Chapter 14

02/02/2022

To their surprise Josh was awake when they got back. He and Wendy were talking while Susan slept. Dr. Lovis was standing watch at door.

Mikiu grinned at his best friend. “You’re awake. Don’t you feel ashamed for napping on the job. I had to go exploring with Jerimy.” The engineer glanced at the engineer and grinned. “We only found one room.”

Josh grinned and nodded to both men. “It’s my understanding that’s what you were looking for, one room. I take it you found it.”

The pair spent the next couple of minutes filling the other’s in. Josh and Wendy both expressed surprise that Jerimy’s attempt to use the mind-link rods had ended so quickly.

“They ignored you,” asked Josh. “Who knew aliens have standards.”

“Very funny,” responded Jerimy. But what’s funny is that we need to communicate with them. If you guys are right and this place is controlled by these artificial brains, then we need them to shut down the weather attacking the colony.”

Josh’s expression turned serious, “Sorry, couldn’t resist the shot but you’re right of course. We need to get the weather shut down.”

Jerimy settled into the couch opposite of Josh. “Okay, fair’s fair. We told about my encounter with the Ais. How about telling us about your buddy the whale?”

Josh inclined his head. He had been avoiding the issue. He licked his lips while thinking of a place to start. “I’ve been trying to think of a place to start the story. It’s a little hard because Mikiu and Dr. Lovis don’t have the same points of reference as me or Wendy or Jerimy. And of course I don’t know how to compare their experience with my own. Wendy and I have talked about it a little and I think understand a little of what’s involved. Jerimy’s experience is different, but maybe not that different, right now I don’t know.

He paused to take a drink because his lips suddenly felt dry. “I’m not sure why I grasped the rod when we saw the whale. I don’t remember making a choice to do so. I don’t remember doing it. In the beginning,” he stopped and laughed at himself, “sorry, didn’t mean to sound like a religious book. That expression just came to mind. The only thing I could feel, and I mean feel in a way you’ve never felt something, was anguish, loneliness, and suddenly, joy. Joy that the long wait was over. I guess the wait for the loneliness to end. Oh hell. This isn’t getting the job done. Bottom line, the whale was very sad about being alone and very happy that it was over. I’m going to call it a he because I hate using it as a pronoun for something that’s alive. For all I know it’s reproduces asexually, although I’ve never heard of that in any species that actually has a brain.” He raised a hand to ward off comments. “I know that’s not true. To continue the joy he hit me with almost killed me. Then I think he realized he was killing me and drew it back. I think he could tell that he took to much out of me so he left me with some clear thoughts that my brain is still unpacking.”

He felt the others watching. “He’s old. I don’t mean old in any sense that we understand for a living creature. I mean like before we discovered fire old. Again, I have no reference point to explain it.”

Mikiu shrugged his shoulders, “That’s going to be a common problem with alien intelligences. No common references for things that are measured.”

“Yes,” agreed Josh. “It’s like number systems when you don’t know what the base is but even stranger than that. Yet, I think the joy and sadness part, the loneliness, those were real. And in reference to what Mikiu just said, those don’t need a base number system to coordinate with.”

He looked around the expression on their faces. “I know. I’m not making a whole lot of sense. It’s like trying to explain what you see to someone who’s been blind from birth, if that was still a thing.”

Dr. Lovis, still standing watch at the door, said. “We used to have to do that. We got by. Lack of reference just means you have to work at finding something in common. We have some,” she shrugged her shoulders, “like water. It/he lives in it. I’m sure he understands the not water we live in.”

“I know that doc. The entire thing happened so fast. Like I said, it’s just now beginning to unwind in my mind.” Josh took a big breath and looked up at the others.

“I’d like to try it with the Ais. I think I met them. They were there, just in the background. Maybe they’ll talk to me.”

Jerimy said grimly, “And maybe they won’t. But since our options are limited to none. We don’t really have a choice. The fact that they were present when Josh talked to the whale may give him an in that none of the rest of us have.”

“And like you said,” added Josh, “we don’t really have another option.”

Wendy, discovering that her hand was on top of his, squeezed it gently. “I could try. It’s not like my burn wound would interfere. There’s even a nice couch to sit on.”

Josh tilted his head and tried to read her eyes. He wasn’t entirely comfortable with what he saw there, but he did like it. Having someone willing to take risks for him wasn’t new. In this case, he found that the liked the feeling it produced in him. “No, I don’t think that would be a good idea. And I’m not being protective, at least not entirely. It took a huge toll on my body physically. With you already fighting that gouge … I don’t’ think it would be good idea.”

Jerimy said, “So it’s settled, Josh will try, right after we eat.”

\*\*\*

Jerimy and Mikiu returned to the mind-link this time accompanied by josh and Dr. Lovis. The doctor had wanted to be on hand in case use the rods took more out of Josh than it had last time. Susan had assured them that between her and Wendy, who was spending most of her time awake now, they would be able to hold their makeshift base of operations.

The room was exactly the same as they had left it. Once again Mikiu was tasked with watching the hallway for dangers while the other two observed Josh. To watch his physical reactions the doctor linked his wrist comp to her sensor display.

The doctor and Jerimy took up a seated position where Mikiu had sat before. Mikiu kept his feet this time and positioned himself just inside the entrance. He still wanted to keep an eye on both the couch and the corridor.

Josh sat on the outer edge of the seat and slowly worked his back towards the rear, much the same as Jerimy had earlier. With a long sigh he forced his shoulders to relax and settled back across the black bar, his expression one of alertness, and perhaps a little timidity. This was his first intentional use of the rods for mind linking purposes. The other two times had been his choice.

As soon as he felt the pressure of the back of the bench, he felt something spread from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. He couldn’t really qualify the feeling, it was warmth, and yet it wasn’t. A sense of not being alone in his mind quickly warned him the rods were working,

Prepared this time he quickly used some mental exercises to focus his thoughts and try to separate any that weren’t his own. He tried a concept he had learned in survival skill training during his brief term with the Sartagius system patrol. He isolated the various goings on in his mind into colors to better isolate any foreign presence.

Soon he isolated several distinct colors whose purpose he couldn’t discern, there were three. Picking one he was associating with a light shade of green he attempted to send as closely as he could remember, the hello feeling he had received from the whale creature. The response was immediate.

The three colors became swirling sensations of excitement, followed almost as quickly by a feeling of repulsion, and then a tentative reapproaching. He realized that he had inadvertently confused whomever or whatever he was in contact with by using the language/thoughts of the whale creature. For a brief second they had thought it was the creature.

Breathing deeply he tried to still his own excitement and project his own message of hello.

\*\*\*

They didn’t need Dr. Lovis’s instruments to tell them when Josh made contact. The motions of his body and the changing expressions flittering across his face were obvious. Something that they couldn’t see was happening. They didn’t know what.

Several minutes passed and Dr. Lovis was getting concerned. Some of Josh’s readings were staying at higher-than-normal levels, while some had jumped originally but returned to normal. This was outside the normal range of her experience, and she was way outside her comfort zone. Normally she would have called a halt, at least temporarily, to whatever experiment was causing such out of bounds mental and physical readings. But with the survival of the colony at stake she hesitated, unsure of what to do. A quick look at Jerimy got a nod of understanding, and a raised hand for patience. She waited.

\*\*\*

Josh felt his body slump away from the black bar in the bench. He felt physically drained although he hadn’t consciously been aware of any strain on his body. Mentally, that was a different story. If a brain could sweat from exertion his would have been drenched. He felt drained, but not overwhelmed. That feeling had quickly passed as his mind had accepted the presence of others and learned how to keep his own identity separated. There was no cross sharing of thoughts like there had been with Wendy. Josh came to the startling realization that the other minds, both the artificial ones and the great one of the whale, communicated in a manner that he could only classify as civilized, even polite. Between he and Wendy it had been different. Josh briefly considered whether that was because they were both human. Or maybe it was because they had a connection he was unaware of. Maybe humans just didn’t know how to communicate like this. It was far different than talking, more intimate, and yet, more elusive in context.

He sensed the others gathering around him and then chastised himself for thinking he could sense other actions now. The sound of them moving was what he sensed. Shaking his head he forced his mind to shift back to dealing with the real world.

“That. That was different,” he managed to squeak out.

Mikiu’s voice, taunt with surprise and fear, shattered his slow return to normal. “We’ve got company.”

He forced his eyes open as Jerimy rushed to the entrance, taking a position opposite of Mikiu. The doctor grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet.

“Security robots, same model, coming in,” said Mikiu.

Jerimy snapped, “There weapons are up. I think they mean business.” He readied the heavy-beam rifle in his hands, ready to shoot preemptively.

Josh found his voice, “Wait.” He shook off the doctors hand and darted back on to the bench, slamming his back up against the embedded mind-link bar. His eyes closed and his breathing stopped, and then slowly resumed.

The two men at the doorway were torn between Josh’s actions and the advancing threat. Jerimy was about to order Mikiu to open fire when the robots stopped, two thirds of the way down the corridor. They remained frozen for several seconds before reversing their direction of travel while lowering their weapons. The two men watched, trigger fingers ready, as the robots reached the elevator room and vanished to each side.

“There’re gone. At least for now.” Josh was moving as he talked. Let’s get back to the others. I don’t think we’ll have a problem, but things are a little uncertain. I’ll explain when we get there.”

They started down the corridor. Josh in the lead with Mikiu by his side, both with weapons drawn but not pointed. They didn’t relax until they reached the Lounge Room and saw Susan standing guard at the door. She snapped to alertness and drew were gun as soon as she saw they had their weapons drawn and Jerimy checking the corridor behind them..

Josh holstered his weapon. “Relax Susan. I think we’re okay.” He looked over his shoulder to Jerimy as he came up form behind. “Clear?”

“Clear, but I wish I know where they went.”

“Where who went?” asked Susan.

“Couple of the security bots, only these were working models.”

Dr. Lovis went into check on her patients, the others followed, even Susan, though she kept an eye on the door and her weapon in hand.