome, cracking it. The small fissures in his head's carapace stung when he hit the human, but it was worth it because he sent the little thing down onto its back. Varien screamed something in his ridiculous song-language as Ohmaron reared back and bashed his head into the shell again. Then there was a flash of blue light, and something appeared in the human's hands. Ohmaron only had enough time to make out the general shape, a long tube of white metal. Then its end spun and glowed blue, and his vision went white.

The next thing he knew, the human was gone, and colored blotches clung to his vision no matter how hard he blinked. Where had... what happened?!

Something moved out of the corner of his vision. He turned to see it, and saw the human surging through the waters with another tool in his hands. He'd gotten out of the damaged walking-shell and was heading deeper into the grass plains. Ohmaron snarled, lit up his prongs, and gave chase. He pumped his gills hard, powering through the creeping tiredness as he swam fast enough to leave a trail of bubbles behind him.

The human turned around, revealing both the metal tools in his hands. One was the propelling device that let him swim fast. The other was the white cylinder that had seemingly teleported the
human away. The end of it lit up blue again, and something shot at him.

Ohmaron didn't have enough time to predict where the thing was going, to predict where he needed to go. He just moved, wrenching his body to the side hard enough to hurt. A blue ball the size of his jaws soared past him and fizzled out harmlessly in the distance. With an odd noise, the tool in Varien's hand fired again, and again, barraging Ohmaron with the orbs.

He was forced to slow down. He ducked, he wove, he spun and twisted. Several times he saw the bubbles hit the ground, where they blew outward into shimmering orbs. He didn't want to get hit by one of them; he'd been hit once and it let the human nearly get away!

The rapid shots let up. Ohmaron took that opportunity to light up his prongs and charge. In seconds he was so close, he could see the fear in the human's eyes! But then Varien pointed the tool at himself and -

White light again.

In what felt like an instant, the world changed; where Varien had been was another flickering, crackling orb of energy. As he watched it shrunk and vanished. In the distance, the disgusting human was getting away again!

An idea came to him. Ohmaron shot forward, but also rose up and up, closing in on the strange membrane above him. He kept his prongs quiet, but panted and struggled to get enough water across his gills. That didn't matter; he was right above Varien and the human was none the wiser. His swim bladder still felt bloated, but he clenched it as hard as he could, turned in the water, and dove straight down.

The human didn't see him coming, it kept looking around behind him. Varien didn't expect him to come from above. Ohmaron crackled a laugh, then as he grew closer, lit up all his prongs at once and surrounded himself in his power. The human looked up as he grew closer and took aim. The metal tube began to light up.

Too late! he thought gleefully.

CRACK! Ohmaron unleashed all his power into the water, flashing deathly shadows across the stones. Varien screamed and went still in the water. His tool's shot went wide.

He relaxed and coiled up next to the human, watching him. Varien's chest still moved up and down, so the creature was alive. But he wasn't swimming, wasn't singing fearful songs. The creature who'd hurt his friend was utterly stunned. He did it. He'd won!

Ohmaron opened his jaws and lunged.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
CRACK!

Blue lights blinded him. Then acute, stabbing pain shot through his body all at once, gone before he could even truly feel it. A weak scream left his throat as it came and went, leaving his limbs unresponsive. All across his body, it felt like his muscles quivered furiously beneath the skin. Even taking breaths was a herculean task.

The ampeel twisted through the water, row after row of dark carapace passing his vision. Ohmaron drew up a fair distance from him and inspected him with acidic green eyes.

Varien's heart froze, his thoughts buzzing with adrenaline. He had to move, he had to move! Grab his stasis rifle, his seaglide, something, anything! But his body was unresponsive. He could barely even gurgle his own spit!

The massive eel charged. Varien couldn't flinch away as the massive jaw filled with needle fangs grew closer and closer -

Something dark grey smashed Ohmaron to the side. He lost sight as the two creatures squirmed about each other and left his field of vision. He heard harsh snapping, and hair-raising zaps.

Focus. Focus! He concentrated on his legs, trying to move them. His toes twitched. Slowly but surely the shock receded from his system, leaving behind it a sore, aching pain. But before he could reclaim too much motion, an ampeel swam up ahead of him.

"Hesso?" it lisped. "I'm Tesss... ugh, Teslara." The voice provided by his translator turned feminine, like a kindly woman in her late fifties. "Are you okay?"

In response, he croaked out a weak noise.

"Oh, oh dear, he got you didn't he?" Teslara crooned. "Let me get you back into your shell." The giant eel swam around and nudged Varien's side, pushing him through the waters until he was back at his damaged exosuit.

By then, he had some muscle control back. "Gh," he grunted, squirming away from the ampeel behind him. He spun in the water to face the P.R.A.W.N.; it'd seen much better days. The grappling
arm on the left had no grapple, and the right arm had been torn off at the shoulder, leaving inert wires to flop about in the currents. The glass dome was cracked like a spiderweb. To top it off the suit was on its back, staring up at the surface where, if the hint of red was anything to go by, the local star was rising.

Frantically, his hands scrabbled at the hatch. His fingers were stiff as stone, but he managed to open it up and slide inside. With great effort, he brought his trembling arms and legs into place and got the machine into a standing position. Teslara, meanwhile, stared at him curiously. He made sure his translator was in place, and spoke.

"Th - thanks," he managed. "I thought I was going to die!" He looked left and right. Colorful schools of fish swam about, but there was no hint of his attacker. "Where did he go?"

"I sent him away," Teslara snarled. Now that they were properly face to face, he noticed one of her prongs was missing. "Cut open his shess in a few places. If he's lucky, his consort wiss just kill him for what he tried." She crackled a laugh along her tail fin. "If he's luckier, Zaparon won't fassow him to the Underworld just to keep shouting at him."

Right, so she chased him off. He narrowed his eyes at her. "Teslara... I think I've heard your name before."

She zapped her tusk prongs. "You met my consort, Herzaron," she explained.

Something wasn't making sense. Maybe it was the sluggishness in his thoughts, but why was Teslara here then? Wait. Teslara. Herzaron. And her. "Did Volara send you?" he asked, spitting her name. His blood ran hot. "What, did she send you to try and get me to forgive her or - "

"I sent mysself," the ampeel interrupted, snapping her jaws at him with a chilling crunch. "And you're right to be angry at her. She shousd've figured out your consort was a person despite never having seen a non-shocker person in her sife," she said flatly.

He stared at her. Was he being mocked? His right hand gripped the controls harder. His left hand was still too shocked to do much. "So why'd you come?" he muttered, tracing the cracks on the windshield. He needed to fix that. He had some glass back at base that could do the job. "You know what? I don't care. I need to head back to my shelter."

"I'ss escort you there," she offered.

He wasn't willing to argue.

Making his way back proved more difficult than it had any right to be. His left hand was still stiff. That wasn't good; what if it'd been permanently damaged?

It didn't matter too much, he supposed. He had a first aid kit in the lockers, surely that'd fix him right up. The grapple arm was busted anyway. Damn it, he'd need to make a new one. A new claw arm, too.

His base soon came into view, golden rays of sunlight trickling through the surface and casting shifting patterns on the seafloor. He grimaced at the sight of the massive gash in his habitat, and through the window he could even see a few boomerangs swimming about inside. Varien turned to Teslara. "I'm going to go inside and fix what Ohmaron did. I may take a while."

"No rush," Teslara replied. "I'ss just do some hunting in the meantime." She turned around and the massive megafauna's dark form glided into the distance. She turned around a cliff face and vanished from sight. Varien grunted, struggled out of his suit, and swam into his shelter through
the moonpools. Then he got to work.

The inside of his shelter was flooded beyond belief. He had to swim above his bed. Just as he'd seen from outside, small schools of fish swarmed the metal confines. He climbed the ladders to the second floor, where the damage was. Varien grimaced at the state of his soaking farms; he'd need to go to the Degasi island for more seeds. All the same, he summoned his repair tool and began welding the massive rift in the metal hull together.

"Hull integrity restored," the base announced. "Draining systems initiated." Sure enough, the water began to drain. Soon Varien could stand on his feet, and before much longer his base was drained. He slid down the ladder to the first floor and scooped up the flopping boomerangs. By some small miracle the fabricator was waterproof, so he salted the fish and put them aside for later. Then he inspected his storage compartments and got a few supplies, including a first aid kit and some glass. After assigning his moonpool to create a new arm for his P.R.A.W.N. - a task that would take a few hours - he swam outside. He repaired the damage to his exosuit's windshield and clambered back inside.

Once in, he collapsed in the chair with a groan. He scratched around one of the blisters on his left hand, gasping for breath. Stars above, everything was so tiring to do. Maybe he could just close his eyes...

_Bzzt!_ Before he could doze off, he snapped awake at the sound of electricity. Teslara had returned and faced him, chomping her jaws lightly. Now that he looked closer, he could see more differences than just the missing prong. The patterns on her shell were different. Were ampeels like zebras in that regard?

"The fish here taste strange," she said, coming to a halt. "Anyway, are you done?" He nodded, and she must've understood. "Do you... want to task about what happened?"

"No," he snarled. He opened the first aid kit and, with shaking hands, grabbed the nanite bottle. A spray into each nostril, and hopefully that'd fix anything the electricity did to his insides.

Teslara sighed and undulated her gargantuan body up and down. "Do you want to go anywhere?"

Varien bristled. His first instinct was to snap no. What was she, his mother?! But he forced it down and thought about it. "There's one place. I'd been hoping that everyone else was hiding in the last Degasi base. I haven't found it yet, but I know where it should be. I want to go see it. Just to prove it to myself that..." He trailed off.

"Alright. I understand Vosara was acting as your guard?" The ampeel tilted her head. "I can see why. I'ss come asong and hesp you."

Great, another eel to tag along and make constant quips about how weak he was. Just what he wanted.

Well, whatever. He took out his PDA and tapped a few fingers on it until it had the data files from the second Degasi base. Five hundred meters down, a kilometer north-east. Varien just needed to find his way back to the crabsnake cavern entrance first. He turned left and right until he thought he had it right, then motioned with his hand. "Alright, follow me." Teslara fell in behind him as he started stomping forward. It was tricky; since his suit only had one arm, it constantly listed to the left. He felt less like he was walking and more as though he was stumbling forward and constantly catching himself. To say nothing of the pulsing headache of illness, or the lingering stiffness in his left arm.
Difficulties aside, he soon made it to the grass plains and, after a moment's search, found a network of tunnels that led down to the crabsnake caves.

*Where Volara threw herself in front of a crabsnake for me,* he thought briefly.

He chased the thought off. These weren't the tunnels he'd gone down anyway; they were out in the open rather than in a cave, leaving the honeycomb of tunnels open to the sun.

Teslara swam above it, peering down. "Is this it?"

"No, it's where we need to start from." He checked his vision implant's compass and turned to the north-east. "This way." Varien stomped off, not bothering to wait for the fish to catch up.

Sandsharks and schools of biters passed by him, but none came close. For *some* reason, the crackle of electricity behind him always scared them off. Soon the land turned up into a rocky cliff, which he climbed. Then he looked down, and his stomach dropped.

North-east, as it turned out, led him to the dark reef lined with glowing blue orbs. A few hoopfish and spadefish dotted the oily waters with the natural light. He felt nauseous staring into the gloom, as if something would come surging out of the darkness. A Reaper Leviathan, maybe. He hadn't seen one in weeks; it'd be just his luck to stumble into their territory now that he was so sick.

He took a deep breath to steady his nerves, but it turned into a series of hacking coughs that drew a concerned look from Teslara. Once he recovered, he gestured down. "Well, there it is," he said quietly. A glance into the top of his vision said he was roughly a hundred meters down. Four hundred meters to go. "Let's start heading down."

"What is this space?" she asked.

"You'll see," he snapped. Varien walked his P.R.A.W.N. forward, and for a horrifying moment his guts leaped into his throat when he started falling. Then he activated the thrusters, and his plunge transformed into a glide. He touched down on the ocean floor, black rock covered in speckled orange and purple moss. Membrain trees cut through the darkness. Teslara's natural bioluminescence followed him from above.

As they went further ahead, the ground sloped down like a bowl. Two hundred meters. Two-fifty. Three hundred. The ampeel by his side kept looking around, amazed. No surprise; this was probably her first time out of the blood kelp zone.

"She feels awful about what she did," Teslara said abruptly. "She's not patrossing, not hunting, not eating. She mopes about in her cavern and nothing else."

His gut twisted. What, was Teslara trying to make him forgive *her?* "Good," he spat. "Volara deserves at least that much."

She followed him as he dropped down a short drop. "And if things had been reversed? Can you really say you would've done anything different?"

"Of course I would've," he snapped. But that was a lie, and he knew it. Who cared, though? He hadn't killed anyone, and she had. And not just *anyone* either. It crossed his mind again how horrible Silvia's death was. Just two-fifty meters down the water pressure had been crushing. What would it've been like *five hundred* meters down? How horrible would the rushing water in her lungs have been? He shuddered again; nobody deserved to die that way. Small mercy that Volara only let her suffer for a moment.
The exosuit's headlights continued to cut through the darkness. All around him, towering blue orbs reached for the surface. Ahead of him, he thought he saw something. A shelf of land above him and, more importantly, a tunnel leading underneath. He couldn't see much farther due to the darkness, but he bet anything it led to a series of caves.

He stopped to have breakfast; it was morning after all, and he hadn't had anything to eat since he woke up to the sound of water gushing into his base. Varien ate a cured boomerang and washed it down with water. He had to rely mostly on his right hand though, since his left's fingers were still stiff. That was worrying; he'd used the nanites and everything. Was his left hand just permanently damaged?

Damn it.

Once done he licked the salty grease from his hands and pointed down into the gloom. It must've easily descended three, four hundred meters under the surface. "Alright, let's head on in there," he told Teslara. "It looks like this might be the spot."

She zapped her tusk prongs. "Sead the way, human."

"Right." He stepped forward and sunk into the tunnel. As Varien strode down the slope, he caught sight of a few purple plants growing between the strange mosses. They looked sort of like pinecones.

Something shrieked. Teslara jolted about in the water, looking for the source. He did too, looking left and right. Varien didn't need to look long before the source of the wail swam into view; it was just a jellyray, long and glowing spectral blue.

"Weird," he said. "I thought jellyrays only lived in the mushrooms forests?"

"Seems not," Teslara said. "Are they dangerous to you?"

"Only if I try to eat them, which I won't." He headed deeper. It didn't grow any darker, though. If anything, when he stepped ahead it grew lighter due to all the glowing animals. Still dark enough he had to squint to see anything outside the headlights, though.

He was in a huge cave, large enough he couldn't see the far end. The reef's blue orbs and purplish moss were as abundant as outside, but on top of that were the alien pinecones hidden away in nooks and crannies, the occasional fist-sized chunks of diamond and uraninite growing from the walls, and the many jellyrays swimming about, casting their feeble bioluminescence into the water. Bubbles flickered in the water around him, as did small gray clouds of what he assumed were plankton.

"Scans indicate a large amount of tunnels in the area," his PDA announced. "Titanium mass detected in the region. Unable to identify whether or not it originated from the Aurora."

That was promising. Now to find it.

"Let's look around," he told his babysitter. "There should be something around here."

She tilted her head, looking down on him. "What makes you say that?"

"I'm not going to explain it to you," he snapped, with apparently enough venom to make the giant eel back away. "Let's just start exploring."

And that they did. They moved up and around the caverns, searching for the titanium he'd detected.
Several times Varien leaped his exosuit on top of the blue orbs, which squished beneath his feet. At first everything was quiet save for the rays wailing; everything on 4546B was so loud. Except the ampeels.

He wasn't unmolested long, either. A flash of light and the screech of metal startled him enough to nearly fall out of his seat. The warper turned to him, inhumanly cold eyes focused on him. Luckily, Teslara wreathed her body in energy and charged into it, forcing the cyborg to teleport away as quickly as it'd come. She turned back to him. "The summoners are after you?"

Varien gestured to the boils and dark veins covering his body. "What do you think?" Something occurred to him and he hummed, tapping the side of his head with an aching finger. "Actually, I've been wondering. If your species talks with electricity, then is that barrier thing you do the equivalent of screaming?"

Teslara stared at him blankly, flicking her tail fin. "... what is screaming?"

Oh, right. She wouldn't know. Varien took a deep breath, cleared his throat and, "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" A nearby jellyray turned from him and swam away in a hurry.

The ampeel staring at him even startled and swam back, curling her body into something like a C. "... yes. It is exactly like screaming."

Hmm. Well that answered that. "Great. Let's keep looking."

They looked left, turned right, looked up and down. Varien thrustered his way on top of a narrow cliff and kicked a pine cone off into the midnight depths. His gut tingled. This had to be it. The third Degasi base was around here. There was nowhere else on the planet any other survivors could possibly be. Part of him still held out hope that Volara was wrong, that he'd made a mistake, that the person on that recording had only sounded like Silvia and she was down here waiting for him.

And as he and Teslara turned a corner, he saw it.

The base stood on a foundation atop a spire of stone, in a clearing among the blue orbs. It was stockier than the other bases he'd seen; while he couldn't make out any detail from the darkness, he could tell it was three multipurpose rooms stacked on top of one another, with a set of corridors extending from the bottom one. This was it. And it was black as space. No lights. No sign of activity. Just darkness and -

UCK UCK UCK UCK! Oock oock oock oock!

- and crabsquids.

He froze, staring forward in terror. There they were, visible through their natural glow. Crabsquids, horrible lovecraftian squid monsters with bulbous, visible brains and rows of pincers surrounding a terrible mandible, all underneath a quartet of dead blue eyes. They drifted around the base, warbling and clicking as they scuttled along its roof. Above it, below it, around it. He counted one, two, three. No, four. Five? Six?! His mouth went dry and a chill crept down his arms.

"That's - that's a lot of them," he stammered.

Teslara flicked her tail fin. "Green-bsasters, here too." She looked down at him and tilted her head. "Resax. There's no amount of any creature that can give us shockers a probsem. Watch!"

"Wait, don't - " he started, but it was too late. The ampeel shimmied in the water and shot towards
the habitat, lighting up all her prongs with painfully bright lightning.

It was impossible to look away. Teslara bit, snapped, lunged and spiraled among the shrieking monsters, electrocuting them and shredding them. She tore off their arms, rent open their clear heads. Even when her tail fin smashed into one its brain collapsed inside with a sickening squelch. She was untouchable, invincible.

One of the crabsquids drifted away from her and raised its pincers. It warbled and shrieked, shaking its face back and forth. To Varien's shock, neon green lights flickered in and around its brain as it glared at the ampeel. Then the beast slammed its legs down and, with a shrieking cry, the energy exploded outward. He yelped and jumped in his seat as a nova of emerald light, blinding in the dark cave, washed outward from the crabsquid's head. It coasted above his head and slammed into Teslara to no effect.

His breaths came faintly and his stomach was heavy. Green-blasters. Ampeels called them green-blasters, and now he saw why. The squids had EMPs. What kind of fucking planet was this?!

By the time he finishes wiping the spots from his vision, Teslara was back and staring at him intently. "I got rid of them," she said.

"I saw," he muttered, rubbing his left eye one last time. "Stars above that was brutal." He glanced at the missing prong on her fourth row. What could do that to her? "If you don't mind me asking, how'd you, um..." He gestured to her.

"My prong? It's asright. The soul congsomerate got me when I was a fry." She moved her body left and right. "I was fortunate; it onsy csipped me. If Herzy had been any sater pussing me into the cave..." Teslara shuddered.

"You knew him back then?" Varien looked past her at the dead, drifting crabsquids.

She looked at him oddly. "Wess, obvioussy, dear. We were part of the same csutch."

Wait, they were siblings? But weren't they also - Varien decided to put it out of his mind. He had other things to focus on anyway. "Right. Anyway, thanks for clearing them out. Let me just get closer..." He hopped his suit and jetted across a gap. With a thunderous slam he landed on the base's foundation, summoned both his flashlight and dive, and jumped out into the waters.

Varien shivered the moment he touched the sea; it was bitterly, unbearably cold. Was it just because of the temperature, or was his fever adding to it?

He drew closer and turned his flashlight onto the Degasi base. Immediately, his heart clenched in that half-hearted way whenever he was expecting disappointment, and was proven right.

The Degasi base here, as with all others, was ruined and corroded. Barnacles and sea stars clung to the metal surface, which was marked all over with scratches and bite marks. The tunnel out the bottom was broken off at the midway point. No lights. No activity. No nothing.

So, that was it then. Varien truly was all alone. Everyone else on the Aurora had died. The guy who sat next to him in the programming core, Silvia's coworker who always asked way too personal questions, the janitor at Elevator 32-B. None of them made it, all of them died in various painful ways. He was all alone. Now that he thought about it, it had seemed funny that all the equipment called him 'Captain'. Everyone else was dead, so he was promoted by default.

Captain of nothing.
Varien sighed, but got to work. He tied the dive reel's end to a piece of twisted metal and dove into the broken corridor. Everything was covered in plantlife, from hanging kelp to what looked like glowing starfish. He slowly and carefully beat his flippered feet at the water, making his way into the bottom multipurpose room.

Everywhere his flashlight pointed, the world unveiled itself. This must've been their living quarters. The reinforcements on the walls were still intact. An empty picture frame rested on one of the walls. There was a table with something blocky on it. He swam closer and wiped away the grime to reveal... a faded symbol representing a cup of coffee. A coffee machine. Oh stars, when had been the last time he drank coffee? He scanned the thing and added it to his habitat builder's list; as soon as he got home he was making coffee.

There were beds, too. A single bed that must've been for Bart, and a double bed for Paul and Maida. He could still make out the wrinkles in the sheets; Paul and Maida slept with their backs to each other.

Next to Bart's bed was a tall shelf. On the bottom were empty bottles of old liquor from the early 21st century. On top was a dead PDA leaning against the wall. He waved his PDA over it to download the contents and moved on wordlessly.

Varien couldn't find anything else in the tomblike room; there was no stair up to the second and third floors. So he exited the way he'd come to look for another way inside. Teslara was still around, her titanic form crackling as she swam a lap around the base. His ravaged, dismembered exosuit sat on the stony cliffs in silent vigil. Crabsquid corpses floated at the cavern ceiling.

Soon he came to the back of the base, which was littered with boxes. He almost passed them over, but he saw the remaining pieces for a scanner room and, more interestingly, another abandoned PDA. He got everything from what he could find, and looked up.

Sure enough, there was another way into the base; at the top of the third floor was a hatch, but the glass was missing so he didn't even need to open it. Varien squeezed himself in and looked around with his lights.

The third floor was dominated by a single cylindrical titan of glass, tarnished and overgrown inside and out. His scanner told him it was an 'alien containment unit'. He didn't know what use he could possibly have for one, but he scanned it for the blueprint anyway. The only other thing of note on the third floor were the two observatories at opposite ends. Each one of the spherical glass domes was tarnished with unspeakable, rust-colored grime to the point of opaqueness. One contained a data box for a Cyclops submarine's shield generator; the data box's side had the words Don't forget to install scratched into it. The other observatory had another PDA resting on a table. He downloaded its contents.

On the third floor, there was a series of yellow ladders down to the second floor. Varien climbed down, slow and sluggish in the icy water, and found himself in what could've been an abandoned hospital. Vials and microscopes littered the ground, readout charts clung frozen to the walls. What really drew his attention was the orange light on one of the tables. He swam over and breathed out in shock.

Another alien artifact. But unlike the other tablets this one's symbol was orange and, if memory served, different from theirs; this one was vaguely in the shape of an 'N'. Why was it so different from the others?

He considered it. The purple ones worked like keys to the force fields. Maybe this was just a higher authorization key? Made sense to him. He put the relic in his suit's storage and searched on,
swinging his flashlight through the murky ocean. The one other thing of note he found was a final PDA, so he downloaded it.

Well, that was it. Nothing left. Varien swam out the way he'd come and made his way back to the exosuit. Once inside his brought up his own PDA and started reading through the entries he'd found.

It told the story of the last days of the Degasi survivors. Apparently, they'd started feeling ill. Flu-like symptoms and itchy skin, some 'new' pathogen the scanners couldn't identify. Obviously, they'd contracted the Carar. Bart Torgal said he might be able to find a cure, if they could test the bacterium on live samples. Next, Maida started bringing in live specimens. Bigger and bigger ones. It culminated when she'd -

He did a double take. Had he read that right?

- it culminated when she'd drugged up a *Reaper Leviathan* and dragged it back to their base. And apparently the Reaper wasn't good for Bart dead or drugged up, and Paul's fears of other Reapers following it proved well founded. The Degasi were attacked by a Reaper Leviathan. Maida clung onto it and vanished. Paul followed a light, but it vanished, and he ran out of air. And Bart was flung clear, to return to the island and wait out the rest of his days.

So, that was it. There were no survivors left. Even if they'd all somehow made it, if Maida killed the Reaper, if Paul swam to the surface, if Bart didn't kill himself, they still had the Carar and that was ten years ago. They were gone. Nobody else had found this base either.

He was utterly and truly alone on 4546B. Varien bowed his head miserably as he processed the thought. He wanted to scream and cry and punch something, but he didn't.

Teslara must've sensed what he learned, because the ampeel gently approached his windshield with the typical grimace all ampeels had. "You're not alone, you know. My consort and I are here for you, and she's be there too, if you'ss set her." He looked up and was about to hotly retort when she continued. "You know that even if Vosara had not been there, it wousd've ended the same."

His chest grew hot. *Not it wouldn't, Silvia could've handled a crabsquid!* he wanted to retort. Instead he just said, "I'm not in the mood."

She zapped her tusks. "Alright."

Varien sighed. "Let's just go back." He turned his P.R.A.W.N. away from the desiccated, ruined husk of the base and started stomping ahead without waiting for his babysitter. Teslara followed after him.

A pair of warpers harassed him on the way out of the cavern, but the ampeel next to him sent them packing. He climbed up and out of the cave, and out past the reef with its blue orbs and pitch black water. Before long they made it back to his base. Varien docked in the moonpool and went to his shelter's window to talk to Teslara.

"Well, thanks." *For confirming my worst fears,* he wanted to add. But he didn't. The worst Teslara had done was try convincing him to make friends with Volara.

She opened and closed her jaw, lower body swaying in the currents. "Do you need anything e'se, dearie? Food, water?"

*I want my fiance back, I want to be back building the phase gate with all the comforts of home. I want to go home.* He again said nothing. "Just go," he growled. His skin itched with Teslara's
presence; why wasn't this sea monster leaving him alone already?

Teslara dipped her head. "If you wish. I understand you don't want to, but know this." She fixed him with a glare. "I am going to send Vosara over here. Neither I nor Herzy wiss stand by and let you both destroy yourselves, dear." Before he could fire off a retort about her meddling, she turned and sped off into a kelp forest, gone from view in seconds.

He huffed. Even giant alien fish could stick their noses where they didn't belong. His fists clenched with the urge to lash out and punch and scream. But he didn't, because all that would do was hurt himself and did he deserve more pain? No.

Whatever. Whatever! He needed to fix his farms anyway.

Irate and irritable, Varien got back to work.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Don't Fear the Reaper

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Thanks to DevoutRelic for editing.

Chapter published 11/16/17.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Estimated Time to Death: 16 days, 17 hours, 37 minutes

Varien

Black fluid trickled from the machine. He watched patiently as it filled up a white cup. Varien didn't know what it did to the organic material it filtered from the sea to turn it into coffee and a mug, and he didn't want to know. All that mattered was that, in the span of a few short minutes, he had a cup of hot coffee ready to go.

He stared down into the dark fluid. Silvia liked her coffee black, he remembered painfully.

"Would you like cream?" the machine chirped in its metallic voice before he could spiral downward.

"Yes, please," he begged.

Something in it clicked. "Dispensing product." Milky cream spilled into his coffee. Once done, Varien grabbed the cup and stuck in a finger - one not sprouting a boil - and stirred the coffee. With shaking hands, he lifted the mug to his lips and drank deep. His knees trembled as the brew washed over his tongue and down his throat; after a month with nothing to drink but water, the coffee was heavenly even if it did taste kinda weird.

The odd taste was, honestly, probably him being deathly ill.

Once he drained the coffee he let out a long suffering sigh, massaged some of his especially hurting joints, and made his way over to the moonpool where his exosuit was docked. He tossed the mug into the ocean, climbed into his suit - it had both arms functional now - and ejected.

He didn't stay ejected for long, though. It was just a short trek across the shimmering ocean floor until he was under his Cyclops. Its underbelly opened up and he leaped straight into it. Suction cups latched onto his P.R.A.W.N. and hoisted him up. He pressed a button to open the hatch and, with great difficulty, climbed onto the top floor of his submarine.

Varien didn't pay much attention to the ship welcoming him aboard, and instead headed for the engine room. One by one he visited the empty slots, pulled one of the recently charged power cells from his suit's storage, and pushed them into the slots until they clicked into place.

With his Cyclops fully powered he headed to the bridge with heavy, plodding steps. Every step felt like lead blocks were hooked to his limbs, so by the time he got to the steering wheel he collapsed
over it.

_HOOOOOOOOONK!_ the horn sounded.

He stared listlessly out the windshield, at the kelp forest far ahead of him. For a few long minutes all there was was the hooting of gasopods and chirping of fish, and the occasional stalker flickering in and out of the creepvine. Then there was something else; a crackle of light blue in the middle of the forest.

Out of the darkness swam not one, but three ampeels side to side. The one in the middle had their head down. All of them were silent. Volara, guided here by Teslara and Herzaron, if he had to guess.

The two ampeels flanking _her_ swam away. Volara drifted until she was level with his Cyclops. He stared at her. She stared at some point below him. His guts felt like they were rotting.

Her prongs lit up. "What can I do?" she asked.

At least she wasn't apologizing. Regardless, a dozen ideas flitted through his head. _Bring the dead back to life, travel back in time_, he wanted to snap. Anything to rub it in and make her feel miserable. Instead he gave it more thought, forced down a coughing fit, and pulled his translator from his suit. "I still need to find the mod station so I can find this thermal plant. I'm thinking I could go look around the sandy dunes, maybe the area around the precursor gun. Guard me."

She nodded. "Okay," she muttered, swimming to the side of his Cyclops, out of sight.

Varien sighed, then began steering the wheel. He pushed forward, coughed a couple times, and began sliding out of the shallows. Everything was tense. He wanted to scream at her and throw things, but instead trembled silently. At least she had the decency to stay out of his sight.

The alien sea slid by beneath him. The kelp fronds bent around his Cyclops as he plowed through. The grassy plateaus passed underneath. The land reached a cliff and plummeted, giving way to the vast basin that held the mushroom forest. Bonesharks and jellyrays hunted and drifted beneath him. He passed by a singular giant stalk, towering more than halfway to the surface. Beautiful rays orbited the trunk like planets.

He just grunted at it and moved on.

Before long he made it. To his distant right the darkness sloped away into the blood kelp chasm where Volara lived. To his left were vast dips and mounds of sand the sizes of a skyscraper, stretching away into the oily distance.

"Well, here we are," he muttered, turning the Cyclops to face Volara. She looked up at him with dim eyes. "Let's go along the edge of the mushrooms for a bit, see if we can find anything here." He glanced back into the dunes. "I don't like the looks of this."

She nodded again. Didn't zap her tusks. Nodded. "Alright."

He puttered his Cyclops around the perimeter of the mushroom forest, keeping an eye on the dunes to his right. It was hard to see anything in the darkness, but once or twice he saw sandsharks burst from the ground, or the flash of warpers teleporting in the distance. It was barren and empty, not a scrap of plantlife that he could see. Before long he came across something, though. A massive black structure at the base of a few dunes, curved like a massive letter C, surrounded by a halo of debris.
"There," he said, coming to a stop. He turned his ship to face the structure head on. "A wreck. Let's go explore."

Volara, barely in range to look at his translator, nodded. "Okay," she whispered.

And with that, he drove forward into the dunes. But not one second after he left the mushroom forest did his PDA chime in. "Caution," it warned. ", detecting several leviathan-class lifeforms in the region."

What?!

The PDA's voice, alarmingly, turned worried. "Are you certain whatever you're doing is worth it?"

He froze and the Cyclops came to a halt. Varien stared blankly out into the open ocean. "Leviathans?" he echoed.

Volara swam into view and looked at him with a worried tilt of her head. "Varien? What's wrong?"

"My - it senses - my PDA said there are leviathans in this area. Reaper Leviathans, plural, oh fuck." He hadn't seen a Reaper in nearly a month. Why? Why now, when he was half dead?

"Reaper... Leviathans? Leviathan like the skeleton in the Underworld?" she asked.

"Not like that one. A Reaper's the fish I was afraid of around the Aurora, it trashed my seamoth and nearly killed me after I fixed the reactor," he explained. "It's like, three times longer than you, bright red and white, and it has these claws around its head," he tried to describe, waving his hands wildly. Why was his heart beating so fast? H-He had an ampeel with him, right? Surely Volara's electricity could fend off a Reaper, right?

The ampeel in question turned, looking up and down and across the desolate waters. "I don't see anything like that... but don't worry, Varien." She looked back at him seriously. "If any show up, I won't let them get near you."

Thanks, he wanted to say for a moment. Instead he just said, "Good." Varien gripped the steering wheel again and drove forward. Volara swam out of the way as he moved forward, drifting above the wreckage.

From the way it was strewn about, Varien guessed it hadn't landed in the dunes to begin with; rather it landed at the border with the mushroom forest and slid all the way down. If it had, the currents buried the deep gouge it would've left in the sand. The only evidence of it sliding down were the pieces of metal forming a line right down to the main mass like a trail of breadcrumbs.

His hands gripped the wheel so hard his knuckles were white. His head swiveled back and forth, listening for any sign of a Reaper's roar, of its scything tail fin. There was nothing, but that wasn't much reassurance; he was close to three hundred meters below the surface and as such it was pitch black everywhere his sub's floodlights didn't fall. Volara's nightvision was a thousand times better than his and she wasn't saying anything about a Reaper, but could he trust her to tell him if she did?

No, no he could not.

With agonizing ease, he arrived on top of the wreck and descended, using his lower camera to guide him. Volara chased away the sand sharks and the warpers, then took up a position atop the 'C' of the ruins. Once he decided he was at a good height, he let go of the helm.

His left hand stayed rigid, as if holding an invisible wheel. Varien frowned, worked some feeling
into his fingers, and flexed them into a fist. He grabbed his translator and set off. Panting with effort, he walked back to where his exosuit was docked and slid in. Close the hatch, press the button, and use the thrusters to feather the drop.

Once landed, he turned to where Volara was perched atop the metal skeleton of the wreck, and she looked back at him. "Coast is clear," she murmured. "You should be safe."

Varien's response was to exhale sharply through his nose.

Without further ado he started to explore. There was a data box scattered on the ground, but it was just for a shield generator. He had that blueprint already. Varien found an entrance to the wreck, parked his suit there, and got out into the chilly ocean.

Distantly, a sand shark growled. Bubbles of dissolved oxygen flickered around him menacingly. He shivered, made sure to pull out his dive reel, and hooked it outside. With that done, he swam inside.

The month spent in the ocean clearly hadn't done the wreck any favors. That became readily apparent once he turned his flashlight on. Alien barnacles clung to the corners and rugged seaweed grew from cracks in the ceiling. Boxes laid across the floor and shelves had long ago spilled their contents. He made his way slowly but surely, eyes peeled for anything of use. More than once he had to stop to cut through a sealed door. The blazing light of his laser cutter was, in the gloom, so intense as to be blinding and cast eerie shadows along the metal tomb.

He wondered how many people had died in this section of the Aurora.

The silence was crushing. Varien's breaths were deafening, and the shadows claustrophobic. All too slowly, he made his way through. Soon the tunnels opened up into a larger bay, littered with shattered P.R.A.W.N. suits. Their arms cluttered the floor like twigs. He noticed that some of them were diamond-tipped drill arms; he didn't have the blueprint for that, so he held his scanner to them.

No modification station, though. At best there were plenty of bottles of disinfected water. Varien patrolled the entire wreckage, peering into vents and nooks and crannies with his flashlight, but nothing revealed itself. With two of his three hours of oxygen gone, he made his way out of the wreck.

Outside, it was still dark as ever, with Volara swimming circles above him and radiating her meager light. His Cyclops hung in the waters, cutting through the gloom. Varien unhooked the dive reel, hopped in the exosuit, and docked it back into the submarine.

Another dud. What a surprise.

Volara swam into view, head low. "I didn't see anything like you described. Did you find your tool?"

"No," he snapped. "Of course I didn't find it, just - " He brought his hands over his eyes and took a deep breath. "Fuck it. Let's just head over to the gun." With harsh movements, Varien grabbed the wheel and turned his Cyclops. It took a moment to fish out his PDA and find the coordinates of the energy pulse, but once he found them he turned it on. Right away a blue dot embedded itself in his vision.

Without waiting for Volara, he sped off.
What she wouldn't give for hands. That way she'd be able to claw open her own shell.

Why had she let her friends push her into this? Volara could barely even stand to look at him. It made her stomach churn, made her upper heart clench, and it made her shell tight and itchy.

... well, her shell was tight and itchy anyway, but she didn't want to think about that.

Varien piloted his massive Cyclops shell up and away from the wreckage, and she followed in his wake with her head swerving from side to side. She didn't know exactly what this 'Reaper Leviathan' looked like, but she felt she'd be able to identify it based on his description.

And if she saw one, she'd protect him from it. She was bound to; she had no right to refuse anything of anyone, least of all him. Volara would put her life on the line if it meant he could see his mission through. That much she owed, after she killed his consort and didn't even stop Ohmaron from attacking him. Some friend she was.

They left the sand dunes, first and foremost. Varien's metal shell ascended and she relaxed her swim bladder to match his pace, ignoring the nausea of rising so quickly through the water. The spires of the mushroom forest weren't far below, close enough it seemed their tips would scrape her underbelly. After seeing it so much, the wonders of the Above hardly warranted a second glance. Especially not when she swore there was so much filth in her she could vomit it up.

The mushroom forest passed, and they skirted past the edge of the floating chunks of underwater stone, dozens of bonesharks swimming about to their left. A few of them got rowdy, but Volara was there to send them away. It was the least she could do.

The abyss curved away, and the land in front bent up to the surface where the water met Varien's not-water. Volara took a moment to stare up in shock; the land jutted up and out of the water! She didn't know it could do that, but now that it was right there, she felt like an idiot for not thinking of it earlier. The stone was brackish gray; not the soothing dark of her home, or the blinding brightness where Varien lived, but a mottled gray between the two, utterly devoid of even the barest scrap of plantlife.

The Cyclops housing her human charge swerved right, plowing bloodily through a school of red chompers. Far to the right was another kelp forest, but Varien headed past it, with her following to his right. Eventually she couldn't handle the bloated, swelling sensation within her; despite visiting the Above so often she couldn't quite handle rising so fast. So she threw up, retching and shuddering at the horrible feeling of her insides twisting inside out. Privately, Volara was amazed her stomach's contents weren't pitch black.

She put it out of her mind and raced to catch back up with Varien. The two of them passed a bridge of land, the border between a second mushroom forest and the bulb zone.

Volara thought she heard something behind her, coming from the direction of the land-spike, but when she turned to face it there was nothing. Just her nerves, right?

Her human veered off to the right, sinking into what looked like the entry to a canyon. In the distance, the light of summoners popping in and out of existence sparkled with gentle menace. The light grew dimmer and Varien's control of the shell grew unsure and jerky. Volara saw it before him; another shell of unnaturally smooth metal, leaning up against the stony shelf. She swam forward into his view and jutted her head down.
"That way," she said.

Varien sang something behind her, but she didn't turn to look at his translator. Instead she got out of his way and let him descend, taking up a guard at the moving bits on top of the Cyclops. He leveled out at a shelf of stone near the wreckage, then went still. For a moment his purple shell was silent. Then its bottom opened up and out dropped his walking shell. Volara cringed at the sight of Varien covered in hideous green blisters. She'd seen it happen so many times before, and it always ended the same. Part of her felt that was her fault, too.

He got out and swam inside, and Volara took up guard near the wreck's entrance, waiting patiently as he rummaged about. A school of the Above's red chompers swam by and tried to get in, so she fried them and ate them. They were chewier than the regular, white chompers of her home.

When he swam out, huffing and puffing, she gave him space to get back in his Prawn. She didn't need to ask if he'd found anything. His miserable frown was all the reply she needed.

Without a word Varien entered his Cyclops. He steered it right and sped off, Volara keeping pace. The land here was sparse and lumpy, jolting up and down like the waves on the surface. Approaching them was a massive rise that stood above the others, reaching for the not-water but not reaching it. A smaller spire of stone stuck up from its side, leaking something hot and black into the water.

The water was lukewarm. The area was deathly silent and uninviting, only the churning of the Cyclops's tail end to break the quiet. Even the summoners had stopped flickering in the distance.

It took a while, during which Varien stopped to eat. But together they swam up the mountain, reaching the desolate peak. Before them the land sloped back down, sometimes flattening out to form irregular steps. She and Varien both saw it at the same time. Another wreckage, smaller than the last but surrounded by more than twice the debris. This one looked less like an arch and more like a cube, spiky and frayed. Varien began to descend -

She heard something. A low rumble that echoed through the water.

Hurriedly she swam in front of Varien. "Stop, stop stop stop!" she crackled. He did, narrowing his eyebrows at her. "I hear something."

Silently, the two of them listened. The roar came again, and Varien's eyes widened. He looked at her, then past her to his right. He stumbled back from his wheel and fell on his back. "Volara, it's - Reaper - oh stars above I need to - " His breaths came faster and faster. Filled with grim determination, she turned around to see this fabled 'Reaper Leviathan'.

Her stomach flipped. It was so much worse than Varien had described.

Its face was whiter than anything she'd ever seen, with a wide mouth filled with so many fangs she wondered how they all fit in. Atop and below its head were colossal crests, the color of Varien's red blood. Four black, lidless eyes glared hatefully at the open water. Most obvious were the four things sticking out of its face, two on either side, deep red and capped with inward facing talons as black as sin. From Volara's angle she could see the rest of its body too, a coil of muscle and sinew flexing beneath white scales, lined with crimson fins and markings.

It was big, too. She'd accepted that the reefbacks were bigger than her, but they were prey. This thing. It was a predator. It was bigger than her three times over and the sheer impossibility of what she was seeing made chilling fingers numb her head. Was this how Varien felt, face to face with predators many times his size?
As she watched, it *roared*, flexing its four mandibles back and opening its jaws wide. The horrible, deep echoes of its bellow washed over her, bouncing around her earholes. Volara's prongs stuttered something meaningless.

The echoing roar faded. The Reaper's undulating body flexed and it turned to face her. Volara's eyes widened, and she turned back to Varien. "Hide!"

The Reaper Leviathan roared again. Volara turned to face it, and in that short amount of time it'd halved the distance between them. She yelped and surrounded herself in an electric barrier just in time for the Reaper to arrive. But it hadn't been charging *her*.

*SMASH!* The Reaper face-planted into the side of the Cyclops, denting the metal. Its four mandibles struck out with awful screeching groans as they tore effortlessly through the purple shell. The entire vehicle listed to the side and slammed against the mountain.

"What?! No! Get away!" she shouted, charging at the Reaper as it gnawed with its teeth. Volara coiled up then thrust her mouth at the side of its neck, biting deep and discharging at the same time.

The titanic predator roared, rattling Volara's insides against her shell, as she drew blood and electrified the wound. The Reaper drew away from the Cyclops, coiled its massive, powerful body, and launched away.

One of its various fins struck her in her underbelly, launching her away from the Reaper. Volara doubled over as white hot pain streaked through her vision, blood dribbling from the narrow gash in her shell that had, by no small miracle, missed every one of her prongs. She retched and threw up, her vision blurring. Oh gods, she didn't think she'd ever been hurt so much. Volara was - she couldn't -

She focused. Volara *had* to kill this thing. Varien was counting on her. Where had it gone? She wheeled about in the water, bleeding from her underbelly as her cracked shell rubbed against itself horribly.

It didn't take her long to find the Reaper. It'd looped back around and was over the wreck, charging in for another round. But this time, its gaping cavern of a mouth was aimed right at her.

Her gills gave a panicked ripple, and she activated her barrier again. The horrible, talon-tipped mandibles flexed outward and prepared to stab into her, so Volara darted underneath the Reaper and charged straight up below it. She opened her jaws and desperately bit down on its bottom crest, electrifying it. The monstrous creature roared again, shimmying back and forth as it struggled to lose her, but she was latched onto its head so it couldn't do anything. Terrible mandibles flexed and waved in the corner of her vision until the Reaper twisted and spun in the water, sending her flying with its unholy strength.

Volara tumbled about in the water until she came to a stop and righted herself, searching for the Reaper Leviathan -

Teeth.

She screamed and flexed back as the Leviathan roared in her face. A moment later Volara realized it wasn't as close as she feared, rather the Reaper was just that *big*. The predator faced her, the coiling loops of its body dancing about her vision. Its four mandibles moved and came together, locking the talons with a click. It continued to charge, and it *slammed* the interlocking claws into her underbelly. Volara yelped as it barreled into her, roaring in her face as it pushed her down,
down into the mountain.

*SLAM!*

With a shout she released enough electricity to *crack* through the water. The Reaper bellowed and veered off, letting Volara moan weakly and assess her situation. Ow. The top of her body hurt, since she’d been slammed into the ground upside down. Her upper prongs ached. She floated and looked around; apparently she hadn't just hit the ground, but also one of the pieces of metal wreckage. *Ow.*

Volara whimpered, green blood oozing from her cracked body. Hot and viscous pain rippled through her, knotting inside her stomach to eat away at her insides. She... she didn't think she could do this.

Another echoing roar cut through the water. She glanced up; there was the Reaper, bleeding through the bite she'd left on its chin. From so far away its glowing red marks were pestilent green. It circled through the water and charged Varien's Cyclops. There was nothing in the world that could've stopped the monstrous carnivore; it crashed into Varien's shell, gnawing and slashing with its teeth and claws to leave grooves and tears in the metal. Its rippling body kept pumping, pushing the Cyclops down and into the rocks hard enough to leave a deep indent in the ground.

*No,* she thought. She couldn't give up. She *had* to protect Varien. Her hearts pounded hard, and she charged straight up into the Reaper's underbelly with her jaws wide open. The vast tracks of its flesh loomed closer, taking up her entire world as it ravaged the metal shell. With a soft *whumph* Volara crashed into its underbelly and bit down hard.

Blood flooded her mouth, tangy and delicious. The Leviathan's white flesh was bitter and foul, but she still reached in and tore out chunks.

The creature's roar shook the world. The good news was it abandoned trying to destroy the Cyclops. The bad news was that it jostled its body hard enough to throw her off and tear out a dozen of her fangs in the process, each with their own sharp stabs of pain. Head reeling, Volara glanced at the Cyclops. It laid still and silent against the mountain; Varien made no attempt to get away from the Reaper Leviathan.

She hoped he was alright in there.

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**Varien**

"Fuck fuck fuck!" he shouted, choking on both phlegm and smoke. The fire extinguisher burned in his hands and the brilliant flames he was trying to put out burned his eyes. "FUCK!"

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**Volara**

She and the Reaper circled each other, its gargantuan body scything through the water. Despite the trickle of its blood, it didn't behave injured at all. It chomped its mouth menacingly, and her prongs flickered weakly as stabs of pain shot through her body's length. Once she was between it and Varien, it flexed its tendrils and, with another bellowing cry, charged forward. Volara narrowed her eyes as it came close, trying to think of what to - *it'd already reached her!*

With a shriek that lit up the waters she shot straight up, narrowly escaping being skewered on the black talons. The Reaper roared as her electricity passed through it, but it didn't stop for an instant and circled back around to face her. The Reaper chased her relentlessly. Volara dodged and ducked,
swam in circles and loops and spirals, but the Leviathan was always hot on her tail fin.

Her hearts pounded deafeningly. Think think think, what was she going to do?!

She swerved hard to the right, and while the Reaper had trouble turning so sharply it wasn't long before it was upon her again, the razor claws sprouting from its head close enough to touch, leaving occasional cuts and punctures in her tail fin.

Alright, so the Reaper was bigger, stronger, and faster than her. Dumber too; it hadn't tried to cut her off once, instead just chasing her mindlessly. Come on, there had to be something she could do with that information...

On a whim, she tried something. Volara wrenched her upper body up and backwards, turning around and upside down. She flipped over and charged at a spot just above the Reaper's head. It opened its mouth and snapped its teeth with terrible force, but she was nowhere near its jaws. Once above its head Volara turned back around, opened her mouth, and bit down hard right behind its crimson sail of a crest.

It roared and shook its head back and forth nearly hard enough to dislodge her, but Volara dug her fangs deeper, then lit up the darkness with her prongs. The Reaper screamed and thrashed back and forth, its muscles quivering beneath her as she pumped as much of her power into it as she could. Finally she couldn't sustain the onslaught and relented, but after a moment she kept electrocuting it. Volara'd never channeled so much electricity before. Her head spun and hummed, her body ached and contorted as she struggled to keep her jaws locked in the monster's flesh.

The Reaper Leviathan bucked and circled and swayed, trying to rear up and scrape her off, but she wasn't going to let go. Volara stopped focusing on her mouth or her prongs, instead racing desperate die die, come on how much does it take to kill this thing?! through her thoughts as she clung to the creature like a nova of light and pain.

Then finally, mercifully, the Reaper began succumbing to the lightning pulsing through its brain. It slowed its struggles, the roars quieted down, and the twitching muscles all around her jaws twitched less and less. But Volara didn't relent for a second. Even when it fell prey to the paralyzing power of her kind, she continued to fry it until she was absolutely certain it was dead. Only then did she let go of it.

Volara slid off the Reaper, lightheaded. She didn't have the strength to muster even a spark, her entire body hurt inside and out, and it seemed no matter how hard she pumped her gills she could never pass enough water over them.

Looking around, she noticed that she'd ended up all the way on the other side of the wreckage's gulf from Varien. The Cyclops he piloted was where she remembered, laying against the mountain, but even from so far she could make out Varien swimming around its outside, repairing the damage.

Well, that wasn't acceptable. What if the red chompers found him? She... she needed to get over to him. Slowly and agonizingly, Volara beat her tail fin against the water and swam over.

He looked over at her, helmet over his head and repair tool in his shaking hands, as she approached. He sang something short and curious, but the translator wasn't with him. Volara tried to reply, but managed little more than a few sparks from her prongs. Under his helmet Varien's eyes narrowed and he chittered something out. The human pointed to the ground and gestured her to sink. She did, gratefully tightening her swim bladder until she came to a rest on the smooth stone.
Varien swam towards her, muttered something in a low voice, and set down near her head. With a flash of blue light something emerged from his suit's magical storage; some kind of red and white box - green so far down - like he'd used to heal her after a crabsnake bit her. He opened it and pulled some things out and approached her.

He went to work plugging her bleeding wounds, placing a sticky white thing over the cracks in her shell, and dripping a stinging cold fluid into her cuts. She didn't say anything, lest her prongs hurt him like she'd hurt - she didn't say anything. Not that she had the strength to. Volara tried to think back to a time when she'd run out of electricity, but simply couldn't think of anything. Was this what it was like to be helpless?

The Reaper Leviathan had hurt her more than she'd thought; Varien needed several of those kits before he was done. He bandaged her back, her tail fin, her underbelly, even a crack along her snout that led into her nasal arch. During it all he kept muttering quietly to himself; she could only imagine what unflattering things were going through his head.

Varien swam up, then came down in his Prawn with the translator sitting at his feet. "You killed it?" he asked. His voice was a touch softer than before, but that only made her stomach clench harder. He shouldn't forgive her. Not even after she fought a Reaper.

"I did," she croaked, her electricity coming weakly. "Are you alright? It attacked your shell a lot."

The human rubbed his arms and winced. "I'll live. I need to check the wreck, will you be alright?"

With a flex of her swim bladder she drifted up, marginally. "I'll live," she whispered.

He nodded grimly. Varien left without further word. She turned and watched him stomp up to the small box of tortured metal, right up until he stepped out of her line of sight. Volara turned and looked into the distance, where the Reaper's gargantuan corpse slowly drifted to the ocean floor, its trails of blood attracting swarms of red chompers.

She... she did it. It dawned on her that she actually did it. Slowly she began to send stuttering arcs across her tail fin, laughing hysterically. She did it! Of course she did, was that any surprise? She was a shocker! Not even these so-called 'leviathan class' predators were a match for their power and intellect. She laughed and laughed until something deep inside of her ached and she stopped.

Ow.

Then Varien screamed.

Hurriedly she swam over to where she'd last seen him, every inch of her body protesting the movement. She found the empty Prawn suit standing by a square entrance into the wreckage. "Varien?" she managed to ask. Not that he could see her. "Varien what's wrong?!" Her gut flipped. Did red chompers swim inside and eat him?! Stupid stupid stupid, this was exactly what she'd been afraid of, she should've been guarding the entrance, she should've -

Then he appeared in the doorway, clutching at it with his gloved hands. Inside the mask he stared at her, wide eyed but alive and unharmed. "I found it!" he shouted with more energy than he'd had in days. "I found it!"

She lowered the front of her body until her head was level with him. "Found it? Found what?"

"The modification station! I finally found it!"

Her jaw dropped. "You found it," she echoed. "Then that means..."
For the first time in days, she saw him smile and it was like she could fight a thousand Reapers. "That means it's time to find the Precursor thermal plant."

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Here be Dragons

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Thanks to DevoutRelic for editing.

Chapter published 12/3/17.

Estimated Time to Death: 14 days, 18 hours, 50 minutes

Varien

Click!

The pressure compensator slid into his P.R.A.W.N.'s upgrade panel. The entire suit shuddered for a moment as it ate up the materials he'd placed in its storage, using them to rearrange its molecules into something that could handle far greater pressures.

Just the act of placing it in had winded Varien, so he took a moment to get his breath back. Once better he hopped into the exosuit and ejected from the moonpool. A glance at the top of his vision made him smile; good for seventeen-hundred meters. That had to be enough.

Volara was already waiting for him, so he placed the translator where she could see. She glanced at him, narrowed her eyes, then gestured with her head at his suit's arms. "That's changed," she said. "What are the new arms for?"

"These?" He hefted the exosuit's double-barreled left arm. "It's a torpedo arm." She wouldn't know that word. "Uh, tor-pe-do. It shoots torpedoes, little metal weapons that chase things down and hurt them. And this," He showed off the drill arm on the right. ", grinds things." He'd seen how much trouble Volara'd had with the Reaper Leviathan. If anything similar existed down below, it was going to get both a black hole and a diamond-tipped drill to the face. "Let me just get inside..." He walked over to the underside of his Cyclops and docked his suit. It took far too long to get to the bridge, but eventually Varien dragged himself there and plopped the translator on the ground.

"Alright," he wheezed as Volara swam into view. "Let me just... check everything again."

He ran through the list of things he'd upgraded in the past two days, using the modification station and the materials Volara helped him scavenge. A battery-powered thermoblade, oxygen tanks that were good for ten hours rather than three, fins that would propel him faster, and a top-tier pressure compensator for both his P.R.A.W.N. and Cyclops. On top of this he'd made, without the modification station, both a fully-loaded torpedo arm and a drill arm.

Right, that was everything.

Varien glanced up at where Volara swam in the shallows, her sleek body dark against the vibrant coral. A lance of bitterness shot through him, and he wanted so badly to hold onto that hatred, but it was so hard after she put herself in harm's way again and again, even against a leviathan-class
predator, for his sake.

Whatever. He gripped the wheel and powered on the engines, feeling the familiar rumble of the submarine beneath his feet. The vibrations hurt Varien down to his bones, which was new; if he were in a hospital he’d definitely be bedridden. "Let's get going." He looked around. "Can you, uh, lead the way?" he asked.

Volara zapped her tusks and dipped her head. "Of course!" She wheeled around in the body, showing off row after row of prongs and armor plates as the ampeel oriented towards the underground river's entrance. Volara took off, swaying her tail fin from side to side, and Varien followed. Once or twice she stopped and shook her head, though. Varien frowned. Was she feeling alright? Her armor was scarred heavily after her battle with the Reaper. Maybe it'd rattled her more than she let on.

Good, a selfish thought whispered before going quiet.

The waters grew deeper and darker. Ghostly blood kelp came into view, along with a lovecraftian crabsquid scurrying across the black basalt. Volara was quick to chase it off. Warpers popped in and out in the distance like stars, but mercifully none of them came close enough to hunt him.

But the going was slow. It was like his body was a rusted gear, barely squeaking through its motion, deprived of lubrication. He couldn't afford to stop and rest every time he was short on breath, though, so Varien simply powered through by resting with his body hanging over the steering wheel to keep moving. That and coffee. Lots of coffee.

They came up on the entrance to the underground river, as cavernous and gaping as he remembered. They turned around to face it, but when he drove forward to enter the tunnel Volara hesitated.

"Oh not this again," he muttered. He turned to face her. The ampeel stared past him, at the entrance to what she called the 'Underworld'. "What's wrong?" he asked.

She continued to stare, before crackling out a huff and lashing her tail fin. "Nothing. Let's go, we need to hurry."

He nodded. Good, she got over her superstitious nonsense on her own. He turned back to face the cave and drove forward, Volara following at his side with her bioluminescence casting eerie shadows on the stalactites. The blood kelp zone vanished behind him. Black water was replaced with more of the same, but with the addition of calcified trees that could've been skeleton hands, all above a river of vomit-colored brine. Beautiful rays flapped about, and terrible skeletal prowlers hunted the dim waters.

They traveled through quickly, his headlights providing him enough light to see by. At one point Varien thought he saw, far to the right, something monstrous. Something spectral with multiple sulfuric eyes... but when he looked again it was just a river prowler next to a stalactite. Nevertheless, the hairs on his arm stood on end and they didn't relax until they reached the brinefall that led out of the ghostly forest.

Down they went. Seven hundred meters. Seven-fifty. Eight hundred meters, and he parked over the leviathan skeleton. Volara hunted the local spinefish for breakfast. Varien, for his part, ate a cured spadefish that looked like a shovel, had the texture of salmon, and the flavor of a bowl of salt. Once done, she came around the front of the Cyclops and they looked at each other.

"So..." he began. "We need to get something like five hundred meters further down." A knot of
worry formed in his stomach. "Any ideas?"

Volara looked around, swerving her serpentine body around the dark waters. "So... there's three paths," she explained after a moment. "The one that led to the disease building, another up ahead, and one more to the right. The one up ahead looks like it goes up, and the one to the right - err, your right - goes down."

"Right it is, then," he said, grabbing the Cyclops's wheel after a coughing fit. He turned it as Volara suggested and drove forward.

At first, the headlights didn't reveal anything special. Then they came across rivers and puddles of brine, but the misty liquid was sky blue rather than poison green. Then Varien turned off the headlights entirely when the main feature of the chamber came into view.

"Whoa," he muttered. Volara echoed his words.

The path wasn't a tunnel, but a colossal chamber. Blue brine formed streaks and rivers through the stone, like a spiral of rock leading into the middle. In the center was a gargantuan tree, dozens of meters tall, with a thick brown bark speckled with glowing magenta and orange. The branches zigzagged through the water until their glowing tips were halfway to him. Nestled inside the tree were three giant, transparent orbs shaped like eggs, each with something thick and white drifting within them.

All around the centerpiece tree were dozens - no, hundreds - of the transparent ghost rays, flapping and wailing about. But despite the concentration of rays, there wasn't a single river prowler. A pair of black smokers stuck out of the walls on the far ends, and hoards of deep-shrooms cluttered around mineral deposits down below, along with clods of yellow sulfur. Everything seemed to move in slow motion, peaceful and serene, nothing to chase them and nothing to worry about.

"What is that?" Volara wondered.

"I don't know," he whispered, driving forward. "Some kind of tree." She looked at him blankly. "Uh, a type of plant we have on the surface. Usually has more green though," he muttered. "I'm going to get a closer look." Varien stepped away from the wheel with the translator in hand and, arduously, headed down the ladder. He put his helmet on, opened the hatch, and slipped outside.

"Ah!" he yelped as his skin prickled. He'd forgotten how bitterly cold the underground river was. Then he nearly had a heart attack when a head the size of a small auto, complete with a fang-filled grimace, filled his vision. He floundered in the water, but then Volara's snout nudged him gently in the stomach and he let himself collapse over her front as she pushed him. "Oh. Thanks."

The cove tree grew larger and larger. He gulped; it was so much bigger up close. Once Varien was close enough to touch Volara let him go and swam away, letting him fish out his scanner. He pointed it at the tree and held the trigger, forcing the plant to erupt into flowing ripples of light. In the gloom it was blinding, and several ghost rays went swimming away.

How did plants grow this big?

Once done scanning he pulled up his PDA and found the new entry. "Microorganisms living in the surface, fast growing bark, branches appear to be wrapped around - "

He nearly had a heart attack.

_Around several eggs of an unidentified leviathan-class predator_, he read silently. Apparently the eggs had been laid when the tree was young, and the pattern of the branch growth suggested it'd
held dozens of eggs, waiting in stasis for the opportunity to hatch.

All of a sudden, the cove wasn't nearly as peaceful and serene as it was before. He turned back to Volara and waggled the translator. "Get me back! Please," he added.

"Right," she crackled at a safe distance, before swimming in to fill his vision. The ampeel tenderly guided him back to his Cyclops, and was waiting for him when he crawled back to the bridge. "So, what is it?"

"They're eggs," he stammered. "The big glowing things. Leviathan eggs." Were those the eggs of what Volara called 'soul conglomerates'? It'd certainly explain a lot about their superstition. "We should get out of here."

Volara's emerald eyes went wide. "... or I could break the eggs while we're here?" she suggested.

"They could be poisonous. Let's just move," he glanced around at the walls and hummed. He hadn't noticed it before, but it was different from the rest of the cave. Rippled and smooth, alternating with patches riddled with holes. "Yeah, look at the rock. That looks like hardened lava, we're close."

Volara looked around, twisting her body to look at it. "This 'volcanic' area, you think it has more of that liquid rock that we found in the crabsnake caves?" she asked. He nodded, and she shivered. "Wonderful."

He grabbed the steering wheel and headed on, leaving the cove tree behind. Both Varien and Volara kept gazing at the cavern walls, at the crimson minerals and dull gel sacks clinging to the volcanic rock. Everything was eerily quiet. Even the ghost rays flapping about seemed to be holding their breath as they swam above the azure brine.

The cove led into a colossal tunnel, curving away to the left until he couldn't see anything even with the floodlights on. The tunnel kept turning, but soon enough they came to what appeared, on first glance, to be a dead end. The dominating feature of the dead end was a single ghostly tree surrounded by the glowing blue amoeboid disks on the ground, along with misty blue brine.

Volara shuddered. "It's warmer," she said.

Warmer. "That means we have to be going the right way." He narrowed his eyes at the view through his windshield. "But where do we go?"

The ampeel turned to him. "... you don't see it? There's a drop right next to the walls."

"Really?" Varien leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. Sure enough, there was a dip in the frozen-magma floors on the far end of the chamber. It didn't look that big from where he was, but if 4546B had taught him anything that gap was probably several dozen times larger than his Cyclops.

He drove over to the drop and sure enough, it was larger than it had seemed and much deeper than he thought. Varien peered down through the submarine's glass, watching as the cyan brinefall trickled into mist as it tumbled down.

Volara followed him as he descended. They passed hunks of uraninite, clusters of gold and growths of lithium, each the size of a car. Enough mineral wealth in that descent alone that if he could sell all those on the market, he'd have been set for life.

The drop continued to turn, and the brine kept thinning. They went down another step, and froze in shock. Drifting above sparse blue plants, they stared ahead.
There it was.

The tunnel stretched to the ceiling and down to the core. The hole-riddled lava walls they'd followed formed the top of the chambers, fitting like misshapen jigsaw puzzles around walls of lumpy basalt. Pale deep-shrooms hung around a last gasp of azure vegetation, but then it was mushrooms all the way down. Puddles of molten rock dotted the ground far below, boiling the water around them as they churned in and out, blackened parts of the magma sinking down to be replaced by fresh emerald. Emerald that, if they went closer, would surely be crimson. Glossy obsidian hugged the walls, dead weeds cluttered the ground, and chunks of an impossibly blue mineral burst from the cliffs like trees. Even the water shimmered with heat.

Looking to the left, the tunnel ended swiftly. But looking to the right it stretched on and on, disappearing into the depths. Strange fish swum around, like someone had taken boomerangs and eyeyes and dunked them in red paint. Varien glanced at his depth; just over a kilometer underwater.

As if to confirm his observations, his PDA spoke up. "Detecting increased volcanic activity and several unusual electromagnetic signatures. Exercise caution when diving deeper."

Volara drifted in front so he could see her. "This is it," she said, gazing out into the molten hellsscape. Her electric crackles were especially bright against the dark background. "This is what we were looking for." She shook her head and groaned. "Water's so warm..."

"Is it?" he asked, prompting the giant eel to turn around. His eyebrows creased in worry. Didn't her species live in cold water? "If you feel it's too much you should stay back. I don't want to find out what the ampeel version of heatstroke is."

She chomped irately. "I'm fine," she insisted. "I'm tough, Varien. Let's..." Something moved towards him. It wasn't the regular, red fish. This one looked like a leech of some sort. "So uh, let's..." With a quiet chirp the leech attached itself onto his Cyclops's window. From so close he could get a better look; its body was mostly the color of basalt, but it had red rings where its eyes should've been. The underside, latched firmly onto his vessel, contained rings of teeth like something out of an old sci-fi movie.

He and Volara both stared at the creature, even as his PDA labeled it a 'lava larva'. "What the heck?" he asked. "Hang on, I'm going to scan it." Varien did so, and read over the entry. "Suction cup, I can see that. Thick scales, makes sense. Draws... wait, draws energy? Keep away from powered vehicles." His eyes widened and understanding dawned on him. Shit! "Eat it! Eat it, get it off!" he stammered.

She didn't waste any time, lashing out with her jaws and tearing the grub in half. It didn't even have time to squeak before she gulped it down. "What was it doing? Are you alright?" she stammered, thrusting her face against the windshield.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he said, standing fearlessly in the face of the giant carnivore. "Those things apparently drain energy from vehicles." He peered past her and gulped. Now that he was looking, he could see many more lava larva out there, blending in with the background like shifting, rippling obsidian. "Oh, that's a lot of them." Varien put a finger to his chin and thought it over. He could take his Cyclops deeper and rely on Volara to snap off the larva, but then what if there were more things out there? But if he only went in with his P.R.A.W.N., that was much less metal between him and the sea monsters.

He made his choice. "Alright, hang on. I'm going to park this thing back there and come out in my suit." He turned the wheel and retreated into the underground river, past the trickling brinefalls. Varien went over his tools one more time to make sure he had everything; from his tools to the
alien devices he'd found, as well as some food and water. Once he was satisfied, he hopped into the exosuit.

The *thud* of landing on solid stone made him cry out; he'd hit one of his blisters. After a minute or so of hissing and clenched teeth he arduously walked the mechanical suit up to Volara. "Alright, let's go."

"Are you alright?" she asked from above him. He fixed the gargantuan fish with a miserly look, and she sighed. "Right, of course you're not," she whispered.

Without further ado, he dropped down into the lava zone. The temperature on his suit's thermometer shot up. Twenty degrees, thirty, forty, until it finally leveled out at a broiling *fifty* degrees. Volara followed after him sluggishly, mouth agape. A dark, intrusive thought whispered, *Good, fry you fish.*

Varien waved it off and turned to the right, facing the massive slope downward. He found the signals in his PDA and activated the one for the alien thermal plant. The blue waypoint that appeared in his vision was dead ahead. "Signal says it's this way," he said, pointing with the torpedo arm. "Let's go."

And that was what they did. Volara swam languidly above him, fending off the occasional lava larva that set its eyes on his suit. Varien took each step carefully, looking for the next piece of solid ground rather than goopy magma that merely looked like it'd cooled and hardened. The massive pillars of blue crystal, he learned he could grind to dust with his P.R.A.W.N.'s drill. The shards powdered and flaked apart under the diamond weapon's power. The larger chunks he collected; apparently it was some mineral called kyanite.

Whatever. He pocketed some of it and they moved on.

The landscape around him was, even on this alien world, alien. All around him were pillars of black rock that may have been stalactites and stalagmites before they grew together. Drops of magma dripped from the ceiling, cooling into basalt before they drifted halfway down. It wasn't just the landscape trying to melt his suit and fry him, either.

Warpers followed him all around, in far greater number than he'd ever seen. They lurked around the pillars waiting to jump out and scare him. They popped into existence behind him with the sound of screaming metal. They came at him with the scythes raised, or by shooting a white orb through the waters that he only barely avoided.

Luckily, Volara was always there to fend them off; just one bite or one zap and the warpers vanished back to wherever they were when not making his life miserable. A few times one tried to raise its blades against *her*, but that was probably just the warper trying to defend itself.

The tunnel went down, down, down. The ground dipped and dove, sometimes rising up over a small bowl, or curving around hills that looked more like the ground had been crumpled together. But always down. The alien thermal plant's marker remained in place, the numbers attached to it counting down. One thousand meters. Nine hundred. Eight hundred. Seven hundred.

At a little more than six hundred meters from the thermal plant and twelve hundred meters beneath the surface, with his nerves on edge with anticipation, the tunnel's walls fell away to the side. Both he and Volara came to a stop and stared at the scene before them.

Calling it a cavern or a chamber or anything of the sort would've been a grave injustice. Not only did the area stretch off into the gloom left, right, and ahead, but also above him so that he couldn't
see the ceiling no matter how hard he tried. From the way she twisted and turned about in the water, Volara couldn't see any walls either. The ground dipped and fell, rolling off into the murky gloom.

There was more life too, in addition to the larva and little fish. Massive rays flapped about the chamber, circling monolithic stone spires that stretched to the heavens. Unlike the ghost rays, these were completely opaque with freckled red skin that faded into pestilent green with distance. The crimson rays' eyes were pairs of baleful cinders mounted on the front of their thin bodies, but otherwise they seemed harmless enough.

What caught his attention were the lizards. The size of a dolphin and moss green, they swam around individually, beating the water with their webbed flippers. They swam like stalkers, undulating their tails up and down. Their mouths were gargantuan with hook fangs that stuck outside, and their eyes were milky marbles. As Varien watched, one swam through a stream of magma and emerged unharmed, with smoldering rock on its body as armor.

"Oh wow," Volara crackled, her electricity piercing through the darkness. "Just... ugh." She shook her head. "Which way is it?" she managed. "I'll keep them away. I'll keep you safe."

Varien pointed his drill ahead, at the mammoth rock formations littering the ground. "That way." He glanced back up at her. "You sure you're alright?" he asked, worried.

With her jaw permanently agape, Volara released another pattern of electricity. It translated to a strained growl. "I'm fine. You have bigger things to worry about."

His gut twisted at that. No, she wasn't fine, it was obvious to everyone; who did she think she was fooling? But he let it go; she had a point. They had to find the cure and fast. So he gripped the exosuit's controls and walked it forward.

The structures of the lava zone passed around him like something out of a dream, or a nightmare. Geysers of steam burst around him. Pillars of basalt rose out of sight. Other pillars had tumbled and lingered as shattered piles of rubble. Still others had clearly done something similar, but instead just dripped down and froze in mournful, melted formations on the ground. Sulfur and kyanite sprang up like trees, and his suit's air conditioning blew hard enough that it'd have ruffled his hair if it weren't for his helmet. Sometimes a lava lizard tried to take a bite out of him, growling bestially and approaching with a gaping mouth. Volara was always there to electrocute them. Sometimes a leech got through her vigil, but he could tell her about it and she'd pull it off. The warpers had, mercifully, relented for the time being. Maybe they were all busy licking their wounds?

The ground was ruined and tortured, speckled with glowing magma and gouged open by rivers of molten rock. Or sometimes it folded up and Varien had to use his suit's thrusters to pass over the obstacle. It was like walking through a ruined city, desiccated structures on all -

SINKING!

"Ah!" he yelped, stepping back. "Ah, no no no!" Varien babbled when he watched the magma he'd stepped in cling to the suit's left foot, eating away at the metal. "Get it off get it - ach, acph!" he tried to say, trailing off into coughs.

Volara's face nudged itself at him, but she was too close for him to see what was zapping along her prongs. She nudged his exosuit, then backed off when he began dragging the melting foot on the ground.

Once all was said and done, it wasn't so bad. The metal casing had melted off though, leaving only
the central skeleton of the suit for him to walk with. "Alright," he said. "It's fine. It's fine. We needed to get lunch anyway."

Volara zapped her tusks warily. "Right."

The meal was quick and nervous. Hisses and growls and wails filled the hell-waters all around them, echoing from all directions. Varien ate a cooked peeper, cold but still good. Volara stunned the local 'magmarangs' and red eyeyes. Apparently they were spicy, if her adorable, begging-for-mercy reactions to it were anything to go by. She must not've eaten anything hot before in her life.

Then lunch was over and they passed over the next mound of risen basalt. And for the umpteenth time that day were rendered speechless.

If he didn't know better, Varien could've easily called it the end of the cavern. A mountain of stone rose to the concealed ceiling. It stretched left and right, curving at the edges. Once when he was a kid, he'd stuck a dozen marshmallows together in the microwave and watched as they melted over each other in ballooning mounds. That was the same structure this lump of stone had, but at the tops were also strands of rock reaching straight up, as if the magma'd dripped upwards and froze in place. From half of the spires, choking black smoke spewed forth.

According to his PDA, the alien thermal plant was three hundred meters dead ahead. It was inside the underground mountain.

"Whoa. Alright, uh." He turned to Volara. "Do you see any entrance?"

"Rrrgh," she growled, shaking her head to fight off the heat. "No. Let's swim around, see if we can't find a tunnel or - "

RRROOOOOAAAAARRRRRR!

They both froze. Together, they turned around and looked up.

It was bigger than a Reaper.

The front half of the creature was like a lizard, mottled green. Its head sported four eyes, each a miniature sun, along with two antennae where there should've been nostrils. Fins sprouted from behind its head, and its mouth was made of interlocking fangs that resembled a slasher grin. The jaws were big enough to snap him up like a bite-sized snack, big enough to slurp up Volara like a strand of spaghetti. It had a pair of arms, with purple marks like warpaint over the biceps, which ended in a webbed paw with four gleaming claws each the size of Varien himself.

All along the underside of the monster were thick, armored scales punctuated with glowing orange holes, as if the entirety of the beast was just skin stretched over a burning star. The back half of the creature was entirely made of tentacles, like an octopus but with more of the star-holes in place of suction cups, which together doubled the length of the beast. It pumped them languidly, but even that lazy motion was enough to propel it through the water faster than anything he'd ever seen.

Varien's brain short-circuited. "That's the - that's the skeleton - that's a dragon," he stammered. For the moment, it was mercifully uncaring of their presence.

He and Volara shared a look as the leviathan passed overhead. "Varien," she whimpered, head low. "I don't," she stammered, trailing off. "I don't think I can fight that," she finished.

"It's fine," he whispered. "Just keep your electricity down, we'll sneak around the - "
"New creature discovered!" his PDA announced.

RAAWWWRRRR?!

The monster turned in a circle and angled its head down to look at them with its quartet of supernova eyes. Varien frantically shushed his PDA, but it was too late.

"Labeling... Sea Dragon Leviathan."

The Sea Dragon opened its jaws wide and released another roar, loud enough to rattle his bones and leave tinnitus ringing in his ears. Varien turned to Volara. "RUN!"

The leviathan descended upon them, swimming gargantuan circles until it was on their level. Volara lashed her body harshly and shot forward like a bullet, all her sluggishness forgotten. Varien, for his part, cursed himself for replacing the grappling arm. Torpedos weren't going to cut it against... that. He stomped forward as fast as he could, eyes wide. Oh stars above he could feel it, it was right behind him, it was going to -

Tink!

Varien's world turned upside down. He screamed like a baby as his suit, with him still in it, went flying to the side like a ragdoll. He tumbled head over heels, bumping into the metal sides of his exosuit with blinding flashes of pain as the translator smashed into him, or as he hit his sensitive, pus-filled boils. When at last he came to a rest his vehicle was on its side, leaving him in the perfect position to view the Sea Dragon as it approached him. A leering grin was plastered on its face. It swam towards him like a cat playing with its food. A pillar of rock was in the way, but it swatted it with a limb and shattered the stone like it was made of styrofoam.

His mouth gaped and he croaked out something despairing. He pushed the suit's controls and tried to right it, but all he managed to do was push the ground with his torpedo arm, and the entire right side of the thing was dented in like cheap cardboard. The dragon was getting closer.

" - FROM HIM!" Volara's voice shot in. She rocketed in from the sides, alight with energy, and exploded into a nova right underneath the dragon's jaw. It roared and tilted its head to the side, and for a moment his jaw dropped at the sheer size of it; Volara was gargantuan on the best of days, but she was a chew toy next to this leviathan. It smacked a paw at her, but she was already gone, swimming towards him. "Get up, get up!" she shouted, grabbing his drill arm in her jaws and pulling. With her help, they managed to get him upright. "Which way do we go?" she demanded.

He looked around the lava zone. Everything looked the same, except that all other fauna was conspicuously absent. "Uh..."

RRROOOOOAAAAARRRRRR!

"This way!" he guessed as the dragon recovered and began bearing down on him. He guided himself and Volara to another structure of stone, this one a loop melted into the ground, and hid behind it. He gestured for her to stay down. Maybe it'd lose track of them?

A shadow passed overhead. Both himself and the ampeel looked up fearfully to see the dragon passing by them. But just before they could breathe a sigh of relief, it turned around and faced them with its grinning mouth shut. Then it opened its jaws and a neon green star appeared in its gullet. The dragon snapped its jaws shut but the orb of light remained, growing bigger and redder at a death-defying pace.

It was an honest to goodness meteor.
Varien dodged out of the way, but Volara was too slow and the ball of burning rock exploded on the lower half of her body. She screamed out a burst of electricity, then curled up limply with whimpering arcs playing along her body. Varien caught a glimpse of her lower carapace, covered in black burns like toast.

The dragon still floated where it'd been, seemingly appraising its own work. Then it began closing the distance again.

Something hot boiled up inside Varien. *This thing had just hurt her!* He raised the torpedo arm and opened the targeting system. In his vision, interlocking circles appeared on the Sea Dragon Leviathan's body. With trembling fingers, he pressed the button three times.

The torpedo arm recoiled, but Varien felt nothing. A trio of missiles, dull in the gloom, tore bubble-filled paths through the water. Each one hit the dragon in a different spot; one in the snout, one in the right side of its armored underbelly, and the final one to the left. Each tore open a vantablack sphere, forcing the water around it to churn into a beautiful vortex. The dragon roared painfully loud and beat its tentacles, but it was going nowhere.

*Now!*

"Come on!" he shouted at Volara, who was still gasping at her burned body. "We need to go! Those things won't last forever!"

Twitching, she straightened out. "R-Right. But where?"


"Right!" She leaned down and grasped his drill arm, then *lifted* and swam. He thrashed around in his seat as the ampeel lifted and carried him off, but didn't protest. Without the grapple arm he was in no position to outrun the Sea Dragon. Rock formations passed in and out of his vision as he dangled from the megafauna's jaws, but Varien was more focused on looking behind him, at where the trio of vortexes kept the leviathan in place.

But even as he looked, the vortexes rippled and vanished. The instant it was free it turned to face them. In seconds the Sea Dragon Leviathan bore down on them with its jaws wide open.

"Um, Volara?" he squeaked.

The dragon raised an arm.

"Volara?!"

The arm came down, but it was nowhere near them. As it turned out that didn't matter, because the wave it sent through the water caught up with them in no time and tossed both him and Volara around like leaves. She let go of him and crashed into a stone pillar. Miraculously, Varien hit the ground right side up. He turned to face the dragon as it approached his friend with mocking slowness. He gulped and held his right index finger down on a button. The drill arm came to life with the sound of thunder and, as fast as he could, he charged the dragon.

Varien raised the drill arm and pressed it against the massive, world-filling flipper's skin. With a horrible crunch and a shower of sparks, the drill snagged. Then the flipper blurred and he was flying backwards again. With coordination he didn't know he had he braced the exosuit's feet against the ground and leaned forward, turning what would've been another uncontrollable tumble into a harsh, bone-chilling slide against the rugged terrain. He let out a weak breath and looked up.
There was the leviathan, low to the ground and heading for him. And there was Volara, collapsed limply against the rocks she'd hit. Her eyes were closed. Somewhere, far to the left, was the corridor out of the lava zone. He took a deep breath. Miraculously, he didn't cough. Then he acted.

The dragon's jaws snapped shut with unimaginable force, but Varien wasn't there. He leaped on top of the dragon with his thrusters and ran along the finned, wildly bucking back of the monster. It began to turn so he jumped, turned to face the dragon, and unloaded his last three torpedoes into it. A trio of black holes formed, holding it in place, and he wasted no time hurrying over to Volara.

His P.R.A.W.N. didn't have proper grabbers anymore. And Volara was gigantic. But he did his best to wedge the two arms under the midsection of her body and lift. Carrying the massive eel - and trying to make sure he didn't bump her head along the half-molten ground - he ran off. Varien thrustered and ran as fast as he could. He kept glancing behind him; surely the vortexes were gone by now, right? Surely the dragon was going to come barrelling out of the darkness any second in a maelstrom of claws and fangs. But mercifully, it never came.

Varien didn't stop until he found the tunnel again and ducked inside. He found a ledge high up and rested Volara on it. Now that he wasn't running for his life, he could see the full extent of her injuries.

The armored shell along the bottom half of her body was scorched and cracked, pockmarked with bits of molten rock that'd gotten wedged in it and froze there. A massive crack ruptured the middle of her carapace, oozing green blood. There was another crack on her face, running into her nasal arch. His breath came in quick pants. No, no no no. He had to do something about this. Varien fiddled with his PDA until he had both the medical kits he'd brought with him. He affixed his helmet and jumped out into the water.

The first thing that hit him was the heat. After the air conditioned exosuit it was appalling, like standing on the surface of the Sun. The next was the weight of the water. It'd been weeks since he last felt any water pressure, not since he made a reinforced dive suit. Apparently being so far down was putting it to its limit.

But heat and pressure aside, he had to help her. His heart felt like it was going to burst out of its chest. He went to the cuts and bandaged them, pouring antiseptic into the wounds. He went to the craters in her shell and, with his thermoblade turned off, fished out the chunks of rock. All across Volara's body he could see her gills, hidden between her plates, slowly pumping water. Were they supposed to be that slow?

He finished up and was prepared to swim away when a crackle of electricity swam across her prongs. He shrieked as it passed over and inside him, but it was weaker than getting shocked by a doorknob.

Volara wasn't stirring. Her eyes remained firmly shut. But she wasn't bleeding anymore so what else could he -

The heat!

He climbed back into his exosuit and scooped her up again. Jumping and running, trampling mushrooms and vaulting over magma pits, Varien made his way up the tunnel as fast as he could, hoping against hope it wasn't too late as Volara's huge body flopped around in his grip. Not soon enough, the exit appeared. The glorious exit to the lava zone, up and to the left, shrouded in blue mist. He could even see the outline of his Cyclops, waiting patiently.

Varien jumped up to it and watched as his suit's thermometer crashed from fifty to fifteen degrees.
He set Volara down on a dark patch of blue stone and stepped away, fingers nervously intertwined. Come on, come on...

She stirred, running a groan down her prongs. Her eyelids fluttered open and a huge weight lifted itself from his chest. "Where are we?" she muttered.

"Back in the underground river," he said. "You, uh, got thrown into a pillar pretty hard." She shuffled her body and floated a meter or two up. He moved forwards in his suit, arms up. "Hey, hey, don't strain yourself. Just take it easy."

They rested a while longer. Varien hopped out several times to throw cooked and salted fish for Volara to eat and rebuild her strength. Eventually she could swim about without much difficulty, as long as she didn't go fast enough to rip the bandages. "Alright, I'm feeling..." She retched and shook her head. "Ugh."

Varien frowned. "Hang on, I'm going to scan you real quick." He pulled out the tool. "Maybe it'll have some medical advice or something." She didn't resist as he held it to her and bathed her in the spectroscope's standard bands of shifting light. When it ended, it didn't tell him anything about her recovery.

Instead, the screen lit up with a mocking, crimson INFECTED.

For a long moment he stared at it, then up at her. "You have the Carar?" he whispered. "When?"

Volara closed her eyes, then crackled out a sigh. "... I didn't want to worry you. I first started feeling it around the time I fought the Reaper. My shell was itching. That means it probably first found me when that crabsnake bit me." When it bit her, and exposed her insides directly to the Carar-infested waters.

He swam over to his exosuit and sat on it. So, that was it then. He sat his PDA on his lap and flipped through the data entries until he found the one from the precursors he was looking for. Ampeels survived five weeks before succumbing to the disease. That left her... about two and a half weeks. She'd die not long after him.

The two of them sat in silence. "What are we going to do?" she asked. "We can't go back in there, not with that thing around."

"We need to, though," he muttered. "It's the only way." He sighed.

The two of them continued to sit, feeling miserable about themselves.

What were they going to do?

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
He sat on the edge of his seamoth's moonpool, bare feet dangling into the water. Now and then a peeper or some other fish would come around and swim around his blister-covered toes before darting away. But while Varien sat peacefully, his thoughts were anything but.

His thoughts, instead, were a tangled web of planning and thinking. How could he get to the cure now that it was guarded by a literal dragon straight out of mythology? Bringing Volara with him was out; the heat had nearly killed her. But that left him, by himself, in the volcanic nightmare beneath the waves. With Volara gone he had to worry about all sorts of things he otherwise didn't. Lava lizards, the larva, even just the river prowlers on his way to the lava zone became important to consider.

And of course, it didn't help that half the time his planning was derailed by stony depression clenching on his heart, or by him breaking into a coughing fit courtesy of his bronchitis which'd recently upgraded into pneumonia.

Varien continued to stare into the waters and sighed. Could he do anything?

Slowly though, thoughts pieced them together in his mind. No more torpedo arm; they could hold the dragon in place but only for so long, and it took too many torpedoes to do so. The grappling arm was much better. He considered tossing the drill arm, given how useless it'd been against the Sea Dragon Leviathan's thick hide, but then he remembered the lava lizards that swam around the area and decided it'd be best to keep it.

But that still left everything else, and what to bring with him and... argh!

Finally, Varien stood. He stared into the water one last time, then nodded. "I'm not going to die here," he said aloud, and went to work.

Materials, including the kyanite and sulfur he'd nabbed from the lava zone, went into one of the moonpools' fabricators. He boarded his Cyclops and dumped more stuff into its fabricator. Also, he moved everything in his habitat onboard the submarine. Food, water, precious metals, and the storage compartments that held them went, until only his water filter and farms were left. He brought his bed and coffee machine, he even disassembled the window and cut off passage to the moonpools, leaving no way into the multipurpose room except the hatch. Varien left no stone unturned. He recolored his P.R.A.W.N. in browns and reds to camouflage with the lava zone. As a
finishing touch he docked his exosuit into the Cyclops, then went over to the naming console. He changed the name of the Cyclops to a bright, kelp green.

Varien renamed the vessel 'Cure or Bust'.

While waiting for the fabricators to finish, Varien found himself in the habitat. He swallowed something tight in his throat and pulled out a PDA. The little piece of electronic plastic wasn't his. It was Silvia's, scavenged from her grave. He tapped it and it lit up, requesting a password. He typed in his last name, Stelisk, and it accepted. He fiddled around with the controls until he had the camera and microphone online. Varien sat against the walls of his shelter and brought it up to his face.

Then he began recording.

"Ahem. To anyone seeing this, this is Varien Stelisk, acting captain of the Alterra starship Aurora. As far as I know I am the only survivor after the Aurora crash landed on planet HIP 4546B." He let out a breath and slicked his hair back. "Where do I even begin. So uh, you probably see I'm not doing too well." He gestured to the green boils on his face, filled with a combination of pus and Carar bacteria. "There's an incredibly dangerous waterborne disease on the planet called the Carar. It seems to cross species like nothing. In humans, or my case at least, the first symptoms manifest after two weeks, and after that it's another five weeks until it kills. I." He placed a hand to his chest. ", have twelve days left, according to my PDA."

He went through some basic survival tips, such as where crashfish liked to hide, the existence of sandsharks, how crabsnakes hid in their mushrooms, and the preferred territory of Reaper Leviathans. As he did he also transferred all the data from his PDA over to Silvia's. "Of note are the species called ampeels, more data in the files attached. They're intelligent. And not in the way nonuplifted dolphins or chimps are; I mean full, human intelligence. They communicate with a pattern of electrical pulses rather than sound. One of them, a native called Volara actually, helped me tremendously during my time here, warding off the other predators of the planet. I've attached the dictionary, but if you want to talk back to them you'll need to hand-build a translator." He went over how he'd built his.

Now he was on to the last part of the message. Varien breathed out. "The Carar, from what I can tell, is not native to the planet. During my stay here I discovered that the Aurora did not simply crash, but was rather shot down by a massive ground to air cannon of unknown design. My PDA's analysis of the data files within the weapon's structure indicates it was not created by humans. I've attached coordinates for all the 'precursor' structures I've found," he said, emphasizing precursor with finger quotes. ", so you can go look if you don't believe me. From what I can piece together, these aliens stumbled onto Carar on another planet while colonizing worlds, and it began wiping them out. They sent a team to 4546B to look for a cure. Unfortunately, one of the local leviathan predators broke the quarantine and it all spiraled down from there."

He continued explaining more, of how there was hopefully data pertaining to the cure and the 'Emperor' specimen deep in the volcanic wasteland, but it was guarded by at least one Sea Dragon Leviathan. "I've moved everything except my water filter, seamoth, and farms onto my Cyclops. I am going to go down there, find the cure, and save myself." And Volara, he thought. "Once I do I'll come back and erase this message. So if you're seeing this, that means I failed. Here's hoping you can do better." Varien's gut churned at that. He was really doing it. He was admitting aloud that he could die. "Alright. This is Varien Stelisk, signing off." He stopped the recording.

Gingerly, he set the PDA down. Varien stood and looked around. Everything was so bare, so empty. This might be the last time he ever stood there. He took a deep breath through his nose,
tasting the warm, salty air. Then without further ado he strode to the hatch and climbed out. He grabbed the upgrade modules from the fabricator and headed back out.

Varien climbed into his Cyclops and made a beeline to its fabricator. That module was finished as well. He strode to the other side of the engine room, where he put in the Cyclops Thermal Charging unit, alongside the Mark-Two Pressure Compensator, Shield, and Sonar. He went to the glass floor above his docked exosuit and, with fiddling with one of the Cyclops's many consoles, put both the P.R.A.W.N.'s thermal charging and thruster upgrade into it. He also replaced the storage module with extra armor for the hull.

With that done, he made himself two cups of coffee and strode to the bridge, sipping on one.

The Cyclops was high enough that it stuck out of the choppy waters. The skies were clear of all but a few puffy clouds, letting the local star shine down on him in full force. The Aurora's quiet ruins hung in the distance. It'd sunken further into the water since the last time he'd seen it. Varien closed his eyes and bathed in the sunlight; when was the last time he'd been above water? He hadn't missed it as much as he imagined he would.

He grabbed the wheel and signaled for the engine to turn on. Once the ship stopped rumbling he descended beneath the waves and headed off for the blood kelp zone, his face set in grim determination.

The shallows, kelp forest, and plateaus passed by him. Varien took the time to take in their beauty: the many corals, the dense green, the endless grass. He wondered if he'd ever see them, or the light of day, again.

The twinkling shafts of light faded as he went deeper, slipping to an early twilight as he sailed over the mushroom forest. Varien glanced down into it as it passed by him, smiling at the beautiful jellyrays orbiting their trees.

Ahead of him, the ground dipped into what he could only describe as a jagged gash in the ocean floor, lined with black stone and filled with glowing, ghostly bloodvines. Varien descended into the beautiful darkness, shining his Cyclops's headlights on the strange deep-sea life. Spinefish swam by. A blood crawler ducked into a cave.

He piloted his ship over to where he thought the underground river's entrance was. Miracle of miracles he was right; Varien soon found himself above the gaping maw of the cavernous tunnel. He turned his sub around to face it, and took a deep breath.

"Cure or bust," he said aloud to calm his nerves. The yawning path ahead of him, with stalactites for teeth, was all too predatory without an ampeel by his side. "Cure or bust."

Electric crackles filled the water. Varien startled and glanced about, looking for the eel.

They made themselves apparent soon enough, coiling in front of his windshield. "I thought I'd find you here," Volara said quietly, swaying her lower body sluggishly.

"... so we're going back in again?" she asked.

Varien pressed his lips together. "No. I'm going in. You're staying here." Her prongs began to light up, but he cut her off. "Volara, listen. We both saw how awful you were doing down there. That heat's no good for you. And if the dragon attacks us again, and you..." He trailed off, his chest tight at the mere thought. The sight of Volara, torn clean in half, briefly haunted his mind's eye. "I have
to do this on my own."

She swayed, and crackled something that translated to a low moan. "I know... but can't I at least follow you down there? Until we get to the hot area?"

He wanted her to. Oh stars above he wanted her to. But no. He shook his head. "I have to get used to not having you there to attack anything that comes after me. Volara, listen." He stepped around the wheel and closer to the windshield. Varien placed his palm against the glass and stared at the megafauna. "I could never have gotten this far without you. You gave me food, you protected me from bonesharks, crabsquids, crabsnakes, warpers, river prowlers, lava lizards, sandsharks, Reapers, Sea Dragons. You gave me someone to talk to. You've gotten me this far, you saved my life and thank you. But I have to do the rest on my own."

Volara bowed her head and swam forward, until her snout was across the glass from his hand. "Varien," she muttered.

"And I know things weren't great these past few days, but..." He swallowed, something bitter scratching his heart and something wet blurring his vision. "You couldn't have known Silvia was intelligent. It wasn't your fault. I want you to know that." And if I die down there I don't want you to spend your last days thinking I still hate you. "You've been the only thing that made my time on this planet at all bearable. And I - I don't." He cut himself off before he started babbling.

Still pressed up against the glass, Volara started crackling. "I didn't think anyone but my people were smart, could think," she said. "The gods died long ago, and it was only us. But then you came! You showed me a world beyond my home. For all its heat and light, you opened the Above for me, Varien. The bulbs, the crabsnake mushrooms, your shallows. You showed me the future that could be if the Green Weakness stopped killing us all. You're smart and you're friendly and - " She cut herself off. If Varien had to guess she was going to call him 'adorable' like one might call a dog adorable.


"Thank you," he croaked. "Take care of yourself, Volara. As soon as I get the cure, I'm going to bring it back." And hope that it works for both humans and ampeels, not just precursors. "Just hold on."

She both zapped her tusks and nodded, before swimming away from in front of his submarine. Varien took a deep breath and throttled the wheel forward. The engines came back online, driving him deeper into the darkness. As he descended, Varien briefly called up the exterior cameras and pointed one straight back. There, silhouetted against the abyssal darkness, was Volara. She stared back at him motionlessly until he turned the corner and she vanished from sight.

This was it then. He was, once again, alone on HIP 4546B.

For the third time, the sickly green world of the brine river came into view. Despite the Cyclops's heating system keeping out the icy chill, Varien shivered. The ghostly trees looked like bramble walls. The river prowlers' fangs seemed twice the size they'd been before. He jumped when a ghost ray moaned.

Volara I take it back please help.

With aching slowness, pausing routinely to cough his lungs up, Varien crept his submersible forward. It was all so much more cramped than he remembered. He could barely squeeze his ship
between the ceiling and the trees. Part of him wanted to just bash his way forward, but knowing his luck the ghost trees were tougher than plasteel and would just tear open his Cyclops's hull.

A hull breach this far down would kill him almost instantly.

Far too slowly but eventually, he arrived at the vertical drop. Varien carefully piloted his Cyclops down, narrowly avoiding banging the walls of the tunnel.

A river prowler came into view.

"Ah!" he yelped, stumbling backward. He'd never seen one this close; Volara never let them approach. It was skeletal, with a reddish skull for a head with gleaming red eyes. Its fangs were something to behold, and from so close he could see that it was nearly as long as a damn ampeel. No wonder Volara thought they were her kind's ghosts.

Varien braced for the river prowler to attack, but it didn't. Instead it looked his way and shrieked in the distinctive, metallic warbles of its species. It turned tail and fled into the gloom. Weird, but he'd take it.

… or maybe not that weird. There was a tree with leviathan eggs nearby, it made sense if these things had learned to fear things bigger than them.

Speaking of the tree, Varien soon reached the bottom of the tunnel and steered his way to the tree's cove. It was exactly like he remembered, with spirals of azure brine pooling at the bottom, black smokers at the outskirt brine lakes, hundreds of ghost rays, all dominated by the central tree as it stood above enough mineral wealth to buy his own asteroid. Despite the knowledge of baby leviathans waiting to hatch, the scene was as peaceful and serene as ever.

Last stop before the hard part, he thought.

He wondered if maybe he should destroy the leviathan eggs while they were here. Whatever the 'soul conglomerate leviathans' were like, they were clearly bad news even for the ampeels. It'd be doing them a favor.

… maybe? He didn't know what other important things the leviathans did for the environment. Maybe destroying the eggs would do more harm than good. Varien piloted past them thinking, I really hope I don't come back and regret that decision.

The patterns of hardened magma spelled out all he needed to know as he left the tree behind. The tunnel curved to the left as he followed it, before plunging straight down. The diseased butterflies in his stomach multiplied as he descended. Varien gulped and breathed shallowly as his depth meter's number climbed up and up, finally rolling past one thousand meters.

At last, the lava zone was in front of him, red and cruel in his windshield.

Varien parked the Cyclops where he had last time to keep it safe from the lava larva. Just to be safe, though, he took out three of the power cells and stuck them in a storage locker. He went over everything in his dive suit's storage to be absolutely certain he had all he needed. Then he went to his P.R.A.W.N. and checked as well. All his food and water? Check. Ion cubes and an assortment of purple and orange artifacts? Check. All his tools? Check. Spare batteries? Check. Two first aid kits? Check. Raw materials in case he needed to repair his exosuit? Check.

Well. That was it, then. He couldn't put it off any longer.

After checking to make sure his helmet was screwed in properly and the rest of his reinforced dive
suit was done up properly, he opened his exosuit's hatch and slid inside. "E-Eject," he stammered. The Cyclops opened its docking bay and out he fell. Varien used his thrusters to make the fall gentle, and he marveled at how smoothly it went. The thruster upgrade was already proving itself.

He stepped aside, and turned back to face his submarine. It floated silently in the darkness, waiting for him to return. The brilliant Cure or Bust on its side stood out against the gloom.

Varien stared at it and closed his eyes. This might be the last time he ever saw it. If he failed, the power cells would eventually run out. If he died down here, would the next people to crash on 4546B come by his Cyclops? What state would it be in by then?

Stop wondering, he told himself. You're stalling again.

He absolutely was stalling. He didn't want to go in there alone! He'd barely gotten away alive even with Volara there to protect him.

A rumble from his stomach gave him the excuse to stall even more. He ate a nutrient block - because who knew when he might ever get the chance to again? - and downed it with a small bottle of bladderfish water. But then lunch was over, and he had no more excuses. Nervously, Varien walked his suit forward.

He dropped down a massive ledge into the lava zone, then another ledge, and another, like he was going down the world's largest staircase. Varien landed on the lumpy floor, surrounded on all ends by bursts of steam, gouged-out magma rivers, and cracks of molten rock seeping through the ground. Far above him swam the small, hardy creatures that called the lava zone home. All around him were clusters of deep shrooms and hardy, dry grasses barely clinging to life.

Yip! something squeaked. A heartbeat later something thudded against his exosuit, and Varien resisted the urge to sigh.

"That didn't take long," he groused, miserably standing. Thermoblade in hand, Varien popped out of his P.R.A.W.N. and into the searing waters. Like before, the immense pressure weighed down on his chest and the preternatural heat made him break into a sweat. He wondered if his reinforced dive suit was still protecting him from decompression sickness. He hoped so; the last thing he needed was the Bends on top of everything else.

Whatever. He had more immediate concerns, in the form of a giant alien leech attached to his suit.

Now that he was out here next to it, the lava larva seemed even bigger than it had before. It was about the length of his torso and legs combined. He swam closer to where it was hunched over his exosuit's shoulder and tightened his grip. He knew these things were defenseless. They'd never even tried to snap at Volara when she pried them off. They didn't even have eyes to know where he was! But he couldn't help the absurd fear that when he touched it, it'd turn around with that toothy suction cup and bite him.

Ugh.

Before he could completely lose his nerve, he turned on his thermoblade's battery and let it warm up. He didn't know how much the heat would burn something that lived in the lava zone, but it was worth a shot. Once the blade was hot enough to leave bubbles in the surrounding water, he swung at the leech's thick back. It squeaked as he tore open a tiny line in its back, then again as he cut deeper the second time. With greenish-yellow blood streaming from its wounds, the larva detached and swam away in a hurry.
Well, that was that taken care of. Varien hopped back into his suit and moved on.

Without Volara there to make everything look small, the lava zone's corridor was even more gargantuan than he remembered. Hills the size of apartment blocks. Pillars like skyscrapers. Rivers of magma like lakes. Most of the land looked like a giant had sculpted clay with their bare hands, like an art project left half done. Traversing it was tricky with his sense of scale so out of whack. He tried to get more practice with his grappling arm, but half the time he misjudged how far something was and the tether hit nothing. The times he did connect, he was drawn through the water hard enough to summon that awful tingling in his crotch and stomach that came with falling incredibly fast.

As he was swinging about, Varien found himself on a ledge overlooking the corridor. "Wait," he said suddenly. "The signal." With his left hand he grabbed his PDA and swiftly he activated the alien thermal plant's coordinates. Eight hundred meters ahead of him, said the blue marker in his vision. "Good." He put his PDA away... but his left hand's fingers were numb, frozen in the position of holding it. He tried to wiggle them, but there wasn't any feeling. "Crap."

Eventually feeling came back, but that was worrying. Maybe Ohmaron had hurt him more than Varien thought.

A burst of light and sound above and in front of him ended his worries about permanent nerve damage. A warper had arrived.

Varien's breath caught in his throat and he backpedaled his exosuit. Oh stars above, warpers. He didn't know how to handle warpers. What, was he supposed to just hit them?! The violet cyborg's vortex ended and it turned to face him. Its horrible face, with a beak that looked like buck teeth, came closer and closer. He got a good look at its transparent underbelly, inside which purple organs and wires pumped furiously. His mouth hung open like a fish as it loomed over him. With a metallic screech that'd be at home on a rocket crashing, it raised its arms and brought the sickles down.

CRUNCH! The icy blades tore through his P.R.A.W.N.'s reinforced plasteel chassis like butter. He screamed like a little girl and, on instinct, slammed the inactive drill arm into its seemingly soft underbelly. The diamond tip did nothing but chip the warper's clear shell. But that was enough for it to warble, then pull its arms up to its face and vanish in a blinding portal of energy. Once it was gone, he collapsed into his seat and tried to calm his frantic heart. Only once he had marginally succeeded at that did he get back out into the water to repair his exosuit.

Varien had brought fifteen clumps of titanium and just as much lithium with him to fix the plasteel exoskeleton. Just the one hit from the warper had him use up two of each, and he hadn't even gotten to the lava zone's main chamber yet!

The rest of his journey through the corridor was similarly miserable. Dodge the jets of steam, hop over the magma ponds. Cough up your lungs every two steps. Fight off the world-spinning nausea. Dodge the lava larva. Dislodge the other lava larva you didn't notice. A warper up there, hide behind this ledge. Oh, oops, there's molten rock there.

He so wished he had Volara with him. All the stress made it feel like his heart'd burst.

Then, he arrived at the main chamber.
"Moooooaaaaa," a crimson ray bellowed, flapping miserably in the distance. A distant larva yelped as a lizard tore into it. Massive structures of hardened and still-molten magma littered the landscape. Warpers by the dozens patrolled the upper reaches. Somewhere in the distance, at least one Sea Dragon Leviathan was waiting for him.

He took a deep breath and shook his head. Ugh. Not only was he in the worst place on the planet now, the constant exhaustion he carried around with him was getting worse despite all the coffee he'd drank. He'd need to eat dinner and sleep soon. Spending a night roughing it in the lava zone sounded as appealing as gargling broken glass, but it beat passing out in the middle of being chased by a dragon.

But where could he park his suit safely? He could walk forwards, making a beeline for the alien thermal plant, and then take shelter beneath one of the many jagged stone columns. But that still left him mostly in the open, and that was just asking for it. On the other hand, he could follow the walls to the left or right and take shelter with them as an overhang. The problem was, he didn't know how far they went to the side. He had a week and a half until he died and who knew how long until he couldn't move. Did he dare risk taking the longer way around?

*I'll follow the walls for a few minutes,* he told himself. *If it doesn't look like they turn around after ten minutes, I go straight for the thermal plant.* Varien turned to the right, stomping and grappling forward.

The following hour or so was nightmarish beyond belief. Every second he had to watch his step lest he melt his suit's feet in magma puddles. There was always a lava lizard prowling nearby; they attacked him by charging with open jaws, so fending them off with his drill was a terrifying game of chicken. There were always warpers, always leeches, even the rays and edible fish kept moving about in his peripherals to startle him. To say nothing of his continuing health problems.

But luckily, the walls *did* curve around within a few minutes of him traveling. The cavern was gigantic, but not unmanageably so. He could skirt around the edges and get to the underground mountain with some semblance of shelter above him.

The thermal plant, when he first entered the caverns, was six hundred meters away. By the time his eyelids felt like lead and he knew it was time to call it a day, that distance had only dropped to five hundred. Varien found a pocket in the half-liquid walls that only looked mildly awful and tucked his exosuit away inside. He reclined on his seat, stretching to work out kinks that never went away, and fixed himself dinner.

As he was chewing a bite of his spinefish, it happened.

The edges of his vision blurred and rippled. Something heavy pressed on his brain, like a bubble trying to burst inside his skull. He jerked in his seat, looking around wildly. This looked so similar to what mesmers did. But what was a mesmer doing so far down?!

Then clods of darkness formed in his vision, rushing together to form the head of some gigantic monster. They formed a crest and a pair of mandibles. Four eyes as blue as the star Rigel stared at him. The figure's head shifted back and forth. He heard something *slam* in his head, followed by warbling clicks and clacks.

"You are so close," he heard an old, motherly voice say. "Do not give up!"

Then the pressure in his skull vanished. The figure's head faded. The distorted colors settled.

He sat in his chair for a moment, breathing shallowly. Then his hands shook wildly. "What the fuck
was that?!” he shouted. Varien curled up and shivered. What the fuck. What the fuck?! Was he hallucinating? Was he insane? Was this some messed up symptom of the Carar? If he thought about it, he remembered that voice; he'd heard it in his nightmares after the Sunbeam was destroyed. Was he just going mad from the isolation? Sure he'd had company in Volara, but maybe now that she was gone it was all catching up with him or something? And it'd been so lifelike! He'd never hallucinated before; Varien thought he would've been able to tell. But the head had been so real, like he could reach out and touch it. If he hallucinated something else, something more mundane, would he even be able to tell?!

With shaking hands and weak breaths, Varien finished his dinner.

Okay, okay, it was fine. Hallucination or not, it didn't matter. All that mattered was getting the cure. He could go insane however much he wanted afterward. As long as Varien kept a lid on it, he was fine, right? There was already so much wrong. Going mad was just one more thing on the pile, right?

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, he'd get to the thermal plant, get the cure, and then worry about his sanity. For the time being, he couldn't hold off sleep anymore. His thoughts grew sluggish out of nowhere, his eyelids heavier and heavier. His head dipped forward and he slipped out of conscious -

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
He woke with a start, to a mouth full of fangs.

"AH!" he yelped. The lava lizard snarled in response. Varien thrashed about in his P.R.A.W.N., fell off the seat, and landed on the floor with a grunt. The sea monster bashed into the top of his suit, flopping about and smacking the glass dome with its flippers hard enough to tip him over. Naturally, his yelp turned into a coughing fit, but he fought through it to reach his exosuit's controls.

The plan that flashed through his mind was to stand his suit up, shoot the grapple into the lizard, then use the leverage to drill into its underbelly. What actually happened was that he rolled over so that Varien was face to face with the tortured ground of the lava zone, which he then proceeded to punch with his suit's arms.

CRUNCH!

His heart shot up into his throat when he heard something break.

Varien fiddled with the controls again, and this time he succeeded in both standing and bringing the drill arm to life. He spun around and yelped when the lava lizard came into view, engulfing his field of view with its greenish skin and milky eyes. Worse still was its gaping maw and hook fangs. Varien screamed and drove his drill forward, half expecting it to crunch like it had against the Sea Dragon's thick hide. Instead it carved into the lizard's side as though it was made of yogurt. Clumps of white flesh flew out and yellowish blood spurted. The fish hissed in pain and beat a hasty retreat, leaving Varien to get his breath back.

"Ah, ah, hah," he breathed weakly, a hand to his chest. Once Varien got a hold of himself, he fished his PDA out and checked the time. His eyes bugged out; he had some ten and a half days left. Which meant... "I slept for a whole day?!" Horror chilled him; how close had he come to never waking up at all?

Alright, first thing was first; how badly did the lava lizard trash his suit? He put on his oxygen mask and helmet, made sure his welder was working, and popped out into the burning waters.

As it turned out, it was bad. While the lizard had mercifully avoided the glass dome, it'd done terrible work on the plasteel hull. Everywhere Varien looked there were bite marks, gashes,
gouges. He worked as fast as he could, using up most of his titanium and lithium to fix it. But then he got to the back, just above the thrusters and beneath the storage. It was something his PDA told him was the P.R.A.W.N.'s air recycler; it took the carbon dioxide he exhaled and turned it back into oxygen. And it was busted.

Varien didn't have what he needed to repair it; he needed copper, and all his copper was in his Cyclops back in the underground river. So he could either walk his suit all the way back, get the copper, then retrace his steps, or he could press forward and hope the thermal plant had fresh air.

He pulled himself back into his vessel and relaxed his head against the seat's padded cushion. "Fuck," he croaked. "Alright, think."

Going back to his Cyclops sounded like a terrible idea with him getting progressively sicker. But did pressing forward sound any more appealing? Actually if he thought about it, it did. The precursor gun's underwater portion had had air, so the thermal plant would likely have force fields to keep out the water. And his oxygen tanks were very large; even if every drop of oxygen in his exosuit vanished instantly, he'd still have ten hours in his tanks. With the P.R.A.W.N., he was looking at something like fifteen hours.

Onwards it was; he couldn't waste any time backtracking. Not when he'd apparently spent a day in a near-coma.

Varien's stomach snarled at him, so he quickly nibbled on a nutrient block and gulped down a bottle of filtered water. With that done he found where the thermal plant's signal was in his vision and set off.

Spending a night sleeping in it hadn't made the lava zone any less menacing. The awful, heat-loving creatures still speckled the water like stars and mounds of basalt rose out of sight like a petrified lava lamp. The thermal plant was five hundred meters in front of him in the middle of a hill the size of a small city. Kyanite sprouted from the ground like trees, painfully bright contrasted with everything else, and sulfur littered the stone like garbage. Alongside them were gargantuan clusters of quartz, gold, nickel and more, churned up by the intense volcanism.

As he trekked across the volcanic lands, his thoughts wandered up, through the stone, to Volara. What was she doing right now? What did ampeels with the Carar do? Did they try to just fight through it and go through life as usual? Did they just sit in their territories and rest? Was she being harassed by warpers right now? Were Teslara and Herzaron taking care of her? If he thought about it, ampeels probably didn't know diseases could spread through proximity; they were constantly swimming in the stuff, after all.

His frown deepened and he pressed on, dodging the relentless dangers of the lava zone. It didn't matter. Volara was tough, and her illness was less advanced than his. The giant electrical alien fish could take care of herself; he needed to worry about himself.

At around three hundred and fifty meters away from the thermal plant, the gloomy fortress of solidified magma came into view again, in all its black-smoker speckled glory.

RRROOOOOAAAAARRRRRR!

Varien forcibly choked down a scream and pressed his exosuit against a skyscraper of basalt. He froze in place. He listened. He watched.

... rrroooaaarrrrr!
The bellows echoed through the water again. If he listened closely, he thought it sounded like it was coming from behind him. That was good; it meant the pillar of rock was between him and the leviathan.

... oh goodness. His pulse was through the roof. His throat felt like it was clogged, and his legs were cold. *Come on, I'm not here,* he thought forcefully. *I'm not here, I'm not here, I'm not here...*

Thankfully, the Sea Dragon Leviathan's roars grew fainter and fainter. Varien let out a breath he didn't know he was holding, only for the breath to turn into an ugly, wet coughing fit. But once it passed he swung out from his shelter and beheld the monolith of stone. He scanned it over, looking for an entrance. But the more he looked, the less he found. Ridges and ripples of the gooey basalt were aplenty, but no cave systems. His heart sunk; what if the mountain hadn't been there when the thermal plant was erected? What if it'd grown around in in the meantime and buried it under millions of tonnes of stone and magma? What if -

A twinkle of green interrupted his thoughts. Varien leaned forward, hope blossoming in his chest. There! Nestled into the side of the lava castle, just barely bright enough to make out, was a glowing precursor lamp, not unlike the ones outside the cache in Volara's home. That had to be it. Varien just needed to make his way over there while avoiding the dragon, the lizards, the warpers, the lava, the leeches...

*Oh stars above. *Forget it, just go! You'll overthink it otherwise.*

Gripping the controls of his exosuit, he charged forward. With panicked breaths he wove between the dangers, fending them off one at a time. There was always the Sea Dragon's distant roars to raise the hairs on his neck. But his grapples all connected, his thrusters were aimed right, and by some small miracle he arrived by the precursor pillar unharmed.

He nearly lost his balance; the ground was uneven and his exosuit wasn't level. Varien took a moment to even it out and examined the area.

It was a tunnel. A pair of alien pillars stood at the sides of a path leading into the magma monolith. He couldn't see deep into it, but a menacing crimson glow wafted up from within. The thermal plant's signal came from inside, so he definitely needed to go in. Varien took a breath to steel his fried nerves and steady his shaking arms. Then he walked inside.

The ground, he noticed immediately, was far more tortured than outside. Great dents in the land filled with molten stone scarred the ground like infected wounds. Even the walls didn't appear all that solid. Varien walked forward and soon found himself on a narrow bridge of stone, twisting and uneven, above a pit of bubbling magma. Pillars of blue crystal stuck from the sulfur-dusted walls like sore thumbs. In addition to that were the white, oblong orbs littered about, always close - but not too close - to a pool of liquid rock.

Were those lava lizard eggs? If so, and the mountain he was in was their nesting ground, he'd better leave them alone.

A distant roar from a Sea Dragon made him jump; even from so far away and with so much stone between him and it, he still could've sworn it was right behind him. Paranoid, Varien glanced back to see if that was the case; it wasn't, thank goodness.

Soon enough the bridge veered off to the left, while also sloping down sharply into a corkscrew. The path twisted around single narrow stream of magma, flowing unnervingly fast, went from the ceiling to the ground-level pool. Geysers of steam and bubbling black smokers lined the walls.
"The volcanic rock in this area can be carbon dated to between eight hundred and three thousand years ago," his PDA informed him. "Suggests relative stability of structure despite volcanic activity. Further information required." A moment later it beeped. "Caution: detecting alien materials and a one gigawatt power mass."

"Alien materials and a gigawatt of power, hmm? Sounds like a thermal plant to me," he muttered, walking on. Teetering with his balance, Varien soon reached the bottom of the corkscrew ramp and arrived at a vertical gash in the walls. Beyond the gash was another chamber, along with...

"There it is!" he shouted, a smile breaking out on his face.

The alien thermal plant was smaller than the other facilities he'd seen so far; hard to believe it was generating an entire gigawatt. Like the disease research facility in the underground river it was cubical and attached to the walls of its titanic chamber with thick cables. Unlike the research facility it seemed to be in pristine condition, hanging proudly above a steaming magma lake. If he squinted, he even thought he could see an entrance on one of the faces. Streams of magma trickled all around it, but not close enough to cause any problems.

Then his smile faded; lava lizards and warpers surrounded it like a halo.

Alright, how to do this? He didn't think just charging through was going to work. He looked around, eyes narrowed. The water was surprisingly clear, but it was also painfully bright and constantly bubbled with steam. Where could he go? Maybe... maybe onto that ledge? And from there... no no no, work backwards. So there was the entrance, could the cables hold him? Probably. But from there...

As he pondered what to do, a lava lizard swam in from one of the many tunnels leading into the magma chamber. This one was riddled with the Carar and engulfed in emerald boils. All at once, every warper in the chamber turned to look at it.

Now's my chance! he thought. Varien released his grapple arm, and smiled when it found its place in the walls to his left. He let his exosuit fly forward until he landed on a narrow ledge of stone. He turned to face the entrance to the thermal plant - a rectangular opening in its side with a force field to keep out the ocean - and thrustered his way in. For a terrifying moment he thought he was going to miss and fall into the liquid rock below, but he smoothly sailed into the building.

The temperature plummeted from fifty to twenty degrees. The eerie green, patterned walls of the precursors surrounded him on all sides, along with their dim lights. There was a ramp to the right, so Varien piloted his P.R.A.W.N. down it.

His eyes immediately went to a glowing pile of ion cubes as tall as his exosuit, quietly crackling against a wall. There was also a force field keeping him out of a room, as well as another room with some kind of structure in it. He was too far away to really tell.

The next thing that grabbed his attention was a clinking, clacking noise. He followed it to a robot on the walls. It sort of looked like the cave crawlers he'd seen, with four legs sprouting off a central body, but it had only sharp corners, and some strange glowing contraption on its main body that, from a distance, looked like a single pair of claws. Three of them scuttled along the walls, moving this way and that like spiders.

Varien walked over and scanned one from a safe distance; he'd feel pretty stupid if he walked right by them, and they turned out to be some sort of cure dispenser robots.

... but no. According to his spectroscope, they were just maintenance robots. Of course it wouldn't
be that easy.

He carefully used his exosuit's drill arm on the giant clump of ion cubes, taking them apart one by one so he could store them in his dive suit's stasis. With that done he headed to the structure's room. Once there he craned his neck back. "Whoa." It was some sort of arch, but rather than a circle it was a diamond with one point on the ground and another on the ceiling. In front of it was a square box protruding from the ground, waiting patiently.

Carefully, Varien had his suit sit on the ground. Once done he climbed out and gently lowered himself to the ground, wincing when both his joints and the blisters around them ached fiercely. He tapped his PDA for a moment and summoned forth a single ion cube.

He wondered... that arch looked an awful lot like...

The square terminal popped up and shot its sides out, revealing a hollow orifice within. Like a magnet the ion cube flew from Varien's outstretched hands and settled inside. The terminal closed back up and disappeared into the ground. Just a moment later the floor hummed, the patterns all along the arch glowed, and -

"Ah!" Varien shouted, shielding his eyes. All of a sudden the arch burst into emerald light, rolling and squirming and flowing into a central point with the sound of rushing water. He lowered his hands when his eyes adjusted to the light, blinking to get the red spots out. "Whoa." It looked like he could reach out and touch it. That was precisely what he didn't do; Varien turned back.

Now that he was looking at it from ground level, he noticed there was a ramp heading down. He raised an eyebrow, but headed down, looking uneasily at the precursor robots zapping and pinching at the metals around him.

The ramp took a few twists and turns, giving Varien time to appreciate the walls around him. It'd been... what, four weeks or so since he'd last been in a precursor structure? The grandeur was tainted by misery this time. The black and green spirals seemed lifeless. These wasn't an exciting alien building. It was a tomb, tended to only by the gravediggers.

Varien was dumped into an antechamber, appropriately gigantic for 4546B. Maybe the precursors had been larger than humans; it certainly seemed likely, given the scale of their works. To one side of the antechamber was a single ion cube resting on a pedestal. On the other side was a terminal, linked to the gigantic force field stretching across the longer wall. Varien couldn't see much through it, but there was definitely some activity.

Luckily he'd made several purple and orange precursor tablets before setting off for the lava zone. He fished out a purple one, as the structure demanded, and fed it its key. The field hummed, whirred, and faded from view. Behind it was the source of the motion he'd seen, and it blew him away.

Half a dozen pillars stretched across the cube of a room, sucking emerald lightning in from the ceilings as they pumped and hummed. Electricity crackled in the air and made his every hair stand on end. Even the saltwater-ridden hair on his head poofed out. A catwalk stretched up around the back of the room to an orange hologram, along with a pair of green ones on the ground.

Varien went to work, eagerly scanning and downloading data from everything he could. He always kept a wary eye to the sky, watching the rivers of energy flowing overhead lest they decide he looked like a lightning rod. But the precursor works were safe so he went through unscathed, and in the doorway of the power plant's generator he sat and flipped through his downloads.
The machinery in front of him was, apparently, turning thermal energy into electricity at a staggering ninety percent efficiency. Obviously there was no way for him to turn it off. Most of the energy was kept for the facility itself in the ion cubes, but one of the terminals was a power router interface; fifteen percent of the energy it controlled was wirelessly transmitted to the warpers, thirty-five to the giant gun, and a whole fifty percent to the 'Primary Containment Facility'.

Primary Containment Facility. If there was anywhere they'd have held the Emperor specimen, and come up with a cure, that'd be it. It was apparently located even deeper, in a natural chasm, to the southeast.

There'd been enough data on ion cubes that his PDA pieced together how to make upgrade batteries and power cells, but none of that was useful to him. The fossil data was interesting though; the precursors had drilled through the rock here and analyzed it; there'd been a mass extinction going on. Most of the life back then was different compared to what existed now.

His first thought was that obviously the Carar's release was the cause of the mass extinction. But then again, they'd taken this data before the Sea Dragon disaster. Had 4546B already been suffering a mass extinction and the Carar made it worse? Or maybe the soil analysis was, like so many other things, automatic and had continued after the precursors died, picking up the mass extinction of the Carar.

Well, whatever.

Varien climbed back up from the ramp, having exhausted everything of use down there, and headed for the first force field he'd seen.

It was far smaller than the one down below. If the precursors were so much larger than a human, it might've been the equivalent of a small door for them. He fished out another purple artifact and offered it to the force field as appeasement.

On the other side of the barrier there was only a short hallway. At the end there was nothing but an alien artifact, floating in mid-air. Unlike the others this one was a bright, sky blue with a symbol not unlike a sideways letter H. Varien nervously approached it and scanned the artifact. At the very least, having so much data would allow his fabricators to make them in minutes as opposed to hours.

Not that it matters, a cruel thought whispered. You're never going to see another fabricator in your life if you don't cure yourself.

He shook the thought off. Whatever.

As far as he could tell, this was the last thing of interest in the thermal plant unless he wanted to try stepping into the portal, which he didn't, so off to the Primary Containment Facility it was. He nabbed the blue artifact, stored it, and headed back for his exosuit. It took some effort to climb up its metal hull and then inside, enough for him to pine for lunch.

Damn it, getting inside was so much easier underwater.

Varien roused the suit to stand, but then his head began to hurt. Then it hurt more and more, like a bubble bursting. Something slammed in his ears and colors distorted. The pain vanished, but Varien still sat stock still as a dark form materialized in his vision.

"Come closer," she insisted, her quartet of burning eyes piercing into him. "Come to me!"

The hallucination vanished as quickly as it'd come, leaving him breathless and shaking.
"D-Definitely a symptom of the Carar," he whimpered. When had his voice gotten so hoarse? "I need to get the fuck outta here."

Like liquid lightning had been poured into his veins, Varien sprinted his exosuit out of the thermal plant. The warpers set upon him and he swore, but with all the lava lizards around attacking them, he made a quick getaway no problem. He did have troubles with one lava lizard coming after him instead, but a drill to the face warded it off easily. He landed back in the same tunnel with which he'd gotten inside and retraced his steps.

Soon Varien stood on the outside of the lava castle with a precursor pillar on either side. He glanced at his compass; the facility was to the southeast, right? So -

**RRROOOOAAAARRRRRRR**!

Varien hurriedly ducked back inside the tunnel, looking out fearfully. For a long moment, there was nothing. For another long moment, there was still nothing.

Then, without warning, a dull green tentacle the size of a house passed by the exit. The crimson spots on its underside slid by, like dozens of eyes staring at him. The spaded tip came and went with a flourish that left Varien near catatonic.

"Fucking dragons," he whimpered. Or maybe he didn't, maybe he just thought it. It was hard to tell given how loud his heartbeats were.

More roars sounded through the water. Sometimes they came closer, sometimes they went further away. It was only when Varien, who nibbled his fingernails down to nothing while waiting, decided the dragon was far enough that he jumped his exosuit from the tunnel, thrustered down to the ground, and ran southeast with his stomach in his throat.

*It's right behind me,* he thought. *It's right behind me, it's gonna get me, it's gonna get me...*

But the dragon never did.

While traveling southeast, looking for any cave system that could lead him another two hundred meters down, Varien spotted many unsettling things: a lava lizard tearing a leech in half. A warper bisecting an infected ray. Another lizard swallowing a red eyeye whole. Each display of preternatural strength made his stomach flip, each *chomp* of fangs had his treasonous thoughts picture those teeth closing around him.

Would he even have time to die of Carar down here?

Then, from the gloom, a pit manifested before his very eyes. It was as wide as a city square and half as deep, like someone had scooped a bowl out of the ground. Hesitantly Varien jumped in, feathering his fall until he reached the bottom. Once there he looked around; the center of the pit rose up into a domed shield of magma, cracked with angry red. The distant walls rippled in and out to form a dozen alcoves in the land all around.

Varien turned his exosuit around, looking about worriedly. He half expected some other giant monster to burst from the pit, but there was nothing. No dragons, no warpers or lizards, no leeches and rays, no eyeyes and boomerangs. Nothing at all except the frothing of steam.

Well it was as good a place to start looking as any. First, though, he felt exhaustion tugging at the back of his mind, so he took a break to drink all his remaining coffee. Once done, he began looking around. Varien went to the wall and hugged it, going counterclockwise around the pit while keeping his eyes peeled for anything of use.
... alcove.

... alcove.

... alcove.

... there! Instead of a dent in the walls, it was an opening into another, deeper cave system. That had to be where the Primary Containment Facility was. Though he had to gulp nervously to steady the ice in his stomach; he was already thirteen-fifty meters down. How much deeper did he have to go?

He stepped through the gap and his eyes widened. Apparently he had quite a bit deeper to go.

The scene before him was of a waterfall of magma, pooling to his left and tumbling down to his right to fill a canyon. The ceiling, covered in drooping nodes of half-molten rock, shimmered in the heat. All along the walls were various mineral growths, and the lake into which the magmaball flowed was a small island of tormented basalt, above which rays and lizards flapped and swam. The water was crystal clear too, clearer than anywhere else he'd ever seen, enough to let Varien see not just the falls, or the small river they fed into, but also the opening far to his right that appeared to lead to the dozenth giant cave he'd seen all day.

Cautiously he stepped forward and sunk, carefully using his thrusters and grapple to avoid the liquid rock and only touch solid ground. Varien looked around himself at the magisterial molten landscape, allowed himself a moment of awe, and pressed forward. He jumped down the magmaball, thrustering forward until he landed on the island of basalt.

For a split second before he reached it, terror clenched his throat like a vice. What if it wasn't an island, but a raft? What if landing on it capsized it? He prepared to jump away the instant it started to tip. But it didn't move at all. The way his suit's left foot sunk into the solid stone was worrying though, so he made sure to leap away from the island and grapple onto the firmly solid beach of black stone surrounding the lake. Doing so also brought him close enough to the opening to let him see the cave on the other end.

Awe and joy and terror warred within him.

Awe, because it was a literal ocean of magma, churning and bubbling, turning black as the water cooled it only to sink back below and be replaced by fresh, crimson goo. Dozens of magmaballs poured into it from all angles, and trickles of liquid rock oozed from the ceiling into the middle of the burning ocean. The water right above frothed with steam, but above it the ocean was so clear he might've been standing in air. All around the edges of the searing lake was a beachhead of black basalt, cracked with orange fissures. Unlike the lava zone above, there wasn't a single white mushroom or hardy scrub clinging to life. The entire area was devoid of plantlife; what did these animals eat? Was this place just somewhere they passed through on migrations?

Joy, because through the pristine water he could see what had to be the Primary Containment Facility. It rested on a slab of basalt on the far end of the cavern, a spot of black and green against the tide of red and orange. Unlike the research facility and the thermal plant, it wasn't a cube. It was a proper structure, a flat rectangular prism with an ornate center reaching up and out. Spotlights shone out from it into the sea, and even from where he was he could see a force field keeping out the water. Outside it was a collection of smaller precursor constructions, like cubes standing on spindly cable legs that vanished, unharmed, into the middle of the magma. This was it, this was his goal, so close he could reach out and touch it!

And terror, because alongside the warpers and lizards, there was a single Sea Dragon Leviathan
patrolling the open space above the lava lake, pushing water aside with its massive flippers as it surveyed its domain.

His eyes flickered left and right, looking for a way - any way - past the dragon. But he found nothing. The land was smooth and uncluttered. There was nowhere to hide and sneak past the dragon. An insane part of him debated just charging across, hopping across the precursor platforms, before the dragon could catch him. An even crazier part of him wanted to fight and kill the Sea Dragon, just deal with the problem head on.

Then, as he sat there and tried to come up with a plan, it happened again. The brief headache, the flowing colors, the slam of noise and chirping warbles of a massive creature. The hallucination's face appeared in his vision again, blocking view of the dragon.

"Come inside, and I will help you," she urged. "That is all you need to worry about!" Then she vanished.

Inside? Inside the Primary Containment Facility? Varien scratched his head; maybe this wasn't a hallucination? But if not, then what?

Unfortunately, he didn't get any longer to wonder, because his PDA spoke up urgently. "Emergency! Severe genetic damage detected!"

He looked down at the piece of plastic, mouth agape. "What? What do you mean?!"

"Cellular structure altered. Liver function greatly impaired. Updating calculations..."

His PDA began to hum. Deep, freezing horror, cold enough to freeze the entire lake of magma before him, engulfed his body. Liver function impaired? Liver failure?!

"Estimated time to death: twenty-three hours and seven minutes," it intoned.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Sink or Swim

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Thanks to DevoutRelic for editing.

Chapter published 12/27/17.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ESTIMATED TIME TO DEATH: 23 HOURS, 6 MINUTES

Varien

Weakened immune system. Pneumonia. Painful pus-filled boils. Constant exhaustion. Joint pains. Nausea. And now, on top of everything else, liver failure?!

A day to live. A day to live, and some hours until he was comatose. Or would that happen at all? Varien wasn't a doctor; he knew the liver was absolutely vital because it filtered toxins, but that was it. How did liver failure kill? Would he feel it creeping up on him until he didn't have the strength to carry on? Or would he just walk around and drop dead out of nowhere? The tension, the anxiety, was already mounting on him, like a sword above his neck hanging by a thread.

He gulped, fastened his helmet, and tightened his grip on the exosuit's controls. Bile rose in his throat and a cramp stabbed to the right of his stomach; was he feeling the symptoms already? No, no way. It was all in his head, right? Focus. He had to focus.

Get inside the facility. The voice told him that was all he had to worry about. Hallucinations and insanity aside, it was right. As long as Varien got inside, the lizards and warpers and patrolling dragon didn't matter.

But how was he going to get in?! The dragon never looked away long enough for him to just sneak past. Damn it, several times he swore it looked right at him, its toothy grin seemingly saying, 'Come on, just a little closer, give me an excuse.'

Varien looked around again. There had to be something he'd overlooked, right? Some way to sneak past the Sea Dragon. But he kept looking and looking, and the best he could come up with was skirting around the edges, jumping along the magmawalls, before sneaking past to the facility.

... well, it beat charging past the leviathan. He turned left and stepped forward. Varien dropped down into the lava lakes, his stomach leaping into his throat when he landed on the beach of shattered basalt. The jolt of landing made his heart lurch; for a moment he thought he was collapsing, his failing body dropping like a stringless puppet.

When he overcame that bout of panic, he glanced around and gulped. The scene was so much different from ground level; the magma churned and broiled with an incredibly fine detail of red and orange and black. The creatures swimming above seemed like demonic angels staring down at him. The Sea Dragon Leviathan, even with its back currently to him, seemed thrice the size it'd been from above. His throat clenched in tension, he jumped to the left and grappled to relative
safety on a series of ledges, each spilling their molten rock into the cauldron. Varien's suit began tilting, so he walked around until he found flat, stable land.

He let out a shaky breath. So, he was one third of the way there. It was fine. He just had to do this two more times and -

RRRRROOOOOOAAAAAARRRRRRR!

Varien turned around and just about had a heart attack. He saw something like a star. But the twinkles of light were Sea Dragon tentacles, and the core of the star was a meteor of molten rock hurtling towards him. Screaming like a little girl, he slammed his feet down and his exosuit's thrusters came to life. Varien sailed up fast enough to prevent the meteor from smashing into the glass, but not fast enough to keep it from clipping the suit's legs.

"Oof!" The P.R.A.W.N. tipped forward, sending Varien spilling out of his seat and face first onto the glass dome, giving him an even closer look at the Sea Dragon Leviathan's pearly teeth.

The dragon raised its left flipper, warping Varien's perception of scale as the giant limb's size changed in his sight. Then, with his exosuit falling through the water, the dragon smashed the whale-sized limb into him and swatted Varien like a fly.

"AAAHHHH!" He tumbled head over heels, pressed into one side after another of his suit as it careened through the boiling ocean. Then the motion turned simple but rugged and rough as the exosuit landed face down and skidded along the strip of basalt, carving deep grooves into the soft, heated rock. He frantically got back in the seat and stood the suit up, looking up at the Sea Dragon.

In return, it looked back down at him. It chuffed and made little snorting sounds, like it wanted to roar but didn't have its heart in it. It swam leisurely towards him, but that was still fast enough to make it fill his vision in seconds.

Varien glanced to the right. The plan that flashed through his mind wasn't words, but it mostly amounted to 'duck under the dragon and run for the facility'. But in the time it took him to come up with that plan, the leviathan dipped its head, opened its jaws, and scooped his exosuit into its mouth.

He screamed again as he was brought up and around, staring straight down the dragon's gullet. Its meaty tongue flapped about beneath his suit's legs. The rings of throat muscles contracted over and over, like it was trying to swallow him already. Its person-sized fangs, open just wide enough to hold his exosuit but not wide enough to swallow it, dug into the plasteel.

In a dim corner of his panicked mind, he noticed the dragon had no uvula.

Babbling in mindless terror, Varien's right hand found the suit's controls and his thumb pressed the button hard enough that the flesh turned white. The drill arm spun to life and he reached forward with it, digging into the dragon's cheeks. Unlike when he'd tried attacking its skin, the drill didn't break. Instead off-yellow spurts of blood filled the water and blinded him. The dragon keened in pain and flexed its tongue to push him out of its bloody mouth. Varien's breath came in shallow breaths as its two sulfuric left eyes stared straight at him.

Then its flipper blurred with motion and he was tumbling through the ocean again. He hit something hard and unyielding, flipping his suit up and over. By sheer luck he landed right side up, shaking in his seat, on one of the precursor cubes sticking up from the magma lake. Already the dragon was coming in fast. With a knee-jerk reaction, Varien activated the thrusters and rocketed up into the water. The dragon's jaws snapped, but he managed to pass above it in time. He released
the thrusters as the leviathan's broad, striped back passed beneath him, and he shot his grapple into it.

Unlike the drill, which did absolutely nothing, the grapple hooked into the dragon's back and pulled him down onto it. He landed on the leviathan's thick hide with a grunt, and it grunted back.

"Whoa!" The dragon growled and shifted, swaying and swerving to dislodge him. Thankfully the grapple kept him firmly anchored, and Varien took the opportunity to look to the left. There was the facility, waiting patiently for him. Forget the dragon; he just needed to get in there! He jumped off, aiming to leap across the precursor cubes and reach the entrance... but his grapple pulled him back onto the wildly swimming dragon's back. Varien took his left thumb off the button to retract the grapple.

... he took his left thumb off the button.

... his thumb wasn't moving. His entire left hand had, in fact, locked up.

No, he begged. No, not now!

While Varien tried to get his damaged nerves working again, the dragon twisted, snarled, and flipped upside down fast enough to trap Varien against its underbelly with a paw. He screamed as the webbed limb closed around his suit, blocking the light from outside, and hurled him. The grapple snapped from the Sea Dragon's back with a tiny squirt of alien blood as he sailed through the water. Varien began sinking, straight into the pool of magma. He raised the grapple, aimed at the nearest wall, and let it fly. The anchor flew out and out... and fell short. It retracted to his suit, and he fell into the molten rock.

"AH!" he screamed as the glowing goop rose up around his glass. Already the heat was scalding and he had to draw his feet up from the ground. But then he remembered that that was where the thrusters were, so Varien gritted his teeth and slammed both feet back onto the burning pedals before he could sink any lower.

It hurt like nothing before, and the effort of fighting through the pain to keep rocketing up and out of the molten rock had his every muscle twitching and shivering. But he lashed out with the grapple again and this time it thunked into solid stone. Varien let himself get pulled in -

The world flipped upside down. He yelped as the back of the P.R.A.W.N. shot forward, forcing him to arch his back as the seat shot forward. The world spun in wild circles, but the Sea Dragon was definitely part of it. It must've smacked him in the back. He shot forward and crash-landed where his grapple had anchored. Varien released the grapple and turned around, only to groan; the containment facility was on the other side of the magma lake. He was back where he'd started!

The dragon in front of him opened its mouth as if to laugh at his misfortune. But instead of laughter, pain came out. Instead of a single giant orb of molten rock, it peppered him with a steady spray of dozens of smaller meteors, each the size of his torso. Many of them missed and cratered the basalt around him, but far too many smashed into his exosuit in spite of his attempts to dodge.

Thunk!

Thump!

CRICK!

The glass dome cracked. Massive lightning bolts shot through it, impairing Varien's vision. He froze up in terror; what if the dragon was about to break it? The water shooting in would kill him.
instantly! He needed to get away! Varien turned to the left and shot his grapple forward to pull himself along the beach of sand and away from the dragon. But the dragon hadn't swum over to Varien.

It'd swum over to where Varien was going to be.

The Sea Dragon Leviathan roared and lowered its head to Varien's grapple, slicing the tether in half with a chomp. His eyes grew to the size of saucers as the dragon casually rendered his grapple arm useless.

The sea monster turned its head to look at him, then spat a meteor in his direction. Varien's response was to scream and leap up as fast as the thrusters could let him. The meteor passed below harmlessly, and he took a moment to try to breathe. But it wasn't working; his heart was louder than the dragon's roaring, his arms and legs shook like branches in a hurricane, and when he bent his wrists he couldn't even keep his hands from flapping like a bird.

Roaring in triumph, the Sea Dragon - when did it swim up to him?! - smacked him with the same strength that could shatter precursor structures. Once more he was sent flying, and when he stabilized he was forced to thruster away from the magma and onto a precursor cube.

Even standing on it, though, his suit listed to the left; was the foot there damaged? It had to have been. So -

Something shot at him from the side. In the split second he had to see it, Varien saw a football sized orb of cascading energy smash into his exosuit. Then the entire world was consumed with light. Burning, searing ribbons of light that flowed into a central point in his vision. After a second it vanished, and Varien floated before a warper. He wasn't in his exosuit so the water around him pushed inward like an elephant sitting on his chest; an elephant on fire, at that. With a metallic screech it raised its sickles, angled them towards him, and sliced.

With skill he didn't know he had, he twisted between the arcing claws and did the first thing he could think of. He balled a fist and punched the warper's stomach as hard as he could. Pain blossomed along the fingers on his left hand as he dully thumped the cyborg, but that was still enough to make it teleport away in a blinding display of energy.

Varien swiveled about in the water, desperate to find his suit. In moments he found it, in the Sea Dragon's jaws. A moment later there was a flash of electricity and a falling whine as the monster destroyed the exosuit. The bubble of air within rose up, undulating as the water pressure wrought havoc on it, before scattering into bubbles at the top of the cavern.

The dragon turned towards Varien's exposed, fleshy form, and swam.

Stammering weakly, he frantically summoned his seaglide from his dive suit's storage. It materialized in his hands and, in a heartbeat, he dove straight down. Not even a second later, the Sea Dragon's jaws snapped shut over where he'd just been.

He swerved left to avoid one flipper. He swerved right to avoid the other. He blinked; the pool of magma ahead of him was hideously bright. Varien strained his muscles to pull up and aim himself at the Primary Containment Facility.

Get to the facility, get to the facility, he repeated as a mantra even as the boiling ocean seared his skin through the heat resistant fibers of his suit. Get to the facility get to the facility get to the facility
Above him, the dragon bellowed. It swam forward past him as if trying to block him from the facility, its gargantuan tentacles swaying mere centimeters above his head. It found a gout of magma pouring from the ceiling, opened its mouth, and drank the molten rock like a faucet. Even as his seaglide carried him forward, Varien stared with mouth agape. He again found himself asking *What the hell kind of planet is this?!*

The dragon pulled away from its burning drink, turned its head to face him, and cracked open its jaws. A hailstorm of fireballs shot at Varien. He grunted, and steered his seaglide up. Then down. Up and left and right and backwards, anywhere he had to go to avoid the burning projectiles carving steam-filled paths through the ocean. The assault ended, and he looked up.

There was the entrance to the facility. He could see the force field shimmering as it kept out the water. He was so close!

But then, of course, the leviathan lowered its mighty head towards him and prowled forward like it wanted to headbutt him. He cried out and jerked himself to the right. The armored plate of its forehead vanished to be replaced by its two left eyes. He was so close he could make out the thin pupils gazing back at him. He was so close the water itself jostled with the dragon's movements, pushing him left and right.

Varien rammed his seaglide into one of the eyes.

**RRRRROOOOOOAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRR!**

Halfway through the beast's anguished roar, sharp pain flashed in his ears. Then the world quieted down as his eardrums ruptured. The bottom dropped out from underneath him and the world spun with vertigo. Varien threw up into his suit, aimed downward so the putrid mass stuck to his chest rather than his glass visor. The dragon's sharp movements churned the water and tossed him clear of the monster.

It was like watching the world through soundproof glass. There was the Sea Dragon Leviathan, reeling, one eye slammed shut amidst a spray of its own bodily fluids. And there behind it was the facility.

The thought that flashed through his mind didn't quite say *Now's my chance* but it was close enough. He grabbed the seaglide and sailed forward as fast as he could. Varien ducked beneath the keening, wailing dragon and beelined for the entrance. It was so close, *he was so close!* Thirty meters. Twenty. Ten!

The dragon swerved, and one of its tentacles sliced through the water below him. The ripple of scalding water it released shot up into Varien and lifted him, just as he passed the force field.

Gravity reasserted himself, and his insides crawled up into his head as he fell right into his left foot with a dull thump. A supernova of white pain flashed up his left side; there was no audible snap, but he could feel the grinding of hard organs. His foot was broken.

**Rroooaaaaarrrrrrr!**

Gasping for breaths that never seemed to be enough, Varien spun around on his back and faced outside the exit. His heart hammered; would the Sea Dragon still pursue him? If one had broken the disease research facility it could break this structure too, right?

But even if it could, the dragon didn't seem keen to. It looked towards him, snorted twice through its massive nostrils, and roared again. Then it whined like a kicked dog and swam away. It
vanished to the left, hopefully into some nook where it'd spend a while nursing its lost eye.

He relaxed and leaned back to lay on the ground. At that moment the adrenaline faded, and the full pain came rushing in in all its hideous power. His left foot was broken. His eardrums were burst. Something like a fist kept punching into his abdomen. Every inch of his skin, but especially the boils, tingled with the heat he'd been subjected to. His lungs ached from the water pressure, making every breath a struggle. But he was alive. He'd made it past the Sea Dragon Leviathan. A weak breath turned into a weak laugh. A weak laugh turned into a chuckle. A chuckle almost turned into crazed laughter, but instead it turned into coughs.

Varien rolled over and fished out his PDA. He found his two first aid kits, stripped himself naked, and went to work. He inhaled the nanite sprays, and let them do their work. Soon his ears were better, and some of the pains throughout his body were numbed. He didn't dare hope they'd bought him any more time before his failing liver killed him. While the nanites did their thing, he found the bandages and wrapped them around his broken foot, covering them with paste and then another layer of bandages to form the best cast he could manage. After cleaning off the vomit he put his dive suit back on save for the helmet, stored away his seaglide, and looked around.

Behind him was the force field leading to the lava zone. Ahead of him was a green barrier blocking the way and, next to it, a single podium. He limped towards it, but even then dull pain kept shooting up his foot. Once he was close enough to the terminal it opened, showing it demanded a single blue tablet. Varien closed his eyes.

"Oh stars above, thank goodness I found it," he muttered, fishing out the blue tablet he'd found in the thermal plant. The alien terminal eagerly devoured it, and lowered the force field. Beyond it was a ramp of twisted metal, with rows of pillars forming a road. Varien made his way towards it, and nearly jumped out of his skin when the pillars lit up one by one, illuminating the area with sickly green light. "Whoa," he marveled, looking around.

The ramp led up to a huge antechamber, with a domed ceiling towering dozens of meters above him. In the center of the dome was a structure of metal, like a finger pointing down. He followed it to a pedestal in the center of the room, thrice his height, with dozens of ion cubes quietly crackling atop it. To his left and right were glass cases, each holding what appeared to be a precursor artifact of some kind. Three hallways to the left and three to the right. Behind him, a pair of ramps wrapped around the way he'd come and led to a single doorway along with an emerald hologram. In front of him was a long and squat force field barring the way forward.

First things first. Varien dragged himself forward to the artifacts in their casings, careful not to put weight on his bad foot, and scanned them. There was a surprising variety among them. A compact orb of blue and magenta. A yin and yang made from alien fibers. Even a bloodied sword. Reading through the data he got on them, most weren't that noteworthy. But apparently the compact orb was a solar system destroying doomsday bomb, which was not something he needed to know about.

At least it was broken.

Strangely enough, the artifacts were never the same black and green metal of the precursor walls around him. It made him wonder if the magnificently carved walls around him were the precursor version of spartan, dull government walls.

Wincing with every step, he dragged himself up the ramp to the green hologram and swiped his PDA over it. "Aliens found an indigenous leviathan, produced what they called Enzyme 42. *Inhibits symptoms of the bacterial infection!* This was it. This had to be it! But... a leviathan? This Emperor was a leviathan? How many leviathans did this planet have?! "Specimen captured and contained, went to great lengths to provide for its needs, but health still deteriorated." He read on,
and his eyebrows furrowed. "When quarantine was imposed all warpgates and force fields were sealed. At the time, attempts to develop Enzyme 42 into a vaccine were unsuccessful."

He put his PDA away and looked around, the awful tension, the sensation of an axe over his head, returning. Unsuccessful. Could Varien really have come all this way for nothing?

Varien walked down the ramps, wincing, and headed for the far left gateway. It led to a hallway that twisted up and around, which dead ended in an alien portal. He sighed, but nevertheless fished out one of the ion cubes he'd gotten from the thermal planted and fed it to the receptacle. The arch before him groaned like an old man waking up, hummed, and powered up.

Now that it was online, Varien seriously debated going inside. If the aliens were unsuccessful in making the vaccine was there anything he could do? Or maybe he could just finish it up? Or hey! Maybe that hologram was out of date, and the vaccine was complete, hiding out in the portals somewhere?

His stomach gurgled, and not from hunger. A jolt of pain made him wince; he really hoped there was a vaccine through the portal. Fearlessly - or perhaps just more scared of something else - he strode into the shimmering green portal.

It was cold, and wrapped around him like water. The rushing colors enveloped his world, rippling at the edges of his eyesight as they streamed from a central point in his vision. He couldn't feel any ground beneath his feet. All around him were hissing, quiet whispers.

Then the lights faded and he was spat out. Varien stumbled forward and nearly tripped before catching his balance. Once he righted himself, he looked around.

Gone was the metal of the precursors. Instead he was in a dark and dank cave. No longer was he a kilometer and a half beneath the waves, but only two hundred meters. Pink caps and lichens coated the walls. Marveling at it, Varien walked forward; where was he?

It didn't take long to find out, the path leading from the portal terminated in a force field to keep out the water. He peered out through it, glancing about, and breathed out in shock. He was in the mushroom forest, at the bottom of a narrow crevice. Judging by how dark it was, it was night.

"Teleporters brought in life from various biomes," he recited from the hologram. "Guess that's how." He turned and retraced his steps to the portal. Varien passed through, stumbled once he was back in the facility, and made his way back to the antechamber.

So that was one of the seven open doorways down. He headed to another corner path, only to find that led to a portal as well. In fact, all four of the corner paths did, and he made sure to light up each portal in turn and look through. One led to the bulb zone. Another to the boneshark infested craggy spires. And the last one led to a wall of flowing green that turned out to be a brinefall; he was back in the underground river! With his seaglide, he'd be able to access his Cyclops without much difficulty.

Varien grinned once he returned from the last portal. Sure his exosuit was gone, but things were looking up.

He headed to one of the three remaining paths. This one, rather than leading up to a portal, simply opened up into a rectangular chamber. Varien blinked at the sight; he'd been expecting alien machinery hanging from the ceiling, or containers full of tissue samples. Instead, what he found were eggs, dozens of them, behind glass containers. Rabbit ray eggs, sandshark eggs, stalker eggs, a spiked leathery thing that must've been a Sea Dragon egg, lava lizard eggs, crabsquid eggs, and to
his horror, an ampeel egg.

In addition to the circus of eggs he could recognize, there was a single one he did not recognize, resting in its case next to a dim hologram. The egg was taller than Varien, and looked to be coated in plates of sandy armor. Along one side, however, were sky blue nodes laced together like a zipper. After downloading the data next to him, titled 'Sea Emperor Research Data', he had to conclude that it was an Emperor egg.

"Size categories have been adjust upwards to accommodate this species?" he read off his PDA, raising an eyebrow. That big? Bigger than the Sea Dragon? "Feeds off microorganisms, so like a whale. Produces eggs but infertile, manufactures Enzyme 42 in the stomach and periodically releases it. Its presence in the - " He cut off and read it over to make sure he'd seen that right. "The enzyme's presence in the ecosystem today?! Today, explains how life survived the outbreak. The mechanism by which it is delivered remains to be seen. So somehow, Enzyme 42 is getting into the world above. Emperor was 600 years old at the time of capture, wow." He read the last sentence. "While a healthy emperor specimen may have held some potential as a cure, it is unlikely any specimen survived the quarantine."

Varien thought back to the hallucinations that'd been plaguing him since he returned to the lava zone. "Unlikely to survive, huh? I don't know about that..." He'd heard about some people who went the full yard with brain implants being able to speak to each other telepathically. Could it be this Sea Emperor had evolved that naturally? But then that meant it was intelligent! Just ampeels being intelligent was unlikely enough, but two thinking species on the same planet?

He put it out of his head and left the room. There were still two more places to look at before heading to the force field, and the menacing growls of his gut weren't getting quieter.

On the other side of the room, opposite from the egg repository, was a room filled to bursting with pipes, with glass on the walls showing miniature aquariums. The pipes were nothing to scoff at, either. They were thick, glass things filling up most of the airspace, winding in and around, coiling to a lower floor, rushing with cool water. A hologram confirmed they were pumping oxygen rich water in, and oxygen poor water out.

In and out from where, though?

The strange thing was the peepers riding in the tubes, shooting in and out of wherever they led. Come to think of it, hadn't he and Volara found peepers going in and out of pipes a while ago?

According to his scanner, the ones going in had seeds in their bellies and symptoms of the Carar. Those going out had empty stomachs and their symptoms were relieved. So, wherever they were going, it was making them better. He thought about laser-cutting the high-pressure water pipes open and plunging in to find this relief-source himself, but then he decided that was a stupid idea and moved on.

Varien climbed the ramps to the first hologram he'd downloaded in this facility, feeling something like water sloshed about in his bowels. Past the hologram was a path to the left and right, but they both looped back around to the same place. He walked in and gasped, a hand flying to his mouth.

The chamber was long and dimly lit. There was a large cube of green tinted glass with tools like spider arms hanging from its ceiling. Inside was something dead. He walked up to the side and placed a hand on the side of the glass, looking in.

The dead creature reminded him of a Sea Dragon, with its front half with two arms, and the lower half with propulsion tentacles. But its skin was dark brown, its arms ended in turtle-like paddles
rather than claws, and there were no lines of orange nodes. At most there were teal nodes on the
tips of its tentacles. The head was weird too, with nubs out the sides, mandibles around the front,
and a jagged, flat mouth. Above the mouth were two short antennae with green nodes at the end.
The head was frightfully similar to what he saw in his hallucinations. It was curled over, eyes
closed. It couldn't have been much bigger than Varien himself, and his heart went out to it.

A quick scan confirmed it was a Sea Emperor Leviathan, but a child. The precursors had forcefully
removed it from its egg - glancing around he saw another egg like he'd seen in the egg chamber,
torn and cut apart, in a tank - and died in the process. The aliens had taken samples from its
digestive track.

It wasn't hard to piece together what happened. They precursors found the Sea Emperor could
make Enzyme 42, but it was in poor health and its enzyme quality was poor. So they took an egg,
and tore out the fetus to see if that'd work.

He doubted it had.

A chill ran down his spine and his stomach flipped independently of the Carar's symptoms. Varien
eagerly made his way out of the child's grave, down the ramp, and to the terminal controlling the
force field. It opened up, and demanded a blue arti - what?!

"A blue artifact?!!" he shouted. "I only had one!" His hands came up to his face as the world began
to spin with despair. No no no, he'd only found a single blue artifact and he'd used it to get in. How
was he going to get another? There was no way! If he had a fabricator maybe he could but the
closest fabricator was in his Cyclops and seagliding all the way there and back in the short time he
had left was impossible he was going to die he'd come so close but it hadn't...

His racing thoughts trailed off as an idea came to him. Maybe he couldn't go back through the lava
zone, but what if he used the portal? It'd dump him out in the underground river's ghostly forest, he
could seaglide to his Cyclops, make the blue artifact there, and bring the sub back to the gateway.

Right away he could see a big problem with that plan: river prowlers. In his Cyclops, they
considered him a leviathan and steered clear. But with just the seaglide? They'd ravage him. He
whined tightly in his throat even as he knew he had no choice but to brave the portal and hope he
could evade the prowlers; there wasn't any other way to get a blue tablet, and nothing he'd found so
far was a cure. He was running out of places to look.

Varien retraced his steps to the ghost forest's portal and stepped through. Once on the other side he
walked through the cave, ducking below the roots plunging through the ceiling and sidestepping
the pools of corrosive brine. He reached the water, braced himself, and plunged through with
seaglide in hand.

No wonder he hadn't seen the portal coming down; it was hidden behind a brinefall. Varien
mentally marked the location and sped through, hugging the walls of the chamber. He made sure to
stay up to avoid the blood crawlers down below, but he couldn't help glancing to the left where
packs of river prowlers hunted the open waters. His heart felt like it was going to burst, and every
time one turned in his direction his stomach tried clawing out of his throat. Every subtle current of
water reminded him of the doom hanging over his head. The bitterly cold waters, icy enough to
numb his extremities, didn't help things either.

He heard something else, too. Far off bestial hisses and screams, like the wailing souls of the
damned.

But he was careful enough, and soon he was at the vertical drop unmolested. He plunged down and
from there it was a short trip to the cove tree. From there, a short trip through the chilling sea to the drop leading to the lava zone. The waters around him warmed as he descended the step-like crevice, the heat making his fingers and toes tingle uncomfortably.

And there! In the distance, resting in the gloom, was his Cyclops's dark blue form. Varien's heart soared as he approached, and when he finally opened the bottom hatch and pulled himself into his submarine tears of relief streamed down his cheeks.

"Welcome aboard, Captain," its voice droned. "All systems online."

"Oh I've missed hearing that." He stumbled his way up the ladder to the bridge. After he'd evacuated his shelter onto the Cyclops, Varien had placed the fabricator to the left of the helm, not far from the holographic display of the Cyclops's condition. He found his storage compartments one room back and stole the resources he needed to, along with a single ion cube, make a blue artifact. He fed them to the fabricator and, while its lasers were busy constructing the alien tablet, he grabbed the steering wheel and turned the engine on.

Time to bring the Cyclops back to the portal.

The trip back was eerily quiet. There were nothing but ghost rays to cut through the white noise of his fabricator working. Varien pessimistically wondered how many more detours he'd need to take before he finally found the cure, if there was one at all.

Were there microbes in the precursor facilities? If he died there, would he remain perfectly preserved until the next people to be shot down came and found him?

How far along were Volara's symptoms? Was she breaking out into green cysts yet, or was she still on the flu symptoms?

Before he knew it he was back at the portal, just in time for his fabricator to be done. He nabbed the artifact and limped his way back to the Primary Containment Facility, mindful of his broken leg while irately muttering, "Back and forth, back and forth, it's all I fucking do."

Through the caves, into the portal, down the ramps, and to the terminal. It opened up, selfishly demanding its colored tablet. Varien pulled it out and, rather than wait for the magnets to pull it from his grasp, slammed it onto the terminal and pulled his hands back. The force field vanished. On the other side was a tunnel, leading to a large, empty chamber.

Empty except for, as he found when he entered, a pool of water in the middle.

He looked around. Everything was dim and quiet. There were no terminals or the like. The only way forward was into the pool of water. He had a feeling the Emperor, or its remains, would be there. So he put his helmet back on, checked his air tanks, and plunged into the water. Bubbles rushed around him. Varien turned about in the water to look around.

He was in an aquarium, but instead of glass the walls were precursor metal. They were far away, too, and from the top he'd entered from something like a balcony hung down. Maybe calling it a balcony was too much; it was just a flat square of metal, suspended by wires from all four corners.

Varien let himself sink until his flippers touched the ground. The water was surprisingly warm. Not blistering like in the lava lakes, but gentle and soothing, like a hot bath.

BOOM!

He wheeled around at the massive slam, and a whimper died in his throat.
All doubts that the Sea Emperor Leviathan was alive evaporated.

An enormous paddle arm had reached up and rested against one of the corners of the balcony, tilting it with a screech of metal. As Varien watched, open mouthed, the Emperor's head rose up with four blinking, sky-blue eyes. Its other paddle followed and rested on another corner of the metal, evening it out.

It was big, too. *Disgustingly* big. Bigger than a Reaper. Bigger than a Sea Dragon, by a wide margin. Its arms were the size of a Cyclops. Varien could stand at the bottom of an eye, reach up, and not reach its top. From the side of its head, a pair of gargantuan blades stuck out to the sides, a far cry from the nubs of the dissected fetus. Its mandibles wrapped all the way to the front of its mouth, sharp as razors. It clicked and warbled as it pulled itself up to see him.

The edges of his vision distorted. But this time there was no black figure in his vision, or deafening slam. Then the same motherly voice came to him, echoing inside his head. "Ah, there you are," she said.

His words stuck inside his throat. What could he say? Should he say anything? It felt like any words he could come up with would be some kind of transgression.

The Sea Emperor looked down, and shook her head. "Oh... poor thing, so far along. Come, come down. I will help, as best as I am able." Her arms pulled off and she turned away before diving in slow motion. Varien watched in awe as her head, her armored back, and her long tentacles all slid by, giving him a glimpse of her true size. When the last of the tendrils, tipped with azure nodes, slid away he grabbed his seaglide and made to follow after the Emperor.

"Whoa," he whispered when the full aquarium came into view.

It was enormous. The walls and ceiling were all precursor metal, but the ground was soft sand forming mounds and ravines and, if he looked closely, caves beneath the ground. Two pillars, spotted with green lights, stood up from the center. Fish of all kinds swam around him. Pale bladderfish, chirping peepers, rabbit rays, even things that shouldn't mingle with them like the crabsnake caves' oculus, or the deep-sea spinefish. Stalkers and bonesharks by the dozens swam around, startling him, but they all seemed... placated. Gentle, even.

All manner of plants grew from the ocean floor. There were dockleaves, brain coral, membrains, cradles. In some spots purple and orange lichen coated the ground, as if he were in the dark, grand reef. One of the walls had two recesses into it. On the other side was an inactive portal covered in sand. From it a ramp led down to a strange metal structure grown into the ground. The Sea Emperor swam slow, leisurely laps around the chamber, and he frowned. The aquarium was beyond massive to him, but to her it must've been like being trapped inside a single room.

For a thousand years.

His gut twisted at that thought. It was so wrong for something so majestic to be trapped like this.

"What... is this place?" he wondered dumbly, though he already had a good idea.

"My prison. My home," she responded, circling behind him. "The ones you know as 'precursors' came to this world and brought me here," she explained. "They were scared, they were desperate, and sought only to take and take, rather than risk asking and be turned down." As she made another loop, the Emperor gestured with a paddle to the device at the base of the portal's ramp.

Wordlessly, he obeyed and directed his seaglide there. He eyed the bonesharks and stalkers around
him warily, but they didn't even look at him. It was like they couldn't see him. As he traveled he
noticed a glob of something dull orange, floating about in the middle. Peepers pecked at it one at a
time, sometimes swimming through it to coat themselves before speeding off. The puzzle pieces
connected themselves; the peepers came down here with the seeds, and deposited them to keep the
Emperor alive. In return she gave them Enzyme 42 to carry to the surface and mitigate the Carar.
Did that mean most of the planet was dead, with only a small surviving pocket of life?

When she died, what happened to the survivors?

Varien arrived at the device. From so close, he could see it was an incubator of some kind. Five
Sea Emperor Leviathan eggs had been stuck into the outsides, and a quick scan confirmed there
were tubes running in and out of the eggs. The eggs were still good, resting in a kind of natural
stasis, waiting for the right conditions. Just like the eggs in the cove tree.

"They brought your eggs," he muttered.

THUD! He whirled around to see the Sea Emperor had come to a rest in the middle of the
aquarium, resting her body on the ground with her tentacles extended in all directions. Her paddle
arms pressed onto a pair of stony pillars.

"It is perhaps the cruelest irony of fate I have yet witnessed," she mourned. "Had they left my eggs
where they were, they would have hatched naturally, and the strangers from the sky would have
gotten what they wanted. But they could not have known, and so they brought them here, where
such a thing will not happen." Pained laughter echoed inside his head. "And I, in my foolishness,
could not tell them."

"What? But how? I mean, you're speaking English to me, couldn't you speak their language to
them?"

She shook her mighty head. "I tried. My pod and I all tried, so often, to speak to them. But
whatever the cause was, they could not hear. But that is no excuse, small one. I could have thought
of something!" The Emperor raised an arm and slammed it back into the ground. "I could have
written in the walls, or blinked prime numbers with my eyes. But not one of these things occurred
to me, and they paid the price." She looked up at the ceiling. "They were counting on me. They
came to me, trusted me to be their salvation! They bent over backwards to design this place for my
needs. And in their time of need..." She lowered her head and closed her eyes. "I failed them. I
failed this world." She opened her eyes and extended her head at him. "I failed you." The Sea
Emperor looked around the chambers, then grumbled a low, sad chirp. "I deserve this."

He opened his mouth automatically. "Don't say -

" - it is true!" she snapped. "So many people are dead, so many worlds wiped clean, never again to
experience the cycles of play and rest, and I could have saved them but I did not. But perhaps... you
and my children can still save what is left."

"The eggs," he said. "The data says that a young, healthy Sea Emperor's enzymes would work,
right? But how do I hatch them?"

A sigh of water exhaled from her mouth, and she lifted a paddle to gesture at the incubator. "Closer
to it, small one."

He obeyed, and jumped when an ion cube receptacle popped open. "Ah! Okay, ion cube." He still
had some, but he was running low. Hopefully he wouldn't need many more. His left hand had gone
numb again, so he painstakingly used his right to pull a cube from his suit and drop it into the
incubator. It ate the cube, hummed, and activated.

A podium in its center, which he hadn't noticed before, lit up and displayed a hologram into the water. There were charts and alien words he could never understand, but in the center was the unmistakable form of a Sea Emperor egg. Next to the podium was a short slot.

"The harmonies of this place are not right for them," the Sea Emperor continued. "When they would not hatch, they took my child and tore him free. He gave his life for their noble cause, to show them what must be done. They searched and searched for what was needed, but could not do so before disaster struck. I give to you freely, friend, what they so badly wanted to know."

Her antennae waved about, and a gentle hum filled the water. Then... "New blueprint acquired!" his PDA announced. He looked at it and tapped through it; it had a new blueprint for 'hatching enzymes'.

"One more thing." She lifted off and swam a short distance, resting next to the portal's ramp with one arm higher than the other. Varien twisted round to look up at her; the Sea Emperor's neck was more pronounced from this angle and it made her seem sickly. "What I produce is useless to you, with as far along as you are, but what my children make will save you. It is not enough for you to simply leave them to this prison; they must swim free of this place, and cleanse the world beyond, lest you be doomed again every time you left here. I implored the strangers to give my children this freedom, but fell on deaf ears."

She roared and startled him. The Emperor raised her head and opened her cavernous mouth, sucking in water. Half a breath later she lowered her head to the sand covering the portal and breathed out a jet of water, bubbling white, to clear away the sediment. She brought a massive tendril over and brushed off the remains, revealing the silent power receptacle for the portal.

Wordlessly he nodded and seaglided over there. He powered the arch, lighting it up with shimmering emerald ripples. He glanced up at the Emperor, then his heart fell.

Judging by what he'd seen in the dissection room, the portal was large enough for a baby Emperor. But no way was it large enough for her.

If she noticed this, or cared, she gave no clue. Instead she swam away and back to her resting place in the middle of the room, looking at her eggs solemnly. "I have given all I can," she explained. "The plants you need to find can be found, one of each, in the portals you opened above. The one exception is the clear sack. They are rare these days, but some yet survive here." She unfurled a tentacle and he followed it to where it was pointing. "Hurry, small one. You do not have very long."

He nodded and looked up at her. "Thank you," he whispered. "I'll do my best." Her only response was to keep looking at the eggs, so Varien grabbed his seaglide and sped off to where she'd gestured.

Get the hatching liquid, hatch the Emperor eggs. The Emperor babies would cure him. After so long, there was finally a light at the end of the tunnel.

He found a precursor cable running into a ravine in the ground, so he followed it there and found a few plants clustered around a cave entrance. The gabe's feather plants common in Volara's home, a few corals and barnacles, and a new plant he'd never seen before. It looked like a jellyfish that had taken root. His PDA labeled it a Sea Crown, and it was one of the things he needed for the hatching liquid. He didn't know how much he needed, so he sliced the entire thing free and stored it in his suit. Better he have excess than not enough.
There were four more plants he needed. A sample from the mushroom forest's fungi, the spherical bulb bushes, one of those freaky glowing eye stalks, and lastly, a ghost weed like the kind that often grew around bloodvines. The Sea Emperor had said he could find one of each through the four portals up above.

So... mushroom forest, bulb zone, crag field, and then the underground river where his Cyclops was waiting with its fabricator. He could manage that, in that order.

He surfaced from the aquarium and, after some floundering with the metal walls, pulled himself up and out. Every step felt like there was a lead weight attached, to say nothing of the joint pain, but Varien trudged back from where he'd come and, like a torpedo, sought out the first portal.

On the other end he groaned, and doubled over, clutching his stomach in pain. His breaths came through clenched teeth and, when the sudden bout of pain ended and he could stand, he could've sworn his stomach seemed a little... bloated. And were those bruises spreading along his arms? They looked like spider webs.

The sample from the mushroom forests was easy. Varien seaglided up out of the portal's ravine, found one of the literal thousands of mushrooms, and sliced off a head-sized chunk for his suit. Just as quick he retreated back into the deep; bonesharks lived there, after all.

He reappeared in the Primary Containment Facility and shivered. He swore, he could feel the Emperor's telepathic eyes on him. Varien made for the next portal, the one for the bulb zone, and stepped through. Once on the other end he trudged as quickly as he could through the dry path, and froze at the barrier keeping out the water.

It was still night out there. But even with the darkness he could see the glowing bulb bushes resting on the ground. Tiny herbivores pecked at them. But the real problem was the crackling of electric lights all around; ampeels.

Ampeels that spoke a different language than Volara, so he couldn't talk to them.

He breathed out weakly. Ampeels could kill Reaper Leviathans and he could barely walk. How in the world was he going to get out, get a bulb sample, and get back in without one of them deciding he looked tasty?

Varien didn't dare sit, lest he not have the strength to stand again. So, he brought his PDA out where he was and examined what was in his suit. Ion cube, no. Laser cutter, no. Stasis rifle! Maybe? It had slowed Ohmaron down some, it could buy him time. And time was all he needed. He tabbed the glass of his data assistant, and the stasis rifle materialized in his arms.

He spent a few tense minutes coming up with how he wanted to do this, all while he felt the sword over his head coming closer. Shooting at the ampeels was no good since they could dodge. He could shoot himself though, and the IFF would keep him from being frozen.

So, leapfrog. Place a stasis field on himself, move to its edge, and place a new one on himself. Perfect. He edged himself right to the edge of the water barrier, aimed the stasis rifle at his chest, and held down the trigger. The prongs on its end spun and glowed blue, collecting motes of light before the trigger released on its own and he fired point black into himself. A humming sphere erupted from the point of impact, blossoming until it was nearly as wide across as an ampeel was long. Varien walked out into the waters, gingerly approached the edge of the stasis bubble - don't focus on the ampeels don't focus on them looking at you don't focus on the ampeels - and fired another bubble at himself. He swam to its edge as well, inching closer and closer to the nearest bulb bush he could see.
Move, charge, fire. Move, charge, fire. Move, charge, fire. That was enough to bring him, panting in exhaustion, to the bulb bush. With the latest freezing field around him he lashed out with his thermoblade, tearing chunks of the bulb bush off like moss and storing it. He made his way back, ampeels swimming about outside his field, crackling wildly in what was no doubt confusion. Move, charge, fire. Move, charge fire.

Move, charge - no, it just clicked. The battery had run out!

Varien gasped and, barely thinking, swapped the rifle for his seaglide and booked it. He burst out of the stasis bubble, and a pair of ampeels jerked in surprise. The zapping prongs were so loud, and the air so charged with energy it made his skin prickle. Any second he feared their jaws would close on his outstretched legs, but it never came and he landed back inside the dry tunnel unharmed. Varien took a minute - he could afford himself only that much - and headed back to the precursor facility.

Sea crown, done. Mushrooms, done. Bulb bush, done. All that was left was the eye stalk and the ghost weed.

The next portal he entered brought him to the crag field. He'd never ventured there, only ever seen it from a distance and balked at the number of bone sharks. But when he trudged through the tunnel and up to the barrier keeping the oceans from intruding, he didn't see a single one outside. With his flashlight he peered through the brackish waters, looking for an eye stalk, but could see nothing. He'd just have to explore.

But first, he swapped out the seaglide's waning battery for the laser cutter's fresh, unused one. He did not want to risk the seaglide running out of power like the stasis rifle had. In fact, he also swapped the rifle's dead battery for his repair tool's live one. Then there was nothing left to stall and he plunged out, instantly fearing that bonesharks had hidden in the darkness, waiting to snap him up. But nothing came.

Nervously, he flipped on the seaglide's blue light to illuminate his surroundings. He hated the very idea of giving off any light to draw things to him, but he hated the idea of running into rocks even more. He scanned the area around the portal in a spiral, starting close to its home spire and slowly drifting out. The crags stuck out from the ground like the fingers of a buried giant, concealing nodes of quartz and hardy tigerplants between them. A pod of reefbacks, bellowed far above, shining their bioluminescent undersides down at him. Varien searched diligently, but he found nothing but metal scrap from the Aurora and assorted mineral wealth. All the credits they could buy him were worthless; all he cared about was finding an eye stalk.

... there! A glimmer of yellow out of the corner of his vision. He turned the seaglide around hard enough to nearly whiplash himself, bringing the yellow glimmer into view. Sure enough, it was a cluster of eye stalks growing from the rocky terrain. He half expected to see - or at least hear - a pack of bonesharks guarding them. But he saw and heard nothing. Just the moaning of reefbacks.

Varien made his way over to the eye stalks and hummed. They were an odd plant, to be sure. They grew up like an antler, and the tips all had oddly colored nodes that resembled eyes. He saw-bladed one in half with his knife and stuck it into his storage. He turned around, ready to go back to the portal, when something caught his eye. Something bright blue and -

Colors swam into the corners of his vision and his thoughts filled with cotton.

"It is your highest priority to swim closer to that beautiful creature," his PDA insisted, its feminine voice seductive and warped.
"It is my highest priority to swim closer to that beautiful creature," he thought dumbly. What was it called? He felt like he'd seen one before...

"Swim closer now."

*I will swim closer now.* He did just that.

"It's so pretty."

*It's so pretty.* But then why was looking at its beautiful, shimmering wings calling up the memory of pain and blood?

No, that was nonsense. It was so pretty. It was safe.

"Do not resist."

*I will not resist,* he thought, his thoughts a touch faster than before. What was this creature before? He'd definitely... definitely seen one. It was close enough that he could make out the mesmer's closed shell and -

The thought shot through his hazy thoughts like a lightning bolt, accompanied by chilling panic.

*MESMER!*

His first thought was to wrench his eyes closed, but it was like helium balloons had been tied to his eyelids. His arms and legs stuttered in the water, halting his forward motion. The fear was already melting away into the shimmering, world-engulfing colors that streamed from its wings.

"It is friendly and will not hurt."

*It is friendly and will not... no, it will!* he struggled to think, swimming in place. He had to... had to get away. Had to... the cure. Volara. The Emperor. Carar.

"Go closer..."

With a herculean effort, Varien wrenched his head to the side until the mesmer was in peripherals. The cotton filling up his head drained, making it easier to look further away until the horrible, hideous creature was entirely out of sight. He slammed his eyes shut and aimed his seaglide straight up. Varien swam up and up with it until he was certain he was safe. Only then did he open his eyes and retrace his steps to the portal.

Soon, he found himself back in the facility, moving leaden limbs to the fourth and final portal. Every step was a struggle, every movement threatened to upturn his mantra of 'Move Varien, move!' Every step felt like that was it, that was the end of his willpower, that he'd dug as deep as he could but there was nothing more. And yet somehow there was always more, and he kept moving forward like in a dream until he was at the portal, in the tunnel, and outside in the underground river.

Thank goodness, the ghost weed was easy to find. One grew right below his Cyclops's resting place. It was a pale frond rising into the water, surrounded by spiraling green and red ones. He got a sample from each part, and boarded his Cyclops. Varien hauled himself, screaming, up the ladder and over to his fabricator. He fed it glass, and every one of his samples. He found a seat and sat, watching the blue lights going to work with agonizing sloth; couldn't they work any faster?! This was serious!
The glass base formed. The glass tube formed. The white, sludgy liquid inside formed. The stopper formed. It was done!

As quick as he could manage he sprung from his seat, tossed the hatching enzymes into his dive suit, all but tumbled down the Cyclops's ladder, and stumbled back into the portal. Green lights engulfed him as he was transported into the facility.

The energy around him faded and the portal spat him out on his hands and knees. They wobbled, and Varien collapsed, swollen stomach pressing against the ground.

No, no no no, his thoughts slurred, like he was drunk. I'm so close!

Painfully, he crawled over to the nearest wall and pushed his back against it. Caked in sweat, he pushed himself up until he could stand again, but even then he had to keep a hand on the wall as he made his way back to the aquarium. The pool of water was beauty to behold, and he gratefully plunged in headfirst to let the water take the weight off his limbs. He sunk straight to the balcony's floor, groaning.

His vision shimmered, and the Emperor's voice returned. "Small one, you are hurt! Stay still. I will ask one of the locals to aid you."

The locals? What did she mean by that?

He didn't need to wonder long; a stalker swam up to him. Varien stammered weakly as it approached, but instead of snapping its jaws and killing him, it gently wrapped its front flippers around him as best it could and swam off with him, down to where the Sea Emperor was waiting, and deposited him next to the incubator.

The stalker let go and swam off. He rolled over onto his stomach, summoned the enzymes, and held them into the water for her to see. "Got it!" he wheezed.

She nodded, but said nothing.

He half swam, half crawled along the incubator to its control panel, where a groove in the floor had slid aside for the enzymes. He uncorked the bottle, and dumped the sludgy milk inside.

A beat passed.

... crack!

Varien glanced up at the source of the noise. Both he and the Sea Emperor stared at one of the eggs as its zipper-like blue nodes came undone, and tiny little paddle arms came out. A babyish head came next, just like the dissected fetus he'd seen up above. It chirped and clicked and warbled, tearing itself free and dancing in the water.

... crack!

... crack!

... crack!

... crack!

One by one, all the Sea Emperor eggs hatched. One had trouble, but they too pulled themselves
out. Varien watched, hysterical laughs escaping him now and then, as the fries played about in the water. Once or twice they burped, releasing something orange into the water. One by one they headed over to their mother, nuzzling and rubbing her and playing along her comparatively giant horns and hanging from her mandibles.

For his part, Varien seaglided to the sticky stuff they burped. One orb hovered before him, slightly larger than his hand. The globule hung in the water, its insides squirming about. That was it. This was Enzyme 42. He took a deep breath and removed both his helmet and oxygen mask. Then Varien plunged his face into the enzyme ball and drank.

It had the gut-wrenching flavor and chunky texture of vomit, but he chugged it like cocoa. He drank and drank until his lungs demanded air and he pulled back, affixing his helmet back on. Already he could feel the enzyme settling in his stomach and soaking up into his blood, cold and icy like mint. Something in his body tingled and he grunted, pulling his limbs in as an antiseptic burn started in his core and spread to every inch of his body. He squeezed his eyes and clenched his teeth as the cleansing fire swept through his tissues, before subsiding and leaving behind it a refreshing cleanliness.

He tore his left glove off; the pustules still remained. But he didn't despair yet, and instead brought his scanner to bear and showered himself in light.

The spectroscope's menu lit up a pure green 'Normal', and his PDA elaborated. "Performing self scan. All bacterium matching Carar exhibit zero life signs and will be swept up by immune system without issue. Detecting rapid tissue damage reversal. White blood cell count increasing. Estimated time to full recovery: twenty-three days and fourteen hours."

Varien gasped, looking at the heavenly 'Normal'. He alternated between crying laughs and laughing sobs. His heart sung. His thoughts lifted. The sun shone for him again. Tears blurred his vision as he put the glove back on. He was cured. *He was cured!* He looked up at where the Sea Emperor was still playing with her children. One of the baby emperors looked his way, squawked, and swam towards him. The others followed suit and surrounded him, nuzzling him and playfully batting him with their paddle arms and tickling him with their antennae. Varien laughed, rubbing their heads to which they responded by nuzzling into his palms. He cried, overwhelmed with feeling as the baby emperors played around him. He could easily believe they were thanking him for hatching them.

One by one they broke away, heading for the portal and burping more enzymes along the way. Varien made sure to store as many as he could in his suit; he needed to get them to Volara, after all. After putting enough away he turned around to look at the Sea Emperor and opened his mouth, ready to thank her. But then her right arm trembled, and collapsed. She bent over with a quiet roar, head hanging, like a disgraced mother.

"At last," she rumbled into his thoughts. "My young are free, and will play in the shallows above. Thank you, friend Varien," she said, using his name for the first time. "As for me, I have lived so long. I have allowed so much pain. It is fitting that this be my end..."

"W-Wait, what?" he stammered, swimming higher. "What do you mean? There has to be a way. What if you just touch the portal a little? Or - "

She shook her head, but so slowly he had to wonder if even that was a struggle. "This is how it must be, how it should be. I have held on so long, holding out hope you would come. I can let go, now. Do not worry about me; we will meet again, friend Varien. Perhaps I will be an ocean current, caressing you on a clear day. Or a grub, scuttling between grains of sand." His throat
tightly, and his words died before they even reached his tongue. He couldn't tell her. How could
he tell this ancient, wonderful being that she was wrong, that she was going to be destroyed
forever?

He swam closer to her head, where her two left eyes could see him. "No... it's not right! It wasn't
your fault, it wasn't! You should go back up with them, or at least not die here!"

"This is where I doomed them all," she mourned. "Where my lack of inspiration destroyed my pod
and friends. Go, Varien. Be with the people who care for you."

Varien narrowed his eyes and swallowed. "No, no it's not right." He made up his mind and swam
closer; Volara still had a long time left. "I'm staying here," he insisted. "At least until the end. You
shouldn't die alone," he promised, swimming closer and rubbing his hands over the flexible armor
beneath one of her eyes. "I'll tell everyone. I'll tell everyone in space of how much you helped me,
of how you saved me. You saved everyone! Your name, and... and..." he trailed off.

The Sea Emperor's telepathy was quieter, was pained. The eye before him blinked slowly. "Hah...
such a kind heart... if you truly must then tell them. Kr-ttr-vx... is what my friends called me...
please... do not lie and make me out to be better than I was..."

She didn't say more, instead staying up in the water, struggling to pass enough water over her gills.
Varien stared into her massive eye, inside which the tiny white pupil stared back. Slowly, the
Emperor's other arm went limp too, and he followed her as she collapsed to the ocean floor,
tentacles still. She continued to take weak breaths of water, her other three eyes slamming shut.
Slowly but surely, the last one's eyelid closed, but Varien stayed, whispering promises to her that
it'd be okay, that he'd be here until the end. That he'd be the last thing she saw.

The eye shut, and a minute later she stopped taking breaths. Varien didn't leave, and kept stroking
her armor. Brain death took a while to set in. He wondered if she was still inside, a prisoner within
her body. He resolved to stay with her even then, patting her and whispering kindnesses, that he
wouldn't lie, that whatever she thought the truth was that she was a hero. Three minutes passed. Six
minutes passed. He waited ten more to be sure that she was gone. Only then did he kick off and
swim a fair distance away.

The stalkers and bonesharks had retreated to the far ends of the aquarium. Schools of fish still
swarmed. Kr-ttr-vx's body was an ugly scar on the land. With a gulp, Varien turned away from it
and looked up.

And swam for his home.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Subnautica. Unknown Worlds does.

Thanks to DevoutRelic for editing.

Chapter published 1/16/18.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Varien

The moment he entered the Cyclops, his stomach lurched. He spun around, tossed his helmet into a corner, opened the submarine's hatch, and vomited straight into the ocean. After retching up the hideous liquids his gut had bloated with not hours before, he frantically washed the taste out with a bottle of water.

"Ugh," he groaned, closing the hatch once he was done. "Awful."

One of the boils on his hands itched, so Varien huffed and stripped out of both his dive suit and clothes. He pulled out his thermoblade - with the heat turned firmly off - and brought the sharp tip to the skin over one of his glowing boils. He winced and poked it, slowly emptying the cyst of pus and Carar as best he could. He repeated the process for the rest of his body, until every blister was drained. Varien wiped up with a strip of fiber mesh, put his clothes and suit back on, and climbed the ladder to the Cyclops's bridge.

He swung his arms back and forth, grunting. Varien felt better than he could remember feeling in a while. He felt clean, liberated, free. Exhaustion still tugged at his limbs, but nowhere near as bad as it had before being cured. He swore he could feel the tiredness flowing out from him. Even his bruises were gone.

"Foot's still broken though," he said aloud, wiggling his toes and immediately regretting it when pain stabbed into his sole. "Whatever." A part of him badly wanted to go to bed, get the sleep he deserved, but he couldn't yet. He still had to leave the underground river, find Volara, and give her the enzyme stored in his dive suit.

... which now that he thought about it, might be a bit tricky. His ampeel translator'd been in his P.R.A.W.N., which was now a dragon's chew toy. At least he could rely on her not to attack on sight.

Varien hobbled over to the steering wheel, a smile on his face. It still hadn't sunk in yet. He was cured. He was cured! After four weeks of worry and stress and terror, he was safe. No more nights spent awake coughing. No more uneasy silence filled with the sensation of his insides rotting. It was finally behind him.

The smile melted off his face as he thought back to the Sea Emperor, and he shuddered at the memory of her dying before him. She'd stopped breathing, or passing water over her gills. Whatever the case, did that mean she suffocated, a prisoner in her own body? The mere thought
sent chills down his spine. He couldn't even imagine...

"Stop it," he told himself, slapping himself gently across the face. "Just get out of the river." He grabbed the wheel, turned the sub's engine on, and began steering.

But partway through turning the wheel, he saw something in the distance. Something big, hissing and wailing into the water, so he narrowed his eyes to get a better look.

His initial impression was a hammerhead shark that glowed blue, but the mouth was a vertical slit in its mouth that opened in a hideous sideways manner, and it had six glowing yellow eyes clustered above it. There were no fins or flippers, but rather a whiplike body extending behind the hammerhead, coiling around the ghostly trees. Looking closely, he noticed that its flesh was actually transparent, and inside it was a darker core of black flesh speckled with orange dots.

Orange dots, not unlike the ones on the cove tree.

"Oh fu -"

"New creature discovered!" his PDA interjected as the Reaper-sized monstrosity screamed and chased after a river prowler, mouth wide open. "Labeling... Ghost Leviathan. Juvenile."

**Juvenile?!**

"Okay, okay," he whispered, his legs weak. "Guess there really are soul conglomerates, sort of. It's fine." He gripped the wheel and turned it, hoping to slip by the Ghost Leviathan while it was distracted with massacring prowlers. "I'll just slip by and be out of here in no time." He set his Cyclops to as slow as possible. Make no noise, he had to make no noise. He even activated the dampeners to quiet the engines further. Just sneak past to the entrance.

Varien was not going to die here. Not after all that.

Inch by painful inch he slinked away. He set Cyclops's glass dome to display the rear camera's feed, through which he kept a close eye on the Ghost Leviathan as it patrolled the ghostly forest. Inch by painful inch it grew further, quieter, until finally - finally! - it vanished behind a pillar of stone.

He shuddered and breathed out weakly, turning off the camera feed. Varien turned the dampeners off and looked ahead. There was the way out, he could even see stalks of bloodvine up ahead.

He was almost home free.

---

Volara

This was the fourth day he was gone.

Volara couldn't focus on anything. She'd try to hunt, only for her racing thoughts to lead her astray. She'd try to rest, only to toss and turn on her bedding ceaselessly. The awful lethargy of the Green Weakness, or the nausea that made the world sway, was barely even material to her. All Volara did, day in and day out, was worry about Varien. How horribly close to death he was, how scared and hurt he must've been in the volcanic land far below.

What had she been thinking, letting him go on his own? She understood his reasoning; his metal protected him from the heat, but she had nothing. But still! She was his friend. She should've gone. She should've tried harder to push through the heat. Or to fight the dragon earlier so they wouldn't
Day in and day out, her imagination tormented her with the various ways Varien could've been dead. His suit crumpling around him, the metal digging into his flesh as the pressure crushed it. Or buried under a rockslide, his bones tearing his skin open. Or simply laying in his Cyclops, gasping for not-water as the illness sapped the life from him. The worry rotted at her stomach, it clenched her swim bladder. It was all she could think about. Herzaron stopped by to try and help her, but her thoughts kept straying from the other shocker and back down below.

She should've gone to follow him. But she hadn't, and now her dear Varien, struck down from the stars, was alone and surrounded by creatures that even shockers could not kill.

Volara swam about in the open waters, staring down the gullet of the Underworld's tunnel. She lashed her tail fin with each sway of her body, struggling with her indecision. Sometimes she stopped to rub her itchy carapace against a rock. The stiffness of her eggs in her lower body didn't help matters.

Where was he? How long could it take? One day down, one day up. Not even that much. He'd been there for well over two days. What was taking so long?! The obvious answer was that he was never coming up ever again, the mere thought of which made her guts flip and her prongs quiet. She kept staring, hoping and praying otherwise.

But nothing in the Underworld moved.

What if he'd succeeded? What if he'd found the cure, but ran into trouble on the way back? What if he was trapped in the Underworld, surrounded by lethal spirits? It couldn't hurt just to check. S-She could survive the Underworld, right? Even if she had the Green Weakness, Volara wasn't that far along. Her shell hadn't even erupted into green sores yet.

Volara continued to debate with herself, as she had so many times in the past few days, lighting up the water with impatient arcs of power. Finally she made her choice. Right. She'd just go in, do a quick patrol of the Underworld, and head back to her territory if she didn't find him. Easy. Volara rippled her body and headed forward, the stone throat of the Underworld passing around her.

... wait. There! Something moving in the distance. Something big and bright.

Her jaw opened and her hearts pounded. Was it him? Did he find it? Was he alright? She put on a burst of speed to shoot forward and see better. The shape grew larger and larger, resolving itself into the Cyclops metal shell, beaming its 'head-lights' out into the water. And there, standing behind its clear dome, was her puny human.

"Varien!" she shouted, her electricity redoubling in strength. She tore through the water fast enough to leave a trail of bubbles, then spiraled upwards to keep from smashing into the clear dome. "You're alive!" she beamed, looking down at him. He looked much better than she remembered, too. Varien stood straighter, his grip on the wheel wasn't as limp, and even the boils across his body were replaced by limp flaps of skin. "I'm guessing you found the cure?" she asked.

The human looked around, then frowned and put a hand over his mouth.

"You... can't speak?"

He shook his head left and right - that meant no, if she recalled - and gestured to the spot next to him, where his translator -

Oh.
No translator. He must've lost it in the dangers he faced. She thought about it, narrowing her eyes. "Well, it's fine. You can still understand me, right?" she zapped, swaying her lower body.

He nodded up and down.

"Then I'll just have to ask you yes and no questions," she concluded. "It's fine. And you can make a second one, right?"

He beamed, the skin on his face stretching into a smile as he nodded. Then he sang something - oh it'd been too long since she'd heard his melodies! - and climbed down the stairs of his ship.

Volara already knew what he was planning, so she swam down to the hatch on the Cyclops's underbelly and waited. When Varien emerged, helmet on, she charged into him. He yelped and protested as she nudged her snout into him, singing in bursts but she didn't care; he was here, he was alive! Unfortunately he was tiny so she couldn't coil her body around him, but nuzzling into his chest was the next best thing, even if she had to not speak. Eventually, he relaxed and wrapped his arms around her as best he could, hugging her back.

After getting that out of her system, she let go and swam away, curling her tail beneath her and contorting into an arch. "So you found the cure. Do you have it?"

Varien nodded again, then brought out his Pee-Dee-Aye and tapped the clear surface. Something burst from his dive suit and floated quietly in the water. It was... what was it? It looked like that rotten bone fish she'd thrown up as a hatchling. Orange and spherical, but unlike the fish it glistened inside. The orb was about the size of Varien's chest, shifting and squirming in the gentle currents. Was that it? How could a ball of gunk destroy the Green Weakness of all things?

She eyed her human, and decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. "So do I just... eat it?"

A nod, and Varien swam further away. He gestured to her, so she opened her jaws and chomped down on the cure ball. It tasted awful, but she dutifully swallowed. Strangely, it felt cool when it rested in her belly.

One moment.

Two moments.

Then the coolness turned freezing and hot, spreading out through her body. Volara yelped and straightened out as the chill washed through her in wave after wave, scouring away the awful twisting in her flesh. Then the cold was replaced by warmth, leaving her feeling raw. She turned back to Varien, mouth still open. "Is... is that it?" she asked, scarcely willing to believe it.

Varien nodded, already heading back for his Cyclops. She waited for him to board it and come up by the wheel, by which time she was already there waiting for him. "So I guess you'll want to head back and make another translator?" she asked, getting a nod in reply. "I'll follow you! It's the least I can do, since..." Since he came back and saved her from the most terrible curse ever to seep into the water.

Without wasting any more time, they made their way up to his territory. They swam past shrieking green-blasters scuttling along the ground and idle summoners that weren't trying to kill them anymore. They entered the mushroom forest, where Volara stunned a boneshark and tore chunks of its white flesh off for a late meal. They rose further still, and waited in the grass plains to let Volara get used to the pressure. The water grew brighter and warmer, the prey more colorful, until they
were pressed up against the surface in the shallows where Varien made his home.

Throughout the journey Volara kept stealing glances at Varien and letting happy arcs play along her body. He was here! He was okay! She was okay! He'd gone and done the impossible, he'd saved her from the Green Weakness! The future was bright, it was glorious, all thanks to him. Though she had to wonder how he found the cure. How did he survive the dragon? She had so many questions!

His metallic territory came into view, a beautiful patch of dark metal against the wickedly bright Above. Glancing in through the window, however, revealed it was far more sparse than she remembered. What happened to the bed? The thing that shot out light to make things? Maybe he'd taken it all with him on his journey? The only thing she could see was one of those clear tablets, abandoned in the middle of the shelter.

Volara chased away a few of the local prey, clearing the path for Varien to swim inside. She waited patiently as he went about his task while she stared into his shelter to try and glean what was going on. Most of his tools still seemed like magic, but she understood what he was doing. First he was bringing stuff out of his Cyclops, then making it into a fabricator. Now he was putting that black metal inside and turning it into rods... oh! Like the rods his translator used. Was he making a new one?

He made a few more trips, even stopping once to collect slime from a plant and tap the tablet he'd left behind a few times. He created flash-lights and took them apart, stuck orange threads through their guts, and chattered to his Pee-Dee-Aye while Volara waited outside, swaying in the currents as she watched a second translator take shape in his magical fingers.

He sang something, and the lights along his tool lit up. "Testing, testing." Varien tapped the tip of his tool, glancing at her. "Is it working?"

"It is!" she zapped with sharp joy. "Varien you did it! How?! How did you find it, how did you survive the summoners, or the dragon, or..."

He held up his hands and laughed, coming closer and sitting at the base of the window. Oh she missed his laugh, the rising and falling bursts of song. "Whoa whoa, one at a time. So, I found the thermal plant in a tunnel in the mountain. The cure wasn't there, but it told me where the Emperor was held, even deeper..."

She listened intently as Varien recounted the story, of the terrible and frantic trek through the lava zone while fending off grubs and lizards and summoners, hiding from the dragon, of going deeper and nearly getting killed by a different dragon. He continued on to explain the facility he found, how the precursors discovered the Emperor could make a cure, but it was too weak and they needed an Emperor fry.

It was when Varien explained the weird voice in his head, the Emperor's voice, that she shot backward in surprise. "Wait, stop. So she could speak to you in your thoughts? Even when you're far away?"

Varien looked at her oddly. "Um, yes? Why?"

She shot up, nearly breaching the surface. He'd met - ! He didn't even know - ! "Varien, you met a god! I thought - mother told me the Green Weakness destroyed them generations ago!" She stared off into the distance. "You found one, she was still holding on..."

He looked at her funny, but continued. "... uh, right. A god. So anyway, she explained how to hatch
her eggs, and that was a nightmare on its own, but I managed to do it. They hatched and..." He choked up. "She was - oh stars above. She died, Volara." She looked at him sharply to make sure she'd heard correctly. Then her hearts clenched. "She was so old. She's gone now."

A tense silence passed, both of them looking down.

"But her fries are free?" she asked eventually, her gaze lowered to the sifting sand. Varien nodded, and she pondered that. At long last she said, "Varien... I don't know how to explain this. Do you understand what you just did? You destroyed the Green Weakness. You brought the gods back to life!" The words felt odd to even herself. It was like a story her mother would've told her, of heroes who could kill soul conglomerates by themselves. And here was Varien, so small and frail and bad at swimming, and he'd done this. "You actually did it."

"Almost," Varien said, tapping his chin. "There's one more thing... the gun!"

She tilted her head and blinked. "You mean the one that shot down your ship? What about it?"

"I can turn it off," he explained. "There was a button to do it last time, but it didn't let me because I was sick. But now I should be able to."

Volara tilted her head. Nevermind the idea of buttons 'letting' someone do something. "But why do you need to turn it off?" Her upper heart clenched. "Are you going to be leaving soon?"

He blinked. "What? No, no it's not that." He sighed. "Volara, two ships vanished here within two weeks of each other. The Degasi vanished before that. Hundreds of people. That's going to draw attention. If I don't turn that gun off, more people are going to die when they come here trying to find out what happened."

She zapped her prongs, her coiled body relaxing. "Alright, I understand." He wasn't leaving her. Not yet. "Let's go, then?"

He dipped his head. "I'll just get in my seamoth." Varien smiled. "Wow, haven't used it in forever. One sec." He walked backwards into a corridor and out of Volara's sight, but she knew where he was going. She wriggled her body to move from the clear window and over to the rectangular shell that held his seamoth. Not seconds later the round shell - in which she'd met him, so long ago - dropped into the sea with a flurry of bubbles.

"Lead the way," she said, gesturing to him with her head. She'd never actually been to the weapon, so she sure couldn't lead him.

"Will do," he said, steering forward. She followed after him, and the two of them made their way swiftly from the shallows.

The scenery passed around her as they traveled in easy silence. Volara could've easily believed she was in the earlier days, before his rescue had been shot down, before he'd been sick, before he'd learned she murdered his consort. Just him and her, learning about each other, seeing the sights of the Above. They wove through kelp fronds, with Volara blasting away the stalkers. They swam above plains of crimson grass, laughing at the clumsy ambush predators lurking below.

After another tangled forest of hideously green kelp, the ground became sparse and barren, and rose up out of the water. Far to the right she saw more rising and falling hills; they were in the mountains, where she'd fought off a Reaper Leviathan.

"It should be just around the other side," he said, lifting his left hand. She thought she was going to point, but his fingers stayed locked in place, like they were holding a phantom wheel. "Damn it."
"Are you okay?" she asked worriedly.

"Ohmaron's electricity," he explained. "My hand keeps locking up."

She chomped quietly at the waters and looked away in shame. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It's not your fault," he said, lowering his hand. "Whatever happened to him, anyway?"

Volara chuckled lightly. "After Zaparon - that's his consort - found out he tried to kill you, he grounded Ohmaron. He's been sulking about in his cave ever since." Maybe she should go talk to him. Make sure he wasn't beating himself up too bad.

"Good," Varien grunted. "Anyway, it's just over here." He piloted his seamoth forward, Volara easily keeping pace as he went around the mound of stone. If she looked closely, it even looked like it rose up and out of the water. But soon her gaze was drawn away from the surface, and back ahead when something drew into view.

It was made of black and green metal, just like the disease facility in the Underworld. The structures clinging to the mountain were unnaturally cubical, connected to each other by thick cables running in and out of the stone. Schools of 'reginald' prey swam around, pursued by red chompers. Clusters of blocky black metal clung to the mountainside. One of the metal structures, larger than the rest, rose up and out of the surface and into the not-water. Beneath her, another structure glittered with emerald light.

"Here it is," Varien said, leading her to one of the larger boxes. This one was hollow, with a gaping square hole that led inside. She swam in after him, marveling at the lively patterns around her.

Varien surfaced, leading his seamoth to the surface of the water inside before climbing out onto the dry metal. She followed him to the edge of the chamber, where he knelt and looked at her through the water. "I'll be right back," he said.

"I'll go patrol outside," she offered. "See if there's anything to worry about."

He smiled and reached a hand into the water, giving her a quick stroke on the head. "Thanks, I'll be quick!" He pulled back and jogged out of sight.

For her part, Volara did as she said. She swam out of the hollow precursor building and did a quick patrol around. She used the opportunity to get close to the surface and peer through. The metal structure up there was a pillar, rising from a bed of metal, up towards the blue sky.

Then, suddenly, a deep rumbling noise filled the water. She gasped and receded deeper, staring up at the pillar as it rotated around on an invisible pivot. Bellows filled the water, hard enough to shake her insides against her shell, like the wailing of a dying beast. One bellow. Two bellows. Three bellows.

The green lights all along the precursor structure went dim, dimmer, and vanished into blackness. The pillar spun and fell, its tip tumbling over until it nearly touched the water. One more faint bellow echoed before the world went silent.

Was that him? she wondered. It must've been. She hurried back to where his seamoth was parked and waited.

Volara didn't need to wait long. Varien strode into view seconds later, a grin on his face. He stepped into his shell, closed its top, and turned it to face her. "Well, that's it," he sang happily. "It's finally shut off."
Volara crackled a happy laugh along her tail fin. "So what happens now? The Green Weakness is gone, this weapon is shut off."

He leaned back and closed his eyes. "Well, first I need to unload all the stuff from my Cyclops, and recharge its cells. After that... well, there's nothing pressing." He opened his eyes and leaned forward. "Hey, Volara. A while back you asked if I wanted to move my habitat into your territory."

He smiled warmly. "Is that offer still open?"

She really couldn't say anything except yes. Repeatedly.

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
The following days and weeks were among the happiest, most relaxed ones he could remember.

When he'd first landed, it'd been a raw struggle for survival against the elements, a desperate rush to get food and water and a shelter that wouldn't be smashed by hurricanes. Then it was fruitlessly searching for survivors, to try and get to them before they died while also learning Volara's language. Then it was making sure he got to the Sunbeam before it left without him. Then it was a terrible month of desperately looking for a cure.

And now it was over. He had plenty of food and water. There was no danger. No rush. Finally, Varien could relax and take his time.

Which was fine, because moving his base all the way down to Volara's cave had more than a few technical challenges. There was an entire day spent down there planning what to do, then an entire week spent with his terraformer digging tunnels beneath her cave and dumping the rocks in the shallows. Then the step-by-step creation of his habitat, with many Cyclops trips back and forth.

Now that he wasn't fighting for his life, though, Varien could afford to be non-utilitarian with his designs. Plenty of tables and benches, a vending machine, even an aquarium. And reinforcements. Lots and lots of plasteel reinforcements.

By the end of two weeks, he'd fully moved in. Most of his new base was underground, tunneling through the black rock beneath Volara's cave to save space. He'd even made dedicated rooms for various things. There was his farming room, with all sorts of edible plants along with nonedible ones he'd grabbed from the Degasi island. There was a room solely dedicated to water filters, another one for storage, and so on. One even had an 'alien containment' chamber, which was just a gigantic, squat cylinder in the center of the room filled with water, with sand and plants along the bottom. He raised fish to eat there, with growth hormones to grow them fast and genetic scramblers to prevent inbreeding.

Power'd been only a minor concern. There was no sunlight, and there was no thermal energy. A bioreactor wouldn't cut it. Luckily he had the nuclear option, and just four reactor rods gave him all the power he'd need for the next decade and then some.

When he hadn't been busy building his habitat, he and Volara had spent hours in each others' company. She showed him around her territory in detail, showing off the unusual rock formations that were ten times his size. Varien managed to hack his PDA and bring it out of emergency mode, and showed her all sorts of pictures he had stored on it.
Amazingly, the picture of 4546B from orbit wasn't enough to convince her the world was round.

Varien happily walked through the metal hallway, munching on the last bits of a cooked spinefish while humming a tune. Ahead of him the tunnel ended in a ladder straight up. Swallowing the last of his food he grabbed the rungs and climbed up, easily hauling himself up the narrow tube of a vertical connector. The climb didn't exhaust him in the least. He hadn't noticed it while sick, but now he felt good. No, he felt great! He was in the best shape of his life, given all the swimming he'd been doing.

He finished climbing and ended up in his above-ground observatory, a sphere made of solid glass banded with titanium, tough enough to resist the water pressure. In its center was a small but comfortable bed. Varien walked forward and looked around, staring out into the black waters. The internal lighting pushed back the gloom right around him, but beyond that the only lighting was from the bioluminescent plants.

He walked over to the bed and sat on it, staring contentedly into the darkness. He saw the outline of his moonpools where they stuck out of the rock, as well as his docked Cyclops. Rouge Cradles cast their crimson lights around them, fading to sickly green by the time it reached him.

His smile turned to a grimace, and he rolled his left arm. He must've slept wrong, his shoulder was killing him.

To his left, a row of glowing dots came into view, arcs of lightning playing between them now and again. His heart jumped as the ampeel grew closer, but he didn't want to get ahead of himself. Varien fished out his translator and narrowed his eyes, inspecting the eel's head. A swirl there, another there, going around their eyes. If he recalled correctly...

"Herzaron, right?" he guessed, pointing at him.

"You guessed right," the ampeel said. "Where's Volara, little thing?"

Varien suppressed an eye roll. "Went out for the season, I think she's going to fertilize Ohmaron's eggs." He couldn't help but feel his face warm slightly at the words. It helped that the mere word Ohmaron made his spine chill and his left hand ache. At least he and Volara were getting along and, by extension, he wasn't trying to murder him anymore. "She left her own out for the blighters to eat not long ago." Ampeel eggs were strange. They were purple, oblong things, and on each end they had four nodes like actual ampeel prongs sticking out. They were big too, as big as his torso.

Herzaron chomped angrily at the water. "Oh for - damn it. I needed to see her. Very well, thank you." He ran a charge along his tusk prongs. "I'll just go look for her."

"Tell her I'm going to be out, please?" he asked, receiving another tusk-zap in response before Herzaron swam out, gone as quickly as he'd come.

He stayed in the observatory for another minute, admiring the scenery. A blighter came by with its rasping laugh and milky eyes, tapping uselessly against the enameled glass. It bashed against the observatory for a few minutes before realizing it wasn't going to get him, at which point it swam away. Varien took that as his cue to slide down the ladders and make his way over to his seamoth's moonpool. He took a few turns through the metal corridors until he arrived at another ladder to climb.

His seamoth rested in the middle of his moonpool, held aloft by the suction-cup arms. Beneath it the black waters churned peacefully, the pressure held at bay by surface tension amplifiers. Varien'd painted the vehicle in shades of black and light blue, not unlike the black stone and
ghostly blood vines of the area. He climbed in and picked up his helmet from the floor and put it on. With that done he pressed a button on the submarine's dashboard, dropping it with a jolt into the icy water.

Sitting straight up in his seat, he piloted it out of the cavern and into the gloomy chasm. Varien didn't bother with headlights, and instead waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Once they did, the barest details of the blood kelp zone came into view.

The ghostly vines stretched far overhead, clustering around him like a barren forest. Some stalks were higher than him, others started so far beneath him they didn't even reach his seamothe. Ghastly blighters harassed schools of eerie spinefish. Globs of blood oil tumbled from their stalks. Varien smiled, perfectly at ease in the alien landscape half a kilometer beneath the waves. Varien admired the chasm's cycle of life a few minutes longer, then gripped the steering wheel and headed off.

He didn't grow sloppy as he ascended. But neither did his heart pound, or his spine chill, or his hands go clammy when the planet's megafauna drifted in and out of vision. A crabsquid appeared far to the left, so he simply moved in the other direction. When he left the dark trench and passed through the mushroom forest, he skillfully wove between the bonesharks that frequented the stony spires.

The forest faded behind him as he piloted his submarine higher and higher. Sunlight trickled down in thin streaks, and a pod of bellowing reefbacks silhouetted themselves against the local star while Varien soared across the grassy plains. Dense splotches of kelp swam in and out of view. Then the land began to fall again, overgrown with purple and orange moss, transparent membrain trees, and massive blue orbs straining to float against their anchors of vegetation, with spadefish swimming around the strands. The ground tumbled out of sight, like an entire section of the volcanic island had deliberately fallen into darkness. He'd arrived in the reef.

Varien stared down into the abyss, then sunk until he skirted the tops of the spheres. He piloted his seamothe in a long patrol, slowly moving inward, eyes peeled for both danger and the person he was looking for. She should be around somewhere... she lived in the reef, right?

After an hour of fruitless searching, and a quick lunch break, he finally spotted her.

There, paddling in the open waters with her head high and jagged mouth open, was a Sea Emperor Leviathan. Even in the darkness, she gave off enough bioluminescence that he could make out the outline. Her tendrils beat furiously against the water as she chased motes of grey detritus, batting at them playfully. She was larger than when he'd last seen her; she'd grown from the size of a human to the size of an ampeel. Her horns were still short and mandibles still nubby, but they'd certainly grown in proportion.

Varien drove closer to her and flashed her with his headlights. Aa-nvc-vx, or 'Nev' as he called her, froze and turned in place to look at him, orienting herself upright while Varien put on his helmet and climbed out of his submersible.

Then the quartet of azure eyes flew wide open and the edges of his vision shimmered with colors. "Friend Varien!" a little girl's voice squealed in his head while she audibly chirped. She shot forward with surprising speed and wrapped her paddle arms around him, drawing him close to her armored chest. "Oh I have not seen you in many a day!" she cheered, crushing him with her preternatural strength.

*Pop!*

She froze and instantly the crushing grip relaxed. Varien gasped for breath, then shifted his arm.
"Oh, thanks. You fixed my shoulder."

Nev drifted away and covered her mouth with an arm, giggling. "Hee hee! You are most welcome. Apologies, friend Varien, but it has been so long! I simply could not contain myself!" Her antennae waved around, the yellow tips bobbing in the current. "Oh! Where are my manners?" She gestured to one of the pods. "Please, sit! Sit!"

Obeying her, he swam to a nearby blue orb and sat on its surface. It was springy to the touch, but firm. Nev sat on one across from him, wrapping her tentacles around and below it, pressing the teal nubs at the end of her tendrils into the sphere. She looked down at him and chirped out a happy song. "What ever brings you here, friend? I thought you were mostly spending your time with Volara and Qrt?"

He nodded, looking up at the leviathan across from him. "Usually, but I'm actually going around your siblings and getting messages from them," he said, tapping some buttons on his PDA. In a flash another tablet burst from his suit; Silvia's tablet, loaded up with interviews from Nev's siblings. Holding it made his heart just that much more leaden. "You know about the rocket?"

"The rocket..." she muttered, tilting her head this way and that. "I cannot say I do!"

"The Neptune escape rocket," he clarified. "The one Alterra transmitted blueprints for so I can build it and leave."

The flowing colors of Nev's telepathy turned grayscale and her head drooped. "... oh."

"I'm not leaving," he clarified. "But I still need to send it off. Nobody else knows that thinking people exist on this planet, Nev. I was hoping you could give just say a little hello to everyone out there?"

She lifted both paddles to her mouth and shivered. It was such a human gesture, it was disgustingly adorable. "Oh, you're putting me on the spot!" she whined. "What do I do? What do I say? Um, hello people in the future, I - "

"I haven't started recording yet." He tapped a button on the screen and held it up to her, recording the video. "Alright, now go."

"Oh! Um." She waved an arm. "Hello, people out there. I am - "

"It doesn't work if you use telepathy," he said aloud. "It can only translate if you actually talk."

"I knew thaaat," she whined, resting both arms on the orb beneath her. Nev opened her mouth and began clicking and chirping, his PDA translating for him. "So um, hello people out there." She tapped an arm against her armored chest. "I am Aa-nvc-vx." She looked down and hummed. "Oh goodness me, where do I begin." She looked back up at his PDA. "I hope you are all having a splendid day, whenever you see this." Nev looked around the PDA and at him. "That's how it works, right? They'll be able to see this whenever they so desire?"

"It is, Nev," he replied.

"Oh, good! Hee hee!" she giggled. "So, um, anyway..."

Nev continued to speak, talking about how she hoped that once more humans invariably arrived, that they could join together in peace and harmony and all sorts of sappy stuff he'd come to expect from the leviathan children. Personally, Varien just enjoyed listening to her talk. Sea Emperor chirps and clicks were melodious, soothing to the ear. Even when she hiccuped out a blob of
enzyme and excused herself.

"... friend Varien here," she continued, gesturing to him. ", has shown us much of the ways of your people, and your ability to utilize metal and stone. I do dearly hope that such things will not be kept a secret between us, and - "

A haunting, bone-chilling scream tore through the water. Varien shouted and dropped the tablet, spinning around on the blue orb. With shaking hands and trembling fingers he picked it back up, realized it was recording him, and flipped it around while he searched through the black ocean for the source of the cry. He'd only heard anything like it once before.

It was a Ghost Leviathan.

Then, to his left and Nev's right, it appeared, water bubbling and frothing around its head as it charged with its sideways mouth wide open. His gut sunk nauseously as he took in the scale of the thing. It was bigger than the juvenile he'd found in the underground river. This one was nearly dragon sized. Two ampeels could've laid end to end on the blades of its head with room to spare. His thoughts froze and his legs stiffened while he tried fruitlessly to think of some way out of this.

Nev clicked angrily, and he spared a glance to see her antennae waving furiously. The Ghost Leviathan closed its mouth with a crunch and went still, staring at them with half a dozen sulfurous eyes. Then it released a grumbling roar and turned around, nearly bashing Varien with its whiplike tail as it returned to the abyss as suddenly as it'd come.

Nev looked at him, and he shakingly had the presence of mind to point the PDA at her. "My apologies," she huffed. Still sitting, Nev raised herself haughtily and used a tentacle to gesture to where the Ghost had been. "My neighbors are most rude."

"W-What did you d-do?" he stammered, still trying to get the ice off his heart.

"I simply told it that we are both poisonous, and if it even gets close to us it'll die. Poor thing simply is not bright enough to consider I may have lied."

That got his attention. "Ghost Leviathans have a language?" Two intelligent species was pushing it already. But a third?!

She shook her mighty head. "No, no, my friend. Not like us. But they do have dim concepts. Like the peepers squeaking to attract mates. Oh! So, where was I before we were so rudely interrupted?"

"S-Something about technology?" he supplied, his thoughts still overwhelmed.

"Right!" she giggled happily. "Anyway..."

Nev continued to talk for another half hour, at which point she started to run out of ideas. "Um... I don't know what else to say," she said at last. "Take care, humans?"

"I guess that'll be it, then." He tapped the PDA, turning it off.

"Goodbye, humans!" she said, waving a paddle.

"I already stopped recording."

She turned her head away, looking at him with only two eyes. "... I knew thaat," she complained, this time with telepathy.
Varien chuckled and stood on top of the blue orb. He kicked off into the water and beat his legs against the currents to stay in place. "Alright, alright. I need to get going, lots of things to do with this. Thanks for taking the time to do this, Nev."

"But of course, my friend!" She squeezed her tendrils, popping her off the orb like a cork. The young leviathan swam over to him and gave him a playful nuzzle with her giant head, mindful of the sharp edges of her mouth. "Please, do not be a stranger! My home is open to you whenever!"

He smiled and stroked the hard plate above her jaws with a hand. "Alright, alright. But only if you stop by tomorrow for movie night."

Nev chuckled, which for Emperors was a gleeful, rising and falling chirp without a moment's break. "I have no idea what that is, but I shall! I assume Qrt will be there too?" He nodded. "Then it is agreed! Hee hee." With a twirl of her tendrils, she spun away from him. "I shall head over at sundown tomorrow, then! Farewell, friend Varien!"

"Bye!" he waved as she swam into the darkness. He climbed back into his seamoth, gripped the wheel, and turned around. The rocket wouldn't build itself, after all.

With a grunt, he gripped the switch and threw it. The rocket shuddered beneath his feet, and a young woman's voice sounded around him. "Hydraulics system online."

"Three down." He stepped around to the ladder, rapped a fist on the empty storage bin to his left, and climbed up. As Varien climbed up into the roof, he entered a slim gap between the floors that let him see the shining white reactor core of the escape rocket. Then it slipped beneath him, and Varien pulled himself up onto the floor of the cockpit.

It was a hemisphere of a room, with multiple reinforced windows above to show the blue, sunny sky, with not a cloud to obscure it. A rarity given how much water there was. In the center were two tables centered around a swiveling black command chair, with holograms projected above them. The rocket wasn't set to launch yet.

Varien headed to the primary computer. He'd spent weeks reprogramming it, looking for any potential bugs, and changing the destination coordinates. He tapped a few buttons, and the rocket let him know it was online.

With his heart pounding in his chest, he walked to the next structure. He placed an open palm against the scanner, which beeped and opened the panel to its right to expose a time capsule. The capsule was about as long as he was tall, little more than a cylinder with rounded ends. He put in a few of the more rare resources - kyanite and crystalline sulfur - along with a picture of the Aurora's decaying frame sitting on the horizon. As for the message, he didn't know what to say. So he didn't write anything, and let the time capsule seal itself away.

Last but not least was the life support. Face leaden, he turned it on.

"Life support online. Rocket ready for departure at your command, captain," it informed him.

Varien sighed and looked around. Sure enough, the holograms were green, ready to launch. He slid down the ladders, opened one of the storage compartments, and placed Silvia's PDA - filled with all the data on 4546B's geology and biosphere he could gather, along with video messages from himself, the Emperors, and Volara - inside. He stroked it one last time, trying not to think of how it was the last thing he had connecting him to her. He squashed a stab of bitterness at the thought of Silvia's fate, and locked the compartment.
With that done he opened the entry door and stepped outside. A warm, salty ocean breeze blew 
over his face, billowing around in his ears. He put his helmet on with mechanical stiffness. Making 
sure not to look down - because wow that was a drop - he walked over to the elevator and ordered it 
to go down. Once down he jumped off the launch platform and, after pulling out his seaglide from 
his suit, made his way to a rocky nook in the shallows, where the land almost pierced through the 
choppy surface.

Volara was there, her long and dark body coiled around the cramped space. Her beady emerald 
eyes stared at him while she finished eating a stunned peeper, and her tail fin flicked happily. "So 
it's done?" she asked. He imagined that it wasn't just Volara looking; the Emperor children were 
probably looking through her eyes. Maybe even his. He wouldn't have been able to tell. Creepy.

After taking a moment to grab his translator, he nodded. "It's ready. Let me just..." He swam to the 
elevated stone and stood; it was tall enough that the upper half of his body stuck up out of the 
waves. Varien looked at the rocket, a safe distance away over the grass plains. The Aurora was to 
its right, a pale and mammoth shadow of the vessel standing ready to leave the planet.

Next to him, Volara stuck her head out of the water. She closed her eyes in discomfort as the water 
rang off her carapace, then opened them again. "You're sure about this?"

He was. Varien had rigged the rocket to be able to launch remotely; he wasn't going with it. His 
parents didn't think highly of him, Silvia was dead, and there was the small matter of his one 
trillion credit debt to Alterra. The last one he could probably lawyer his way out of, but not easily. 
There was nothing waiting for him back there, while meanwhile here he had friends, someone to 
live with, and he was healthier than he'd ever been.

There were things he'd miss. He'd miss greasy fast food auto-shops. He'd miss all the new movies 
and games and books. He'd miss solid ground. The hustle and bustle of cities. The sparse and 
welcoming countrysides. But those were all creature comforts, and he had plenty of those already 
in his new habitat.

"I'm sure." He held up his PDA and raised a finger over the appropriate button. "Here goes." He 
brought his finger in, hesitated, then shook his head and pressed it against his tablet.

For a moment nothing happened, but then the escape rocket began to roar. Light shone from the 
thrusters. Varien mentally counted down from ten, wondering if he was counting too fast or too 
slow.

*Three, two, one, liftoff*, he thought. No liftoff. Too fast, then.

A second later, fire exploded from the rocket. A sound like a Reaper's roar cut through the air, 
making both him and Volara back away. Plumes of smoke erupted up and around, obscuring the 
ship. Then the nose punched through the smoke like a fist. Crackling and bellowing, the metal ship 
lifted into the air atop a blinding pillar of fire, sending skyrays flying for shelter. Varien craned his 
neck back as the ship rose higher and higher, growing smaller and smaller until it was just a speck 
of light at the end of a narrow trail of smoke. It veered off to the side, flying not just straight up but 
also towards the local star. Was it out of the atmosphere already?

He stared wistfully at the rocket as it continued for a while longer. The fiery light vanished and the 
plume of smoke ended. Then, scant seconds later, there was the brilliant blue flash of warp travel. 
The rocket was gone.

Varien had not just programmed the rocket to go without him. He knew what Alterra was like - 
Silvia had spent many nights griping about some of its more predatory practices - and while their
laws said that planets with intelligent species weren't to be touched, it'd be all too easy to suppress that information and come in anyway to pillage and plunder. And not with the makeshift weaponry he'd had, but with actual military-grade weapons.

So, the rocket wasn't going to Alterra. Instead it was going to the peace-and-harmony hippy Mongolians. Whatever else he could say about those religious idiots, they'd definitely put protections on 4546B once they found the data he'd sent.

He breathed out. "Well, that's it," he said, turning to Volara.

She glanced at him, not turning her head, and dove back beneath the waves. He followed after her and sat on a rock while the friendly megafauna drifted in the currents in front of him. "And it's gone," she whispered with dim arcs of lightning. "You stayed." She looked up at him. "Varien, I - I know you said, but I was afraid that you'd..." She looked down and sent a sigh crackling along her glowing prongs. "I was afraid."

"Hey, hey." He set the translator somewhere she could see and swam closer, stroking her head just above her mouth. This close he could see every one of her needle fangs, locked in an eternal frown, of the flesh inside her nasal arch. "This is my home. I'm not going anywhere." Varien kicked off from her and grabbed his translator.

"Now come on," he told the ampeel, his heart swimming in a mix of regret and nostalgia and relief and indecision. "Let's go home."

Chapter End Notes

Please do leave a comment, let me know what you think.
A Few Years Later

Varien

With a start, he woke from a nightmare. Heart pounding beneath his icy skin, Varien sat straight up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

Damn it. Another one? He thought he'd gotten over those; it'd been a month since the last one. He sat up in his bed, sending the sheets tumbling down, and placed a hand over his roaring heart.

To his left, outside the observatory's glass dome, Volara's massive form woke up. Her glowing eyes snapped open, and her prongs cast enough light for him to see the outline of her body curled up on a mat of plants. "Bad dream?" she asked, the light-show of her speech hurting his grimy eyes.

"Yeah," he grunted, swinging his feet over the side of the bed. Varien stood and stretched, popping his spine in a few places. Damn, was he getting old? "It's fine. Just a dream about bleeders."

"If you say so. Varien, you know I'm here if you ever feel that you're not fine."

A grin broke out on his face. "Thanks for the concern, but it's not the worst I've had. I'm gonna grab breakfast, okay?"

Volara drifted up and gently nudged her mighty snout against the glass. "Be quick!"

He took a moment to marvel at the swirling patterns on her carapace. "I will, I will," he called, turning away and heading down the ladder into the depths of his habitat. A few turns and ladders later brought him to his alien containment chamber. He snagged a few of the reginald fish roaming about within the cylindrical aquarium, cooked them at a nearby fabricator, then climbed higher up in his habitat until he was back in his observatory-slash-bedroom.

Varien sat on his bed, crossed his legs, and started munching on the greasy, mohawked fish. He stared outside into the blackness of Volara's cave, willing his eyes to adjust. There was Volara, with her massive glowing rows of prongs, chewing on a blood crawler. Around her, three smaller rows of light swam about in energetic loops and spirals. The smaller ampeels were puny next to Volara, barely able to reach from the bottom of her head to the top, only as long as he was tall.

One of them, with lines going up and down from her eyes, curled around a blood crawler's severed,
spiky leg, chewing on the barbs. "Dipolara, no playing with your food," he chided, wagging a finger at her.

She uncoiled around it and whipped around to face him. "Sorry, Dad," she groused in a burst of static. Dipolara brought her jaws around to the wide end of the leg and started crunching the armor to get at the meat inside.

Varien finished his breakfast first, washing it down with coffee. He slipped into his reinforced dive suit - then checked and double checked it was secure - and opened one of the many hatches in his habitat. Feet first, he entered the oily waters and swam over to where the four ampeels'd be able to see him. He and Volara made small talk while the fries ate, his translator always close at hand. Once they were done he beat his flippered feet to where Dipolara, Faralaron, and Magnelara could all see him. "Alright, you three. Come on, time for lessons."

"Aww."

"Yay!"

Magnelara smacked Diploara with her tail fin. "Don't complain!"

"Sorry, Dad," she grumbled, looking away.

Volara ran a laugh along her prongs, rising into the water. "Alright I'm full. I'm going over to Ohmaron's, they wanted me for some redecorating. Be good for your father, you three." The giant ampeel coiled about in the water until she was turned around. With a swaying motion of her long body she swam out of the cave, vanishing from Varien's sight in seconds.

He pulled his seaglide out. "Come on, let's head down," he told the fries. He held down the handle and let the machine pull him forward, the human-sized ampeel children easily keeping pace with him.

It was insulting how easily they could swim as fast as his seaglide even while so young.

They burst from the cavern entrance and oriented straight down, passing the black, quartz-streaked rocks to reach the ocean floor. All around Varien the familiar, ghostly beauty of the blood kelp zone surrounded him. Beautiful but dangerous. He always had to remember that; one blighter biting his suit would be the end of him. At least he had apex predators on his side.

He touched down on a dull, worn stalagmite and stored his seaglide away. He'd spent the trip down running through the day's lessons in his head. Some hunting skills, mainly in identification, leading into math seemed good.

Varien reached into his dive suit, and pulled out one of the dead, bony spinefish he'd kept stored there. He let go and the fish flopped limply, slowly but steadily rising through the water. "Alright, who can tell me if this one is dead, or just pretending to be dead?" he asked.

The three ampeels looked among each other, crackling to each other in quiet whispers. "It's alive!" Faralaron said at last, his eyes happy.

"No, it's dead!" Dipolara insisted, pushing in front.

"Alive!"

"Dead!"
Varien reached up and dragged the dead fish back down.

"Alive!"

"Dead!"

"... I think it's alive," Magnelara said from the back.

He held up his hands. "Stop, stop," Varien called. "Faralaron, why do you think it's alive?"

"Well it's still all bright and stuff! It isn't rotten or anything."

Varien nodded, keeping his lips tight to avoid smiling. He turned to the other ampeel fry. "Dipolara? Why's it dead?"

"Well look at all that flaky white stuff on it! It's gotta be dead!" she insisted, coiling energetically in the pitch black water.

"Aaaactually, I agree with Faralaron," Magnelara said, swimming around to look her sister in the eye. "That white stuff could just be the flakes they eat -"

"Actually," Varien spoke up, grabbing their attention. "Dipolara's right, it's dead."

"YES!"

"Aww!"

"Come on!"

"You can tell," he continued. "by the flakes. These, you see, are fungus." He rubbed one of the white, squishy flakes between his fingers, showing off how it came apart. "This one was dead for long enough to start rotting. Rotting doesn't always mean it gets darker, Faralaron."

The fry looked away awkwardly. "... oh," he muttered.

"It's alright," he said, swimming closer and scratching Faralaron's chin. He leaned in and crackled happily, but he was young enough and Varien's suit was insulative enough that the electricity just tickled. "Everyone makes mistakes, and I sure didn't know how to tell until your mother told me. Alright, now, let's try another one."

Varien ran his kids - the mere thought sent his heart hammering and a heady warmth into his head - through several more trial spinefish, then took a lunch break. For them, the lunch was said spinefish, or the ones that weren't old and rotten anyway. Sadly, Varien couldn't exactly eat while in his suit, so he toughed it out. He didn't mind if it was for them, and -

- and he'd gone through much, much worse than missing one lunch. The pit in his stomach, the dizziness, the sensation of his limbs being sucked in -

A sparkle of lights in his face shook him out of it, and Varien found his head fuzzy and his glass visor foggy. His lungs were tight; had he been hyperventilating?

"Dad?" Faralaron asked, close enough to take up most of his vision. Squeezing into the corners of his field of view, his daughters looked at him despairingly too.

He breathed out weakly, body shuddering, and drew Faralaron into a crushing hug. He hadn't even noticed he'd sunk back to the ocean floor. Magnelara and Dipolara came in around his back and
legs, crackling out of sight so that he couldn't see what they were saying as they nuzzled into him.

The horror faded, the terror receded and the memory went back to a memory. He pulled away and let out a shaky breath. "Okay, okay. I - I think we should call it for now. Let's head back."

The fries shared uneasy looks, but zapped their tusks and followed him as he seaglided back up to the cave with the ampeels on his tail. His habitat, even with the lights off, stuck out in the darkness when his lights fell upon the glossy metal hull. Like a crazed man he wrenched open a hatch and tumbled inside, letting his seaglide clang and clatter into a corner.

Varien trudged to his bed and collapsed on it, staring up at the glass ceiling of the observatory. Dipolara, Faralaron, and Magnelara swam to the top, looking down at him. "Dad, are you sure you're okay?" Magnelara asked with dim zaps.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he said, waving off her concern.

"Here!" Dipolara bopped the hatch with her snout, and when he opened it to inspect, she spat a spinefish from her jaws into the habitat. "You didn't eat anything when we were."

His heart warmed and he smiled at her generosity. Varien picked up the dead fish, headed over to the fabricator at the far end of the corridor, and cooked it. Varien stumbled over to his bed and sat on it, nibbling the chewy, watery flesh of his food while the ampeel children swam around the observatory, looking at him worriedly. But time passed, minutes ticked on, and when they saw he was fine, they started playing and joking around with each other, nipping each other's armor and zapping the water.

Varien smiled and looked up at them playing, and his thoughts started to wander. Time to time, when going about his day, Varien sometimes felt gnawing doubts telling him he should've gone with the rocket. That he still could build a new one and leave. That this dangerous world was no place for a human, however beautiful it was. That he missed the creature comforts of living in federation space. But he'd come up and watch the kids - his kids! - playing, or take one look at Volara, and he'd remember why he stayed here.

He wondered if the rocket had arrived in Mongolian space yet. Probably not; it was a years-long trip there, to say nothing of the round trip. Varien allowed himself a smile; he could only imagine some poor desk lackey getting the messages on his PDA and spitting their coffee all over a monitor when they read it.

He finished up his lunch and jumped back into the water, rounding up the fries and running them through addition and subtraction. Though privately he wondered if maybe Faralaron was ready for multiplication. It'd be easier with a written language, but whatever. One step at a time.

Eventually a hum of electricity, louder than the three fries trying to work out twenty-seven minus twelve, came to his ears and he spun around in the water to see Volara swimming in. "You're back!" he greeted, swimming in. They met up and Volara nudged her snout into his stomach, driving him into the stone floor while wriggling her body around excitedly. "How was it?"

She let go and drifted a safe distance before talking again. "Well, Zaparon kept trying - oh!"

"Mom, you're back!" Magnelara shouted, rubbing her snout along the underside of Volara's head. The other fries swarmed her, their serpentine, glowing forms dwarfed by their mother.

"We were just going over their numbers," he told her, swimming in place with ease. "I had some trouble around mealt ime, but I'm better now."
Volara snapped her attention to him. "You did?" she asked quietly. She swam close. Not too close to talk, but close enough to make out the worry in her gently glowing eyes. "Do you want to talk about it?"

No. "Sure. It was... you know how before we met, I had a rough time? I just... I was so hungry back then, and I skipped lunch with the fries, so..."

"Hey, hey," Volara insisted. She swam in and nuzzled him, and he responded by leaning in and laying his head on her snout, feeling warm and tingly. Then she drifted away. "It's behind you. Anyway -"

Colors flooded into his vision and he shouted. Volara and the fries contorted about in surprise too, but they all quickly relaxed. The familiar visage of a Sea Emperor, with painfully bright eyes, appeared in his field of view. "I'm sorry, am I interrupting?" Aa-qrt-vx - or Quart as Varien called him - asked.

He swam to his observatory and sat on the glass dome. "Uh, sort of, why?"

"Well, it's just that you invited me over, and it's about time for movie night?" Quart shyly insisted.

His eyes widened. "Really? Already?" Yeesh, did living in pitch darkness messed with his sense of time or what? He turned to the ampeels, then focused back on the hallucination. "Uh, sure, come on over. I'll get it set up." The vision faded and he turned to Volara. "Be right back, I gotta go get it set up."

"Go ahead!" she said with a dip of her head.

Without further ado, he slipped back into the shelter and fished out his PDA. He flipped through his collection of movies - enough to last him several lifetimes - and chose one he thought they'd like. It was an old classic from the 2050s, revolving around the drama of automation taking over even skilled and creative labor in some parts of Earth. He ran a few light tests to make sure it could project properly - he'd terraformed a smooth slab of stone just for this purpose - and supported the PDA properly so it'd stay in place.

By the time he got it set up, Quart arrived. With his natural luminescence, the teenage Sea Emperor took the form of a dark blob with teal outlines, so large he could barely fit through the cave entrance. And he still wasn't done growing, either! It amazed him how big the creatures on 4546B could get. "I'm here," he called out telepathically, squeezing his tentacles through the gap.

Magnelara, Faralaron, and Dipolara cheered when he arrived and charged at him. The fries wrapped around his mandibles and hung from his horns, crackling excitedly.

"Qrt, you're here!"

"Uncle Qrt!"

"Don't call me that, I'm not that much older than you."

"Hey, Qrt-vx. Good to see you."

Volara swam up to him, and Quart turned to her and bowed his head. "Friend Volara, friend Varien, thank you for inviting me into your home," he said, gesturing calmly with his paddle arms. Given he was five times Volara's size, his overly-polite speech bordered on comical. "I trust friend Varien has set up rousing entertainment for this morning?"
"It's morning?!” Varien shouted.

Quart chuckled, raising an arm to his jagged mouth, but said nothing more.

He sighed. "Anyway, yeah, we're all set up. Take a seat, get comfortable."

"Why, thank you." Varien's kids swam away from Quart as he moved, swimming into the middle of the cavern. Qrt didn't have to worry much about a good seat, what with his telepathy and all. "Also, is it alright if Pmt and Vrr watch?"

He waved it off. "Sure."

Volara ran a charge along her tusks, waving her lower body back and forth. "I'd be delighted, O Great One!"

"Please don't call me that."

Varien laughed. "Alright alright, get comfortable, I'll start it up." He dipped back into his habitat, quickly activated a two-minute timer to start the movie, and headed back out. He quickly seaglided to beneath the 'screen' and placed one of his spare translators there to act as subtitles for the ampeels, and took a position near where Volara had laid on the ground. "It'll start soon."

Soon, the movie began. Faralaron and Dipolara rested on Volara's sloping snout. Magnelara swam to him and curled up in his lap. She shuffled around to find a comfortable position for her prongs and he scratched between her armor, mindful of her gills. He smiled as she crackled ticklishly, and selfishly wished that the fries never grew any larger than they were now.

As the introduction went on and the characters were introduced, Varien's smile grew dopey. Whatever doubts he occasionally had, he wouldn't trade this for all the world. He was happy here. He had a family; he had kids, friends, and a ' consort' as Volara called it. When the Aurora first fell, his life'd been derailed. He'd lost his future, his chance at a house, and the love of his life. Those were all things he had again.

He'd finally made it home.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

And there it is. I hope you've all enjoyed. I hope you all have a wonderful day, and find many wonderful stories to read.

See you around.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!