**New Story**

**Part 10**

**04/10/2020**

Despite her clumsiness in zero gravity Karen managed to make her way back to the shuttle bay without too much drama. She hoped the suit prevented any bruising from her less than graceful moves. She was now accustomed to cycling the airlock wearing a suit so she moved through the double chambers in what was for her, record time. Jed was waiting on the other side, a look of relief visible on his smooth face. She knew that he had a permanent depilatory performed. It was one of the things she liked about him, his smooth face.

He helped her off with the heavy helmet.

“Hey good lookin.”

“Save it for when you’re in trouble,” Karen said. “I got a field radio. Let’s see if we can reach Command.”

“Shh, keep you voice down,” Jed said, looking over his shoulder towards the other end of the shuttle bay. An end that was currently blocked from sight by a mountain of jagged metal from a weapons hit. They had been lucky that the ship had maintained atmospheric integrity.

She frowned but lowered her voice. “We’re keeping secret that I got a radio?”

He nodded, “Yes, they’ve been getting more and more restless. I guess boredom is getting bad. A couple of hot heads are demanding action.”

“You mean Victoria Pause,” Karen was getting tired of the Biologist and her entitled attitude. She almost seemed to take affront at being rescued.

“That would be the chief hot head. Let’s find out what the score is before we let them know what’s going on.”

“Okay, what have you got in mind?” she asked.

“Would you go tell them about engineering. You know, keep them busy while I talk to the Captain.”

“If you can reach the Captain, yea I’ll go play nice.

She finished getting out her suit with his help and went to face the scientist.

§

Cheryl jumped in her seat. Clamping a hand over the headset in her right ear she raised a hand to signal the Captain.

It wasn’t necessary. Captain Mendez had been reviewing ships logs of he fight on Fargonius IV when he saw the woman react. He waited patiently while she replied.

“Captain, I’ve got Jed Pulmer in the Shuttle Bay,” she called to him.

“Put it on speaker.”

He saw her sneak a quick look in Dr. Allsop’s direction. Then she flipped a control, and just as quickly flipped it back. “Sorry sir, you’ll have to headset it,” she said.

His curiosity aroused he gave her some cover while unclipping the headset from the side of his chair, “Is there anything still working on this ship?”

Adjusting the headset for comfort he keyed the switch. “Captain Mendez here Jed.”

“Sorry Captain, I asked Cheryl to make this private. These scientist people are getting a bit out of sorts. They demand to be rescued and they want it to happen now. I beginning to think some of the colonist on Fargonius may have been right.” Jed’s voice was quiet but intense.

“Yes Jed, I can hear you better now. How’s you situation down there?”

“It’s okay for now. I just thought you’d like to know. What can you tell me?”

The Captain filled his engineer in the bay in on the current plan. So the visitors were getting bored, not that they had any other options but it might be wise to let Halerin know. His friend might want to change how he separated the refugees on his ship.

§

Karen was explaining for the third time that there was nothing the two guys in engineering could do about fixing the ship when Jed came from the area of the airlock.

Jed, coming in on the end of the explanation took over. Glancing around the area holding the remains of the expedition, they had made use of a temporary warehouse off the main shuttle parking area, he took in the faces in a multitude of expressions. Some of them were absolutely worn out, and others were between lost and outraged. He knew how they felt. This had not been an easy voyage for anybody aboard ship and he knew that without anything to do, it had been worse for them.

He decided to be honest. “Okay guys listen up. I finally managed to get through to the Captain. The guys in Engineering sent along a field radio which didn’t work from there but did allow a short communication from here. It’s tough with all this mangled metal in the way.

“What I got is this. We need to start working on getting one of the outside airlocks, probably number three, back in operation. It doesn’t have to be perfect, but it does have to seal correctly. The two shuttles from the Deidre have been pushing the ship into a new orbit. They have to go back to refuel and every time they do each one will carry 8 passengers. That’ll be a tight fit and uncomfortable. Right now it’s a good 18 hour trip back to the Deidre, and then a turn over refueling pause and then they come back. So it’s initially going to be once a day, faster the closer we get. Everybody understand so far?”

Donovan Reed, the expeditions medical doctor asked, “How do we transfer to the shuttles? Are we going to have to suit everyone?”

“Good question Doc. The shuttles say that the docking rings on number three look usable so we’ll give them a try first. So, if you’ve got people you don’t want to suit I suggest getting them across first. And Doc, one of the people on the first trip needs to be you,” said Jed, stopping to catch a breath.

“Why me. Doesn’t the Deidre have a doctor. They have a couple but it’s my understanding that the head Doc will be on the planet surface.”

Reed nodded and stood up. “How long do we have to get ready?”

Jed answered grimly, “By the time we get the airlock working I imagine the shuttles will be waiting. So, Karen and I will get started and we’ll need any of you that have practical mechanical experience.”

Several hands went up and Jed selected two women and on man. The rest he told, “The rest of you start getting ready and gather up anything you’ll want to take. That’s all for now.”

Turning he led his new recruits out into the bay in the direction of airlock number 3.

§

When Jarwan woke he had no idea what time it was. Which in itself was okay because he didn’t know where he was either. Finally the metal beams of the ceiling and the back ground noise of people talking or sleeping began to make sense. He was finally able to place himself, the underground warehouse. Then the events of the last week came flooding back along with the terror of the drive here in the cargo hauler. That brought the idea of time back to him for he had no idea how long ago that trip had been. Sitting up he took in the room, it was dimly lite and no one seemed to be doing much of anything. It was then he noticed the background noise of the wind. It under scored all the human noise of the room with a constant low howling. It didn’t seem to change in tone or intensity and he realized that the walls and roof of the building along with the three meters of earth above them muted the wind to a back ground gremlin. It was always there and ready to attack, but out of the way enough not to be a constant bother. Struggling to his feet he looked at his local companions, Dunzin, Denise and Micael. He was surprised to find the latter awake. The man’s face looked tired and drawn but showed no pain.

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

“Well, with your legs like that I would think you would prefer it.”

“Oh, believe me, I do.”

Jarwan sat up and forced himself to stand up. After a few seconds of dizziness he discovered that he could stand without the threat of falling down.

“Any place to get a cup of coffee around here?”

Jameson pointed to the corner along the short wall of the warehouse. “Kitchens over there. Should be a coffee pot set up. Course, I don’t know how fresh it’ll be.”

“Thanks,” said Jarwan, “you want a cup?”

“Yes, please. I’ve been trying to fall back asleep for an hour and nothing. I might as well start the day.”

Jarwan started towards the corner, the backdrop of the wind becoming more oppressive as he approached the kitchen are. The wind must be coming from that direction he thought to himself. Checking his watch, he realized that it was almost morning. He had slept about seven hours. He decided that it hadn’t been enough.

§

A scream woke Josh up. It was coming from Jameson who apparently had the ill luck of being the first to awaken. Josh stumbled to his feet quickly looking around for the supplies. It took him a minute to realize he didn’t know whose backpack the meds were in. Fortunately Susan was already on it and a Pain Jab in her hands.

“One of these?” she asked.

Josh nodded without much thought, after sleeping all night another wasn’t going to hurt him.

They waited through several minutes of screaming until Jameson began to relax, and then gradually fell asleep. His thoughts were already on Wendy. She was awake, but clearly not in the same kind of pain as Jameson. Still he asked, “You need something?”

“Yes,” she said through clenched lips, “but nothing like that. Give me a couple of InstaTabs. I’ll be okay.”

Once again Susan beat him to it, handing over pills and a canteen to Wendy.

He watched as the girl in pain quickly swallowed the meds and drank from the canteen. He knew it would take a few minutes to work. She would stay awake thought and he needed her awake.

“Mikiu, we need to go topside again. Talk to the Deidre and find out what my Dad has planned. Susan, you think you and Wendy can hold down the fort again?”

“No problem. Tell your dad to hurry. We’re going to run out of pain meds before these two run out of pain,” she said.

“I think he’s about ready to bring the ship down,” responded Josh. “Don’t worry, I’m sure he’ll get help to us as soon as he can.”

“Find out about Rinein?” said Wendy. “I need to know that they’re alright.”

“Got it. You ready to roll Mikiu. Then let’s go.”

The two of them strode out of the room, but not before Josh threw a smile back over his shoulder to Wendy.

§

The Captain’s boat, more properly called the Captain’s gig, was a long tradition in ships. It’s main function had been to serve as a taxi for the Captain, but had long ago picked up other functions. These days it was barely used for it’s original function and instead served mostly as an additional shuttle.

Nominally it held four people but in an emergency the back two seats could be linked together into a bench to accommodate four, raising the headcount to six. Lack of protection for high speed acceleration in this mode made it’s use a last resort.

Jerimy watched from the right hand seat as Patty Forsht, one of the Deidre’s pilots ran through her preflight check list. Like everyone on board the Deidre she was cross trained in several areas. Her second area of expertise was as a security officer which was hard to believe. She stood barely one and a third meters in height and was skinny as a rail. However, she was an expert in various martial arts, having trained for over a century.

Behind them in the right hand seat was Dr. Lovis carrying a cloth shoulder medical bag. Several additional bags containing items for the burn weapon injuries were stored in the crafts small cargo area along with new clothing, food and other items for the exploration team.

Jerimy hit the intercom switch, “How do we look Deidre?”

Wally’s voice came back. “Everything looks good out here Jerimy. How about in their?”

He looked over at Patty who was finishing her checklist, she gave him a thumbs up. “Apparently we’re good to go,” said Jerimy.

“Okay, standby. Coming up on drop point in two minutes. Then it’s up to you guys.”

“Affirmative,” cut in Patty, “my board shows us buttoned up.”

“Same here, withdrawing umbilical’s now. Connections severed. You’re on your own *Little Girl*.”

“Roger.”

Patty turned to Jerimy. “I give up. Why the name?”

He shrugged, “No idea, ask the Captain. It was his idea.”

“I’m sure there’s probably a cute story behind it.”

Jerimy grimaced, “Don’t accuse the Captain of anything with the word cute in it. He’ll leave you some place.”

“Right,” she keyed her mic, “dropping now.”

She pressed the release button on her console arm. Immediately the shuttle dropped slowly through the already open bay doors and into her own orbit. Patty hit her breaking rockets for a few seconds to induce some separation between the two craft. As soon as the Deidre was well forward of them, she took hold of the control yoke and firmly fired the braking rockets causing the little arrowhead shaped ship to drop into the upper atmosphere.

Jerimy looked out the side view port as the small craft was increasingly buffeted by the increase atmospheric pressure. Patty had the nose of the ship pointed upwards using the increasing air density to start acting as a kind of brake, not allowing the ship to accelerate to quickly. He knew that the belly skin of the ship was probably beginning to glow by now. It was a pretty standard insertion in towards the planet. If their aim, so to speak, was true they would soon be in place above the estimated position of the hidden lake.

He watched as the scenery gradually changed from a back drop of darkness and stars to an eventual darkening blue. Tingies 0017 was had the good fortune to be one of those planets that closely matched man’s original home — Earth. The star was a good match for the Earth’s sun too, trending just a little to the blue side of the spectrum. It didn’t arouse any feelings of home for Jerimy Isen. He was born on Sartagius, a larger planet with a close red dwarf star. What affected him was the difference in the curvature of the horizon. Every planet was different if you paid attention.

Soon the buffeting stopped as they reached a depth in the atmosphere where the ships shape started to enable control enough to make a pilot necessary.

Patty looked over at him. “I’ve got positive control now. You might want to try the radio.”

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

He didn’t have to wait long. “Little Girl, this is expo team,” came Josh’s voice. It was weak and barely readable. Jerimy remembered that they were no longer using a satellite phone but their belt field radio’s.

He started to answer when the craft jerked suddenly. Patty was holding on to the control yoke with both hands. She yelled to him, “Something has a hold of us. It’s pulling us down.”

“What?” he asked.

“Tractor beam and a strong one, I can’t get away,” said Patty.

Jerimy thought fast, “Don’t try to fight it. Go with it and try to sheer away slowly.” He raised the mic back to his lips and said, “Josh, hang on, we’ve got a problem.”

§

Josh starred at the radio in his hand before turning his attention to Mikiu. “What do you suppose this is all about?”

Mikiu shrugged, “I don’t know. Ask him. The worst he can do is not answer.”

“Little Girl, please repeat,” said Josh keying the radio.

The only answer was silence. He was about to try again when Mikiu grabbed his arm. “Look at that,” he yelled, pointing to the sky.

Josh followed Mikiu’s extended arm to the sky. There, high in the morning sky, was a moving dot streaking downwards. It was to far away to be anything more than a spot in the sky but Josh knew who and what it was. Frantically he tried to call them again. Jerimy didn’t respond.

He grabbed his binoculars from his belt and focused them. The dot became a bigger dot and he could make out the general shape. It was the *Little Girl*. “That’s her all right.”

Mikiu also had his glasses pointed skyward. “And she’s coming right towards us. But her flight looks controlled.”

“You’re right. It does looked controlled. She’s not just falling. And I don’t think she’s headed here. Just in front of us.”

The thought hit them both at the same time. They both shouted Star Base.

Josh yelled into the radio again. “Jerimy, don’t fight it. There’s a port down here.” He looked at Mikiu. “I hope he makes sense of that. I’m going to try and reach Deidre on the sat phone.”

“You better hurry, they’ll be at the water in minute. We’d better get down there.

Josh brought the sat phone to his mouth. His voice still high and excited. “Deidre, Deidre this is Expo do you read.”

He let off the mic for a second to listen. Hearing nothing, he tried again while keeping his eyes tracking the rapidly descending ship. “Deidre, I don’t have time to wait. The *Little Girl* is coming down and not under own power. We think she’s caught in a tractor beam. We found a Star Port down here. I’ll call back.” He shut the sat radio down and returned it to his belt.

He and Mikiu watched until the ship hit the water, a good distance away, and disappeared from sight. Without a word they turned an ran for the elevator room.

§

On board the ship Yelaa’s hand was frozen on the transmit switch as they listened to Josh’s words. As soon as his voice went silent she tried to call the sat phone back. When that didn’t work she again tried to reach the *Little Girl*. Neither attempt yielded a response.

Captain Halerin, his mouth open watched the entire thing without saying a word. Shook his head and said, “Yelaa, keep trying to get them both. Wally, what did I just hear?”

The First officer, sitting straight up in his chair thought about it, “I’m not entirely sure Captain. I distinctly heard the words Tractor Beam, coming down and Star Port. What do they mean I have no idea.

“Anything on the scanners?” asked the Captain.

“Nothing. We had them and then all of a sudden they vanished. It was like something plucked them out of the air.

“A tractor beam?”

“Yea Captain, but not one like I’ve ever seen,” said Wally.

Halerin sat back to think. They’d seen a lot of things they had never seen this trip. He was getting used to it. That made him a little nervous.

§

It took what seemed like forever for the elevator room to descend to level 6. As soon as the room stopped Josh and Mikiu rushed for the exit to the star port. They were forced to slow down to give it a chance to open. They started out at a dead run until Josh pulled up and yelled for Mikiu to stop.

“This is silly,” he said. “The last time it took us over and hour to walk. I don’t think we’re going to make it all the way running. At least I know I won’t.” He collapsed to the floor. Better to rest for a minute and then set a reasonable pace forward.

He heard Mikiu hit the floor beside him. “God, I was hoping that you would get tired first. I didn’t want to be the one face planting.”

Josh got back to his feet. “Okay, come on. This time we hold it to a fast walk and that’s probably going to be tough.”

They plodded on is silence for quite a while. This gave both of them to reach a reasonable heart rate before speaking again.

Josh broke the silence. “What do you think happened?”

It took Mikiu almost fifty steps to answer. “I think they got caught by a tractor beam and pulled down to the star base.”

“A tractor-beam, other than a directional magnet field I thought that they didn’t exist,” said Josh.

“They don’t, as far as we know. Sure, there’s been a couple of pseudo tractor-beams operating on different principles but nothing that could do what we just saw. At least none that I’ve heard of.”

“Do you think they’re alright? They still hit the water at a pretty good speed.”

His friend shrugged, “I don’t know. Yes, they were definitely moving at terminal velocity when they hit the water or when we think they hit the water. It was over the horizon. But if we’re going with the assumption that it’s some kind of automated landing system then there’s probably some mechanism involved to control descent. At least that’s what I’m hoping,” said Mikiu.

“So, you think it opened a tunnel through the water and slowed them down?” asked Josh.

Mikiu’s reply was grim, “We’d better hope so.”

The two resumed their silence, walking quickly down the long corridor. Afraid of what they might find.

§

All three occupants of the little ship starred in fear as they rushed towards the surface. Jerimy felt paralyzed but forced his mind to regain its footing. “Patty, dial the power all the way back.”

“Do what,” she yelled.

“Shut down the power. We’re being guided in. Don’t fight it.”

She starred at him for a long second and then took her hands off the yoke and toggled off the thrust. The vibration that had been shaking the craft vanished and its speed begin to slow. As they approached the water a tunnel began to open, a tunnel of water. It was if someone had stuck a pipe down through the water to create a space for them to fly.

“I’ll be dammed,” said Patty.

Jerimy was a little more specific. “I think that probably applies to all three of us. This planet suddenly got a lot more interesting. I’m guessing this has something to do with why Josh was being so mysterious.”

Patty said, “You never said Josh was being mysterious.”

“Sorry about that. He didn’t exactly say what it was.”

They all three tensed up as they passed the water line. Jerimy said, “But I think we’re about to find out what it was in a minute.”

The craft continued to slow until they were barely crawling and then they entered a huge cavernous space. It was so dimly lit that visibility didn’t extend very far. The couldn’t even see the walls on either side of them and a look at the front and back camera revealed no walls there.

“This,” said Patty, “is a big god dammed room.”

“I don’t think you can call it a room in the traditional sense.” Said Jerimy, “This is a cavern, a really big cavern.”

Dr. Lovis spoke for the first time, “It had an artificial roof. I was looking for it. It was some kind of grey dull material like Josh has described about everything down here.”

“Well, it’s good to know that this is normal for the planet, I think,” said Jerimy. “Have we stopped?”

Patty looked down at here control board, “Yes we have, sorry. Now what?”

Jerimy looked around and grinned. “Put down the landing gear.”

She gave him a look but did so. As soon as the gear locked into place Jerimy could feel the craft start to slowly descend again.

“Did I mention that it’s apparently a smart automated landing system,” he said.

The three watched, entranced, as the small craft moved slowly forward and down to an empty spot next to a much bigger ship. A ship that Jerimy guessed was a cargo vessel of some kind by its fat shape and multiple open entrances.

Patty had noticed it too. “That thing could haul some shit.”

“Yes,” said Jerimy, “and apparently a lot of it.”

They waited until they felt the ship’s landing gear touch down and absorb weight.

Patty reached for the control panel but paused to ask Jerimy a question. “Shut it down?”

He nodded, “Not all the way. Just put us in standby in case we need to leave in a hurry.”

He waited as the sounds of the ship’s engines wound down to a soft but constant hum. Then he busied himself checking the atmosphere and surroundings with the little vessel’s sensors.

He talked to himself. “Air, good, a little stale. Gravity, heat, everything reads nominal. We can go out if we want to.”

Patty asked, “Do we want too?”

“Well, I don’t think we’re going to get any answers in here,” said Jerimy.

“We have to explore. These are alien Starship’s. Imagine the technology they might reveal,” said Dr. Samantha Lovis. “Think about what they could teach us about medicine.”

“Doc, I hate to break it to you, but any medicine they teach us probably isn’t going to help us. I’m pretty sure we’re the wrong body type,” replied Jerimy.

“That doesn’t matter, the more we learn about the universe the more we learn about ourselves.”

“Nice sentiment but that’s not the reason we’re here. We came down to fix up the Expo team, so we need to go find them.”

“Do you think this is what Josh was referring to?” asked Patty.

“I think that would be a good bet. This is the biggest discovery in man’s history of exploring the galaxy. A functional star port.”

“How do you know it’s functional?”

“Are you kidding,” said Jerimy. “Did you land us.”

“Well, okay, at least that part of it’s working. Do you think there’s any chance the aliens are still here.”  
 “Don’t think so, but we don’t know for sure. One of Josh’s reports mentioned something about maintenance robots. This whole place may just be self-repairing.”

Dr. Lovis said, “Then that may mean their health care may be functioning also.”

“Maybe,” said Jerimy, “let’s go find out.”

§

Eventually the strain of the rapid pace began to take its toll on them. Both men were in good shape but years of working in low gravity had robbed them of endurance. Although Josh did his best to keep them moving, they were forced to take a couple of short breaks to rest. He didn’t really care. He knew that the size of the Star base would take forever to cover. Looking for the little ships boat would be like the proverbial needle in a haystack. His best hope was the Jerimy and whoever was with him would also be searching for them.

“If we don’t find them fairly quickly the others are going to get worried,” said Mikiu during one of the rest stops.

“I know, but we’ve got to find them. We need Dr. Lovis. It’s better for Wendy and Jameson if we show up late with a Doctor. Maybe our field radios will work in the port. That’s a pretty big open space. There should be nothing to block any radio signals.”

“Except,” said Mikiu, “all those ships sitting around. I’m guessing that whatever brought them down probably landed them. Even if it didn’t, they have no idea how to pick a spot close to us. I doubt if they ever saw the island on the way down.”

“You’ve got a point, but there’s no reason we can’t try a radio now,” said Josh. He pulled the field radio from his belt, checked to make sure it still had power, and tried to contact the *Little Girl*. “Jerimy, do you read? This is Josh, can you hear me.” He kept repeating some combination of queries for a full minute before waiting for a reply. They heard nothing.

“Okay,” said Josh, “maybe do actually have to be in the port. Let’s get moving.”

Mikiu shrugged and got to his feet. The two of them moved on down the corridor. The previous spring in their steps now just a leaning forward. Josh could see the glow from the Port in the distance. Another fifteen minutes should do it he thought. Of course, they still had no idea how far away the two groups would be. His only hope as they walked was that the ship had been headed in their direction. Maybe they would be close.

§

Jerimy led the way with Patty in the rear. They kept the doctor and her equipment safely in between them. Exiting the small craft had been easy using the center floor hatch and extendable ladder. All three were dressed in full excursion body suits similar to the ones worn by the exploration team. In addition to personal sidearms all three carried, Jerimy and Patty wielded heavy caliber rifles. Jerimy hoped that they would be effective against any attacking robot. They were the heaviest hand carried weapons the ship possessed.

They moved slowly out from under the ship. Jerimy had all three of them carrying shoulder mounted flashes to keep their hands free. Besides that, even with the threat of hostile robots, he needed to advertise their location to Josh and the Expo team. The further they were apart the greater the danger.

He had the doctor, along with her medical equipment, make use of the recording capability of her belt computer to record the surroundings. He knew that wasn’t doing the place full justice, but he would worry about proper exploration later.

The beam from his flash illuminated a path twenty meters deep in front of him. It’s wide setting doing a good job of lighting up everything in a 60 degree inverted cone. There was no doubt about it, the place was huge.

There appeared to be multiple rows of ships. Each with a huge landing pad that appeared to be consistent in details. The same number of tubing connections and what looked like cable jacks were located in the same places with the same colors on every landing area. Jerimy couldn’t estimate the number of ships or open spots. It was hard to see over the vast size of some of the vessels and the lack of bright lighting made it difficult to get an accurate count. He gave it up when he reached a hundred pads and he thought about sixty vessels. The vessels were of varying types from the Cargo ships like the one they had landed beside to smaller ships that were obviously shuttles or maybe even atmospheric. There were a couple of very large ships that spanned two or four pads. He had no idea what there purpose was. They could be warships, super-sized cargo or just really big passenger craft. Their appearance was similar to the round shape of the cargo ships but lacked the multitude of openings that would suggest a transporter of goods. He didn’t spend much time guessing. He was more interested in finding the Exploration team and tending to the wounded colonists.

Trying to keep a straight line back to their ship was becoming more and more difficult. More and more ships were now between them and although Dr. Lovis was recording their path he no longer had a good sense of direction about which way they were going. He was considering calling a halt to figure out exactly where they were when his belt radio squawked.

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

He returned the call. “Josh, is that you?”

“Are you Jerimy or Jerimy’s ghost because we saw you going gown really fast,” return Josh.

Jerimy laughed. “I don’t think I’m ready for ghost status yet, but it got kind of close out there. We came down through a magic tunnel of water. I take it you weren’t responsible for that.”

“No. That was apparently the base acting on it’s own. You may have triggered it though with your radio call.”

“That thought occurred to me. Don’t know of any way to prove or disprove it,” said Jerimy. “Exactly where are you?”

Josh’s voice sounded puzzled, “Well us getting together might present a problem. I’m at the entrance to this place from the Island tunnel complex and I have absolutely no fucking idea how to tell you where that is.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. This place is huge. I don’t suppose you have a flare gun with you?”

There was silence for a moment and then Josh’s voice came back excited. “A flare gun no. But I do have some flares. How about we just throw one in the air?”

Patty jabbed Jerimy in the arm. “Tell him to just yell as loud as he can. If nothing else maybe we get a direction.”

Jerimy pursed his lips for a second and smiled, “That might just work.”

“Josh, Patty had an idea, yell loud and long.”

They waited quietly and then from far away Jerimy could hear a yell. It sounded like two people shouting. Patty pointed towards their right, “That way.”

“Josh, stand by. Patty gave us a direction. Let us get a little closer and we’ll do it again.”

Jerimy led the group in the general direction Patty had pointed. “You know Patty, that should not have worked. Human voices don’t carry that far.”

“I know, but I figured with so many empty landing pads that they probably vectored us to one close to the entrance,” said Patty.

“In other words, it was a guess,” said Jerimy.

“Didn’t hurt to try.”

“I guess not,” admitted Jerimy as he cut around a mid-sized patrol boat of some kind. Identifying this one was easy from the obvious weapon rails.

“This is the first ship that looks military,” said Samantha Lovis.

Jerimy knew that as a doctor she really hated weapons, but if need be she was pretty handy with them.

Jerimy stopped the group and asked Josh to yell again. This time they sounded closer and Jerimy had an easier time selecting a path he thought was in the right direction. At the same time he hoped that the inertia tracker kept a good path to the ship. He really didn’t want to lose it.

§

“We must be out of shape,” said Josh as he tried to catch his breath.

“What gave you that idea,” asked Mikiu, also struggling to breath. “Of course, it might have something to do with living on field rations and lack of sleep.”

“Yea, well there’s always that. Should be yell again?”

“Nah, let’s wait till they ask again.”

Josh nodded agreement. His throat already felt like someone had taken a file to it. If he didn’t need to yell again he saw no reason to volunteer. They were standing just to the right side of the entrance to the giant cavern. Mikiu had suggested that having a solid wall behind them would enable their voices to carry further. Josh wasn’t sure whether to believe him or not.

“There,” said Mikiu pointing.

In the distance Josh could make out a faint bouncing glimmer of light. As he watched it got closer and a little stronger with the passage of time. “I think you’re right. That may be them.”

“Well if it’s anybody else we have a problem. I don’t think I’m up to another fire fight,” said Mikiu.

“That makes two of us. Tell you what. If that’s not them we’ll just run,” said Josh.

The started moving forward to meet the oncoming group. Josh left his hand on his sidearm until he was able to make out the three figures. Soon they met in under the swollen belly of a small cargo ship.

“Jerimy, am I glad to see you. Patty, Dr. Lovis,” said Josh.

The five spent a few minutes catching up and then Josh led them ot the exit from the vast chamber.

“How far does this go?” asked Jerimy.

“It’s about an hour’s walk. Unless you try to run it like we did after seeing you fly into the water.” Josh didn’t want them to think they hadn’t hurried.

“Told you. We flew into a nice hole in the water and anyway, Patty was driving.”

“Hey, I thought I did a nice job. Got you here didn’t I?” said Patty.

Josh took a look at the doctors bags. “Here Doc, let me carry those for you.”

“Thank you, Josh, I can handle the smaller one if you take the heavy one.”

“Deal,” said Josh. “We’d better get moving. Wendy and Jameson need some doctoring from someone besides me.” With that he started down the corridor.

As they walked, he filed Jerimy in on all that had happened to them since they had arrived. It took most of the walk to the center.

§

It turned out that the damage to the number three airlock hadn’t been as bad as Karen expected. They had been able to repair the lock in a short period of time. Most of the damage, compared to everything around it, had been cosmetic. They had transferred six of the scientist to each shuttle. Jed had split up the pair of Pause and Reed. He allowed only Donovan Reed to make the first trip. He figured that would give Captain Halerin at least a chance to withstand the demands of the group. Ever since they had found out about alien ruins on the planet they had insisted they be allowed to investigate. Well Karen figured, it was the Deidre’s problem now. She had at least had a chance to fill in the shuttle pilots. Now all they had to do was keep the rest of them alive until the next trip.

§

Captain Mike Halerin was beginning to lose patience, with everything. They were out of communication with Josh, the Colony, and the rescue team. In fact, the only people he could talk to were on the Arbiter or on one of his two shuttles. And those conversations were frustratingly long because of the distance involved.

“How long has it been since we lost communications with the ‘Little Girl’ Wally,” he asked.

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

“Have you replayed 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 to do.

“Sorry Wally,” he said. “I’m just frustrated.”

“I know boss. We all are. But there’s nothing that we’re not doing. At least not anything I can think of.”

“What about Rinein. Any changes there.”

“No, weathers still really bad, although I don’t understand why we haven’t even gotten a squeak on the radio. The type of storm their having shouldn’t completely block radio. Unless of course they lost their antenna in the wind, but I thought they had some backups,” answered Wally.

“They did, but if they were forced to move to the underground warehouse, they might have lost access to their backups. I think they were using the building shell as an antenna.”

“That might be it,” said Wally.

Yelaa added in, “I’ll keep trying sir.”

The girl turned back to her console and then stopped herself. “I almost forgot boss. We got a message from Russ a little while ago. He wanted me to relay it to you.”

Halerin frowned, “Is it private?”

“No sir. I think he meant it for all of us.”

“Well, let’s hear it.”

“The crew of the Arbiter wanted to warn us about these scientist they’re transferring over. They’re apparently head strong, pissed off about being rescued, and they want to explore the ruins on Tingies. They think we should be careful of them.”

“Careful how?”

“Karen Meeks…”

The Captain interrupted, “The cook?”

“Yes sir. She’s a good officer,” said Yelaa.

“I know that. In fact, I’d trust her above some of the other crew Mendez’s go aboard,” said Halerin. “Now what did she say?”

“She thinks that maybe some of the trouble on Fargonius was started by the research group. They don’t know for sure.”

”Are any of these people armed?”

“Unknown sir.”

He frowned. Armed or not he had no time to deal with troublemakers. “Yelaa, get me Jeson up here. We got time before the shuttles get here. Let’s make sure we’re prepared.”

“Aye boss. Thanks.”

He nodded to the woman and settled back into his seat. Nothing to do but wait some more. God he was tired of waiting.

§

He slept late. The late-night coffee with Micael and the shear exhaustion of the last several days had ended in his surrender to a full eight hours of sleep. Jarwan stretched and looked for someone to give him a status update. He saw Dunzin a few feet away but he was sound asleep. He didn’t have the heart to wake him. Across the room, by one of the now half dozen coffee stations he spotted the Doctor. Well, he needed coffee, and an encounter with the lovely doctor wouldn’t hurt.

The stiffness in his legs almost cost him an embarrassing spill or two until his body started to limber up. The entire floor of the warehouse was littered with both people and their gear. One had to be careful not to step on someone. As he got closer to the corner where Denise was now making a fresh pot of coffee, he figured out the passageways through the confusion. Either that or he just woke up enough not to fall over someone — he wasn’t sure which.

She greeted him with a smile. “Ah, our fearless leader is up,” she jested.

“I don’t know about fearless. If you yelled boo at me right now I’d probably run or worse yet tell that coffee isn’t done,” said Jarwan.

The pretty dark haired woman turned back to the coffee machine. “Ah, you’re in luck because it just finished. I’d say that was pretty good timing.”

He looked around the room. It didn’t seem that their was a whole lot going on. Most of the people seemed to be either sleeping or talking. “I don’t guess theirs a lot to do right now.”

“Well, Dunzin’s got a couple of men up at the entrance to keep and eye on things. Samuel is one of them. I tried to talk him out of it but you know boys. He wanted to be where the excitement is.”

“Everyone his age is like that. It goes away the older you get.” Jarwan knew that wasn’t quite true. He hadn’t reached that stage yet and to be honest, he didn’t want to. Even though he had chosen the life of a colonist over space travel he had not lost his lust for excitement. He just found it in different places these days. He grinned at her to let her know he kidding.

Just them their was a commotion from the direction of the doorway to the ramp from above. Someone had entered the people door beside it and taken a direct path across the room to Dunzin. He recognized Denise’s boy Samuel.

“Whoa Sam, what’s going on?” he shouted. He had to shout to be heard above the noise of those the boy had just awakened in his jaunt across the room.

The boy stopped just as he got to Dunzin, who was now awake, and looked left and then right. Trying to decide who to report to Jarwan guessed. “Just spit it out. What’s the problem?

“Sorry sir, it’s the wind. It yanked the cover off the entrance ramp! Sand is starting to work its way down!”

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

“It was just like a second or two. It was there and then all of a sudden it lifted from side to side and it was gone.” The boy was starting to get his breath back, but the color was still missing from his face.

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

“Yes, they sent me down to get you.”

Dunzin was on his feet now, pulling up his field suit to close it. “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.”

“Hurry up. 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 had burned himself with the hot liquid, but she didn’t stay long enough to notice. She ran over to check on her son. Which was good because it gave him the chance to spit the coffee out and head for the door.

It was still open. Dunzin hadn’t taken the time to close it. He ran up the first two levels of the ramp and slowed to a walk before starting around the corner to the final length of vehicle ramp. Already he could feel the wind blowing against him, but it was doing so without a great deal of strength. He fought his way around the corner and started up the ramp to where the others stood halfway to the ground level entrance. There were three of them standing there including Dunzin.

“Well boss, we lost the cover. Apparently the seal wasn’t as good as I thought,” said Dunzin.

“Is this the worse it’s going to get? If it is we can live with this.” Jarwan didn’t think things looked all that bad. The amount of sand the storm had blown down the ramp was barely a fine dusting.

“It doesn’t look bad right now. But the covers only been off for an hour, probably less. And the sand isn’t swirling in this direction right now. If the wind changes direction it could fill then tunnel up a meter or so in a hurry.”

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

“No way to tell. It might just stay like this or it could pack it form floor to ceiling in no time. With a storm like this there’s just no way to judge.”

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? I don’t want to have to dig our way out of here. And what about the ventilation shafts?””

“I think the only thing we can do with this ramp is to keep an eye on it. I don’t know what else to do. The ventilation shafts are two and three meters in the air with shielded intakes. As long as the wind keeps blowing it should keep them clear as long as we don’t let them clog up and we can prevent that from below.”

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

“Sorry boss. I’m so used to reacting that I just ran up here without thinking. Sides, we had no way of knowing how bad it was going to be.”

“That’s true. So I burned myself on my coffee for no good reason,” said Jarwan.

It was Dunzin’s turn to give him a look, but this one was more of a smile. “Hey boss, I’m sure the good Doctor would be glad to look at that for you.”

“She probably would. But we’re not going to tell her that I was stupid enough to gulp hot coffee.”

“Of course not. Come on, we’ll move these two down to the corner and get some lunch. After that, I want to check on the ventilation shafts.”

Jarwan motioned for him to lead the way.

§

Jerimy was impressed by the elevator room. Josh had been sure that he would be. The engineer had always had in interest in the various ways that engineering could be useful. He valued the end result of any device as much as he did the way it was accomplished.

The walk from the elevator room to the lounge room where the others waited was short in terms of time, but Jerimy managed to observe and comment more about the structure of the alien base in the time than Josh had thought of during his entire stay.

Once they arrived at the Lounge room and welcomes had been dispensed the Doctor took charge. She started on Jameson, who was obviously the worst for wear, and gave him a thorough examine. He was semi-consciousness when she started but after applying pressure to determine the extent of his injuries he had reverted to an unconsciousness state of being. She didn’t appear to notice other than checking his breathing.

Josh finally asked, “What’s the word Doc?”

She held up a hand to silence him while she administered several infusions. “Well, that should help keep him under for awhile and I need to catheterize him for the return trip, but he’s not in as bad a shape as I had envisioned.

Jerimy said, “Return trip. You mean as in fly back. You weren’t planning on that anytime soon were you Doc?”

“Yes, I was. Is there a problem?” she answered while cleaning up the supplies she had used on Jameson. Now she began pulling additional infuser vials out for Wendy.”

Jerimy looked at Josh and Mikiu, who both shook their heads. He said, “It’s like this Dr. Lovis. Before we go anywhere, we need to figure out exactly how we got down here. And considering the size of the place, that may take some time.”

Wendy said weakly, “I don’t think we’re leaving soon Doctor.”

Dr. Lovis looked up at Jerimy and Josh. “Then I suggest that you get to work on finding some way out of here. And while you’re at it, you might as well bring me the rest of the supplies I stored on the ship. This a lot better place to treat them then trying to wedge them into that ship.”

Jerimy looked at Josh. “She doesn’t think much of the Captain’s boat.”

“I didn’t say that. I just meant it’s small, very small,” said Dr. Lovis.

Josh looked around at the others and turned his attention back to Wendy. “How you feel Wendy?”

The girl smiled and tried to put on a good face but Josh recognized it for what it was. Courage in the face of surrender. She knew the Doctor was going to take care of her but wanted to leave a good impression. Josh knew that the act was mostly for him and he appreciated it.

“Okay Jerimy, while she’s working on these two idle people. Tell me what it is you’d like to see first?”

Jerimy looked at Patty. Thought about it for a minute and then said. “Well, I don’t know. You think we can contact your father from the surface?”

“Should be able to. Unless you guys screwed it up by coming through the force field,” added Josh.

Jerimy looked surprised. “Patty, did we screw anything up.”

“I don’t think so boss, but I could be wrong,” she said, a look of concern on her face.

Josh and Mikiu starred at each other. Mikiu asked, “They rehearsing for some kind of comedy review?”

“If they are I would say that a lot more practice is required,” ventured Josh.

“Okay, let’s quite clowning around,” said Jerimy. How long to get to the surface?”

Josh grabbed his coat, “You and I can go. Patty and Mikiu can go over our logs and stuff. We shouldn’t be gone long.”

Jerimy nodded, “Sounds good. Lead the way.”

The two were soon back in the elevator room heading towards the surface.

§

It had taken what seem an eternity but Jarwan had finally got as much of the dust and dirt off his field suit as possible The only thing that he couldn’t’ rid of was the unmistakable odor of an unclean human being that was beginning to deep out of the close fitting neck gasket of said suit. In other words, he needed a bath worse than his suit did. Fortunately, he thought as he moved into the corner where the doctor was waiting with a steaming cup of coffee, everyone was in the same boat. What water they did have stored was exclusively for drinking. What made that a shame was that a lot of water was close by. Just inaccessible because of the wind.

He hopped that Denise was as nose blind as he was as he sat down beside and excepted the 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 layer is slowly filling up. Dunzin’s got guys keeping an eye on it to make sure we don’t get blocked in here.

“What would we do if we were?”

“There wouldn’t be much of a choice — dig ourselves out,” he said.

She pursed her lips, which Jarwan decided was cute. “I let Sam go back up there. Is he in any danger?” she asked.

“Look, I want to be honest. Until this nonsense stops, we’re all in potential danger. Sam’s as safe on the ramp as he is down here.”

She nodded. The movement causing her short hair to bounce, something else he found cute.

He settled back to get some rest. He had a feeling he was going to need it.

§

Darkness was well on the way to settling over the water when they got to the surface. Josh noticed that the air had cooled, more than it had the other nights he had been here. He didn’t know whether that meant impending bad weather or something else. He didn’t like the thought of either.

“It’s cooled down, something it hasn’t done other nights,” he told Jerimy.

Jerimy put away the scanner he had been sweeping across the sky. “I wouldn’t read anything into it lad. From what we’ve been seeing topside the weather on this planet follows no pattern, rhyme or reason.”

“Meaning that it’s being controlled,” said Josh.

“Depends on what you mean controlled. All this nastiness could just be an unforeseen set of events started by something completely different.” Jerimy shrugged his shoulders, “We just don’t know. What we do know however is that whatever brought down the Captain’s boat, well, that was indeed in control.”

Josh thought about it for a moment. “Seems to me that this is targeted at the colony. The planet wants them gone.”

“That’s possible. You said that the monitor room you found was full of screens yet not a single screen showed a view from the desert area?”

“No, nothing from inside that damm wall,” replied Josh.

“Maybe it doesn’t control that area, I mean, other than the weather. Or just as likely there’s some type of religious or security significance to the area. There could be any number of reasons the planet don’t want us there. What ever it is it’s obviously outdated, and doesn’t concern us. Our job is to find out how to turn it off or if need be destroy it. Hopefully we don’t have to do that. This technology is well worth studying.”  
 “Not to mention worth a fortune.”

“Oh right,” said Jerimy absent mindedly. Josh knew that the man was fairly immune to considerations of material things. He just like work on his engines and learn things.

The Deidre was apparently waiting for them to communicate as Yelaa’s voice came back immediately.

“Whoa, that was quick,” said Josh.

“Please tell me Jerimy and the others are with you?” Her voice was pleading.

“Take it easy Yelaa. Jerimy’s here. The others are down below. Doc’s working on Wendy and Jameson,” he said. Somehow, he knew that the next voice would be his father.

“Son, what the hell is going on? Did *Little Girl* crash? How are the wounded?” asked Halerins undisciplined voice.

“Whoa Dad,” he turned to Jerimy and smirked. “Here’s Jerimy. I’ll let him explain.”

Jerimy took the offered phone while glaring at Josh. ***Very Funny*** he mouthed.

“Calm down Mike, everything’s under control,” he told the Captain.

There was a short silence and then the Captain’s voice returned, much less frenetic. “Sorry. It just gets dammed frustrating up here when no one tells you anything and you can’t tell what’s going on. I take it you didn’t crash?”

While Jerimy filled the Captain in on the landing and the Star Port, past the point of keeping that secret for now, Josh walked around the center building taking in the weather. He wasn’t sure but from the one direction, what his wrist comp said was North — the direction of the mountains — the sky seemed to be darkening. And know the temperature was definitely falling, much more than the oncoming night would account for. It was going to storm again and that he was almost certain of. Finishing his route around the star island he tapped Jerimy on the shoulder.

“Tell him it’s going to start pouring the rain down again. And I don’t think it’s going to be long,” he said.

Jerimy nodded once and relayed the information to the Captain and added the provision that he should find someway to let Rinein know. After a few minutes of additional conversation he switched off the sat phone and handed It back to Josh.

“He doesn’t know if they can get through with a high gain burst or not, but he’s going to try. Anything you want to show me on the way down. It might give me a better idea of the setup.”

Josh led the way into the central elevator room. “Well, we have room to make a couple of stops that might interest you. But there’s only one I really want to show you. It’s on level 5. I didn’t mention it before because I really have no idea how to explain it. Even if I knew what it was for…,” he added.

The trip down was by now familiar to Josh but he noticed that Jerimy was still a little unsettled by it. Trying to watch his balance and anticipate the rooms acceleration and deacceleration.

Josh didn’t say anything as he led the engineer into the room with the mind transfer rods. He wanted to get his unbiased opinion.

Jerimy, for his part, noticed Josh’s lack of an explanation and concentrated on why this room hid some puzzle that Josh wanted solved. He quickly examined the larger part of the room before settling his glance on the rods projecting into the water. Finally, he asked, “Any idea what they do?”

Josh selected his words carefully. He wanted Jerimy to understand what had happened, but he didn’t want him to understand to much. “It, as far as I can tell, is a mind linker of some kind.”

Jerimy turned slowly to examine Josh’s face. He was sure that his hearing was working okay. He just wanted to make sure that his leg wasn’t being pulled. One look at Josh’s face told him that his leg was fine, and that Josh was serious.

“Mind Linker?” he asked.

Josh licked his lips before answering. It didn’t help, they were still dry. “Okay, here’s the story. Wendy and I both touched the same one at the same time. Then I’m not sure what happened. I’m still not. All of a sudden, I was looking at myself from her point of view both emotionally, visually and memory wise. I was experiencing her feelings and desires, and she was feeling mine.” He glanced away. “It was very awkward.”

Jerimy thought for a second. He remembered that Josh and Wendy had once had a thing when she was really young. He wondered if old feelings were coming back.

“You mentioned memory?”

“Yea, I know I did. And yes, I know how she felt about me. And I know how she feels now. I’m wrestling with it. So is she.” He was careful keep his eyes averted. He wasn’t ready to see Jerimy’s reaction.

“Okay. You still have feelings?” Jerimy asked.

Josh nodded. “And she knows it. It kind of makes things easier.”

Jerimy decided to get back to the matter at hand. “I’m assuming that you think this whole setup here is to communicate with something that used to live in the lake?”

“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.

§

!!!!!!!!!!!

Okay – here we loose the Arbiter story line.

The sub-minds – we’ll let our characters figure out the planet.

And the deer creature Follower – we can keep the animals just no named ones.

Made backup till this point.

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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Jarwan was awake again and starting his second cup of coffee when Sam came running into the room. Sighting the colony leader across the room he adroitly but quickly made his way over to the so called *command corner*.

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

“Sir, it’s raining again.”

“How hard?” asked Jarwan before remembering the boy had no way of knowing that.

“I mean, how hard is it running down?”

“Not that much, but we don’t know how hard it’s raining. It could be building up above. They sent me to tell you.”

“Damm,” said Dunzin. He had gotten there in time to hear.

“That’s the one thing that could hurt us.” Dunzin looked like someone had ruined his day.

“How bad can it be,” asked Jarwan. “I thought we had drains to handle this.”

“We do. But the missing roof cover and the dammed sand is going to make it a bitch to keep the drains from clogging. We need to try and filter the water on the way down. Sam, go back and tell the others to try and get as far up the first ramp as possible. We need to get an idea of how hard it’s raining.”

The boy yelled a “yes sir,” and reversed his trip across the room. If anything he moved even faster. Dunzin was busy getting into his field suit again and Jarwan decided to follow suit. As the leader he had to take a look. Even if he had no idea what to do. But first , he needed to finish that second cup of coffee and get some food into his stomach. Even if it was approaching the last third of the day his body wanted and needed breakfast, or at least a meal of some type.

Soon he, Dunzin and the Doctor were sitting around the small round table that was their sorry excuse for a working desk. With the quick move they had carried little in the way of operational furniture. The larger tables were being used as anything from equipment consoles to operating tables, and they only had two larger tables.

Dunzin was constantly checking the time, the doctor reviewing patient charts and he was studying inventory reports trying to determine what they would run out of first.

He noticed Dunzin check the time again. “You late for a meeting or something?” Jarwan asked.

“No, just waiting for Sammy to get back here with a report. If it’s raining hard again then it has me worried. I’m just trying to figure out how to filter the runoff.”

“How big are the drains?” asked the doctor.

“Four inches, all of them. But it’s not the size I’m worried about, it’s the sand. If they get clogged up before the water gets to the spreader network thirty meters down they could back up and we got no place to put water,” said Dunzin.

Jarwan felt the noise rather than heard it. A dull thump, that barely registered to his ears but was immediately recognized by his feet. Something, somewhere, had slammed into something else. It was apparent that the others had heard it too. Dunzin was already on his feet. The doctor was reacting as well, a damm it what now look on her face being quickly replaced with one of sheer terror. Jarwan realized what it was that he had felt. The upper layer of the ramp had collapsed, that was the only possibility!

He was slow getting to his feet and trailed the other two to the door. They sprinted up the lower three ramps to arrive at the turn for the last ramp to the surface. There they were stopped by a mass of sand and building material clogging the opening. It was obvious that the roof had collapsed. The only question was how much of the passage had given way and where were the three men who had been watching it. Denise, the doctor, started screaming her son’s name. Jarwan put a hand on her arm.

“Wait, give them a chance to answer.”

The doctor looked cluelessly at him until a sense of awareness returned to her eyes.

“I’m okay,” she said. Turning her head to the wall of rubble she waited.

Dunzin had silenced the three, two men and one woman, who had followed their headlong charge. Just coming into view behind the three was Denise’s other child, Polly. He motioned for her to silence as well. She quickly moved to her mother grabbing hold of her 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. Putting his mouth close to the largest opening he could find he yelled as loud as he could, over and over. Then he stopped and put his ear to a section of roof sticking out of the pile.

He heard nothing. Moving on to the next opening he repeated the process, yelling, then listening. He used this method to move from right to left across the opening. Finally, when he got near the left edge, he thought he heard something in answer to his yell. Turning he motioned for the doctor to listen. She did so, excitement registering on her face as she too heard a return. She turned and motioned to her daughter.

“Polly, go get me a stethoscope. No wait, just bring me my travel bag,” she ordered.

Jarwan turned to Dunzin but his second in command had already sent one of the others for digging implements.

They took turns yelling and listening while waiting for the young girl to return. The sound they were hearing was to faint to be understandable as he assumed their yelling was on the other side. He just wanted those trapped to know that someone was looking for them. He imagined how scarred they must be. And their physical condition was unknown. He wanted to take their mind off the present situation and if that meant getting them to yell, so be it.

It didn’t take Polly long to return with the bag and a large following of colonists now alerted to the fact that something was wrong. The man with the shovels was right behind them, a pry bar also in hand.

Jarwan waved his hands.

“Okay everyone, let’s have some silence. I need everyone to be quiet. We can hear a response, but we can’t tell what they’re saying. The doctors going to use her stethoscope to try and hear them. So keep it quiet, and no moving around.”

He turned back to the doctor who already had the stethoscope around her neck. It was a new instrument, but the design hadn’t changed in centuries, only the materials. With a nod she signaled to Jarwan that she was ready.

He took a deep breath and yelled the loudest yell of his life. He wanted to make sure to get their attention.

He saw intensity on her face as she listened. Then, a quick change, and a tenuous look of maybe spread across her face.

“I can hear voices. One of them is Sam. Hold on….,” she said. With renewed concentration she listened.

Jarwan found that he was holding his breath. Slowly he resumed breathing, trying to do so as quietly as possible. Watching her face he wondered what she was thinking and he hoped that she was not assigning blame in his direction. He had after all, sent the boy to find out how hard it was raining. He had never imagined that something like this could happen. Once again he found himself wondering how a simple ships engine minder could end up responsible for so many people. It wasn’t something he had set out to do, but fate had chosen for him. Watching the doctor closely he forced his self-doubts into the background. Right now, there was work to be done.

Finally Denise stepped back from the wall of debris.

“They finally figured out that only one could talk at a time. They’re in an air pocket and they can feel cold air from the surface.” She paused for a minute, looking at the small streams of water running. “And they’ve got water moving through. I don’t think it’s very much.”

Dunzin asked, “Did they say how far up they are?”

The doctor looked tired, now that she knew her son was safe the weariness was back. “Five meters, they were on their way back down.”

Dunzin looked at Jarwan. “Since they appear to be getting air I think we should feed a bore scope up to them. That’ll give us an idea of what’s in the way. We still need to set up filters to keep the sand out of the drains.”

“Okay, pick teams and send someone back for whatever you need,” said Jarwan. “Let’s get them out of there before it gets worse.”

Dunzin quickly divided men into teams. One he sent back for more equipment and at the doctor’s request, more medical gear. She sent Polly along to identify what she needed. The other team he had stand by while they waited for someone to return with the bore scope. He spent his time trying to identify the various pieces of construction material sticking out of the rubble. A lot of it was clearly just sand that had fallen into the collapsed area. The trickles of water on the floor could no longer be qualified as minor. One of them was rapidly turning into a small stream.

Jarwan kept by the doctor’s side so that they could keep each other’s resolve up. She continued to listen but for now there were no additional communication from the trapped men. They apparently realized that their rescue would take some time.

He had an idea, looking around he finally decided on one of the pry bars. Using it he tapped three times on an exposed metal alloy beam that used to be part of the ceiling. The doctor, catching on, listened carefully. Soon they both heard the response, he didn’t even need a stethoscope to hear it.

“Okay, every five minutes we’ll do this. That’ll let us know if them pass out,” Jarwan said.

“Pass out or die,” she responded. Catching the look on his face she frowned. “Sorry, I know you’re trying to help. Don’t let a mother’s fear stop you.”

“Don’t worry. I know you’re scared. I am too. We’ll get through this.” He intended to add *together* to that sentence but chickened out. The middle of an emergency was no time for romance or so he told himself.

He found Dunzin at his side, bore scope in hand. The coiled length of flex-cable coiled in his right hand.

“How much length?” he asked.

His second in command answered, “ten meters. If that’s not enough we’ve go plenty of extensions.”

“Good enough. I’ll feed,” said Jarwan.

Dunzin handed him the coiled-up cable and the two of them knelt. Dunzin used a small hand shovel to dig a starter hole for the camera bean mounted to the end of the cable and began entering it into the hole, watching its progress on the camera feed. The screen showed only brown as it moved through sand occasionally hitting an open spot illuminated by the camera’s build in lights. Behind Dunzin Jarwan patiently played the cable out. Denise Bitterlly maintained her listening post to their right.

Jarwan watched the camera output over Dunzin’s s shoulder. He estimated that they had played out about three meters of cable when the camera found another open area. This time however it was water that the camera entered, not air.

“Is that a random pocket do you think?” asked Jarwan, eyeing the increasing size of the stream leaking down the ramp.

“Maybe,” said Dunzin, “we’re about a foot off ground level. We may have to move quick If the water starts rising fast.”

“How much time do you figure we have?” asked Jarwan.

“Hard to say, still don’t know how hard it’s raining.”

Jarwan looked at the ever-expanding river at his feet. “Let’s assume that we’re out of time. What then?

Dunzin turned his gaze to the water at their feet only to see the small stream suddenly quiver. A wave running through it as if someone had tossed a pebble in at some unknown distance. But these waves were radiating from the debris wall and there was a distinct long smushing sound. It sounded like a collapse in slow motion.

Jarwan reacted without thought. Grabbing the doctor by the shoulders he lunged away from the now shifting wall of debris, from which dust and droplets were suddenly being expelled. He heard his voice screaming ‘get back’ before he realized he was yelling. And then, just as quickly as it had started, it was over. The ground was quiet as was the sound.

Rolling over from where he had landed, he caught sight of the others laying in stunned silence. Beside him the doctor was struggling to rise to her feet and Jarwan could feel the fear for her son radiating off her. The fear also quickly gripped him as well, yet he was more scared for her than the boy. He didn’t know the boy that well. He hoped that he still had a chance to rectify that.

“Dunzin, what the hell was that?” he asked.

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