**Crumbling World**

1. Arrival

Lorin’s head pounded overwhelming his senses. His eyes resisted his attempts to open them. As the pounding faded it was replaced by an alarm that pierced in to his very core. Surely whatever he needed to be awake for wasn’t this important. He shook himself, forcing himself up. Red lights flashed around him. Alarms became louder as his awareness returned.

Panic arose from somewhere inside Lorin. Those alarms indicated danger to the ship’s crew. He needed to escape. Instinct took over. Years of training meant he barely had to think about how to react. On his way to the door he grabbed a helmet, shoved it on and secured it to his skin tight suit. As he reached the door he slammed the release button. Both doors would be released flinging him in to the void of space and saving him from danger. For the split second before the door slid open the idea of being left in space alone scared him.

The doors shot open screeching as they revealed a barren land. Lorin didn’t have time to consider where he was before he was pushed back with a magnificent force, likely due to a higher pressure outside than inside the ship. As he landed his lower back was pushed forward. Pulling himself up, Lorin noticed he had been impaled by a ship support beam through his side. Roof panels began falling a few meters away from him, the hole that was left spewed electrical fire.

Lorin’s path to the door was blocked by a wall of fire. He couldn’t even feel the pain from the support beam protruding from his side. He needed a new escape route. Frantically he looked for escape options. His hibernation pod was able to be ejected from the ship as a last resort. Hopping in to the pod he closed it using the controls on his wrist computer. The flames approached the pod as the hydraulic closing mechanism slowly closed the top.

Fire engulfed the pod just as the top locked down. All Lorin could see through the glass top was the swirling yellow and white of high temperature flames. Using his wrist computer he ejected the pod. As the pod erupted from the side of the ship, flames followed. The pod landed throwing Lorin around and twisting the beam in his side; it was designed to be ejected in the vacuum of space where this wouldn’t happen.

The pod had cleared enough distance that Lorin was no longer within the flames of the burning ship, but he didn’t want to wait around to see if they caught up. He released the roof of the pod, pushing it in an attempt to open in more quickly. As soon as the pod was open Lorin ran. With every step he felt the beam through his side twist and turn, but the pain was dulled by his desire to survive. The Terrain was rocky making his escape more difficult and causing him to stumble as he ran.

Reaching what felt like a safe distance Lorin collapsed breathing heavily. While Lorin started to relax a stabbing pain pulsed through his side reminding him that he wasn’t safe yet. There were medical kits on the ship with gel to patch cuts. If the beam hadn’t pierced any major organs, pulling it out and covering the entry wound in gel should keep Lorin alive.

The supply section of the small ship Lorin had arrived on looked to be reachable. Compared to the other sections of the ship, which were spewing fire each opening the mouth of a dragon, the supply section looked like it would be easy to reach. Lorin forced himself up, the sooner he reached his supply room the less likely it was to be on fire. As if the flames had read his mind, the supply wing of the ship was surrounded by flame. Lorin could barely see the metal of the ship exterior beneath the fire. He slumped back to the ground; the flames wouldn’t last long there wasn’t much to burn. Hopefully he could salvage something when they had dissipated.

A short time later the flames dwindled, Lorin decided not to wait any longer. Blood was coming out quickly from his side even though the beam was still lodged inside his wound. He headed for the supply room hoping at least some medical supplies would have survived the flames.

When Lorin arrived at the door to the supply wing the control panel no longer worked. That should leave the doors loose as the electromagnets would no longer be active. He pried the doors open with his hands without too much difficulty. Some flames lingered on various supplies inside. Luckily some of the supplies were contained in a metal chests, hopefully that had prevented their contents from burning.

Lorin knew what supplies were in the ship, but not where they were. Someone else had loaded the ship so he hoped that one of these chests contained medical supplies. After a quick search Lorin found the gel he needed. Now he needed to pull the beam out of his side, it was hurting more now that the adrenaline of escaping the ship had faded. He dreaded the pain that removing the beam would cause him, but if he didn’t remove it the beam would cause even more damage.

As the beam exited his body the flesh around it expanded in to the space that was left. Lorin winced with the pain eyes watering. Blood began to pulse from the hole much more quickly than it had previously been flowing. The gel was in a spray form that would harden in the air, hopefully the air here would be similar to earth allowing it to work as usual. Lorin sprayed the wound. The gel hardened quickly. Lorin held his breath hoping the gel was strong enough to hold back the blood flow. It held.

Now Lorin had covered his wound and the ship was relatively safe, he checked to see if there was anything he could use. In the supply room he found a few days’ rations, a pop up shelter and the visor that he could attach to his wrist computer, the Explorer 7. In the control room he collected the message memory from the main computer which he could play on his Explorer. The communications along with many other parts of the ship were too damaged to use, but the memory didn’t seem to have been damaged in the crash or fire.

After salvaging everything he could Lorin left the ship entering the rocky world outside. This didn’t seem like the planet, Selkan, where he was supposed be. His mission was to meet an intelligent species that had been found and initiate relations with them, yet the planet they were from was supposed to be very green as was earth. Lorin’s helmet display indicated that the air was breathable on whatever planet he was on. There were supposedly few planets close to Selkan which had a habitable atmosphere so Lorin had no idea where he could be.

Lorin found a reasonably flat section of ground to set up his portable shelter. The ground was oddly rough in most places almost unnaturally so. The shelter didn’t take long to set up, after the press of a button on the pack it erected itself. A recent design on earth, it was useful but took some of the fun out of camping. He hauled the supplies which he’d found in the ship to the shelter. He didn’t want to stay in the ship; he would have to move various broken parts, and was cautious in case the structure was unstable from what must have been a crash. It had become dark outside as he moved the supplies. Exploring the rough terrain in the dark would be hard, so Lorin decided to rest.

Before Lorin slept he checked the messages he had collected using his Explorer to connect to the display on his helmet. He could use the visor for the same purpose when he removed his helmet. The last message that was on the drive would have been sent at least ten years ago as Selkan was roughly ten light-years away. Pulses of light were used to send messages. That was if he was anywhere near Selkan anyway. Lorin played the most recent message.

“War has broken out on Selkan.” a rough voice said. Not one he knew, all the people he had worked for were probably dead. Although a message could be sent in ten years, it would have took closer to a two centuries for Lorin to get close to Selkan. “We received little information about the war from the Selka and communications have been quiet for almost a century now.” The voice continued, “When you reach Selkan, we don’t know what you should expect. If you are in danger return to Earth, send a message when you land and inform us of your situation.” The messages went on not really giving much other useful information. Was it possible that the war on Selkan had caused it to become this barren, rocky, wasteland he was now in?

Lorin had no messages from family they had all died before he left for Selkan. He was an only child and his parents had died seemingly from old age. There was nothing left for him on Earth, he had tried everything from cliff diving to knitting. His family were gone and anyone he had known would be now as well. Lorin didn’t see why anyone who had anything to lose would have come on this mission. Return would have took about four hundred years if it happened at all, but that was why Lorin had come. Coming to an unknown planet gave almost infinite possibilities, and if he didn’t like it he could return to an unrecognisable Earth that had advanced considerably while he was gone. If Lorin’s ship had been usable he wouldn’t have gone back. Not yet. He needed to explore and if this was Selkan then it had a lot of stories to tell.

2. Discovery

After a disturbed sleep Lorin woke. The temperature was hotter than most places he’d visited on Earth and Lorin had done a lot of traveling. The heat caused a stuffy humid air on the surface of whatever planet he was on, even at night. Lorin prepared himself for the day, eating breakfast rations and getting dressed. He wore his visor today, there was no need for his helmet since the air was oxygenated. In addition to the visor he wore his suit, the gash from the beam held together with heavy duty tape.

Leaving the tent the first thing Lorin saw was the wreckage of the ship. It wasn’t beyond repair, as far as Lorin could tell, but it would take a lot of work. Much of the circuitry had been destroyed, but the main structure of the ship was still intact. Repairing the ship wasn’t Lorin’s main priority, he didn’t want to leave yet and even if he did he had more important things to focus on. He only had food for a few days and he might need to find a better shelter in case of harsh weather on the planet.

Turning around Lorin had his first true look at the landscape of the planet. Yesterday he’d been too busy staying alive to appreciate where he was. The land was almost entirely black rock, but it had incredible shapes. Holes of varying sizes covered the land as far as he could see. They seemed to be almost unnatural in their nature, like they had been painted. The holes caused a very rough landscape, with many points and odd shapes. It would be hard for Lorin to get anywhere quickly on this terrain.

Soon Lorin would need to find sources of food and water if he wished to survive, but first he wanted to experience the land. He headed in the direction his Explorer indicated was north, worrying about the Explorer’s battery wouldn’t be a problem on this planet. The Explorer was solar powered and the planet had two suns. Two suns, that was promising. Selkan’s solar system had two suns. Binary systems were extremely rare so Lorin was at least close to Selkan.

Although the terrain was rough, it wasn’t void of life. Small green sprouts of plants dotted the landscape and there seemed to be many small flying creatures. The creatures were squirrel size with a main body and long neck to a head with a singular eye. What appeared to be a mouth was halfway up the neck and they had a large hole in the underneath of their bodies. This hole seemed to disperse air allowing the creatures to float, occasionally they would land. Lorin assumed they needed to land to restock on air so they could continue to hover.

After walking to the north for a few hours, Lorin hadn’t seen much else apart from the green buds from the ground and the hovering creatures. Looking back he still appeared to be very close to his ship. Perhaps it would take him much longer than he thought to travel any distance or maybe he’d been too distracted by the floating creatures. Either way he would need to head back to eat soon and he had found very little. He had no idea how to survive on the planet and no understanding of what was edible as he might on Earth.

Lorin decided to continue traveling north for a little while. There was a peak in the rock ahead that could allow him a better vantage. On closer look the ground seemed to be all one rock rather than many, like the holes had been carved away. When Lorin reached the top of the peak he was greeted by an extraordinary sight. A bright green bubble of liquid floated in the sky. It sloshed around violently and surrounded the top of a large purple structure. The structure was very curved and rounded, its design felt much more natural than buildings on Earth, much less sharp. The structure was huge, the size of a large town on Earth. However, the entrances seemed to be much higher than the ground. Thin beams that looked less natural separated the building from the rocky ground. The beams appeared to be almost an afterthought of the original structure, but how could beams supporting the structure be built after it?

Scattered around the structure were smaller purple pod like structures. They weren’t suspended and seemed almost like they had fallen in to the positions they were in. Some of the pods had open doors while others did not. If Lorin wasn’t on Selkan then these structures had to be made by the Selka as there was no other sentient life nearby, but they had been unable to travel through space. Their messages had asked Earth to send someone as they had no spacecraft. Lorin was sure this must be Selkan. How the planet had changed so drastically confused him though. How had a green planet, mostly covered in jungle, become a rocky wasteland and why were these purple pods arranged like this?

Lorin was eager to continue his exploration and investigate the purple structures, but his stomach held him back. He would return back to his little camp, eat, search closer to the ship for the rest of the day and come back tomorrow. He could travel further if he brought rations with him next time allowing him to search for the whole day. Lorin should have took more care planning his day so he could have been more efficient, but the world had distracted him. He needed to know how it worked and wanted to find out as much about it as he could.

Back at the peak before the purple structures Lorin was ready to explore. He had rations for the day and had arrived at the peak earlier than he had the day before. Back at the camp, Lorin had been distracted while searching closer to his ship. He had found nothing and his mind had constantly drifted back to these purple structures he was now approaching. He needed to know about these structures, to understand them.

Lorin reached one of the pods. Up close it towered above him, it was the size of a large warehouse on Earth. The pod was at an odd angle in the rock. What appeared to be a door was halfway up a side of the pod. Lorin was able to reach the door due to the side being at a shallow incline. The door seemed quite hard to reach, surely the pod wasn’t designed like this.

After entering the pod Lorin slid down the floor to the nearest wall. The entire inside of the pod seemed to be at the same weird angle as the outside of the ship. This floor must have been flat at some point to allow the inhabitants to walk easily across it. Inside was completely dark; Lorin flicked a switch on the side of his visor to activate his headlight. He traversed the rooms with the slopped floor with some difficulty eventually reaching a central room.

In the middle of the room there was a control panel. It was cylindrical with points to access it on all sides. Purple rods came out of the panel in various directions. Most rods went in to the ceilings, but some went in to upper parts of walls. Lorin shone his light on the control panel, his visor display indicated that the buttons used Selka characters. During initial communications with the Selka, linguists had translated their language. The visor could translate Selka allowing Lorin to read or understand the language. It would also translate English, which he spoke, to the Selka if he wished.

After some searching Lorin found a button which said ‘life’ in Selka. He pressed it since that was the closest he’d found to an on button. The central chamber lit up, circular lights on the roof turning on along with screens on the computer. Lorin’s vision was briefly washed out before his eyes adjusted to the light and then he saw the room. He was at the heart of a series of cylindrical tunnels almost like veins. The tunnels had no order to the places they came from and there was no symmetry in the room design.

Lorin gave himself a moment to take in the room before continuing to use the computer. With some effort, trying to understand the broken translations, Lorin was able to navigate to the logs of the computer. There he found information on the purpose of the pod and why it was needed.

The information that Lorin read indicated that the outer shell of the pod was made out of the only material on Selkan that could withstand, something in Selka, a word that his visor couldn’t translate. After war had broken out many of these pods were made to save Selka from the destruction that would be caused. If that was the case, where were the Selka? Reading on Lorin found out there had only been rations for a few years. Many Selka had starved and the logs ended a few years after they had begun, almost eighty years ago. If the Selka had died in here where were the bodies?

This place was like an extremely strong fallout shelter from Earth, designed to protect against the worst weapon the species had created. It appeared that mutually assured destruction hadn’t prevented the use of this weapon as it had on Earth with nukes for so many years. Maybe destruction had been prevented for a long time, but the Selka had gone past breaking point. Lorin had felt sure nothing like this would ever happen on Earth, there had been the possibility for hundreds of years and it hadn’t happened yet.

The pod computer Left Lorin with more questions than it answered, but at least he knew he was on Selkan now. Perhaps that wasn’t a good thing, the land must have been destroyed by whatever weapon the Selka used and Lorin had no idea how to survive here. If the damage to the terrain outside had been caused by this weapon that was mentioned in the logs, then it could do much more damage than anything on Earth.

Lorin searched the pod for a while longer. He found many empty rooms, very few had anything of significance in them. There were no Selka to be found and no supplies of use. It took more effort to leave the pod due to the slopped floor, but Lorin managed it. When he emerged Lorin noticed one sun had set and the other was following. He headed back to his camp, it was probably a good idea to get back before dark. The rocks would be a nightmare to cross in the dark.

3. Despair

Returning to the camp hadn’t been too hard, but when Lorin had got back he’d lay down and fell straight to sleep. The climate was hash even easy tasks were more taxing than they would be on Earth and Lorin’s wound made them even harder. He woke opening the pack which he had been using to store his rations, inside was a single nutrition stick. Lorin’s stomach dropped. He had spent too much time exploring and not enough working out how to survive here. Luckily he still had water for a few days. He could survive for much longer without food than water. Lorin knew he needed to refocus his efforts, survival was more important than his curiosities. Wasn’t it?

Much of Lorin’s morning was spent trying to catch one of the floating creatures. He initially tried throwing pieces of rock at them, but they had surprisingly good reflexes. Later he decided to try to wait until they landed on the ground to restock on air so that he could grab one. As soon as he got close they would shoot off in to the air briefly, landing about a hundred meters away. Lorin grew increasingly frustrated, these creatures seemed to be able to inexplicably avoid him. How did they always have just enough air stored to escape him? Maybe he should return to the purple pods at least that was interesting. No. No there was no food there, the Selka had probably eaten all the food in each pod. Lorin allowed himself to collapse, why was he trying?

Water was more important than food anyway. Even though he hadn’t run out of water, he would die of thirst sooner than he would starve. The little green shoots, surely they needed water to grow. Lorin tried to dig around a shoot to no avail. The solid rock resisted any of Lorin’s attempts, with his hands, to pull it away. Maybe he could pull the shoot out and use the hole to break away the ground. Lorin tugged the shoot with one hand then both. He stood up, putting all his weight in to pulling the shoot. It wouldn’t budge. It was incredibly tough. Lorin’s frustration rose back from inside of him. Why would nothing go his way on this planet?

He lay next to the plant for a long time, he’d rolled over there after many angered attempts at removing the shoot. Hunger grew in his stomach, it wasn’t that bad but Lorin knew that it would come back later more fearsome. After letting his head clear, Lorin decided there was no use in frustration or anger they’d just cause him to waste time like he had with the shoot. It was obviously too tough to break, probably since it had to grow through this black rock. Lorin had no tools to break the area around the rock. Slowly he was beginning to realise that he wasn’t going to survive near to his ship. He needed to find somewhere else with supplies of food and water.

From the previous few days Lorin judged that it was reaching midday. He left a marker on his explorer for where his ship’s wreck was, put his portable shelter in to his pack and began walking. This was his best chance at survival. He headed south figuring he hadn’t seen anything edible to the north and there were no Selka. If any had survived they must have either starved by the pods or left to find somewhere more inhabitable to live. The terrain became increasingly jagged as Lorin travelled south, he contemplated if he had decided to travel in the right direction, but forced himself onward.

While travelling Lorin noticed the heat more than he had on previous days. He seemed to be covered in sweat everywhere. His hunger rose up in spurts. The times when both feelings came at once were the worst. It made him feel hopeless. If he hadn’t been able to survive with a clear head and full stomach, how was Lorin going to survive when every step felt like walking a mile. He allowed his body to droop knowing it wouldn’t help.

After the first sun set Lorin began setting up camp. He could have walked for at least another hour with good light, but he no longer cared. Apart from the change in rock formations he’d found nothing. The same useless shoots and annoying flying creatures. It was almost as if they mocked him, food and maybe water within his reach yet unobtainable. The planet mocked him, it had seen him coming and crumbled just so he would rot here alone.

His sleep had been disturbed. Thoughts constantly drifting to how hopeless his situation was and the heat seemed to be underneath his skin. Hunger visited him over and over each time more painful than the last. Getting up was a welcome disruption to this constant cycle of disturbing thoughts and feelings. At least when he was awake he could attempt to do something about it. He suppressed his dark, hopeless thoughts and tried to stir up some optimistic ones. He was good at this sort of thing. He’d survived for weeks alone on Earth. This isn’t Earth though is it? No it wasn’t Earth, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t use his survival techniques.

Lorin exited his portable shelter while considering survival techniques. Something pushed him to ground hard. His leg was scraped by a bit of rock jutting upwards and he landed on his bad side. Pain ate in to his side, it felt worse than when he’d first been impaled. He rolled in pain noticing what had pushed him.

The beast stood over him with six legs, its head blocking the sunlight. Gooey saliva dripped slowly on to Lorin’s face as it panted. Each tooth was a claw the size of a finger, three eyes stared in to Lorin inspecting him. The creature looked to have a soft underbelly, but its back replicated the jagged rocky landscape. That could be how it snuck up on Lorin, honestly he hadn’t been paying much attention to his surroundings. He had been beginning to believe that he would find nothing on this foreign landscape.

Lorin tried to pull himself backward, but as his chest rose the beast slammed one of its feet down on to him. He was pinned in place. Any attempt to wriggle away did nothing. The beast sniffed at Lorin’s face, it acted surprisingly dog like. No not a dog, more of a wolf. This creature was far from tame. The claws of the wolf like creature began to dig in to Lorin’s chest. Lorin pulled at one in a frantic attempt to stop the beast. The beast began growling louder and louder its claw digging deeper and deeper. Surprisingly one of the claws snapped off in Lorin’s hand.

The beast yowled at the sky in pain and backed away far enough for Lorin to sit up. Its eyes narrowed, teeth gritted. The beast’s legs bent ready to pounce. Lorin pre-empted the jump. As the beast landed on him he thrust the claw in his hand in to the beast’s chest. The soft under side of the beast pierced easily gushing pink blood. He must have hit something vital, since the body of the creature collapsed crushing Lorin. Air was forced out of him leaving him gasping for breath, but all that came was the thick pink blood.

Lorin Tried to push the beast away, but it was no use. He began to panic flailing. Then he felt himself slipping from underneath the beast. He pulled himself in the direction he was slipping, his chest feeling like it was going to burst from lack of air. He escaped. Kneeling over he gasped and sputtered. Pink liquid seeped from his mouth as he took in much needed air. He breathed air in until he felt his chest would burst then rolled over. Turning his head he looked at the beast he had killed, it was four times his size. How was he alive?

After recovering, Lorin checked his wounds. He filled seven circular holes in his chest with gel, before discovering a large gash on the back of his calve. He proceeded to fill that with gel, but hadn’t brought tape to repair his suit. Then he turned his attention to the beast. Pink blood pooled under its head glistening in the sun. It reminded him of his dried mouth. He still had a bottle of water, but the blood could be drinkable. Reaching with a shaky hand Lorin took a mouthful. It tasted earthy and bit at the back of his mouth, but quenched his thirst. He took another mouthful the taste growing more bearable. This blood could save him from the dehydration that would have come in the next few days.

Lorin filled all his empty containers with the beast’s blood; this might keep him alive after his water ran out. It didn’t seem to be dangerous, but he would soon find out. Afterward he cut open the beast’s stomach using its claw since he had few tools. He felt savage, almost wild doing so. The flesh of the beast was a dark brown colour. It looked disgusting, like a lump of clay that had been smoothed. Hunger forced Lorin onward. After cutting away enough with the claw he ripped away a chunk of meat stringy flesh resisting. With no means of cooking he bit straight in to the raw, chewy chunk. It popped under the grip of his teeth leaking pink blood. It tasted good, perhaps anything would in Lorin’s state. After not eating for what felt like a decade.

After wolfing down a large portion of meat Lorin packed as much as he could carry in to his pack. He continued in the direction he had been traveling; it seemed promising if deadly. With a full stomach and after conquering a mighty beast he felt empowered. What could stop him? Those little flying creatures could keep their lives, the food they would provide paled in comparison to what he had in his pack. He could rule this world if he wanted to.

Half a day of travelling later Lorin rested. Where the cuts in his suit were had begun to burn. Initially he had thought it was the cuts that were hurting, but upon closer inspection the skin around the cuts seemed to be bubbling. It stung to the touch and there were no signs of what had caused it. Lorin picked himself up and continued, this wouldn’t stop him. It was nothing compared to what he had fought. He marched on noticing the heat fazed him less than it had before. Maybe he was adjusting to the climate. That happened when you went to new places.

When the night fell Lorin decided to eat before setting up his shelter. Before he could eat a pain came in his stomach. It felt like his insides were squirming. His stomach had begun to feel odd earlier, but he had dismissed it as nothing. Now that feeling came tenfold. It caused Lorin to writhe. He gulped down the feeling trying to suppress it. His stomach was going to explode he was sure of it. The feeling rushed through him. He keeled over chunky liquid exploding from his mouth. It was pink, but somehow brighter than the blood had been. After the vomiting subsided, Lorin delicately placed himself on the floor.

His stomach pain didn’t leave. His bubbling skin pain grew. Heat encapsulated him. No feeling would leave, he couldn’t shake them. No matter how he lay the pain was there just in a different way. He was pain. How had he ever thought he could rule this world? He was a beggar clutching at anything he could. In doing so he had eaten a poisonous beast that had almost killed him.

He wished he’d died in the fire on that ship, at least then he wouldn’t have gone through so much pain. Then he remembered the purple pods, the green bubble, and the little flying creatures. He would never have discovered them otherwise, their beauty. The pain came in waves, each worse than the last. He would die here. He would never go back to Earth. Had he really exhausted everything to do on Earth? He couldn’t have done, it was stupid to come here. He wanted to ski again, in contrast to the heat snow seemed mythical now.

Lorin’s thoughts began to blur. They became incoherent, but he was certain of one thing. He wanted to return to Earth. He couldn’t die on Selkan. His vision became patchy. He rolled on the rocky floor unable to control himself. He burned inside and out. Why hadn’t he burned away yet? On the edge of consciousness figures surrounded him. He tried to back away, but couldn’t stop the rolling cycle his body had got in to. The figures probably weren’t even real at this point. They just seemed like looming shadows.

Lorin faded in and out of consciousness. The figures were around him. The figures were carrying him. They were all sat next to him. He was being carried again. Lorin lost track of what they were doing. It didn’t matter he was dying anyway, the pain continued to remind him of that. Each time he awoke the pain took over. It burned.

4. Captured

One day Lorin woke up and the pain had gone. He felt well. His surroundings suddenly seemed to matter again. Wrapped in rags he lay on a smooth floor in a cage. Vision clear, Lorin looked around trying to determine where he was. The rocky terrain, he was on Selkan. Events of the days since he had landed here came back to his fussy mind. None of those memories seemed to explain how he was here. Shadowy figures were the most recent thing he could force his mind to remember.

Outside of the cage were three beings that fit the description of Selka. Purple with four tentacle like legs and four arms. They used the tentacles, flat to the ground like snakes, to pull themselves around. They had no neck just a rounded top of their heads. The mouths on their faces looked infirm and wobbled constantly. One turned its head to Lorin noticing he was awake. Its six eyed gaze pierced Lorin, those eyes looked like they wanted something.

After the first gestured to the others all three Selka approached. They observed Lorin like he was an animal in a zoo. Curiously one pushed a bowl under the caged wall with a free tentacle. It looked to Lorin then the bowl encouragingly. Lorin peered in hesitantly. It was a bowl of water. Lorin drank. He had been thirsty, but had only noticed after seeing the water. The Selka seemed happy with how Lorin had responded. Perhaps Lorin could speak to them. “Hello, I’m Lorin. What happened?” he attempted. The alien that had given him the bowl replied with an undecipherable grunt. Lorin looked down at his wrist realising they had removed his Explorer and visor. Communication wouldn’t be easy.

Lorin tried to talk to the Selka for a while longer with no results. After a while the Selka began to grow bored breaking off to do various tasks. Maybe one of them would go to where Lorin’s Explorer was. He watched them. They seemed to be doing various things around a camp. One hacked at a green shoot using an improvised rock tool. Another cooked some brown meat on a fire, where had he got that wood? The last one shouted in to a hole in the ground, Lorin had no idea what that Selka hoped to achieve. They seemed to have a permanent camp here, they were surviving.

For days Lorin observed. The Selka brought food regularly and always kept his bowl topped up with water. They got the water from underneath the green shoots, once you removed them water spurted from the hole that was left for a time. Occasionally they went hunting bringing back various meats, some seeming to be like the beast Lorin had eaten. When cooked that didn’t seem to poison you. They also ate the inside of the green shoots which were softer than the outside, if a bit chewy. When wood ran out the Selka ventured in to one of the larger holes in the rock and returned with fresh wood. Lorin hadn’t even considered that there would be anything useful in those holes.

Even though the Selka were surviving well, they did some odd things. They all seemed to shout in to holes in the rock, even shallow ones that definitely didn’t go anywhere. They would occasionally just hit the ground with their tools, but never in the same place. The weirdest thing they did was throwing some of the food they gathered off a nearby cliff whenever they came back with some. These things didn’t seem to make sense at all to Lorin, but they must have had some purpose. They had survived here and Lorin hadn’t, perhaps they knew something he didn’t. They were native to the planet.

Most days the Selka would come to observe Lorin for a while. They always seemed curious, but their attention’s faded quickly. Each time they came Lorin attempted to communicate with them. If he could get his Explorer back he could have a conversation with them, get to know them maybe. One day the Selka who had given him water originally approached. Lorin could distinguish him by green markings going down the sides of his body. In an attempt to get his Explorer he pointed at his wrist and then tried to imitate the shape of the explorer with his hands. The Selka cocked his head as he watched Lorin’s hand motions. He seemed to nod and then walked away. Lorin watched, but he just seemed to return to his usual daily routine. It had seemed like the Selka had understood, perhaps it just didn’t care.

The next day when the green sided Selka visited again he brought Lorin’s Explorer and visor. After giving them to Lorin he watched seemingly interested. Apparently the Selka had understood him, but had just waited to give him the Explorer and visor. Lorin put them both on and began speaking to the Selka, “hello.” As he spoke the Explorer translated. A tinny simulated voice spoke Lorin’s words in Selka. Green sides wiggled back a bit surprised. He responded, “Hello, what you?” The visor translated through an earpiece to Lorin.

Lorin explained that he was from another planet and what his mission was while the Selka listened. Afterward the Selka said, “You are pet now. I, Shalak, am master.” The visor translated poorly, but Lorin believed he understood. Shalak didn’t care what he had been doing, he would keep him in this cage anyway. Lorin told Shalak his name and not long after he left. Shalak hadn’t taken the Explorer so Lorin was able to listen to the conversations of the Selka throughout the day.

Most notably the Selka shouted random words in to the holes. They were rarely the same and didn’t seem to mean much. Their other conversations seemed to be relatively normal most of the time, but sometimes that was hard to judge due to some broken translation. They regarded him as a pet and treated him quite well. They fed him about as much as they ate themselves and gave him plenty of water. The Selka never talked about the food they threw off the cliff though.

After a while Lorin began to think about the Selka. Why were there only three? How had they or their parents survived the war? While questioning things his thoughts drifted to himself. Why was he still here? He had become comfortable in the care of the Selka after almost dying on his own. He had remembered home, Earth, when he was close to death. For all of its flaws it was good. Much more welcoming than Selka had become. Dying he had wanted to return home and this idea grew within him. Lorin would observe the Selka, he would see how they survived, how they worked and then escape. Using what he had learnt he could survive off this landscape, return to his ship and repair it. He would not die here.

From previous days Lorin had seen how to get water and break the green shoots. He could probably do that with loose bits of rock even if he couldn’t make the tools like the Selka had. He wanted to know how they got the meat, the shoots looked like they took a lot of effort to break and weren’t very filling on their own. A day or two later one of the Selka caught one of the flying creatures, they called them something that translated to zoomers, close enough to camp that Lorin could see. He sprinkled some bark on the ground. Not long later the nearby zoomer landed next to the bark and started eating it. While eating the zoomer closed its eyes making it an easy target for the Selka.

The wood came from the deep holes. Lorin worried it was only the hole by this camp; he would constantly have to avoid the Selka if he escaped and wanted to get wood, since the hole was nowhere near the ship. Surprising himself, Lorin noticed he’d already seen most of what the Selka used to survive without the intention of using their skills. Perhaps Lorin’s innate curiosity was more useful than he gave it credit. Prioritising his curiosity to look at the pods had almost caused him to starve to death though. Now all he needed to do was work out an escape plan.

Lorin’s cage was made out of wood, he hadn’t even tested its strength yet. He gave a bar a testing pull. It didn’t give at all. How was it supported? Looking down at the rock the bars seemed to be stuck in to small dug out holes. Maybe Lorin could lift the side. He heaved a pole upward. It came out easily, but was quite heavy. Quickly he slipped the wood back in to the hole hopping none of the Selka had noticed. He would use this to escape when the Selka slept. It wouldn’t be too hard to lift high enough to get underneath. There was a small tent where supplies were kept and one where the Selka slept, both made from the same rags as Lorin’s clothing. If Lorin’s portable shelter was anywhere it would be in the supply tent. Lorin knew everything he needed to escape, all he had to do was wait until nightfall and get away.

5. Escape

After the suns had set Lorin began to work on escaping. To start he lifted the side of the cage, squeezing underneath while using all his strength to support the cage with his arms. After getting out he attempted to gradually ease the cage back in to the holes so it would make as little noise as possible. Suddenly the cage slipped through his hands crunching in to the ground. Lorin got up. Running he looked for the nearest rock and dived behind it. Hopefully if the Selka had heard he would be able to sneak away while they were still confused.

After waiting behind the rock for what seemed like forever, but was actually about ten minutes according to Lorin’s Explorer no Selka emerged from the tents. The Selka must have had terrible hearing or were very deep sleepers, because the sound had been ear piercing to Lorin. If the Selka were going to come out then they probably would have already, so Lorin decided he was safe to move.

The rock that Lorin had been hiding behind was very close to the cliff which the Selka had been throwing food off. Being so close Lorin couldn’t help looking. Expecting some large monster, which the Selka were feeding so that it didn’t eat them, Lorin cautiously edged to the cliff face. He peaked over the side to discover a huge pile of rotting food. The smell hit him like a wall knocking him back. The Selka were surely crazy. This much food wasted for no reason, unless this was some form of sacrifice in their culture. Perhaps this was a part of their religion; if it was Lorin wanted to know what twisted logic they used to justify this.

Happy to leave the wretched stench of rotting food Lorin turned toward the supply tent. He approached the tent with as light footsteps as he could. Footsteps probably wouldn’t make anywhere near as much noise as the cage dropping, but Lorin wanted to be careful. Upon reaching the tent Lorin had made little noise. Inside he found his pack which contained the portable shelter, and he also took a few tools the Selka had stored there. They looked to be crude axes with stone lashed to wood. Trying to leave as quickly as possible Lorin didn’t search the tent too thoroughly.

Before he left Lorin decided to get some wood from the nearby hole in case he couldn’t find any close to the ship. The decline inside was steep, but manageable. Lorin continued down until he could no longer see, at this point he turned the light on his visor on. The light revealed a large underground cavern filled with huge roots; some of the largest sections of root much wider than Lorin was tall. Roots were everywhere. On closer inspection fungi could be seen growing on the roots and small bugs, too quick to examine, darted about. There were also occasional pools of water. The roots must have supported the jungle trees which once covered the planet, but somehow they now supported an underground ecosystem. Maybe this ecosystem had been here while the jungle was above and was now the only natural part of the land that had survived the Selka’s weapon.

How the Selka had known where to go in the dark, without any light, Lorin didn’t know. While walking he almost tripped several times due to twisting roots and unexpected rock formations. The only explanations that Lorin could think of were that the Selka use their tentacles to feel the way through or they had some natural way to see in the dark. After navigating through the roots for a while Lorin found some which were small enough to hack away. It took around half an hour to fill the empty part of his pack with wood. Hopefully that would be enough for a while.

On his way out Lorin stood on a red mushroom like fungus causing it to burst. When the plant burst it threw yellow spores that looked little bigger than dust particles. They didn’t seem to cause any problems, but after that Lorin was careful not to step on anymore. He had seen many films where breathing spores in had bad results. After he was a good distance from where the spores had been dispersed Lorin looked back at them. They were floating upward. One hit the top of the cave and then another, eventually they were lining a section of the rocky celling.

They didn’t do anything for a moment and then together they exploded. The cave shook and bits of rock fell. Before Lorin could even consider what was going on he was running for the entrance. He darted under roots and jumped others narrowly avoiding being tripped several times. Rocks fell where Lorin’s feet had been milliseconds before. The rocks stopped falling, but Lorin kept running. It was better to get out now rather than waiting and risking being caught in another rock fall.

Lorin had reached the entrance to the cave with few other issues, when he heard the shouts of Selka. They must not have been loud, because Lorin’s Explorer didn’t translate the shouts. The explosions must have disturbed the Selka, Lorin only hoped they hadn’t noticed he had escaped yet. It would be best to leave the cave as quickly as possible or Lorin would risk being trapped. If the Selka came to the cave entrance he knew no other way out.

Leaving the cave Lorin found the three Selka approaching. They began shouting; this time it translated, “Stop, come pet.” They didn’t seem happy and continued to shout things along these lines. Lorin ran. The Selka hadn’t surrounded the hole so he could easily slip past. He scrambled over rock. Screams and shouts from Selka followed. All he had to do was out run them and Lorin was free. Lorin snuck a look over his shoulder expecting the Selka not to be far behind. Although they looked to be putting all their effort in to moving, the Selka were going at a laughably slow pace.

Lorin slowed his run deciding he didn’t need to waste so much energy, but looking back again he noticed the Selka still looked to be going slow. They might even have been going at walking pace. The tentacles might have helped the Selka feel their way around underground, but they didn’t help when the Selka wanted to get around quickly. When Lorin had jogged far enough that he could no Longer see the Selka he checked his Explorer. It could tell him which way to go to get back to the ship as he had left a marker. The Explorer measured distance travelled based on motion so didn’t need in orbit satellites to locate things. Unfortunately it didn’t have maps though, so it just pointed you in the right direction.

The ship was almost directly north. It wasn’t surprising that the Selka hadn’t took Lorin far from his path considering the speed at which they moved. After a short while Lorin was on terrain which he roughly recognised from before he was captured, but continued to use his Explorer since he didn’t know exactly where he was. The delirious state Lorin had been in had probably affected his perception of his surroundings. Lorin was growing tired, but continued for a while just in case the Selka had somehow grown legs and managed to catch up.

When Lorin felt comfortable with the distance he had put between himself and the Selka he stopped and set up his shelter. It looked to be midday, but he was tired after being up all night and the days were longer on Selkan than Earth. Lorin would need to find food when he woke up, but for now he just thought about the Selka. They hadn’t been what he expected. From the communications they received they seemed to be very intelligent and they had hoped to benefit from communications with us. Of course it was inevitable, as with any species, that an individual’s ideas would vary from other individuals. Yet the creatures that had captured him seemed far from the ones that had built the purple pods. His captors seemed superstitious if not insane, but that could have been normal for Selka. The only comparison Lorin had was the messages he had read back on earth.

6. Survival

It looked to be very early morning when Lorin woke, only one sun had risen. This was when the real test would come. Escape had been easy, but that didn’t mean survival would be. To begin with Lorin hacked the top of a green shoot away using one of the makeshift axes he had taken from the supply tent. It took quite a bit of effort, but was considerably easier than trying to pull the shoot out. After the top came off water erupted from where it had been. The water reached as high as Lorin’s waist. With nothing to store the water, the Selka must have taken Lorin’s bottles, Lorin put his mouth over the spurting water. It wasn’t hard to drink due to the sheer quantity of water coming out, but Lorin knew there were better methods. The wasted water made Lorin think about how much he would have given for even a drop not long ago. It seemed so inefficient. Lorin would have to hack away a shoot like this every time he wanted a drink unless he could store the water somehow.

When Lorin had quenched his thirst he decided to get moving. Even though he was quite hungry Lorin didn’t want to risk the Selka catching up if they were still pursuing. The hunger was nothing compared to what Lorin had once felt. Staying free so Lorin could get back to the ship, maybe even Earth, was more important for now. Earth was better than this place. He would walk for at least an hour before trying to get some food. That should be far enough. The walk was relatively easy. Most of the hour only one sun was up and it was quite low so the heat wasn’t bad. In addition, it didn’t take too much effort for Lorin to get water when he needed now. The shoots only took a few minutes to cut through, but the waste still nagged at Lorin.

Almost as soon as an Earth hour had past according to Lorin’s Explorer he began hunting. The more he had walked the more he had considered that the Selka would never catch him up, but he still managed to walk an hour before giving in to his hunger. First Lorin tried to catch a zoomer, sprinkling the bark from some of the roots he had collected close to one he had found. Within minutes the zoomer was eating the bark. Lorin hit it in the back with the axe felling it with ease. Survival seemed so easy now that Lorin knew how. He had spent hours trying to catch a zoomer before, and now it took minutes. Survival was the same on Earth though; He would never have survived alone for weeks there if he didn’t know how.

Lorin had learned how to light a fire on Earth and the principle was the same on Selkan. Rubbing a stick in to a thicker bit of root quickly enough lit a nice fire. He added a good amount of fuel until he judged the fire would be hot enough and then cooked the zoomer. The zoomer burned, but Lorin didn’t mind. This time he would make sure it was cooked so he didn’t kill himself. Those searing stomach pains Lorin had felt were worth eating burnt food to avoid. You could eat almost all of a zoomer from what Lorin had gathered in the Selka camp, which was exactly what Lorin did. After getting past the burnt exterior it actually tasted quite good, better than the raw beast Lorin still didn’t know the name of.

For the next day Lorin continued like that. Eating Zoomers and bits of green shoot and drinking the water that came from underground. Lorin ran out of wood at the end of the day. His explorer indicated that he was another day’s travel from getting back to the ship. It was either travel another day eating only green shoots, which didn’t need to be cooked, or try to gather some wood now. This was assuming that either way Lorin would be able to find somewhere to get wood. If the underground ecosystem wasn’t accessible nearby or by the ship then the option didn’t really matter.

After some deliberation, Lorin decided it would be best to try to gather some wood now. If he couldn’t find another way underground it would be good to know before he got too far from the Selka camp. Then he might be able to get back to the camp before he starved. The shoots probably wouldn’t sustain Lorin on their own. Without too much effort Lorin was able to find a hole that seemed to go quite deep in to the ground. The decline inside was much shallower than the one in the hole by the Selka camp so it took a while to get down.

On the way Lorin’s thoughts returned to getting home, getting back to Earth. He remembered that although the fire had been quite bad on his ship, the main structure of the ship had remained. Many wires would be broken, but if he could get one of the computers of the ship working that would show him to see the plans for the rest of the ship. Everyone who took part in space travel needed a good understanding of how their ship worked, so Lorin believed it wouldn’t be too hard to fix if he could find the right resources. He might be able to find some tools on the ship, but metals needed to replace wires might be hard to find. Then maybe he could ski again or just live normally.

It hadn’t been too long a descent before Lorin entered an underground cavern. Fortunately it was similar to the last and had the wood Lorin needed. Taking care not to step on any of the red mushrooms Lorin found some appropriate roots and filled his pack again. When he looked for the red mushrooms they were easy to see and they weren’t too common. Everything seemed to be going well for Lorin finally. The fact that there was another underground area with roots here meant it was more likely he could find one close to the ship. If he had wood he could cook and he now knew how to catch food and find water.

Avoiding the red mushrooms on his way out again, Lorin easily got to the surface. At the surface he camped for the night and then continued back to his ship. Using the survival skills he had picked up the next day was easy. Able to get fresh water whenever he was too hot and food when he wanted, Lorin had little trouble. Wasting water began to disturb Lorin less. It wasn’t like he was using it all up, there seemed to be plenty, he was just doing what he had to. The landscape even seemed to be easier to traverse than before. Maybe that was, because Lorin had more energy or felt like he actually had a chance.

Knowing he could survive Lorin returned to his ship. It was late afternoon when he got there and the ship looked far more salvageable now that it had stopped spurting flames. Setting up his camp, Lorin realised he could make it more permanent now. He could have a base to work from and moving less would give him more time. While setting up camp he considered the most efficient ways to spend the next few days. Now that he knew how long it took to get the required things to survive and how long they would last it shouldn’t be too hard. For the first time since Lorin had been on Selkan he fell asleep fully content with his plans and how to carry them out.

7. Possibilities

Lorin managed to catch a few zoomers early in the morning. That would probably be enough for the day giving him plenty of time to assess the damage to the ship. First he went to the supply room. Although he had searched here before, he hadn’t been looking for tools or water containers since he hadn’t needed them. The tools were in a metal chest like the first aid kit had been, this meant they hadn’t been affected by the fire. Lorin also found a bottle in the supply room, the outside was charred but it would be useable. A bottle would give him time to search the ship, as he wouldn’t have to go and chop down a shoot whenever he wanted a drink. Now Lorin had everything he could get without assessing the damage properly, he headed to the control room.

Navigating the ship wasn’t too hard. The ship had landed roughly the right way up so the corridors were flat. There was the occasional bit of roof panel that Lorin had to move out of the way, but there weren’t many other obstructions. Inside the control room there was more damage. Metal panels were all over, broken wires hung from holes in the roof. The ship might be harder to fix than Lorin had thought.

Computers on this ship could work independently of each other allowing information to be accessed even if only one computer was still working. All could access the ships main memory if it was still intact. Unfortunately for Lorin all of the computers were broken with varying degrees of problems. One had been completely crushed by a roof panel and others didn’t have much less damage. Luckily all the computers weren’t needed to fly the ship, many were designed for communications and locating other ships. As long as Lorin could get the navigation, hibernation and main computers working he would be able to get home. He would also need to repair some structural damage to the ship. The real problem was how.

Ship memory was hard to reach and fixing a computer to see if it could access the main memory was probably the quickest way to check it. The hibernation computer was the least damaged so Lorin started work on that. On Earth Lorin had been an engineer before he had joined the space travel program. They had trained him further in engineering among many other skills since he would be travelling alone to Selkan. He needed to know enough to be able to fix small problems on the ship, so wouldn’t have too much of a problem fixing the computer. The only thing he knew about fixing the rest of the ship was that the plans were in the memory though; that would be a much harder task.

By midday the computer was working. After various attempts to fix the computer the final thing on Lorin’s list of fixes that might work did. Many times he had thought he had the computer fixed, pressed the power button and nothing happened. He had been expecting his final attempt to be the same when the monitor turned on. It lit up with a blue background and flashy logo for the operating system. Once it had booted, Lorin checked the memory. Only the computer’s individual memory was accessible, ship memory wasn’t connected. Lorin closed the window and opened it again to make sure. He refreshed the connection. If this didn’t work he would have no idea how to fix the ship. Even if he could reach the main memory he probably wouldn’t be able to fix whatever was wrong. It would be like him trying to catch a zoomer without knowing that they were distracted by bark.

As a last hope before trying to get to the main memory Lorin checked inside the computer again. Maybe a wire wasn’t connected here, maybe it wouldn’t be too hard to fix. Inside Lorin found a socket which had the right label for the main memory. It was abbreviated MM, anyone who didn’t know would have no chance of even being able to plug the right wire in. The wire was already there. Lorin would have to go to the main memory. Not even thinking about it he tested the wire. It was lose. He pushed it back in to the socket. Checking the computer, by some stroke of luck, the main memory was connected. That meant the connection between here and the memory hadn’t been damaged, and the main memory was also still working.

After quickly checking the plans, Lorin copied them over to his Explorer so he could directly compare them to the ship while he was checking it. Then he went around the ship comparing each room to the plans and looking at what was damaged. He noted each problem in a word processor on his Explorer. There were so many problems, the list was overwhelming. How would Lorin have time to do this even if he did have the right supplies? Maybe all this effort had been a waste of time. It couldn’t have been. Lorin compartmentalised the problems, he would work through a room at a time. That way he didn’t have as long of a list. Maybe he could fix everything he had the supplies for first, that would shorten the list.

Eating His third zoomer of the day Lorin considered his situation. He had stopped working on the ship; it was growing late. After fixing the hibernation computer, he had worked on the room it was in for the rest of the day. He had made a list of things to do in the room he was working on. The list was barley shorter than it had been to begin with. When Lorin had been moving panels to make room he had found further structural damage to the floor, increasing the length of his list of things he couldn’t do. Gritting his teeth, Lorin threw the zoomer across the portable shelter. What was the point in surviving if that was all he was doing? At this rate he would be spending all of his days working. He had to go to quite the effort to survive, and in the time he wasn’t try to survive he was working on a task that he might not even be able to finish. He hadn’t even considered how he would get the supplies he didn’t have. There was no chance he would return to Earth.

Slowing his breathing, Lorin tried to push his anger away. Like the last time when he had got angry with the shoot, he had achieved nothing from it. While walking over to collect his zoomer he tried to think about the positives. He was surviving on an alien world, he had fixed the hibernation computer, and he had the plans for the ship and now knew how to fix it. Lorin had made so much progress he was just overwhelmed by the list. After completing one task he had been presented with a hundred more. It was possible for him to fix this he just needed to take it step by step. When he finished his zoomer, Lorin was irritated that he had got so frustrated. Now he need to clean the wall of his portable shelter and he had made so much progress. He had been close to death from a lack of knowledge of survival on Selkan only a few weeks ago. Now he was surviving on his own and managing to have time to try to get home.

Progress seemed better for the next few days. With a full day to do repairs Lorin could see the list shortening day by day. The shorter the list the more manageable it seemed. Then one day he finished the list for the hibernation room, then a while after that he finished the list for another room. A month had passed when Lorin finished all of the lists that he had the supplies for. The ship actually looked good; it was almost usable. Survival had become second nature to Lorin. He got up and hunted for the day. He would fill up his bottle about three or four times a day from the shoots. Every few days he would go and get wood from underground; after searching for a while he had found a hole which led to the system of roots there. Most of his days had been spent fixing the ship. Something he had been working on for so long had been finished.

Lorin let himself relax for a day before he thought about what to do next. Then he worked out how he would fix the rest of the ship. Checking his list, he worked out what he needed for each problem. It was mostly conductive metals to fix wires and materials to fix the ship’s structure. Unfortunately, metals used in other areas of the ship couldn’t be used for the wires. They were mostly steel which was nowhere near conductive enough for the ship to function correctly. He would also needed to find a way to seal the ship, in areas where it had broken, from the vacuum of space. That could be quite difficult, it would hard on Earth for people with access to more or less whatever they wanted. Now Lorin would have to find these things alone. He would go exploring tomorrow; this time with good reason and the survival skills to make it viable.

8. Scavenging

Lorin decided that he would begin by checking the purple pods when he woke up. It was unlikely the Selka used similar technology, but the materials were certainly strong enough to repair structural damage. They had withstood the Selka weapon somehow. The biggest issue would be removing the materials from the pod. Maybe in the process Lorin would find some metals that he could melt down as well. He could essentially use any metal to repair wires if it was conductive enough as one of the tools he had, the Fusi, could melt any material with a melting point below one thousand five hundred degrees Celsius. It also had the ability to solidify the material in most simple shapes, allowing for it to be easily used. This could also be used for sealing some of the ship, but not all of it as some parts were required to be movable. Seals on doors and other components needed different materials.

The first pod that Lorin checked was the pod he searched when he first landed. As Lorin had expected, the exterior of the pod was near impossible to remove. The purple material seemed to have an extremely high melting point as the Fusi couldn’t even mark it. This didn’t matter too much. Lorin only needed a material strong enough to withstand the pressure inside the ship. He could possibly use materials from inside the pod, that wouldn’t need to be as strong, as they weren’t designed to withstand a super weapon.

The material that was used for the interior of the pods was able to be cut with the Fusi. That was at least something that Lorin could use for ship repairs. With this material he probably wouldn’t needed anything else for structural repairs. It wouldn’t melt though so wasn’t a metal; the Fusi had to be used in cut mode otherwise the material would disintegrate. Lorin couldn’t use it for repairing wires. He hadn’t expected to be able to use a structural material for wires. Even if the interior had been made from metal, it was unlikely it would be conductive enough to use in the ship.

After leaving the material where it was, he could come back for that later, Lorin headed to the control room. Here would be his best bet for finding conductive metals in the pod. If the Selka used wires for their computers, which was admittedly a long shot, the control room would be the easiest place to access them. Using the Fusi to cut open the side of a panel, Lorin checked inside one of the Selka computers. The inside made little sense to Lorin. There were tubes all in natural looking formations. They seemed to expand and contract almost like they were breathing. When Lorin touched one it retracted. It was a vein pulsing with a rhythm. Was the computer or maybe even the pod alive?

Checking various other sections Lorin found more of the tubes. The purple rods coming from the control panel also contained the seemingly living tubes. It seemed the Selka used some form of organism to transfer signals in a similar way to how wires did on Earth. After searching for a while, Lorin found little else. The tubes had intersections occasionally where many met in bulbous lumps. Intersections seemed to be able to connect any number of tubes and the tubes had a similar sprawling layout to the corridors of the pod. Being unable to begin to understand how the tubes worked Lorin moved on. It appeared that Lorin wouldn’t find any conductive materials that he could use in the pod. At least the day hadn’t been a failure, he had found a material to use for structural repairs on the ship.

A few days later, Lorin had transferred all the materials he would need for structural repairs over to his ship. It had took a lot of effort; the material was particularly heavy and in the heat of Selkan that meant hard work. While working Lorin had been pondering the ship repairs. Maybe he could use some of the components from the unnecessary parts of the ship to repair the parts he needed. He might not find enough to fix everything, but it would mean a lot less effort scavenging for metals. Considering how metals on Earth were usually in underground deposits, they might be equally hard to find on Selkan. His best bet for finding some would probably be in Selka structures which he hadn’t had any luck with so far.

When Lorin had been transferring materials, he had got some from other pods as well. They had been just as deserted as the first and had almost exactly the same design. The information in their computers prior to the Selka logs were the same, but the logs were different. They did indicate not having the right things to survive like the other pod, but each one seemed to be lacking a different thing. The first hadn’t had enough food. Another didn’t have any water; the logs had ended quickly there. Then there were more peculiar problems, one hadn’t had any beds and one had no doors. In some the logs lasted until very recently finishing only a few months ago. Yet none had any Selka or any Selka bodies.

In the unnecessary parts of the ship Lorin was able to find many components that he would need. While collecting them he only hoped there would be enough. Otherwise it might take a lifetime to find the metals he needed, if they were even on the planet. At the end of his search he seemed to have a lot wires and other parts. Could he have enough? He had filled a tool box with components when he had expected maybe a handful of them. This would be extremely helpful with the repairs, but it would make it much more difficult to fix the parts of the ship Lorin had taken them from. Hopefully he wouldn’t end up needing them.

Lorin had done all the repairs he could with the materials he had about a week later. It had took some effort. The plans for the ship were occasionally difficult to understand, leaving Lorin to work them out for hours. Materials from the Selka Pods were hard to fit in to the broken structural parts and had to be cut very precisely. Lorin had nothing to seal the materials in with, so he would need to do more work on some external parts of the ship when he had the materials. Also, Lorin was just short of the components he needed to fix the computers he needed working. Fortunately it was just a few wires which would be easy to replace if Lorin could find some metal.

Searching for materials hadn’t been his priority, but while getting his usual supplies to survive Lorin had been on the lookout. Above ground was the same everywhere, nothing seemed to interrupt the black rocky landscape apart from the green shoots. Apart from maybe in the Selka main structure with the green ball, underground was were Lorin believed he had the best hope of finding something. Every time he went down to get wood he seemed to find something new. A few days ago he saw a bat like creature that was a dark purple colour. The bat was too quick and before Lorin had seen it properly it flew away.

He decided he would search underground first. The Selka structure looked almost impossible to access with its stilts to suspend it. Reaching the hole to access the underground cave system, Lorin was surprisingly happy. He had no idea how to get the supplies he needed, or if he could even get his ship to work if he got them. His progress with the ship repairs was good, but that didn’t warrant this energy that he had. Deciding not to dwell on his unexpected happiness too long in case he managed to stop it, Lorin began his search. He was fully underground now. While he was down there he felt more aware than he used to.

When Lorin had first entered one of these caves he had barley been able to travel a few steps without almost tripping. How had he even escaped when the cave under the Selka camp had begun to collapse? Now he understood the way the roots twisted, chopping them and avoiding them for over a month had meant observing them without really trying. This allowed quick navigation of the cave floor.

Lorin had been exploring for half of the day. It would have been impossible to tell without his Explorer. He had just ate the food he had brought down and was getting ready to continue. Up to now he hadn’t found much, although he had caught another glimpse of one of the bat like creatures. The walls and floor of the cave mirrored the surface of Selka; uninterrupted black rock. Maybe Lorin had been unlucky or maybe there just wasn’t any metals. Perhaps he would need to dig in to the ground to find metal. Where would he even start with that?

Searching for a while longer Lorin found something which he wasn’t expecting. Scrambling on to a large tree root revealed a purple pod. This one looked untouched, completely the right way up. It was embedded in to the rock with the door meeting the floor of the cave exactly. The other pods had seemed scattered while this one looked to be intentionally placed. The main door was closed; most of the pods Lorin had visited had open doors. Pods which hadn’t been open were easily opened by hand, like they had been left unlocked.

Lorin approached the door testing it. It didn’t move at all. He tried to get his hands in between the gap where the two parts of the door met. Pulling at it was useless, Lorin’s hands just slipped across the smooth surface of the door. Maybe he could find a button or something that would open the door. He looked close to the door finding nothing. Perhaps he could pry the door open. If he could find something to use as a lever to put between the doors that might work. As Lorin began walking in to the nearby roots to look for something, the doors slid open with a quick swish. Lorin turned. Many curious Selka emerged from the pod.

9. Intelligence

The Selka surrounded Lorin. He was up against the root he had climbed over to find the pod. Looking at the root he probably wouldn’t be able to get away before the Selka reached him even at their slow pace. These Selka might be different than the others he had met. “Hello.” Lorin said and his Explorer translated. Murmurs rose up in the horde of Selka. A few were translated in Lorin’s ear. Many seemed amazed stating things like, “It speaks.” A Selka with a red spot on the top of its head emerged from the crowd. “Greetings creature. What you?” Lorin attempted to briefly explain.

He conveyed how he had come from another planet and why. He explained how he had found Selkan destroyed and survived on its desolate landscape. He told them how he was trying to get home. All with few interruptions apart from occasional explanations of untranslated words. The Selka understood, but seemed to be shocked by the concept. After the explanation the red spotted Selka whose name was Glaka invited Lorin in to the pod. Hesitantly Lorin accepted. These Selka seemed nothing like the others; there was the potential this was a trap, and it was harder to read people when they spoke through a translator.

Inside felt like a city. Selka everywhere going about tasks. Some seemed to be carrying supplies from outside while others used devices Lorin hadn’t seen before. When Lorin walked by Selka stopped and looked curiously. He wasn’t surprised, he wouldn’t react much differently if an alien unexpectedly walked through his home. None seemed too worried about him, just shocked and maybe confused. The pod felt much easier to navigate than other pods Lorin had been in. Lights and a flat floor were surprisingly useful.

Reaching a room which seemed to be set up like a canteen, Glaka stopped. There were tables inside, but none had chairs. Selka were stood up while eating, although the tables were low enough for Lorin to kneel on the floor and reach. While in captivity Lorin had never noticed how small the Selka were. They probably varied from about four to five feet tall.

Glaka turned to Lorin, “You must eat, survival on Selkan hard. I will explain what happened here.” She or he, Lorin couldn’t tell, stood at one side of the table gesturing Lorin to go to the other. Soon food was presented. It seemed to be a thick green soup like dish. Trying to eat it from so low down was difficult. Would the Selka be offended if Lorin kneeled or sat down? “Do you mind if I kneel?” Lorin asked Glaka. Kneel didn’t translate and a confused look crossed Glaka’s face. Lorin looked around noticing that the Selka’s bodies were flat to the ground with tentacles coming out of the sides. The Selka couldn’t kneel even if they wanted to; no wonder they didn’t have a word for it.

Lorin knelt saying kneel as he did so. He then explained that the table was too low for him, but he didn’t want to be rude. Glaka roared happily; could that be their laugh. “Rude. No, how can it be rude if we don’t even know what it is.” Lorin knelt and began to eat his soup properly. It was almost creamy, Lorin wondered how it had been made. He hadn’t tasted anything like it while he had been on Selkan.

Glaka began to explain the situation on Selkan. The world had been destroyed due to a war as Lorin had gathered already. The great weapon was a ‘groda’. That seemed to be how Glaka said it anyway. The groda was a ball of liquid which floated where it landed. It then expanded out with strong waves breaking away everything in its path. After it took years to collapse, slowly getting smaller as it did. That must have been the green ball on the surface around the main Selka structure. The Selka continued to explain; the purple material the pods, their name translated to capsules, were made out of was the only material known to be able to withstand the groda.

However the Selka, knowing that groda would be sent to almost everywhere on the planet, knew they didn’t have the materials to protect everyone. The empty pods on the surface had been left high in the ground. They would be easier for the groda to reach and they didn’t have the supplies to survive. This was apparently to allow the supplies for pods like this one, so at least some Selka could survive.

Glaka seemed ashamed while explaining that some Selka had been sacrificed while others had survived. Glaka had been born in the pod and many of the Selka who had made those decisions were now dead. Glaka, who now seemed to be in charge, had decided they should rescue any Selka in bad pods and bury those who had died. That explained the lack of Selka in the pods Lorin had searched. After that Glaka seemed to have told Lorin everything she wanted to. Lorin thanked Glaka and then began to explain his current situation. How he was trying to get home.

Seeming happy to help Glaka said, “We will give anything you need. It is least Selka can do after stranding you here.” It appeared that the Selka felt responsible for the actions of their kind more than humans. It was by no means Glaka or this group of Selka’s fault Lorin was here and yet they felt the need to help him. “Unfortunately, we have lost much of knowledge of technology.” Glaka continued, “Much not stored in pod memory, so may be hard to help. Your ship sounds complicated. Any supplies you need are yours.”

“I’m grateful for any help Glaka. You are very generous.” Lorin responded. These Selka were nothing like the others he had encountered. They seemed so civil, but for all Lorin knew they could still have a pit where they threw half of their food somewhere.

After eating Glaka insisted on showing Lorin around the pod. Many rooms were just furnished versions of what he had seen in the other pods. They must have also taken things of use from the other pods. A room that really interested Lorin was their medical room. They had a tube which a Selka could lie in; it would cure many Selka diseases. Lorin didn’t know how it worked, but it seemed incredibly advanced compared to medicine on Earth. With this and the groda the Selka appeared to have very complex technology. If they hadn’t been destroyed, due to war, the Selka would have undoubtedly have been more advanced than humans. It was surprising that they hadn’t had any form of space travel.

The tour of the pod had been very thorough. Lorin felt like he had seen every corner of the pod; more than he had seen of any he had visited before. Glaka excitedly explained every room that they went through. They probably didn’t get many visitors, let alone ones from other planets. When the tour had finished Lorin headed back to his camp. As he left Glaka insisted that he come back, and said that after he knew what he needed for the ship all he had to do was ask.

Lorin knew almost exactly what he needed, but felt like he was asking too much to give the Selka the whole list. They would probably give him everything he needed, at least that’s what Lorin judged from their hospitality. He would have another look and decided what he should tell them first. Metal and a movable seal were the main things he hadn’t been able to find up to now. He would go back then he worked out exactly how much he needed. That way they wouldn’t go to too much effort and get more than they had to. How had a species with beings that were so accommodating destroyed itself like this? How had they destroyed an entire planet?

10. Supplies

A few days later Lorin returned to the Selka pod knowing exactly what he needed to repair the ship. He would need enough metal to make five meters of wire and about ten litres of seal. Approaching the pod Lorin considered its location. These underground plants must have been here when the pod was made along with the cave. The pod was almost perfectly cut in to place, it almost looked natural. Surely it wouldn’t have been that hard to make the other pods in this cave instead of in one higher up. Even if they hadn’t had enough food then they would have been able to go out in to the cave. Then they might have been able to collect food themselves.

When Lorin got to the pod a Selka hurried out to greet him. “Hello Lorin. We weren’t expecting so soon.” He said seemingly out of breath, “Do you know what you need yet?”

“Yes I think so.” Lorin replied. The Selka, who seemed small even for them, led Lorin to Glaka. Glaka seemed happy about Lorin’s return. “Welcome back friend, what you need?” Lorin explained that he needed some conductive metal. The Selka didn’t seem to understand conductivity and there weren’t translations for the names of many metals. Metals like copper and gold which would have been best didn’t translate, but aluminium did. That would have to do if the Selka could find it.

“Do you think you can get me about five meters of the metal at about a millimetre wide?” Lorin asked. Glaka replied with confusion. It was not surprising that standard measurements weren’t the same on Selkan, but Lorin hadn’t even considered it. After doing some calculations he worked out how much he would need if the metal was in a lump. He then showed Glaka with hand gestures. Glaka roared again as she had when Lorin asked to kneel. “Aluminium everywhere Lorin. I could find you that underneath any root in cave.” Glaka exclaimed. It seemed aluminium was abundant on Selkan if you knew where to look.

After that he asked about some form of seal that he could use. The Selka had apparently lost the material they used to seal much of the pods. The plant that it had been extracted from had been destroyed by the groda. It used to grow on the surface of the planet. He asked if there was anything else he could use, but they knew of nothing that fit the specifications he gave. It may have been easier to explain if there were translations for various measurements. If Lorin wanted to truly explain what he wanted he would have to slowly work out conversions for Selka measurements.

After being here for so long that didn’t sound too bad. It would take a while to fix the wires with the metal he had and now he wasn’t completely alone. He could survive here now. Earth could be completely different when he went back anyway, at least here he knew what was going on. When Lorin returned home he probably wouldn’t even recognise it. Living here for a few months wouldn’t be too bad, it might even be enjoyable now there wasn’t the possibility of death every day. He might be able to learn more about the planet and the Selka. Their culture seemed quite interesting, their customs for hospitality were very welcoming.

Not long after, Lorin was returning to the pod to collect the aluminium. The Selka had asked him to give them a few days to collect it. Lorin hadn’t been in contact with them since then, but he had no reason to believe that the Selka wouldn’t have the metal. When he returned he noticed the Selka had begun to set up tents outside of the pod. The other times Lorin had visited all the Selka had been living inside the pod. Now they looked to be setting up places to stay in the cave.

On the way Lorin decided to ask one of the Selka what was going on. The Selka replied, “The capsule become overcrowded and you showed this world survivable.” Lorin thanked him and continued on. The Selka had already left the pods and had been gathering materials from outside, so Lorin had assumed that they knew what the conditions were like outside of the pod. Maybe they hadn’t been confident in their ability to survive without the pod before they had met him. There didn’t seem to be any lasting after effects from the groda as with radiation from nukes; it was surprising the Selka hadn’t at least tried to leave the pod. The pods were probably all they knew Glaka, the Selka leader, had been born in the pod so most of the other Selka probably were as well.

Some Selka that Lorin passed appeared to be using some form of paste to stick bits of root together. They were using this to make frames for their tents. Lorin stopped to watch. He then noticed another frame that had been finished. The Selka were unfolding it, the bits where the paste had been used were able to twist and bend easily. Could that be useable for his seal? If it was strong enough it seemed to have perfect properties.

When Lorin met Glaka, the Selka presented him with a huge chunk of aluminium. It had been completely extracted from its ore and was in a usable state. The only problem was the size. How would Lorin transport such a large piece of metal? It was the size of most Selka; much bigger than Lorin had asked for. As if reading Lorin’s mind Glaka said, “You must allow us transport your metal. Maybe we could watch. Learn something.”

“Of course. I’d be happy to let you to see how my ship works considering how much you’ve helped. Maybe I could give you some translated plans for the ship as well.” Glaka seemed happy with this. “I would appreciate.” Glaka said, “How do workings go for seal?” Lorin explained his current developments in working for the measurement translations. Afterward he mentioned the paste he had seen used outside, and asked if there was any possibility he could test some. Glaka replied with the usual roar and explained that the paste was made from the roots. It was very easy to make and Lorin could have as much as he needed.

Lorin felt as if the Selka were willing to give too much. He was an alien to them. A species they knew nothing about until he came, and yet they were willing to help him with anything he asked. The only thing they had asked in return, up to now, was to watch him work. They hadn’t even asked him to show them what he was doing, just to watch. It made him feel almost guilty, because he had gave so little in return. He didn’t have much to give, and translated plans for his ship were about all he had that the Selka might find useful. However, he still felt like he hadn’t quite gave the Selka enough. Glaka had said that they owed him since the Selka were the reason he was in this situation, but the Selka here weren’t the same Selka that had caused Lorin to be in this situation.

Lorin had asked The Selka to come with the aluminium the following day. They had also offered to bring him some of the paste to test. Glaka didn’t come, she probably had important things to do, but there were about ten Selka that arrived. They carried the aluminium on some fabric which was attached to some wooden poles. The Selka held the poles and the chunk of metal was on the fabric in the centre. A few Selka followed behind carrying a large bowl that contained the root paste.

Walking up to the Selka, Lorin greeted them and thanked them. He then offered to explain to them what he was doing as he worked. People watching him work usually annoyed him as it made it hard to work things out, but Lorin already knew almost exactly what he needed to do. He’d looked at these problems hundreds of times, he just hadn’t had the materials to fix them. He then began work on the wires, using the Fusi to shape the metal, with the Selka watching.

While Lorin explained the Selka seemed extremely interested. They asked lots of questions and took notes; this slowed Lorin’s progress, but he didn’t mind. They had helped so much that this was the least he could do. One did ask an interesting question though, “Could we build ship big enough for all Selka?” Lorin answered explaining that it would probably be possible, but would take a lot more energy to get the ship out of orbit. He didn’t know exactly how this worked, but did know enough to give some explanation.

Later, when Loin had been thinking about it for a while, he asked the same Selka why they would transport so many Selka. The Selka responded and simply said, “This world has been destroyed. New one better.” It made sense. If the Selka could get to a world where it would be easier to survive, then why would they stay on Selkan?

After that the day went on without too much variation. Lorin would start work on a different part of the ship and explain what he was doing. The Selka would then ask more questions. At the end of the day, before the Selka left, Lorin decided to do some tests on the paste. It would be better to do them before the Selka left in case he needed to ask anything about how the paste worked.

The paste did exactly what Lorin needed it to do. It was strong enough and easy to use. The Selka hadn’t really needed to be there while Lorin tested the paste; he hadn’t asked them anything. After this world had almost killed him, it now seemed to be giving Lorin almost everything he needed. All he had to do was wait and persevere and now everything seemed to be working.

When the Selka left Lorin considered what they had said. They wanted to leave the planet to find somewhere more survivable. Maybe he could do more for them than just give them the ship plans. He could probably give them the Universe maps and maybe show them how he was using their materials as substitutes for Earth’s. That way they would have more chance of finding somewhere to live and might be able to build a ship with what they had more quickly. Translating all of it to Selka would be easy with the Explorer. He just need some way for the Selka to store the information or a way to transfer it to the Selka computers.

11. Help

Work on the ship had been going well for Lorin. He’d continued to show the Selka what he was doing while working on the ship. The Selka had willingly provided enough paste for Lorin. While the Selka weren’t around he would translate information for them and when they were he worked on the ship. When Lorin began working with the paste the Selka offered to help. They insisted that since he had been helping them, they should help him. Suggesting that they knew how the paste worked, and could help with that unlike the electronics.

It had been about a week since Lorin had received the aluminium from the Selka. He hadn’t yet mentioned the translations he had been working on to any of them. Currently he was on his way to meet Glaka to discuss progress and what the Selka had learned from him. In this meeting he would mention the translations he was working on. Glaka would probably think he was offering too much, but hopefully wouldn’t refuse his help.

Walking through the camp outside the Selka pod, Lorin noticed the building had progressed considerably. There were many completed tents, some more permanent structures appeared to be being built and many Selka looked to be living there now. It appeared the Selka had known how to build these kinds of structures, maybe they had even planed how to expand outside of the pod, before Lorin had come. It seemed crazy that they had delayed so long with how proficient they were now being.

The meeting with Glaka went as expected to begin with. Lorin explained his progress on the ship, he would probably take another week to finish repairs, and then Glaka told Lorin what the Selka had learned. Lorin already knew much of what the Selka learned since he had taught them. After this, Lorin mentioned his work on translating his information for the Selka. Glaka seemed happy, but didn’t seem surprised, “Thank you. Appreciate any help you give. As you seem to have understood we want get off world.” Perhaps it was common in Selka culture to give help and be accommodating, but then greater accommodation was expected in return. Maybe one of the Selka had just told Glaka about their conversation about the Selka leaving. The Selka remained hard to read, it would take a lifetime to fully understand them. Not long after, the meeting finished. Lorin had explained that he needed some way to transfer his translations to the Selka, Glaka had agreed to look in to anything they could do. This probably wouldn’t bring any results though, the Selka didn’t really know how technology from Earth worked.

Work on the ship continued to proceed well. From the rate Lorin was translating the plans, using the Explorer, they would be translated before the ship was finished. As Lorin had expected the Selka hadn’t found any ways to transfer the translations. His attempts had been just as unsuccessful; knowing as little about Selka technology as the Selka knew about his own made it difficult. After a search of the ship Lorin had found nothing that was portable to store the information on. Perhaps he could give the Selka his Explorer. That could store the information and wasn’t needed for Lorin to get home, but it had probably saved his life multiple times. He’d used it to find his ship again and translate Selka. Without it he would never have made so much progress on the ship. After his ship was working he shouldn’t need it again though. The ship would take him straight home; he wouldn’t be in a survival situation there. The Selka would need the Explorer, for the information, more than Lorin needed it after he got his ship working. That seemed to be the only way to give the Selka the translations.

The Selka seemed to pick up information incredibly quickly. Lorin wouldn’t say that he was good at explaining things, but they now seemed to understand a lot of what he was doing while he worked on the ship. At first, Lorin had had doubts that the Selka would be able to make good use of the plans he was translating. After seeing them work and learn, Lorin was certain they would be able to make good use of the plans. It might take them some time to progress as they had lost so much to the groda, but they undoubtedly would.

The ship was finished. Lorin had almost got used to life on Selkan. He’d got in to a routine and almost forgotten why he was even working on the ship. His near death experiences and inability to survive seemed like centuries ago now. The Selka who came to watch him work knew him now and he knew them. Survival had become easy and he had spent his free time working on the ship. Life hadn’t been too bad on Selkan. Now he would return to Earth a planet that would likely be unrecognisable. He had longed so much to die on Earth when his insides burned from food poisoning, but now he almost felt like he wanted to stay on Selkan.

Lorin had just finished testing the ship, it worked as intended. Lorin hadn’t tested it in space, but as long as the ship didn’t collapse when he left the atmosphere he would be able to get to Earth. He landed close to where he had crashed. Selka crowded around outside; they had wanted to watch. The Selka had never seen someone fly in a vehicle before, so many had gathered. It seemed like almost the entire population of the underground pod was here.

When Lorin left his ship Glaka approached, “Magnificent. Surprising something so large can get off ground.” Glaka followed this sentence with a roar. If Lorin was going to leave he was going to go now. If he let himself think about it too long, he might persuade himself to stay. The thought of Earth had kept him going until he had met the Selka. It seemed only right to go back, but now he felt a connection to Selkan. This planet was so interesting; the barren landscape had a hidden lure to it. He presented Glaka with the Explorer, “As we haven’t been able to transfer the translations please take this. It has all the translated plans on it, universe maps and can translate human languages. I’m going home now. Thank you for all of your hospitality and help. I wouldn’t have got anywhere without it.”

“Of course human. Selka pride ourselves on hospitality. We almost see it as competition. Your help will be beneficial. Good travel.” Finally the Selka hospitality fully made sense to Lorin. They wanted to be as helpful a possible so they were considered to be good hosts.

After this he approached his ship. When he got to the door he turned and waved, the Selka replied with confused glances at each other. They obviously had no idea what a wave was, what could their equivalent be? Lorin shook the thought away, he needed to get back to Earth. Back home. At least there people would understand him. He entered the ship, set himself up and took off.

12. Return

Inside the ship was surprisingly cool. It was adjusted to average room temperature on Earth, but after Lorin’s months on Selkan he had become accustomed to the heat. He had still felt hot working under the two suns, but now the heat was no longer there the cold caused him to shiver. He was now leaving the orbit of Selkan. It was best to wait until you left orbit before you hibernated, but the ship would fly from the surface of one planet to the surface of another automatically when the course was set. That was what was supposed to happen anyway, Lorin still had no idea how he had crashed on Selkan.

Before entering hibernation Lorin looked down at Selkan one last time. His computer said it was over six Earth months since he had crashed. That planet had been his home for half a year. It looked like a large asteroid from above. Various groda had torn the green landscape away leaving a black dead looking planet. The planet certainly wasn’t dead, Lorin had learned that. He had found much life; not only the Selka, but many creatures and plants. Looking at pictures stored on the ship Selkan looked nothing like the green paradise it was supposed to be, yet that hadn’t stopped Lorin from wanting to stay.

Lorin caught a last glimpse of Selkan, before the Ship reached top speed and shot away from the binary star system. He could turn the ship around by resetting the course, but then all of Lorin’s effort would have been for nothing. With only enough fuel to get to Selkan and back when he set off, he now only just had enough to get back to Earth. If he turned round he would be stranded on Selkan again. When he got home he would be able to ski again and he would have the payment for the trip in a lump sum. He was paid a good wage and with over four hundred years for the return journey he would never have to work again. Ship time was much shorter due to relativity and with hibernation Lorin would have only aged by the time he was on Selkan. He could essentially do whatever he wanted for the rest of his life.

Entering the hibernation pod Lorin remembered how he had felt last time he woke up. Hopefully, without the sudden wake up caused by a crash Lorin wouldn’t have as bad a head when he woke up. The pod top closed slowly, this time without the worry of being engulfed by fire, and gas was emitted in to the chamber. Lorin slowly drifted to sleep with no figures creeping in to his vision this time.

Lorin woke up feeling energised. No alarms disturbed him which was a good sign. The computer had recorded a good journey and landing, Lorin’s work on the ship had paid off. He was back on familiar soil. The world would have changed considerably, but it would be nowhere near as alien as Selkan had been. He could explore this world without the need to worry and could do everything he used to love on Earth. After he got paid he would travel to France and go skiing. Selkan was a dream now, his hibernation the deep sleep that had incubated it.

He got dressed and ready to leave the ship. It should have landed in the space station on Earth. People would undoubtedly be ready to meet him when he left. As Lorin approached the air lock on the ship, he noticed a yellow warning on the control panel. Looking closer it read ‘radiation level moderate’. Surely that was nothing to worry about. A yellow warning was still a liveable condition, just higher than average Earth background radiation.

Lorin pressed the release on the air lock revealing a barren land. It was rocky with little life. The only sign of humans was a crumbling building in the distance. This couldn’t be earth. Lorin rushed back in to the ship and checked the navigation computer. It indicated he was on Earth and in the right system. This couldn’t be right. He must have made a mistake when fixing the ship. Earth couldn’t have been destroyed. In his panic, Lorin realised that even if this wasn’t Earth there was nothing he could do now. He didn’t have the fuel to leave.

He crept back outside for another look at the Landscape. It was jagged and rough, with occasional spots of greenery. Could he still be on Selkan? The ground was brown and looked muddy, the plants were too familiar. No this was Earth, this was Lorin’s home. He had thought it impossible that something like what happened on Selkan could happen here. He hadn’t even considered it when returning home. The groda and Selka seemed so different from things on Earth, a similar level of destruction on both planets seemed so unlikely.

Lorin’s gut feeling to stay on Selkan had been right. Those months of work he had spent trying to leave had been pointless. Now he was in the same scenario as he had been when he crashed on Selkan. He was in a destroyed world, with limited supplies and it was nearly impossible to leave. He did know more about survival on Earth, but that might not help in a post nuclear world. There was the possibility that only the location where Lorin had landed had been affected; that didn’t seem likely though. The world had known that it would essentially destroy itself through attempts to retaliate if a nuke was fired.

Lorin considered giving up. What was the point in doing the same thing again? He had only ended up back where he started. Yet he had come so far so he decided to explore. Hopefully he would find something edible or some water. Lorin had learnt how to survive on a planet light years away, he could survive on Earth.