

CHOICES, IN SEQUENTIAL ORDER

Into the unknown.

BY KARLO YEAGER RODRÍGUEZ

SINGLE-AXIS DESIGNS:

THE KEY TO LIFE! (COPYRIGHT 2349).
START

PLANET: EARTH / TAU CETI E
Tau Ceti e.

REDIRECTING TO XENOBIOTA...

You're killing me, down in this tunnel you've made, but I feel like I can only talk to you. Strange, huh? I feel euphoric. I wonder if it's the low oxygen levels on the planet's surface. I feel it's because of you. I'm 12 light years away from home, paralysed in a hole in the ground, on a hell-planet, but you're everything I ever dreamed in my life.

CAN IT MOVE? PRESENT / NOT PRESENT
Present.

SYMMETRY: RADIAL OR PENTAMERISM / BILATERAL
Bilateral.

Because of you, the promise of you, Vee and Mom agreed. The one time they agreed on something, y'know? They joined forces, but I was ready. I told them Pop would've jumped at the chance I was given.

Xenobiologist! An advance team. Pop would have been so proud! The only space exploration he knew was contained in the paperbacks he read until he couldn't read any longer. When that happened, I read to him. The breathing machines shushed me, the rattle and hiss of air pumped in and out of Pop's lungs. His eyes closed, I'm sure he dreamed of the vast frontier. And one day — one day, the machines stuttered into stillness. I knew the time had come. With Pop gone, why did I have to stay Earthbound?

After I beam the dichotomous key data back, I'll suggest naming you after my Pop. *Xenopendra Pérezii* has a good ring.

When I mentioned his wishes, Vee and Mom said it wasn't fair. What does fair have to do with anything?

PANARTHROPODA

JOINTED LEGS? YES / NO

Yes.

HOW MANY ANTENNAE? TWO PAIRS / ONE PAIR OR NONE

It only has one pair.

It's getting dark in here. How's the saying go? Better to light a viewscreen than to curse the darkness, huh? Good thing my suit's helmet has a heads-up display. Best thing, the display — I have something to do while you're gone. Auxiliary team needs to know about you.

Thank you for pinning me down. Probably break my neck. I'm dead either way.



My cheek itches.

Where are —? Oh — you're fast! You must not need visible light to see, huh?

Oh, I — I guess maybe I moved, but that glued me to the spot. Won't move anymore.

I can feel them wriggle around, now. I wonder if they'll tickle when they hatch?

NUMBER OF LEGS? THREE PAIRS / FOUR OR MORE PAIRS

Four or more pairs.

NUMBER OF LEGS PER SEGMENT? TWO PAIRS / ONE PAIR

One pair.

Can't feel my fingers. There's a hot breeze across my belly, though. The crosswind tells me you must have dug out another exit. The airflow leaves my mouth full of sand. I can feel it across my belly, too — suit's torn open.

The diagnostic module doesn't respond. You must have damaged it when you ripped it open. It could've analysed for poison. Vitals circuit's running. Redundancies: good. The beacon's activated if vitals drop to null.

Fangs — forcipules, yes, not fangs — must deliver a weak toxin. Is the euphoria caused by it alone, or is it a factor? What about low oxygen? Temperature?

I must've pissed myself — I can smell it.

Pressure like a clenching fist on my abdomen. Now, it unclenches and flutters open, moves, clenches again.

Why am I so — accepting? I know — my brain knows — your young will devour me. Why can't I feel panic? Fear? I should stop — why can't I stop talking to you?

NUMBER OF TRUNK SEGMENTS? 12 / MORE THAN 12

More than 12. Much more.

FORCIPULES? YES / NO

Yes.

Vee never listened — 'no' meant getting what she wanted suffered a setback. She pushed and pushed and pushed — always what she wanted. Exhausting. She wanted to

have kids — she tells me this the night before. Incredible, right? I'm ready to go to the facility, to get scrubbed, suited up, loaded into a high-tech version of a tin can and shot across the vast reaches of space. She wants to talk babies.

Strange — before, Vee had shouted down to me from her place on the corporate ladder: a few more years! I ignored her.

Where are you? I hear a scraping sound at the far end of the tunnel — are you digging? Are you going to leave me here? I suppose I should expect it. I would have thought you might watch over your babies.

No. Larvae — the right word is larvae. Certain species coil around their egg cluster. Not you.

So — babies. Oh, you should have seen Vee break stuff! She even threatened me at knifepoint, blocked my way out of the house. The security team made sure I got to the facility in time, though. They hustled me out of the house, through the prep stations. It's funny. Now I remember: they wanted to make sure I didn't bring any bugs with me. Hilarious, right?

CHILOPODA? YES / NO

No.

RECALCULATING...

RECALCULATING...

RECALCULATING...

SIZE: A METRE OR LESS / MORE THAN A METRE

More than a metre.

CURVED TAIL, WITH OVIPOSITOR?

YES / NO

That an ovipositor in your pocket? Or are you happy to see me?

'THETA OVIPOSITOR AIR POCKET ARE YOU HAPPY TWO SEAMY' IS NOT ACCEPTED. PLEASE ANSWER IN 'YES' OR 'NO' FORMAT

Yes.

Yes.

It's happening.

They do tickle and my breath is ragged as I suppress laughter. The viewscreen flashes once, flickers and goes out, switches to auxiliary power. I am part of something bigger, something more, now.

ALERT! DANGEROUS XENIFORM

ACTIVATING RESCUE BEACON

SOS SOS SOS ■

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