**Desert Ring**

**Part 11**

**01/05/2022**

Josh was a little nervous taking Jerimy to the ‘mind link’ room. He knew that Mikiu, who accompanied them, had already shown the engineer the room, and he had given a brief but incomplete version of what had transpired between him and Wendy in the room. That had occurred last night after dinner, while Wendy and Jameson slept.

After the meal he and Mikiu had spent the rest of the evening showing Jerimy the sections of the underground complex they already explored. Josh was surprised at how little time that had taken. It took less time to cover known territory.

As expected, Jerimy had been interested in the monitor room, the dead alien, and the shot-up robot. Surprisingly he had been most interested in the supply room across from the monitor room. Jerimy had always been a stickler for having crucial spare parts available, so Josh wasn’t surprised. It was obvious that the alien engineers had felt the same way.

The engineer examined the dead alien and robot without comment. He did raise his eyebrows as he regarded the robot and its double weapons. His right-hand touched the standard issue beam gun on his hip unconsciously. The nature of the robot making an impression.

Josh had his weapon ready the entire time. He preferred to keep watch while Mikiu played travel guide. He wasn’t going to be caught off guard again, especially in front of Jerimy.

And now, for their first stop in the morning, they had arrived on the fifth level and the mind-link room. Josh and Mikiu took a seat while Jerimy took his time covering the two black mind-link rods with his handheld sensor. He was very deliberate in his investigation, and paid close attention to the black pillar that rose from the floor to support each rod. Both of the supporting pillars held their rods parallel with the floor and appeared to be made of the same material. That was something that Josh had failed to register during his first visit to the room.

Jerimy seemed particularly interested in the joints connecting vertical and horizontal. As far as Josh could see they merged so seamlessly they appeared to be one piece. Finally, after taking one last roundabout circuit of the entire room the engineer took a seat with Josh and Mikiu. He pursed his lips and stared into the walled water intruding into the room. “Okay, just to make sure I’ve got this right. You and Wendy both touched the same rod. Is that correct?”

Josh nodded. “Yea, me on the end, just before it rounds off, and Wendy up where it goes through the glass – or whatever that stuff is.”

The engineer nodded. “It’s a simple enough concept, opening a link between minds, and it’s a dandy way for to disparate species to communicate. Once you get past concept though it gets really difficult, how the hell do you do it. I do find two things interesting.”

Mikiu looked like he was stifling a yell. “Two things, you only find two things interesting. Are you kidding me?”

Jerimy shook his head and raised his hands in mock surrender. “Sorry. Let me restate that. What I was going to point out that is the rod appears to link to somewhere else. Notice where the support meets the floor. It goes through a collar, like it’s just passing through and not bolted down. I think that there’s another station on this mind-link network, maybe down below where the others are. You only explored a small part of the complex, who knows what else is down there.”

He glanced over at the entrance to chamber, which was some five meters away. “And if it runs straight down it would clear the tunnel to the port so we wouldn’t have seen it.”

Mikiu looked thoughtful. “You mean like an extension. Why have this setup if you could just talk from somewhere else?”

Josh snorted. “That doesn’t mean anything. The Deidre has a radio room, and we never talk to anyone from there. Besides, they may want to see who they’re talking to, or maybe it’s for whoever they’re talking to. And remember the monitor room. They apparently don’t camera to in order to see somewhere. I’d really like to know how they do that.”

Jerimy agreed. “That makes two of us. The only thing we can do is make an educated guess. I doubt if we’ll ever understand their design motivations. For that matter, those down rods might just be to reach a power source.”

“Anyway, notice how the rods extend only a few meters into the water. That leaves a good twenty meters of space between them. I’m guessing that allows for two of whoever or whatever, to use it at the same time.”

“That’s a big question?” said Josh, “who or what, we don’t know. We did pick up something in the lake the size of a whale. Don’t know if it’s related to the whoever or whatever’s the aliens communicated with. Could be a distant descendant I suppose.”  
 Jerimy’s face froze for just a second and then a wry grin broke out. “My guess is we’re about to find out.”  
 Josh and Mikiu swiveled their heads around to see what had his attention. There, behind the pseudo glass wall, was a creature that could stand in for an Earth whale, it was large enough. It had the size and the body shape, but that’s where the similarities ended. The creature had two side by side large dark eyes and short arm like appendages with fingered hands on both sides of its massive head. The arms and hands looked ridiculously out of place on an aquatic animal. It was floating not quite perpendicular to the transparent surface. the opposite eyes and arm just barely visible. It was just floating quietly, studying them with all four eyes.”

Josh recovered first. “Jameson would love this. He’s a biologist.”

Jerimy glanced at him briefly. “It has binocular vision, on each side of its head. Strange for a undersea creature to need that much distance acuity.”

“And,” said Josh, “it has hands. Why?”

Mikiu voice sounded stretched, “hands, with little arms. That doesn’t make sense in a creature of this type. What reason would they have to develop them?”

“Don’t judge them by our experience,” said Jerimy. “But I agree. It doesn’t fit any evolutionary path I know of.”

The creature gave Josh a feeling of agelessness. He wasn’t sure where the feeling came from. Maybe it was just because the ruins themselves were ancient, but he was sure that wasn’t it.

Without a word the three got to their feet and slowly approached the water. The creature was still until they actual reached the wall. Then when josh touched the transparent surface it slowly backed up, turned, and with a ponderous wave of its tail slid into position by the nearest rod. It came to rest with its head pressed against the round disc on the end of the rod and surprisingly grabbed hold of the rod itself with the little hand, the small arm appendage fully extended. Mikiu exhaled slowly. “Not an evolutionary trait, an engineered one. I think the arm and hand are just for this room, this purpose.”

“Jerimy nodded. “I think you may be right. From a system point of view this could be a designed interface. Of course that’s raw speculation. The real question is who did the designing, the people who built the base or this creature’s ancestors. That would tell us who was boss in this relationship.”

Josh moved away from the wall and found himself moving to the end of the rod, where he had grasped it before. He didn’t realize he was speaking. “This is no descendant. This guy’s been here forever. He’s been waiting for someone to talk to.” He grasped the end of the rod with both hands, although he wasn’t sure why. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, his brain was screaming at his hands to stop. They didn’t listen. He could feel his fingers close over the smooth black finish, grasping the rod tightly. He was dimly aware of the shouts of the others. He was staring at the creature in the water now, but out of the corner of his eye he could see Jerimy restrain Mikiu from grabbing him. The voices were vague and confusing. “Don’t, we don’t know what it might do to him.” And then his mind was overwhelmed by the greatest sense of sadness he had ever known, and then just as quickly he felt incredible joy cursing through every fiber of his body.

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Lecmare was excited, or at least it thought it was, it had been so long it wasn’t sure. It had been alone so long that it had, for its own protection, forgotten most emotions and even how to recognize them. Knowing about the intruders hadn’t prepared it for the resurgence of those forgotten feelings when it finally gazed on them with physical eyes. They resembled the Mambre, but only in form. Their thoughts were discordant and jumbled. He found them just as un-understandable as those of the Mambre. But they were thoughts, real thoughts that revolved around more than food or sex. Those thoughts were staples of the few species in the lake or forest that it could hear with its mind. Its thoughts grew loud in joy.

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Jerimy felt Mikiu tear loose from his grasp. He had been distracted swinging his eyes back and forth between Josh and the creature. He reacted quickly but wasn’t able to stop the science officer from grabbing his friend. Mikiu put both arms around Josh’s waist and try to pull him away from the rod. He failed.

Jerimy reached Mikiu just as he planted his feet to secure better leverage. He was unsure on helping or hindering when Josh spoke. “Let me go. I know what I’m doing”

Hearing Josh’s words the engineer grabbed Mikiu’s right hand and whispered into his ear. “You heard him. You might hurt him if you force him off the bar. Let him control this.”

Mikiu turned his head to Jerimy, finding his eyes inches away. The look in those eyes was intense and unsettled. Mikiu realized that Jerimy was no more certain of the correct thing to do than he was. And then he felt shame wash over him as he realized that a man that Josh sometimes fought with had more faith in his friend than he did. He reluctantly released Josh’s waist and allowed the engineer to lead him away. They retreated a few meters, but no further in case Josh collapsed.

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A time and a place away sub-mind D117 felt the once familiar presence of Lecmare on the network, and then realized that another mind was also present. A mind he recognized as neither friend nor foe. With a start, D117 understood that the second set of thoughts was one of the creatures causing the disruption. As much as any sub-mind could be surprised D117 was astonished that the mind was open to the network and could communicate, if it so desired. It realized that it, and another of its kind, had already been on the network before, briefly, without any sub-mind being aware. D117 quickly removed the filters put in place to keep spurious traffic off of the network.

After a few wasted seconds trying to interpret the new thoughts, it initiated an analysis sub-system and settled patiently to wait, but not before sending instructions downstream to its sub-minds to removed filters from all exterior processing sensors. It them packaged the last moment of activity and sent it upstream as a notification. No recommendation or request for guidance was included. D117 had no applicable protocol to initiate at this time.

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Lecmare felt the added presence of the sub-mind network. It had been a long time since it had been on the network. It didn’t consider the sub-minds friends, or someone to have talks with. It didn’t like them, they lacked personality, something that Lecmare regarded highly. His communication with the sub-minds had evolved to simple requests when it needed something, and that hadn’t happened in millennia. Lecmare needed no material things that the lake didn’t provide. It had forgotten the other things it needed.

Lecmare was startled when another part of his mind played the events happening on the other side of the window into the core shaft. It hadn’t been paying attention but now realized it was causing distress with the one on the network. With haste it pulled back the emotional outpouring that it had been casting and tried to focus on a single thread of thought. It tried to say ‘hi’.

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Jarwan was felt a someone wrap his hand around a warm cylinder. To his surprise his nose informed him that it was coffee, and not the cheap artificial stuff, but the real thing. He wondered who had had the nerve to raid the colony’s lean supply. And then his lips touched the mug and he quit questioning.

Memory came flooding back and he reluctantly forced his eyes open and his body to a sitting position. His eyes were slow to adjust to the low light and he realized that he was still on the ramps. He couldn’t tell which level. Around him were others in various stages of sitting and laying. Only a few were on their feet, including Denise, who had just handed him the coffee. He did his best to smile thanks.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

He had to think about it and wished that he hadn’t. The memory of leaving Danny sliced in half in the collapsed tunnel came rushing back and a feeling of failure came with it. He had lost people before, but never in his presence, never in his arms.

Denise saw the smile fade from his face and guessed why. “You saved my son. You saved Waters. You did the best that could be done. This wasn’t your fault.”

He tried to speak and found that his mouth wasn’t ready yet. Another sip of strong coffee helped. He disagreed. “I sent them up there. Whose fault should it be?”

She took a seat on the ground directly in front of him and took his free hand in both of hers’. “If you want someone to blame, blame the aliens, or blame their ghosts. This was not fair, and it was not your fault. You had no way of knowing the roof was going to come down.”

He looked into luminesce pale eyes, felt the warmth of her hands around his, and asked a question that he didn’t want to know the answer too, but had to ask. “And if Sam had been the one killed. Would you still be saying that?”

Her head shifted down, looking at the concrete wet with water still flowing, and answered. “I’d like to think I would. I do know that even if I was angry at the moment, I would realize that it wasn’t your fault. At least that’s how I hope I would think. I can’t truthfully say for sure. But if I did say different, I would hope you understood, and would forgive.”

Jarwan had to take a moment to digest that. To his amazement he realized that she had thought about it, perhaps in the moments of frantic digging, and she had been unsure of herself. Now she was feeling guilty for her thoughts, and hoping that if it had happened, he would understand. This raw display of emotions and honesty was unsettling to him. He sat the mug down and placed his hand over hers. “This kind of thinking is going nowhere. Sam’s okay, I’m okay, you’re okay and that’s the best way for things to be considering. We need to talk – about us. Now’s not the time, too much to do. Where’s Dunzin?” He looked around. “I haven’t seen or heard him?”

She pulled her hands free and got to her feet, sneaking in a quick touch to his face along the way. “He’s still up on the second level running things. I told the others to let him give orders, but no heavy lifting. He hurt himself digging through that crap. They’re putting up barricades to keep the mud river contained, or at least slow it down. He’s got others at the bottom making sure that the water is strained before it hits the drains.”

Jarwan struggled to his feet. It was harder than expected. The digging had taken a toll on his arms and shoulders. “Whew, Dunzin’s not the only one that muck took the pluck out of. I’m as wobbly as a new-born puppy.”

“And you’ll follow the same orders as Dunzin, no lifting, no helping. You can look, you can talk, and that’s all. Understand?”

He nodded and started slowly up the ramp, preying to any God listening, not to let his steps falter in front of this woman.

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Mikiu and Jerimy stood transfixed. Their eyes bouncing between Josh with his hands gripped tightly around the mind-link rod, and the large whale like creature with the four eyes and surprising hands. The hands sported three long fingers and an opposable thumb, something which had no place on a creature of the water.

Josh’s expression had changed. It was still contorted in surprise, but the fear that had been there before was gone. The fear was gone because the overwhelming sense of sadness and the explosion of joy had both receded. He could still feel them, but in a distance he couldn’t explain.

Josh was dimly aware of his body, even more dimly he could sense Mikiu and Jerimy’s presence. But these were tenuous flitters around the center of his attention. That attention was fixated on an ethereal yet very solid feeling he had never experienced. The brief interlude with Wendy had been just a whisper of what his mind now heard. It was a sound, but not a sound. A taste, but not a taste. A touch, but not a touch. He couldn’t determine which senses, if any, were involved. For the first time in his life he realized the true meaning of alone – because now he wasn’t. There was another being present, not in a physical sense, and after the initial contact not in an invasive way. It was just another set of thoughts, not his own, occupying his head. The thoughts weren’t overpowering or coercive. They were just there, giving an impression. He was joyously surprised when he recognized the impression for what it was. ‘Hello’.

He felt his body shudder in a physical response. Quickly he did his best to respond with his own thought of ‘Hello’. It took several attempts and variations before the shared thought received an acknowledgement. That answer, delicate as it was, caused his mind to celebrate. He felt the impression of waiting, as if the mind on the other side, having obtained connection, was waiting for him. He considered his response.

Jerimy was studying the creature itself when he felt Mikiu’s hand grab his shoulder. Josh’s body had relaxed, and his hands were slowly slipping from the rod. Silently he melted to the floor. They weren’t close enough to catch him, but they were at his side quickly, Mikiu cradling his head.

Jerimy glanced over his shoulder to the whale like creature. It too had released its grip, the hand open as the creature floated backwards, no longer touching the rod.

Mikiu quietly said, “Josh, Josh, are you okay?”

Josh heard Mikiu’s voice. Briefly, he responded with a thought. Then realized he was back in what he had always considered the real world. It took a second to find his ability to put words together. “I’m okay. Help me up.”

The two men gently raised him to his feet. Balance and full awareness returned at once. He straightened his back and shoulders and shook off the helping hands. “I’m okay.” He turned his attention to the water and to found that his new friend was gone. Unlike the others, that fact didn’t surprise him. The other two stared in surprise. They hadn’t noticed the creature’s departure. It had been that quick.

“He’ll be back.” Josh felt the adrenalin that had been fueling him begin to subside. “I think,” he said weakly, “I think maybe I’m not okay after all. I need to rest.” He would have slumped to the floor but the other two caught him, offering enough support for him to stay upright.

Mikiu looked around and started directing him to the couch.

Josh, with some effort planted his feet and stopped. “No, not the couch. I can make it back to the others, with help. Once I sit down it’s going to be a while.”

“Right,” said Jerimy, looking at Mikiu, “we can get him that far.”

Mikiu didn’t look convinced but turned and led the way to the elevator room.

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By the time Jarwan reached Dunzin, who was only in the middle of the next level, he couldn’t decide whether his fatigue was getting worse, or a second wind was arriving. Fortunately there was a storage container right next to the one Dunzin was sitting on. Sitting heavily he was glad he wouldn’t have to find out if the second wind was real. “I see you’re doing what the Doc ordered.”

His second in command gave him a side-eyed frown. “Your girlfriend has spies everywhere. If I try doing anything one of these mutts will report me.” The engineer gestured to the handful of colonists surrounding them. They were busy filling other storage containers with mud.

Jarwan frowned himself. “Isn’t that going to be a bitch to clean out?”

“Nah, if the sun ever comes out we just let the insides dry and brush the dust out. Of course, that depends on it being sunny again someday. Even odds on that happening.”

Jarwan watched what the others were doing. They were placing the filled containers as a barricade against the mud and muck oozing down the ramp. “I get it. This your substitute for sandbags.”

His friend laughed. “To fill sandbags would by definition, require sand. The only thing we’ve got is this shit. Besides, these storage containers are the closest thing we’ve got to grain bags. It’s what the Deidre brings us grain in.”

“I think that that’s because square is easier to store and transport than bags.”

Dunzin shrugged. “Okay, would you believe we’re using them because the mud slides along them better. You’ll notice that we have alternating slides on each side. I’m hoping that the water will drain out at some point and just leave the mud behind. Sort of a wall building machine. The nice thing is that these containers stackable and the interlock. When the mud gets high enough, we add another row.”

“I get it. Is it working?”

“So far,” answered Dunzin. Then his face softened. “How about you. Are you working? I know Danny’s death hurt.”

“I don’t know if I say I was in working condition, but I’ll get there. I haven’t had time to process yet. How about you. You were there too?”

“I’m keeping busy. I’ll grieve for Danny when this is over and I can stop being busy. You know we can’t stay here.”

“I know, but where do we go.” Jarwan threw his hands in the air. “Hell, how do we get out of here?”

Dunzin shrugged. “I’ve got some ideas on how. The big questions are where do we go, and what do we take. Answering them is your job.

Jarwan stood and stepped closer to the waterlogged morass creeping down on them. Taking a long look he pursed his lips and sighed through his nose. “So, we both have jobs that suck. Which doesn’t change the fact that we have to do them. We need have a meeting and get ideas, find out how we stand on everything. How long you figure this barrier, or whatever it is, will last.”

The engineer eyed the progress of his workers. “I would like to use this entire level, but we have neither the time or enough storage containers. I’m guessing that we can go another four rows with what we have on hand. And that should be enough to protect us for a few days. The more stuff that gets shoved in from the top the more it’ll build its own barricade once it hits here and the water drains. I’ll just get denser and denser for a while. Hell, it might get strong enough to hold permanently. Trouble…”

Jarwan finished the thought, “The trouble is the denser it gets the harder to dig through. We need to get out of here before it gets as thick as concrete. Any chance of digging our way out someplace else.”

Dunzin looked thoughtful, his eyes wondering in all four directions as he contemplated different thoughts. One after another ideas died in the man’s eyes. He turned his attention back to Jarwan. “Where is it that you intend to go?”

Jarwan settled back onto the container. “I guess the meeting is know in order. Let’s make choice.”

“Fine,” said Dunzin, pulling a third container to join them. Turning to one of his workers he sent her down to get Denise Bitterlly. “Might as well have your woman here.”

“She’s not my woman, net yet.” He somehow couldn’t stifle a quick grin.

“Uh-huh. She is our doctor, and we need her opinion on this.”

“Not going to argue that.”

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Jarwan felt a hand on his shoulder. He snapped his eyes open to find Denise looking down at him concerned. He realized he had actually fallen asleep sitting slumped on the storage container. He felt foolish and tried to cover it. “No coffee this time?”

She gave him a quick smile as she took a seat. “God, I hand him one cup of coffee and he’s already spoiled.”

Dunzin laughed. “I don’t know why he wants another cup. The first one obviously didn’t work.”

“Oh, it worked,” said Jarwan. “Just not long enough. Say, that was real coffee. Where did that come from.”

“Cheryl brought if up. They had a container break open when they were moving stuff around. She figured we could use it.”

Jarwan looked skeptical. “Container with real coffee just happen to the one to break open. Uh-huh.”

Dunzin twisted his lips in a snarl. “Obviously I should have stayed put. I didn’t get any of it.”

The woman turned to Polly, who had followed her up. The girl nodded and headed back down ramp. Denise said, “Don’t worry, there was more left to make. She’ll bring it up.”

Dunzin looked grateful. “Good, I can use it.”

They started planning while waiting for the girl to return. Denise’s only major concern involved moving Micael. “He would have to ride. Do you think the cargo haulers survived?”

Jarwan looked expectantly at Dunzin, he wanted an answer to that as well.

The engineer glanced towards the surface. “I hope so. We left both haulers in the garage. Besides the powerhouse outer wall it’s the only thing we used prefab concrete blocks on. They’re certainly strong enough for the wind and the wall beams are anchored down five meters. We used beams that were designed for multi-story buildings, of which we never built any, so we used them for other stuff.”

“The third hauler?” asked Jarwan.

“It was already in the garage, waiting for someone to fix. We screwed up the gear box when some idiot thought the back wheels could fill in for a wench.”

Denise frowned for a second and then realized that the man was talking about himself. “Oh, you did it.”

“Yeah, I was the idiot.”

Jarwan cut off the banter. “So, all our tracked vehicles are all safe, or all gone.”

“Yea that’s about the size of it,” admitted Dunzin. “If they’re gone we’ll have to rely on the carry-bots. They’re not exactly fast, and I don’t know how well they’ll work in muddy conditions. That’s never been an issue.”

“Speed is a non-factor. We’ll need them anyway. We can’t carry enough stuff for survival on our backs.”

Denise got to her feet just as Polly arrived with the coffee. She took a cup and the others a cup. “Okay, you’ve hear my requirement, we have to carry Micael. I need to start getting stuff together. The only thing I need is a time frame.”

Jarwan deferred to Dunzin. “How about it?”

The engineer was decisive. “Morning, day after tomorrow. If we don’t start tunneling now it’s just going to get more difficult. I don’t think there’s much left on to top to trickle down other than wind blown sand but I these lower sidewalls are going to fail sooner than later. Too much ground shifting around them. If we’re going to go, we need to do it now.” He paused, looking at Jarwan. “I ask again, where is it we’re going.”

Jarwan was slow to answer. He replayed his thoughts to himself before speaking. “East, that’s the shortest path and probably the quickest way out of the rain. I’d like to follow the expo team, we know they found shelter.”  
 Dunzin finished for him, “But we can’t cross the river. Even going east it’s four hundred meters at the shortest. We can do maybe twenty kilometers a day, and that’s really pushing it in this weather and assuming we have the cargo-haulers. Then there’s the question of the wall. If it truly extends all the way around we’ll have to get over it.”

“You don’t think the aliens will open a door for us?” asked Denise.

Jarwan shook his head. There are no aliens, at least not alive, but that means an A.I.’s in charge and we can’t rely on it to help. Dunzin, any ideas?”

“I’ll see what I can find to create a temporary bridge that we can carry. If that disruption field Josh described is still in effect we’ll need a way to get across in a hurry. I don’t see building a bridge high enough to avoid it.”

“Just see what we have that might be useful, and as you say, that we can carry. If we’re lucky we’ll march out of the weather and Deidre and send shuttles down to ferry us.”

“I’m not going to count on that,” said Dunzin. “I’ll start thinking on it. In the meantime I’ve got to redirect the effort here. We won’t need barricades t dig our way out.”

\*\*\* /\* Okay, most of the last couple of pages has to go. To much talking, not enough doing.