

Seventeen Gam Theta

By K.L.A. Hyatt

Coming out of deep space, we cruised our carapods through the port at the upper part of our home ship. Each pilot in our clutch landed her vessel in a specific docking bay and began to disengage from the carapod's systems. Once I had severed links with the biomech's nervous system and com links, I slid out of the pilot's hold into zero-G. I stretched long sending myself into a slow flip. In the docking bay next to me, Seventeen Gam Iota held on to her carapod and kicked her legs in a little jig to alleviate the pins and needles. After some mild jokes at Iota's expense, we settled into the chore of caring for the exoskeleton of our carapods.

Seventeen Gam clutch had been out on a long-range scouting mission. We had surveyed Raccroc 4.8-74/6° to evaluate its suitability as a potential home planet. It had been a disappointing mission and we were all plaintive while doing our post-mission work. The planet had many of the characteristics we were looking for but the air was toxic to us in our current form. I thought it would take at least four generations before we would be able to produce people able to live in that environment. Everyone was hopeful we could find a planet we could settle on immediately.

I examined my exoskeleton for wear, missing my extra set of limbs. After spending hours inside a giant beetle-like cyborg vessel, it was hard to get used to being so much smaller, with only four limbs and no pincers. I often felt the phantom limbs in my middle long after a mission was completed.

My eighteen sisters, the pilots in my clutch, talked quietly among themselves. Rho and Beta, the most raucous of my sisters, shared a joke that made them laugh loudly, disturbing the relative quiet of the docking bay. Many of my sisters were excited about a program being presented in the ship's main hull in an hour. However, I was looking forward to finishing a book on Earth physics in my bunk.

Rho and Beta finished first and rushed to the hyperdissecting lock, yelling their general goodbyes. Several other sisters were just leaving when we heard Sixteen Gam clutch fly into their docking bay immediately below ours. They had been sent farther afield to scout a different planet. Thirteen Gam clutch had been sent out too, but I could see that they had arrived back hours before my own clutch. There were only six of them left and they were getting quite old to be still flying missions. As far as I knew, they were going to be retired in the next cycle after the Eighteen Gam clutch was ready to fly. Right now Eighteen Gam were still pupating with their carapods.

Iota was just leaving when she stopped and asked, "Theta, you're going too right?"

I smiled and shook my head in the negative.

"Suit yourself, you always do," she replied and flicked her long forked tongue at me in a silly gesture.

I finished working on my own carapod and gave it a loving buff with my sleeve. It had been a part of me since my own pupation many cycles before. I was as fond of it as my own body, for in a way it was. It

had been designed and constructed by others, but it was my interconnection with it that made it an important tool for exploring for a new world to colonize.

Satisfied that the exoskeleton was in tip top shape, I inserted the tubes that would nourish the interior of the vessel, keeping it alive and well-fed until the next outing.

My sisters were all gone ahead by the time I propelled myself to the hyperdisinfecting lock. Inside, I stripped off my flight suit and floated naked while I was treated with a series of lights and sounds, the air whisked around me. Home ship was ever vigilant about keeping out any potential contamination. When the treatment was done, the lock unsealed itself gravity side and I stepped out into the empty locker room and put on my casual tunic uniform. I smoothed down my shag of black prickly hair and sighed because it looked exactly the same. Hair was such a nuisance. It was a remnant of our human ancestors but served no purpose for us in our current forms.

I left the locker room and headed for the elevator chute. Heading towards me were two officers, so I stepped to the side, my back against the wall. The uniform of one was highly decorated—a commander and obviously of advanced age. As the two neared, I could just make out the symbols on their name badges.

14 Jes 6

8 Gam 1

The Jes Division were the administrative units. They never left gravity, for all their duties were of a practical nature and included ship maintenance, supplies, and other such day-to-day needs. The Jes were shorter and slimmer than the combat divisions, Gam and Hern. Their skin was a light pearl gray and their fingers were even longer than my own with an extra joint to them.

When I saw the name of the decorated officer, Eight Gam Theta, I nearly lost my composure. She was one of my own division but from a far earlier clutch. I had heard that she was one of the commanding officers of our ship, Arach 6 Scouting, but I'd never seen her before. She must be the oldest surviving Gam. I knew for a fact that the Ten and Eleven Gams had been wiped out and that there were a few remaining Twelve, but an Eight was practically a myth.

I tried to examine her appearance without outwardly appearing to do so. She was just my height with the same dark grey skin, creased and baggy around her narrow, pointy face. Her hair stubble was pure white.

I tried to remain steady as they neared, holding my breath until they passed. Eight Gam Theta stopped short when she saw my name. "Ah, another Gam Theta," she said. I nodded. "Seventeen Gam Theta, then you are one of our newest clutches."

"Yes, Commander," I replied.

"You were on a mission today, were you not?" she said, turning to face me. Disinterested, Fourteen Jes Ka looked down the hallway.

“Yes, Commander.”

“Just returning?”

“Yes, Commander. I’ve just finished caring for my carapod. My sisters have all gone ahead.”

“Your carapod,” she said wistfully. “I’m glad to understand that you take good care of it. I miss mine so.” A nervous look must have passed across my face. “I lost mine during a battle many cycles ago.” She smiled at me. “I suppose that is why I’m the oldest living Gam.”

She reached out and patted me on the shoulder. “Good work, Pilot.” Then she walked on, Jes Ka beside her.

I was a little stunned to be so noticed by such a high-ranking officer. When they were no longer in sight, I made my way to the elevator chute, then down to the mess room. Several of my sisters were still there. I told them of my encounter with much glee while I ate the awful porridge available at all times for self-service. We were too late from our mission for a proper dinner.

My sisters were as amazed as I was to learn about Eight Gam Theta and gushed how lucky I was that we shared a name. Before long a trill sounded through the coms speaker indicating that the program was about to begin. My sisters left me to finish my porridge.

The room was empty as I disposed of my dishes. I took the long way back to our compartment, going by the main hull. I passed it on an upper platform, looking down at the filled room below. It was packed with people enjoying themselves. On a holo-projector in the center was an entertainment. Six Det Thaal, a professional jokester, was hosting a live program from our home ship, Pioneer. As she told jokes about the Explorers’ funny-looking bodies and bulbous heads, a series of cartoonish images passed through the hologram. The figures looked nothing like the original humans from Earth. The Explorers were supposed to resemble original humans.

When we left the earth on the Pioneer and Explorer resettlement ships, many hundreds of cycles before, we all were human. The Explorer had a smooth journey that allowed them to expand their technologies far beyond ours. The Pioneer encountered a virus that nearly wiped out the entire population. The only way to survive was to make ourselves resistant to the virus by combining our DNA with other living creatures. Insect DNA proved the most resilient and from there we developed into the specialized segments of our society as it is now.

The goal for all of us descended from those on the Pioneer is to find a home world to settle. One that would allow us to devolve back into a more homogenous society.

I watched the holographic entertainment for only a few minutes, but I found that it did not interest me—even though my shipmates were howling with laughter below. I moved on to the Seventeen Gam compartment. On entering our suite, I found my sister Delta on the platform at the center of the concave

room taking a lesson in fluloon from Fourteen Gam Nu who was quite accomplished at the complex instrument. Delta was still a novice and I wished she didn't need so much practice.

On the upper platform of the concave were our individual bunks. With a wave to Delta and Fourteen Gam Nu, I slid open the door to mine and lay down. Our bunks were just long enough for us to lie down and stretch and just wide enough to roll over a few times. My own bunk was austere with little decoration. Only a picture of the old Earth with its blue oceans and brown lands was on the wall at the foot of my bed.

Out of a shelf recess, I pulled out my handle. Once clear of the shelf, its screen descended displaying my personal choices. I choose the book I had been reading and settled in to relax.

A claxson grew louder in a rising crescendo. I woke with a start, still holding my handle. The screen had evaporated. I had no idea how long I'd been asleep. I released the door and stood up. Many of my sisters were already crowding around the hologram on the center platform below. I stepped down to get a closer look as the remainder of my sisters exited their bunks, some pulling clothing on as they moved towards the hologram. From the corner of my eye, I saw Rho's bunk door slide open slightly and saw a face peek out. Seeing that the whole clutch was already viewing the screen, her door slid open and she tumbled out with a male whom she pushed ahead of her out the main door. From the look of him, out of uniform it was hard to tell, I thought he was from the research level, perhaps even the larval incubators.

Rho saw that I noticed, her black eyes growing wide, so wide a hint of white showed around the edges. She gave me a pleading look and a little shake of her head. A clutch's quarters was meant to be an inner sanctum private to them. There were private rooms available for personal play. Rho and her lover could get into a lot of trouble, but I just shrugged and turned back to the center of the room. Though I did wonder how often she had done such a thing before. Her bunk was right next to the main door. The

The hologram on the platform was framed in red for emergency. Down one side ran the orders for each division. In the center showed an Explorer ship—a large long-range cruiser with ancillary guard ships surrounding it. The Explorer were close and had not yet attacked, perhaps they hadn't even detected our presence. This time we would be bringing the attack to them.

As soon as the orders for the Gam Division ran through, we turned as one for the hatch next to the port window. It was a tube that took us directly to the docking floors. One by one we jumped up and were pushed the twenty floors to our dock at the top of the station. In single file, we exited and jogged quickly towards our locker room, the reduced pull of gravity on the upper floors aided our passage. Most of my sisters were silent as we changed into our flight suits. Only a few made nervous jokes and whispers.

I was one of the first out the lock and into the docking bay. I propelled myself over the others' carapods until I got to my own, marked by a large 1 on its thorax. I slid a hand lovingly over its smooth shell as I made my way to its hookups. Disengaged, it shook with a small tremor as its muscles woke up. While

floating in a quick circle, I did a quick check of the built-in externals—fuel, arms, compressors, communications, thrusters—all was as it should be.

My sisters were all completing similar inspections and nearly as one, we pulled up our hoods on our flight suits, engaged the eyewear, and made for the interiors of our ships. Sliding into the soft, narrow compartment was like coming home. The Gam division was genetically engineered to be at one with their carapods. That was why we spent so long pupating from larvae to adult, so we would feel most comfortable in our exoskeletons.

At ease inside the familiar damp dark, I hooked myself the carapod's nervous system and shut the hatch, feeling the automatic pressurization. I toggled the communications switch and took a deep breath letting myself synchronize with my exoskeleton. I stretched my new limbs and clamped my pincers. It felt right.

“This is Seventeen Gam Alpha. Roll call.” Our sister Alpha was the de facto leader of our clutch due more to the arbitrariness of the naming convention than true leadership. Yet the other eighteen of us called out in descending order of our names without question. During the check in, I turned on the compression thrusters and prepared for undocking.

Alpha made the command to undock the carapods and we drifted free. I climbed to the side of the docking port to let my sisters out first watching the legs of their carapods scramble for the air lock. As soon as Alpha reached the lock, it opened and her carapod careened out into the dark, its wingtips flaring while its legs tucked into the ducts between the upper and lower shells.

I was the last to exit. I was naturally more cautious than my sisters, as had been established early on in our upbringing, so my role was to fly in the rear, to watch everything, and to offer guidance as needed. Once we were all launched we settled into our true formation. Beta, Eta, and Nu flying point. Rho above, Chi below. My thirteen other sisters flying in rotation in the middle and me at the upper back watching them all. Sixteen and Fifteen Gams had launched before us. Thirteen and Fourteen would be following close behind. Less than two long measures out, Fifteen moved off to horizon left in order to take the Explorers from the side.

It was only a matter of minutes before they would be in our sights—that was how close they had come to us. The navigators on the bridge were chatting excitedly about something, I could hear them through my coms. Something about an Explorers ship without the technology to perceive our presence in this quadrant. The R&D team's latest technical development allowed us to hide the heat and sound signatures of our ships from the Explorers. The only defense they had was to utilize an old Earth technology that had long been out of use, something called radar. The navigators were thrilled because the ship we were to engage was not equipped with it. Our attack would have the element of surprise.

The cruiser we were approaching must have been a long-cycle research vessel. I'd read that the Explorers were constantly searching the neighboring planets of the system for potential materials and elements to improve their already far advanced technologies. This vessel must not have been upgraded with the old technologies—to our gain.

The Gam clutches traveled in silence as we neared the Explorers ship's quadrant. Even the navigators' chatter died away as the battle approached.

I saw the Explorers' ship and its ancillaries on my systems well before I could make out the main ship itself. Even with the telescoping ability of my carapod's eyes, it was hard to make out. It reflected very little light. As I was straining to see, a flash of light to my lower left eye blinded me for a second. Then another. I pulled in the telescoping to normal sight. My coms told me it was the Fifteen clutch attacking from the side, but it was well too early for the Explorers to have scrambled their fighters.

"Advance, advance," came the orders from our navigator.

Alpha gave the order, "Up to speed six." My carapod charged up as I reacted to the orders.

The clutch had barely hit speed five when they were upon us. The Explorers' fighters used some sort of cloaking technology so that I couldn't see them with my system or eyes until they were practically upon us. "Incoming sub-horizon left," I shouted on our clutch's com frequency, but I was already too late. Three of my sisters were hit. I continued to shout, "Three freighters with unmanned fighters."

Rho and Iota had both evaded and were now attacking from above. Alpha led in six of our sisters for a head on attack. Just in front of me, Omi and Sigma dove straight down. I remained behind using my long-range laser to pick off the fighters one-by-one.

The unmanned craft were numerous but easy to destroy. They operated on a fixed algorithm and couldn't adapt to changes easily. While their software was updated after every encounter, we were told, they couldn't adapt in-flight. We could.

Soon there were smaller explosions dotting the sky. From the coms I heard that Fifteen and Thirteen Gam were destroyed and Sixteen had taken heavy casualties. Our heavy artillery carapod division, Hern, had been dispatched and were on their way.

I had watched a screen about old Earth that described the insects known as ants. That is what the unmanned fighters looked like to me. We would take out ten and there would be fifteen more. Tau and Mu had landed on one of the freighters and were tearing it apart with their pincers and lasers. Just before it exploded, they both took off, but Mu was picked off by a fighter before she could get far enough away. When the freighter exploded, a half dozen of the unmanned fighters that I could see went dead, hurtling off into space.

"Concentrate on the freighters," I directed. "The fighters won't fire on you while you're on them. Alpha took her team to the nearest freighter while the rest of us concentrated on reducing the number of fighters. In minutes the second freighter was gone, but so were two more of our clutch. Sixteen Gam was down to three fighters who were on their way to join us. Fourteen Gam were still holding out, but just.

Another two freighters soon joined the remaining freighter and once again we were deluged by unmanned fighters. In a few minutes the Hern division would catch up. We just had to hold out until then.

My long-range laser was getting too hot so I had to be more careful with its use. I let go two shots, one hit my target the other going long out into the dark. I half wondered as I locked on my next target how far the shot would go before hitting something solid or coming across an atmosphere.

With my next shot my long-range laser was done. The only way I could help now was to join in the melee. I scanned my systems and examined the scene before me in case there were any “ins” I could offer. My heart skipped a beat when I saw that the Hern Division was fast approaching.

Preparing for a dive under to help Delta’s team on the horizon right, I just barely noticed when one of the Hern Division ships blinked out of sight. Then two more. I was already moving into my dive when a powerful shot streamed by sending a shockwave through my carapod. I pulled my dive up short. Examining the space nearby. The Hern Division was in disarray, some seemed to be wounded and were making their way back to Arach 6. Others were still moving forward, but going faster than any of them, making straight for our battle, was an Explorer ship—a small expeditionary ship. One that was obviously manned with heavy weaponry.

I started moving again, calling out to my sisters and the remaining Fourteen Gam what was going on. Knowing that I was the first thing between the armored cruiser and its mothership, I went into zigzag motion, opening up my compression thrusters and using one wing at a time to make my movements random. Two more shots rang by me before the cruiser was too close to fire again.

I spiraled away as it went past now firing on my sisters. I saw two more of them taken out. The small cruiser had come from nowhere. Now it was after my sisters. The coms from navigation were saying to press on. Fourteen Gam had broken through to the main ship.

What remained of the Seventeen Gam were attaching themselves to the remaining two freighters. The short-range cruiser wouldn’t fire on its own ships—even though it had no problem taking out its own unmanned fighters. It looked like it was making its way back to the home ship where the Fourteen Gam was causing a ruckus.

I sent my carapod into a shallow dive, blasting the thrusters to their full extent. As the cruiser passed near the freighters, I came up some distance in front of it and killed my thrusters. My plan relied on the shear hope that the cruiser would be so preoccupied with the dangers my sisters posed that they wouldn’t notice a dead-in-the-water beetle exoskeleton. It sent several shots towards the freighters, but my sisters were hiding on their backsides probably working their pincers into the hulls. One of the freighters exploded. The short cruiser blasted its propulsion mechanism and it took off. I easily attached myself as it whisked by. Secure on the bottom, I closed down my wing tips. I crawled carefully up to the wing and used my canon to blow it off. As the short cruiser began slowly careening out of control. I tucked three sticker bombs into the plates in the hull and detached myself as the cruiser spiraled away.

When it exploded, the force of the blast blew me off course directly into the Explorers main ship. I landed with a thud on the smooth upper side, the breath knocked out of me, amidst a barrage of twisted metal and parts.

It took me a moment to get my bearings. There was some gravity here holding me to the ship, at least enough that I didn't go flying into space. Looking into the dark I could see flashes of explosions. Sparks of light flaring for just an instant. Checking my systems, I found that my undercarriage had been damaged and was leaking. My compression unit would only be able to keep the air internalized for a few minutes more. Maybe as long as a half hour. Not long enough to get back to Arach 6.

But I was on an Explorer cruiser. No one got this close to one of these ships. Any of the Explorers' cruisers destroyed were the result of specialized missiles too large for any mere carapod or armored pod to wield. Yet, here I was and I had a chance, a small chance, to try to heavily damage the ship before our reinforcements arrived. Turning around I looked for an angle on the smooth surface, something I could use to lever myself. I didn't think any of my weaponry alone would be able to breach the thick surface material.

I scuttled along towards the rear of the ship, at last finding a six meter indentation with a jutting overhang. It must have been some sort of release hatch. Standing back I used my close-range laser to rip a seam into the indentation. The laser alone wouldn't be able to breach the ship skin material. Moving into the indentation, I wedged the carapod's body in, using the front and rear legs to push at either side.

There was a slight rumbling, almost like the feeling in my head when I hum, but stronger. A faint light shimmered around the surface of the ship. An odd pressure enveloped the carapod. It felt like something was trying to rip me apart from every square inch. My ears popped, then it was gone. I stopped trying to open the seal and looked out over the surface of the cruiser and out into the nothing of space. There were no signs of battle. There was nothing but black.

I scanned my systems. No sign of any of our ships. I was growing anxious. What could have happened to all my sisters? What kind of weapon was this? I studied the formations of the home ship's ancillaries—the freighters and guard ships. I must have scanned each bit of data ten times before I noticed it. The ancillaries were in the same positions, exactly, as when I had first sighted them before the battle started. There were fourteen, just as there had been before. But I personally saw four of the freighters destroyed and I know more vessels probably had been by the other clutches.

I took a deep breath and relaxed into thinking, turning over the problem since I seemed to be well hid in my spot on the surface of the ship.

The Explorers were known for their sophisticated technology. Our spies had given us many insights into their advances. There was one thing it might be. I thought it was just a rumor, just gossip, but what if it wasn't? I had heard the Explorers could bend pockets of space and time to a small degree. What if that was what they had done? What if I had been sucked back in time with the ship?

I had no way of knowing if it was true. Actually none of the Pioneers could know for certain. If we had been sent back in time, how would we know it? How could we tell? Maybe this wasn't even the first time it had happened. Right now another version of myself could be heading right into battle. A battle that this time would be stacked against us.

As if to reinforce my thoughts, four of the freighters split off from the group and headed in the direction of Arach 6. That movement galvanized me into action. I would destroy the ship myself and give my other self a chance to live.

I put even more effort into pulling apart the seam in the ship's surface. I felt the crack in my carapod grow even longer, but at last I felt the Explorers ship exterior break. I looked down into what seemed like a duct system. On the edge of the break, I put two sticker bombs and backed away, low to the surface. The bombs went off with a burst of escaping air and materials.

I scrambled the carapod to the jagged edge of the hole I'd just blown using my pincers to keep from being flung into space by the escaping air pressure. I pulled myself into the hole just as some flexible, metal-like fabric was flung out covering the chasm my bombs had made. Not all of the carapod made it through. As the material sealed the rupture, my back right leg was still outside and was severed.

Gripping the ceiling of the room I had just entered, my sensors indicated that the area had pressurized. The material must work as a stopgap measure for breaches.

I looked around me then, my vision going to infrared in the near darkness. I was in a storeroom of some sort—crates were piled up every which way. Looking down, I saw that the bombs had created a crater going several levels deeper. I needed to get as low as I could. The gravity up here was light, so I needed to head towards the source of it. Explorer ships used a similar energy source to our own that also generated the ship's gravity. A technology developed on the old Earth generations before our migration. If I could get to the source, I'd have a good chance of disabling the ship.

On the levels below I could see movement. I needed to act fast before I was swarmed with soldiers. I let fly two canon blasts into the vertical tunnel I had already begun. Then fired two more. Before the smoke and debris had cleared I dived down the hole. I could feel the pull of the artificial gravity get stronger.

I was jolted in my hold when the carapod could fall no longer. Looking around, I tried to assess my position, but the air was thick with dust and smoke. I tried to move, but found it difficult. I was in some sort of small room.

Just then the debris and smoke was sucked up. The Explorers must have released the material covering the rupture, pulling all the smoke out. As quickly as it started, it stopped. Air pressure returning to normal. Now that I could see, I found myself in a hallway. The hole I had made continued down several more levels, but the carapod had fallen onto a jagged shelf.

I had just barely come to this conclusion when my sensors indicated a blast of some sort had hit the outer shell. Looking round I saw an armed unit of soldiers running down the hallway, two abreast, towards me. I launched a canon blast down the hallway and dropped into the hole again.

When I landed this time, after a much shorter fall, I knew the carapod was wedged even tighter than before. Checking my systems I found that the carapod was jammed between two floors. The thorax above and the abdomen below. It was time to get out of my beloved exoskeleton.

I used the emergency protocols to disconnect from the systems. While they shut down, I disengaged the personal firearms, strapping them to my thighs. One last look through the eyes of the carapod showed me another military unit running along a hallway towards the upper half, they were shooting random shots.

I slid out of the hold, landing with a thud on the floor, not used to exiting the carapod in gravity. I pulled off my goggles and hood to better see. I was in a large room that seemed to be some sort of manufacturing lab—shiny metal parts and conveyor belts.

I reached back inside the carapod, reaching for the hidden panel that would let me commence the self-destruct procedure. Once set, I would have about a minute before the systems over heated and blew up.

With one last loving stroke along the shell of my second self, I turned to run, only to find myself not five meters from two Explorers. They both wore baggy coats. I couldn't tell if they were male or female—they looked so much alike. They stared at me with faces that seemed to express both fascination and horror.

I had never seen a real one up close. I was transfixed by their oversized heads and small bodies. Their limbs seemed so short and useless. They did look somewhat similar to holograms I'd seen of original humans, but not quite as symmetrical.

A shout from above brought me to attention. The armed unit had reached the upper part of the carapod. Looking for a way out, I saw that there was a crack large enough in the floor of this level that would allow me to jump through to the next. I slipped through it barely. The pursuing soldiers would never get their big heads through that way. This time I was in a dimly lit room filled with giant boxes that smelled most foul. I had to get out of there and not just because of the smell. My carapod would be getting very hot by this time and I didn't want to be standing under the explosion.

There were doors in three sides of the room. One had a window next to it that revealed a smaller room. No good. I sprinted for the nearest door. There was no way to open it that I could see. Dashing to the third door, I found a screen pad next to the door, but it wouldn't react to my skin. I took a firearm from the holster on my thigh and shot it. No response. I shot at the door and barely scratched it. Frantically looking for anyway to exit, I couldn't see any way out. Out of frustration, I shot at the wall next to the door. A large hole dissolved around my shot.

“Ha!” I said out loud and shot more holes until I could push my way through. I was in a narrow hallway, only wide enough for myself and barely tall enough. It ran some distance in each direction before curving out of sight. Turning towards the back end of the ship, I ducked my head and sprinted, throwing my arms forward to help gain speed. I hadn't gone twenty meters before my beloved carapod met its demise. The explosion shook the whole cruiser and knocked me to the ground.

I felt the air gust past me back from whence I'd run. The explosion must have blasted a hole in the hull. That meant I was close to the bottom.

Which I should have realized quicker. The pull of the artificial gravity here was fierce. No wonder I couldn't run very fast.

As the air whipping around me slowed, I stood up and jogged down the path. After the hallway curved, I came to a large chamber that seemed to follow the shape of the outside hull on the left side. The space was filled with technology I didn't understand—both below and soaring far above me. The space wasn't long, just deep, and the path I was on turned into a narrow bridge leading to another hallway. About ten meters below were a number of Explorers in those baggy coats.

It hit me that this was probably the engine room of the great ship. The gravity center had to be close by.

Taking both of my firearms out and holding one in each hand, I took a breath. I sprinted out into the middle of the bridge. Stopped long enough to aim my weapons and fired repeatedly on the machines below me. I took off again shooting above and behind me as I made it to the next hallway.

As I stopped to take stock and a much needed breath, I heard screams coming from the open cavern. What was more disturbing was that I could hear the sound of many people running echoing from the hallway I just left.

I steadied myself trying to determine what my next action should be. Taking that quiet moment in the middle of the chaos gave me direction. Not only was the gravity weighing me to the floor, heavily, it was also pulling me towards the wall, towards the middle of the ship. I took off running again, looking for any way out of the narrow hall. It curved off to the right, seeming to circle the posterior of the ship. I passed several screens, probably ventilation, but no hatchways or doors.

It wasn't until the curved hallway began to straighten again that I saw a door on the left. Just in time too as I could feel the floor shaking underneath me from soldiers pursuing me from behind.

There was no lock on the door and no handle. It merely slid from one side to the other into a pocket in the door frame. I felt deflated thinking that this couldn't possibly be the way to the gravitational source. But I had no time to dally and blindly went into the dark room.

Which turned out to be a spiral stair case. It was too small for me and I had to slither down it to get through. Hastily assessing my surroundings, I found I was on a platform jutting out into a narrow tube-shaped room only a few meters up the floor and a dozen or so below the ceiling. The unusual room was lit by a warm light and stepping towards the edge of the platform, I looked down into the gravitational source, the source of energy for the whole ship.

It was an old technology that hadn't been surpassed since the Explorer and the Pioneer left Earth. I didn't know how it worked. I was no engineer and my limited knowledge of physics left a lot wanting. I didn't

even know if harming it would destroy the ship, or even if I could harm it. I stared into its bright light, bouncing from the surface mirror-like.

I aimed my firearms and took two shots directly into it. The light flared but nothing more. I heard voices then and turned to see soldier balanced on the upper steps aiming a firearm at me. I moved aside, but a fraction too late and was hit in the arm. My weapon flew from my hand.

Without a second thought I jumped from the platform flinging myself into the energy source. Aiming my weapon at it and firing as I fell.

As I plummeted down, I fleetingly thought of my other self who would be anxiously heading towards battle, just as I was just a little while ago. Then out of nowhere the Explorers' cruiser would explode in a single sudden flash of light. I wished I could tell her what I've done, what I've seen.

Then there was only light and a brief moment of pain.