

LONGER AGO AND
FARTHER AWAY
The Expedition

A Prequel Short Story

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Longer Ago and Farther Away – Coming July 2027

Janid Braxen has unique abilities of telekinesis and extrasensory perception that he has kept hidden his entire life. He is learning to control them, but there is still so much he does not understand. When a mysterious crystal enters his life, his secret is exposed and an enemy he didn't even know he had is coming for him. As if that weren't enough, an ancient Void lies buried beneath his world—patient, merciless, and finally ready to wake. To survive, Janid must master his powers. And fast!

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Please enjoy this prequel short story, which offers a glimpse into some of the lore of Janid's homeworld.

The Expedition

The roar of mega-thrusters stunned the swamp into silence as the great craft descended. Incandescent plumes incinerated the high canopy and everything beneath, scorching a space for the Strydez Corp. lander. The earth shook as the vessel settled heavily into the blazing clearing.

How do those morons tolerate this? Alistair thought, wishing for the millionth time he was back aboard his luxury cruiser. The final jolt of touchdown had been so violent it sloshed amber liquid right over the rim of his glass, ruining his sleeve.

He closed his eyes, visualizing the glory this venture would win him. Being part of the first landing party would make him a celebrity across the industry—probably even put him in the history books. Any hardship would be paid a thousand-fold.

He was finally here—the place all those cowards said no one should ever go. He had planted the Strydez flag right in the heart of The Great Swamp of Corvarus Two. That was cause for celebration.

“Meet me in the briefing room,” he said, queuing up comms for his mission support staff. He wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible.

Sable Caldwell was the first person to arrive at the briefing room. She surveyed it quickly, then picked a chair near the center of the large rectangular table. Strydez would sit at the head, and she didn’t want to be too close. But she didn’t want to look like she was afraid of him, either.

She didn’t like the man. So arrogant about the success of the mission when he clearly did not understand it. To him, it was simply staking a claim in the place where so many of his predecessors had failed. Idiot.

The near-infinite wealth that surrounded them was completely lost on Alistair Strydez, as evidenced by his choice of landing site. Thousands—maybe millions—of unique species of microbes were destroyed by his little stunt. Gone forever. Extinct.

She took a slow breath, calming herself. Millions were a drop in the bucket to the trillions that were out there. But still, what a waste. She had tried to convince him to land outside the canopy zone. But no, that wouldn’t send the right message—wouldn’t look grand enough to his corporate cronies. He insisted on treating this like a prospecting expedition, as if they were simply poking around for a rich vein of precious metals. Nothing could be further from the truth. Idiot, idiot, idiot.

While Sable fumed, the other team members arrived and found seats. Strydez came in last. *Of course he did*, she thought. He always had to make an entrance—be the center of attention. At least he didn’t waste time.

“Hollis, where are we at?” Strydez said as he strode towards his accustomed seat at the head of the table.

Rennika Hollis stood and waved a hand at the holo-screen on the back wall of their large briefing room. Multiple views of the exterior appeared, captured by survey probes and showing different angles of their massive ship and the still-burning surroundings. “It’ll be half a day before the landing site is cool enough for the bots to start setting up a perimeter, but we should have it human-safe by sunrise tomorrow.” Then nodding to Sable, she added, “Dr. Caldwell can send her collection teams out any time after that.”

Hollis was smart and efficient, and Sable respected that. The research teams would be well-protected with Hollis in charge of ground operations.

“Dr. Caldwell,” Strydez said, addressing Sable, “I don’t believe you’ve met Corvin yet. He’ll be acting as my value delivery manager on this expedition. And Corvin, this is the esteemed Dr. Sable Caldwell, research director extraordinaire, and the woman who’s going to make us all rich with her discoveries.”

Sable knew who Corvin Vasse was, of course—she did her homework. Vasse was always Strydez’s right-hand man on his business ventures. He was the money man and would see everything through that lens. She intended to avoid him as much as possible. It shouldn’t be difficult—the microbes were out there. Her teams would start delivering results tomorrow, and Vasse could just sit in his office and count the credits.

The next morning, Rennika was on edge. She hated this part. Her bots had set up a secure perimeter fifty paces out from the ship, giving them plenty of room to work. The area scorched by their landing extended well beyond that, so no surprises would come up from the ground.

A tall physical barrier three times her height defined the base of the perimeter, and above that a sonic shield formed a dome over the entire area, capable of repelling everything from microscopic organisms to airborne fauna much larger than any known to exist on this planet.

They had sterilized the entire volume of air under the dome before allowing any humans outside the ship, and if any airborne fauna did manage to penetrate the dome, she had a full array of military-grade laser weapons.

They were completely safe here. And that was the problem.

“Collection teams are ready to deploy, Rennika,” Dr. Caldwell said. Her voice came through perfectly over Rennika’s comms. *Only because we’re inside the perimeter*, Rennika thought. Outside, communications would break down fast. They’d already proven that by losing contact with three exploratory probes. The swamp didn’t like technology. That’s what the history books said. No one knew why. Maybe this expedition would solve that riddle.

Rennika worked the controls to open a breach in the east wall and unconsciously held her breath as sixteen humans walked through it, into the unprotected area beyond. Then she closed the breach behind them and slowly exhaled. She hated this part.

Sable loved this part. Today, she would prove beyond all doubt that the vast wealth of The Great Swamp was real. Teams of four—two astrobiologists and two security—fanned out along different paths to cover as broad an area as possible. Very little was known about the fauna here, and Rennika had insisted they err on the side of safety. Sable didn't mind. The security people could help carry samples, which would double the number of cores her people could collect each day. Everything came down to what the collection teams found. When Team One called in their report from the first collection site, it was exactly what she wanted to hear.

"The scanners are lighting up. We're getting massive readouts of unclassified gene clusters across the board. We've collected three core samples. Moving on to the next site."

The remaining teams reported similar results. This was going to be everything they had hoped for.

Comms degraded as the teams moved away from the ship, and soon they were out of range completely. After that, there was nothing to do but wait, which made for a long, anxious day.

Alistair was startled awake in the late afternoon when the comms line in his quarters crackled with static. He had left comms open so he would hear the reports when the teams returned. Not that he particularly cared—it was just his clever way to break up the monotony.

His role in all of this was simply getting them here. With that accomplished, he was facing fifteen days of utter boredom before the first resupply transport arrived to take him back to his cruiser so he could bask in the glory of this operation.

He told the computer to filter the garbled message, and a calm, confident voice emanated from his console, speaking the words it was able to recover from the static.

“Return. Test. Distance. Success. Collected. Beyond.”

Alistair was mildly impressed—that was more than he expected. Presumably, someone had attempted a broadcast from beyond comms range, simply to see if it would work. And the rest of the message seemed like happy words, so clearly everything was going exactly according to plan. The only challenge now was finding a way to spend the evening without going mad from boredom.

Ship’s Captain Osric Thane also listened in on comms as the teams returned, and didn’t fully relax until they were all back within the safety of the perimeter. He always kept a low profile so the corporate types could carry out their mission without interference. But he also watched them closely, ready to step in if anything seemed unsafe.

Blast that Strydez, he thought, unconsciously making a fist.

Thane had maintained a perfect record of never letting fools put their safety at risk. Not on his watch. It was a point of pride for him—a pillar of his self-esteem. And now he’d gone and let Strydez bully him into compromising the safety of everyone on this mission, not once, but twice.

Crazy idiot’s going to get me grounded, he thought morosely. It started with the landing stunt yesterday, setting down right on top of a densely forested area. Strydez hadn’t even mentioned that little detail until the flight was underway. He knew full well flight planning would never allow it, but he’d pushed for it with all the corporate leverage he could muster, which was quite a bit.

Then, just as foolhardy, Strydez refused to allow sending a status report after they landed, claiming it was mission-critical to wait until they had results from the first day of collection. They had essentially been lost to flight control for two days now.

First-day collections were now complete, and Thane would be making that report in the morning at first light, as soon as the communication window opened. Nothing Strydez said would stop him this time—that was for sure.

But it wasn’t Strydez that stopped him.

High atop the ship in the dim pre-dawn light, the antenna array hummed as power began to flow through it. Instead of quietly generating a quantum entanglement field,

however, the antenna spat showers of sparks from several locations, and power abruptly cut off.

Thane shook his head in frustration as he read the analysis report from the computer. Soot and resins from their little landing fiasco had coated the antenna, causing it to overheat and blow out.

Thane tapped the keys harder than necessary as he quickly summarized the report using simple words that Strydez could understand. He sent it flagged as high priority and urgent so it would be sure to interrupt the fool's beauty sleep.

The antenna itself wasn't a problem—it simply needed to be repaired. The repairs would take most of the day, however, so they would miss their communication window. The report would be delayed for another day.

Rennika was surprised to see Captain Thane approaching as she closed the perimeter breach behind the collection teams heading out for the day. He had introduced himself to everyone before they launched, but she hadn't seen him since. Seeing him now could only mean trouble.

"We have a bit of a problem, I'm afraid," he said apologetically.

He quickly explained the antenna failure, then said, "Our repair droids can't operate up there with your sonic shield in place. I'm going to have to ask you to take it down while we make the repairs."

Rennika scoffed and said, "You want to take down our overhead security?"

"I know," he said, raising his hands defensively. "I don't like it either, but we have to get that antenna repaired."

Rennika put her fingertips to her temples, but after a moment she said, "Fine. How long will it take?"

"We should be finished by mid-afternoon. Maybe sooner."

Rennika sighed and nodded.

Thane and his crew prepped for the repairs as Rennika monitored the collection teams on the outward leg of their collection runs. After they made their final staticky reports and moved out of comms range, Thane approached and told Rennika they were ready.

As Rennika reluctantly shut down the sonic shield, Dr. Jaxom Vance and the rest of Team Three moved farther out of comms range.

Jaxom didn't care about comms as he walked through the lush undergrowth. He cared about the microbial life that surrounded them, of course—he'd dedicated his life to studying it. But today, he cared far more about something else. *Someone* else.

Dr. Lyra Meeler was his partner for the day, and he desperately wanted to make a good impression. He had been harboring a crush on her since the very first team briefing. She was smart, obviously, or she wouldn't be here, but she was also friendly, which was rare in this profession.

Lyra was leading the way, walking several steps ahead. Jaxom was scrambling to think of something to say when a loud "whump" sounded behind him, like two sandbags slamming together. He whirled to see what had happened.

Gar was struggling to retrieve the projectile weapon slung across his back as he frantically scanned the thicket.

Where was Zane? He should have been bringing up the rear. Jaxom opened his mouth to ask when a lightning bolt of black fur, teeth, and claws exploded from the thicket. A massive cat—two, maybe three times his weight—flashed through his vision and collided with Gar. Without slowing, the cat vanished into the undergrowth as quickly as it had appeared, carrying Gar with it.

"Our security's gone," Jaxom said to no one in particular, his brain clouded with shock and adrenaline.

Lyra.

He spun to warn her of the danger, but there was no one there—he was alone. Her collection kit was ripped open and strewn across the clearing. And was that blood?

His mind cleared enough to recognize the gravity of his situation.

Run.

But a low growl from behind did not bode well for his chances.

High in the canopy, far from the horrors Dr. Jaxom Vance was facing, a venom wasp was agitated. An unfamiliar vibration grated on its senses—distant, but constant. Occasional buzzing from nearby nests was acceptable, so long as it was brief. But a sustained frequency meant danger. The wasp released an alarm pheromone. Other individuals, agitated by the same alien buzzing, also released the pheromone. Nearby workers caught the scent and responded in kind. Within moments, thousands of defenders launched from the hive to swarm towards the unknown threat. Neighboring colonies also swarmed. The rival hives ignored one another for now—the distant vibration was their common enemy.

A loud crack startled Rennika as the laser next to her fired a sapphire beam of energy into the sky. Shading her eyes, she tried to see what the laser had fired at, but there was nothing. It fired again, and the next laser in the array also fired. Then she saw it. As the lasers continued to fire, a cloud of insects, high up, was entering their protected area.

A powerful laser blast cut through the swarm, vaporizing a venom wasp's wing. The wasp above it was sliced cleanly in half. A dozen more were caught by the narrow beam and began a slow death spiral to the ground. Hundreds of thousands of others, however, continued on, unaffected and unaware. The laser that could disable a starship with a single burst was useless against this enormous swarm.

Rennika watched intently as the cloud slowly advanced, apparently heading directly for the top of their ship. Straining her ears, she could hear the faint buzz from high above.

She expected the swarm to simply flow around the top of the ship and the robots working there, but when one of the droids dropped towards the ground to swap out a damaged component, a significant portion of the cloud changed direction to follow.

“Oh no,” she whispered, as realization dawned on her.

“They’re attacking the droids!” she yelled, looking about for Captain Thane.

But he had been watching, too, and was already issuing commands.

“Get the repair droids out of our airspace, now!” Thane said into his comms device.

“No, don’t bring them down—keep them at altitude. Just get them away from the ship.”

Rennika relaxed as the airborne robots moved away and the swarm followed, but one of the droids became inundated by the insects. She sucked in a breath and held it as the robot listed, then fell, covered with insects, and more descending from the swarm above.

“Inside!” Rennika yelled, realizing what was about to happen. “Everyone inside the ship, now!”

The droid crashed to the ground, scattering broken pieces and angry wasps.

Thane herded everyone near the hatch inside, but that left Rennika’s people, Renner, Tarrik, and Kruze, who had been patrolling the perimeter.

Kruze was just on the other side of the droid crash site, and was sprinting a circular path around it, trying to make it past before the insects had a chance to regroup.

Renner was far to the south, and the crash site was halfway between him and the ship. He ran a few steps towards Rennika but pulled up, seeing the quickly growing swarm above the broken droid. Making eye contact with Rennika, he shook his head in a clear “no,” and spun about to sprint the opposite way, obviously intending to circle the ship and come in from the other direction.

Rennika silently wished him luck as she keyed up her comms and said, “Tarrik, get inside the ship, now.”

“Already there, boss,” came his instant reply, and she turned to see him quickly wave as he ran the last few paces to the hatch and ducked through it.

Kruze was halfway to the ship and running full out, but she swatted at her arm as she ran. Then on the next stride she swatted at her ear. She made two more strides before she stumbled and went down. Rennika started towards her stricken team member, but Thane’s hand clamped onto her upper arm.

“No,” he said sternly. “I’m sending a bot. Get inside the ship. Now.”

Rennika would have resisted, but the ship’s rescue bot sped past them at that exact moment. She allowed Thane to guide her quickly through the open hatch, which immediately closed behind them.

“They’re still out there,” Rennika said angrily, jerking her arm from Thane’s grasp.

Thane simply pointed to a large display screen that showed multiple views of the exterior of the ship. The humanoid rescue bot knelt next to Kruze, cradling her in its arms as she convulsed and foamed at the mouth. Then she stiffened for a moment and went limp.

Rennika shivered at the many large insects—some kind of wasp—that had landed on Kruze.

Thane waved his hand at that portion of the display and said, “Status,” in the commanding tone of a ship’s captain.

As the robot laid Kruze back on the ground and placed its hands on her chest, a robotic voice came from the display.

“The patient’s heart has stopped. Using cardio resonator to attempt resuscitation.”

Kruze’s body made a mighty heave, and then lay still. Another mighty heave, and once again she lay still. Rennika buried her face in her hands and didn’t watch any further attempts.

After a time, the robot’s voice came again. “I do not believe this patient can be revived, Captain.”

Thane sighed deeply, then, speaking to the robot, he said, “Put yourself into low-power mode and wait for instructions.”

“Yes, Captain.”

The display showed Kruze lying on the ground with the robot kneeling above her. Both were perfectly still.

“I’m sorry,” Thane whispered to Rennika.

Rennika nodded silently, keeping her head bent, face pressed into her hands. Then looking up, she asked, "How's Renner doing?"

"He took shelter under one of the emergency habitat domes stored on the west side of the ship. He should be fine."

Rennika immediately queued up comms, but Thane held a finger to his lips and said, "Quietly."

Nodding in understanding, she whispered into her comms, "Renner, report. Are you okay?"

There was silence for a few tense moments before the comms crackled with a whispered response.

"Renner here. I'm good, boss. Just tryin' to hide from the bugs."

Rennika smiled in spite of herself. "Stay put. Stay quiet. We'll be in touch."

The repair droids had landed outside the perimeter, and with the source of agitation removed, the wasps quickly calmed down and returned to the canopy. Rennika reactivated the sonic shield, and let Renner know it was safe to abandon his hideout.

Thane spoke quietly through his comms, and the rescue bot gently picked up Kruze's body and returned to the ship.

"We'll take her back to her family," Thane said quietly.

Everyone stood aside as the robot carried her past them and down a hallway.

Later, when the collection teams finally checked in at the end of the day, Team Three was notably silent.

Everyone hoped they were just running a little slow, but as the other teams arrived back at the ship, it became painfully clear that was not the case.

Team Three was missing.

"So let me get this straight," Strydez said with irritation, "we're cutting back from four collection teams to just two?"

Given the events of the day, Thane had called a meeting of senior staff. Rennika and Dr. Caldwell agreed that a search party should be sent out the next morning to find the missing team. Consensus was that the swamp had interfered with their mapping equipment, and they had simply lost their way. That only left enough security personnel to accompany two collection teams.

"It's just for one day, Alistair," Caldwell said.

Strydez was about to make an angry retort when Corvin Vasse chimed in for the first time.

"Even one day of reduced performance this early in the program will look like a major setback to corporate," he said matter-of-factly. "They'll take that into account when they set budgets for follow-up missions."

"It can't be helped," Caldwell said, looking back and forth between Vasse and Strydez. "It's the best we can do right now."

Strydez glared around the room, looking for a target to vent his frustration on.

"This is your fault, Hollis," he said, pointing a finger at Rennika. "You're supposed to keep us safe."

Rennika remained silent, but Caldwell came to her defense.

"It wasn't anyone's fault, Alistair. It was just..." She paused, realizing the implications of what she was about to say. She looked around the table with just the faintest hint of fear beginning to show in her eyes. "Bad luck."

Bad luck.

Those words hung in the air. Everyone at the table knew the reputation of this planet—of this swamp. "Bad luck" disasters were said to befall every expedition that dared venture here. Never the same problem twice. Just some random event that pulled success out from under the feet of explorers foolhardy enough to tread The Great Swamp. That's what the lore said.

A lot of superstitious rubbish, they had all agreed. But now Pria Kruze was dead, Team Three was missing, and they had no way to send a message.

No one spoke. Even Strydez seemed taken aback.

The silence stretched but was abruptly broken by the sudden blare of a ship's alarm, which sounded once, twice, and then fell silent. All eyes turned to Thane as he pulled out his comms device with an air of annoyance.

"Report," he said.

The response came immediately. "Kalder here. I'm looking at the status panel now. It looks like we blew out the main air circulation fan. Checking air circ system logs... Okay, we were cycling in fresh air from outside, and it looks like the filter clogged up somehow. Yeah, it's completely blocked. Must have been the wasps. Anyway, it looks like the blockage caused one of the motors to overheat."

"What's our status?" Thane asked.

"We're fine for now, Captain. Secondary fans can carry the load temporarily. We should probably repair it soon, though. We can do the job from inside the ship. No need for the repair droids. Want me to get a detail started on it now?"

Thane closed his eyes and tipped his head back to think for a moment, then said, "No. Get a good night's sleep. We'll do the repair first thing tomorrow."

"One more thing, Captain. We're fine on the ground with the secondary fans, but we can't launch that way. We're effectively grounded until we get this repair done. Still want me to hold off?"

"First thing tomorrow, Lieutenant."

"Understood."

Thane stood and looked around the table. "I suggest we all get some rest. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day."

"Okay, Rennika, the collection teams are ready to deploy." Once again Dr. Caldwell's voice was crystal clear over comms, and once again Rennika held her breath as the teams passed through the breach—from the protected area into the swamp. Two collection teams and a search party. Her breath shuddered slightly as she closed the breach behind them. Everything felt decidedly less safe today.

“Stay within comms range of each other at all times,” she said into comms, addressing her security teams. “No exceptions.”

The teams wouldn’t get as much exploration done that way, but it was a fair trade for a little extra safety, Rennika thought.

While Rennika stressed over sending people into the swamp, Lieutenant Kalder was about to encounter some stress of his own. Several cycles back, a repair crew had temporarily re-routed a high-pressure coolant line to lie adjacent to the primary air circulation fan, and then forgotten to return it to its original position. Under normal circumstances, that never would have caused a problem. But this was The Great Swamp.

The fan became extremely hot before it finally failed. The coolant line lying against it was damaged by the heat, becoming brittle and fragile. As Kalder removed the damaged fan, it jostled the coolant line, and it ruptured. Foul-smelling liquid sprayed from the broken hose with significant force. Acting on instinct born of training, Kalder dove through the hatch and slammed it shut behind him.

Ordinarily, that would have been the right move to isolate the contamination, but the secondary air circulation was unfiltered. As the coolant evaporated into noxious gas, the fans drew it into the ventilation system.

Alarms began to sound throughout the ship.

“We have to spend the night out here?” Rennika asked incredulously.

“Can’t be helped,” Kalder said. “The secondary fans are venting, but it won’t be safe to go back inside until morning.”

Strydez’s distant voice from the far south wall grew loud once again, and Rennika and Kalder both turned to look. He had initially ranted at Captain Thane about being evacuated from the ship, but the captain had said something—Rennika hadn’t heard what—that quieted Strydez right down. He had stormed off with Vasse in tow, and had been venting loudly ever since.

Kalder chuckled, shaking his head, and Rennika couldn't help smiling, too.

"So where does that leave us?" Rennika asked, a worried look once again crossing her face.

"I can have everything repaired by tomorrow afternoon. The ventilation system will be quick, and the repair droids got far enough on the antenna that I can finish off the rest from inside the ship."

Rennika sighed. Just one night. Sleeping outside wasn't necessarily unsafe, but it wasn't ideal, either. When her teams got back, she'd have them brainstorm about extra security measures they could put in place for the night.

Just then a stream of static arrived over comms. Rennika and Kalder both looked to Captain Thane, who was standing nearby talking with Dr. Caldwell.

Thane glanced around at all of them as he said, "The computer's filtering it now."

Rennika and Kalder walked over to join Thane and Caldwell, and after a moment the computer read off the collection of words that it was able to recover.

"Attacked. Dead. Together. Soon. Return."

No one spoke.

Thane broke the silence. "Should we try to go meet them?" he asked, looking at Rennika.

Rennika thought for a moment and made the hard call. "No. They have eight security people. We need to be ready when they get back here. Can you have the rescue bot bring out all the medical supplies you have?"

Thane spoke into his comms and the robot soon exited the ship carrying a large case under each arm. They set up tables and spread out the medical supplies, not knowing what they would need, hoping they wouldn't need any of it.

Before long they got another message, staticky, but understandable.

"Base, this is Marashe. Can you hear me?"

Thane nodded to Rennika, and she answered on her comms. "Go ahead, Marashe."

"We joined up with the two collection teams, but we're in trouble. We're heading in. Slowly, though. A fighting retreat is the best we can do. They're big cats, but they're pack hunters. They're fast and they're smart. We lost Doresh and Fenmore. Trelling is injured, but she can walk with assistance. We're making the best time we can. Team Three didn't make it. The cats got 'em yesterday. Sorry boss."

"Be safe, Marashe," Rennika said. "We've got medical supplies and the rescue bot ready for you when you get here."

They stayed in contact as the team approached. At one point while the comms channel was open, Marashe was interrupted by yelling and bursts of fire from projectile weapons. When he spoke again, he was breathless and clearly angry.

"Boss, we just lost Ostane. Those cats come out of nowhere and they're so crazy fast. We've fired hundreds of rounds, and I know we've scored some hits, but they just keep coming."

Rennika had a white-knuckle grip on her comms device as she said, "Just get here, Marashe. Quick as you can."

When they finally reached the scorched area that surrounded the barrier wall, Kalder used a small hand-held control panel to open the breach. Thane and Rennika stood on either side of it as the team made their way slowly across the final distance. The five remaining security formed a rough semi-circle facing the rear and the sides, and they maintained that formation all the way up to the breach. Rennika never saw any trace of the cats they were battling, but no one lowered their weapon until they were within the perimeter.

The rescue bot rushed Trelling to the medical supply table and began treating her wounds. Several members of the team had lesser injuries that needed treatment. All of them looked haunted.

Rennika returned to the immediate task of surviving the night outside the ship. The trauma her team had suffered would make everything more difficult.

No one had said it yet, but this was now a game of survival. Everyone knew it, with the possible exception of Strydez.

In the morning we'll get back inside the ship, she thought. By end of day, we'll have the subspace antenna fixed and we'll be able to take off.

As Rennika visualized their escape, the swamp proved to have other plans. High above the traumatized crew, an inversion zone of naturally dry air sat above the high canopy in stark contrast to the dense, humid air closer to the ground. A mild static charge accumulated there, ebbing and flowing across the vast expanse of the swamp. It was partly responsible for the communication difficulties, but it rarely built up to be anything more than a passive phenomenon.

The vaporized organic materials from their landing had been steadily settling into the inversion zone. The introduction of carbon atoms to the dust and pollen already floating there acted like a catalyst, supercharging the static buildup. It was now drawing dangerously close to the critical stage.

The evaporated coolant venting from the ship was inadvertently forming a column of ionized particles—a near-perfect conductor for the static energy collecting above them. And not simply to the ground, but through the open ventilation port and straight into the heart of the ship.

Rennika was knocked to the ground as a blinding flash coincided with a deafening blast that left her dazed. For a time, her only sensations were the light show playing behind her closed eyelids, and the blaring ringing of her ears.

Her eyes recovered first. Lying flat on her back, she saw the sky above her, beautiful as the evening colors began to spread across the window of blue that she could see through the trees. Her head finally cleared a moment later, and she sat up.

Their clearing was thick with smoke. She saw a few people struggling to get up, and a few others staggering in various directions. She saw others lying on the ground, unmoving.

She got to her feet, unsteady, still deaf to anything but the constant ring in her ears.

The ship.

Turning towards it, she saw cascades of sparks spewing from various points, and near the hatch was a hole that hadn't been there before with flames coming out of it. The ship was dead.

The lasers.

They hung askew, limp without the power they required to maintain their stalwart vigil. If the lasers were down, then so was the sonic shield. The barrier wall was still in place. Maybe it was tall enough to protect them. She tried to see it through the haze.

There, just above where the breach would be. Was that something sitting on top of the wall?

The ringing in her ears was fading. From the north she heard yelling and the rattle of projectile weapons, but smoke blocked her vision in that direction. She looked back to the barrier wall, but the dark shape was gone.

She had just started making her way north to see if she could help with whatever was happening there when, with incredible force, large padded feet with long, sharp claws slammed into her from behind, driving her to the ground.

Alistair was standing next to the barrier wall when the lightning struck. The biggest bolt he had ever seen arced from beyond the treetops right into the side of his ship. He was blinded momentarily by the flash and knocked against the wall by the shock wave. As the afterimage of the searing white bolt faded, he saw huge gouts of flame blasting from the hole where the lightning struck.

Well, that ship's not going anywhere, he thought in annoyance.

He set off to find Captain Thane to see how he planned to remedy this situation. Then he remembered Vasse. He turned back just in time to see a great black shape fly from the shadows and slam into Vasse. For one terrifying moment, he and Vasse made eye contact before the dark shape blasted Vasse away into the shadows.

Sprinting now, for he was no fool, Alistair immediately knew it was one of the cats security had been complaining about earlier. The idiots had led them straight back here. Wonderful.

Alistair ran directly to where the emergency habitat domes were stored. He'd been impressed when Renner hid under one during the wasp incident. Alistair grabbed a dome from the rack and quickly dropped to the ground and let it fall over him. Double-checking that the edges of the dome contacted the scorched earth all the way around, he sighed in relief, proud of his presence of mind in the face of danger.

I'll make sure this part makes it into the history books, he thought with a smile. Now all that remained was to wait for those fools to come and rescue him.

Alistair listened as he waited. He heard running footsteps. He heard yelling and weapons fire. One burst from a projectile weapon was so close and so loud that he had to cover his ears. More than once he heard screams that were abruptly cut off. Then he heard silence for a long time.

He was beginning to wonder why his rescuers were taking so long when scuffling sounded outside the dome.

Finally, he thought.

But when the dome was ripped violently away to leave Alistair exposed beneath the darkening sky, it was not a rescue team that awaited him.

The Great Swamp is only one of the dangers lurking on Corvarus Two. Travel with Janid as he is drawn into all of them. Can he master his powers in time to survive the perils that await him?

Follow the adventure in [*Longer Ago and Farther Away*](#)!

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