

The Message

"Maybe it's just a coincidence," Stenton suggested.

"No. There won't be coincidences in this message, Dr. Stenton," said Demarco in a dismissive voice. He then went to the podium, which Henry ceded, tapped some keys and a moment later, the ones and zeros of the binary message aligned themselves in the form of a perfect square. With a flourish, Demarco pushed the last button. A black square appeared for every zero in the message and a white square for every one. A black and white array appeared, rendering a clear, unambiguous picture of a planetary system. One with four planets, the second one from the sun circled.

"My God!" someone shouted from the back. "They sent us a picture."

Henry smiled and yelled to Louis. "Hey, Louis, I told you a picture would be easy."

Without taking his eyes off the screen, Demarco asked, "Is that the Lambda system, Dr. Worthington?"

Heads swiveled to Aster. She nodded. "Yes. That is the correct spacing for the Lambda star system."

"Another large number after the last spacer. Different one, but the same number of bits," Jeremy announced, speaking loud over the din.

Demarco did his magic again, and a humanoid body filled the screen, strikingly similar to a human, except for a slightly larger head. Their hands had three digits, not five.

"It's them."

"They're like us."

Someone from the back shouted, "The Lambdons." Now the aliens had a face and a name.

Louis, however, scrunched his face in consternation. He shuffled close to the screen, studying it.

Aster watched the muttering biologist. "Louis, what's wrong?"

Louis turned around, his face worried. "These Lambdons... they look like us."

"Not exactly like us. They have three fingers and a larger head."

"Too close," mumbled the biologist.

The Locusts

Dozens of the strange locusts had descended on the marine nearest her. Gun dropped, with arms, torso, and legs covered with the little creatures, his hands were frantically brushing off the locust-like creatures, but more and more took their place. Some had purchased holds on his hands, their small heads stubbornly attached like ticks on dog while their bodies bounced up and down with soldier's panicky movements. More and more landed on his face and he started to run wildly, screaming all the while.

One of her earliest memories from childhood was her grandmother, a farmer's wife, chopping off a chicken's head. Headless, the poor bird ran in one direction, then another, somehow keeping its balance. After too many horrible seconds, the poor chicken fell to the

ground, twitching. The man's aimless running reminded her of the chicken running, not knowing it was already dead.

The man screamed again, fell to his knees and ripped his shirt open. The locust must have burrowed through his clothes because they now covered his entire chest. With each locust plucked away, a red wound appeared. She watched in horror as the man fell to his knees first, his arms by his side. Then he collapsed, face first, to the floor.

She pulled her eyes from the soldier only to witness other soldiers swatting at the locust or brushing them off their clothes, all experiencing the same horror. Some held tight to their guns while they tried to wipe the locusts off their uniforms. Others had discarded their weapons and employed both hands in ridding themselves of the vile little creatures. Small bumps of cloth rippled along their shirts and pants, giving the impression the uniforms were alive. There were more and more screams.

Trapped in the Dome

Her eyes snapped open and wide-eyed, searched the area close to her. She scooted back up. *Any of those damn centipedes around? None. She was safe. At least from those creepy, crawly things.*

Then a clacking sound. Those horrible feet, ending with hooves, not feet, the tapping sound on cement. She let out a gurgle of hysterical laughter. *Here come the bad guys again!* She pinched herself hard to try to get control and took a shaky breath. *Don't lose it now. You've made it this far.* She got up and moved lightly along the wall and, at the junction, steered away from the clacks. *Don't know where in hell I am.* She hummed lightly under her breath, repeating it several times, then giggled. *No, but I do know that I'm in Hell, don't I? How about that, Daddy? You were right all along. Your scientist daughter is rotting in Hell, just like you said I would.*

She walked for about an hour, winding her way through the corridors, hugging a wall and trying not to be seen, carefully stepping over the gray cauliflower-fungi peppering the ground. Always steering away from those clacking sounds. Looking for centipedes and either killing them or walking away from the larger ones. They didn't seem to have eyes, but somehow the centipedes could detect her. Smell? Sound?

Finally, bowing to her fatigue, Aster Worthington, famed astronomer, sagged down and sat with her knees pulled up to her chest. She just couldn't go any farther. Exhausted, all she could do was keep watching left and right.