

CONTACT

By Philip Rainford

Sharon McCall peeled her long blonde hair from her face and stared through the haze for any sign of her companions. There was none, only that endless sparsely vegetated landscape reminding her of the barren deserts of Central Australia where she'd grown up. The soil here lacked the rich red colour of home, but the heat was every bit as intense. It sapped her body of the energy she needed to do anything more than just sit. She continued drawing circles with a stick in the red soil, carefully avoiding the ants occasionally dropping into the ridges formed by her lettering.

She felt tired, having sat on that rock for three hours guarding their camp against, who knew what? They were the seventh expedition to the stars, in search of life and probably the last if they failed. Success did not appear likely on this planet, so her talents as a biologist trained to study new life were wasted. She considered that concept. How could she really be trained to study new life when no new life had ever been found? Unless you considered vegetation new life, but she was not a botanist, anyway, plants, even new plants bored her.

She maintained her post patiently, observing the hairs on her arms plastered down with sweat. She desperately needed a bath and peered longingly towards the ship's interior. She turned away as it only made her feel worse, and returned her attention to the circles and the ants.

She watched them marking a trail around her obstacles and traced their path visually back through the rocks punctuating the expanse of ground surrounding their landing spot. She felt she should follow them to their nest but couldn't motivate herself. Slowly, her mind, numbed by the heat, came to a realisation. "Ants!" It had seemed so natural for them to be there that she had not recognized them as a life form indigenous to this planet.

Spurred on by a sudden burst of energy, she ran into the ship to emerge seconds later with a jar. Carefully, she gathered some of the ants and sealed the container. As she did, she heard a noise and looked up to see Captain Edwards returning. She ran towards him. "I found it! I found life. Look!" she exclaimed excitedly waving the jar at him.

"What? Ants?" replied Edwards, not sounding very impressed. As ship's captain he did not find the prospect of returning to Earth with the news that the only life they had found were "ants". And not being a scientist, he did not immediately comprehend the implications.

"Native ants," stressed Sharon, disappointed by his reaction.

Edwards took the jar and looked at them. "You sure you didn't bring these from Earth. They look identical."

Her disappointment turned to anger. She knew he did not respect her. He didn't believe anyone half his age could know anything and Sharon was only twenty-five with a piece of paper making her an expert in something they hadn't found yet. Her studies had been theoretical but her ability to think laterally and adapt her knowledge between species on Earth had won her a place on this mission ahead of fifty-three other applicants. "I gathered them from over there," she pointed coldly. "There's a whole nest around here somewhere."

"Well Sharon. You're the expert." he stated cynically, handing back the jar. "Go examine them. When you find the nest, we'll take some readings." he concluded and walked off, entering the ship.

"Stupid old fart!" she mumbled and wandered off to follow the trail into the rocks.

Although the landscape was monotonously flat, it was dotted with relatively large rocky features. The ant trail led Sharon to a tall group of sandstone rocks that together occupied an area of about twenty square feet offering a view of the plain from fourteen feet off the ground.

Sharon reached the top and took readings from a hand-held instrument known as a SAB. The Spectral Analysis Beam consisted of a small, coloured screen displaying data, with a few keys to modify the search parameters of the beam. All this in a unit no bigger than her hand. The device did have one design fault in that, from the top protruded a sensor node that if knocked, tended to break off rendering it useless.

She scanned the outcrop, then the area around and became engrossed in her findings. She couldn't believe the extent of her discovery.

"Sharon!" She looked up and saw Damien standing nearby. He was a young man in his mid thirties who insisted on brandishing a small black moustache which was always neatly trimmed. She felt unsure of his descent, probably Mediterranean but she had never felt comfortable enough to ask. He was the ship's botanist and like herself was qualified to study that which they had not discovered. However, he had been more successful, as it seemed that plant life is more abundant in our part of the universe than animal life.

"You may need to hold off on those readings until tomorrow, it's getting late."

Sharon examined the skyline and saw evening approaching. It was their first night on the planet and the striking colours across the sky reminded her of home. An aboriginal myth, told to her by a local tribesman, came to mind of the ant man and the Willy Willy. The ant man, hungry and tired had stolen food from the Willy Willy, which flew over the land, stirring the air and ripping up trees. Afraid, the ant man turned himself into an ant and hid underground constructing a big hill above him which the Willy Willy could never knock down. This was the origin of ant hills according to the legend. The rocky features surrounding their camp bore some resemblance to ant hills but were too big.

She became aware that Damien was still watching her, probably concerned about her being late for dinner as he doubled as ship's cook. They all had dual functions, as room aboard was limited, and passengers were a luxury not permitted. Her function as ship's Medical Officer gave her a sense of importance on a mission where life was not expected to be found. She nodded to Damien she was coming, disappointed that he had not found her discovery important enough to mention... or was it the Captain had not bothered to mention it?

She watched Damien go back to the ship, which in older times would probably have been described as a silver flying saucer. It had one ramp up to the entrance at the side but no portholes, just a solid silver hull that glistened in the hot sun. She hadn't realised how hot it still was, her bare arms and legs had become sun burned. Carefully, she climbed down from the rock and returned to the ship.

Inside, the ship had a simple design. The lower deck housed the engines, power supply and storage areas. The upper deck was divided into four quadrants. Quadrant one, to the right of the entrance was the ship's Control Room, to the left, the laboratory. The third quadrant offered the crew a recreation area and the final section had been divided into four private sleeping areas.

Damien observed her sullen appearance as she entered. "What's the matter?"

"I just thought my discovery would have attracted some interest among the rest of you. I didn't expect much from the Captain, but I thought you would at least acknowledge it."

Damien was puzzled. "What are you talking about? What discovery?"

"Didn't the Captain tell you?" she asked. Damien continued to look blank. "I found a colony of native ants!" she announced, as her excitement began to rebuild in expectation.

"Ants?" he replied with a frown that wiped the glee from her mind as she prepared herself for another disappointment. Then his face burst into excitement. "Do you know what this means? If there are ants... then there must be other insects. That means there must be some form of life in the ocean and possibly some animal life if we're lucky!" he yelled excitedly.

She smiled uncertainly at him, unprepared for his over enthusiastic response as he grabbed her by the arms and danced around with her in excitement. This quickly became contagious, and they hugged each other with joy as they continued dancing out into the passageway.

“What is going on out here?” inquired Edwards, scowling as he emerged from around the corner leading to the ships main Control Room, a domain that few dared to enter without an invitation.

“We’re celebrating Sharon’s discovery! It may well have saved the Star Search program! They’ll have to send an eighth mission out, if for no other reason than to search this planet more thoroughly,” reported Damien, his voice still reflecting his excitement.

“I gather you have confirmed they were not stowaways.” asked the Captain, still unimpressed.

“Yes! That nest out there is big. There’s no way we could have brought those things here. They are too well established. That nest stretches for about two miles in all directions and about a mile down.” reported Sharon.

“Wow!” exclaimed Damien, “That is one big nest!”

Sharon stepped towards the Captain, a tone of defiance reflecting her anger. "I have also confirmed in preliminary scans that they are a new species, more aggressive than ants on Earth. I suggest you seal up the ship tonight."

The Captain simply nodded as he retreated back into his domain without further comment, leaving Sharon fuming at his attitude.

“What’s happening?” asked a new voice and they turned to see Margaret, the fourth member of their crew, standing in the doorway.

Night settled over the planet with a magnificent sunset of red and yellow slicing into the grey of dusk, providing a spectacular backdrop for the few grey clouds lingering in that hot land. Edwards emerged from the Control Room still not enthused by the discovery despite their attempts to convey its importance. The only thing concerning him was the finding was not spectacular enough. Damien had earlier compared their Captain’s reaction to that of a proud fisherman who had returned with the smallest catch of the day.

Each night Edwards made a tour of the ship before retiring, tonight he found Damien securing the outer door. "Closing up for the night?" asked the Captain, catching Damien by surprise.

“Yes, Captain.” he replied unenthusiastically, concealing his own anger at the Captain’s lack of interest in their discovery.

Edwards observed his reaction. “You got a problem?”

Damien considered remaining silent but thought better of it. “You might say that. I think as Captain you could give Sharon some encouragement. She has worked hard with no result until now. And you are taking the edge off that excitement because you are not happy with the find. I don’t think you realise its importance!”

“Is that all?” asked the Captain stony faced. Damien nodded and Edwards walked off towards his room without further comment.

Damien watched him before he proceeded to the lab, where he found Sharon still working on her specimens. "You'd better get some rest. Time for that in the morning." he suggested, realizing she would work all night if permitted.

She smiled at him and nodded, realising she how exhausted she really was and went off to bed. As Sharon fell asleep, she failed to notice an ant walk brazenly across her pillow towards her ear. As it entered, she turned her head to the side. Immediately a swarm of ants crossed the pillow in a flash, entering her nose and mouth. Unable to breath she awoke, choking on the bodies

of hundreds of ants blocking her airways. She clawed helplessly at the ants all over her face but to no effect. She tried to scream but could not make a sound, choking in silence. Eventually she ceased her struggle and faded into unconsciousness and then... death. Her near naked body lay on the bed, her hands clutching her throat as her arms lay across her chest, helpless and lifeless, the only movement, came from the ants as they swarmed over her.

Next morning, Margaret Vinton went looking for Sharon and found a blood stained sheet and a skeleton. Her scream echoed through the ship bringing Edwards and Damien to the cabin. Both stood and stared, horrified by what they saw. "What on earth could have done that?" asked Damien, being the first to break the silence since Margaret had stopped screaming and become frozen to the spot with terror.

"I suspect nothing on Earth," replied Edwards solemnly. "We'd best check the lab. Margaret! You go to the Control Room check on the ship status. Damien. You come with me."

The Captain and Damien proceeded to the lab where they found the sample of ants had been knocked over and lay smashed on the floor. "You don't think ...?" asked Damien. Edwards nodded solemnly. "But there weren't enough of them." persisted Damien.

"Captain!" shouted an alarmed Margaret over the ship's intercom. "You need to come and look at this."

They crossed the passageway to the Control Room where Margaret had activated the external viewers. They appeared blank at first glance. Something was covering them and that 'something' was moving.

"I sent out a probe and this is what it showed." reported Margaret, more than a little alarmed. As science officer, navigator, and ship's mechanic, she had been trained to face the realities of alien contact. However, when it actually occurs one's feelings are often different to that expected. She switched viewer reception to an aerial view of the ship showing it was covered in a black seething mass that extended out into their immediate surrounds.

"Do we know where they came from?" asked Edwards.

"From Sharon's nest," replied Margaret. "It's deeper than Sharon thought. In fact it seems to go down about five miles not two and we have landed at what appears to be their main entrance."

Edwards stared at the living seething, blanket covering his ship, while his crew waited expectantly for a command. Usually, they ignored his commands or obeyed them for the sake of harmony. Edwards always believed it was a mistake to have a crew of civilians; they did not have the discipline to react in a crisis, bureaucrats never understood that. If they had their way, all uniformed personnel would have been replaced by bureaucrats who seemed to forget their purpose for existence was to supply support to the Space Corps. Now, this would be the test. Would they follow him or argue the point at every turn?

"Shall I turn on the force field?" asked Margaret in the absence of any instructions.

"No. That would incinerate the ants on the ship. That could upset those ants inside here with us." replied Damien still staring at the mass of life enveloping his ship.

"You speak as if they were intelligent." queried Margaret.

"Maybe not as we tend to think of intelligence, but ants on Earth are one of the oldest species in existence with one of the most efficient societies ever evolved. They operate like programmed soldiers and in this case we appear to be the enemy." he replied, stroking his chin as he dredged up old memories and considered their options.

"Since when did you become an expert on ants?" demanded Edwards. "You're a botanist!"

"Botany does involve studying insects and their role in pollination. I remember a lecture where ants were quoted as an example of what sheer determination and numbers can achieve. They are relentless, fearless, and prepared to sacrifice huge numbers to achieve their goals.

Sharon said these were more aggressive than our ants, which concerns me. They may prove a greater prize than I originally thought. I suggest we track down our intruders and evict them before we all end up like Sharon."

"Any suggestions on how we do that?" asked Edwards. He got no response. They had no idea. "Alright! This is what we'll do! Arm yourselves with extinguishers. The cold will paralyse them; then we can vacuum them up and eject them."

Damien smiled; feeling more relaxed now they had a plan. The solution was simple. They'd have them off the ship in no time, then take-off leaving them to drop off as they gained altitude. "You're the boss." he replied with a mock salute and started breaking out the extinguishers.

Shortly after, Damien armed with an extinguisher and an SAB walked through the ship's power room on the lower level seeking signs of life. He took a localised reading and reported it to Edwards over his voice activated portable intercom hanging from his belt. Cautiously he approached the hatch where the instruments detected the ants. Then he opened it.

Margaret entered at this point to provide backup as Damien opened the hatch and saw the ants pour out of the cupboard at a speed she would have thought impossible. Their target was Damien. Unprepared for the speed of such an attack Damien became engulfed by a quivering sea of black overcoming him before he could take aim. Margaret screamed out for Edwards and stepped forward as Damien fell to the floor yelling and choking while she sprayed the ants with the cold gas.

Edwards arrived seconds later to find Margaret still spraying the console from where they had come. The ants had retreated from the cold but Damien was dead! He'd been choked by ants seeking to kill him while having no regard for their own lives. Edwards grabbed Damien by the arms and dragged him out while Margaret covered their departure and sealed the door.

They took him to the infirmary where he was laid on the examination table in the centre of the room. "We have only one chance," announced Edwards as they stared solemnly at the body. "We have to take the ship up and expose it to vacuum. The cold should destroy them." Margaret still in shock simply nodded.

Captain Edwards gently touched her shoulder when she failed to move, her gaze locked on Damien's face frozen in terror. She looked up. "I'm going to need your help." he stated and she followed him to the Control Room. Edwards wasted no time switching on the force shield... then watched with great satisfaction as the ants on the hull were incinerated.

"I thought you said not to do that." queried Margaret.

"That was before. Now it doesn't matter. Get into your suit and prepare for lift off." he ordered and started the engines. As Margaret went through the pre-flight check, the Captain got into his space suit then waited for Margaret to do the same while he monitored the ants within the ship. "They've got in behind the walls. If we don't stop them they'll take over the whole ship!" he announced, ignoring her failure to respond.

Margaret watched her instruments, her fear growing as she thought of Sharon, eaten alive and now Damien... choking to death. What fate awaited them? And where could they go for help? They were three months travel time from Earth; alone in an empty universe.

The ship lifted off the planet, leaving a scorched bull's eye in the centre of the swarm of ants surrounding the ship's landing area, a swarm stretching for about a mile in every direction. They were scarcely off the ground before the area was covered over by new ants moving in.

The hull, now clear, glistened in the hot sun as it gained altitude. Finally, the ship broke atmosphere and entered space, heading away from the planet to its cold dark side, out of reach of the stars rays which could warm the hull and nurture survivors. Once there, they put on their helmets and sealed their suits before depressurising the ship by opening the doors. The internal temperature rapidly fell to below freezing. They waited.

“How long?” asked Margaret, after what appeared to be an eternity.

“I want to make sure.” responded Edwards. “We’ll wait thirty minutes. That should be long enough to penetrate the deepest parts of the ship.”

The time passed very slowly. Margaret spent that time staring out into infinity from the open door. The only thing separating her from naked space was her suit. It was impossible to comprehend the distances she was staring into,

Edwards spent his time scanning the ship, wandering around exposing areas he thought may offer them protection from the cold. He detected no movement, other than their own. No sign of any life forms aboard, other than dead ants and of course Damien's body.

"We did it!" shouted Edwards triumphantly over the intercom, giving Margaret a fright. It drew her out of her daydreams and back to reality as the door closed abruptly in front of her cutting her off from the wonder of space which had placed her in a mesmerised state. Edwards continued closing up the ship and pressurising the compartments as Margaret re-entered the Control Room and waited.

The ship soon warmed up and they stepped out of their suits. Another check was made for the ants followed by a search of the ship. It was clear, except for a lot of ant bodies which they proceeded to clean up and incinerate in the waste disposal. They had made it!

Now, there was only one more job before leaving this system. The bodies of Damien and Sharon needed to be disposed of. Currently they lay in the infirmary covered in a sheet awaiting some ceremony to send them on their way. Margaret entered alone, the horror of their deaths making her reluctant to look at their bodies but she reminded herself what nearly could have been the fate of them all.

Captain Edwards followed her in but his approach lacked her hesitancy. He removed the sheets. “If you want to say a few words before we send them into space, do so. I’m not one for services,” he announced bluntly.

Margaret just wanted it to be over. They approached Damien’s body frozen on the surface by the coldness of the vacuum. They needed to place the remains into a body bag which was laid out on the next examination table, she grabbed the feet as Edwards placed his hands under Damien’s armpits to raise him. As he did this, an ant fell out of Damien’s mouth, followed by another. At first Margaret did not take much notice then his mouth seemed to open as a mass of ants emerged.

“Captain!” she called as Damien’s chest burst into life. She dropped his feet in panic and stepped back in horror. The Captain, also aware of the danger, dropped the body as it released its cargo of killer- ants emerging like a tidal wave from every orifice - the body, having offered the ants a sheltered refuge from the cold. "Captain!" screamed Margaret as she stumbled and fell back. The ants approached her rapidly, moving towards the door.

“Get up!” he yelled, as she brushed off the first ants to reach her. He grabbed Margaret, yanking her to her feet and dragged her from the room, sealing the door behind them.

Breathlessly Margaret added, her whole body shaking. "We'd better seal the room completely," she mumbled as he shut down all ventilation to the room furiously thinking of any other means by which the ants could escape. "They're going to kill us! We can't kill them!" Margaret was becoming resigned to her fate. She felt helpless and now wished they would get it over with so this fear would go away.

Edwards ignored her, his attention drawn to the ant’s activities, now they were trapped within the laboratory. He considered opening up the room to space but suspected they would only retreat back into the body and wait out the cold. Margaret drew closer, a morbid fascination pulling her towards the reinforced clear plastic panel in the sealed door.

"They must have guessed what we were going to do." she announced, as she peered through the window and watched the ants scurrying around the room.

"I doubt they are that intelligent. They simply took refuge from the cold." replied Edwards, wishing he had more information about these creatures.

"Can they get out of there?" she asked, suspecting the answer.

"They're small and organised. Miss Vinton. They only need a small opening. We have one advantage; the lab is designed to contain anything we might pick up. I only hope it can seal them in long enough for us to destroy them." He replied, solemnly, unsure himself if they could be contained.

"Which means that eventually, they will find a way out." replied Margaret, her fear subsiding and her survival instincts beginning to revive. The Captain nodded his head in agreement. Margaret swallowed hard and peered once more at their nemesis. "So, how do we stop them?"

"I don't know...." he began then caught sight of the waste disposal shoot still open. "Raise the oxygen level in there then send a power surge through the equipment."

"That will cause an explosion!" protested Margaret. Edwards simply nodded. "But we need that equipment."

The Captain stared at her. "Not if we're dead. Miss Vinton! I want a scorching inferno to be ignited in there consuming everything, including Damien's body."

"What you're proposing is dangerous. Why don't we just go home for help, let them bring in an exterminator?" she suggested.

"We can't. Even if we survived the journey, quarantine regulators would never let us out of the ship. If we tried to go into suspension we can't be sure those things wouldn't find their way into the system, short it out and get to us before we came around. We have to defeat them here or we're never going home."

Margaret hesitated, looking up into his face realising he was correct. It was their only chance. "In that case I have a better idea. Why don't we flood the room with Delzatine fumes from the engines? It is more flammable, burns hotter and is not as explosive on ignition."

"Do it! Fast! Before they find a way out." ordered the Captain. Margaret smiled to herself and disappeared down the passage believing they might just have a chance after all.

As soon as the fumes entered the room, ants began retreating back into Damien's body, sensing some kind of danger. Other ants persisted with their reconnaissance, impressing Edwards with their fearless dedication. Nothing was more important than their mission always based on survival of the species, not the individual.

Suddenly, the furnace ignited the fumes and a bellowing orange and red fireball filled the room. The ship rocked on ignition, then settled down. Margaret joined her Captain as they watched Damien's body being reduced to ashes, saw metal begin to melt and combustibles vanish in a flash in the raging inferno.

The two surviving crewmen peered through the window into the smouldering laboratory. "It has been six hours. There's no sign of life on any of the SAB's aboard ship. I think we did it this time!" Margaret announced tentatively, allowing her excitement to re-emerge into her world.

Edwards examined his instruments while making a visual sweep of the room. There was nothing left in there but black residue and melted metal. "Just in case; we won't unseal this room and I want all life support shut down outside of our quarters while we're in suspension. I think it's time we went home," he stated coldly and began walking towards the Control Room, and then he turned back. "It is unfortunate we don't have a specimen to take home."

"I hope you're joking." replied Margaret with a shudder. He smiled and resumed his departure. She watched him go realising it was the first time she had seen him smile.

Margaret's first sensation was that of cold, then of stiffness. It was the usual effect of long months in suspended animation. Modern travel had reduced the distances between stars to months instead of years but that was still time that was hard to fill productively on a cramped ship. She opened her eyes and tried to focus. Something was moving nearby, perhaps it was the Captain. Finally her vision cleared and she found herself staring into the faces of two very small ants on the other side of the clear Perspex container in which she lay. She screamed uncontrollably and they vanished while she thrashed around in panic. When no-one came and time had allowed her to relax, she began to wonder if she had imagined it. Cautiously she released the lever, unsealing her suspension chamber. The lid flipped up and she peered over the side. All seemed normal. Had it been a dream or an illusion? She tried to stand and found her body stiff and not quite functioning at normal efficiency. She stretched and began a few exercises trying to get the blood circulating. Then, she stepped over to the control panel.

The control panel was an interactive communications screen enabling crewmen to interface directly with any system aboard through the ship's central computer. This provided a voice activation capability. It consisted of a small screen and three touch pads, one to activate the visual, one, to disconnect and one, to focus the visual. She activated the visual "Captain! You awake?" but she received neither picture nor any other response. She repeated her inquiry.

"Yes. Miss Vinton. I'm awake but barely." came the groggy reply, but still no visual. "You had best reactivate life support outside of our quarters while I attempt to get my system operational."

"As you wish, Captain." she replied, beginning to feel relaxed as she instructed the computer to hand back control of the ship to her, and to reactivate all life support systems. This feature enabled them to run the ship from anywhere in case of emergency. The screen lit up and she selected the function she wanted by touching the screen. Ships status appeared. For a moment she studied the readings becoming alarmed, then called back the Captain. "Captain! I just checked ships status. All systems operating, ship pressurised... life support functioning."

"Good work, Miss Vinton. I'll meet you in the Control Room shortly." replied the Captain.

"You don't understand, Captain. I haven't touched them yet."

A silence fell at the other end, for just a minute. "The whole ship is pressurised? All of it?" He waited for her confirmation which came quickly and unsettled him. "We cut those systems. Who reactivated them?" he asked, not expecting her to reply as his stomach muscles began to knot with fear. "Miss Vinton?" he inquired after awhile. A frightened acknowledgment was returned. "Check the ship's location while I scan the ship." he ordered trying to conceal his own fear.

"Yes, Captain." she replied.

Edwards selected 'life scan' on his screen. "Oh, my God!" he exclaimed on viewing the result. They were everywhere, in the walls, moving through the passageways, masses of thriving tiny black bodies.

Margaret overheard his exclamation. "They've taken over, haven't they?"

Edwards ignored the question; the answer was obvious to them both. "Where are we, Miss Vinton?" he asked while his mind was screaming. How could they possibly defeat them? Only a handful must have survived! Yet they'd reproduced at an enormous rate almost filling the ship. But why had the ants avoided them while they had been vulnerable in their sleeping chambers?

"Entering Earth's system. ETA for planet fall, twelve hours thirteen minutes." she reported stiltedly. "They're intelligent, aren't they? They must be, to have turned on the life support."

Edwards had been thinking the same thing as he leaned against the wall, his mind racing. At present they were trapped in their quarters. If the ants were intelligent then he and Margaret had been spared for a purpose. But what was that purpose? Or had something prevented them from entering these rooms? If so, then maybe they had a weapon. But what was it? All he had

were questions lots of them and not one answer. He could not allow this ship to land on Earth and release its cargo.

“Captain? You still there?” asked Margaret when he failed to respond.

“Yes. I’m still here.” he replied considering what might be different about their quarters. “I was wondering why the ants haven’t come in here?”

“I think they have. I’m sure I saw several on the sleeping chamber when I woke. They were looking at me as if waiting for me to wake.” she announced.

That’s one theory smashed, his mind told him. “Are you sure? You could have imagined it!” he queried hoping to salvage some hope.

“I thought so too at first. Now, I’m not so sure.” she replied hesitantly. “What if we blew the escape hatches again and exposed the ship to vacuum. It worked before.”

“Try it. We have nothing to lose.” suggested the Captain, momentarily defeated. He scratched his head then sat down on the bed to wait the result.

After only a few moments he wondered what was happening, all was very quiet. “Miss Vinton. Are you going to open up the ship or not?”

“Captain. I tried. Nothing happened. I did a diagnostic. The emergency escape sequence has been disconnected. They’re not going to let us do that again,” she reported, sounding defeated. “We can’t beat them. We may as well just walk out there and let them take us. I can’t stand all this waiting any longer. I’m going out there Captain! They can have me!”

“No! Margaret! Don’t do it! I need you to help me!” he yelled but there was no response. He switched to viewer and focused on the corridor outside their cabins. It was a mass of swarming black bodies. Margaret’s door opened and the ants made way. She walked out but nothing happened.

“What’s wrong with you? Take me! I can’t stand it anymore!” she yelled at the ants but they made no move against her. In anger she began to stomp on them but they simply backed away. Finally, she walked over to the Captain’s cabin and opened his door.

Edwards expected them to pour in, engulf him and her but they stayed outside and allowed her to enter unharmed. She closed the door and stood there in disappointed shock. She was still alive... but why? Edwards placed his arms around her. She gently put her head on his shoulder and cried. “What are we going to do? What do they want?” she pleaded after a few minutes.

“I wish I knew. I wish we still had Sharon. This was her field,” stated Edwards regretting how he’d ignored her in the past. “Perhaps we should start with her notes. She studied these things before she died. Maybe she learnt something. Maybe that’s why they got her first. Either way, I think we need to learn more about ants from the ship’s library.”

Outside, the ants were sending out reconnaissance parties to explore the room and observe the actions of their captives.

An hour later, they had examined Sharon’s field notes and observations as recorded in the ship’s data banks. They had offered little help other than to confirm that these ants appeared to vary little from Earth’s own, except for the fact that they had established that unusually large nest. Sharon’s study indicated that it was not just one nest but a community of nests co-operating together to support the massive needs of its combined population. She had speculated that due to the barren nature of the local environment, massive expeditions would have to be mounted by the ants in search for food. That could have taken them great distances from the prime community to more fertile areas. If these areas were populated by other nests she wondered whether they would fight over the resources or evolve some means of trade.

“She was a dreamer. Why wasn’t she more specific?” complained Edwards. “If she hadn’t been so inexperienced she might have left us less speculation and more fact.”

Margaret ignored his outburst. She had been defending Sharon since they began and had decided to concentrate on more fruitful efforts. "It says here that ants on our world have not changed significantly in over seventy million years." reported Margaret, as Edwards sat on his sleeping chamber considering Sharon's notes. "There are over 5,000 known species, most of which nest in the ground. They have three castes, male, female, and worker. The worker is often polymorphic."

Edwards looked up. "Can you keep it less technical? What is polymorphic?" he exploded, giving away his first signs of tension.

Annoyed by his outburst but determined not to let him upset her, she pressed on. "The workers can take on different structural forms at various stages of their life cycle." She paused, received no response so continued. "The queen may be winged at maturity and is the only one that can lay fertilised eggs. To do so, she must be inseminated during a marriage flight where the queen receives all the sperm cells she will have for the rest of her life; which by the way, can be up to fifteen years. The male is discarded at the end of the flight and dies. The newly fertilised queen's primary objective is to find a spot where she can safely raise her brood. As they never move the nest, this founding must not only suit the species but its plans for expansion in the future."

Edwards stood up. He approached the control panel visual revealing the corridors, all filled with black seething bodies. "Maybe that is why we failed to wipe them out," he speculated staring at the screen thoughtfully. "The queen survived and has established her nest aboard the ship?"

Margaret watched him staring at the screen. He appeared absorbed by his thoughts. She decided to break his concentration by indicating a few flaws in his logic. "You're assuming these ants behave in the same manner. Remember they come from a different planet."

He swung around violently. Irritated by what he considered a statement of the obvious. He didn't like people questioning his judgement, especially when it inferred a degree of stupidity. "That may well be, Miss Vinton. But if they are similar, the queen may be their weak point. If we can get to her, we could then test our theory. How important is the queen to the colony?"

Margaret concealed a smidgen of joy at getting a rise out of him as she scanned through her hand-held portable computer. "It says here ... if an ant colony is to be exterminated the queen must be killed. Since she resides in the most secure part of the nest, most lethal poisons will fail to reach her. However, as the queen receives more food than any individual worker a concentration of poison which will not kill the workers has a cumulative effect on the queen when she is fed. It recommends a 2% arsenic content to a sugar-based bait."

"Food!" exclaimed Edwards. "It should have occurred to me before. What are they using for food?" He pounced on the visual and scanned the food lockers. "We had a three-year supply aboard," he muttered to himself as he located the food storage areas.

The mention of food reminded Margaret they'd not eaten, and she began to feel hungry. Edwards blocked her line of sight to the wall viewer so she drew closer. "They seem undisturbed." she remarked after studying the picture for a while.

"We can't be sure." replied the Captain without looking away, his eyes watching for any sign of movement. "I suspect they are ant infested. Does that reference tell you how long it might take to poison the queen?" She shook her head. "I suspect too long, but we should try it anyway." he speculated. "I think we should go down there and check out those units." he recommended still intently watching the viewer.

Margaret did not enjoy the prospect of going out there again. She had had second thoughts of dying and decided she wanted to live. "What about trying to communicate with them? Maybe we can make friends, take them home to their planet instead of destroying them." suggested Margaret, unsure of any strategy that could win over their captors.

The Captain stared at her as if she was a child then burst into laughter embarrassing her. "I think that is a very naive approach. We don't even know how they communicate?" replied Edwards when he had overcome his outburst.

"They communicate with their forward antenna by touch or smell." she replied, flatly, still feeling subdued by the scorn of his laughter.

For a moment he stared at her, not sure whether to take her seriously as his own desperation swept over him. He had no plan, no ideas. "You're serious, aren't you?" He waited as she silently nodded her head. He stared back at the food storage area for a second then look at her again. "Fine, how do you propose we do that? Do we just go out there and touch their antenna using ... what was that old telegraph system? Morse code?"

Margaret ignored his sarcasm and addressed her remarks elsewhere. If he was not going to take her seriously then perhaps she should take herself seriously. "Computer! Access files on nature of ants and cross check with report 26K Sharon Mc Coll. Compare with activities of the ants aboard ship and seek out method of communication." The computer acknowledged her verbal command with a red light indicating it was processing. They both waited, Edwards looked at her, with a sceptical smile. She knew he was waiting to gloat over the negative result.

Ten minutes later, the computer reported it had established a means of communication. Edwards, who had been lying on his bed in smug anticipation of her failure, now suddenly sprang to his feet, becoming interested in her plan. He pushed her aside, leaving her standing there with her mouth open about to give an instruction. Edwards stood before the viewer and issued his orders. "Computer! Communicate this message to the Ant Queen." he hesitated while he considered what to say. "This is the Captain. We wish to speak with the queen."

"Very impressive." remarked Margaret sarcastically. "Couldn't you think of anything more grandiose... such as King Edwards welcome you to his domain?"

"I'd like to see you do better." he quipped angrily. Then he stopped as he sensed something change, Margaret noticed it too. The silence! Since they had awoken there had been an almost imperceptible background sound of movement, now it had stopped. Edwards checked the viewer and saw the ants were no longer moving they were still as if waiting for something.

Time ticked by in nervous anticipation. Then a printed message showed on the computer screen, translated by the computer. "This is the queen. Are you the giants who provide this nest?"

Edwards saw his chance as a plan began to form in his mind. "Computer. Locate the source of that message. And while you do it send this reply," he ordered, becoming excited. Margaret watched feeling just a little uneasy. "We are the giants. What do you want from us?"

"Our ancestors tell us you were left in our care after establishing this nest. Many perished but those who survived protected the Queen and established the Nest. But now it is too small and those who have ventured beyond have not returned. Our food grows short and there are no means of getting to the surface to seek out more," read the printed message.

Margaret and the Captain stared at one another. "How long does an ant live?" asked the Captain. Margaret didn't know. "Computer! Time elapsed since departure from alien planet." The mechanical response was given - five years, two months, seventeen days.

Margaret's stomach twisted. "How can that be? It was only a three month trip."

Edwards ignored her, driven by his own concerns as to what extent had they taken control of the ship. "Visual of ship's instruments." he demanded and examined the Control Room instruments; they were thankfully not covered in ants. "They cut the speed!" he exclaimed. "Computer! Ask the Queen what have her people being doing to the instruments?"

The reply took a few minutes. "Our scientists examined the Nests artificial life support and expanded its capacity to meet our growing colony. We have not mastered its wonders, there are many aspects yet to be explored but they will be revealed to us."

“Computer! Tell her to stop her people interfering or it may endanger all our lives. I will operate the instruments and protect the Nest,” he ordered, his voice strained. They had to delay their return to Earth.

Margaret watched as the response returned agreeing to the request. Edwards then rushed out of his room to the Control Room, ants scrambling to get out of his way. Margaret followed and stood in the doorway, her arms folded as she watched him pour excitedly over his instruments. “What are you planning?” she asked in a quiet whispering tone that had an accusing edge.

This was not missed by Edwards. His head shot up and then turned towards her in a sharp defensive move. “A way out of here,” he replied, then hesitated wondering if he should tell her. “I’m going to overload the power core, then we evacuate in the ejection pod after making sure no ants accompany us.” He waited, watching her face, unsure how to read her expression.

Margaret remained leaning against the door jam, her face conveying nothing. “That’s a total a betrayal of their trust. You must know they mean us no harm.”

Edwards became angry and snapped. “Tell that to Sharon and Damien! Who knows when they’ll get hungry enough to turn on us! Are you prepared to sit and wait? I’m not! Besides ...Earth isn’t going to let this ship land with them aboard. Do you want to be responsible for letting a swarm of carnivorous ants loose on our planet? He swung around to continue working at his instruments, ignoring the ants scuttling across his panel. He did not wait for a response from Margaret; he was not interested in her opinion anymore.

Margaret hesitated. She had seen him in these moods before, usually when he didn’t get his own way. In times like these she knew it was best to leave him to cool down and to broach the topic again later. But in this instance there was no time. “So you are going to murder them. I don’t like that either.” she stated, calmly, her tone gentle and non-threatening.

Edwards was not going to be challenged on this. He knew his duty and he was the Captain. Out here he was the nearest thing to God and he would be obeyed and not questioned. His response was quick and violent, without taking his attention away from the programming job he was performing, he barked his instructions. “You don’t have to like it! Just do it! You are here to obey orders, not question them. Now, download all computer files to the ejection pod and be prepared to board!” When no response came, he turned to extract a reply and found she had gone. He gritted his teeth in anger then addressed the computer. “Have you located the Queen?”

The visual response from the computer was to zoom in on a section of the food locker. All he could see was a concentration of ants around a cocoon-like structure constructed of refuse from around the ship. “Computer! Scan the life pod for ants, if any locate, instruct the Queen to clear the area. We are going to clear the route to the surface and it could get dangerous.”

He waited as the computer sent the message then noticed that data was being downloaded to the pod. He assumed Margaret had taken up her post within the escape pod despite her moral misgivings. He then removed the final barrier to the power core commencing an unstable reaction. This would eventually become critical and convert the ship and its contents to a trail of molecules and dust, moving at an accelerated rate from their point of origin.

Margaret looked up as he entered the cramped escape pod then looked away, leaving him to quietly take his seat. The pod was meant to be large enough for four occupants, but it felt claustrophobic with just two. There was little leg room, the ceiling, was low and their seats were built into the instrument panels, reminding her of early space flight capsules back in the 20th century.

“I see you chose to join us rather than pursue your moral position.” He remarked in an attempt to rub salt into her moral wound.

“Just do your job and don’t expect me to pat you on the back for it.” she said through gritted teeth. “How much time have we got until detonation?”

Edwards shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I’m no nuclear physicist. However long it takes for the power core to reach critical.”

Margaret stared at him in horror. “Computer. Status of power core,” she asked. Margaret read the response as it came back. “Critical mass in five minutes and twelve seconds! That hardly gives us time to get clear. Didn’t you bother to check? It could have been instantaneous and then where would we have been?”

“You worry too much. Disengage locking clamps and... shut up. I’ve had enough of you and your complaints,” he replied as he set engines to engage. They waited. Nothing happened.

“Are you trying to scare me or are we not moving?” asked Margaret calmly.

Edwards pressed the engine activation pad again without result; then re-checked his instruments. “What have those ants done now!” he exclaimed pulling free of his safety belt and reopening the escape hatch. He crawled out and examined the outer shell as Margaret checked off the four-minute mark.

At that moment she felt helpless. Their fate was sealed by their own actions. It seemed just, that they should perish with their crew mates and those whom they sort to destroy. There was nothing she could do; if the engines would not fire it was unlikely it could be fixed in four minutes. As a mechanic, she knew this for a certainty. She decided to call home. “Deep Space Mission to Earth. This is Margaret Vinton, initiating emergency signal.”

“This is DSM Control. What is your emergency?” came the reply from an anxious but excited male voice.

“We located life, intelligent insect life. Two crew members’ dead, killed by carnivorous ants. Ship infested. Life pod only safe part of the ship but it will not eject. Ship is set to detonate in...” She stopped to view the timer which read two minutes and forty seconds. “...in less than three minutes. Do not let ship land. Prepare to receive downloaded ship log.” She felt certain they were about to die, something inside her wanted the world to know the reason.

DSM Control took its time responding, then a frantic response. “DSM. Do not destroy the ship. We need specimens to study. Leave ship in orbit. Abort Destruct and await rescue!”

“The fools!” replied Edwards, re-entering the pod. “They don’t realise what we have here. Some fool will let one of these suckers crawl aboard, then they’ll just take it home to breed.” he mumbled as he re buckled his belt and reset his instruments for lift off. “Can’t let it happen.”

“What are you doing?” queried Margaret watching him as if he had a purpose.

“We’re lifting off. Those bloody ants disconnected the ignition switch,” he announced as he pressed the ignition pad. The engines roared into life as Margaret checked the timer. It read fifty- seven seconds.

“We have no time!” she screamed as the pod ejected and moved away but at a pace that would not exceed the blast wave. The ship exploded, sending the pod tumbling out into space, its momentum, boosted by the impact of the explosion, spinning the pod out of control causing it to turn end over end. Inside, it felt like the worst visual reality fun park ride either of them had ever experienced. No one did the real thing anymore, it was considered too dangerous. At that moment, Margaret tended to agree with the legislators as she passed into unconsciousness.

A small rescue ship nudged up alongside the scorched and battered life pod as it continued its endless journey through space. It was propelled along its frictionless course without the aid of engines. Her engines had fused and the crew from the rescue ship wondered about the survival of the occupants, but a SAB probe indicated two functioning life forms were still within.

They caught the pod in a beam which steadied the craft, ceasing that sickening roll, while the rescue ship matched speed and aligned their air locks. Eventually, the ships were married and

the air locks released. The medics squeezed into the compact area and removed their patients quickly and efficiently leaving the pod unattended as the automated systems closed up the air lock, ready to eject the now useless pod into space.

In those few minutes before the area was sealed, no one noticed the Queen's observers emerge from their point of concealment and venture outside the pod into the rescue ship. It was only a small colony, but they were equipped to establish a new alien nest on the surface.

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