

# **The Loss of Demeter 4**

by

Barry Alder

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###

Marshal leaned against the railing of the balcony overlooking the ocean, the heaviness of the still, moisture-laden tropical air matched by the feelings that seeped into his very bones, feelings of defeat and frustration. He watched the last remnants of the setting sun, a glorious bright orange display reflecting off the distant grey storm clouds, belying the pending violence, and wished for even a slight breeze, something that would physically cool him, and emotionally hint that change was possible. It would be cooler inside, but he wanted, no needed, to gauge the night. The heavy air was still now, but the gathering storm clouds and the virtually continuous flash of lightning in the distance foreshadowed the coming monsoon-like rains, a deluge that would tax their protective field generators and signal the planet's final violence against their presence here.

The water directly below the balcony was smooth, almost glass-like, except for the drops of sweat that fell from his chin, and the tiny disturbances left by the insects as they

crawled out of the water onto the support pilings. He couldn't see the insects from this height, but the continuous flashes of light as they spent their lives trying to get through the protective force shields told him everything; that even in the apparent calm here, violence persisted.

The ballroom behind him was low-lit and only sparsely occupied; few of the remaining inhabitants of the colony were in the mood for partying. Most of those here were congregated at a couple of tables or near the bar, lending an atmosphere of emptiness to the large room. It was supposed to be a leaving party, a chance to say final farewells before they dispersed to other colonies, other planets; but it felt more like a wake. In a sense, it was, for tomorrow morning they would leave this planet, abandoning their great plans of colonizing it, leaving in a failure that galled Marshal to the bone.

When they first arrived, it had seemed like an easily achievable goal. The initial surveys had shown the planet as mostly water covered, with a few large marsh areas where the water was only a few meters deep, teeming with marine life. The only large animals found lived in the deep oceans and seemed content to remain there. The weather was mostly calm, with only the occasional heavy downpour on the marsh areas, and major storms occurring solely near the poles; an ideal tourist destination.

But what the planet lacked in large land mass, it made up for in quantity of life. The insects that inhabited the marshes occupied every nook possible, from the tops of the massive trees to deep in the mud. One of the early scientists had joked that this place just might have billions of life-forms per cubic meter, far above the millions normally encountered. Later surveys found it wasn't such a joke. There had been a fear that the colony would be overrun with the insects, but the engineers building the colony had been confident they could keep it free of them – they'd overcome worse environments.

He heard the door open behind him, and felt the coolness of the inner room waft across his wet back, causing a shiver. He remained staring out across the open expanse of ocean towards the incoming storm clouds.

"Marshal," she said softly as she leaned on the rail beside him, the smell of her perfume contrasting with the ocean air. "You should come in. The others are worried about you."

He paused for a few moments before slowly turning to her.

Jen had been his partner for ten years now, overseeing the construction of three colonies, and his companion for the last five. She knew him as well as anyone could.

"I'll be okay," he said, reaching to hold her hand and smiling slightly. "You know, I'm just not used to defeat."

"Neither am I," Jen said softly, "but that doesn't change anything."

"I know," Marshal sighed. "I just need a few more minutes."

Jen smiled at him weakly, and then returned to the ballroom.

Marshal resumed leaning against the rail, looking slightly south, to where the ocean sports building had been just a short while ago. There was no trace of it now. The building that had been designed to last fifty years without any maintenance now rested in pieces on the bottom of the marsh, right by the drop to the deep ocean. In the eighteen months since they had first arrived, none of the deep sea behemoths had ventured anywhere near the colony, but that had changed. Two weeks ago, without any warning, four had appeared and rammed the support legs of the building, destroying the strongest plastisteel compound in existence and killing twenty-three people. And then they had left and not returned. There had been speculation and theories as to why this had happened, but no definitive answers.

He let out a heavy sigh. He should have seen it coming. For the past two months he'd had an uneasy feeling about the colony; a feeling that something bad was approaching; and it had come. First it was the problems with the water intakes, clean and open for the last year, and then, suddenly, clogged with massive colonies of water insects, reducing the flow to almost nothing. They had cleaned them out but the intakes were clogged again the next day. This had gone on for a week and then, as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. The entomologists thought it was some sort of reproduction behavior triggered by the presence of foreign material, but that didn't make sense to him; didn't feel right. Even if he couldn't put his finger on it, he felt something else was going on.

Next it was the massive insect invasions; huge clouds of them circling the colony, trying to get in, hurling themselves against the protective shields that surrounded the buildings. What was puzzling was that it wasn't just one type of insect. It seemed that anything that could fly was attacking them. This time the entomologists didn't have an answer. For any one type, this sort of action would be normal if they'd disturbed a nest or colony, but they'd done no construction or digging for weeks now and even that wouldn't explain all the different types of insects. The repellents had kept them out, but only just. In the end they'd had to activate the force shields to stop them, and with the force shields up, no one could enter. Like the first incident, this lasted for a week and then suddenly stopped.

The sudden clap of thunder from a nearby lightning strike startled Marshal from his thoughts. The storm was closer now, the downpour in the distance clearly visible, and it would hit in full fury within half an hour. He stood straight, breathed another heavy sigh, and went inside.

He walked to the bar, slowly sat on a stool, poured himself a Scotch, and stared at the glasses on the wall behind the bar.

"Not one of our finer moments," commented Reg as he sat beside Marshal, placing his half full glass carefully on the counter.

Marshal took a slow sip before replying, not looking at Reg.

"No. It isn't."

Reg waited patiently for Marshal to continue, but Marshal continued to be silent.

“I swear this planet’s got it in for us,” Reg said half-jokingly after a few moments of silence.

This brought a smile to Marshal’s lips and he turned to face his friend.

“You think so too?” he asked.

Reg shook his head no.

“It seems to be the only thing that makes sense, except it doesn’t make sense; doesn’t make sense at all.”

“Makes perfect sense to me,” Marshal said as he held his glass with both hands and placed his elbows on the bar.

“What makes perfect sense?” asked Jen as she slid alongside Marshal.

“The intelligent planet theory,” said Reg sarcastically.

“Oh. That,” said Jen calmly.

“Don’t tell me you believe that too?” sneered Reg.

“You said it yourself, Reg,” replied Marshal, “it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“So what do you think, Jen?” asked Reg.

“If you’d asked me that three weeks ago, I’d have scoffed at the idea. Now, I’m not so sure. Too many strange things have happened to not be intelligently driven, yet we’ve found no intelligent species on this world.”

“None that we’ve recognized,” said Reg.

“Come on, Reg,” said Marshall forcefully, turning to face him once more. “You know the scans the planet had to go through before we were allowed to set foot on it. Two years of intensive monitoring from space to see any evidence of intelligence, and then another year of on-planet probes. They didn’t spot anything and, what’s more, the probes weren’t attacked in any way. So why us?”

“I don’t know,” sighed Reg. “But I can’t believe a planet can be intelligent.”

“Maybe ‘intelligent’ isn’t the right word,” said Jen. “Maybe ‘aware’ would be better.”

“That still doesn’t change anything,” said Marshall. “Aware. Intelligent. It’s still attacking us.”

“Do you honestly think these things are attacking us?” said Reg. “Don’t you think there could be another explanation?”

“Reg, Reg, Reg,” Marshal said calmly. “We’ve been colonizing planets for over a century now and have come across some pretty strange things, but we’ve always found the reasons for them. The Exploration and Colonization Department has a lot of experience, and they haven’t got a clue as to why these things are happening.

“While I was on the balcony, I was watching the supports. The bugs are trying to get in again. From the intensity of the light, I’d guess millions are trying to crawl up from the sea. Can you explain why only those insects are trying now?”

Neither Reg nor Jen replied.

A bolt of lightning struck the building, momentarily dimming the lights and temporarily blinding and deafening everyone in it.

“That was close,” said Jen, a touch of fear in her voice.

“Don’t worry,” said Reg. “The shields can handle that.”

As if to challenge his statement, four more bolts struck the building in quick succession, leaving the room in darkness.

Marshal chuckled and slowly took a sip of his drink.

“I think you’d better not test them again,” he said, turning from the bar to examine the others in the room. The only light came from the decorative candles on the tables, but he could see that everyone was afraid and whispering in small groups.

“Marshal,” said Reg, tentatively, “why haven’t the emergency lights come on?”

The slight smile on Marshal’s face faded as he looked at the dark lamps placed high in the ceiling. He jumped off his chair and dashed to the door of the balcony, jerking it open, and racing for the rail. He looked down at the support columns, to see if the light show of the dying insects was still taking place. An icy shiver went down his back. There was only blackness.

Then he felt it, a tickle on the back of his neck, and then another on his face. He slapped at the one on his cheek and looked at his hand, at the remains of a small insect.

Looking up, he saw the swarm, headed directly toward him. Without hesitating, he ran back inside, pulling the door tight behind him.

“Everyone,” he shouted, “the shields are down. Get to the shuttles!”

No one moved.

“To the shuttles! Now! But stay inside!” he screamed.

This time, as the situation finally sunk in, they all raced for the exits. Only Reg and Jen stayed behind.

“What’s happened?” asked Jen.

“That last lightning strike took out the generators and the bugs are getting in. Lots of them.”

A look of fear briefly crossed Jen’s face before she nodded quickly to Marshal and left.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Reg.

“Do we have anything to keep them at bay while we load?”

“Why? We can get everyone loaded before opening the hangar doors.”

“Reg. They *will* get in. We’re not perfectly sealed, so it’s only a matter of time. If we can get everybody to the boarding lounge and seal it completely, we can use the security doors as an air lock and get the people aboard in small groups when the bugs get to the hangar.”

“We have a few field suits with personal repellers by the boat launch. I’ll grab someone and get them to the lounge.”

As Reg departed, Marshal took out his communicator and selected General Broadcast.

“Attention everyone. This is Marshal Williams. We have to evacuate the complex immediately. The generators are down and the local insect population has mounted another attack and will be inside the complex shortly, if they’re not already in. Do not. I repeat. Do not get anything from your rooms. Head directly to the hangar boarding lounge. We will be loading the shuttles from there.”

He looked around and relaxed slightly. He was the only one here. The people were moving.

\* \* \*

In the hangar control room, Chief of Operations Larns O’Meggan watched calmly as the hangar doors shut. After forty years in Operations, he knew the drill perfectly.

“As soon as the doors are sealed,” he said to the other operators, “I want the hangar filled with disinfectant.”

The two other operators nodded. As with Larns, they were well experienced and would have done what he had ordered even if he hadn’t been there.

“Where do we stand?” asked Marshal as he entered the room.

Larns turned from the control panel.

“The hangar will be ready in three minutes. The waiting room is packed, so I guess most of the colony is here. Basically we can begin loading at any time.”

“Do we have enough shuttles?”

Larns paused before responding.

“We can get just under half up in the first load, but the rest will need to wait for the shuttles to return.”

Marshal rubbed his eyes. That meant over eighty people would have to wait almost six hours to escape, and he was sure the insects wouldn’t be so accommodating.

“Larns, is there any way the bugs can get into the hangar?”

“Eventually, yes, but from what we’ve seen so far, it would take them about seven hours. By my estimates, it’ll be close, but the hangar will be perfectly safe until we’re all off.”

“The hangar will be safe,” said Marshal strongly, “but the bugs will be able to get to the waiting area from the main complex. Is there anything we can do about that?”

Larns thought for a moment.

“If we can get everyone into the waiting area, we can seal the doors with hangar patching foam. It’s the same composition as the hangar, so the bugs won’t be able to get through.”

“Foam?”

“Yea. We use it for patching seams when we’re building the hangar.”

Marshal felt relieved. All he needed to do now was get everyone to the waiting area.

\* \* \*

Jen and her assistant were quietly taking the names of the people who had come into the waiting room. Most of the colony had arrived before them, and Jen was busy processing them while her assistant got the new arrivals. She was pleased to see that only four colonists were still missing.

Marshal entered the waiting area and went directly to her.

“Only four,” she answered to his unspoken question.

“Which ones?” he asked.

“Jason Smith, Will Jones, John Wilson, and William O’Regan.”

Marshal nodded.

“Jason, Will, and William are already on the main ship. I sent them up earlier today.”

“So that just leaves Dr. Wilson,” Jen replied slowly, a frown on her head.

“Yes,” replied Marshal slowly, anger building in his voice.

“Do you think?” started Jen.

“Probably,” interrupted Marshal, “but there’s nothing we can do about it right now. We need to get these people on board – fast.”

Jen motioned for her assistant to come over.

“We’re only missing Dr. Wilson, so keep an eye out for him in case he shows up,” she said. “Hopefully he’s only gathering his bug collection from the lab and not doing something hideously stupid like going outside to observe them.”

The assistant nodded knowingly. Dr. Wilson was the chief entomologist and had a rightly earned reputation for doing stupid things when it came to gathering observations of whatever he was studying.

“What do we do about the door?” asked Jen.

“Tape it for now,” replied Marshal. “We can’t seal it until Wilson gets here.”

Jen smiled weakly and headed off.

Moments later an announcement came over the public address system.

“Attention everyone! We have filled the hangar with disinfectant, so we will be using the breathing masks and carriers for loading. We’ll be loading in numeric order, so will the first twenty people please proceed to the air lock.”

“So far, so good,” murmured Marshal to himself as he looked through the window in the door leading back to the complex, “but where is he?”

\* \* \*

Half an hour later, Dr. Wilson had still not shown, and Marshal was getting decidedly agitated. Jen had noticed this and went over to him.

“Do you think he’s still alive?” she asked nervously.

“I wish I knew. He might not be, or he might just be trapped. Either way, I need to know.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I know we have a couple of bio-suits here. I’m going to get into one and leave by way of the hangar when the main doors open. They should protect me, and I can take the second one for Wilson, if he’s still alive.”

“You’d better hurry then,” said Jen. “The first two shuttles are almost ready to go.”

“Damn,” replied Marshal as he dashed toward the air lock and the suits.

Ten minutes later, Marshal was standing just inside the hangar doors, waiting impatiently for them to open. Even though the suit’s helmet muffled the sounds, he could hear the insect activity from outside.

*How many of them are there?* he wondered.

In answer to his question, the giant doors slowly started to open and a wave of bugs poured in. He had intended to scoot out as soon as he could, but quickly realized that there was no way to wade through the waist high pile, and so he waited until the doors were more fully open. Even at the outer edges of the doors, the bugs were piled ankle deep, and he almost slipped on the greasy residue as he stepped through them. He looked around and was relieved to see that the insects seemed to be primarily concerned with the hangar. Then he noticed that the storm had dissipated; there wasn’t a cloud in the night sky and the wind had completely died; and another cold shiver went down his back.

He turned to watch the shuttles exit the hangar. The insects appeared to be focusing on the first shuttle and had just about covered every inch of the outside.

“Commander Williams to shuttle one,” he said over his suit microphone.

“Shuttle one here, Commander.”

“Can you see where you’re going? From here it looks like the cockpit window is completely covered.”

“It is, Commander. We’re using the landing radar and my experience. I should be pretty near center of the hangar doors right now. How am I doing?”

“You’re doing great. You have lots of clearance on either side.”

“That’s good to know. We can take it from here, Commander.”

“10-4. Williams out.”

The shuttles continued to exit the hangar despite the insects and were soon in launch position. Marshal turned and headed toward the nearest door to the complex. As he approached the door, a small group of bugs flew directly at him. They struck with enough force to slightly knock him to one side, but not knock him over. They were circling to attack again as he quickly slipped inside, closed the door, and ensured it was sealed tight.

A quick glance showed him that the bugs had fully infiltrated the complex, but he felt relieved as they were not in great numbers in this corridor. He started a slow jog. The labs were at the far end of the complex and he knew he had to rush.

\* \* \*

He was half way to Dr. Wilson's lab and had just entered a side corridor when he came to an abrupt halt. A colony of flying bugs, similar to bees, had set up a hive. Most of the corridor was blocked by the honeycomb of cells. He knew there was another way to the lab, but that would require him to back-track, go outside, and circle around to another other door; a long process. It was an option he didn't have time to take.

Slowly, he approached the hive, sensing the increasing agitation of the insects the closer he came. He paused about five feet from the only opening in the structure, and was pleased as he looked through. The structure wasn't thick and he knew he could get through without too much effort.

As he moved to the opening, the whole colony attacked. Although each insect only weighed a couple of ounces, he could feel the pressure of the colony loading on his suit, blocking his sight, and making further movement difficult. The rapid tapping on his helmet sounded like a buzz as the insects tried to sting him to death. Unfortunately for the bugs, they had no effect on the suit.

Marshal pushed his way through the hole, causing half the structure to collapse and release its sticky substance. Feet mired in the syrup and loaded down with the colony, he struggled to move forward, but with each step, more of the syrup was left behind and walking became easier and, with each step, the number of bugs on him decreased. As he turned down the final corridor, he was free of the insects.

He quickly found Dr. Wilson's lab and carefully entered. The lights were on and he was surprised to see the doctor standing calmly the middle of it, dressed in his 'bug suit', watching the last couple of insects leave by the open window.

"Wilson," he yelled. "What the hell are you doing? Why aren't you with the others?"

Wilson slowly turned to him and replied.

"Observing. And trying to determine why they're doing what they're doing."

"Well, forget that and let's go! You're the only person not at the hangar."

"Oh, hang on Marshal, we have lots of time. I know how long it takes to get people out and we have hours yet."

"Normally, yes," Marshal replied angrily, "but we may not be able to keep the bugs out that long. Now move it!"

Dr. Wilson moved to his desk and started packing notebooks and recording pads into a box."

"Leave them, and get into the suit!" ordered Marshal.

"It will only take a second," replied Wilson, "and my suit will be fine."

“No, it won’t,” said Marshal sternly. “That suit might keep a few off you, but there are billions of them out there.”

Dr. Wilson gave him a quizzical look.

“Yes, I said billions,” said Marshal impatiently, “and I just might be underestimating the number.”

“I gather you don’t mean scattered over the complex,” said Wilson cautiously.

“No. They seem to be all centered on the hangar. Now get into that suit!”

Wilson stopped packing, removed his ‘bug suit’, and quickly donned the bio-suit Marshal had brought.

While he was changing, Marshall asked: “Why did you come back here?”

“Like I said before, I wanted to observe the insects. I released all the ones I’d caught and wanted to see if they behaved differently.”

“Did they?”

“Yes, they all went directly to the window. They ignored everything else. When I opened it, they all left. It was as though they didn’t notice me at all.”

“Did you expect them to do anything else?”

“Yes. And no. Normally the flying ones will attack anything unusual in their area. I’d expected them to do that, that’s why I wore my suit, but they didn’t do that.”

“But you weren’t surprised,” Marshal stated coolly.

“No.”

“So why did you stay. I mean, after all the bugs left.”

“They didn’t all get out quickly. The crawling ones were a lot slower. I wanted to see what they all did. There are two species that are vicious enemies of each other. They’ll tear each other apart if they meet. I had to see how they reacted when they reached the window together. When they did, they did nothing. They just left. Those were the last ones to leave.”

“I saw them as I came in.”

Wilson was suited by now and made his way to his desk.

“Leave it!” Marshal barked. “Someone will get it later.”

Wilson hesitated for a moment, and then grabbed one of the recording pads.

Marshal gave him a stern look.

“It’s all my critical data. It’ll be needed by anyone coming back,” said Wilson.

“Come on,” ordered Marshal.

\* \* \*

The encounter with the hive was less of a problem as they returned and they didn’t encounter any other bug groups until they were outside the hangar.

“My God!” exclaimed Wilson. “How can there be that many?”

“I don’t know,” replied Marshal, “but hurry up. The doors are closing.”

\* \* \*

Marshal looked at the wall clock as he got out of his bio-suit. It had been two hours since they had started loading, and the last of the shuttles had just left. At this rate it would be another eight hours before everyone was safe, well outside the safe time Larns had calculated.

*Got to get this moving faster,* thought Marshal as he raced for the hangar control room.

\* \* \*

“Larns!” he called as he entered the room.

Larns turned from the woman he was speaking to, gave a quick nod to Marshal, and finished his conversation before Marshal came up to him.

“You don’t need to say anything,” Larns said. “I know this is taking longer than we have.”

“So what can we do about it?”

“Part of the problem is the bags some are carrying. It’s slowing down the loading.”

“And the other?”

“We only have enough portable air masks for the ground crew. We have to rely on the carriers and getting people into and out of them is a slow process.”

“Well, at least I can fix the first problem,” said Marshal sternly as he picked up the public address microphone.

“Attention everyone! This is Marshal Williams. We need to move faster in loading the shuttles and extra baggage is slowing us down. So, unless you can carry it on your person with both hands free, no one is to take any extra baggage. Once we’re on the ship, I’ll

make arrangements with Special Services to get everything we left behind. If anyone has a problem with this, I'll be down in a moment."

"You know you'll be facing some angry staff when you get down there," said Larns as Marshal returned the microphone to its cradle.

Marshal just shook his head as he departed.

\* \* \*

By the time the first shuttle returned, Marshal could tell many in the waiting area were getting very nervous. Word had gotten around about Larns' estimate and some were worried the bugs would get in before they were safe. Marshal wasn't concerned, however. He knew Larns' estimate would hold and, if anything, they would be safe much longer. He'd long ago realized that Larns was not a risk taker and tended to err on the safe side. Marshal's big concern was for the seven who would have to wait for the shuttles to get back from their second trip; the ones who would have to wait an additional two hours after the shuttles left; the ones still here well after the seven hours had passed.

He took a glance at the outside window and saw it was covered in insects, with no light coming in. The window on the corridor door, now completely sealed by hangar foam, was also completely covered, no doubt contributing to the worry inside.

From the control room, he watched the shuttles enter. As soon as the doors were opened, massive swarms of bugs flew in, succumbing to the spraying disinfectant. The whole room was amazed as the shuttles taxied in, so completely covered that they were barely recognizable. Fortunately, the disinfectant worked efficiently and, shortly after the outer doors were sealed again, all of the insects were dead.

"I've never seen anything like this," murmured Dr. Wilson as he watched the screens. "Do you think it's possible for me to get some samples?"

"Samples?" asked Marshal, astonished by the question, and turning to the doctor.

"This area can't support this number of insects," replied Wilson. "From what I've studied with them, there shouldn't be that mass of them out there. It's not possible."

"That's not our imagination, Doctor," said Jen sternly. "It is possible."

"Yes. Yes. I know. But it shouldn't be. That's why I need the samples."

Marshal rolled his eyes. It was becoming surrealistic, a bad dream.

"Okay," he said slowly. "I'll get the ground crew to bring you some. In a sealed container!"

"That will be fine," replied Wilson sheepishly, suddenly aware of Marshal's controlled anger.

\* \* \*

It was half an hour before they could begin loading, with the ground crew using makeshift dozers and shovels to clear paths to the shuttles. Finally, the shuttles were loaded and ready to leave. The hangar control team watched, through interior cameras mounted high in the hangar, as the hangar doors opened to a wall of insects; a quarter of the way up the doors and completely across the width.

“Can they make it through that?” Jen asked Larns.

A quick call to the pilots brought a tentative but affirmative answer.

\* \* \*

Loading of the second two shuttles was again slowed down by the sheer number of dead bodies the crew had to move. The hangar was designed to hold two large shuttles, but both Larns and Marshal wondered if there would be enough space for even one shuttle to get in any more with the large piles of dead insects.

The two shuttles had exited the hangar, and Marshal, Jen, Dr. Wilson, and Larns watched as the three remaining members of the ground crew used high pressure air hoses to clear the tracks and seals to let the hangar doors close. For a few moments, it looked like they would not be able to seal them completely, but the air blasts eventually succeeded.

“Now we wait,” said Larns softly.

It would be two hours before the first shuttle returned, one hour past Larns’ estimate of how long the hangar could survive.

The shuttle landing area was surrounded by remote cameras placed on high poles, and Marshal used these to get a view of the outside of the hangar. Despite the number of bugs that had made it inside, he saw that there were many, many more still struggling to get in from all sides.

\* \* \*

Seventy-five minutes later, they heard a loud groan, and then a sharp crack, startling everyone.

“Larns?” asked Marshal.

Larns was already at the view screens, scanning the inside of the hangar bay.

“Damn,” he said. “They’ve pushed one of the doors off its track. We won’t be able to open them.”

“Are they getting in?” asked Jen, anxiously.

“It doesn’t appear so, but it may not be long.”

“The disinfectant will kill them if they do,” said Marshal.

“But not if we have to continually keep using it. We had plenty for one more exchange, but if we have to keep spraying the hangar, we’ll run out long before the shuttle arrives.”

“Let’s hope that doesn’t happen,” replied Jen.

“Doctor,” Marshal said, turning to Wilson, “why are they still there? There’s only the seven of us, and they didn’t seem concerned with the two of us when we returned. Now that everyone else is gone, why are they still trying to get in?”

Dr. Wilson turned slowly, carefully placing the scanner he held on the table.

“I was right,” he said. “These are not the insects I studied earlier. All of the ones brought in are drones, and most malformed. I suspect, for whatever reason, they were bred just to attack us.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jen fearfully.

“They have pincers and stingers, but nothing to let them feed or breed. I doubt they could survive for more than a day, even if they did their best to conserve their energy.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Larns. “What would be the purpose?”

“The closest analogy I can think of,” said Wilson, “would be those ground insects that create a warrior class to protect the nest. But those individuals are usually much bigger than the rest of the nest, and still need to be fed. These are much smaller, adolescents really, and have another very unusual feature.”

Everyone looked at him, silently waiting for him to continue.

“They all have enlarged infrared receptors.”

“So they feel our heat?” asked Larns.

“Yes,” replied Wilson.

“But that doesn’t explain why they’re still attacking,” stated Marshal. “Surely we can’t be generating that much heat?”

“We aren’t now,” said Larns, “but between all the colonists here and the shuttle engines, we were putting out a big heat signature.”

“Again, that was then, this is now. Why?”

“The hangar structure is still hot,” said Larns. “Unless we had the air conditioning on, it’ll take a while to dissipate the heat.”

“Well, let’s turn it on then,” exclaimed Wilson.

“Can’t do that,” replied Jen. “It would let the bugs in, but we have a bigger problem. How do we get out now, with the doors broken?”

“The service tunnel,” replied one of the ground crew. “It will take us to the other side of the landing area.”

“Good thinking,” said Larns. “But we’ll need protection. We only have four bio-suits.”

“Easy,” replied the tech. “We have six fire-fighting suits we can use. They’re air tight and should be strong enough to keep out the bites.”

Larns smiled, and nodded to the tech, who immediately left to get the suits.

“How can we keep the bugs here while we get on the shuttle?” asked Wilson. “The shuttle engines will attract them.”

“Already thought of that,” said Larns. “We start a big fire here before the shuttle arrives. That should get their attention. I’ve switched off the sprinkler systems in the hangar, so it will keep going after we leave. The lounge will be okay though.”

“Good thinking,” commented Marshal. “The shuttle should be here in about half an hour so we’d better get suited up.”

\* \* \*

The service tunnel was narrow and cramped; two men in fire-fighting suits could barely pass each other. Marshal, Jen, Dr. Wilson, and Larns were in the bio-suits, while the three techs wore the fire-fighting suits. Larns led the group, followed by Marshal. All had gone well as they approached the halfway point of the tunnel. The tunnel was well sealed with multiple protection doors, and they hadn’t encountered any insects.

Larns opened the next door and stopped, almost causing Marshal to run into him.

“What is it?” Marshal asked.

“A problem,” Larns replied flatly, and moved aside for Marshal to see.

What Marshal saw sent a shiver down his back. About six yards ahead, there was a solid mass of insects, completely blocking the passageway.

“Is there another way we can take?” he asked.

“Not without going outside,” replied Larns, “and we’d have to go back to the hangar to do that.”

Dr. Wilson pushed his way forward.

“Let me take a closer look,” he said to Marshal.

“Be careful.”

Wilson slowly approached the mass. They were all crawling insects, piled as high as the ceiling, but not moving. At first he thought they were dead, but he looked closer and saw that they had linked their legs together to form a solid web. He tried to push his pointed finger into the mass, but was met with an unmoving surface. In frustration, he made a fist and struck the wall of insects, and was pleased to see that he had made a small dent, the bugs under his fist flattened. However, his elation quickly disappeared as other bugs quickly replaced the dead ones.

“Looks like this is a dead end,” he reported to Marshal. “We can’t push our way through. Anybody have any ideas?”

“Hang on,” came the voice of one of the techs as he wiggled his way to the front. “I thought this might come in handy.”

He moved in front of the insect wall and lifted a large CO2 container he had been carrying. Unleashing the frozen cloud on the bugs had an immediate effect. The wall immediately collapsed and he continued spraying around the sides, killing the bugs coming to replace the downed ones. After three minutes, the CO2 container sputtered and stopped, its contents emptied.

The tech took a few paces forward, the sound of crunching as he stepped on the frozen bugs.

“Looks clear now, folks,” he said.

Marshal breathed a sigh of relief. Hopefully there wouldn’t be any more.

\* \* \*

They slowly emerged from the tunnel into a small hut on the opposite side of the landing area from the hangar. There was only one small window on the hut’s door, but it was enough for Marshal to see that the bugs were still concentrating on the main hangar, now smoking profusely.

“How long before the shuttle arrives?” asked Jen.

“Shouldn’t be long now,” replied Larns. “I spoke with them just before we left to tell them where to meet us. They’ll contact me on the portable just before they land.”

They all crowded silently in the hut, patiently waiting for the shuttle. About ten minutes later, Larns’ radio crackled.

“Shuttle one to colony, please come in.”

“Larns here. We’re here in the service hut, as planned. It looks clear from here, but we only have a limited view. What do you see?”

“You’re clear, but you’ll have to be quick. The main mass isn’t that far from you.”

“Roger that,” replied Larns, turning to Marshal. “You, Jen, Dr. Wilson, and Jim will go first. The shuttle’s air lock can only handle four at a time. Once you’re in, the pilot will let me know and the rest of us will come.”

Marshal shook his head.

“No. You go. I should be the last to leave.”

Larns sighed heavily.

“Okay then. Have it your way.”

The sound of the shuttle thrusters rose as the craft set down just outside the hut. As soon as the pilot gave the okay, the first four dashed to the shuttle. Already, the mass of bugs surrounding the hangar was moving toward them. Moments later, Marshal got the okay to board.

The leading edge of the insect mass was already at the shuttle as Marshal arrived. He hurried the last two techs into the air lock, and almost slipped on the greasy remains of the bugs that he’d stepped on as he mounted the step into the air lock. By the time the door was sealed, they were knee deep in crawling insects.

Marshal quickly went to the intercom and switched it on.

“The lock is filled with bugs,” he said. “Is there any way to flush them out or kill them before we open the inside door?”

“One moment, Commander.”

A few seconds later, the voice resumed.

“I’m going to flush the lock with CO<sub>2</sub>. It’ll get pretty cold for a while, but you shouldn’t be hurt. Hang on.”

A blast of CO<sub>2</sub> came down from the ceiling, instantly killing the bugs and causing everyone to shiver uncontrollably. Moments later, the inside door opened and the three occupants stumbled out to the waiting shuttle crew members. Marshal quickly removed his helmet.

“Get going, Now!” he ordered.

One of the shuttle crew spoke into the intercom and Marshal could hear the thruster engines start up. He raced for his seat and, once buckled in beside Jen, realized they hadn’t lifted off yet.

“Why aren’t we airborne?” he asked of the crewman sitting across from him.

The woman made a face indicating that she didn't know, and activated her communications set.

"It's the bugs, sir," she said after a minute. "They've buried us and we don't have enough power to lift."

Jen grabbed Marshal's hand tightly, a look of panic on her face. Marshal felt a wave of anger and frustration flow over him. *To have gotten so far and then be stopped.* He was about to say something encouraging to Jen when a thunderous sound filled the shuttle and it shook violently. Moments later, it lurched upward and continued climbing, the view ports clearing and the bugs falling off.

\* \* \*

Half an hour later, in low orbit and on their way to the transport ship, Marshal gently held Jen's hand and looked down at Demeter Four. From here, it looked like a pristine jewel, inviting and tempting, but he knew now that there would never be a colony there. The planet didn't want them and had made that abundantly clear. *No*, he thought sadly, *we won't be back. We'll respect your wishes, whatever you are.*