Chris Vaure

The First Seed

Excerpt:
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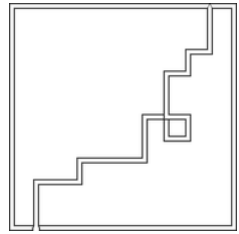
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Tukoshan Crew

Name	***Nickname***	***Role***
James Abelin	*Cap*	*Captain*
Zacharie Phelps	*Zack*	*Point*
Yomna Patris	*Yoyo*	*Cartographer*
Ron André	*Rock*	*Fauna / Flora*
Clark Fira	*Rock*	*Geology / Meteorology*
Marc Jutti	*Prince*	*Linguist / Ethnologist / Archaeologist*
Kate Le Duc		*Second-in-command*
Courtney Tess	*Court*	*Pilot*
T.T. Sparks	*Poet*	*Communication officer*
Henri Duff	*Doc*	*Doctor*
Ernesto Padido		*Intendant*
Rémi Hopady		*Chef*
Hugh Kameno		*Steward*
Maxime Suyona		*Facilities / Maintenance*
Grant Julise		*Maintenance*
Kyle Néal		*Gardener*
Hans Klein		*Mechanic*
Thomas Moli		*Mechanic*



TUKOSHAN

The call from our Communications Officer snapped everyone to attention. With a quick motion, he tapped a control, and a soft, steady beep filled the room.

The captain answered at once.

"Yes, Comms?"

"It's a simple, repeating shortwave signal. It's being transmitted from a fixed point, about a hundred kilometers off the west coast, and roughly three hundred kilometers from the southern tip. We'll be directly above it in three minutes."

Our Communications Officer, T. T. Sparks, had half-risen from his seat. Extending his arm, he pointed to a view of the continent showing the signal's source on one of the overhead screens dominating the room.

The captain reacted instantly and addressed Courtney Tess:

"Pilot, go geostationary when Mess Sparks gives you the signal."

"Copy, Captain!" she replied, adjusting a few parameters on her console.

The captain continued:

"Is this frequency logged anywhere? One of our beacons? A rogue satellite?"

"I don't think so, Captain. We have no beacons in that sector, and none of our satellites, even lost or old ones, use this kind of frequency…"

"Thank you, Comms. Keep digging and check every possible transmission."

Turning toward me, he added:
"Miss Patris, the terminator's getting close, isn't it?"
"Yes, Captain. It'll be night over the area around the emitter in eighty-six minutes."
"Thank you, Miss. You geniuses in the Nucleus, gather everything you can before nightfall. Point, prepare an expedition in case the reports support a descent. We'll review everything after nightfall."
The Captain rubbed his chin unconsciously, betraying his tension.
I saw T. T. Sparks signaling to Courtney.
The very slight acceleration of our ship, the Tukoshan, went unnoticed; until then, it had simply remained in place, letting KOHMH-9656C drift past beneath our windows and sensors. From then on, we would keep our eyes fixed on the signal's source.

As my colleagues and I focused on our consoles, our control room suddenly seemed to awaken from too long a sleep, from too long a routine. Eight years searching for signs of civilization… Eight years finding nothing but a few new types of animals—most often highly intelligent insects. But civilization: none. New technology: zero. Aliens: nada…
Only one other crew on a mission like ours had ever made headlines: the crew of the Barcelona, who had encountered, on Gizee (GZHEE-345B), a species resembling bear cubs. They used tools and traded their surplus fish for flowers, which they carefully placed in their bedding.

I heard footsteps echoing through the corridor. Those who weren't on duty or asleep had heard the news over the general channel and were hurrying in to learn more. I looked up to watch them gather along the gallery overlooking the control room. From there, they had an unobstructed view of space through the glass canopy.
Ernesto Padido caught my eye and gave me two thumbs up. I smiled back, sharing his excitement.

We had never picked up a signal from a planet we were about to visit! My mind was racing, already imagining the missions to come, the possible discoveries, the mysteries yet to be solved. Surprise and excitement were written on every face.
The signal was so simple… And yet that was all it took to set everyone aboard the Tukoshan dreaming of all kinds of adventures.

My console completed its task, and I set it to begin a more detailed mapping of the emitter's sector.
I glanced at the Rocks, our versatile specialists in planetary environments. They would provide their data for me to integrate into my maps once they were done. Ron met my eyes and gave me a five-minute estimate.
"Yomna?" Zack asked. The glow of his console cast a soft light across his face, giving his skin a warm, golden tone.
I moved closer to him.
"Is your unit running? Can you walk me through what you already have?"
"Yes. The target continent is the largest on the planet; the equator runs through its northern third. It's heavily mountainous at the southern end, and along the southern part of the east coast, cliffs drop straight into the ocean. The terrain becomes more rolling toward the center, heavily vegetated. Beaches line almost the entire northern half. You'll want to confirm with our favorite experts, but I'd bet temperatures there are perfectly manageable for us—cool at night, warm during the day."
"Good. Now the search area?"
"It's located in the southern part of the continent, about fifty kilometers from the base of the mountains. It's a rolling area, but not steep. The emission point lies at the center of an oval forest covering thirty square kilometers, crossed by streams. So far, no sign of any structures."
"Good, what results will you be able to get before nightfall?"

"I'll only have a rank-four map within a hundred-kilometer radius of the signal. I'll program a rank eight within thirty kilometers to start at dawn. It'll take a good hour tomorrow morning, but at least we'll know what we'll be dealing with."
"Understood. Here come our Rocks. Stay with us—you'll compile the data afterward."

Sure enough, Ron and Clark were sliding their seats toward us, while Marc joined us to listen to their report.
As he often did, Ron spoke for both of them while Clark projected their maps. He began with the planet's geology: tectonic activity was low across the continent and appeared dormant in our search area.
Ron went on:
"As for fauna, we can already assume there's at least enough animal life to sustain forests: insects, rodents, birds—whatever their equivalents are here. So far, we've found no trace of larger animals, like boar, and no evidence of large herbivores in the plains either. So in theory, no large or very large predators in this region."
"Noted. Climate?"
"Perfect vacation weather… as you've seen, KOHMH checks almost all the boxes for an Earth-type planet: similar size, a slightly hotter sun but farther away, twenty-seven-hour days.
"The parameters are very close to Earth's, and the climate follows suit: temperate to tropical in this region, with fairly cool nights—down to around ten degrees Celsius, I'd say. On dry days, temperatures likely rise to thirty or even forty degrees."
"Fairly comfortable indeed, though that's quite a range…"
"I'm not worried. Clark here is basically a walking hot-water bottle in any weather, but our little Yoyo might get cold if she stays all alone in her cocoon, Point!" Ron added with a wink.
"Keep your noses out of my sleeping arrangements, or I'll put you two on separate watches!" Zack shot back.
"Oh, we didn't say anything!" Ron replied with a wide grin, while Clark struggled not to laugh.

"Seriously, guys—you still manage to joke on a day like this, and you haven't even finished your report yet!" Zack protested. But his eyes sparkled, showing he appreciated this moment of lightness amid the tension of this crazy day.
"Yeah, sorry, Zack. This really is a momentous day! I'm really looking forward to this!"
"So are we all, but you still need to find me a reliable landing zone. Start from the beacon and try to identify the best area within thirty kilometers. Yoyo will have a rank eight an hour after dawn."

Back at my console, I displayed the rank four map as it revealed its sectors one after another, and resumed my meticulous search for buildings. In training, it was one of my specialties, but here, I couldn't find anything. The vegetation seemed particularly dense in this area, and I couldn't make out anything unusual. I caught myself biting a fingernail in frustration. But the sun was setting on KOHMH-9656C, and without light there was nothing more I could do.

Zack went to join the Captain, spoke with him for a few seconds, then they climbed the steps leading to the upper level. I heard their footsteps stop shortly afterward. They were probably lingering by the observation windows, watching KOHMH.
Meanwhile, I had sent the map to the theater and programmed the next day's mapping.
I downed a coffee, quickly stopped by my cabin to freshen up, then made my way to the theater.

It was a place apart on the Tukoshan—a ship that was itself anything but ordinary.
Our space operator, Tulu Quest, was a larger-than-life, unpredictable Indonesian who had built his fortune through the construction and operation of space freighters, and his reputation through luxurious private space yachts. The Tukoshan was his first venture

under an exploration-vessel license, and he had decided to make our ship a showcase for his company. The theater was a perfect example: supposed to be the Nucleus's workspace, it was filled with crimson velvet and gilding. Beneath all that finery, however, lay cutting-edge technology that allowed for fully immersive training.

The Rocks were still busy analyzing their latest data. Marc Jutti, affectionately nicknamed the Prince for his naturally gracious manner, was already there.

Our archaeologist, ethnologist, and linguist had excellent field skills, but his areas of expertise had not yet had a chance to prove useful during our missions. Of course, he also worked on his personal research or assignments commissioned by Earth, but his frustration was real, though understated.

"You look so calm, Prince," I said, "how do you keep from bouncing off the walls?"

Softening his words with a genuine smile, he replied:

"I love your enthusiasm, but I bet you already have twelve scenarios in your head, and tomorrow you'll be all sad because reality didn't live up to them!"

I laughed at the jab:

"Except for T. T. and the Captain, everyone here calls me Yoyo. You're all used to my ups and downs. And come on, if there was ever a time for me to get carried away, isn't this it? For us to get carried away, Mr. Cautious Prince? We have a signal, Marc—just think about that!"

He was about to answer, smiling, when the Rocks arrived:

"We can hear you from the corridor, Yoyo, and we agree with you: we have a signal!" The couple started a little happy dance. Ron moved to my left, Clark to my right, and they spun me around with them.

My eyes were still shining when Zack and the Captain entered the room.

I tapped the nearest console, and a map of KOHMH's main continent spread across the floor. Projected by the holos, the cliffs at the

southern tip rose at our feet. A red dot and green concentric circles marked the location of the signal and the search area.

Zack gave his report to Cap, detailing what we knew and what we still didn't know. I added a few details.

The Captain spoke, his gray eyes making him look colder than he really was:

"All right, Nucleus. Since nothing seems to stand in the way, all five of you are heading down to KOHMH-9656C tomorrow. Locate the emitter, find out who is sending this signal and why. You'll also need to collect the usual samples. Miss Patris, what time do you estimate the rank-eight mapping will be complete?"

"Between 8:00 and 8:30, Captain. I'll check it as it progresses, and I'll need another twenty minutes or so for an overall review."

"Understood. As soon as the mapping is complete, transfer the new map here. Everyone meets at nine sharp. Of course, contact me if any important new facts emerge. Point?"

"Thank you, Captain."

Our Point turned to us:

"KOHMH-9656C is a terrestrial planet, and you've done enough sampling missions to know better than to let your guard down. But the other planets didn't have a signal. We don't know who—or what—is transmitting this signal, or for what purpose. So maximum caution.

"Don't stay up too late tonight, and get plenty of sleep. Tomorrow, we'll have some walking to do. Rocks and Prince, I want you here with me at dawn tomorrow. We'll study the approach points. Tonight, I'll pack the bags."

After the meeting, I went to my cartography console. I wanted to put my mind at ease by checking the maps and readings again.

Then I climbed the few steps to the observation gallery… Packed tonight, of course! This vantage point overlooking the control room was one of my favorite places on the ship. With its immense windows, it allowed us to contemplate the stars and, tonight, to watch KOHMH in all the splendor of night falling across it. This planet

intrigued me so much. I wondered what surprises would be waiting for us in those vast forests.
I took a few moments to savor the fabulous sight, drinking it in. It was already late. I headed to the dining hall, where all my colleagues were already gathered.

I thought of the Rocks and the Prince as my brothers within the larger family of the Tukoshan's eighteen-member crew. But my relationship with Zack… between Zack and me, it clearly went beyond friendship. Our initial attraction had gradually grown into a romance. I still often thought about the time he had forgotten his jacket on my cocoon, like a promise left there. We had never really defined our relationship, and we didn't need to. We each had our own cabin on the Tukoshan, and while we sometimes spent a few nights alone, we could just as easily spend a week in one cabin or the other.
I smiled at him as I sat down beside him, and together we ate without even noticing the meal, too absorbed in discussing the incredible adventure ahead of us. We could speculate all we wanted based on the facts we already had; whatever the reality turned out to be, it couldn't possibly be any less fascinating than what we were dreaming of.

Of course, once I was in my cocoon, sleep was slow to come: I was so eager for tomorrow, and I had so many questions. Zack came and lay down against me during the night. I nestled against his skin, and eventually, I managed to fall asleep.

Only a few hours later, my cocoon vibrated to wake me. Zack was already up, probably taking care of the last few details before the mission. I was so excited about the day ahead of us, already eager to be aboard the Mexplo that would take us down to KOHMH.
No way was I skipping breakfast on such an important day, but I was relieved to see the dining hall was almost empty. I didn't want

to waste time talking and spinning elaborate theories; I only wanted to eat and get back to my station as quickly as possible so I could monitor the images as they appeared.

I settled in at my station, armed with an extra cup of coffee. Barely two minutes later, the console beeped, signaling the automatic start of rank eight. From then on, I never took my eyes off the display, trying to familiarize myself with what would soon be our environment and still, unsuccessfully, searching for clues about the nature of our mission.
When the console finished its work, I was no further along, despite having scrutinized the terrain from every angle the ship allowed. As agreed, I sent the data to the theater, prepared a tray of orange juice, and joined my colleagues in the room. It was 8:50.

The Captain arrived just after me.
"Miss Patris, any new information?"
"No, Captain. No sign of buildings, roads, or infrastructure on or below the surface. I'm leaning toward an isolated signal, because I don't think there's anyone on this planet."
"Good. Mess André, Mess Fira?"
"No large warm-blooded life-forms. As for cold-blooded animals or beings, we'll have to wait until we're on the ground. Clark did notice something, though."
"Yes, Mess Fira? Go ahead."
"Um, yes, Yoyo and I had already noted that the target area was particularly densely vegetated. It also seems to have very large populations of small animals and insects. I don't know these life-forms yet, but I think the insect population is quite high in that area. I want to stress that these are only assumptions."
"Yes, thank you, Mess Fira. We're familiar with your professional caution. Is it possible that these insects are the source of the signal?"
"Anything is possible, Captain…"
"Mess Phelps, do you consider that a possibility?"

"Of course, Captain. I'm not ruling anything out. But if that's the case, things could get complicated. You know how quickly diplomatic incidents with insects can happen."
"Yes, Mess Phelps, but I'm sure you'll manage to be as diplomatic as necessary. I've reviewed your mission plan, and you have my approval. If you're all ready, you'll brief your team aboard the Mexplo."
Zack looked around at the team, and each of us nodded to confirm we were ready to leave.
"Yes, Captain. We're ready, and so is the equipment."
"Good," he replied, then, pressing a button on his com, announced over the general channel:
"Attention, everyone. The Nucleus will depart aboard the Mexplo in thirty minutes."
Then, addressing us directly:
"Miss, Mess, see you shortly."

He turned on his heel, leaving us alone.
"All right, Nucleus, here we go again!" Zack said with a smile. "I'll tell you everything in the module. Go get ready. You heard Cap: you have twenty-nine minutes to take care of any last details and get your gear. If your pouches are ready, now's the time to give them to me; otherwise, meet outside the Mexplo's cargo hold in twenty minutes. " Only the Prince had his with him.
"Zack, mine's in my cabin. If you're heading that way, can I give it to you on the way?" I asked the Point.
"No problem. I need to stop by mine too."

We made our way to my cabin, stopped along the way by crew members who wouldn't be able to see us off at the exploration module.
As the Point, Zack had broad discretion to choose our equipment and our mission clothing. The pouch, meanwhile, was meant for personal belongings and could be attached to our backpacks.
In mine, I had only put my media player.

Doc and the Point managed the medical pouches together, since Zack would be the first one expected to treat us if anything went wrong. Every one of us was his to look after. Fortunately, we had the best Point possible, with no oversized ego: he considered himself on the same level as us. I appreciated him all the more for it.

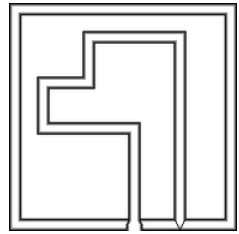
He looked at me with his large, gentle dark eyes, kissed me softly, and said:
"You're so eager, my Yoyo. Your eyes are sparkling!"
"Yours are sparkling too, Zack. Don't tell me you, Point of the Tukoshan, aren't eager to go dig up some old abandoned beacon!"
"Of course I am! I just hope it'll be more interesting than that! And maybe there's something other than the mission making my eyes shine," he said, ending with a hungry kiss.
We had loved each other for a long time—young adults with all the habits of an old couple. Yet we had never bothered to put a label on our relationship, perhaps because the freedom of leaving it undefined suited us so well. That was just us: uncomplicated and full of love.

One more quick kiss, and we were off—him toward his cabin and then decontamination, me toward the bridge to quickly say goodbye to my friend Courtney, whose duties would keep her at the controls during our departure.

With that done, I had just enough time to get to the airlock. Every crew member who had managed to get away was there, which always warmed my heart before we left.
After a few hugs and words of encouragement, I went through decontamination, then joined my team and Cap in the departure area, where he addressed us:
"You're heading out on a mission that looks extremely promising, but please, be very careful. I want all of you back in one piece at the end of the mission. And don't forget that we'll be right here with you, just above. Good luck, everyone!"

That was it. Departure time had come. Everyone boarded the Mexplo. We locked the hatches, and once Cap confirmed over com that the departure zone was secure, Zack requested and received clearance to leave the Tukoshan.

Being released from the ship always gave me a little flutter in the pit of my stomach. I liked watching our beautiful Tukoshan grow smaller, knowing I would return to it and that it was my home, the place where I belonged.



COME

We remained silent, strapped in a few meters behind the pilot station where Zack sat. About ten minutes after separation, his voice came over the general channel:

"We're now outside your control zone, Tukoshan. I'm engaging the autopilot until planetary approach."

"Copy that, and good luck on 'Come,' Nucleus," Courtney said. Zack joined us at the table, amusement in his eyes.

"I think Court just renamed the planet! So Come it is!"

"Simple and effective!" Clark said.

"All right, Nucleus," Zack announced. "Let's take stock. We'll enter the atmosphere in about a hundred minutes. After that, we'll need around two hours to reach the signal area, make our initial flyovers, and land, putting us down shortly after 2:00 p.m. ship time. Remember, we can't overlook anything. Safety comes first. Yoyo, put up the rank-eight map, centered on the signal."

I did so, and a rendering of that part of the continent appeared on the table. I added the visual markers we had already used. Our Point continued:

"There are several plains near the signal that look safe. I chose to keep a little distance for safety."

"It's here," he said, pointing to a spot about five kilometers south of our target. I added a marker to the map.

"Once we land, everyone stays inside to change into exploration gear. As soon as the analyzer confirms the air quality, Ron and I will go size up the forest. We'll be back in under an hour. Meanwhile, Marc,

you'll cover Yoyo and Clark while they unload our packs; they're in cargo hold one; don't forget the blue trunk too: T. T. packed it with all the technical equipment we might need to examine the emitter if we can reach it. The Mexplo will be in chameleon mode, but if you find natural materials to improve the camouflage, use them. Questions?"

"Yes. What time will it get dark, and where do you want us to be when it does?" Ron asked.

"It'll be dark at 9:30 p.m., so tonight, if everything goes perfectly, we'll have approached the emitter and its creators and set up camp nearby. Otherwise, we should have enough time to make it back here. Remember: caution first!"

"You want us to eat lunch on board, I assume?" the Prince asked.

"Yes, the Chef prepared something for us; knowing him, he probably spoiled us. Dessert stays chilled, and the main course needs five minutes to heat up. Can you take care of that for us in an hour, please?"

The Prince nodded.

"Thanks. Until then, make sure you've got the map down, charge your coms, and check their connection to the Mexplo. Rest too if you slept badly last night. You'll need to be at your best later. If no one objects, I'm going to lie down before lunch. Yoyo, you already know the map well, so I'm leaving the autopilot with you."

"I have one more question, Point," Ron cut in.

"Go ahead?"

"What do you think we're going to find? Let's place bets," Ron said. "I'm putting five credits on the scientific discovery of the century: a shortwave signal emitted by plants. What about you, Zack?"

"Still a gambler, Ron. But five credits works for me. For the price of a chocolate bar, we can have some fun. Just don't let that make you forget caution."

"Yes, Point!" we chorused, all sweetness and innocence, gently teasing him.

"Go on, place your bet: human or not?" the Prince pressed.

"I'd say human, and I'm thinking a simple beacon."

"I'm betting on an object too, but not human, and stranded, because I'm sure there's no one in this sector," I said in turn. "Prince?"
"Same as Zack. Some busted old human-made thing stranded here. We don't clean up after ourselves in space. Clark?"
"Not human. Technology, not flora," he replied, smiling at Ron.

His partner put away the little notebook where he'd recorded everything and said to the Point:
"Noted. Thanks, everyone. Go get some rest, Zack. We'll call you for lunch." Once the Point had gone to his cocoon at the back of the Mexplo for some privacy, I settled into the pilot's seat. In automatic mode, all I had to do was keep an eye on the different displays; the ship's systems would detect the slightest anomaly much faster than I could. The view of Come drawing closer was magnificent, and I didn't want to miss it. I could hear the men behind me discussing the rock formations. Before long, Ron went to rest too. Later, the Prince left his seat to heat lunch, and Clark helped him set the table. I got up to wake Zack and Ron, but they were already coming together, looking more refreshed. The meal was delicious, like everything Rémi cooked. I was sure having such a good chef did a lot to make life aboard the Tukoshan pleasant.

"Atmospheric entry: five minutes," the autopilot announced.
We all hurried to clear the table and clean up, then I took the copilot's seat beside Zack. The Rocks and the Prince went to their cocoons and activated their protection. They could still move or communicate, but like us, they would be fully secured and protected if anything went wrong.
The Mexplo entered the atmosphere under autopilot control. Colored trails appeared outside the module, like a halo of multicolored fire, while the ship vibrated and shook. Then the shuttle finally settled down and leveled off into normal flight. For the next two hours, I let Zack fly. I carefully checked once again for any sign of civilization, while enjoying the sight of my maps becoming reality.

The landing was smooth, at 1:55 p.m. Following instructions, we put on our exploration gear.

Zack checked the air analyzer and, in a deliberately cheerful tone, gave us the readout: outside temperature 32 °C, humidity 68%, breathable atmosphere, slightly higher oxygen levels than Earth at the same altitude, no trace of known pathogens. Pressure equalization. We heard the familiar hiss of air venting from the Mexplo, then Zack contacted the ship:
"Tukoshan, this is Mexplo, descent completed successfully, atmosphere safe, pressures equalized, we are preparing to exit. Sending you the data."
"Copy that, Nucleus, stay safe!"
"Yes. We'll stay in contact by com, Tukoshan."
"Copy. The Captain wants a check-in every hour today."
"Copy, talk to you soon."
He stood up from his seat and turned to us:
"Here we go, Nucleus! Prince, set a one-hour timer on your com. Ron, the door!"

Ron opened the hatch and we were finally able to taste Come's air. Those first breaths of a new planet's air had always frightened me, irrationally so… I took a few slow breaths, but Come's air was pleasant. This planet smelled like spring.
The Prince drew his weapon from its holster and slipped down onto the grass at the foot of the module. The grass was finely toothed, dark green, not too long, and it swayed under a light, warm breeze that took the edge off the heat.
Ron and Zack shouldered their packs, then dropped down to the ground beside Marc.

Everything seemed safe. Clark and I watched Ron and Zack move away toward the north, where the edge of the forest lay about fifty meters away.

Now that I could see it clearly, the forest seemed magnificent: tall, with a dense canopy, apparently filled with small, colorful birds whose calls were deep and melodic. Several plant species grew side by side; the undergrowth was open, and higher up, the foliage blended shadowed greens with that surprising dusty mauve hue some Earth forests take on in autumn.

I followed Clark to unload the equipment, staying alert, but nothing disturbed the surroundings. Protocol required that we try to conceal the Mexplo, so we looked for materials to hide our module. Unfortunately, there was nothing in the immediate vicinity. The meadow we had landed in stretched all the way to the forest in every direction; it was safer for the three of us to stay together.

Clark pointed out the mountain range to the south, all the more impressive for being so close. Its white rock peaks stood out against the deep blue sky. We almost felt like we were on Earth—it was unsettling.

After barely half an hour, we were glad to see our two friends emerge from the forest and come back toward us. Zack said a quick word to Ron, who broke into a run toward us, smiling, to reassure us.
"Grab your packs and lock the Mexplo!" he shouted as soon as he was within earshot.
We didn't need to be told twice! Three minutes later, the five of us were walking side by side toward the forest. Marc had put away his weapon, and Zack had picked up a stick.

As we reached the edge of the forest, Ron put on his STIR, a headband that projected an infrared view in front of his eyes. He asked us to remain silent and still while he carefully scanned the surroundings, then explained:

"I can see small insects in the soil, several species, different from those on Earth, but seemingly serving similar functions, as well as pollinators and small flying creatures in the canopy. For now, nothing larger, no mammals and, it seems, no reptiles, but on that point we need to remain cautious. Look at this!"
He took a tiny piece of ration from one of his pockets and placed it at the foot of a tree, its trunk and roots rough, dark brown, telling us to watch closely. Then we saw what had been invisible to us: one of the marks on the root, close to the crumb, began to move, revealing its shape as a caterpillar or a long slug. It approached the crumb, far too large for something so small, touched it, and immediately its body emitted a faint orange glow, gone as quickly as it appeared. Five centimeters below, another caterpillar revealed itself and moved forward until it touched the tail of the first, which seemed to be nibbling at the crumb. As soon as the second caterpillar came into contact with the first, it produced the same strange luminous phenomenon. After a few minutes, fascinated, we were watching an entire line of caterpillars, one after the other. The first caterpillar was eating faster and faster, and seemed to be passing the food down the chain through its body.

Ron dropped another crumb next to the first, then turned away, signaling that we could continue on our way. I turned to look at my crewmates' faces: they were all as amazed as I was by this little spectacle. It wasn't the first time Ron had shown us such secrets, and each time, I was delighted.

"One second," I said.
I stretched and took a drink of water while watching the colorful birds in the canopy.
I took one last look at the caterpillars finishing their meal.
"Let's go."

Our route to reach the beacon was meant to take us straight north, and I quickly understood why our Point had decided to come back for us so quickly: the undergrowth was very open, the ground a carpet of twigs, and we could move forward quickly. After two kilometers, the forest opened up at the top of a grassy hill, offering us a magnificent panorama. Ahead of us stretched kilometers of woods dotted with clearings.

We followed a river for a while. A quick analysis told us it was probably safe to drink. We would run more thorough tests once we set up camp.

We moved quickly but cautiously, and by 5:00 p.m., we were only two kilometers from our goal, which was still invisible, hidden by the canopy when we were on higher ground.

We took a short break, during which our Point sent another message to the ship. Then we resumed our progress. From then on, we would move more slowly, being extremely attentive. Zack would take the lead; I would be behind him with Clark to flank Ron, still equipped with his STIR, and Marc would cover our rear.

Little by little, what we saw confirmed our suspicions: the undergrowth grew greener, vines climbed the trunks, and flowers of all sizes and shapes appeared unexpectedly here and there. They also became more numerous as we advanced, as did the pollinating insects buzzing around them. While many had several pairs of wings, two or three apparently related species propelled themselves using two propellers spinning in intersecting paths above their blue or brown bodies. None of the species we had encountered showed the slightest interest in us; we hadn't been stung once, and we hadn't even had to brush away overly curious creatures. These insects avoided us just as they avoided the trees, seemingly focused only on the heady scents of the flowers that filled the place.

We drew closer to our target—500 meters, then 100—without being able to distinguish it, so dense had the vegetation become.

When we were a mere six meters from the exact point from which the signal originated, we stood before a seemingly impenetrable tangle of plants and flowers, with more insects than ever.
Signaling for us to stay where we were, our Point moved forward slowly, with feline agility. A shaft of light breaking through the canopy made the scene magnificent, and I decided to record with my com. The vivid colors of the flowering undergrowth highlighted my lover's dark skin as he slipped skillfully between trunks and vines. We saw him stop, surprised. He signaled that everything was fine, remaining silent, and tapped at his com for a few moments. Then he came back to us along the same path.

"All good, don't worry! You can put your weapon away, Prince!"
Marc complied. We were extremely eager to know more, but apparently our Point wanted to keep the suspense, or think things through before telling us more. Despite our questions, he led us a kilometer east, into a clearing where we could sit and relax. Then he finally spoke:
"I saw it, but I don't know what it is. I noted a lot of details, but I don't know what they represent. We have quite a mystery to solve…"
"Come on, Point, tell us!" Ron pressed.
"You're such an impatient bunch!" he said, amused. "I promised Cap I'd keep him informed—you'll find out at the same time as him."

He tapped the ship's code into his com:
"Tukoshan, this is the Point and his Nucleus, we are on site."
"Copy that, Zack, are you safe?"
"Yes, Courtney, everything's fine. Patch us through to Cap only."
"Copy, Point, one moment," Cap himself replied.
"I'm in my office now, go ahead," he added.
"Thank you, Captain. The Rocks were right—there are more and more plants and insects as you get closer to the object, until they form a knot in the last few meters. But I was able to get close and

take a few images. Rather than a knot of vegetation, it might be more accurate to call it a nest."

"A nest?" Clark and I exclaimed together.

Zack ignored our surprise. He tapped on his com again, transferring the images to the Captain and then to our coms. He then showed them to us on his screen as he continued:

"You can see: between the com and the object, there was still a good meter of mixed, intertwined vegetation. Then there's a gap that extends through the canopy as well, so the object is bathed in light. It rests on a bed of mud and plants. It's dusty, but much cleaner on top.

"It clearly has the shape of an egg. It must be about 1.5 meters long and 1 meter wide, and I'd personally be afraid of an animal capable of producing such an egg… but I'm certain it isn't animal in origin, and it is clearly the source of the signal."

"Your entire team's safety is at stake, Point—if this egg is the offspring of an animal on this planet, I wouldn't give much for your chances… what makes you so confident?"

"The surface doesn't seem organic at all. I didn't see any welds or fastenings, but it looks like a white metal covered with a hard, transparent, shiny material, like resin. On top of that, we haven't seen any animals larger than the small birds in the canopy, which are clearly incapable of laying such an egg. Lastly, at that distance, Ron would have detected heat with his STIR if that thing were giving off any heat."

"All right, I trust you. What do you plan to do next?"

"We're going to set up camp in this clearing—we're one kilometer east of the egg. I want to study the area and the vegetation around the egg to see whether we can cut through it safely, and install a camera pointed at the egg. If that's conclusive, we could try to make our way through tomorrow morning and probe the object. That gives us a comfortable safety margin to get back to the module in daylight if needed."

"All right. Make sure your camp is as secure as possible, and organize watches in pairs."

"Yes, Captain, that was already my intention."
"Yes, yes, I figured as much, Point, but all your experience won't stop me from worrying! Keep me informed."
"Yes, Captain."

Zack turned back to us, ending the communication:
"All right, I assume you're eager to know more?" Without waiting for our answer, he went on: "Then get to work! I want a camp set up and connected to the Tukoshan within two hours! Yoyo and the Rocks, head down this hill to the north—the map shows a stream at the bottom. Analyze the water, and run it through the purifier. I'm going with the Prince to set up the camera. If you get back before we do, start setting up the camp, and set it up as one large module."

I set off with my two companions toward a small stream cascading down at the bottom of the hill. While Ron and Clark kept watch, I collected water for the analyzer. It was drinkable.
Clark and I carried back four pouches—several days' worth of supplies. Ron had to keep his hands free to cover us.
We were the first to return to the chosen campsite. I sent Zack a message over com, which he would check when he could.
The Rocks began setting up the camp module, a large, heavy-duty tent that could be assembled in several configurations.
As for me, I set up the purifier and connected it to the first pouch. I had to settle for mode 2; the water lacked a few minerals to make it similar to what we had on the ship.

A few moments later, the Point and the Prince came back, and I stepped toward them:
"Glad to see you back! The water is nearby, drinkable, currently being purified in mode 2. The Rocks have almost finished setting up the module."
"Perfect. Prince, start setting up the technical section, and let me know as soon as the connection is established with the Tukoshan

and Mexplo systems. I want displays for the camp, the Mexplo, and of course a display for the camera we set up to monitor the egg. Set up another display in the common area and put it on the camera feed. I don't want us taking our eyes off that thing. In the meantime, I'll help the Rocks finish up. Yoyo, in the shared pouch of your pack, there's a meal to heat up. Have that ready and the table set in about twenty minutes, please."
"OK, Zack!" the Prince replied, heading off to carry out the tasks.

Zack turned to me and pulled me into an embrace:
"So, my lovely impatient Yoyo, do you have even more questions in your head than this morning, back on the Tukoshan?"
"Yes, my dear, but I did get at least one answer…"
"Oh really? Which one?"
"I got confirmation that whatever we could imagine, it was bound to be fascinating. We hadn't imagined this egg, or this feeling of being on a twin of Earth—and it's fascinating. Look, it's as if we were camping on a primordial Earth! Not a path, not even an animal trail across the meadow, no litter, magnificent flowers, and a mission like we all dreamed of… And you're here!"
"And you're by my side, and that makes me happy, and I love seeing you enjoy nature like this. There are other planets I've been wanting to show you for a long time—I have a whole list—but for most of them, scientific teams have already crisscrossed them. This one is untouched, and for at least one more night, we can savor it."

I rarely got such heartfelt words from Zack. With a light heart, I carried out the small tasks of camp life. I prepared the dish the Chef had entrusted to us to heat up. It smelled really good. Rémi always made us little culinary wonders for the first day of exploration, because he knew it took time to find food that was both edible and good on a new planet—time we rarely had during setup—so from the next day on, we would make do with standard synthetic meals.
I saw the Rocks getting ready to head out:
"Meal in five minutes, Rocks!"

"Keep our portions warm, please, Yoyo—we're going to set up the perimeter alarm."
"All right, but come back quickly."

The Prince called Zack: we were connected to the Tukoshan.
Zack crossed the common room to go to the technical section, asking me to delay the meal by ten minutes. I adjusted the settings on the heating cube again and joined the two men. I nodded to Cap on the screen, already in discussion with our Point.
"I have a permanent channel to your camera feed. Miss Le Duc and Mess Padido will take turns watching it. I've given them direct access to your coms. What have you learned?"
"We've opened a small breach in the vegetation. Their sap is harmless; only one is mildly irritating, nothing more. You should be able to see a few cut branches on the left side of your screen."
"Yes, I see the opening. Do you need heavier equipment?"
"Not for now. These branches seem sturdy, but a machete cuts through them easily, so with a laser pen, it's pretty quick."
"Good. Anything else?"
"Yes. It seems the egg is what attracts these plants; however, none of them touches it: no flower or leaf comes closer than five centimeters to the shell. And this remains to be confirmed tomorrow, but I think all the vegetation around the egg functions in a kind of symbiosis with it: it must be releasing phytohormones to attract them. It probably benefits from their presence, and the plants seem to accommodate the egg's needs perfectly: it is surrounded by vegetation, and yet none casts too much shade on it; the opening in the canopy lets light fall directly on it, but the plants seem to avoid using that light, unlike most plants, which would normally grow toward the light. I also think the egg has been there for a very long time and that no one has approached it since. Nothing indicates that it could have been manufactured on this planet. The forest surrounding it beyond the nest is really ancient, and there's no sign of the traces an object falling from space would inevitably have left. So

I think those traces were erased by time, that the forest spread into this area, and that the egg developed, then maintained, its nest. The very simple signal makes me think of a stranded beacon. But not one of our making."
"Understood. I tend to agree with your theory. What's your plan for tomorrow?"
"Shortly after dawn, we'll all go to the site to clear a path to the egg. I don't want to destroy too many plants, since they clearly provide something to it, so we'll watch closely for any reaction. I hope to be able to examine the egg up close with the equipment provided by T. T. It would also be useful for him to be at his screen when we do—his input could be valuable."
"He will be. Do you plan to move the egg?"
"I don't know yet. It will depend on our tests."
"Good luck, then."

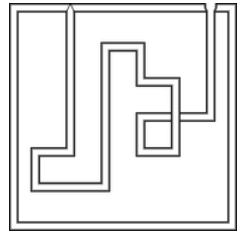
The communication with Cap ended. Absentmindedly, I looked at the other displays, and I found it hard to pull my gaze away from the one connected to the camera, which showed that green wall and, a bit farther, a white patch that must have been the egg. I was dying to see it up close. I couldn't wait for tomorrow.

We heard the Rocks come back into the module, their task completed. While the others summarized the discussion for them, I finished setting the table, and soon we were talking over a good meal.

The discussion went on all evening, but the speculation became far less fanciful… we were coming around to the Point's theory: a stranded beacon from another civilization. We had the beacon, but not the civilization that had created it—even though finding that civilization was our primary mission. It was very likely that our stay on Come would be short. And if it was indeed a stranded beacon, how could we find its creators? And what did it mean? Was it justified to move it? Yes, of course, if it was our only proof of the existence of another technological civilization…

As he often did, Zack took the first watch with me, but it quickly became clear he didn't want to talk about the subject much longer. We were sitting inside the module, facing the closed door, which had been made transparent so we could watch outside and contemplate the Comian night. We could hear nothing but the wind blowing. From where we sat, we could also see the display focused on the egg, but nothing happened. Ron relieved Zack, and we talked about the planet's flora. I felt relieved when Clark came to take my place, as I was exhausted.

As I entered the cabin, I saw that Zack had removed the partition and joined our cocoons. I curled up against him and slept like a log.



GRIFTO

Early in the morning, Zack came to wake me gently. The sun was rising, and Ron had prepared us a solid breakfast.

It didn't take us long to gather the expedition gear, and soon, we were gazing at the nest.

We could make out the egg through the green tangle, and I was awed by its size. The white metal surface, coated in glossy, transparent resin, deepened the sense of strangeness. Behind me, Clark snapped a twig, bringing me back to reality.

Following the orders our Point had given earlier, I set up a second camera, to the right and a short distance from the nest. It would transmit this other angle to the Tukoshan. Meanwhile, my companions were carefully cutting a passage through the knot of vegetation, their arms covered to protect themselves from splashes of sap. Ron had put on his STIR.

Keeping an eye on their progress, I contacted the ship:

"Tukoshan, this is Yomna Patris for the Nucleus."

"Good morning to you, Yomna!" T. T. replied. "I hear you need my services."

"Indeed. First, confirm that you're receiving the second camera."

"Yes, we've had it for a few moments. Kate and Ernesto are watching it. I'm linking us on the com circle. Say hello to Yomna!"

"Hi, Yoyo!" Kate Le Duc and Ernesto Padido answered in unison.

Kate was second-in-command on the ship, and highly competent. Her short blonde hair, cut boyishly, along with her muscular build,

made her seem cold when you first met her, but the months, then the years aboard the Tukoshan had fully woven her into all our lives. Ernesto was our intendant—the man in charge of the ship's supplies, planning, day-to-day organization, even the occasional crew get-together. He also smoothed over the small frictions that sometimes arose between us. He was often our point of contact on the Tukoshan when we were on mission. Which meant he had very little free time. He was a kind, thoughtful man, with, to my mind, an extraordinary sense of organization. You could come and interrupt him with a minor issue while he was deep in thought over more serious problems, and there was no risk he would forget to do what he had said.

"Hello, Kate, hello, Ernesto, what do you think of this place?"

"Pretty close to ideal, but I'd get bored quickly," Kate answered.

"It looks very peaceful," Ernesto added.

"Yes, indeed! It's very calm, almost too calm!"

"Looks like they're making quick progress?" Ernesto pointed out.

"Yes, the lasers are very effective here. Actually, if they're moving fast, I need to keep up!" I then addressed our communications officer by his nickname:

"Poet, Zack asked me to get in touch with you to unpack your equipment and prepare it."

"All right, Yomna. You'll see, there's nothing very complicated. The only real issue is that the scanner I gave you needs to surround the object, and there doesn't seem to be enough space around it."

"How much space do we need around the egg?"

"20 cm minimum between the shell and the scanner walls. Open the blue crate and take out the red case. It assembles like a camp module, with the same range of configurations."

"All right. Is there a floor to place under the egg?"

"No, fortunately! I think you can build a basic rectangular tunnel, extending it up to 2.5 meters depending on the size of the egg and the available space."

"That might be difficult. One minute."

I called Zack, gave him a summary, and he joined the discussion.
"OK, Poet, this is Zack. I assume I can't touch the egg until it's been scanned?"
"Exactly, Point…"
"The issues this creates: the space to clear, the volume of vegetation to cut, even though it seems necessary to the egg, and the shadow it's going to cast on it… The work doesn't scare us; we can even speed up. The shadow should be tolerable for the egg, since night doesn't affect it. But its needs are unknown to us."
"If it's a simple beacon, and given the nest of vegetation, I assume it draws energy from it. We can only hope this won't drain its reserves."
"Thank you, Poet. What do you think, Ernesto?" Zack asked.
"You're the Point, but I think that scanner is essential before touching the object. Trust your instinct. You thought yesterday that this object had been there for millennia, it should be able to withstand this stress. And if we want to study it to find its origin, we'll have to handle it and move it at some point…"
"Yes, that's my opinion too," Zack replied. "We'll speed up the cutting and remove only what's necessary. Poet, stay as attentive to the signal as if it were a heartbeat, you never know."
"Understood, Zack, we're staying with you."
"Yoyo, build the tunnel frame, keeping it folded flat. Plan for 1.5 meters in width and height."
He quickly went back to the nest, gave his orders to the Nucleus, and the pace increased.

After an hour, a one-and-a-half-meter-high breach had been cut through almost the entire thickness of the nest. Ten centimeters of interwoven greenery still separated us from the egg. I moved the second camera and wedged it between the branches, to the side. It pointed directly at the egg, lit by the shaft of light above it. I could finally see the object of our mission up close, and I fully shared Zack's opinion. This egg had been there for a very long time, and on top of that, there was nothing organic about it. The hypothesis of a

beacon of unknown origin seemed more likely. Still, I kept wondering why a beacon would emit on such short waves.

Five minutes later, the passage to the egg was clear, but the space was still insufficient to examine it properly. Our priority was to have enough room for the tunnel.

Since I was the smallest on the team and Zack the most agile, we slid into the space between the egg and the plants, never touching the egg. We cut the plants at the base until we obtained sufficient width, then evened out the height. It was a difficult task: clinging with one hand to the branches to avoid falling backward onto the egg, we also had to be careful about where the cut branches would fall.

"Nucleus, this is Radio: the signal has lost 1% of its strength."

"Copy that, Radio. Is it stable? At what level will you start having trouble receiving it?"

"It's stable, yes. I'll start having trouble below 60%. With optimization, I should still be able to receive it, but only down to 35% of its power."

"Copy that. Let us know if it drops further."

When our Point judged the space sufficient, he positioned himself toward the back, while the Prince handed me the tunnel. I passed it over the egg to Zack. He set the first arch, and I only had to unfold it toward myself, like an accordion, without touching the egg. The required clearances were maintained.

The Poet's voice came through again:

"The signal is losing strength… 2% down… 3%… 4%… 5%… stabilized at 5% down. You'd better not take too long."

I resumed breathing, realizing I had stopped at the Poet's announcement.

"Copy that, Radio."

The Prince handed me the scanner's control unit; I connected it to the tunnel and positioned it so that the display would be visible to the Poet and to Zack. Then I initiated the sequence, watching just as eagerly as the image formed.

"Nucleus: what you're seeing at the base appears to be a reservoir, filled with liquid. Not detected as dangerous. Just after that, there is a honeycomb-like zone. The cells vary in size. Each seems to contain a different substance. Some react to the scanner, but the quantities are minimal. A whole network connects the reservoir to these cells and leads to the next zone. I don't know what it is—I've never seen this kind of machine—but I'd be willing to bet it's a micro chemical plant."

"Dangerous?"

"Like any chemical plant… but no more so. After that, I see a separation, like a thicker membrane, dividing off the base of the egg. The same membrane appears again about 60 cm higher. It also lines the entire shell in that zone. It looks like there's a difference in one place, perhaps a control area, halfway up the egg, on the north side, almost entirely against the ground. I'll need to look more closely—some details aren't coming through clearly.

"Then another membrane. Then there is a 20-centimeter-high section of what looks like granular material, divided in two. The left side has a coarser grain size. I'll be able to analyze the images better once the scan is complete.

"Finally, in the last 20 cm of the egg, at the top, it's filled with crystals of all sizes, connected by an improbable network of metallic wires. Copper, most likely. As for the interior, I don't know any more. The shell itself is metallic—some metal or alloy I don't recognize. The transparent envelope does indeed look like resin, but I believe it is porous, because in many places it seems connected to the chemical plant. That would explain the exchanges with the surrounding vegetation."

"Thank you, Poet. Anything else?"

"No, nothing before I've had time to review the images. Yomna, disconnect the control panel and pass it to the Prince so he can hook it to his com and send me the data. Allow ten minutes for transfer and probably twenty before I can give you more precise details. In the meantime, I suggest you fold the tunnel back up, stow the equipment, and get some rest."

"Thank you, Poet. We'll wait for your analysis. Yoyo, help me fold it up."

We packed the equipment away and settled as comfortably as possible while waiting for the Poet's information.

The discussion was in full swing. What was this chemical plant for? And that reservoir? If it were fuel, it would have been flagged as potentially dangerous.

The Rocks and the Prince leaned toward the idea of a beacon that had been propelled and ended up stranded here, with a chemical plant that allowed it to synthesize phytohormones to attract the plants and draw on an energy source near them.

"OK," Zack replied, "in that case, a beacon for what? A beacon, for us, marks a path to follow, or a danger, or a place of interest. And why such a short wavelength?"

"What if those who built this deliberately chose short waves, undetectable from afar for all the technologies we knew until recently, unless you were on site?" I said.

"You mean they'd be here?" Ron asked.

"Of course not! We haven't seen anything that could produce something like this, nor any trace of intelligence advanced enough! I mean that those who made this either didn't know of anything better than short waves and made do with them, for some unknown purpose, or they thought they were the only ones able to detect them from farther away. So they placed this beacon to come back to it later. A beacon that would say: planet to avoid or…"

"Or a perfect planet to colonize?" Ron cut in. "They would have to be very close to our own needs if that were the case, because this planet seems like an Eden to us, and its plants, at first glance, function similarly to our endemic plants."

"And so?"

"And so, the egg has figured out how to get them to respond to its needs—so there is an understanding of their chemistry."

We were still reflecting on Ron's last words when the Poet's voice came through Zack's com.

"Hello again, Nucleus," he said in a cheerful tone. "I've taken a closer look at your beacon."

"We're listening, Poet. Go ahead, and be clear!" the Point replied.

"Don't worry, what I've understood is very simple, and what I haven't understood, I'd be hard-pressed to explain… Let's start with the good news: five minutes after the scanner tunnel was removed, the signal was back to only one percent below normal.

"Next, your egg—or your beacon, as you prefer. For the shell, I confirm everything I told you earlier: unknown metal, permeable resin connected to the chemical plant. A network of very fine channels runs beneath the metal all around the egg, piercing it at regular points to connect with the resin. I'm projecting the image. You see, this network is composed of two nodes, located at the ends of the egg, from which the channels extend until they reach the opposite pole. There is, however, another very particular area: where I described a possible control zone. There, the density of this network is extremely high. I'm thinking sensors, or touch-sensitive controls."

"Understood."

"Then, starting from the base of the egg as during the scan: the reservoir: without analysis, it's hard to be precise—the liquid could just as well be water, or liquid nitrogen, or anything else… In any case, not dangerous enough to trigger the scanner, and I have full confidence in that equipment.

"The cells that follow are a reserve of various chemical elements, if we accept that the next zone is a chemical plant. Of course, I have no proof of what I'm suggesting—this technology is unknown to us. Still, all these reservoirs, these channels, this permeable resin, these plants forming a nest… it all seems consistent to me.

"I don't know whether the double compartment of granular material is also a reserve. On that point, I know nothing. Nor about the next zone, for that matter. Perhaps that thick membrane allows for gas exchange? That's pure speculation. But it's empty—that much is certain.

"The top of the egg, with its crystals and its copper network, makes me think of a brain—but not a living brain in the usual sense. More like a console, or a database."

Zack stepped in:

"Poet, if it's a database, how do we read it? And if that's the case, with all these reservoirs, these materials… could this egg simply be a kind of record saying, 'this is the type of data we use, read what it contains, and here are the elements present on our planet'?"

"Interesting hypothesis. After all, our ancestors didn't do things so differently… In any case, that idea doesn't contradict how I see the situation:

"If this object had hostile intentions toward you, or orders to harm you, something would most likely have happened already. This object is probably capable of emitting gases that would be at the very least unpleasant, even lethal, and it didn't do so when you cut the surrounding plants, nor when you covered it with the tunnel or scanned it. I think you can handle it carefully. That's an opinion—I'm not the one making the decisions. I've already shared all of this with the Captain and with Ernesto. The latter is on the com circle with us."

"Hi, Nucleus, I'm here. The Captain will be joining us in a few moments. In the meantime, congratulations on the success of your approach this morning! Ah—there's the Captain."

"Good morning, Nucleus. I've been informed of your progress and your discoveries. Mess Sparks has given you his report. What do you think, Point?"

"Good morning, Captain. I find the scanner results rather encouraging, as well as the object's passivity during our approach. It does raise even more questions."

"You wouldn't be here if you weren't a seeker of answers, would you, Point?"

"Exactly, Captain. Which is why I hope this device isn't too heavy, because I fully intend to turn it over to take a closer look at that area that could be a control panel."

"You're the Point. But know that I share your opinion. Mess Padido? What do you think?"
"The same, Captain."
"Good. What is your plan?"
"We'll get some strength back and relax a little, so we can get back to it with a clear head. Then we'll place three additional cameras in the nest; Clark will position himself at its entrance to cover us in case of trouble. Marc, Ron, Yomna, and I will then carefully lift the egg and rotate it until we can access that area, if it is visible. What follows will depend on what we find."
"Understood. Wait until I'm on com before attempting the maneuver."
"Copy that."

A few sandwiches and drinks later, we were setting up the additional cameras. It was time to contact the Tukoshan.

"Tukoshan, this is the Nucleus. You're receiving the feed."
"Nucleus, this is Tukoshan. We've got our eyes on you!"
"Then I hope we look good on camera!" Zack joked. "All right, everyone in position!"
Clark moved to take position in the breach of the nest, from where he could watch both the undergrowth and us.
I positioned myself to Zack's right, at the base end of the egg, while Ron and the Prince took position at the tip.
"Are we set? Let's see…"
Zack first touched the surface of the object with a single gloved finger, then, seeing no reaction, he placed his hands in position to lift it.
"You can touch it. On three, we'll try to lift it, very gently: 1, 2, 3…"
We lifted the egg, which must have weighed no more than about thirty kilos.
"Ready to turn? Slowly, clockwise from my perspective. 1, 2, 3…" We rotated the egg, very slowly.
"I see it, keep going!" Zack told us. Then:

"Stop, that's good! Clark, grab us a cloth! Ron, put on your STIR."
He complied immediately, while Clark came back with the requested item. On our side, we were observing a section of the shell where the metal seemed to emit light. We could only make out a rounded shape of 2 or 3 cm^2; a large patch of dried mud was hiding the rest and covered a significant portion of the egg. In a few strokes of the cloth, that side of the egg became as clean as the rest. We all stood motionless, trying to take in what we were seeing.

On the white curve of the elongated egg was a gray oval, and within that oval, a luminous white imprint depicting a right hand, clearly human, with the fingers slightly apart. A dark circle marked the palm of the hand.
Zack grabbed the nearest camera and aimed it at the object:
"Captain, do you see this?"
"Yes, Point, I see everything. You're the Point."
"Marc?"
"I'm… astounded."
"Ron? Everything normal?"
"Yes, Zack."
"OK, let me know at the slightest change."

Then Zack, his face tense, placed his hand on the imprint. We all held our breath.
Nothing happened.
We exchanged glances, incredulous… Clearly, this imprint must be a lock, and our hands had the required size and shape…
"Point? The object showed no reaction?"
"None, Captain."
"Any idea?"
"Yes, Captain," Zack replied. Then, to Ron beside him:
"Stay at my side. Clark, come closer and film," he said, handing him the camera.
Clark took it and began filming Zack.

Still tense, Zack removed his glove, then placed his hand again on the shell. The entire egg lit up and immediately went dark again.
"Ron? What did you see?"
"Nothing, Zack. Same temperature as before the light. Look!"
Zack turned back to the egg, just as a new luminous image formed within a few seconds.
The first imprint was identical, a little brighter, I thought. Right beside it, a second handprint appeared, this one bearing two concentric circles on the palm.
Zack placed his hand back on the first imprint and nothing happened. He left it there and tried to press his other hand against the shell, but immediately realized that the other imprint represented a second right hand.
"Yoyo?"
"All right."
I moved closer to him, quite intrigued by all this.
"Go ahead, you won't feel a thing."
A little more confident, I held Zack's gaze, removed my glove, then turning toward the egg, placed my hand on the second imprint.
The egg lit up brightly, without blinding us, and without frightening me enough to make me pull my hand away reflexively. It was Zack who took my hand and pulled it away from the egg. He kept it in his for a moment, then addressed Ron.
"Anything new?"
"Yes, it was very fast, but just after the light, the shell stopped being thermally opaque and I was able to see the internal temperatures. There are no hot zones—the interior is at ambient temperature, except for the granular zone, as the Poet calls it. There, it's particularly cold. I think I saw a very small cold point move from that zone toward the center. Then you removed Yoyo's hand and everything became opaque again."
"When I removed her hand, are you sure?"
"Yes."
Zack was looking at the object thoughtfully. It now displayed a wide luminous oval, in the middle of which three dark circles interlaced.

"Tukoshan to Nucleus, Tukoshan to Nucleus!"
"Yes, Poet, what's happening?"
"The beacon stopped emitting on its frequency when it lit up!"
"And yet it doesn't seem damaged—why has it gone silent?"
"No, Zack, it hasn't gone silent, it's just changed frequency."
"Ah, I see. What do you think that could mean?"
"I have no idea, but I'm as surprised as you are."
"Are these still short waves, undetectable without our equipment?"
"Yes, absolutely."
"All right, thank you, Poet…" Zack turned to Ron:
"Come closer and be more attentive than ever—tell me in real time what you see."
"Understood."

Zack placed his hand in the oval, and immediately, across the entire central section of the egg, the white metal seemed to fade away. We then saw that it was hollow, and, as the Poet had told us from the scan, lined on all sides with what appeared to be a viscous, jelly-like substance, 2 to 3 cm thick. It was pinkish but translucent, and the twigs crushed under the weight of the egg remained visible through it.
At the same time, Ron began to speak:
"That's it, I can see everything again. There is indeed one point—no, two! They're tiny, one larger than the other, quite close together. They're traveling together, they're near the center, at this level," he said, pointing to a spot about 3 cm from the "visible" zone, on the base side.
"They're moving fairly slowly, but they're warming up," he went on.
"What do you mean, warming up? Is it going to blow if they meet?" Zack asked immediately.
"No, no, I don't think so—they're traveling together, they would have already gone boom! They're still very cold, below zero." He slid his finger along the shell as the points advanced.
"How big are these points?"
"Really small, maybe 1 and 3 mm."

"Are they still warming up?"
"Yes! They're about to pass through the membrane. They're at zero degrees now, I think."
"Look! There!" Clark shouted. A small opening had just formed at the center of the circular membrane at the base. I raised my eyes to the other side:
"There too! It's coming out!"
On each side, a tiny, soft pink tube slowly emerged from the openings. They stretched out, descending slowly toward the ground.
"There's nothing in the one at the tip, but the points are still warming up in the tube at the base—10 degrees," Ron informed us.
As they touched the floor of pinkish gel at the same time, the tubes extended horizontally, clearly aiming to meet.
"15 degrees," said Ron.
We still didn't understand what we were looking at, but we couldn't take our eyes off it.
"20 degrees."
About 5 cm before the meeting point, a very fine, whitish corolla began to emerge from the tube coming from the top side. The tube advanced, the corolla lengthened, grew, and just before the two tubes met, the corolla swelled and closed like a globe around the ends of the two tubes, separated by a few millimeters. We saw two tiny spheres come out of the tube from the base. The spheres came to a stop, wedged between the two tubes.
"They've come out of the tube—25 degrees."
Nothing more was happening, but it was clear it wasn't over.
"Ron, look without the STIR for a second," Zack advised him.
"Incredible!" he exclaimed, not realizing that we too could now see it.
"You'll watch the show on video, but I wanted you to see this with your own eyes. What temperature now?"
"Thanks, Zack!" Ron replied, putting his STIR back on. "30 degrees… this zone is warming up too. It was at 20, like outside—it's warming faster than the points, but it's only at 25… Zone 30, points 32… Same temperature: 35… 36… 37… It's not rising anymore!"

"37? Are you serious?" Zack asked, surprised.
"Yes, Point, 37. Careful! A large point is coming down from the top tube—it's heating up very fast: 30… 40… 50…"
"Everyone back!" Zack shouted as he heard this.
With his free arm, he tried to push Ron back, who kept calling out his numbers: "60… 70… it's reaching the end! 80."
We then saw a small, gleaming sphere roll like a golden marble and collide with the two spheres. As it touched them, it produced such a bright flash that Ron cried out. The STIR must have amplified the effect.
"Ron! Are you okay?" Clark asked immediately.
"Yes, yes, I'm fine—it just flashed a little too brightly, I'll be back to normal in a few minutes."
"Ron, are you sure?" Zack asked. "Pass the STIR to Yoyo, sit down and keep your eyes closed for a moment, we'll describe everything, don't worry."
"Yes, yes, I'll be fine, Zack. Here, Yoyo, be careful," he said, handing me the STIR.
He took a few unsteady steps, then sat down against the interwoven trunks. I adjusted the STIR and was able to see that the temperature of the pink section was identical to that of my companions' bodies.
"37, stable," I said. Then, noticing a movement: "Look! The tube!"
The tube from the top was folding its corolla and pulling back. Thanks to the STIR, I could see that the retracting part of the tube wasn't coiling up somewhere inside. I explained:
"The tube isn't being stored—it's dissolving into that jelly-like substance!"
A few moments later, there was no trace left of the tube or of the opening from which it had emerged, and, looking closely, we could see that the other tube, still present, seemed fully integrated into the pink material.

Everything seemed to be over. The temperatures were no longer changing; everything was now motionless.

Zack's arm had gone numb from keeping his hand pressed against the surface for so long. Carefully, he removed his hand. In an instant, the beacon returned to its uniform appearance, marked only by the oval with the three circles.

"Yoyo?"

"Everything's opaque, I can't make out anything inside the beacon anymore."

"Do you still think it's a beacon?"

"Yes. Well… I don't know."

"We'll talk about that later. What do you see now?" he asked, placing his hand back again.

"I can see everything again! Temperatures still stable." Quickly checking without the STIR, I saw that the shell of the pink section had become transparent again. I put the STIR back on.

Zack removed his hand again, and the beacon returned to its previous appearance.

"Clark," he called, "try placing your hand, please."

Clark removed his glove and placed his hand on the shell, in the oval. But nothing happened.

"Ron, are you feeling better?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, the afterimage is fading quickly now."

"You'll still go see the Doc when we're back on the Tukoshan. Can you stand up and come try?"

"Of course!" Ron stood up and came to place his hand where Clark's had been. Still no result.

"Prince, your turn…"

"Zack, you know very well that's pointless, don't you?" he asked, looking him straight in the eye.

That wasn't the Prince's usual kind of response—I was very surprised. But he stood up and also placed his hand in the oval, replacing Ron. Nothing changed.

"Prince, put the STIR on your head, will you? Yoyo, come closer."

Intrigued, I removed the STIR and handed it to the Prince. I moved closer to Zack, who said to me:

"Place your hand on the egg, Yoyo."

Not expecting any result, I complied. Yet the pink zone became fully visible again, with no apparent change inside.
I removed my hand to see whether the metal would become opaque again, and it did. I tried one last time to place my hand, and the pink zone appeared. I finally removed my hand. I couldn't make sense of anything anymore; I didn't know why, and I couldn't think. I must have looked a little lost, because Zack immediately asked me:
"Yoyo? Are you okay? What's wrong?"
"Nothing, everything's fine, Zack, it's just that I don't understand any of this and I can't think… my head feels foggy, I don't understand what's happening, why it works for one person and not another… I can't think clearly."
I then saw them all look at each other, apparently surprised by my answer. Then Zack spoke:
"All right, there's little chance anything new will happen for now. Prince, run back to camp and connect the displays to each of the cameras, then don't take your eyes off them while you wait for us. While you do that, we'll pack up the equipment, except for the cameras. Clark, put yours back in the nest where it was. We're heading back to camp—we'll eat and get some rest. That was a lot today." Then, as the Prince was already moving away in long strides:
"Cap, did you hear that?"
"Yes, Nucleus, I saw everything and heard everything. Take it easy on the way back—Miss Patris and Mess André should rest. One moment… The Doc wants you to call him as soon as you reach camp, before Mess André goes to rest."
"Understood."

It didn't take us long to gather the equipment and get ready to leave, and we were just finishing when the Prince called us over the com:
"I'm in position, displays connected, I can see you."
"OK, thanks, Prince. I'll check one last time and we're on our way."
Zack went back to the egg and placed his hand in the oval, revealing the pink zone. He removed his hand and came back, saying:
"Nothing has changed on that side. Let's go."

We set off toward the camp, at an easy pace. Our Point had that look of someone who didn't want to talk, and, as often in those moments, we remained almost completely silent along the way, leaving him to his thoughts.
Walking did me good, but my thoughts were still confused. I still didn't understand what had happened in the forest. Why could I "open" the beacon and not the Prince? Why had Zack been able to make it react? Why two right hands? Why that game with the marbles, that flash?
Zack, still silent, came to walk beside me. I felt better with him so close.
When we reached the camp, he sent me to rest—he would call me when it was time to eat.
I heard him head toward the technical section and ask the Prince if everything was all right. I think that's when I fell asleep…

Clark woke me a few moments before dinner.
At the table, while devouring the meal Clark had prepared, I checked on Ron:
"How are your eyes? What did the Doc say?"
"Everything's fine, don't worry, Yoyo," he replied with a broad smile I didn't really believe. Clark stepped in to confirm my doubts, placing a hand on Ron's shoulder:
"That's not true, he hasn't fully recovered yet! He needs to rest his eyes, and if we don't all head back together tomorrow, he'll have to go back."
"I hope it gets better soon, Ron, but don't lie to me about your condition again," I scolded him, wagging a warning finger at him.
"So we're leaving tomorrow?" I asked Zack.
"If everything goes well, yes. And if the situation with the egg hasn't changed, of course. Tomorrow we take all the samples, and we bring the egg home. Good night, Ron," he added, addressing our colleague, who was heading off to rest while Clark took over from the Prince

to monitor the displays. The Prince joined us at the table—he had heard what Zack had said:
"I don't think there will be any visible changes for quite some time," he said, raising his eyebrows at Zack.
"Why is that? What did I miss? I know I was a bit tired earlier, but I'm still completely lost here!"

The Prince made a strange face and said to Zack:
"It's not for me to explain that to a lady, my dear…"
"What the hell is that supposed to mean! Are you going to answer me or not?" I was starting to get seriously annoyed. I felt like I was the butt of some bad joke that had my friends laughing, and yet that was never the case—so why now?
"My Yoyo, calm down, please sit back down, we're going to explain… or at least try…"
"No, no, no—not try, succeed! I want to understand what you understood and why you're being so mysterious about it while laughing at me!"
"Yoyo, we're not laughing at you, I promise! We were just surprised because we thought you would have been the first to understand."
"Understand what? That this beacon has handprints, makes love to plants, and also makes pretty lights that blind one of my best friends?!"
"Yoyo, I asked you to calm down! Now you stop and let us talk!"
"Only if you stop talking to me like I'm a three-year-old!"
"All right, Yoyo, all right… I'll try to sum up what happened, and you'll probably understand… I don't think the beacon is just a simple beacon… It required a human hand, with one circle. I placed my hand, and the egg lit up. Then it required a second hand, with two circles. And you placed your hand. That reaction was just as clear. But there were five of us there, and the egg didn't ask for a third hand. It just displayed an oval with three circles."
"Yes. But what does that mean?"
"Nothing more than basic symbolism, Yoyo. Think about it—what do you think happened next?"

"Well… you managed to 'open' the egg, in a way, and then there was that whole crazy marble game, and afterward we checked who could open it too, but no one could make the lights happen again."
"That's normal, in my opinion. The process had already been triggered."
"What do you mean?"
"Yoyo, who activated the egg?"
"You… and me," I added, seeing the look he gave me, urging me to continue.
"And who was able to 'open' the egg, as you put it?"
"You and me. The same…"
"Yes, you're on the right track. Now, your marble game… two cold spheres warm up and reach 37°, like their pink surroundings, then a big flash… does that really not ring a bell?"
"37°, that's our body temperature too… two cold spheres for two people? But the third sphere? The flash?"
"A long time ago, we used to restart a stopped heart with some pretty hefty electric shocks."
"Seriously?"
"Yes."
"But wait—if the electricity was for that, then the golden sphere was for that… and the other two spheres… no… wait… no, you're serious?"
Zack and the Prince nodded at me in unison.
"Wait, what you're trying to tell me is that this damn beacon—this thing, this huge egg full of jelly—is pregnant with the two of us?" I shouted, unable to control myself anymore.
"Uh… that's not exactly how I would have put it, but that's the general idea, yes…"
"Oh, the general idea! Well, that's reassuring. Everything's perfect, then! There's just an unknown technology a kilometer away from me that is currently making us a baby—probably extraterrestrial—that is supposed to be 'from us'? It's not exactly like I spent a night with you with our implants turned off and happily discovered two weeks later that I was carrying your child!"

I stormed off immediately to my cabin, where I hurried to separate our cocoons and raise the dividing partition. Then I slipped into my cocoon, set it to immediate sleep mode, and finally let myself cry. Sleep mercifully overtook me before I was done.

You've reached the end of the first three chapters of The First Seed. I hope you've enjoyed the beginning of my book!

Want to find out what happens next for Yomna, Zack, the egg, and the rest of the crew?

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