

Lashawnda at the End

James Van Pelt

We landed in steam. It billowed from where we touched down, then vanished into the dry, frigid air. From that first moment, the planet fascinated Lashawnda. She watched the landing tape over and over, her hand resting on her dark-skinned cheek, her oddly blue eyes reflecting the monitor's light. "I never believe we'll land safely, Spencer," she said.

Lashawnda liked Papaver better than any of the rest of us. She laughed at the gopher-rats that stood on their hind legs to look curiously until we got too close. She reveled in the smaller sun wavering in the not-quite-right blue sky, the lighter gravity, the blond sand and gray rocks that reached to the horizon, but most of all, she liked the way the plants in the gullies leaned her direction when she walked through them, how the flat-leafed bushes turned toward her and stuck to her legs if she brushed against them. Wearing a full contamination suit despite the planet's thin but perfectly breathable atmosphere didn't bother her. Neither did the cold. By midday here on the equator the temperature might peak a few degrees above freezing, but the nights were incredibly chilly. Even Marvin and Beatitude's ugly deaths the first days here didn't affect her like it did everyone else. No, she was in heaven, cataloging the flora, wandering among the misshaped trees in the crooked ravines, coming up with names for each new species.

When we lost our water supply, and it looked like we might not last until the resupply ship came round, she was still happy.

Lashawnda was a research botanist; what else should I have expected? For me, a commercial applications biologist, Papaver represented a lifetime of work for *teams* of scientists, and I was only one guy. After less than two weeks on the planet, I knew the best I got to do was to file a report that said, "Great possibilities for medicinal, scientific, and industrial exploitation." Every plant Lashawnda sent my way revealed a whole catalog of potential pharmaceuticals. The *second* wave of explorers would make all the money.

Lashawnda was dying, but was such a positive person that even in what she knew were her final days, she worked as if no deadly date was flapping its leaden wings toward her. That's the problem in living with a technology that has extended human life so well: death is harder. It must have been easier when humans didn't make it through their first century. People dropped dead left and right, so they couldn't have feared it as much. It couldn't have made them as mad as it made me. Her mortality clung to me like a pall, making everything dark and slow-motion and sad.

Of course, the plants stole our water. We should have seen it coming. Every living creature we'd found spent most of its time finding, extracting, and storing water.

Second Chair pounded on my door. "Get into a suit, Spencer," she yelled when I poked my head into the hallway. "Everyone outside!" A couple of engineers rushed by, faces flushed, half into their suits. "I'm systems control," said one as he passed. "There's no way I should risk a lung full of Papaver rot."

When I made it out of the airlock, the crisis was beyond help. Our water tanks stood twenty meters from the ship, their landing struts crunched beneath them just as they were designed to do. They'd landed on the planet months before we got here, both resting between deep, lichen-filled depressions in the rock. Then the machinery gathered the minuscule water from the air, drop by drop, so that when we arrived the tanks were full. A year on Papaver was enough. Everyone surrounded the tanks. Even in the bulky suits I could see how glum they were, except Lashawnda, who was under the main tank. "It's a fungus," she

said, breaking off a chip of metal from what should have been the smooth underside. Her hand rested in dark mud, but even as I watched, the color leached away. The ground sucked water like a sponge, and underneath the normally arid surface, a dozen plant species waited to store the rare substance. Even now the water would be spreading beneath my feet, pumped from one cell to the next. Ten years' worth of moisture for this little valley, delivered all at once.

She looked at me, smiling through the face shield. "I never checked the water tanks, but I'll bet there was trace condensation on them in the mornings, enough for fungus to live on, and whatever they secreted as waste ate right through. Look at this, Spencer." She yanked hard at the tank's underside, snapping off another hunk of metal, then handed it to me. "It's honeycombed."

The metal covered my hand but didn't weigh any more than a piece of balsa wood. Bits crumbled from the edge when I ran my gloved fingers over it.

"Isn't that marvelous?" she said.

First Chair said, "It's not all gone, is it? Not the other tank too?" He moved beside the next tank, rapped his knuckles on it, producing a resonant note. He was fifty, practically a child, and this was only his second expedition in command. "Damn." He looked into the dry, bathtub-shaped pit in the rock beside the tank where the water undoubtably drained when the bottom broke out.

Lashawnda checked the pipes connecting the tanks to the ship. "There's more here, after only ten days. How remarkable."

First Chair rapped the tank again thoughtfully. "What are our options?"

The environmental engineer said, "We recycle, *a lot*. No more baths."

"Yuck," said someone.

He continued, "We can build dew traps, but there isn't much water in the atmosphere. We're not going to get a lot that way."

"Can we make it?" said First Chair.

The engineer shrugged. "If nothing breaks down."

"Check the ship. If this stuff eats at the engines, we won't be going anywhere."

They shuffled away, stirring dust with their feet. I stayed with Lashawnda. "A daily bleach wash would probably keep things clean," she said. She crouched next to the pipes, her knees grinding into the dirt. I flinched, thinking about microscopic spores caught in her suit's fabric. The spores had killed Marvin and Beatitude. On the third day they'd come in from setting a weather station atop a near hill, and they rushed the decontamination. Why would they worry? After all, the air tested breathable. We all knew that the chances of a bacteria from an alien planet being dangerous to our Earth-grown systems were remote, but we didn't plan on water-hungry spores that didn't care at all what kind of proteins we were made of. The spores only liked the water, and once they'd settled into the warm, moist ports of the two scientist's lungs, they sprouted like crazy, sending tendrils through their systems, breaking down human cells to build their own structures. In an hour the two developed a cough. Six hours later, they were dead. Working remote arms through the quarantine area, I helped zip Beatitude into a body bag after the autopsy. Delicate-looking orange leaves covered her cheeks, and her neck was bumpy with sprouts ready to break through.

At least they didn't suffer. The spore's toxins operated as a powerful opiate. Marvin spent the last hour

babbling and laughing, weaker and weaker, until the last thing he said was, "It's God at the end."

A quick analysis of the spores revealed an enzyme they needed to sprout, and we were inoculated with an enzyme blocker, but everyone was more rigorous decontaminating now.

Lashawnda said, "Come on, Spencer. I want to show you something."

We walked downhill toward the closest gully and its forest. She limped, the result of a deteriorating hip replacement. Like most people her vintage, she'd gone through numerous reconstructive procedures, but you wouldn't know it to look at her. She'd stabilized her looks as a forty-year-old, almost a tenth her real age. Pixie-like features with character lines radiating from the mouth. Just below the ears, dark hair with hints of gray. Slender in the waist. Dancer's legs. Economical in her movements whether she was sorting plant samples or washing her face. Four hundred years! I studied her when she wasn't looking.

I picked thirty for myself. Physically it was a good place to be. I didn't tire easily. My stockiness contrasted well to her slight build.

Lashawnda suffered from cascading cancers, each treatable eruption triggering the next until the body gives up. She'd told me she had a couple of laps around the sun left at best. "Papaver will be my last stop," she'd said during the long trip here. Of course, once we've slept with everyone else (and all the possible combinations of three or four at the same time), and the novelty of inter-ship politicking has worn thin, we all say we're done with planet hopping forever.

I suppose it was inevitable Lashawnda and I ended up together on the ship. I was the second oldest by a century, and she had one-hundred-and-fifty years on me, plus she laughed often and liked to talk. We'd go to bed and converse for a couple hours before sleeping. I'd grown tired of energetic couplings with partners I had nothing to say to afterwards. My own two-hundred-fifty years hung like a heavy coat. What did I have to say to someone who'd been kicking around for only sixty or ninety years?

I cared for her more than anyone in my memory, and she was dying.

When we reached the gully, she said, "What's amazing is that there are so many plants. Papaver should be like Mars. Same age. Lighter gravity and solar wind should have stripped its atmosphere. Unlike Mars, however, Papaver held onto its water, and the plants take care of the air."

Except for the warped orange and brown and yellow "trees" in front of us, that looked more like twisted pipes than plants, we could have been in an arctic desert.

"Darn little water," I said, thinking about our empty tanks.

"Darn little *free* water, but quite a bit locked into the biomass. Did you see the survey results I sent you yesterday?"

We pushed through the first branches. Despite their brittle looks, the stems were supple. They waved back into place after we passed. Broad, waxy leaves that covered the sun side of each branch bent to face us as we came close. I found their mobility unnerving. They were like blank eyes following our movements. In the trees' shadow I found more green than orange and yellow.

"Yeah, I looked at it." Except in a narrow band around the equator, Papaver appeared lifeless. But in the planet's most temperate region, in every sheltering hole and crevice, small plants grew. And peculiar forests, like the one we were in now, filled the gullies. The remote survey, taking samples at even the coldest and deadest-looking areas found life there too. Despite the punishing changes in temperature and the lack of rain, porous rock served as a fertile home for endolithic fungi and algae. Beneath them lived

cyanobacterias.

“If the results are uniform over the rest of the surface, there’s enough water for a small ocean or two.” She wiggled between two large trunks, streaking her suit with greenish-orange residue. “Do you know why the leaves stick to our suits?”

“Transference of seeds?” I hadn’t had time to study the trees’ life cycle. Classifying the types had filled up most of my time, and I did that from within the ship. Lashawnda sent samples so fast, I’d had little chance to investigate much myself.

“Nope. They use airborne spores. What they’re really trying to do is to eat you.”

Obviously she knew where she was going. We’d worked our way far enough into the plants that I wasn’t sure what direction the ship lay. “Excuse me?” I said.

“You were wondering what preyed on the gopher-rats. They’re herbivores. You said they couldn’t be the top of the food chain, and they aren’t. They eat lichens, fungus and leaves, and the trees eat them.” She stopped at a clump of stems, like warped bamboo, and gently pushed the branches apart. “See,” she said.

Half a meter off the ground, a yellow and orange cocoon hung between the branches, like a football-sized hammock. I’d seen the lumps before. “So?”

She dropped to her knees and poked it with her finger. Something inside the shape quivered and wiggled, pushing aside several leaves. A gopher-rat stared out at me for a second, a net of tendrils over its eye.

I stepped back. For a second I thought of Beatitude, her face marked with the tiny, waxy leaves. “How long . . . when did it get caught?”

She laughed. “Yesterday. I startled him, and he jumped into the trees here. When he didn’t come out, I went looking.”

I knelt beside her. Up close I saw how the plant had grown *into* the gopher-rat. In the few uncovered spots, tufts of fur poked out. The biologist in me was fascinated, but for the rest, I found the image repugnant. “How come he didn’t escape? The leaves are a little sticky, but *not* that sticky.”

“Drugs. Tiny spines on the leaves inject some type of opiate. I ran the analysis this morning. Same stuff that kept Marvin and Beatitude from feeling pain.”

“A new data point to add to the ecology.” I rested my hands on my knees. The poor gopher-rat didn’t even get to live out its short life span. For a second I thought about burning down the entire forest for Marvin and Beatitude and the gopher-rat, who were dead and never coming back, except the gopher-rat wasn’t dead yet. I wondered if it knew what was happening.

“Don’t you see what’s interesting?” She pushed the plants back even farther. “This is important.”

“What am I missing?”

She smiled. Even through her faceplate I could tell that she found this exciting. “The gopher-rat should be dead. If the plants grabbed him just for his water, he’d be nothing but bones now, but he’s still living. Obviously something else is going on. There’s lumps like this one all through the forest. I dissected one. Without a thorough analysis, I can’t tell for sure, but it looks like the plant absorbs everything except the gopher-rat’s nervous system. It’s symbiotic.”

The leaves seemed to tighten a little around the gopher-rat. We stood in the middle of the forest. I couldn't see anything but the trees' tall stems and the sticky leaves that covered most of the ground. The sun had dropped lower in the sky so I couldn't find it through the trees, although their tops glowed orange and yellow in the slanting light. Even through the suit, I could feel that it was growing cold. "It doesn't look like an equal relationship to me."

"Maybe not, but it's an interesting direction for the ecology to take, don't you think?"

"Why would a plant want a nervous system?" I said. We'd turned the lights out an hour earlier. My arm was draped over Lashawnda's shoulder, and her bare back pressed warmly against my chest. I didn't want to let her go. Even though my side ached to change position, I wanted to savor every second. I wondered if she sensed my grief.

"No reason that I can think of," she said. Her fingers were wrapped around my wrist, and her heart beat steadily against my own. "But it must have something to do with its survival. There's an evolutionary advantage."

For a long time, I didn't speak. She was so solid and real and *living*. How could her life be threatened? How could it be that she could be here today and not forever? She breathed deeply. I thought she might have gone to sleep, but she suddenly twisted from my embrace, cursing under her breath.

"What's the matter?" I said.

She sat up. In the dark I couldn't see, but I could feel her beside me. Her muscles tensed.

"A little discomfort," she said.

"What did the medic prescribe?"

"Nothing that's doing any good."

She coughed heavily for a few seconds, and I could tell she was stretching, like she was trying to rid herself of a cramp. "I'm going down to the lab. I'm not sleeping well anyway." She rested her hand against my face for an instant before climbing out of bed.

After an hour of tossing and turning, I got up and did what I'd never done before: accessed Lashawnda's medical reports. After reading for a bit I could see she'd been optimistic. There were a lot less than a couple trips around the sun left in her, and her prescription list was a pharmacopoeia of pain killers.

She hadn't returned by morning.

"It's standard operating procedure," said the environmental engineer. She held her report forms to her chest defensively. "If the atmosphere isn't toxic, we're supposed to vent it in to cool the equipment. We've been circulating outside air since the first day. There *are* bioscreens."

First Chair looked at her dubiously. The four of us were crowded into the systems control room. Lashawnda broke the seals of her contamination suit. She'd rushed from decontamination without taking it off. "I should have thought of it," Lashawnda said. The helmet muffled her voice. "The fungi are opportunistic, and they're adept at finding hard-to-get water. You reverse airflow periodically, don't you?"

The environmental engineer nodded. "Sure, it blows dust out of the screens."

"The spores are activated by the moisture you vented, and--"

"I didn't vent *anything*," snapped the engineer. "It is standard operating procedure."

"Right," said Lashawnda, pulling the helmet off her head. She brushed her hair back with a quick gesture. "The fungus grew through the screen, spored, and that's what's in the machinery."

"The *entire* water recycling system? The backup system too?" asked First Chair, a tinge of desperation in his voice.

"Absolutely. There are holes in the valves. All the joints are pitted. The holding tanks would have more fungus in them than water, if there was any water left. Pretty happy fungus at that, I'd guess." She pulled the top half of the suit over her head, then stepped out of the pants. "Here's the unusual part: The water that was in the tank isn't in the room anymore. There are skinny stems leading to the vent that go down the ship's side and into the ground. The fungus pumped the water out. These plants are geniuses at moving water, which they have to be to survive."

First Chair asked, "Why weren't the external tanks already ruined when we got here? They were exposed to this environment much longer than our recycling equipment."

"They landed in the winter. That's the same reason the initial probes didn't find the spores," said Lashawnda. "It's spring now. The plants must only be active when it's warmer. Bad timing on our part."

I looked through the service window into the machinery bay. Even through the thick glass the fungus was evident, a thick fur around the pipes. "You're sure the growth started inside the ship and went out, not the other way around?"

Lashawnda smiled. "Absolutely."

"So what?" said First Chair. I could see the wheels spinning in his head: how much water did we have stored elsewhere? How well were the dew-catchers working? Then he was dividing that amount of water by the minimum amount each crew member needed until the resupply ship arrived. By his expression, he didn't like the math.

Lashawnda said, "That means the plants cooperate. They share the wealth. It's counter-Darwinian. I compared the fly-by photos of this area from the first day until now. Since we've landed, plant growth has thickened and extended, which makes sense. When we lost the external tanks we introduced more free water into the system than it's seen in years, but the forests in the neighboring gulches also are thicker. We thought they were separate ecosystems. They aren't. Water we lost here is ending up as much as five kilometers away. The plants move moisture to where it's needed."

"Will knowing that help us now?" asked First Chair. "I don't care if the plants are setting up volleyball leagues; we've got to figure a way to find enough water to last us five months." He glared at the environmental engineer on his way out. She turned to me.

"I know," I said. "Standard operating procedure."

"Let's go outside," said Lashawnda. "We've got the afternoon left."

"Could we harvest the trees and press water out of them?" I asked.

Lashawnda attached another sensor to a tree stem, moved a few feet along, then fastened the next one. She straightened slowly, her eyes closed against the discomfort. I wondered how she really felt. She never talked about it.

“You did the reports. How many plants would we have to squeeze dry to get a single cup?”

I didn't answer. She was right. Although the plants tied up most of the planet's water, it was spread thinly. I dug into a bare patch of dirt between two stands of trees. Only a dozen centimeters below the surface, a matted network of plant tendrils resisted my efforts to go deeper. I picked one about a finger in width and fastened a sensor to it.

We were deep into the tree-filled gulch. With no sun on us, I had to keep moving to stay warm, and my faceplate defogger wasn't working well.

I looked into a bundle of tree stalks. An old gopher-rat lump hung between the branches. Now that I knew where to look, I found them often. “Have you gone this deep into the gulch before?”

Lashawnda consulted her wrist display. “No, but by the map we are nearly at the end. We'll save time if we go back along the ridge.”

Fifteen minutes later Lashawnda pushed through a particularly heavy patch of trees, and she disappeared.

“Oh!”

“What?”

Pulling my way through the vegetation, I found what stopped her. The gully pinched to a close twenty meters farther, and there were no more trees, but the same kind of sticky leaves that captured the gopher-rats covered the ground in a bed of orange and yellow, like broad-surfaced clover. The setting sun poured a crimson light over the scene, and for the first time since I'd landed on Papaver, I thought something was beautiful. As I watched, the leaves turned their faces toward us and seemed to lean the least bit, as if they yearned for us to lay down.

Lashawnda said, “Let's not walk through that. We'd crush too many of them.” She fastened the last of the sensors to the delicate leaves at the end of the little clearing. Her movements were spare, exact. The final sensor fastened, she paused on her knees, facing the bed of plants. She reached out, hand flat, and brushed the leaves gently. They strained to meet her, leaves wrapping around her fingers; a longer-stemmed leaf encircled her wrist. Within a few seconds, her hand, wrist, and arm to her elbow were encased.

I stepped toward her. The expanse of leaves had changed color! Then I realized the color was the same, but the plants had shifted even further to face her. Sunlight hit them differently. All lines pointed toward Lashawnda. My voice felt choked and tight. “What are you doing?”

“If I move, I must contain water. They're just trying to get it. They work together; isn't that superb? If they got my water, they'd send it to where it was needed.” Gradually she pulled her arm free. The leaves slipped their hold without resistance.

Careful not to step on the plants, we made our way to the edge of the gully and clambered out. The startlingly pink sun brushed the horizon, and yellow and gold glowing streamers layered themselves a third of the way up the sky.

“That's amazing.” I held Lashawnda's hand through the clumsy gloves, the same hand the leaves had covered.

“You haven’t seen one before?” She squeezed my hand back. “Every sunset is like this. It’s the dust in the atmosphere.”

The streamers twisted under the influence of upper air disturbances that didn’t touch us.

“I saw your medical reports,” I said.

She sighed. The sky darkened as more and more of the sun vanished until only a pink diamond winked between two distant hills, and the final golden layer dulled into a yellow haze. “You’re the last one. Are you going to wish me well too? You’d think everyone turned into death and dying counselors. If I hear, ‘You’ve had a good four hundred years,’ again, I’ll scream.”

“No, I wasn’t going to say that.” But I don’t know what I was going to say. I couldn’t tell her that I wanted to do some screaming of my own.

By the time we returned to the ship, the night had grown incredibly cold, and the decontamination chamber wasn’t any warmer. I longed for a hot spiced tea, but First Chair was waiting for us on the other side.

“I need you to drop your other projects and concentrate on the water problem.” His eyes had that haunted I-wish-I-didn’t-have-a-leadership-position look to them. “The geology team is looking for aquifers; the engineers are making more dew traps, and the chemists are working on what can be extracted from the rock, but none of them are hopeful we can find or make enough water fast enough. Is there anything you’ve learned about the plants that might help?”

Lashawnda said, “They’ve spent millions of years learning how to conserve water. I don’t think they’ll give it up easily. Spencer and I are working on an experiment right now that ought to tell us more.”

“Good. Let me know if you get results.” He rushed from the room, and a few seconds later I heard him say to someone in another room, “Have you made any progress?”

“We’ll need to sedate him if we want to work uninterrupted,” she said.

“What is the experiment we’re doing?”

“Electroencephalograph.”

“An EEG on a plant?” I laughed.

She shrugged. “You wondered why a plant would need a nervous system. Let’s find out if it’s using it.”

In the lab, Lashawanda bent over her equipment. “What do you make of that?” She pointed to the readouts on the screen. “Especially when I display it like this.” She tapped a couple keys.

The monitor showed a series of moving graphs, like separate seismographs. “It could be anything. Sound waves maybe. Are those from the sensors we placed?”

“Yep. Now, watch this.” She reached across her table and pressed a switch. Within a couple seconds, all the graphs showed activity so violent that the screen almost turned white. Gradually the graphs settled into the same patterns I’d seen at first.

I leaned closer and saw the readouts were numbered. The ones near the top of the screen corresponded to the sensors we’d placed at the far end of the gully. The bottom ones were nearest to the ship. “What did you do?”

“I shut the exterior vents into the equipment room. The change in the graphs happened when the hatches cut through the fungus stems connecting the growth in the ship to the ground.”

“The plants felt that? They’re thinking about it?”

“Not plants. A single organism. Maybe a planet-wide organism. I’ll have to place more sensors. And yes, it’s thinking.”

The lines on the monitor continued vibrating. It *looked* like brain activity. “That’s ridiculous. Why would a plant need a brain? There’s no precedent.”

“Maybe they didn’t start out as plants. As the weather grew colder and it became harder and harder for animals to live high on the food chain, they became what we see now, a thinking, cooperative intelligence.”

Lashawnda put her hands on the small of her back and pushed hard, her eyes closed. “A sentience wouldn’t operate the same way non-thinking plants would. We just need to discover the difference.” She opened a floor cabinet and took out a clear sample bag stuffed with waxy orange shapes.

I barely recognized it before she opened the bag, broke off a Papaver leaf, and pressed it against her inner arm.

After a moment, she opened her eyes and smiled “Marvin said, ‘It’s God at the end,’ so I thought I’d give it a try. He wasn’t too far off.” She enunciated the words carefully, as if her hearing were abruptly acute. “The toxins are an outstanding opiate. Much more effective on pain than the rest of the stuff I’ve been taking. I don’t think the gopher-rats suffer.”

No recrimination would have been appropriate. Although it was most likely the leaves wouldn’t affect her at all, the first time she did it she might have just as easily killed herself. “How long?” I took the bag from her hand. It wasn’t dated. She’d smuggled it in.

“A couple of days.”

“Is it addictive?”

She giggled, and I looked at her sharply. She seemed lucid and happy, not drugged.

“I don’t know. I haven’t tried quitting.” She held her hand out. I gave her the bag. She said, “I wonder what an entity as big as a planet thinks about? How *old* would you guess it is?” The bag vanished into the cabinet. “Not very often I run into something older than me.”

“Did you tell the medic about that?” I nodded toward the cabinet.

She levered herself up so she could sit on the counter. “I’m taking notes she can see afterwards. No need to bother her with it now. Besides, we have bigger problems. If First Chair is right, in a month we’ll have died of thirst. How are we going to convince a plant to give us back the water it took?”

Sitting where she was, her heels against the cabinet doors, she looked like a young girl, but shadows under her eyes marked her face, and her skin appeared more drawn, as if she were thinning, becoming more fragile, and she was.

“How do you feel?” I asked. I had tried to maintain within myself her concentration, her ability to ignore the obvious fact, but I couldn’t. I worried about the crew and the water they needed. But for me? I didn’t care. Death would find Lashawnda before it took me.

She slid off the counter and tapped a code into her workstation. The recording of our landing came up again. Clouds of steam surged from the ground. She said, without meeting my eyes, "Look, Spencer. I can't avoid it. It's not going away. So all I can do is work and think and act like it's not there at all. You're behaving as if I should be paralyzed in fear or something, but I'm not going to do that. There's still a quest or two for me in the last days, some effort of note."

I had no answer for that. We went to bed hours later, and when she held me, her arms trembled.

A nightmare woke me. In the dream I wandered through the twisted forest, but I wasn't scared. I was happy. I belonged. The crooked stems gave way before my ungloved hands. My chest was bare. No contamination suit or helmet or shirt. The air smelled sharp and frigid, like winter on a lake's edge where the wind sweeps across the ice, but I wasn't cold. I came upon a thick stand of trees, their narrow trunks forming a wall in front of me. I pushed and tugged at the unmoving branches. I'd never seen a clump of Papaver trees so large. Nothing seemed more important than penetrating that branched fortress. Finally I found a narrow gap where I could squeeze through. At first I wandered in the dark. Gradually shapes became visible: the towering stems forming a shadowy roof overhead, other branches reaching from side to side, and the room felt close.

"Spencer?" said Lashawnda.

"Yes?" I said, turning slowly in the vegetable room. Clumps of waxy-leafed plants covered the ground, but I couldn't see her.

"I'm here, Spencer," she said, and one of the clumps sat up.

I squinted. "It's too dark."

A dim light sparked to life, a pink diamond, like the last glimpse of the sunset we'd seen the day before, growing until the room became bright, revealing a skeleton-thin Lashawnda.

"I'm glad you came," she said.

I stepped closer, all the details clear in the ruddy light. Her eyes sparkled above sharp cheekbones. She smiled at me, the skin pulled tight across her face, her shoulders bony and narrow, barely human anymore. She wore no clothes, but she didn't need them. The plants hid her legs, and leaves covered her stomach and breasts. Like the gopher-rat, she'd been absorbed.

"The plant is old, old, old," she said. "We think deep thoughts, all the way to Papaver's core."

I put my arm around her, the bone's hardness pressing against my hand.

In the dream, I was happy. In the dream, the plants sucking every drop of water from her was right.

"And, Spencer, this way I live forever."

I woke, stifling a scream.

She wasn't in bed.

In the decontamination unit, her suit was gone.

I don't remember how I got my suit on or how I got outside. Running, I passed the empty water tanks, avoided the lichen-filled depressions, and plunged into the forest. The sun had barely cleared the horizon,

pouring pink light through the skinny trees. I tripped. Knocked my face hard against the inside of my helmet. Staggering, I pushed on. The dream image hovered before me. Had the pain become too much for Lashawnda, and the promise of an opiate-loaded bed of leaves, eager to embrace her become too tempting? I imagined her nervous system, like a gopher-rat's, joining the plant consciousness. But who knew what the gopher-rats experienced, if they experienced anything at all? Maybe their lives were filled with nightmares of cold and immobility.

Trees slapped at my arms. Leaves slashed across my faceplate.

When I burst through the last line of trees at the clearing's edge, she was crouched, her back to me, shoulders and head down in the plants. I pictured her faceplate open, her eyes gone already, home for stabbing tendrils seeking the moist tissue behind.

"Don't do it!" I yelled.

Startled, she fell back, holding a sensor; her faceplate was closed. For a second she looked frightened. Then she laughed. I gasped for breath while my air supply whined in my ear.

"What are you doing, Spencer?" A bag filled with the sensors we'd put on the plants sat on the ground beside her. She'd been retrieving them.

"You weren't . . . I mean, you're not . . . hurting yourself . . . you're okay?" I finally blurted.

She held me until I quit shaking and my respiration settled into a parody of regularity.

The sun had risen another handful of degrees. We stayed still so long that the plants turned away to face the light. She hugged me hard, then said, "I know how to find water."

I hugged her back.

"Can you carry the bag?" she said as she pushed herself to her feet. "It's getting darned heavy."

The crew stood around the one-meter-deep depression beside an empty water tank. Like every sheltered spot, lichens covered the rock. Lashawnda supervised the engineers as they arranged the structure she'd sketched out for them, which was two long bars crossing the hole, holding an electric torch suspended above the pit's bottom.

First Chair stood with his arms crossed. "What do you mean, we should have figured out how to get water from the first day?"

Lashawnda sat in a chair someone had brought for her. "The plants here are cooperative. They're not just out for themselves like we're used to seeing. I watched the records of our landing. The ground *steamed*, but, as Spencer will tell you," she nodded to me, "you couldn't get an ounce of water out of a ton of the lichen no matter how hard you tried."

First Chair looked puzzled.

Lashawnda pressed a button, and the electric torch began to glow. I could feel the heat on my face from ten meters away. Lashawnda said, "The plants were protecting each other, or, more accurately, protecting itself. They're geniuses at moving moisture."

In the pit, some of the yellow lichens began to turn brown, and then to smoke. Suddenly the bottom of the pit glistened, rivulets opened from cracks in the rock. Water quickly filled the bathtub-sized

depression, covering the burning plants.

The crew cheered.

“The plant is trying to protect itself,” Lashawnda said. “You better pump it out now, because as soon as the heat’s off, it will be gone.”

First Chair barked out orders, and soon pipes led from the hole into temporary tanks in the ship.

That night I held Lashawnda close, her backbone pressed against me; my lips brushed the back of her neck.

“Did you really think that I’d kill myself by throwing myself into the plants?”

She held my wrist, her fingers so delicate and light that I half feared they’d break.

“I didn’t want to lose even a single day with you,” I said.

Lashawnda didn’t speak for a long time, but I knew she hadn’t drifted into sleep. The room was so quiet I could hear her eyelashes flutter as she blinked. “I don’t want to lose a day with you either.” She pulled my arm around her tighter. “Four hundred years is a good, long time to live. I don’t suppose when I do go that you could arrange for me to be buried in that clearing at the gully’s end?”

I remembered how the plants had grasped her hand and arm, how attentive they were when she passed.

“Sure,” I said.

It occurred to me that I wanted to be buried there too, where the beings work together to save each other and share what they have to help the least of them.

“But we’re not there yet,” I said.