**New Story**

**Part 10**

**04/10/2020**

The captain’s gig had a long history in ships, starting with those whose natural realm was water. The gig’s main function was as a taxi for the captain. These days, in the age of space travel, it was rarely used for that purpose. It served mainly as an auxiliary shuttle, at least aboard the Deidre.

Nominally, the Albatross held six people. In an emergency the back three seats could be linked together to form a bench that could accommodate wounded or as many people could be crowed on to it. Lack of protection for high-speed acceleration and maneuvering in this mode made it a last resort.

Jerimy watched from the right-hand seat as Patty Forsht, one of the Deidre’s pilots slid the vessel through the upper atmosphere. Although the girl stood barely over a meter in height and was skinny as a rail, she was the strongest Deidre pilot and the best at planetary flying where her short center of gravity helped her keep control.

Behind them sat Dr. Lovis carrying a shoulder medical bag. Several additional bags containing medical supplies, exploration gear, new clothing, and food was stored in the open seats and the small cargo area. The little ship was packed to the gills.

Patty looked over at him. “We’re just about over where Josh is supposed to be. You want to try the radio.”

He keyed the microphone, “Albatross to Expo Party, come in.” He repeated it three times before taking a break to wait for an answer.

He didn’t have to wait long. “Albatross, we hear you.” Josh’s voice was clear but weak in the small cabin. Radio communication wasn’t as good as the satellite link.

He started to answer when the craft jerked suddenly. Patty tightened both hands on the control yoke. Her body stiffening with sudden tension. She yelled, “Something’s got a hold of us.”

“A tractor beam, here?”

“A strong one. I can’t fight it,” said Patty, “we don’t have the horses.”.

Jerimy thought fast, “Don’t fight it. Can you sheer away?”

The girl shook her head. “No chance. I think it’s a guide in and I don’t know how to warn it off.”

“Just let it go. See where it takes us.” He raised the mic to his lips, “Josh, we’ve got a problem. Look for us.”

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Josh starred at the portable radio in his hand. “What the hell!”

Mikiu scanned the sky, shielding the sun with his hand. He pointed, “there.”

Josh’s eyes followed Mikiu’s extended arm. There, high in the morning sky, was a moving dot streaking quickly downwards. It was too distant to make out details, but Josh knew what it was, and who was in it. Frantically he tried calling them again and again. He got no response.

He grabbed his binoculars from his belt and focused them. The dot became bigger he could make out the shape the Albatross. “That’s her all right. She’s not falling, just going down quickly.”

Mikiu, following the ship by unaided eyes, said. “She’s coming right at us. You’re right, her flight looks controlled.”

“Not by a pilot, not at that speed. That’s a guide in approach.”

Mikiu turned his eyes from the sky to Josh. “A guide in Tractor beam. Where would it come form…”

The thought hit them both at the same time. Josh yelled, “the spaceport the lake.”

The watched as the streak of light slid into the edge between water and light. The ship just vanished. There wasn’t even the sound of an explosion, or a splash.

Mikiu asked, “You going to call the Deidre?”

“And tell them what. Let’s go see if they’re down there. How the hell can you do that?”

“Hell if I know,” yelled Mikiu as they raced back to the elevator room.

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Wally and Yelaa were sitting, shoulders tense, at control stations monitoring the Albatrosses descent. Halerin forced himself to remain seated. He though looking over your officers’ backs didn’t project the proper temperament for a Star Ship captain. Sometimes it was harder than others to maintain dignity. This was one of them.

“Anything,” he asked quietly.

Yelaa’s head shook no, Wally just raised a hand. “I lost them off sensors, but I can’t tell why. They may have just entered the edge of the field.”

Yelaa looked back at him. “I’ve got nothing either. I was getting bits of their radio calls to Josh and then it stopped. The field doesn’t stop radio but their signal’s not pointed at us. We may just not be able to hear them.”

“Try getting Josh on the Satellite.”

“I’ve got a trigger on his sat phone. He turns it on I’ll know it.”

Halerin forced himself to lean back in his chair, relax. It was going to be a vigil. “I hate waiting.”

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It seemed like forever for the room to descend to level 6. As soon as the doors appeared the two men rushed into the tunnel to the star port at a trot.

Mikiu voice was a little quick. “Fine. You were right about all those hours in the high grav treadmill.”

“You just never know when you’ll need that muscle, or in this case endurance. I tried to tell you.”

“Exactly why are we running,” asked Mikiu, his breathing beginning to labor.

“We not running. This isn’t even a job. And I’m not entirely sure why.” He slowed to a walk. “It’s not like we’ll be able to help if they crashed.”

“That’s true,” said Mikiu.

Josh started trotting again, but slower. “They might stumble into another security bot or something else dangerous.”

“And you want to be there in time for the gunfight?”

“No. I just don’t want to explain to my father what happened to his best friend, and the woman he sleeps with. Not to mention Patty.”

Mikiu turned a side eyed glance toward his companion. “Good point. But I can’t keep this pace up. It took us over an hour to walk. You might want to try the radio. They may work in the corridors.’

Josh slowed to a walk again. “That’s a thought. We never really tried them down here.” He kept walking but forgotten comm unit on his left shoulder. “Jerimy, can you hear me?” He repeated the message the standard three times. There was no response. “Maybe they just can’t hear us through the ship walls.”

“The Albatross has a comm repeater. Jerimy and I had to design and add it,” said Mikiu. “Course, we don’t know what passing through the deception field and the water passage may have done to it.”

“Speaking of that, any ideas?”

The science officer gave a short, chipped laugh. “Sure, it’s impossible. I would like to get a look at the ceiling though. I’m guessing it’s not natural rock like I thought.”

“Who knows. These people had exceptional control of materials; that’s a given. This world could be worth a fortune.”

The man laughed again. “If we can keep it from the Clarigton’s. They find out about this and we’re going to have ships parked on top of each other, all with the big Scarlet Cg on the masthead.”

“And they wouldn’t fear the survey governors with this kind of wealth and power for the taking.”

His friend said quietly. “That’s something I hadn’t even thought about. If they do find out we gotta to make sure every world in the sector knows or we might just be one of those lost colonies they talk about.”

The two walked on in silence.

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The occupants of the little ship lie quietly in their acceleration seats.

Patty was the first to regain her voice. “Did we just fly through a tunnel of water?”

Jerimy fought off the paralyzing fear to answer. “That was not a good experience for someone who drowned once.”

“You drowned?” asked Dr. Lovis.

He let out a sigh. “It wasn’t fatal. But it was close. I’ve avoided water since.”

“You came down here knowing going under a lake is involved.” said Patty.

Jerimy was a little more specific. “I’m not phobic about it. Just don’t like to be reminded of it. You ever see me at a beach.”

He toggled an outside view. It was dim, but enhancing filters kicked in to provide a good look of their surroundings.

Patty was again the first to find her voice. “Do those look like starships to anyone else?”

The doctor answered, “I’m no expert but yes. That’s what they appear to be.”

“Not just starships, alien starships. That’s what Josh was not telling us.”

“Huh?”

“Sorry Patty I should have told you. Josh gave code word when he was talking. In all the rush to get loaded and launched I forgot about it.”

“Well, I’d have to say this warrants a code word. Damm, an alien space port.

Lovis shuddered. “You know what this find will mean to science?”

Jerimy pulled his eyes away from the outside view. “It won’t mean anything if word gets out Doc. The big family groups would squirrel this away under lock and key. With this they could challenge Survey for control. Survey may not be much at governing but they’re a hell of a lot better than letting groups like the Clarigton’s run things.”

“I know that, but we can’t keep this secret. Think what it could mean.”

Patty snorted, “it would mean our death’s. That’s what it would mean.”

The doctor looked shocked. “You think they would kill us.”

“You’ve met Jonathan Clare? What do you think?” asked Jerimy.

Patty answered for her. “To keep this for himself he wouldn’t even think twice about it. He already hates us and every colony we’ve dropped.”

Jerimy put an end to the discussion by popping the cabin door latches. The Albatross was a small enough ship that it didn’t have an airlock. It was never intended for anything but back and forth movements between places that didn’t require one.

Patty toggled the little ship into standby mode while Dr. Lovis checked her med belt. Jerimy checked only his gun. “Weapons ready.” It was a statement, not a question.

In the open doorway he checked the ramp to make sure it had in fact extended correctly – it had. Sniffing the air he caught a faint odor of muskiness which didn’t surprise him, they were under a lot of water. The Albatross was sitting belly first in a square cordoned off area, big enough to fit the Deidre itself with space left over. They were surrounded by other areas containing ships of various designs, none of them human.

Patty, being a pilot, stated the obvious. “Cradles, half these ships are in cradles, they were never meant to land here or anywhere else.”

“Which begs the question,” said Jerimy, respectfully, “how the hell did they get here. That’s one hell of a landing system to handle ships not made to land.” He starred in wonder the large spherical ship to their left. Sitting in a cradle of open form girders, it’s shape and the outlines of many hatches visible left no doubt as to it’s cargo ship nature. “And it’s still working.”

The pilot gave him a questioning look. “Working?”

“Did you land us?” asked the engineer.

“Good point. Now how do we tell it we want to take off.”

“I have patients waiting,” said Lovis. “We can’t be leaving just yet.”

“I know that Doc,” said Patty. “I’d just like to know what the procedure is.”

“This looks like a road between landing pads,” said Jerimy, pointing to the open space running between the various ship areas. “Let’s go see if we can find some answers, and Doc’s patients. Patty, try calling Josh.”

They move slowly while the Pilot called for Josh on her comm unit. There was no answer.

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“If we don’t find them quickly the others are going to get worried,” said Mikiu during one of their slow periods. They were alternating between walking and trotting.

“I know, and the damm radio doesn’t reach either of them,” snapped Josh.

“That’s probably by design but I guessing there’s a comm system here, that we don’t know how to use.”

“There would have to be,” Josh tilted his head in slightly in Mikiu’s direction. “Sorry about the harsh tone. I forgot how much forced walking annoyed me.”

His friend laughed. “I know. You like to walk, but you hate having to walk. You should get that looked at.”

“First chance I get. Is that the entrance?”

“I hope so,” said Mikiu. “What do you figure they’re doing?”

“Knowing Jerimy he’s probably started disassembling some poor freighter.”

“Nah. He’s probably cursing us for not being there,” said Mikiu, chuckling at the thought of Jerimy’s extensive vocabulary of blue language.

“Hopefully we find them before he gets to far into his routine. “I don’t think he could shock Patty, maybe the other way around, but the doctor is another matter. She’s a little more civilized than the rest of us.”

“That’s admirable, trying to protect your future step-mom.”

“I’m pretty sure the Doc doesn’t need protecting. Let’s run some. We can rest at he entrance and try the radio again.”

“Okay,” said Mikiu, breaking into a quick jog.

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The beam from his flash illuminated a path twenty meters in front of him, adding to the limited light produced by the cavern. There were multiple rows of ships. Each landing pad came complete with a full assembly of color-coded cables and tubes. Jerimy would have loved the luxury of examining them but they had to find the others first. Perhaps then he could tackle the meaning of the repeated color patterns. They had now moved from the larger ships into groups of smaller ones, most of them with their own landing gear. These were vessels intended for planetary work, and some of functionality was obvious, some of it was not.

They had picked a direction at random. Jerimy had quickly discovered that his comm unit would d pick up the homing beacon of the Albatross. That meant that radio did work here, just maybe not outside the cavern itself. They hadn’t covered maybe two kilometers when his shoulder comm squawked.

Stopping the group he waited to see if it would repeat — it did. A voice came through, faint and static laced. “Jerimy, can you hear me? Jerimy, can you hear me?” It was Josh’s voice.

He shouted into his shoulder, “Josh, is that you?”

The voice came back relieved. “Is this Jerimy or his ghost, because I thought I saw you crash into the water.”

Jerimy laughed. “I’m not ready for ghost status yet, but it did get close. We just flew through a hole in the water until we landed in something that can’t possibly exist, an underground, underwater, unhuman Space Port, that I guessing you already knew about.”

“I code worded you guys that we found something big.”

“This place certainly qualifies. I take it you had nothing to do with our survival.”

“No. We think you must have triggered an automated response although we have no idea what it is you did. We’re at the from the elevator room I told you about.”

“You have any ideas on how to meet up?”

Josh’s voice sounded hesitant. “I’ve got a couple of signal flares.”

“In a closed environment full of ships and probably explosive compounds, probably not a good idea. You got anyone with you?”

“Mikiu.”

Jerimy felt a tug on his arm, Patty pantomimed yelling. “Patty just had an idea. Why don’t the two of you yell, loudly, and long enough for us to get a bearing.

They waited quietly, listening, and then came a faint sound. Jerimy couldn’t make out what they were yelling. Whatever it was gave him a direction to go. He motioned for the others to follow and broke into trot, going the same direction as before.

He spoke into his shoulder on the run. “Okay, we’re moving your direction. Give us a few minutes and we’ll stop and do that again.”

Patty pointed to a ship on their left. It was a midsized vessel sporting obvious weapon ports and a sturdy permanent landing gear that made it look clumsy.

“That thing looks military,” said Dr. Lovis.

“Some type of patrol ship,” said Jerimy. “One intended for heavy grav planetary work.”

Patty was almost running backwards to keep her eyes on it. “Damn. I’d love to try that boat. She’s a big ship for use on a planet and I’m pretty sure that’s some kind of star drive. That’s a serious ship.”

“You got that right,” said Jerimy. “I think you can rule out the aliens being pacifist.”

The doctor smiled wryly. “That isn’t what I meant. Everybody needs to protect themselves, that doesn’t make them pacifist in nature. It does tell us something about them as a civilization.”

Jerimy agreed with her. “It tells us they were serious. You don’t build a ship like that if you’re not willing to go anywhere and fight if necessary.” He stopped the group and asked Josh to yell again.

The sound of the men yelling was clearer. They were obviously getting close. After acknowledging over the radio they started off again. He stopped short, seeing Patty draw her firearm from the corner of his eye. Turning he was surprised to see a robot, shaped like a tapered square column, approaching from fifty meters away. He hadn’t seen it before.

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“Maybe we should have had them yell back,” said Mikiu.

“Why? So we can look like idiots.”

“To who?”

“Whom,” said Josh, “and I don’t know. It just sounded silly. Wait... I think I see a flashlight.” In the distance Josh could just make out a faint bouncing glimmer. It wasn’t moving.”

He keyed his mike. “I think I can see your light. Are you standing still?”

The reply came in a whisper. “Yes. We have company.”

“I don’t think I’m up for another fire fight,” said Mikiu as the two took in the direction of the light.

“Me neither.”

It took only a few minutes to cross over to next isle of ships and see the group from the Arbiter. They were standing calmly beside a robot type that Josh and Mikiu hadn’t encountered yet. Josh slowed to a walk and lowered holster his weapon. Jerimy and Patty had weapons out but held in arms hanging down. There was clearly no threat.

“Friend of yours?” asked Josh.

“No,” chortled the engineer. Glancing at Josh he went on. “I think we forgot to sign something. It keeps motioning to that pad.” He motioned towards a red circular area on three quarters up the robots two-meter frame. The robot seemed to notice and emitted a tone that reminded Josh of an AI alert.

Josh thought for a second. “Anyone got an idea on how to handle this.”

“We could just shoot it,” said Jerimy.

Dr. Lovis was quick to respond. “Just shoot it. That doesn’t seem very friendly.”

Mikiu threw in, “what she said. I know that we’re just talking AI’s here, but that present a bad image.”

“I agree,” said Josh. “The entire base could decide we’re a threat.”

Jerimy wave a hand in surrender. “I was being sarcastic folks. But what choice do we. It might call in help.”

“No,” he gave Jerimy an intense look. “While I’m in charge of this mission we don’t shoot things.” Josh paused for just a second to see if Jerimy would rebut that. “We’re going to ignore it. That itself may cause a problem. Patty, I want you to stay with the ship. We’ll walk you back.”

“You realize,” said Jerimy dryly, “we can’t leave if the base doesn’t open the door. There’s no reason to guard the ship.”

Josh sent another brief stare the engineers way. “I know that. I’d just feel better with someone on board. Someone who could come looking for us if we don’t check in, or report what happened. I’m assuming that you brought a sat phone.”

“Two,” said Jerimy, giving up his resistance. “I guess it might not be a bad idea to have backup if we need rescuing.”

Patty, who had watched the exchange with interest, chuckled. “And who says I’d come to the rescue.” Her voice turned serious. “There’s one option we haven’t discussed. And I don’t know if we can, but we could try blowing up this base, destroy whatever mechanism is handling the weather. There’s a lot of stuff in here that could probably make a nice boom.”

Josh let his shoulders sag. “We haven’t discussed it because we’re not going to. We’re not going to discuss it now. There’s something odd going on here, and I don’t mean the weather attacking the colony.” He shifted his eyes to Jerimy and then back to Patty. Right now I just want you to stay with the ship. Maybe do some exploring from the inside with the ship’s sensors, your eyes and your brain.”

“How long do I do that?”

“That’s a good question. Let’s say,” glancing at his watch, “two Tingies days. That’s fifty-four hours, give or take a few minutes. If you haven’t heard from us, go topside and call it in. I’ll explain using the elevator and how the rooms below are laid out on the walk to the Albatross.”

The trip back to the ship and back to the entrance took close to two hours. Time Josh considered well spent. Not only did he learn the Albatross’s parking spot, he and Mikiu got a look at the myriad of ship types occupying the chamber. He was astounded at how many ships were present and their variety. This was obviously not an outpost port.

“How far does this go?” asked Jerimy upon seeing the exit tunnel.

“It’s an hour’s walk to the elevator.” He pursed his lips and asked the engineer. “I image you want to call the Deidre. How about you and Mikiu go up top. You can drop the doctor and me off first.”

“Okay. But I was thinking I’d like to see that sub room Mikiu told us about. We could do that while you and the Doc go down.”

Josh laughed. “Sorry, I know we call it an elevator, but the truth is we’ve never tried to call it from another floor. I’m sure you can. We just don’t know how.”

Jerimy stifled a grin and said, “deal.”

“Deal,” acknowledged Josh. We’d better get moving. Wendy and Jameson need Dr. Lovis’s attention.” With that he started down the corridor. As they walked, he filed he and Mikiu continued to fill Jerimy in on everything they had found so far. They were still talking when they reached the elevator.

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When Jarwan woke he had no idea what time it was, he also didn’t know where he was. Memories flooded back quickly. The metal beams of the ceiling coupled with the back ground noise of people talking or sleeping brought him back to the present.

Sitting up he took in the dimly lit room. No one seemed to be doing much of anything. Mostly, people appeared to be sleeping. That told Jarwan that the bad weather had returned because otherwise people would be out working.

Struggling to his feet he found his local companions to be, Dunzin, Denise and Micael. He was surprised to find the latter awake. The man looked tired and drawn.

Micael nodded when he noticed Jarwan’s scrutiny. “If you’re looking for the pain don’t bother. The Doc has enough stuff pumped into me I wouldn’t notice if I was on fire.”

“How do you feel otherwise?”

“Like a bum. Everyone’s working but me and I don’t like it.” He gave the doctor a baleful stare. This woman you like won’t let me do anything. I don’t need my legs to be useful. There’s a lot of things I could be doing to help.”

Denise Bitterlly, to Jarwan’s delight, had the decency to blush. “Who likes me has nothing to do with your treatment. You need to rest and if I let you do anything I’m sure you’d keep finding things to do and never get that rest. “

Jarwan forced himself to his feet. A few seconds of dizziness ensued before he felt stable enough to rejoin the conversation. He stalled while he thought. “Who do I have to like to get a cup of coffee?”

Denise smiled and pointed to the opposite corner of the warehouse. “Kitchens over there.” She raised her hand with her fingers spread and twirled it around. “Four cups of coffee coming up.” Seeing Jarwan’s raised eyebrows she added. “Polly was looking. She knows my coffee signal.”

Jarwan nodded thanks and decided wait sitting down. Once again seated he raised his eyebrows to Dunzin in question.

It took the man a second to figure out his boss’s direction of thought. Then it dawned on him. A glimpse at Micael and Jarwan’s nod confirmed. “Okay by me. They need to know anyway.”

“That’s what I was thinking. And having Micael in on it.... He doesn’t need his legs to use a gun.”

“Why would he need a gun,” asked Denise, her eyebrows raised.

Taking a deep breath Jarwan related the story of Wendy, Jameson, and the robot. “That’s what we know so far. I don’t think we really have to worry about it. But having someone armed wouldn’t hurt. With that blanket over his legs all the time no one will see that he is.

The doctor shuddered briefly. “Killer robots, what else is Tingies going to throw at us?”

Dunzin answered. “Just to be clear about it. This is just between us. No point in scarring everyone. They’re already scarred enough.”

“I like it,” said Micael. Seeing on the expression on their faces he quickly went on. “Not the killer robot part, that sucks. I like the part of having something to do. Jarwan’s right, not going to happen here, but it’s something I can do, keep an eye out, be ready. That way you don’t tie up someone else’s time.”

Denise tilted her head down towards him, smiling. “I agree. It’ll keep him busy without putting a strain on his body. And maybe some light work with the inventory system, as long as he keeps it light. He’ll heal faster feeling useful.”

She turned her attention to other matters. “You said Wendy and Jameson are okay. On whose medical opinion are you basing that, Josh or Mikiu’s?

“Jarwan played back his conversation with Mike Halerin in his mind. “Mike didn’t really specify but don’t worry. He sent Dr. Lovis and Jerimy down to give them a hand.”

Denise relaxed. “She’s good in an emergency.”

Dunzin asked, “what’s the deal with here name. Do her people only have one name or is her first and last names really the same.”

“I think it had something to do with honoring her grandfather.” Said the doctor. “I don’t remember the details but it’s not a culture thing, just a family one.”

Jarwan looked over to Dunzin, “get him a gun when you get a chance. Make sure no one sees you. I’m going to get the mood of the room.” He stopped short and slapped his forehead. “Damm, I forgot about the weather. What’s it doing?”

“I figured you’d get around to asking sooner or later,” said Dunzin, a grin on his face. “All that sleep let your worries leak out. The wind’s definitely getting up to something, the rain too. That monitor over your shoulder is an outside view looking west and the screen beside it is metrics. Right now it’s not that bad, but it’s not getting any better. I think it’s just stretching before it tries any heavy lifting.”

“I assume that someone’s watching it?”

“At least two people at all times,” came the answer. “I also set some trigger points for the few sensors we’ve got that are still running.”

“I don’t like the still running part.”

“None of our weather gear is heavy duty. We never expected weather like this,” said Dunzin apologetically.

Jarwan started to comment on their shortsightedness but didn’t. Voicing their planning failures wasn’t going to change the facts. He wondered away to talk to the other colonist, taking a cup of coffee from the arriving Polly as he did so.

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Captain Mike Halerin was beginning to lose patience, with everything. They were out of communication with the exploration team, the team sent to rescue them, and the Colony. His choices for communication were down to the crew of the Deidre and its two shuttles. And the shuttles didn’t really count, they were still docked with the ship pending the weather over the colony clearing.

“How long has it been since we lost communications with the Albatross Wally,” he asked.

Wally glanced at the ships clock. “Six hours and thirty seven minutes — about thirty minutes more than the last time you asked.”

“Have you re-played all the sensor data?”

Wally dropped his head and did his best to keep his voice quiet. “Yes sir, about twenty times. Would you like me to do it again?”

Halerin caught the words before they could leave his mouth. He forced himself to take a deep breath and relax his shoulder muscles. Driving his crew insane was not going to result in answers. He had to give them time to do their jobs. Trouble was, he didn’t have a job. He didn’t consider waiting a job.

“Sorry Wally,” he said. “Just frustrated.”

“I know boss. We all are.”

“I already know the answer, but I’ll ask anyway. Any changes with the colony.”

“No, weathers still bad. Which doesn’t explain why we haven’t gotten even a squeak on the radio. We put up extra satellites to avoid getting cut off,” answered Wally.

“And yet, we’re cut off. See if you can find a reason for that. Could they have just lost their antenna?”

“Possibly,” said Wally, “but doubtful, not with coverage from three sats. Even with an indoor antenna we should hear something.”

Yelaa added in, “I keep trying.”

“I know that,” snapped the captain, immediately regretting it. “Sorry Yelaa, I appear to have a short fuse today.”

The girl shrugged, “we’re all a little jumpy.”

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Halerin knew from the sudden lean toward her console that someone had gotten through on the radio. “Who is it Yelaa?” He immediately regretted his impatience as a hand shot up telling him to wait. He resisted the urge to go look over her shoulder.

“It’s Jerimy. He’s calling from Josh’s star island.

Halerin let his head slump forward, “that’s one down. Put him on.”

Yelaa said, “you’re on speaker.”

“Thanks. Hey boss, made it.”

“We were starting to wonder. What happened?”

There was silence for a second. “We had a little trouble with the landing. Like your son said, this place is nothing to write home about. Definitely not a spot I’d pick for a vacay.”

The captain frowned and pulled his head back. He noticed Yelaa roll her eyes. Talk about a bad use of code words. “You found Josh already?”

“Mikiu’s with me now. Josh took the Doc to her patients. I just thought you’d like to know we didn’t we didn’t bang up your boat. Might have some trouble taking off though. I’ve got to check a few things. Anything new from the colony?”

“Weather heated up again, no communication. When do you think you’ll check out whatever it is?

“Soon, I hope. Mikiu’s going to show me the sights first. I’ll let Wendy know about the colony. Call you in the morning weather permitting. It looks like we may have another storm coming up here. With the three sat constellation it shouldn’t matter. This is Jerimy signing off.”

Halerin sank back into his command chair as Yelaa echoed the engineers sign off. This whole affair was getting more and more annoying. He missed the days when he actually got to do things. Raising to his feet he walked off the bridge, telling the others he’d be in engineering. At least there he could do some work that didn’t involve the seat of his pants.

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He woke with a start. Damm, he’d let himself drift off to sleep. The morning coffee with Denise and the others apparently not enough to counter the exhaustion of the last several days. Jarwan stretched and looked for someone to give him a status update. He saw Dunzin a few feet away, but he was sound asleep, apparently naps were contagious. Spotted the doctor across the room near the makeshift kitchen he got to his feet and headed that direction. Coffee and Denise’s company might be enough to banish the lingering weight on his eyelids.”

Stiff legs almost resulted in an embarrassing fall as his body adjusted to being in motion. The people and gear littering the warehouse floor also made for some awkward steps.

She greeted him with a smile. “Ah, our fearless leader is back on his feet.”

“I don’t know about fearless. If you yelled boo I might run.” He gratefully accepted the cup of coffee she placed in his hand.

The pretty dark-haired woman turned back to the coffee machine. “From the way you got across the room I have serious doubts about your ability to run. At least, not before you drink that coffee.”

He countered, “I have serious doubts that this stuff qualifies to be called coffee.”

She laughed. “It doesn’t, but it’s all we got remember. Maybe the next time you talk to your captain friend you can see if they have any real coffee up there.”

Jarwan grinned at her. “Mike Halerin’s is a coffee connoisseur. I might be able to talk him into a pound of real Earth coffee, from Earth. If you’re interested?”

Her eyebrows inclined. “Real coffee, from Earth. What do I have to do?”

He forced back the first thought that came to mind. “Just remind me, when this whole learning experience is over.” He saw the almost grin she overcame.

He pulled his attention away to look around. Not a lot was going on. Most people were sleeping, or talking quietly. “Looks like I wasn’t the only one being lazy.”

“Catching up on missed sleep isn’t being lazy. And in this weather there’s not a whole lot else to do. The only people being useful are the two people monitoring the weather. Dunzin’s also got a couple of boys at the entrance in case a door fails or something. My son Samuel is one of them. I think they just want to be involved.”

“I remember that age. The desire for adventure.” He gave the doctor a smirk. “The desire for girls. Fortunately that one you don’t outgrow.

The woman blushed, or at least he thought she did. The lighting was dimmed. Any reply she might have give was cut short by a commotion from the warehouse doorway. Someone had rushed through and fallen charge through the scattered groupings of people on their way to the corner where Dunzin slept. He recognized Denise’s boy Samuel.

“Sam, what’s going on?” he shouted. He had to shout to be heard above the noise of those the boy had disturbed.

The boy glanced his direction as he reached Dunzin, who was in the process of waking. The young man clearly had news but wasn’t sure who to give it to. Jarwan, moving quickly in that direction, solved the dilemma, “just spit it out. What’s the problem?

“Sorry sir, it’s the wind. Yanked the cover right off the entrance ramp. Sand and water are starting to run down the ramp.”

Dunzin was fully awake now. “Ripped it off. How bad?”

“It was twisting from side to side and then suddenly it was gone, ripped right off of the hinges.” The boy went silent, hands on his knees, trying to get his breath back. The color from his face was missing. Denise put her arm around his shoulders.

Dunzin asked, “When you say gone you mean the entire thing?”

A sharp nod.

Dunzin on his feet now, pulled his field suit to closed. “I’d better go take a look. That cover should have stayed down. There was no way for air to get under it.”

“Wait,” said Jarwan, “I’ll come with you.”

“I’ll meet you there,” yelled Dunzin as he sprinted for the door.

Jarwan wasn’t as quick. He chugged down a big swallow of coffee before fastening his own field suit. He tried not to let Denise know that he burned himself, but she noticed anyway. She gave him a rueful look but kept her attention on her panting son. He followed Dunzin’s path to the warehouse people door by the wide bolted cargo door.

Dunzin had left it open for him. He heard steps behind him and didn’t bother closing it. Running up the first two levels he caught up to Dunzin on the next to last switchback before the ramp from the entrance. He could hear and feel the wind. The smell of outside air reached his nostrils but without any force. The two of them peered around the corner at the twenty-meter ramp to the door.

“He wasn’t exaggerating boss. We lost the cover door, right off the frame,” said Dunzin.

“Can we live with this damage?” Jarwan asked, things didn’t look all that bad. The amount of sand and rain coming down the ramp wasn’t that much.

“It doesn’t look bad now. The covers only been off for an hour, maybe less. It’s not raining that hard right now but if it does we could get a slurry flooding down the tunnel. That could be a problem. The water will keep going and leave the dirt as sediment.”

“Any chance it could completely block it?” asked Jarwan.

“No way to tell. Depends on the weather. It might just stay like this, or it could pack it from floor to ceiling. We don’t have anything to compare with.”

“What about the water, you said it would just run through. Will the drains handle it.”

Dunzin gave the rivets of water running around his feet an extended appraisal. “If it doesn’t get to much worse than this no problem.”

“But it’s going to get worse,” stated Jarwan, he could see the doubt on Dunzin’s face.

“Without a doubt. I think I’ll put some filtering over the drains. Keep out any dirt or sand the water manages to carry that far. Drains clogging up is the last thing we need.”

Jarwan nodded and took a good look out the top of the ramp at the storm. The only thing he could make out was a brown haze that seemed to never stop moving. “Is there anything we can do? Any preventive measures. I don’t want to have to dig our way out of here?” He had another thought. “I should have ask before. What about the ventilation. How do we keep the air moving?”

“The ventilation shafts are three meters in the air with shielded intakes. The wind blowing should keep them clear. Just in case it doesn’t I’m prepared with compressed air. We can reverse pressurize the ventilation shafts and blow them clean.”

Jarwan gave him a sardonic look. “So, we just let a seventeen-year-old boy scare the crap out of us.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way. I’ll put up with over reactions to make sure we don’t miss a real problem.”

“Me too. I burned myself on my coffee for no good reason,” said Jarwan. “I have to stop overreacting.”

Dunzin’s gave him a smile. “I’m sure Doctor Denise would be glad to look at that for you.”

“She probably would, and she saw me do it. She thinks I’m an idiot.”

“Of course. But I think she likes you, idiot or not. I’m hungry. The boys can keep watch from here. Let’s go eat.”

Jarwan motioned for him to lead the way.

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The walk with the Dr. Lovis from the elevator to the lounge room wasn’t a long one but Josh still managed to get a clear overall picture of things on the Deidre and at the Colony. He was disappointed that no news had been received from outside the system but also relived. If the Clarigton Group had made inquiries to the colony about them it would have been a warning that Tingies might not be a safe place to hang around. On the other hand it occurred to him that maybe they knew where they were and the silence an effort to surprise them. He could only trust that the friends they had among the various worlds would have somehow sent a warning.

Once they arrived, and welcomes had occurred the doctor took charge. She started on Jameson, who was unconscious and in need of the most care. Giving him a thorough examine she quickly applied medications, both internal and external. “We’ll see how his vitals respond to those.”

Josh asked, “What’s the word Doc?”

Stripping off examine gloves her voice was neutral. “That should stabilize him and stamp down an infection. I’ll want to do a more thorough examine once the meds have a chance to work. You did a good job Josh. Barring any unforeseen problems he should make a full recovery. It will take time and the faster I can get him into med bed the better. That means the Deidre – the colony doesn’t have one.”

“I guess that means we really need to figure out the landing system in a hurry.”

“That would be good. Hello Wendy, I see you’re fighting to stay awake. You’ll heal better if you let yourself rest.”

The girl’s voice was weaker than before. Josh found that bothered him. “She sounded better before we went topside. I knew I should have given her something to sleep.”

Wendy’s voice grew stronger. “I said I’m fine. Just a little sleepy. And pointedly to Josh, “and I don’t need you to take care of me.”

The doctor’s eyebrows rose a little, but she kept her silence while she removed the bandage to examine the girl’s wound.

Josh was at a loss for a second. “Sorry, I didn’t say you did.” He was silent again for a second, still stung emotionally by her response. “Is it okay if I worry a little?”

Wendy tilted here head back and rolled her eyes slightly, mad at herself. “I didn’t mean that as a rebuke. I’m just tired of laying her, and this still hurts. Pain jabs aren’t as long lasting as you’d think.”

“Why didn’t you have Susan give you another?”

“I was waiting for you two to get back I guess. That was dumb.”

Josh started to agree but pulled back his answer. Finally, not knowing what to say he smiled, “not dumb, but you should have said something when we got back.”

The doctor, pulling out an injector, was quick to agree. “Yes, you should have told me before I started on Jameson. He’s out. A few seconds wouldn’t have mattered.”

Josh found himself contrite when he noticed the expression on Wendy’s face. “Sorry, again, didn’t mean to get down on you. You know when you need pain meds. Not me or the doctor’s job to tell you.” He grimaced, blinking slowly, “well, technically it is the Doc’s job. I… I think I’ll just shut up now and relieve Susan on guard. He retreated into the corridor.

The doctor, spraying on a new bandage chuckled. “He usually doesn’t fluster easily. You two reviving some old feelings?” When the girl didn’t respond she glanced up at her face to find here eyes shut. The girl appeared to have fallen asleep. Lovis wasn’t sure she wasn’t faking.

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It had taken what seem a while but Jarwan had finally gotten most of the dust and dirt off his field suit. The only thing that he couldn’t’ rid of was the unmistakable odor of an unclean human being, himself. Several days of non-stop work in the close-fitting environmental suit was producing an odor that even the gasketed openings couldn’t contain. He needed a bath, badly. Fortunately for him, everyone was in the same boat. They all nose-blind to each other. The shame of it was that they were being pelted by water from the sky but had no means for collecting it. He only hoped that Denise was as nose blind as he was. He sat down beside her and excepted a cup of coffee.

“Thanks, I need this.”

“How bad is it out there?” she asked.

‘Well, we lost the door over the tunnel so the first ramp is slowly filling up with debris and we’ve got a steady stream of water running down to the drains. Dunzin’s got guys keeping an eye on it. He glanced down at himself. I just wish there was some way to capture some of it, and maybe rig up some showers.

“That would be nice. Didn’t we have a couple of showers in here when we first built it? I seem to remember that a shower room right next to the bathrooms.”

Jarwan nodded. “We did, and now we don’t. Once we built the first resident hall, we salvaged the plumbing and the walls it. We never had a reason to rebuild the showers here.” He had a sudden thought. “But you know what. I don’t think we ever removed the feed pipe and the floor drain. We might be able to rig up something if they pipes are still connected to the tower. Of course we don’t have any walls, so we’d have to jury rig something for privacy.”

“I think people would love the idea of a shower and we don’t exactly have a taboo against seeing each other naked. Happens all the time swimming in the river.”

Jarwan’s mind immediately flashed to the last time he had seen her swimming. He quickly got to his feet before the blush he knew was coming became visible. “I’ll go check with Dunzin. If we’re lucky he can manufacture a shower nozzle from something, maybe from a food cannister.

The woman nodded, catching the beginning of the red in his cheeks and glancing away as she realized what memory he was seeing. “That would be wonderful.”

“Yes, it would,” he said over his shoulder as he headed towards the exit.

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Josh was still standing watch in the corridor when Jerimy and Mikiu arrived. The pair of them showed the same amount of weariness that Josh felt. “Did you get through to my dad?”

“Yea,” said Jerimy. “I stuck with the vacation theme code. I didn’t tell him how we landed, or was brought in, or however you want to term it. I have a one-time pad cypher key.”

“Good. I was hoping you would. If word got out about an alien spaceport here, we’d have starships stacked three deep in orbit.”

“You got that right. Mikiu gave me a quick peek at the other levels. And I do mean a quick peek. I’d like to start with them tomorrow if that’s okay. If we’re lucky, maybe I’ll see something that catches my eye from an engineering point of view.” He added quickly, “not trying to say you missed something.”

“I know that, the more eyes and brains the better. You want do the same quick look at what we’ve found down here after we eat?”

“Sounds good.”

The three entered the lounge room, Susan moved into the hall to stand guard without being told.

Jerimy paused inside the entrance taking a long slow look around the room. “I can see why you call this the lounge room. This looks like a university study room in an old movie.”

Josh smirked, “you been watching my vid collection?”

“Only to see the old tech.”

“You’re right though. That’s what it looks like all right, separate seating groups centered around tables, with no indication that this was a place to eat.”

Josh nodded, “as far as eating if you’re in the mood for some alien chow we found the cafeteria.”

Mikiu chimed in. “Not surprisingly, they all look alike.”

Jerimy let a smile cross his lips. “Form follows function, that’s what it’s all about. If you assume that alien lifeforms require the same things we do, food, water, places to rest, etc., then you’ll probably find the physical layouts are similar. Good design is most certainly not race specific.”

“Only so many ways to make a wheel – round,” said Mikiu.

Josh, his voice and face serious, “so to find the weather controls we should look for what we would make them look like?”

The engineer shrugged his shoulders. “Not the actual controls, those are a matter of preference, but we should be able to recognize the systems that do the work. That is if they’re located here and not remotely. It’s not an easy task.”

Josh sat down across from the injured team members and opening his backpack which was sitting where he had left it. “I don’t know about the rest of you but I’m hungry. I’m going to eat.”

Jerimy slid into the low couch beside him. That sounds good, been a while since I had field rations. I can see how you’d prefer them instead of the self-heat meal packs I brought.”

“I’ll have one of those,” said Mikiu, his hand shooting skywards.

Josh slowly closed his backpack while giving the engineer a malign gaze. “I hope you brought more field rations too.”

“Of course,” said Jerimy. But I figured you guys would appreciate something approaching a regular meal.”

Josh looked at Jerimy, unsure how to respond. “That was thoughtful, and it is appreciated. What else did you bring?”

The engineer looked somber, “obviously not the right cargo. We didn’t really anticipate being stuck here. We figured if we didn’t crash coming through the field barrier everything would be normal and we could leave at will.”

Josh, somewhat chagrined tried to lighten the mood. “We don’t know that isn’t the case. You probably can take off easily.”

Mikiu added his agreement. “Right after we figure out how to tell the city you want out.”

Jerimy nodded his agreement, “that’s a given. The worst part is it’s probably a simple affair to reverse the automated landing process and send us on our way. We just have to figure it out. Now let’s eat.

They ate in silence. When Mikiu finished he grabbed another meal kit and glanced at Josh while nodding towards the corridor.

“You’re thinking better than I am Mikiu. Go ahead and switch out with her, no reason for Susan to eat standing guard.”

“I’ll hand her this. She’ll be surprised,” said Mikiu as he headed out.

Jerimy turned to Dr. Lovis. “Don’t suppose these two are hungry?”

A slight smile, “oh, they probably are. There’s no way in hell I’m going to try and wake them. The girl would be easy, but I would have to use a strong stimulant to wake him. No reason to do that. Neither of them is in danger of starving.”

Jerimy looked over to Josh. “How about you finish filling me in. One of the rooms Mikiu showed me on the way down from the surface he called the ‘mind link room’, said you would explain.

Josh selected his words carefully. He wanted Jerimy to understand what had happened, but not understand too much. “Mind Link room is as good a moniker for it as any. Keeping as many details private as possible while getting across what had happened Josh calmly explained the instant intimacy of the experience.

Jerimy slowly examined Josh’s face as he talked. He could read the indecision on the younger man’s face as he struggled with how much to reveal. Mikiu, in an effort to explain his friend’s dilemma had given his own opinion on Josh’s feelings towards Wendy. Mikiu was unsure if the feelings were going to last or if this forced closeness was just that, forced. Jerimy knew that the boy had been fond of the girl. It would take time to see how things played out.

“Mind Linker?” he asked when Josh was done. Tilting his head and raising his eyebrows he voiced a question. “How many of you feelings are new? Do you think this ‘mind-link’ created any of them?”

“Created. No, I don’t think it created any thing that wasn’t there before. What it did? I’m not really sure. Jerimy… I know her better than I’ve ever known anyone. It’s like we’ve lived a lifetime together, but it all that living happened in just a few seconds. I really don’t know how to explain it.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe we are just reacting to it because it just happened. The timing and the events aren’t conducive to exploring a relationship right now. The important thing here is the room and its purpose.”

Jerimy was in agreement on that. “Obviously this whole setup was to communicate with something that lived in the lake?”

“The question is what, or I guess the better question would be who?”

“I think,” said Jerimy slowly, “that room is the first thing we need to check out tomorrow, on our way topside to talk with your dad.

“I thought you’d probably want to see where the gunfight took place first. That’s the nearest thing we’ve found that looks like you could control something from it.”

“Since it looks like Susan had finished eating why don’t we go do that know. It would be good to take the Doc along.” Jerimy was doing his best to leave decisions in Josh’s hands.!!!!!

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This section needs to come later. Need to get these two back to the Mind Link room.

“Not used to, does,” said Josh, his voice raspy.

“You think something intelligent is still alive out there after all this time?”

Josh simply said. “Turn around.”

Jerimy felt a chill run down his back as he noticed the intensity in Josh’s eyes. He slowly turned back to the water. And there it was. It was big, very big and it filled almost all of the internal space of the indent. In ways it resembled whales from Earth. Jerimy had once seen one in person when he was a boy. But this creature was bigger, far bigger and it possessed three eyes and large floopy ears. A combination not known for water creatures.

The two stood starring until the creature had fully surveyed both of them with all three eyes. They noticed that each eye had a differently tinted iris. The effect of the eyes, ears and other not quite right body parts made Josh think that the creature had been created out of leftover parts. He knew of course that was an old problem for his race, expecting life on other worlds to meet human expectations.

Jerimy stated quietly, “It appears you may be right. Any ideas on what to do now?”

Josh realized that he was stepping forward, his hands reaching to grasp the nearest rod of it’s own accord. He was holding it, waiting for the behemoth in the water on the other side of the transparent wall to do something.

§

Lecmare watched as the unknown creature slowly placed its grasping limb on the Exchanger. It was obvious that the creature suspected the device’s purpose. It looked a little like the Mambre, but their was enough difference to see clearly that it was a different species. A different species from a different world. It considered the situation. It was not something it had expected and yet it explained a great deal. Lecmare now understood that a great deal of time had passed and that the Mambre were gone, maybe forever. It now understood that it would have to adjust and make new *alliances*, *enemies* and *doesn’t matter’s*. In other words, it now understood that life had changed and the Dory must change with it. He also realized that it was quite possible that he was the last of his kind. But that was something he could change. His race had long ago given up the time consuming and sometimes difficult methods of multiple sex reproduction and constant changes to the species and its ever changing environment had necessitated the simplification of procreation. It could not, it admitted to itself, remember how his race had originally evolved or what it’s initial appearance had been. As a matter of fact it thought, it no longer knew from what home world they had spawned, if indeed it had been a planet. Images and flashes of feelings from the far distant past occasionally swirled through its brain. Some of them suggested different ancestors and histories and yet, Lecmare knew that somehow all of them were true is some form or another.

It felt no great panic about being the last of it’s kind. His species, when no help or assistance from its own race were available, was quite capable of reproducing by fission, or by egg, or if necessary, by live birth. Whatever method was most advantageous for the situation was used. Part of its mind now begin to ponder if now was the right time to do so. It decided that as soon as the current situation was resolved that it would procreate — it did take a lot of energy.

Josh watched as the creature slowly observed his actions, especially after he grasped the thought control rod. While before the creature had looked at him with all three eyes now it was a deliberate thoughtful examination by each eye, starting with the right most one. It was as if each eye was being utilized for a different process, a different evaluation. It was the most intense scrutiny he had ever experienced, and he wondered if he had passed muster.

Finally, apparently having decided in his favor, the giant creature started to drift slowly into the interior ends of the rods. He could not see what moved the giant aquatic being. It was as if it was moving by sheer determination and that thought was somewhat disconcerting.

He mentally felt the creature make contact with the disc like endings of the rods. It was as if a circuit had been completed but no current was flowing. He waited, knowing that something was about to happen, knowing that it needed to happen, and being afraid of it happening. It was not a comfortable feeling.

§

He forced his body to relax and then realized what the two portable stools they had found the first time were for. To sit on while communicating as he realized that this was probably a time consuming affair. He gave Jerimy a quick glance and muttered, “Stool.” As he turned back to face his new acquaintance on the other end of the rod he heard movement behind him. Soon he felt something press into the back of his legs midway between knee and waist. Carefully he settled backwards to a sitting position never taking his hands from the rod. On the other end the behemoth watched him closely with two of its three eyes.

Suddenly, with no advanced warning, he felt the presence of another. It wasn’t a blunt shock like it had been with Wendy, like being thrust into the center of a play, but an awareness, like hearing someone’s breathing in the darkness. He swallowed hard and mentally looked in the direction of the incursion. He saw nothing at first, just darkness, and then a faint glimmer of color whose tint he couldn’t discern. But then he realized that he was not only seeing the color, he was hearing it. What a strange feeling he thought, hearing color.

Then a single thought became supreme. He found himself seeing an underwater scene, from the perspective of actually being underwater. He had to quickly fight down a sense of panic as he coerced himself into staying calm and concentrating on the depiction he was being shown. He was seeing the creature from a distance, but not alone. There were multitudes of fellow creatures surrounding it, some in the background, some the foreground. In fact, he realized that they were swimming all around him. He fought against the desire to duck.

As he watched he realized that he had no essence of time. Intellectually he knew that he was seeing a play intended for just him, an audience of one. Then, and he didn’t know when it had moved to the second act, he realized that the number of creatures was growing smaller, and somehow older. Time wasn’t standing still, it was moving quickly, to tell a story. Finally he got the message as the number of creatures dwindled to one. He was communing with the last of his kind.

And then the image reset. There was once again a vast multitude of beings, and then he realized that the large creatures had been joined by a different, much small creature. A creature that was almost manlike. Similar in size and shape, definitely humanoid, these beings swam among the larger creatures without clothing or accoutrements. It was obvious that they had no need for trips to the surface for air and indeed he was able to make out gills on the side of their necks extending down to the top of their backs. But then time progressed again, and the smaller creatures swam to the surface one by one. And then Josh found himself in the place of the creature. Touching the exchangers, the word sprang to his mind, and starring through the transparent wall to see the smaller creatures on the inside. And then the view changed slightly and he found himself watching himself and Jerimy attempting to communicate.

He felt his hands begin to slip from the rod as a wave of exhaustion swept over him. The feeling of the other mind vanished as he slumped forward, keeping his seating by the use of his weary hands. He felt Jerimy’s arms slip around him and guide him to the ground, the stool a back rest.

Jerimy was talking to Josh but keeping an eye on the behemoth creature. He watched as it slowly slipped away from the rods.

“Josh are you okay. What happened?” he asked.

Josh felt strength returning to his body. Slowly he got to his feet and watched as the creature slowly backed out of sight.

“I’m okay Jerimy. That just took a lot out of me. Let’s get to one of the couches. I think we’re done communicating with the whale for now.”

With Jerimy keeping an eye on him they slowly crossed to the seating area where Josh slid to a semi-reclined position.

“Okay, that took more out of me than I thought,” he said.

“Yea. You know you’re pale as a ghost,” said Jerimy.

“I don’t doubt that. How long did that go on?”

“Well, I’m not sure what it was that was going on but about three hours, give or take a few minutes,” said Jerimy.

“Three hours, I guess that makes sense. That thing, his name is Lecmare by the way, and I don’t remember him telling me that, is a Dory. There used to be a lot of them. I mean a lot. But I think he’s the last one and I don’t even want to think about how old he is.”

“He, it’s a he. You went from thing to male,” said Jerimy.

“I guess I did. I don’t remember him telling me that either. Maybe I just picked male because of his name, or maybe he did tell me. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. The people who used to run this place were called the Mambre, I don’t remember him telling me that either so apparently I wasn’t paying attention. There look like us except with long legs and a short upper body, leathery green skin, and a head with three eyes. Three eyes seem to be a thing around here.” Josh paused to take a deep breath and try to remember what else Lecmare had taught him without his knowledge. Then he remembered a key fact. “Oh yea, the Mambre had gills, they could breath underwater and on land.”

“Explains the lake,” said Jerimy. It made sense he thought, especially with friends like Lecmare around. The creature’s intelligence didn’t surprise him. Earth’s own waters had some highly intelligent life.

“I don’t suppose he told you how to run this place?” asked Jerimy.

Josh was silent for a moment and Jerimy was beginning to think that he hadn’t been heard. He was just about to repeat the question when the man answered.

“What time was it when we got here?”

Jerimy looked at his personal comp and said, “I don’t know, around noon I guess.”

“Well, and I don’t remember being told this either, I’m supposed to be back at the same time tomorrow. I get the impression that now that we’ve met Lecmare has to figure out how to teach me things, or decide whether he should. I’m not really sure on that.”

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Dunzin had immediately approved of the idea of getting the old showers working again. “I don’t know how I missed thinking of that. We don’t have to worry about capturing rainwater either. At least not for a while, the towers full, and I don’t think we can use it faster than the rain can refill it.”

“Good, can you give me a timeframe?” asked Jarwan.

“Give me a couple of hours. I’ll rig a privacy screen too. All it should take is support line and a couple of tarps. How you going to schedule use?”

Jarwan didn’t need much time to think about it. “I’m going to keep it simple. How many people at a time?”

“Say five.”

Okay, five at a time in the order you sign up. I don’t think we have to worry about time limits. That water’s going to be cold.”

“You got that right. Unisex?”

“For now, I think everyone here knows that the other sex has different parts, even the few young kids we have.”

Dunzin laughed, “bet a few people still aren’t going to like it.”

“They can blush, or they can stink. I don’t mind blushing.”

“You just want to smell good for a lady doctor,” chortled Dunzin.

“Smelling good is about all any of us can do right now. I don’t think anybody has the energy to go beyond that.”

Dunzin smiled forlornly. “Unfortunately you are correct, but as soon as I have the energy, I’m going to fix that.”

Jarwan snorted and headed back to the command corner.

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Mike Halerin had finally gotten off the bridge, and this time not just to use the head. He decided that seventy hours in the same uniform was pushing the limits of the bridge crew’s noses, including his own. Fortunately, he was able to get the shower part out of the way before the bridge summoned him back. Yelaa hadn’t sounded like the ship was on fire, so he took the time to dress. Being clean in body and uniform restored some of the energy missing sleep had stolen. He entered the bridge ready to go.

“Okay Yelaa, you didn’t mention Josh or the colony in your summons so I’m guessing that something else is in the crapper.”

The girl laughed mirthlessly, “at least there’s no fan involved yet. We just intercepted a ‘report last seen’ message to the colony from Sartagius – for us.”

The captain looked around, “where’s Wally?”

“Right here boss.” The eyeglass wearing First Officer re-entered the bridge. “Decided if you could wash the crude off it might be a good idea for me to do the same. Figured Yelaa could have a turn when I got back. So, they finally started looking for us. Was it a normal channels type of thing or something special?”

Yelaa, getting up from her console. “Looks like an automated all stations alert. It wasn’t specifically addressed to Tingies, at least I don’t think so. If it’s all right Captain, I’m going to go take that shower. I don’t want to smell worse than you guys.”

“Go ahead, the rest of you too. Wally and I can handle it for a half hour.” Turning to his First officer he raised an eyebrow. “So I guess they’re not looking here specifically.”

“Doesn’t appear that way,” Wally’s fingers played over his controls. “She’s right, that was the equivalent of what they used to call a BOLO, be on the lookout.”

“You and Josh have got to stop watching old videos.”

“Good a description as any. The good news is that they just asked if anyone had seen us recently. There’s no request for a hold or anything.”

“You can bet that whatever message jumper drone picks up an affirmative response it’s going to jump straight to someplace with a NIX sender. And I’ll bet there’s an armed ship around at Sartagius ready to come after us. The Clarigton’s are not ones to forget an insult, and we insulted them plenty last year.”

A chuckle, “yes we did. You’re right. They want us.” Wally glanced at the ceiling of the bridge as he thought it through. “The normal receiving drone jumps to about 60 light hours away from a star, and each drone covers a max of six systems spending an average of twenty hours per system. Jump time is negligible so we’re looking at 120 hours transit time plus the delay for the first system. I doubt if they want us bad enough to reroute a drone receiver. That involves a lot of work and most drones don’t have the brains for it. They would have to use an actual ship, of course that ship could be the armed ship you’re talking about.”

“No, I don’t think its that urgent yet. They need most of their resources for aggregating their control and making sure they have a governing framework in place. Much as I hate to admit it the galaxy could use a better system. But why in God’s name did it have to be them.”

“You actually think they’ll be able to keep control. The other families aren’t going to like that.”

Captain Halerin let his cheeks puff out as he slowly exhaled. “No, they’re not and they will respond. Trouble is they’ll take their time about it. Probably wait for the Clarigton’s to use up resources putting together some type of system and then swoop in an negotiate a treaty to control the thing. And I’m sure Bud Clare knows that. He’s old, actual old, the long-life tech didn’t work for him, and I think he wants a shot at being in charge and getting vengeance on those he believes wronged him.”

Wally nodded, “and that means us of course. So, what we have to do is wait for the others to get involved.”

“And that probably won’t happen until Bud dies. I think the others are letting him get away with this because they feel guilt. His group did provide the long-life technology, and it doesn’t work for his family. Much as I hate the man that kinda sucks.”

“Yes, it does, but it’ll suck more if he gets his hands on us.” Wally shuddered even contemplating the thought.

Halerin noticed the man’s slight shudder. “So let’s make sure that doesn’t happen. Any chance that drone detects us when it skips by?”

“Not if it’s a standard drone. But just to be safe we might want to drop into a lower orbit, make sure we have the planet as a noise source behind us.”

“Let’s go ahead and do that, as soon as Yelaa gets back. We’ll let her handle it, she’s been wanting more experience with orbital maneuvers. Just make sure we get down to where we don’t stick out like a sore thumb.”

“Got it boss. As soon as she gets back.”

Halerin forced himself to relax and settled down into his command chair. He hated waiting, unfortunate considering his profession.

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Jarwan was on another cup of dubious coffee when Sam re-entered the room and ran over.

Jarwan held out a hand for a few seconds to let the boy catch his breath. The young man was clearly excited. Somehow Jarwan knew he wasn’t going to like the message.

“Sir, we had a partial collapse on the ramp.”

Sighing he got to his feet. “How bad?”

The boy shook his head. “When I left it was about a foot deep. I figured I’d better tell Dunzin right away.”

“Good thinking. I’ll find him. I know what he’s doing. You go back tell the men to start digging their way up the ramp. I don’t want the water to build up and keep pushing sludge down.”

Jarwan watched as the boy moved off before heading to the adjoining corner where the shower used to be.

Finding Dunzin he told him about the partial collapse. The man looked like someone had further ruined his day. “Great, just as we get ready to reconnect the water pipes. Better go have a look I suppose.”

“How bad can it be?” asked Jarwan, falling into step beside him.

His friend gave him the side eye. “Don’t say things like that. It just gives the universe an excuse to up its game.”

The trip up the switchback ramps was make in silence after that. Each man running over the possible worst-case scenarios in their mind. They arrived to find young Polly staring at the two-foot layer of mud at the first turn. She turned when she heard them over the background noise of the storm form the surface.

“Hey, no fair sneaking up.”

Jarwan leaned out to look up the sludgy morass covering the ramp’s textured surface. About half way up the sixty meter length he could see Sam Bitterlly, Mitch Waters, and Danny Clinger, the latter two being the ones assigned to stand watch on the ramp. The three were in a circle talking, each had a shovel. He glanced at the girl. “What’s the process here Polly?”

She shrugged, “giving up I think. Sammy said you wanted a trench for the water to run down. That’s as far as they got before they stopped. I guess they’re resting or making a new plan. You can’t talk over the noise.”

Dunzin kicked at the slop beginning to ooze over the meter-high barrier they had rigged to keep the mess confined to the top ramp. “I don’t see any trace of a trench. Surely they didn’t dig through this to get that far up the tunnel.”

The girl shook her head, excited to provide information. “No, it was only up to my knees when they started. They got that far and it just sort of come running down, like something gave way.” \

“I don’t like the sound of that.” Denise’s voice came from behind them. Jarwan turned to find the doctor and two other colonist behind them.

“Hey Doc,” said Dunzin, “what are you doing here.”

She motioned to the two men with her. “They were on their way to relieve the others and I thought I’d tag along and see what my children were up to. I see one of them still likes to play in the mud.”

She leaned over the barrier, put fingers to her lips and let out a shrill whistle. Up the ramp Sam heard it and noticed her. He said something to the other two and they started wading their way down the ramp. It was slow going.

Jarwan, his attention on the struggling men, asked. “What can we do here. Can we block up the entire first level?”

Dunzin, trailing his fingers through the sticky glop, shook his head. “Not here, we’re going to have to give up this ramp to. We’ll try and stop it at the next turn. I’m afraid the showers going to have to wait.”

Jarwan gave a clipped laugh. “Showers not going to do us much good if we’re ass deep in mud. The ventilation shafts going to be okay?”

“They’re high enough above the ground to be okay. What bothers me is how hard it’s going to be to dig our way out of here.”

Jarwan followed Dunzin as he headed down to the next curve. The other two men followed along knowing that they were probably going to be working soon.

Jarwan felt the noise rather than heard it. A dull thump, that barely registered to his ears but was immediately recognized by his feet. He turned rapidly on the ramp slope. The one meter tall wall of dirt was now a ceiling high wall of mud and concrete sprawling out into the second level. A steadily increasing stream of water was beginning to run past there feet. He didn’t even realize he was moving until his feet slamming into the newly deposited mess causing him to pitch forward. He fought his way to his feet and grabbed Denise as she tried to climb past him, clawing at the mud with her bare hands. The doctor was screaming her son’s name. Jarwan pulled her back.

Dunzin silenced the others with an upraised hand and a commanding “quiet”. Polly quickly worked her way forward to wrap her arms around her mother’s waist.

Jarwan turned his attention to the wall of ruble. A closer look revealed that it was not as solid as he had originally thought, small openings under solid debris were evident.

He gave Dunzin, who was standing still, concentration evident on his face, a silent question.

The younger man raised his hand again, this time to keep Jarwan quiet. They waited.

Finally Dunzin’s tongue flicked over his lips and he spoke. “Whole damm thing came apart all at once.”

Denise shrieked, “they’re crushed.”

Dunzin shook his head emphatically. “No, it came apart. It didn’t collapse.”

“What’s the difference?” yelled Jarwan.

“The tunnel roof was put together with one-meter cross slabs tided together on either end. The support rod on the far side gave way. That end of the slabs pivoted down. There should be space underneath on this side, the side they were on.”

“Like a tunnel,” said Jarwan, grasping what had happened. How do we get them out?”

Dunzin had already turned to the remaining two men. “They had all the shovels, go get some more and grab everyone you can find. We need to work fast before the other side fails too.”

Denise, her composure returning, grabbed her daughters’ shoulders. “Polly, go get my med bag, and tell them we need stretchers, three of them. And have someone carry an oxygen rig up. Go, now.”

Jarwan took hold of Denise’s hand and squeezed. “We’ll get them out. Dunzin, is there any way to check on the stability of this wall?”

“No time,” shouted the engineer as he pulled dirt loose from the ceiling joint over his head. “But this is the inside wall. It supports the inside of the ramps all the way down. It’s double built compared to the outside wall.”

Jarwan turned his attention back to the wall of dirt they faced. Now that Dunzin had mentioned it he could see the debris on the left-hand side, the inner wall, was not as high as the rest. The edge of the concrete ceiling beams lying at an angle forming a right triangle type of tunnel and the mud came just to his waist. He just hoped that none of the three had been hit by the beam as it dropped.

Soon men begin arriving bearing shovels and other digging tools. Someone had the foresight to bring some light structural beams that could be used in the rescue process. Jarwan and Dunzin weren’t the only former engineers in the colony. Trailing them came Polly with her mom’s medical bag and two of her nurses, one of each sex, carrying the stretchers.

Jarwan waved his hands to get their attention. “Okay everyone, I need everyone to be quiet. We need to dig the goop out from under the collapsed ceiling. We’ve got three people trapped in there. We don’t know their condition, so we need to get them out fast. The trouble is with the amount of crap that’s running down they may be running out of air. Dunzin, you know how this is put together. I’ll let you run things.”

The blond-haired man grabbed a shovel from a man holding three of them. “I think we have all the shovels now and I think enough people. Here’s how we’re going to do it, single file, me in the lead. As soon as I get a trench going the next man or woman starts moving the dirt back. We just keep moving forward. We’re not really digging a hole, just pulling dirt out of the way to open a path. There’s probably going to be a lot of water at our feet so watch your footing. Let’s go.”

Jarwan reluctantly moved away from the Denise and took an offered shovel. He found himself fourth in line behind Dunzin and quickly fell into rhythm with the others. Like a living thing they moved in concert pulling, shoveling, and pushing scoopfuls of muddy wet debris further down the chamber. As more people arrived, they took up position at the end of the line and using whatever they could find channeled the steady flow of muck to either side of the ramp. That provided a channel for the increasing stream of water draining from topside. Jarwan didn’t have time to worry about that now, but he knew it was going to be a problem at some point.

Sweat begin to accumulate inside his environmental suit, over-coming its ability to wick fluid outward to dry. In fact, the humidity in the passageway was such that Jarwan soon felt like he was swimming in a nightmarish combination of water and earth, and not so sure that he wouldn’t drown in either.

Progress was slow, or so it seemed. Jarwan was later unable to figure out exactly how long they were tunneling. His first attempts to offer encouragement to his fellow diggers failed as his voice failed him in the murky atmosphere. After that he concentrated on the task at hand and trusted Dunzin to lead them where they needed to be. His world become a simple one, convey the muck from the man in front of him to the man behind him. His actions became an exercise in muscle memory.

He was surprised when the next pile of sludge failed to show up. He realized that the man in front of him had moved forward and he dimly heard Dunzin’s voice calling for help. Moving forward was not easy. Even the cleared part of the path had a refilled with ooze from the sides, and even though the collapsed roof sections kept the mud level from growing any higher, the increased water flow kept things constantly shifting. It was an effort.

He reached the front of the line just in time to guide Sam Bitterlly around him and to the rear. The boy was beat, barely keeping his feet, and had a nasty looking gash along the left side of his head. Jarwan waited until another pair of hands took over supporting the boy before turning his attention back forward.

Another body, supported by Gallager, was waiting for his attention. He could see no physical damage to Waters and his environmental suit appeared undamaged but the shaky way he kept his feet told Jarwan that he wasn’t in any better shape than the last man. He hurriedly guided him to the rear and the next set of eager hands. He turned expected the third man, Danny Clinger to be waiting. He was not. Moving forward he put his mouth close the Geromies ear, “where’s Danny?”

The dark-skinned girl with the clashing red hair shook her head. “I don’t think they’ve found him yet.”

Jarwan tugged her arm to move her to the side as he slid around. It was a tight fit, but he managed it. Dunzin and the other person were not in sight. He realized that he hadn’t even taken notice of the second in line’s identity.

The shoulder light of his suit was of little help in the almost mist like conditions. He could see the disappearing pocket where the other two had been and little else other than obscured movements to either side. Dunzin and his unknown helper had cast out to each side searching.

Knowing attempting to help either of the two would further congest things he decided to stand his ground and wait. They knew he was behind them, and that they could reach out for help. The only thing he could do was wait, and that was probably the hardest thing to do under the circumstances.

It seemed like an eternity before Dunzins face appeared to his right. A hand motioned for him to come, and he did so. It took a bit of work to reach where Dunzin led him, the area under the collapsed ceiling where it met the floor. There wasn’t a lot of space but Jarwan could make out the prone form of Danny lying, only his upper torso exposed. The rest of him seem to disappear under the ceiling and he realized with the man was trapped. Kneeling he put his face close to the Danny’s. What he saw caused his stomach to drop further than it already was. The face was pale and listless, the eyes glazed. As he watched the eyes seemed to see him briefly, but the flicker of recognition slid away and the eyes moved away. He was frozen, unable to move as he watched the man die.

Slowly struggling to his feet he watched as the morass retook the man, slowly hiding his face. He tore his gaze away to find Dunzin’s eyes watching him. His second in command struggled to speak, “we better get everyone else out of here.”

Jarwan found his lips to dry as he spoke. “We can’t just leave him here.”

“If we don’t, his body won’t be the only one buried in this muck. We can get him when we dig ourselves out of this hell. We’ve got to go. Now!”

Jarwan took last look at the man’s face, boy really. He had been one of the younger members of the colony. Turning he led Dunzin back to the center finding John Johanson, the unknown second man in line, waiting. He motioned for the man to head back and moved aside to let Dunzin past. He intended to be the last man out.

During the fast trip out, no one was bothering to move dirt, he collected a couple of shovels left behind. He knew they would need them to dig out of their underground prison, for that’s now what it was. Covering the last few feet before the opening he despondently realized that the biggest problem was going to be knowing when it would be safe to dig their way out.

He was still think about that when he crashed into Dunzin’s slumped form. The man had stopped just outside the wall of mud to catch his breath. Jarwan allowed himself to slip towards the ground before a pair of strong hands caught him. Bring his head up he saw that other hands had also grabbed Dunzin and the others. They were all being carried down the ramp, away from encroaching wall of mud. He allowed himself to go limp and be carried. He was too tired to do otherwise.