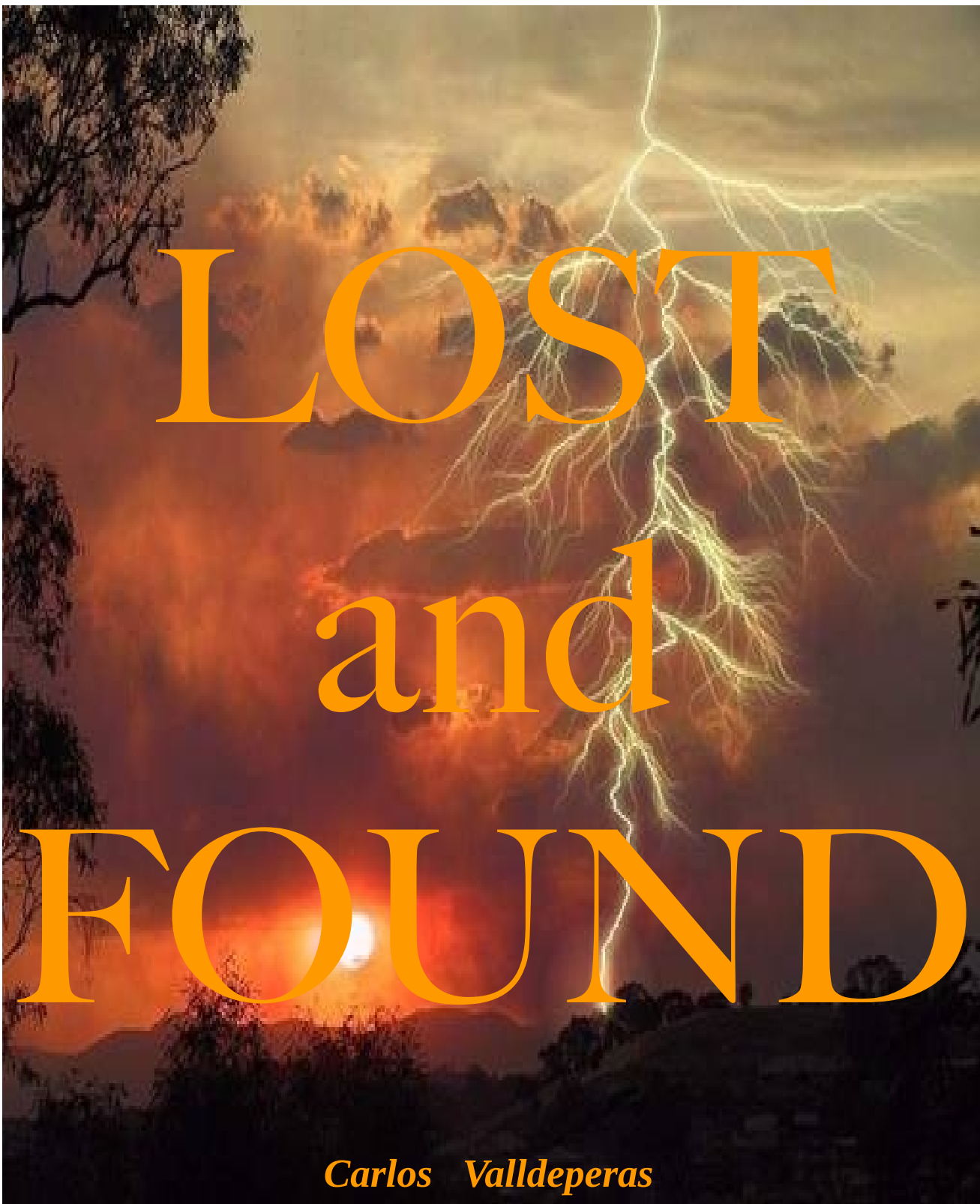




LOST and FOUND

Carlos Valldeperas

EVOLUTION

They fall from the sky. From the dark depths of the unknown above, their fiery ball racing across the sky, like a stepchild of the sun finally cast off. The planet's cloak of tranquility is torn by the screeching interloper. Below the planet's cloak, the hustle and bustle of the teeming life that makes the planet special, take a simultaneous gasp. Each creature, great and small, turns their attention to the fiery disturbance. Those that can, see. Those that see, ponder, then as the one heart beat moves to the next, life and living resume, like water in a river, slowed but never stopped.

They wake to green. One moment each is engulfed in their familiar comfort, next blink they are looking at strange and confusing. Thoughts swirl. Questions rush in like an invading horde, only to be overrun by wonders. How? Why? Where? Who? Like raindrops hitting one single, innocent leaf, the questions keep hitting. As different, unique, and unconnected they were from each other, the staccato of questions are alike.

They made a clamoring, sun burning in the sky entrance. Their streaking through the otherwise tranquil sky purports a world-changing calamity, but it stands stark difference to the landing. They reach the ground like a dove's feather drifting down on to the tender skin of a sleeping infant. From hellish fire to zen peace, the crew arrives on this green world.

'Where am I?'
'What's happened?'
'Where's everyone?'
'Who's there?'
'Who are you?'

'I'm not alone in my head. Some are my thoughts, but there are others. Not many others, but some.'

"Please calm and control your thoughts," this thought goes out, finding others in their individual mental chaos.

'Not home. Not the ethereal,' this thought is mirrored five times.

"I can only sense five others of us, but also many, many other fragmented, foreign minds. Their communications are jumbles of images, fears, ..."

"Communicate back. Send peace. Get a sense of their intent."

"I sense something too. Not our ethereal yet a solid link between us."

"We link but are not connected!" A cold draft of fear and panic breaks through defenses, affecting each just a bit differently.

"I can see our essence contained individually, like cocoons, but also a second container keeping us together, tethered to a small space."

Thoughts of cages, prison, and subjugation races through the crew.

"No, no. Not hostile or oppressive. Helping. Protecting."

"What else can you sense?"

"There is purpose, science. Ah, and it adapts. It provides."

"I can sense, see the landscape. My container is showing a route to a cave. Oh, safety. It is a navigation route to refuge."

"So we are in a ship?"

"Captain, I think I can pilot us there."

'Captain? A ship needs a captain; a leader. And right now, a pilot.'

"Pilot, get us there. Navigator, lay the way."

"Ah, Captain, communication with indigenous, foreign lifeforms seems limited to rudimentary images. Food, shelter, Danger. Most have responded to my images of peace and calm with some understanding or general indifference. Not all, however."

This news produces a sense of alert from the captain. "Are we in danger?" the captain asks.

"One lifeform, and I sense the current number of similar lifeforms, at ten, reflects malevolence, hostility, and hunger." An image of predator killing prey is reflected the crew.

"Thank you, Communicator. Keep reaching out. Peace and calm."

"Yes, Captain. Com Officer at your services."

"Levity. Thank you, Com Officer. Now, Pilot, can you serve with swift, safe travels?"

"Ai Captain!" 'Neat! As the Captain asks, my cocoon gives, meeting needs.'

"Well, if this ship has a Captain, Pilot, and Navigator, it seems to be providing for Tactical too."

"Don't forget Communicator!"

"Right, well, as I think of threats and course of action, my cocoon seems to adapt and provide."

"Can we defend ourselves?" the Captain asks.

A subtle wave of glee ripples out just before a burgeoning tactical responds with, "we have weapons!"

CAVE

The crew is corralled by unfriendly, unyielding, cold angry surfaces. Everything is hard, dead. The ground is all death and decay. Walls and ceiling are craggy and inimical. The light snuffing darkness, with shadows of shadows, the wetness of the air, like swarms of water soldiers intent on suffocating- these the crew can ignore or navigate around. The hardness, the solid essence of the cave, the planet ruthlessly attacks the crew's senses.

They are encased in cocoons, inside a ship, all accommodating, adaptive, helpful, protective, yet they are still of the ether. Home is a nebulous of energy, life, and entwinement.

There they float freely, always in contact, always undulating and interacting with others. Now they are isolated, caged, restricted by everything around them.

The cave offers a refuge. Temporary. Controlled. Yet it is an extreme instance of all the planet is; Everything hard, contained, trapped. Solid ground. Unyielding walls. Green life help in place by solid tethers to the ground. Creatures that roam yet held to an unchanging form by a shell. Some shells more flexible than others, but all containing, limiting the living essence.

So much unknown. So much frightening. So much unlike what they know, love, and pang to return to. This world is death. Below them there is the collection of ages of destruction, finality. Beyond, the living are cold, detached, hostile. The ship keeps it all beyond, but it also keeps them constricted, segregated.

MOTHER

"Ah, I think there is another predator," the Com's announcement comes with images of a massive creature clawing at the cave's small entrance.

"Weapons ready!" barks Tactical.

"Navigation, can we put some distance from the creature?"

Nav projects images of endless tunnels and immense caverns, but says, "distance from this creature puts us closer to the others."

"Wait," blurts Sci. "The creature, with all its ferocity and menacing claws, was gracing in a field of grasses when we first arrived."

"Oh?"

"And," Sci goes on, "its shape and features match those of the hatchling by my side."

'What's' and inquiring images to 'hatchling' swirl among the crew.

Next to the Science crew member is an emerging creature. It is head deep into the shell, the egg, it had just broken free from. This image invokes more questions.

"It is hungry," explains Sci. "It has been licking and clawing at the shell's lining." Presumably, the egg had a supply of nourishment, probably for situations like this, where it hatched away from its parents.

"Not a predator then," the Captain projects images of mother holding offspring.

"Just mama looking for baby."

REUNION

Mama's claws were very effective at tearing away rock. "But it is clearly not a meat eater," Sci projects images of flat teeth and grass-chewing brethren. "Get baby back with mom and we're fine."

Pi says, "the ship is ready for this." Images of a hatch and extending arm are projected by the pilot, then goes on to share a concern. He projects images of mama gracing, of baby eating, of a predator tearing flesh from a kill. "We need nourishment, and this ships needs fuel."

The crew, realizing their own needs, project images of their preferred source of nourishment, followed by thought of a ship running out of fuel out in space. At once the question of ship's fuel come to all.

Com projects a more dire image, saying "mama is in." Once through the cave's small entrance, the creature careens along the cave's obstacles and tight spaces surprisingly fast.

With the ship facing the direction of the cave's entrance and the rushing mother, the pilot extends the ship's arm forward. The baby, like many infant lifeforms, sits passively, unaware, unconcern of any danger.

The mother's manic advance stops when she see her unharmed, content baby. And with hardly a look back, the mother creature takes and guides the fledgeling along the tunnels back out of the cave.

The thought, "well, that was something," is shared by the crew, along with a sense of assuagement.

FUEL

"This is odd," says Nav. "The ship is mapping a path following the creatures, marking spots along the route."

Cap asks, "can you tell what those spots are?"

"Sorry, no. The sensors seem to be fading." The images being projected are looking more and more blurry, like vision blurred by ever more tearing eyes.

"Moving us to the first marker," informs Pi.

"Go slow, just in case."

"My sensors are weakening too but I sense a radiating heat from the spot," Sci offers. "And whatever is there is organic."

Before being asked, Com assures them it is not a living thing. "Not a creature."

Pi announces their arrival to the first spot and projects images of a mass on the ground. They see the mass, and they see the ship retrieve it.

"It ate it!" exclaims Pi.

Sci says, "the ship appears to have absorbed the mass."

"Yeah, but absorbed what?" asks Cap.

With hesitation Sci says, "well, it appeared to be poop."

Exclamations of 'crap,' 'scat,' and 'creature droppings' bounce among the crew.

"My senses are a bit clearer," Nav announces, followed by Pi's "power levels seem to have ticked up a notch."

Sci projects "food," and says "amazing."

"Next spot dead ahead." The ship proceeds on, moving with more purpose and speed.

"I sense two... mounds of poop. Ah, possible fuel," Sci reports.

As with the first dropping, upon reaching the spot the ship quickly absorbs the material. "The smaller mound appears to consist of different matter," explains Sci. "And the ship has absorbed it separately." Sci pauses. With trepidation adds, "the ship is projecting the smaller mound as base material for food. Food for us." Images of material processing are projected to all.

One poop mound remains, but it is dangerously close to the cave entrance. Assumptions are made that the creature's droppings can be converted to fuel for the ship and nourishment for the crew, which weighs on their course of action.

"Well, eating baby shit, that'll be a novelty," Tac's words come projected with unamused sarcasm.

"The ship has benefited," says Pi. "Ship's power and sensors are what appears to be optimum."

"Which is good," Com joins in, "because I had lost track of the true hostile, hungry predators."

Concern comes from all. Cap asks, "where are they now?"

"Two will be on us soon." Though seemingly dire news, Com projects indifference or calm. "The refreshed sensors are allowing me to explore another possible threat I sensed just before entering the cave."

PLANET

The ship cowards at the mouth of the cave as Com tells the crew about the sensor findings.

"We landed in a sprawling field of tall grasses. There were trees and mountains all around." Com details the multiple fields of grass and clumps of forests. With vivid images, there is a breakdown of the species detected. "That includes the predators now within the cave."

"And you say they have adapted to the cave environment?" Tac asks, concern with the predator's looming threat to them.

"Right. Perhaps they are natural cave dwellers, either forced to leave the cave system, maybe for food, or unaware of its existence."

Com points out several rivers and one large lake. "One valley leads to two converging mountain ranges, white caped and uninhabited."

"So a pretty diverse and, well, pretty planet." Pi says, not hiding sarcasm and restlessness.

"Two things stand out." The images Com projects next perplex and agitate.

"Fence," "Cage," "Advanced," and "Flying ship."

"Cap brings things back into focus, saying "extrapolate, please."

"This area, the cave and for some distance around us, at a size comparable to a large island, is all within a barrier."

Before the crew disrupts again, Com adds, "not some natural barrier. An artificial, deliberately placed palisade."

It is Sci who, maintaining composure, projects images and gives details. "It is a fence. A benign but effective force field," Sci explains. Though the lifeforms within, from the smallest foraging creature to massive beasts and all plant forms, represent a massive, varied yet balanced system, it is never the less controlled. "Beyond the fence, it is wild."

"Wild and crowded," adds Nav.

"Com, go on." Cap focuses on one particular projection.

"The second... thing."

"Right," and Com goes on to tell of the flying machine that arrived soon after they did. "Advanced technology, comparably to other lifeforms seen so far." They were biped, using engineered materials to cover most of their bodies.

Tac asks about armament. Sci wonders about intent. Nav interrupts the conversation with an update on the cave predators. "One predator is upon us."

The predator is hard-shelled, with teeth florescent even in the light killing dark, alluring and resplendent, until the snarling mouth reminds of their purpose, and their great proportions and breath cutting sharpness suggests the effectiveness as flesh-tearing meat-eating, killing tools.

PREDATOR

The next series of events pass quicker than a lightning strike can arch through the black of a night's sky, it's victims confused, seeing white where there was only black.

The predator attacks, leaping forward and swiping a multi-clawed short appendage. A caterwaul that jolts the sensors its only warning. It swipes dead space. Ship and pilot avoid blood-hungry claws with two quick moves – up and back. Before the predator can regain balance and attack anew, an energy burst hits it between its bulbous eyes. The crew retreat further.

"I can no longer sense any life energy from the creature," Com says. Adding, "it came with a wild, hungry hate. I sense more of the same nearly upon us."

Cap addresses Nav, asking "any good direction we can go to get clear?"

"Moving us away," interjects Pi.

After a quiet pause, Sci says, "that was a very effective response. Sensors show the exoskeleton of the creature to be rather robust and efficacious in protecting vital organs."

"you can just say, 'nice shot'," exclaims Tac.

Projecting chaotic images full of anxiety, Com asks, "can you do it again, with two targets?" Within a beat, tension suffuses the crew. "Ewww!" Com intones, then says, "never mind. They've stopped at the corpse."

"oh wow!" Sci blurts. "They are tearing into the cadaver."

"Eating their own?" Disgust saturates Tac's inquiry.

The crew watch Sci's projected images with morbid curiosity. "One of them is certainly feeding," Sci offers science to the actions. "Not a totally unique behaviors. Ooh, but the other creature has removed what appears to be egg sacks." Sci pauses.

Cap joins in. "It is moving away with the eegs. Not feeding."

"I sense a nurturing vibe from that one."

Sci agrees with Com and offers more, "it intends to find safety for the eggs."

"Ew," breaks in Com. "The eggs are to hatch."

"What?" wonders Cap. "Right now?" the question is projected and the crew soon see images of the eggs undulating and tearing. "Hatching," is the combined thought.

It perplexes them that a creature carrying eggs so close to bringing forth life would be involved in a potentially dangerous attack. But it is more alarming to watch the hatchlings rush to the carcass and begin to tear flesh and feed.

Sci always about science, ponders "oviparous?"

Tac readies weapons as he voices concern, "they are rather formidable predators."

"Oh, that's not all," and Sci projects images of egg sacks in all predators. "Their reproduction is rather unique."

"You mean fast?" Cap says, rather alarmed.

Sci adds that as well as the predator's having a unique, fast reproduction cycle, it doesn't seem to manifest in any of the other creatures.

COLLABORATION

"My controls appear capable of targeting multiple quarry at once," announces Tac. "If that is the course we want to take."

Cap replies, "hmm, we seem to have started in that course direction, but should we continue?"

"We could exit the cave," offers Nav. "There is a course set that will avoid the predators." Then adds, "though we would then be in an uncomfortable proximity to a biped team."

"Speaking of the bipeds," says Com, "some of these teams have been closing off cave openings."

"Oh," blurts Sci. "Seems like they are using energy fields like the perimeter fence to close off openings."

Cap wonders why these bipeds are using these force field nets to block cave openings. "To what purpose? Why now?"

"We ask them when we sit in front of them, or, we stay and kill more predators." Tac says. Urgency in his tone.

"Note," Sci jumps in, "One biped team has confronted a predator. It seems to have attacked them. The bipeds shot it with some type of non-lethal weapon."

"Tranquilizer," Com projects a sleeping predator image.

"Pi, out we go. Quick."

Like a feather in a friendly breeze, the teardrop shaped ship maneuvers out of the cave. The mother's breath warmth and show-all brightness outside welcoming the crew.

KEEPERS

The crew hear the call: "Interloper has emerged, grid 2-B."

"Target," and "hold," biped group members call back.

"Group 1 Sub 1B to field group 3, any communication from the interloper?"

"This is tertiary, field group 3, possible communication intercepted, interference great, neural stresses extraordinary."

"Group 1 Sub 1B to Group 3 Tertiary, expound on neural..."

"All field groups, three raptor class one emerging, on attack vector, grid 3-C."

Communications turn to shouts for help and cries. Four of the raptor predator creatures rush out of the cave. One quickly overtaking one group of keepers. Along with green-yellow splatter of body fluids arching through the air, showering green fields and gray rock alike with its ordure, the sudden onslaught is accented by flashes of blue from surviving Keepers.

The four raptor predators, including one bathed in the starkly contrasting colors of Keeper fluids, Keeper tissue caught in its gleaming maw, now lay still. Not dead. Not reduced to harmless masses of tissue. Stunned. Subdued.

"Group 4 Sub 1B," the flash of chaos silenced to one voice, "raptors subdued; Field Group 2 overtaken."

"Field Group 4 to air support, four raptors ready. One Field Group to clear."

Before Air Support acknowledges command, a voice heavy with fear adds, "one raptor down by source unknown; foreign."

A hiss of 'interloper' drowns out gasps of fright.

"Source triangulated and confirmed." The alarming information is followed by, "not Keeper energy frequency or polarity yet same tranquilizing quality."

"Threat level?" a stoic voice asks.

"Unknown. No targeting detected nor increased power levels noted."

"All field groups," someone announces, "converge on interlopers, prepare to engage. Maximum enforcement."

"Anyone make contact yet?"

"Is that a ship or a living organism?"

"How is it just floating like that?"

Multiple questions are presented but it is the threat level question that lingers.

The interlopers are soon ensnared by Keepers on the ground and air. Their movement in their strange floating ship is chaotic, like a leaf caught in a wind-gust, but different group members merge, cross, and overtake each other all while closing in on the interlopers, never exposing even a spider's silk thread of an escape route.

"Groups one and four engaging." No command. No request. Just an announcement followed by flashes of light.

"Stunners ineffective." A statement. Fact. No feeling. No fear.

"Lethal engagement." Arches of flashing light from Groups Two and Three thrash at the interlopers.

INTERLOPERS

The strange shell that contains them, the ship that allows them movement yet constrains their essence pings and crackles as bursts of energy seek a submissive target.

"That first volley was consistent with tranquilizer shots."

A second salvo's echoes are just dying off as Sci says, "this second volley was aimed to kill."

Home is a cloud of peace and ethereal fellowship. The crew's home is like a dense morning fog, but rather than being cold and uninviting, theirs is always welcoming and serene. Now they are in strange isolating cocoons, trapped in a bigger cocoon. No one of the crew feels at ease, yet this incarcerating shell of a ship is protecting them. They were just attacked, an attempt to disperse their essence into some unknown nothingness, and the shell that imprisons them has saved them.

Images of the vast cloud of home projects the crew's longing and homesickness, but they are mixed with various images of their current world. There is awe and wonder in the thoughts. They may be trapped in cocoons, isolated, yet those very same cocoons protect and provide. The small cocoons continue to adapt and accommodate, meeting their needs as well as enhancing and providing for each of their individual strengths and skills.

"The little communication I am sensing from these bipeds is monotone. It is like they merely state obvious observances but do not guide or instruct." In the ether of home, Com is a chatty, sociable presence. Now the confining cocoon offers every possible tool so that chatty, social persona can reach out and communicate; can hear and decipher.

In their ethereal world, Sci was the 'why?' of every group, every gathering or event. Always looking for cause and effect, looking for mechanism and purpose. "These bipeds, animal biped implune, are organized and advanced, but they do seem to function without a clear leadership hierarchy." The intrepid nature enhanced by the cocoon's tools.

"Right, right," Tac jumps in. "How about less words and more action before they kill us?"

Cap, a natural leader at home, responds, "will the ship protect us? Can it help communicate or retaliate without killing?"

"Their formation and constant movement prohibit a safe, clean retreat," says Nav.

Pi adds, "Nav is correct. I'd have to crash our way out."

"The ship has deflected their first two attacks," responds Tac, "but they appear to be preparing for a third, with all their members." Tac's position, based on his cocoon's tailored tools, was that a mass attack would overwhelm the ship. "And a forced exit will be thwarted by their numbers."

"No luck communicating?" Cap asks.

"Discongruent images, noise. No. Sorry." Com's reply is thick with regret.

"My controls show we can produce a tranquilizing pulse, multilateral, short range."

"Tac, do it." Cap says. "Pilot, fly away."

Nav suggests a route that follows the mama and calf creatures.

A flash of light pulses off the ship, like the shockwave of a nuclear blast, like the ripples from a stone disrupting calm waters; their teardrop shaped ship rides the wave out, away from the entrapment, like a bird catching thermal winds away from danger. To the crew, rushing past the Keepers, it looks like the flash only blinds. Blinds enough to mask their escape. "Pulse is effective," reports Tac. "All attackers are on the ground, stunned."

Sci adds, "those that were flying will be hurting when they wake up."

"Well then," says Cap, "let's not be near when their nap is over. Pilot, fly us to some poop."

"Running away to scoop creature poop. Great."

Tac's sarcasm goes unanswered but all the crew wonder what they are doing, what this strange place is, and what is next for them.

"Sensors are picking up several ships en-route," Com says.

"I sense alarm and single-minded purpose."

"Purpose?" asks Cap.

"The few clear images I am sensing all suggest trap and return for study."

"I don't like to study," Pi jokes, "but to be studied sounds far worse."

Tac agrees by saying, "run and scoop poop sounds good."

REVELATIONS

During their poop recovery excursion, Sci and Com exploited the tools provided by their cocoons, satisfying their unique perspicacious natures. Com notes that the Keepers, as the crew now routinely calls them, flew in ships that did not achieve a great height.

"They have little trouble clearing tall trees," Com explains, "but there appears to be a definitive limit to their rise."

Pi supposes, "that's why their ships are open-top."

"And why we inflicted physical harm to some when they were stunned by our blast," Nav says.

"They fell limp," Cap flashes the images of the sequence as he says, "some overboard."

Pi objects, saying, "not our intention."

"But the result none the less," sorrow weighing Cap's thoughts.

"Oh, but good to know," Tac jumps in. "It gives us a tactical advantage. Assuming we can rise higher."

"I believe we can," says Sci. "I believe the ship can safely take us totally off planet."

Silence follows as each entertains thoughts of home. Images of their nebulous home flash among them.

"Well," Cap breaks in, "it can certainly give us an advantage at evading these bipeds."

"That's another thing," Com continues, "these Keepers have come looking for us, but they can't seem to see us now."

"No sensors?" asks Pi.

Tac replies saying even with no or limited sensors, some of the second wave of Keeper have come close enough already for visuals. He speculates the why with "some sort of concealment."

"Cloaking?" asks Cap.

"Yes," Sci jumps in. "Now that it has come up, it explains why I've not seen our reflection." Curious about this ship that both entraps and protects them, Sci had been trying to catch a glimpse of it when ever crossing over bodies of water. "Never saw anything," Sci tells, "just figured the angels were wrong or we were moving too fast."

"Yet another tactical advantage," chimes in Tac.

"To evade and observe," offers Cap.

Cap suggests to test the possibility. "High enough to still be able to see. An aerie of sorts."

Pi complies, noting that their power levels did not change after scooping the extra poop. "It seems some of it has gone to generate and maintain that cloaking."

Sci adds that the ship probably anticipated their actions, "a bit creepy, but smart enough to provide necessary conditions for our continued survival."

"Creepy indeed," says Cap, "but one conundrum at a time. You made other observations?" The question is aimed at Sci and Com, but it is Tac who answers.

"Our bellicose friends from the cave did not slow in their predatory ways." Tac recalls a sequence, flashing as many images as he uses words, of an attack on a flock of large grass eaters. One prey is overcome, but at the cost of one of the predators. The fate of that fallen predator is not the same as the dead in the cave.

"It was eaten?" Com's outburst is mirrored in thought by the others.

"Other, smaller predators and carrion descend on the downed creature fast enough," they see the sequence. "It was the focus on the egg sacks that caught my attention." The creature's egg sacks are decimated by any and all that manage to get a hold. "A feeding frenzy," Tac says.

"They seem crazed by some blood lust for the eggs." Cap says what others are thinking.

"They gorged on gonad-rich gorp," Nav proclaims wryly.

Sci ignores Nav's quibble and goes on to speculate that the predator's behavior in the cave was perhaps unique. "The cave, lacking the threat of other predators. Out of the caves they are more cautious. Not amicable, but with greater self-preservation influence."

"Logical," says Cap, "and follows with the idea that this is a preserve, finely tuned to maintain a balance."

"Why?" asks Sci.

"By whose design?" Com wonders.

All wonder, "why are we here?"

CLOUDS

"There are seven preserves or unique, fenced-in eco-systems. This one being the largest. One is fully aquatic. Two are equal parts land and water." Getting a bird's eye view, drifting along with wispy white clouds, the crew study the verdant world below. Sci adds science facts to all the crew's observations.

"This is by far the most protean of areas," Sci goes on, "even with the seemingly voracious mean of the predators we met in the cave, this eco system offers a sybaritic environment to all its residents."

"Actually," chimes in Com, "all the eco systems have amicable, balanced environments for lifeforms in them."

"So," puts in Cap, "controlled environments?"

"Yes," Sci says. "Controlled, well planned, flourishing systems."

"Why?" Tac is the one to ask what all are wondering.

"Study," Sci answers matter of factly. "It is the sort of set-up I'd use if I wanted to study living organisms without interfering with their natural tendencies."

Sci and Com go on to explain scientific study systems and how providing for the most realistic environments for the studied creatures results in usable data. "Four of the creatures in this system are also in two others, suggesting the particular species is more adaptive than others."

"That," Com interjects, "or a species of particular interest to the one's doing the studying."

"Ah, yes, who ever is the orchestrator of the place." Cap's words are laden with disdain and resentment. "It feels like hector vailed in scientific study."

"Without knowing the why, it is hidebound to condemn."

"So, not the Keepers?" asks Pi.

"They are, so far, the only ones with advance tech."

"Correct," Sci addresses Tac's comment. "Advanced tech, but limited."

"Limited?" Pi asks.

"Yes," answers Sci. During the observation from the clouds Sci notices the Keeper's movements and interactions with the creatures and preserves. "They maintain the eco system only superficially. Only when things out of the normal occur."

"Like us showing up," interrupts Cap.

"Like us showing up," agrees Sci. "But only to identify source of disruption, remove it if possible, as they seem to intend to do with us."

"But no attempt to communicate or interact in any way?"

"Correct, Cap. They are minders of the land. A barrier falters or fails, they come in to fix it. A tree falls or a creature dies, they document. No interaction. No communication."

"And their tech is rudimentary. Simple, rugged tech," Com adds.

Cap muses out-loud, "made for field work, far away from home."

"And we have located their home," Sci says, unphased by the revelation. "Not far from here."

"A city?" Pi asks, his excitement showing through vibrations of his cocoon, like a child's body shaking in laughter.

"A cleared area," Com explains, "fenced in by force fields, several serviceable structures for storage and living quarters."

"Not a city," Cap's words are neither questions nor fact; more like resigned confirmation.

Sci goes on to explain that the Keepers, though living, flesh creatures, are more like programmed machines, not diverging from required duties. "Maintenance crews for the preserves, barely autonomous."

"Explains their odd communications," says Com.

"Explains their approach to us," Cap suggests, adding, "they reacted to an intrusion outside normal operating processes by trying to remove the intruders."

"Collect and hold for study," Sci says.

"Study by others," Tac's agreement reflects all their anguish and disappointment.

"And we are back to the who and why."

"That's true, Cap," Sci replies, "but we are now in a position to gather data; to gather understanding."

"Without having to run from predators or evade automaton Keepers," Com suggests, some levity peppering the tone. "The Keepers have gone back to their regular duties."

"Already forgotten," cavils Nav.

Questions of logistics of staying in the clouds come up. No aerial predators to worry about and plenty of fuel to stay up – Sci quickly gives assuagement to those worries.

A plan is agreed upon which will take the crew over each eco system. "To observe and gather data."

"Spy and gossip," Tac's playful nature tries to counterpoise for the otherwise prosaic plans.

"To play overlords and keepers ourselves," says a more edgy and sarcastic Nav.

Sci tries at composure, saying they will not be interfering or interacting in any way with the eco system lifeforms.

"Unless sentient," offers Tac.

"No," interjects Cap. "I think even with sentient species, I believe we will not interact at all until we understand the nature, the purpose of this planet."

"No worries," says Sci. "No sentient species has been detected nor any evidence of such ever existing."

"Beyond the Keepers and creators of all this," Com offers.

"Beyond them," agrees Sci.

"Then let's spy and gossip," Cap says, his tone and images drenched in mischievousness.

CONTACT

"All the eco systems are analogous in respect to balance, hale in unique diversity of plant and animal." The crew have just surveyed all the preserves and Sci is summarizing findings. They are now hovering over the Keeper's compound, some boredom blooming like a nocturnal flower watching the day's gloaming to fade, anticipating the coming of the midnight hour.

Breaking the latest contemplative moment of silence, Pi says, "hale as in healthy, robust."

The role of the Keepers had been discussed. Exhaustively is the word used to reflect their discourse. Pi's remark reflects the exhaustion over the balanced eco system.

"Healthy, robust, with no one species subjugating the rest or becoming dominant," Sci's words intone finality.

"The Keepers are the anomaly," Cap whispers, more as a vocalized thought than an addition to the reports.

"Their role has been observed," Com adds, "and experienced."

All know but Tac is the one to say, "intercede only to clean and remove anything not necessary or part of the system."

Sci does not respond to the comment but goes on to say, "we have detected an advanced communication set-up capable of long range local as well as interstellar transmissions, but have not detected it's use since we've been in our cloud nest."

Com adds, "best we can tell, the Keepers, by flub or dereliction in tutelary duties, have not used the equipment in quite some time."

"Not a malfunction?" asks Cap.

"Not on," decries Tac.

"Right. We detected a stand-by mode, but for all intent and purpose, the Keepers have it set to not receive."

"Ha," Pi offers, "those moxie Keepers are ghosting their makers."

"Hmm," Cap considers the ghosting. "Can we turn it on?" he asks. "Can we un-ghost whoever they might communicate with?"

Com says, "should be able to not only listen to any in-coming traffic but also ping any aery listener."

A change to their current spy and gossip only position gets all their attention. A flurry of images, delphic in detail but suggesting action, fills their minds.

"It will require physical interaction with their equipment," Com says.

"We'd have to flip a switch?" Tac's question is felt by all.

"Essentially, yes," says Com. "But only one of us need do it."

An uproar of suggestions, comments, and one recurring question turn the normally tranquil tear-drop ship into a bubble of noise.

The one question being, "can it be done?"

(Well, the question all thought but none put out for others was, "who will go?")

Cap won the fight to be the lone interloper. "Most disposable of them all," was his winning argument. Cap told them, "I'm not a ruler of you but unifier. Any of you can take my place should things go wrong."

The first test came in ejecting Cap's cocoon from the ship. "Not dead," is all he projects back to the crew, along with images of his flight to the ground. "Like looking through the eyes of some crazed flying inset," someone offers.

Upon landing, Cap projects images of his movements and describes the cocoon's transmutations to facilitate them. "It morphs around me," Cap reports, "at times for locomotion much like the biped Keepers."

The crew's messages of 'fascinating' and 'any keepers?' go unanswered until Cap calls back with, "done."

On Cap's return there are more question about the cocoon, the flight, and the "waling" than about the communication gear or the Keeper's compound. The crew is excited about the idea of leaving the confines of the ship, of exploring this odd world from beyond sensor readings and projected images.

"What was it like, walking?" asks Nav.

Pi wonders about the flying. "Yo had control? The cocoon provided propulsion?"

Even level-headed Sci chimes in with "what did it feel like to be alone, so independent and free?"

"The cocoon provided the perfect protean environment," Cap explains to the restless crew. "It changed shape for flying, then for the walking. Out of the ship the cocoon is less a restrain or cage and more like an extension of me."

"More skeleton shell than confining bubble," Sci supposes out loud.

"Right," Cap agrees. "Like the outer shell of one of the predators."

"Or a Keeper's garment," suggests Com.

"A suit for movement out of the ship," says Sci, as if finding a final piece to a puzzle.

"Out of the ship or away from home ethereal," Cap's words touch the crew. Mixed in their excitement and sense of wonder is also sorrow and reminiscence.

All are startled from their personal revery by Com's screech.

"Our ping has been answered," Com blurts with a hardly restrained energy. "It is an answer directed at us, not the Keepers."

Chaos ensues as thoughts, questions, and demands explode from the crew. It is as if the start signal has been given for a race but no course is laid out and all the participants race in whatever direction they want.

"They wish us to restore communication with the Keepers," Com shouts over the unruly crew. "Once communication with the Keepers is restored and their directives reestablished and ensured, they will address us."

Interstellar communication has a lag time so the crew is instructed to hold all question and comments. Then a familiar but sterile voice, like hearing a staticy recording of a loved one years after they have left our lives, tells a long tale of times before, plans conjured then set into being, and hopes for a far distant future.

"Our nebulous world, kith and kin to worlds, has existed for millennium, ever changing, undulating, reaching beyond and retreating back. We have been observers of the galaxies, sometimes like proud parents as new worlds are birthed, sometimes as grown children saying a last farewell to a departing parent. We have felt the joys of new additions to our ether, their eagerness, hopes, and dreams invigorating our cloud, as we have felt pangs of regret, wrongs done, and familiar voices forever gone silent. Never was there a thought, a hint of a felling, nor a nightmare flash of our nebulous airy world fading away as a whole. It is fading. We are dying.

The world the crew was sent to, with its perfect eco systems, diverse lifeforms, and efficient though slightly faulty autonomous Keepers, was a project created in secrecy, full of hope.

"We sought our salvation," the mournful voice tells them, "only to expose our greatest fault. Hubris. All the worlds we have seen rise, come to be and grow to flourish, end. And it is the strongest, the entities with most potential, most dominance, that see the end coming, point to it's causes, often born by themselves, have the means to mitigate, and end up doing nothing meaningful about it. We thought we would do better, be different, yet here we are, our superiority letting our world die."

The crew sit in silence, taking in the information as one might knowingly absorb lethal waves of radiation. The eco systems were a test to expose a living creature, sentient, adaptable, and dominating, that could absorb their essence.

"Our souls would fill their empty shells, living on in perpetuity. So thought the greatest minds of the nebulous. Minds great by hubris. No creature was good enough. No combination created one dominant force over all others that also produced a stable, lasting world.

"The final blow came when the Keepers broke communications. They are hardly sentient, machines, really, yet keen, self-aware enough to know no creature would suit us, and the creature's lives were just as precious as ours."

The crew, with it's semi-organic tear-drop ship and highly adaptive cocoons was sent to restore communication. "And investigate."

"Our truly best minds created the ship and personalized shells, but none ever came up with a grand purpose. So we sent you blind. Desperation."

For all the questions the crew once tormented themselves with, not one is uttered when the transmission ends. What is there to say? They are dying. Dead.

"Explore," the staticy voice tells them. After another pause in silence it adds, "the planet is yours. You be the new caretakers. Let the shells satisfy your fancies. Explore your talents, loves, wonders. Let passion and compassion be your life."

The speaker is done. Their last words saturated with a sad finality. The crew stagger, like a dying creature long-lived and now drained of all will except to find a secluded place to fade away. A collective sigh follows, then some random noise sneaks into the silence like a thief in the night, then a question, like the why of an eager, brimming with life energy child crackles through the communication device.

"Can more cocoons be made?" Sci is the inquisitive child.

A wait, painful, agonizing, yet drenched heavy in reliance, drenched with hope.

"We can make as many as you may ever need," replies the statically voice. They can even send the tools and materials needed to make more, that ghostly voice tells them.

Sci practically shouts the next words at the sky: "not for us, for you. Join us."

Join us.

THE END