New Story

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01/13/2020

They didn’t arrive back at the camp site until darkness had started to settle in. That was later than Josh had wanted. He reminded himself, putting away the equipment tool longer than taking it out. He always forgot that.

The members from the Deidre took charge and quickly turned two tents into one large tent. It would give them a larger work area and provide a little added security. Now that they had encountered something alien, the desire to group together became important. They set up two communication screens, one for the ship and the other for the colony. This would be a three-way conference so everyone would be up to speed.

After a quick meal Josh had Susan setup the conference. The ship was represented by the Captain, Mike Halerin, and Jerimy, the Chief Engineer. Jarwan Sundersdon, Dunzin Watersun and Martha Genos represented the colony. The ship had filled in the colony members concerning the wall so Josh started with the limited sensor data they had acquired and the failure of the drone.

Jerimy, being an engineer, asked. “You’re sure it wasn’t just a system failure on the drone”?

Mikiu responded, “no way, it was like a knife sliced between me and the drone. It just died.”

“Did you get a look at it afterwards”, asked Jarwan?

Josh shook his head, “only way that happens is if we raise one of the Hover’s that high and I don’t want to try going over that wall until we know what killed the drone. This is not the place or time to experiment.

“Son,” asked his father, the captain, “was it definitely after it passed the wall, and nothing hit it, beam or solid.”

“A field of some kind is what Mikiu is thinking. I tend to agree. If something else occurred none of us saw or recorded it.”

“Well,” went on the older Halerin, “we’re going to have to figure out some way of getting into the forest. Do you think it’s localized?”

Josh laughed, “and we just happen to come to the one spot in the wall where – no, no, I doubt if it’s localized just here, maybe to the wall itself, but not just here. Any sign of anything on the ships sensors?”

Jerimy shook his head, “we’ve went over them with a fine-toothed comb. I even went back and checked the old sensor logs from survey. There are no energy readings, active or passive, on this planet.”

“What if it’s just an absorption field, just sucks energy out of everything?”

Jerimy said, “could be, that wouldn’t necessarily show up on sensors, in theory. We don’t know really know how to scan for that because we don’t know how to make one.”

The captain smirked, “we don’t know how to make that wall either. This looks like alien tech, in which case it may be valuable, and it is most certainly dangerous. Not because it might be a weapon, but because it’s technology we have no experience with.”

Dunzin, from the colony, also an engineer but more of a planet bound one, said. “It’s a wall, and that normally denotes a security reason of some kind or other. Since it’s alien, we don’t know what its function might be. Hell, might just be for looks.”

Josh said, “well it looks pretty damn impassible. Any suggestions on how we investigate further?”

Jarwan spoke up, “we don’t want anyone hurt, can you do a test of some kind to see if the field drains more than power.”

Josh answered, “you mean like life.”

“Yes, that would be handy to know.”

“Concur.” He glanced at the other members of his team. “Mikiu, can we use some Millange Crystals”?

“Sure, but we’ll have to have some way to pull them back over the wall. They’re not really living you know, they just replicate being alive. Hopefully they’ll fool the field.

“Better than one of us trying”, said Josh. “Okay, we’ll give that a try.” He paused for a second, “tomorrow we’ll move this camp close to the wall. If we’re going to be stuck trying different things to get a handle on this, we might as well avoid the long walk. If things go real bad Dad, can you get a shuttle to us”?

“Sure, we’ll keep the ships boat on standby and Dr. Louis ready to go. Do me a favor, don’t do anything stupid son.”

“No sir.”

With that, goodbyes were said, and everyone signed off. Josh looked to the others, “if no one objects we’ll just keep the tents together for the night.”

No one did and soon they all headed to sleep, as a precaution Josh activated a security bot for the camp. He didn’t think they were in any danger, but he preferred to be on the safe side.

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D117, after receiving no more responses from the minds below him concerning the intruders at the barrier sent another message upstream.

C43211, his immediate superior, only because that was the way the net was currently formed, communicated with others of his level. A consensus was reached the relative protocols that could find meant clearing the grid of all life forms. Another message was sent.

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After the exploration team had signed off Halerin motioned for Yelaa to keep the link to the colonist open.

“What do you think Jarwan?”

His old friend gave a grimace. “What I think is that my nice simple retirement colony just got a lot more complicated. Regardless of what they find out there that wall itself is enough to bring people wanting to study it or look for treasure. You know the drill.”

“Yea, it might make you famous. That could be good or bad,” said Halerin.

“Mike,” said Jarwan, “this colony is made up of people who were trying to simplify their lives. I’m not sure they would consider finding alien ruins a good thing. In fact, I know for certain that there are a few who would really be pissed off.”

“Well, that’s your decision of course. You know we wouldn’t say anything. It’s even in our contract.”

“I know Mike. This is going to take some thought. Hell, this is going to take a lot of thought.

“Well, since were three or four months away from pulling out of here you’ve got lots of time to figure it out.”

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With the morning they ate a quick first meal and then proceeded to pack up the camp. Unlike their scientific equipment the tents and camp stuff were designed to be broken down and stowed quickly. Before long they were headed back to the wall. They followed the homing beacon they had planted the day before, but they could have just followed their own tracks since the quiet night had not erased them. It took them about the same amount of time to return. They again set up a temporary camp. This time only about fifty meters from the wall and then they unloaded most of the science gear again. Josh figured that they would probably use most of it as they re-examined the wall with a night’s thoughts to guide them. At least he hoped that everyone had thought of new things to try. He himself, had drawn a blank. Hopefully when they recontacted the ship somebody up there would have come up with something.

They again setup a three-way comm link. Both the ship, and the colony, were soon on. Unfortunately neither group had anything to suggest that the team hadn’t already thought of so they went to work.

They examined the wall from several angles and for a longer time period than the day before. Nothing changed, they could get no reading that made any kind of sense. To top it off, they were now aware of the eerie lack of sound from beyond the wall. It was if no air moved there but Josh could see the leaves moving, following the gentle breezes he felt on his face, but no sound was heard.

“Guys”, asked Josh? “Have you noticed that although we can’t hear the effects of the breeze, we can feel it. I can understand the wall cutting off power, but how is it stifling the sound moving through the air”?

Mikiu frowned, ‘I’ve been wondering that myself. I think maybe it’s more absorption than suppression.” Or, he admitted, “we may have just lumped it in with the sound of the wind in the desert. Wind sound in the desert is kind of non-directional. Of course, it may just dampen the sound at the molecular level.

Josh frowned, “molecular level, that doesn’t sound like it would be very healthy for us”?

“That’s what we’re going to find out. I’m ready to try the Millange Crystals. “

Josh watched as Mikiu had pulled on a pair on a pair of heavy gloves, then proceeded to anchor a poly-steel alloy line to one of the Hover units. The other end he hooked to a small, slotted glass cylinder that contained a blue pyramidal crystal. Mikiu looked in his direction, he nodded and motioned for the others to setup back from the wall.

Mikiu let out a meter and a half of the line, twirled the crystal vertically to build up some speed and then let the line slip through his fingers as the crystal flew over the top of the wall. Josh knew from how Mikiu stopped the sliding line that the cylinder must have clanked against the other side, but there was no sound.

Mikiu glanced his direction, “I felt it hit the side, but I didn’t hear it.”

“That means vibration does get though, if you’re physically connected. How long do we need to leave it there to tell if the crystal is affected?”

“I’m going to leave it a few minutes because I want an observable difference.”

Wendy asked, “I’ve heard of these crystals of course but I don’t really know how they work.”

Susan filled here it, “simple really, they’re the closest thing we’ve ever found to a human life force, whatever that really is. These things come from the planet Millange. Survey was sure they’d found an occupied planet. They spent three years figuring out it was the crystals fooling their sensors. Ever since then they’ve been standard gear for explorations. They have a lot of uses other than what we’re going to use them for here.

After waiting a full five minutes Mikiu slowly begin pulling in the line, making sure to pull it straight over the area where he had placed a net, hastily rigged from an extra tent. With a slight spring the glass cylinder jumped back to their side of the wall and landed in the makeshift net, bouncing lightly a few times before coming to rest. Mikiu dropped the line and grabbed his portable sensor unit to begin scanning.

Josh, although noticing that the red of the crystals appeared lighter in color, waited for him to get a good start before interrupting. “Well, did it kill it?”

“You can’t actually kill something that only mimics being alive,” He moved the scanner some more, “and no, it didn’t kill it, but it sure put it out of commission.”

Wendy asked, “what the hell does that mean?”

“Means it severely depressed the internal goings on of the crystal matrix, but technically it didn’t kill it. It probably would have given enough time.”

“Why did it shut down the drone so fast?”

“Probably messed up its control circuits more than anything else. But this does tell me that the field extends inward from the wall.”

Josh glanced at the trees rising above the barrier. Couldn’t extend to far or it would affect the trees.”

“Yeah,” said Mikiu. The question is, how wide is the field and what will it do to us if we cross it?”

“You think it would kill us?” asked Wendy.

“No, but I’m betting that you’ll not enjoy the trip, even if it’s only one step,” said Mikiu.

Josh starred, “so if we don’t stop to take in the view it probably won’t kill us?”

Jameson looked sharply at Mikiu, “Not killing us, I like the sound of that.”

“I mean that if this is a field to keep something from crossing into the forest, it might not be very wide. We might be able to get past it.”

“Oh, you could be right”, said Jameson. “As Josh pointed out, it doesn’t seem to reach the trees. That’s still a good two meters it appears, a little further than one step.”

“That’s not even the major problem. The real question is how do we cross the field quickly, considering that it’s three meters in the air. Anyone know how to pole vault?”

“Pole vault,” said Wendy.

“Ignore him,” said Mikiu. “He likes to inject ancient facts into conversations. I think someone told him it made him sound smart.”

Josh ignored him. “It’s an old sport, you run with a long pole, plant it at the base of something, and use it to swing over the top of something taller than you.”

Wendy, wondering about his seriousness, said, “and you’ve done this?”

“No, but I’ve seen video. I was just kidding folks, we’ll use the Hovers. Josh turned his gaze back to the part of the trees that stood above the wall. “The question is, how do we do that. I’m open to ideas.”

Wendy said. “Well, we have to find a way over. This planet is going to get small at some point if we can’t. Not to mention that finding out what the hell’s over there might change everything.” She looked at Josh and smiled, “besides we paid good money for you to handle problems like this.”

He retorted, “do you mind if we find a safe way to do it.”

She let her frown answer for her.

Mikiu broke in, “I think I can find a way to test the theory. We may need some additional gear though, and some help from the ship.”

“You’re thinking of using a grav-pack.”

“Yes, why not. Hopefully this thing doesn’t extend that far up.”

Josh thought for a second, anti-grav technology was used a lot for cargo haulers and other things that ran low to the ground, but anything that got very high, especially a man with a grav-pack on, tended to become unstable fairly quickly. Liquid fuel steering jets made their use possible but also limited their range considerably.

“Maybe, we packed them, for cliffs and caves. How can we test how high the field goes?”

Mikiu thought for a minute, “we go fishing. We’ll stick some crystals on a long pole and stick then in the field. If we anchor whoever goes up with manned guidelines, we should be able to keep them clear of the field.”

“And if not”, said Josh dryly, “we can use the lines to drag back your lifeless body.”

“I didn’t say it was a perfect plan and I don’t remember saying I would be the one to try it.”

“You know the rules, your idea, your ass tries it,” said Josh. “Besides, you’ll be able to control the grav-pack easier, you’re shorter than me.”

Wendy broke in, “you know that girls are capable too, right?”

Josh laughed, “You’re not a girl, you’re a client. And as you pointed out, you’re paying us, so we’ll take the risks thank you.”

She gave him an uncertain look. “What do you mean I’m not a girl? I have the right equipment, and what about Susan?”

“She’s the right height, but it was Mikiu’s idea. Or course the real reason is that he’s the one who’s qualified to do the job.” He started to turn away, then turned back. “And I remember that you have the right equipment, I’d prefer you didn’t get it nicked up.” With that he did turn away.

Her face turned a rosy shade of red. Everyone pretended not to notice.

It took them an hour to set everything up for the test. This including a couple of trial runs with Mikiu going up with the grav-pack. Finally, he nodded his go ahead. The real reason Josh had picked him was his experience with the use of a grav-pack. It was one of the principle tools of a science officer while on exploration duty.

With a four-meter pole rigged out of collapsible tent stakes tied to the slotted glass cylinder, complete with new crystals, he was ready. Mikiu had chosen a different set of crystals that would change color from light yellow to dark yellow if the life emulation force was suppressed. If the color disappeared completely it would mean the loss their imitation life force.

Josh checked the straps on the grav-pack one last time. “Okay, I think you’re good to go.” He glanced at Mikiu, “tell me again why I’m you’re doing this and not me?”

“Cause, you insisted, and besides, you’d screw it up.”

Susan snorted.

“Right”, said Josh, “I knew it was something like that. Well, let’s do this.” With that he grasped the one of the guidelines while Mikiu twisted the control grip of the grav-pack. They watched as he reached the top of the wall before nudging the control to inch himself closer to the wall. Behind, and to each side of Mikiu, Josh, Jameson and Susan took up the slack on their anchor lines. Wendy contented herself with just watching, a concerned look on her face.

Mikiu took his time arriving on station. The pole holding the test crystal extending two meters in front of him and two meters behind him. It was fastened to both his side and the side of the grav-pack with a small bag of sand on the end serving as a counterweight. After waiting long enough to ascertain that the yellow of the crystal was indeed deepening, he slowly slid the pole out another meter. This made hovering a little harder but his three line minders increased their back pressure to keep him even. He had to wait for couple of minutes but slowly the yellow of the crystal returned to its lighter hue.

Mikiu glanced down at Josh. “It would appear that you are correct. The field goes a over a meter from the wall. Now what?”

“Move up a couple of meters and try it again, we need to find the upper limit of the field.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.”

It took the better part of three hours because Mikiu insisted on changing the crystals often to give them a chance to regenerate and make it easier to tell if the field affected them. He told Josh he didn’t know how repeated exposure would affect their usefulness. Finally, at a height of ten and a half meters, the effects of the field simply stopped, the crystal never darkened. It was like a switch had been thrown. Mikiu even insisted they rerun the test at that height with new crystals, it didn’t matter, ten and a half meters was the top edge of the field.

Josh and the others helped Mikiu out of the grav-pack harness. The man shook his head before taking a seat on an equipment case. “Well, that wore me out more than a day’s walk.

Josh nodded, “yea, I can believe that. You made me tired and the only thing I was doing was holding a rope.”

He turned to the others. “How about we call it quits for the day and figure out our next move. We probably should get everyone’s opinion anyway.

He was answered by a chorus of affirmations. “Fine,” he said. “Deidre, you copy that, we’re going to take a break and get something to eat. How about we call you after that?”

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The captain, after removing his headset, headed down to engineering to check the progress of the overhaul. It was early third shift, which didn’t change the number of people working. On a starship, shift assignments didn’t really correspond to a time of day. There were no periods of light or dark, light levels were always the same and crew members simply worked the shifts they were assigned. Ships corridors, elevators and ladder tubes were kept to a limited illumination to save power and keep eyes accumulated for the ship’s controls.

As he entered Engineering through the air lock double entry doors, he could hear Jerimy swearing in several different languages and dialects. He was impressed.

He looked over Jerimy’s wide shoulders. “So, are we settling down here or what?”

The swarthy engineer glanced around. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t sneak up on me Mike. I’ve got enough irritation right now.”

“What’s the current problem? I know you have more than one.” Getting the engineer to vent was one of the easiest ways to get him to come up with solutions. It was a little scene they had played out many times in the past.

The man glared at him, his skin dark from the effects of the ships power plants, the whites of his eyes a sharp contrast to the rest of his face. Wiping his hands on a dirty rag tucked into the pocket of his coveralls he turned to face the his Captain and friend.

“It’s a shorter list of the things that aren’t a problem.” He shook his head to clear it. “Actually, there are no real problems, either I’m getting old or the ship is, and I suspect that both of those things are true.”

“So, everything normal”, said Mike.

“I didn’t say that. Half the parts we got from Bosco don’t quite fit. That’s the last time I order from that Joker.”

Mike frowned, if the parts were useless they would take a big hit on their maintenance budget. “How bad is it?”

Jerimy realized he might be needlessly worrying his friend. “We’ll be okay, everything’s still usable, just maybe not the way they’re supposed to be used. We’re have to do a lot of size adjustments. I hate buying parts made off world, they’re always a little off. You’d think standardized sizes would mean everything is the same.” He turned to look back at the machinery. “It just takes additional time is all.”

“Well, with the trouble Josh is running into on the planet, we’ve got plenty of time.”

“Yeah”, said Jerimy, “what do you think this wall is all about.”

“Don’t know, should be interesting to find out.”

“You think there’s anything dangerous?”

Mike thought for a second, there was always the possibility of danger, that was the nature of the job and they dealt with. Sometimes he wondered if repeated brushes with danger had dampened his interest in the unknown. No, he decided, if there was no danger life would be boring and one might as well sit at home. He was not a home body.

Mike responded, “I don’t know, the colony has been here for ten years and nothing had happened to them so far.”

“You and I both know that ten years is nothing. We’ve seen things that hibernate longer than that. Susan able to get any kind of age readings?”

Mike smiled ruefully, “I don’t know, Josh is being his regular self. I’ll call you when I’m good and ready.”

Jerimy laughed, “he is kinda busy, so call him.”

Mike started back to the bridge, “That’s another of the reasons I came down here for. To tell you to be on the bridge in about an hour. Josh is going to call in after they eat and rest for a little bit. Mikiu wore himself out with the grav-pack. It appears that the suppression fields is under two meters wide, and Mikiu thinks they should be okay crossing it if they move quick. The question is to figure out how to do that.”

Jerimy nodded, “I’ll think about it.” Glancing at the interior of the engine room he said, “got to be easier than this.”

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On the planet below, the exploration team was sound asleep. The only one of the group that was paying attention to the surroundings was the security bot. It was a primitive model, but it would alert them if anything should approach during the night. It’s programming was limited but it would notice any radical changes in the environment or their health. The one thing It couldn’t notice was the ancient intelligence watching the camp form the forest.

D117 was aware of the carbon-based ones, they had had visited the planet before. It knew, from a sub-mind level lower than itself, that there was likely a group of them living in the forbidden circle. It had no way of examining for that. D117’s senses covered the most of the planet and near space, but the one thing that was beyond its abilities was the large circular area in the middle of the planets largest land mass. D117 didn’t question that lack of ability, such wondering was beyond the capabilities of its status. However, it was part of his job to question things that occurred near the barrier, such as the security robot and its companions.

To do so, it had to fully ascertain the robots function. It was obviously different than the others he had observed. They seemed to move about and even communicate with each other independent of a central control. The robot differed, observation showed a predictable method of activity. It had a purpose and although D117 was not certain what that purpose was, it recognized a like mind. Albeit a mind that was more primitive than its own. D117, as was it nature, decided to test the robot for its function. He summarized that it was a watcher, the same as D117, and that was the hypothesis it decided to test before making a decision. D117 looked though it’s memory and sent a request to the sub-minds underneath itself. The answers of course, came back quickly. It wasted no time in selecting a test.

With a gently controlled movement of air, the robot toppled over.

Josh was jolted to his feet by the screech of the sentry robot’s siren. Grabbing his sidearm from his belt he launched himself out of the tent. Behind him Mikiu and Susan followed weapons in hand. The two colonists brought up the rear, unsure of what was happening.

The sentry bot was standing in the middle of the camp, rapidly scanning a full circle – it had also triggered all of the camps lighting.

Josh shouted to be heard over the siren. “Mikiu, turn that siren off and tell me what’s going on.”

Mikiu already had his portable comp in his hand and with the wave of a finger the piercing siren went silent. “Something knocked over the bot!”

Josh looked around, seeking something that wasn’t there. “Knocked it over, physically?”

“It would appear so,” said Mikiu, reviewing the robots security log as he spoke.

Josh asked, “anything on the scanner now?”

Mikiu glanced at his handheld remote again, “there wasn’t anything the first time. The sentry robot just fell over.”

Josh glanced sharply at him. “Just fell over!” He glanced at the now stationary but still active bot moving its upper torso in a circle scanning.”

Glancing back to Mikiu he asked, “Fell over, you’re sure. How do you know?”

“It’s on the video feed. I can see it face planet. Hold a moment. Mikiu said as he ran back through the robot’s logs, then, tilting his head, he did it again. “There’s nothing here”, he said. I think, from these readings, that a very selective burst of wind hit the robot.”

“Wind”, the others exclaimed, glancing around at each of in disbelief, for the air was very quiet.

“That is what the sensor log says.” Mikiu shook his head, “let me run a quick diagnostic.”

Josh pulled the others into a group, “okay, I want each of you to take a torch and walk twenty feet in a cardinal direction.”

Wendy asked, “what are looking for?”

“Tracks”, answered Josh, “this sand is loose, if anyone came into the camp they should have left a trail, or at least disturbed the ground somehow.”

She shot back, “the wind doesn’t leave tracks.”

“I know that”, he answered grimly. “But if we’re up against the wind – well that would be a new one.”

The others nodded and set out, Josh picked west, towards the wall. They all got the same results, nothing. The only markings in the sand were their own. Josh wasn’t sure what to think. It was possible that a freak blast of air had up ended the bot, but he didn’t think so. The sentry robot was a meter tall and moved on its own small anti-grav system, it was made of composites, it wasn’t heavy, but it was substantial enough not to be moved easily by a gust of air.

Mikiu looked up as they came back. “I take it no one found anything?”

They all answered “no”.

“That’s because there was nothing to see, whatever it was, it was very localized. In fact, I would say it was deliberate, someone or something, reached out and shoved the bot – with a gust of wind..”

Josh shook his head, “that doesn’t make sense. There are no tracks.”\

Mikiu nodded, “like the girl said, the wind doesn’t leave tracks. Except it does, usually. You can’t really tell in the sand, but I see no signs of anything being displaced. That brings me back to why I said it was localized. The bot’s sensors say that the air pressure knocked it over, but those same sensors show no air movement. Maybe just for a brief second, it happened to fast to tell for sure.”

Josh looked around, an invisible enemy was not something they had an answer for. There had been stories of course from other worlds about invisible foes and unseen events. He considered these as stories to be dismissed as the result of imagination or over imbibing in something.

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This scene was watched in great interest. D117 could only watch of course, the part of the barrier that kept sound from entered the forbidden zone worked both ways. However, he had been right, the artificial device served as a protector for the other strangers. To the extent that he could, he found this fascinating, but his curiosity only went so far. He mentally sent a detailed report of all that had occurred to the C level sub-mind that directed his activities. He got a response from sub-mind C43211 immediately, the directions were clear, standby, and observe. He was to take no further action unless intent to breech the barrier was ascertained. He settled back into his role and waited for either the unknowns to do something else or new orders to arrive..

Sub-mind C43211 spent some time analyzing the situation before sending requests for information down to additional D level sub-minds. That done it settled into waiting for responses. Then it too would respond and perhaps send additional orders.

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Eventually they settled back into the combined tents. There was still three hours left before dawn and Josh didn’t want to spend the next day with a tired team. Still, it didn’t look like anyone was inclined to fall asleep quickly.

Jameson leaned back on one elbow, “okay, we know there was no wind, what else could it have been?”

“I don’t care what it was, I don’t think something wants us here”, said Wendy.

“Really”, said Josh sarcastically. “You’ve been here for ten years and now something is upset by your presence.”

Mikiu broke in, “maybe it’s because we’re out here by the wall. Maybe we triggered some automatic response system.”

“One that has no power signature, that can’t be detected by sensors, even when we’re close, I think the robot malfunctioned and mistakenly thought it detected air movement.”

“The robot passed all of its diagnostics,” pointed out Mikiu.

“So, what do you think it was?” asked Josh.

“I have absolutely no idea. Unless Wendy’s people did something to the planet and it took ten years to get mad.”

“Hey,” said Wendy, her voice sleepy. “Don’t try an lay this on us. Happened after you guys came back.”

Josh was not convinced of anything, but he was sleepy. “Don’t matter to me right now. We’ve got a lot of work to do tomorrow, like taking a look around in daylight to see what we might have missed. Then we’ve got to decide how to cross that wall without getting ourselves killed or injured. So let’s all try to get a few hours of sleep, or at least some rest.”

With that he unceremoniously killed the lights and lay down, after a few seconds he heard the others do the same.

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C43211 had interacted with other C level sub-minds and even contacted a level B mind for guidance. An answer would come in due time. While waiting a course of action had been started. Since none of the sub-minds were capable of examining the restricted area, they would allow the carbon-based entities to enter the forest. If they did so they could studied in greater detail, and perhaps, something could be learned of their intent. In the meantime, it sent a series of orders down to minor sub-minds to do what they could about the presence of newcomers in the forbidden zone. Later it would come to realize that it should have been more specific in those orders. It had been a long time since it had given such complex orders to other sub-minds and much of the procedure lists were stored away in long term memory. It did put in a request for a reloading of the procedure information needed, but until then C43211 would act on its own.

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They awoke sheepishly, a little embarrassed by their brief bout of excitement the night before. After a quick examination of the camp and the surrounding area they took time for a quick meal. Before eating though Josh took the time to quickly update the ship, fortunately his father was asleep and he just updated Yelaa about the incident with the bot.

Over breakfast, they decided that since the field only rose to a little over ten meters, they could risk using a Hover. Normally that height would be too much for the little cargo wagon, but adding guidelines, like they had with Mikiu, would allow it. Then they could cross the barrier, quickly, and attach lines to one of the trees. Josh thought that if they rigged up enough lines to keep the Hover from drifting out of control, they could use it to ferry the team over one or two at a time. It would be a slow process but as safe as they could make it. The main problem as he saw it would be getting across the barrier quickly enough to avoid anyone passing out. Mikiu and those on the ship had reached a consensus that the drone’s apparent demise was mainly caused by the fact that it was still in the field’s influence. They didn’t intend to allow that to happen to themselves – at least that was the plan..

Now that something had attacked, or at least interacted with the sentry robot, turning back was not an option, someone or something knew they were here. For the safety of the colony, they needed to find out who that someone or something was, or at the very least, get an idea of how much of a problem it would be for the young colony. Josh felt a responsibility to the colony. If there was something that threatened them making a home here, he wanted to be in a position to fix it, or at least, with the Deidre’s help, provide an escape.

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It was Wendy who noticed first. “What the fuhh.” She caught herself before finishing the word.

Josh laughed, a laugh that was quickly stopped as he turned to see the object of her profanity. Fifty meters away was the wall, and it was different. Acting as a backdrop to the few pieces of equipment they had left behind, was an arched opening. Through it Josh could see the forest floor and the bottom of the trees he had starred at all of yesterday. Directly in the center of the arch, but clearly on the other side of the wall, lay their drone.

Josh glanced at Mikiu who already had his binoculars to his eyes. “I’m pretty sure that wasn’t there before.”

Mikiu mumbled, “It would appear that all our complicated plans were for naught. Somebody opened the door.”

Susan starred, “Are we being invited in?”

Josh looked through his own binoculars and said, “Apparently so. However,” turning he estimated the width of the Hovers with the width of the arch. I don’t think they want us to bring our luggage.”

Mikiu, also glancing at the Hovers, said, “We could fly them over.”

“We’d have to use the same routine we were going to use to get ourselves over, guild lines and all. Somebody’s trying to make our lives easier. Let’s not complicate it again.”

“Could be a trap,” said Jameson a little nervously.

“Nah, if they can put in a door overnight, they could probably have caused harm if that was their intent.”

Wendy gave Jameson a look that Josh couldn’t identify, and said, “what he said. If they wanted to hurt us why open a door. Should we all go through?” She turned a questioning gaze to Josh.

He shook his head. “That’s a damm good question, shame I don’t have a damm good answer.”

Mikiu said, “If we split up the party we could get separated. That door could shut just as easy as it opened.”

Josh nodded, “you’re right of course.” He gave his friend a wry look. “You’re just assuming that it was easy of course. I don’t fancy splitting up the team thought.”

“True, but if we got stuck it might be nice to have someone on this side to set up our Hover bridge scheme. We can’t use the remote for the Hovers with that suppression field in place.”

Josh made a decision. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. We’ll make a recording telling the ship, and I guess indirectly your dad Wendy, that we’re going through. If they don’t hear from us after a while they can send down a rescue team.”

Jameson asked, ‘why don’t we just call them.”

Wendy laughed, she knew the answer. “Because they might say no. I’m sure that my dad at the least, would want to show up and run things. He still thinks I’m a kid.”

Mikiu starred at Josh, “the old better to ask for forgiveness than permission routine.”

The others nodded. That made sense and they all felt inclined to continue while momentum was in the direction of exploration, not caution.

Josh looked around, “okay, if we’re going to go through I want more equipment then we have now. Since we don’t know for sure that door is going to stay open I suggest we carry a bunch of stuff through and create a supply dump. We’ll make a couple of trips if it let’s us. That way, even if something goes wrong, we have supplies to fall back on.”

Mikiu frowned, “all the science stuff?”

“Maybe not all of it, just the stuff we think we’ll need in a forest, plus a lot of food, weapons etc.”

Susan asked, “weapons? I know we’ll have to go armed, I’m all for that, but I don’t want someone snooping through our gear and deciding we’re evil.”

Josh laughed, “I don’t think it matters, we didn’t exactly bring heavy weapons. The only thing surplus we have is some extra ammo. If they get upset at that we have a problem anyway.”

Jameson added, “might be better if they do find some arms and ammo. We want them to have a true look at who we are. Might as well be honest about it.”

“Makes sense to me,” said Josh.

The others nodded and headed back across the short distance to camp. It took only an hour or so for everything they thought they might need to be packed up and ready to go. Without a word they started the short walk back to the wall. Before leaving for the wall Josh and Wendy created messages for their respective fathers that, along with copies of pertinent sensor and video logs, would transmit to the Deidre only after they were well under way. The amount of gear they settled on as necessary turned out to be smaller less than Josh had thought. They were able, walking slowly, to carry it all on one trip.

After a brief rest to alleviate any fatigue from the short trip they lined up to enter the portal.

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D117, who still was responsible for monitor the intruders, noticed with anticipation that it appeared that they were accepting the invitation to enter the forest.

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Captain Mike Halerin was tired and had intended to go immediately to his bunk, but Yelaa had insisted the message was important and that he should see the transmitted data himself. To spread the misery, he had brought along a protesting Jerimy, who lamented the fact that he could get a few more hours of work in. The captain thought a break would do the engineer good. Besides, he preferred the people messing with the insides of his ship not be exhausted.

Together they listened to Josh’s report and reviewed the logs. A moment of silence ensued as each man thought about what they had just seen and heard.

Jerimy broke the silence first. “Okay, I think, and mind you this is just a first impression, that something was looking for some answers and decided to invite the team in to provide them.”

“You don’t see this as a trap?”

“Why bother, it can probably do more than smack a low credit sentry bot. I think that was just to judge their reactions, thankfully they didn’t come out and shoot anything. You know your son used to be a bit trigger happy.”

Mike shook his head, “He’s too experienced for now and I the colony people are on a tight leash as far as weapons go. Josh wasn’t happy about them being armed in the first place, an opinion he had probably changed now. You may be right about knocking over the bot, and, I agree with you that it’s probably not a trap. But I don’t like the idea of them not taking the Hovers in with them.”

Jerimy thought for a second, “I think that was probably intentional on their hosts part, or maybe just an oversight. Doesn’t matter, they’ll take grav-packs and that’ll be probably be better in among the trees. The Hovers may not have had any maneuvering room anyway. If thing get tight they might have to leave some gear behind, no big lose.”

Mike knew that was a last resort. If they had to escape the wall with grav-packs the two colonists would be a burden. Of course, if it came to that, Josh, Mikiu and Susan would be able to aid them and hopefully the Deidre would have people on site by then.

Sighing he said, “Yelaa, have Wally and Russ get a shuttle stocked up with what ever they think might be needed, make sure they see the logs first.”

He turned to Jerimy, “and I still have to explain it to Jarwan.”

“Think he’s going to want to go along?”

“What do you think. He wanted to go in the first place but let his girl go instead, something he’ll be kicking himself for now..”

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The opening looked just like an arched doorway carved into the wall, it was a little over two meters at the tallest part of the arch and was wide enough for two people to walk comfortably. The first trip they did it one at a time. Josh walked across and back. The first trip he only went far enough to recover their drone.

While Mikiu examined it he, Jameson and Wendy carried the rest of the extra gear through. Josh elected to place it at the base of the first tree they came to walking in a straight line. He intended to use it as a visual anchor to the location of the archway, in case it disappeared on them.

Mikiu finished with the drone and turned his attention to the opening itself. “I don’t understand it. For all the sensors are telling me the opening has been here forever.”

“Maybe it has”, said Josh. “Maybe we just couldn’t see it the first time we were here. What about the drone?”

“Just like we thought, the batteries just shot. I knew we should have sprung for the ones with the mini-nukes built in.”

“Would it have made a difference in what happened to the drone?”

“Maybe, I don’t know.”

Josh shrugged, “then it doesn’t matter. Sides, my father never spends money on fancy gear that doesn’t do a better job.

Josh settled back on his haunches for a second to give a last think. He really wasn’t sure about this course of action, but he also didn’t feel like waiting for the ship to chime in.

Josh raised his voice, “Okay folks, it’s just after midday. Let’s eat and gear up. I want everyone with full standard packs as well as grav-packs hanging, and weapons ready. He looked around, “we’ll eat on the inside of the wall, just in case someone decides to close the door.” With that he took a seat in an open area three meters from the wall and facing away from it. He used one of the tall trees as a back rest. He didn’t fear being snuck up on from the desert, just the forest.

It took slightly longer than he expected to get everyone ready, the colonists were unfamiliar with the concept of hanging grav-packs over their existing backpacks, even for the short trip to the new supply area. Josh was not really happy with leaving the supplies unguarded by nothing more than a security bot, but he preferred carrying food, water, weapons and shelter on their persons. As a precaution he had Mikiu place the two additional security bots at different locations some distance away to provide an overwatch. He hoped that if nothing else it might provide them some warning if someone booby trapped or otherwise tampered with. He was also curious to see if someone would show enough interest to examine their gear. It might give them an idea of who they were dealing with.

They started out with Mikiu in the lead with his sensors, followed by Josh and Susan with hands on their weapons and Wendy and Jameson brought up the rear. Josh had tasked Jameson with keeping an eye on the wall to see if it closed behind them.

Unlike some of the predictions by the colony scientist, the forest floor was not sand but a dark soil that didn’t appear to be moist or dry.

Mikiu stopped when they reached a tree that appeared different than those near the wall. The trunk was the same in color but not size, this one was a meter or more in diameter, with small bark lines running vertically. Reaching out Josh felt the surface, it was smooth and dry. He caught Mikiu’s reproachful glance and realized that he shouldn’t have touched it ungloved.

“I know”, he said, turning to two colonist he said, “that was lesson one on what not to do. No touching something before it’s scanned, or without gloves. That was a mistake on my part. Be smarter than me.”

He gave Wendy a quick intense look to shut down the response he knew was coming. She gave him a small smile, gave a slight tilt of her head, and kept silent.

Jameson, who had been scanning the tree with his own scanner, and Josh noticed, gloves said, “seems to be your standard tree, like those found on a hundred worlds, hard wood, tight grain. I find nothing remarkable.”

Mikiu, with his own scanner in hand, threw in, “make that a very tight grain. this stuff is incredibly dense. That probably why they grow so tall, plus, I think these small bark lines help with the aerodynamics, helps keep the wind from playing havoc with up top. That’s all just a guess of course.”

Jameson said, “a guess is probably all we’re going to get without a lab study. My scanner won’t penetrate the wood deep enough to make a guess on age. How about yours?”

Mikiu shook his head. “the only way we’re going to get an accurate idea on that is to cut one down and count the rings. I assume we won’t be doing that.”

Josh let his breath out slowly. “I don’t even think we have anything to do that with. No other way, can’t you carbon date, this thing looks like it could be old enough.

Mikiu repeated his head shake, “no, we if I could get a good reading we don’t have anything to compare it to, form a baseline. The science officer glanced to Jameson, “we don’t do we?”

The colony biologist said, “no, we’ve not had anything but sand to play with. This is the first chance, other than what survey provided, which was next to nothing, I’ve had to examine anything alive on this planet other than the few fish live in the river.”

Mikiu looked thoughtful, “well – I feel safe in saying they’re old, really old.”

Jameson asked, “are you basing that just on the height?”

Josh exclaimed, “he’s not basing it on anything. He’s guessing.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m not right.”

“What can you tell us?”

Mikiu glanced at him, “Nothing. I can’t even get an accurate read on the root system, it goes down farther than my instruments can read. I can’t even tell if the plants are all individuals or part of a cluster, the root systems could be joined.”

Jameson added, “he’s right. This could be all one big plant, or a colony of really big plants, we have no way of knowing with this equipment.

Josh sighed and took a few minutes to look in every direction. The trees were spaced about every three to five meters and while not closely arranged it didn’t quite look natural, but it didn’t look like an organized planting either. “You think these were planted by someone? They’re awfully well-spaced.”

Mikiu shrugged, “no idea, don’t see anything that like a fruit or seed pod on the trees or the ground. If they were planted, I couldn’t tell you what for.” Looking up he continued, “What’s interesting is that although they have different diameter trunks they appear to be about the same height. Either they have a nature height limit, or they all were planted around the same time and have the same vertical growth speed. I never heard of anything like that.

“I have,” said Jameson, “but not in trees, at least tall one’s like this. I’ve heard of this sort of thing in grain and fruit plants.”

Wendy who while following the conversation, had drifted away from the group to another tree. She had recalled Josh’s warning and pulled on gloves before touching the trunk. To her surprise she could immediately feel the heat through her gloves. “Hey, is that one hot?”

“Hot.” Said Josh as he moved to her side, putting his own gloved hands on the bark beside hers. She was right, the trunk, while not exactly hot, was much warmer than the other one.

“She’s right. Mikiu, what’s the temp on that one?”

The Science officer checked his sensor read-out, “ambient, 21 degrees.”

“Well, this one is quite a bit warmer.”

Mikiu moved to where Josh and Wendy were standing, took a reading, and then, took another. Frowning he said, “That’s odd, this tree is at 30, well above the other, although I wouldn’t call it hot exactly.”

“That’s a big difference for a couple of meters of space”, said Josh. “What’s causing it?”

Another shrug from Mikiu, “again, no idea. From what I can see they’re the same species, could be a difference in sex, age or just metabolism.”

Wendy asked, “Could it be sick?”

“You mean like a fever, highly unlikely. For all we know it’s the tree with the low temp that’s sick. We just don’t have enough information to go on.”

Jameson nodded, “besides, trees regulate temperature through their leaves. I’ve never heard of a tree trunk having a fever.”

Josh said, “we have, on Maric 7. Of course, everything on that planet is strange.”

Mikiu nodded in agreement, “don’t think we’re looking at the same sort of thing here. These trees scan as your basic garden type, nothing special other than their abnormally consistent height, and even that might be an environmental thing.

Josh nodded and looked around, “well, we’re not finding any answers just standing here. Susan, give the ship a status update, let’s make sure they can track us.”

While she was doing that Josh checked his location tracker. It was based solely on their movements, keeping track of them in reference to its last initialization point, which was their arrival location in the desert three days ago. From that initial mark they should be able to follow the recorded movements backwards. By this point Josh was beginning to have doubts about the reliability of their equipment.

Susan added to those doubts when she spoke up, her voice higher than normal. “I can’t raise the ship Josh. I tried all freqs, even the emergency ones.”

Mikiu and Josh pulled out their own communicators. It was soon obvious that Susan was right – communication with the relay comm unit at their campsite, and hence the ship, was gone. And, a direct connection to the ship also failed, although it wasn’t guaranteed under the tree canopy.

Josh looked at Mikiu, “your suppression field?”

“Possibly, are personal comms are a line-of-sight unit, but I’m not having any better luck with the low band stuff, you’d think either the Deidre or the colonies satellite would hear us.”

“Maybe we just can’t hear them back.”

Mikiu shrugged his shoulder, “how would we know, and what difference would it make. We’re out of communication with anyone.”

“Okay, now what”, asked Susan?

Josh thought for a second, “well I don’t think we’re in any immediate danger. No one is expecting a check-in this soon, although I was surprised they hadn’t called us over that little stunt about not talking to them about this little expedition. Maybe this explains why. I say we do a little exploring, take some readings, some photos, and then head back for dinner and a call in.”

Wendy said, “my dad will be anxious about us being out of radio contact.”

Mikiu laughed, “I doubt that. Your dad was a ship man. He knows that not everything goes the way you expect it.”

Josh added, “besides, if we go back and report in now without anything to tell them about this place you and I are going to look mighty foolish to our fathers.”

She nodded, didn’t want that. The others also agreed, so they headed deeper into the forest, keeping as perpendicular as possible to the wall arch. After a short distance the ground begin to slope downward, a slight lowering of temperature became noticeable, and the slightest hint of damp tinged the air. It was obvious that they were getting further away from the top of the canopy, and they soon noticed that the amount of light was decreasing, apparently the leaf density in the canopy was growing thicker. Josh wasn’t sure of the reason for that, and after a kilometer, measured by his tracker, he called a halt.

“Okay, let’s take some more readings from the trees, I want as much information as possible for the ship. Mikiu, is it my imagination or is the top cover heavier?”

“No, it’s definitely not your imagination, it’s getter darker. The good news is that I think we’ve hit the point where it won’t get any worse.”

“That’s good,” said Susan, “at least we won’t have to break out the belly lights. I hate wondering around looking like my navels on fire.”

It was then, that they saw it. A bird, large bird, a bird about the size of human head, with bright green and red plumage that made it stand out from the forest. Like a recon mission, It flew right through the middle of them, as if to ensure their attention. With a graceful swoop upward, it landed on a branch several trees away, well over their heads, and turned to look down on them with intelligent eyes.

Josh was the first to speak, “Mikiu, that seems to be a bird?”

Mikiu answered slowly as he aimed his sensor, “yes, it does, and before you mention it, the survey didn’t say a thing about air borne fauna. Although it stands to reason that when you have tree’s you would have birds.”

“That’s not necessarily the case,” said Jameson. The presence of one does not automatically require the other.”

Susan added, “and your people would never have seem them, way out there in the desert.”

“Well,” said Josh, “we know survey did a poor job so it’s no wonder that you folks didn’t know about them. I wonder what it eats, there’s no ground cover or insects that we’ve seen.”

Jameson said, “look at its beak, long and pointed. I think this guy dines on tree sap or deeply embedded grubs, or its food source may be higher up, in the canopy.”

Wendy, Josh noticed, still had the big smile he had relished ten years ago. She said, “don’t’ care what he eats, he’s beautiful.”

Mikiu smiled as well, “and he, or she, as the case may be, appears to be studying us.”

“We’re new, and probably the first humans he’s ever seen.”, said Wendy.

The bird watched them with tilted head and curious intent. Then with an acrobatic leap it turned in midair and flew deeper into the forest. Josh realized that the only sound it had made was the flapping of its wings.

Wendy gasped and Josh turned to find her starring at a four-legged animal that reminded him of a dog. Its head was shaped somewhat like a horse, but its body resembled a large dog with thick, rough looking red-brown fur and a curved up raised tail. It stared at them intently, a look of puzzlement on its face.

“Well,” laughed Susan, “What does this guy eat? I don’t think it’s tree sap.”

Jameson laughed, “no he looks like a grazer but,” he looked at the bare forest floor, “I have no idea. There has got to be some ground flora around here somewhere.”

Josh checked the time, they still had plenty of daylight left. “We appear to be heading down hill, maybe towards water, maybe towards heavier growth, something this guy eat.”

Wendy took a step towards the creature, which took a step back. “Don’t try to touch him, for all we know he eats people,” warned Jameson.

“I doubt that, and how do you know it’s a him, I don’t see any equipment,” she said. “Besides, unless there’s a whole hidden colony we don’t know about, how he would know we’re good to eat.”

Josh started to make a joke about their past relationship and then thought better of it. “You getting video of this?”

Mikiu spoke, “He, she, it – who knows, and yes I’m getting good video. I also got some of the bird. If I’d known this was going to be a wildlife tour, I would have brought a different camera.” Turning a little he glanced at Wendy, and lack of visible ‘equipment’ doesn’t mean a thing, you know that. A lot of life forms keep everything tucked away, where it can’t get broken.”

Susan chipped in, “you mean for those who have something to break.”

Josh raised his voice a little, “is that a dis or an observation? Okay people let’s not waste time standing here looking at him or her, we got pictures, we can figure out gender later. We only have about two hours of light left before we need to head back and I would like to find out a little more. Then we turn around. I want to spend tonight back on the sand, especially with unknown life forms running around.”

He turned and led the way deeper into the forest, the ground still sloping slightly downward. He heard Wendy murmur, “he’s following us”, but didn’t turn around to check. He wanted to find out where the bottom of this hill was, with luck, they would find water.

They pressed onward, falling into the same marching order as before with the addition of their four-legged companion. It seemed intent on following but was careful not to get closer than about 3 meters. They wondered on, using the inertia tracker to keep to a straight line with the wall entrance. The trees were spaced wide enough that this didn’t present a problem. Josh kept track of their distance from the wall and when they passed two kilometers he decided to wait 500 meters, after that he would turn them back. The ground began to slope downward at an even sharper angle and before he knew it they faced the prospect of continuing only by turning from walking to climbing – that’s when he called a halt.

“Okay guys, this is far as we go today. Mikiu, leave a beacon so we can find our way back tomorrow. We’re going to have to hurry to get back on sand before dark.”

Mikiu opened his left hand to reveal a small homing beacon which he attached shoulder high to the nearest tree with an adhesive patch. “Being ready since the ground morphed into a hill.”

“You’re pretty sure of yourself,” said Josh.

“No, what I was sure of was your not wanting to have to climb back in the dark,” answered Mikiu.

“You got that right. Besides, for all we know they lock the door at night.”

They returned to the wall in reverse order, with the exception of their friend, the not quite dog, who moved to let them past and then took up his position behind them. Josh wondered if they were being watched or herded. They arrived at last at the wall to find, to their delight, that the mysterious archway was still present. They had no trouble passing though the opening. Once on the other side they turned to look back. Their companion had stopped on his side of the wall, and now sat watched them.

Wendy looking back said, “I was hoping he would follow us to camp.”

“Sorry”, said Josh, “I think he knows where he belongs, or at least I hope so. But that does raise an interesting topic.” He turned to his shipmates, Mikiu and Susan, “we should probably stand a watch tonight. I don’t think we have anything to fear from,” he waved a hand towards the archway, “from whatever he is. However, if that arch remains open, we don’t know what else lives in the forest and something with an appetite might have followed us back.

Jameson shook his head in apparent disagreement. “I don’t think so. The presence of our friend there and his or her lack of caution seems to indicate that its not afraid of predators.”

“I don’t think so either; however, in the space of five minutes we encountered two living things. I know that doesn’t exactly smack of high density, but we have no idea what else considers the woods home. Besides that, we still don’t what happened to the sentry robot last night.”

Mikiu broke in, “and probably never will unless it happens again.”

Wendy snorted, “I think we can safely say that he didn’t do it. We have to think of a name for him. It seems silly to call it, it.”

“Fine, after we get to the tents and eat, then we’ll discuss it. Then we’ll call in and get yelled at by our fathers. After that I’ll take first watch, Mikiu second and Susan, you take the till dawn watch and serve as our alarm clock.

As soon as they reached camp the others fixed food, while Josh contacted his father and sent sensor data. He kept his description of events short, knowing that the Captain and Jerimy would review the data later. He guessed that it would also get forwarded to the colony. His father was also short when he asked, “You anticipate any trouble son?”

“Not from anything we’ve seen so far. I mean someone was kind enough to open a door for us. I know I should have called that in, but my job is to explore.”

Jerimy was the one who answered. “Keep in mind Josh, whoever opened that door is probably curious too. But we don’t know the reason they’re curious. They may just be trying to find out what we want, but we can’t count on that. They may have other reasons.”

“Well,” responded Josh, “our intentions are pretty lame. We’re just trying to see what’s here.”

“Keep in mind son, that’s probably what they’re doing to. The real question is, did they know about the colony before this. If the answer is yes, maybe they’re just trying to be friendly. If the answer was no, then they maybe sizing us up.”

Josh nodded and then remembered that it wasn’t a video call, “I know that. We’ll be on our guard. But if anything intended to harm us, they’ve had ample opportunity. Anyway, we’re going to get a good sleep, or try too at any rate. Just to be uber careful I’m going to keep a watch tonight, just ship’s personnel.”

“Sounds good son. If we think of anything we’ll call you in the morning. I don’t like the fact that you can’t communicate out of the forest, but it is what it is. Maybe Jerimy and Wally can come up with an answer. Deidre out.”

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On board the ship the captain looked at Jerimy and Wally. “Okay, what answer are we going to come up with?”

Jerimy laughed, “I love how you promise things when you don’t have to do the work The forest canopy does a good job screening our comms, and our sensors for that matter.”

Wally said, “about that. I’m going to try modifying our communications array to see if we can get a tighter focus, maybe at least let them hear us. Also, I think just maybe the infrared can be tweaked to give us a better view of the ground. That forest canopy and the height of the trees does a real number on our systems.”

“Can you see anything at all?”

“Maybe, Jerimy and I have tried. We see what could be ancient roads, buildings, even cities, but nothing definite, just hints at what might be there.”

Jerimy added, “We never replaced Winston, so Wally and I are just guessing. I think Josh has a much better chance better of finding something down there than we do of seeing through the forest cover.”

Halerin nodded, “Note to self, get a new archaeologist.” There last crew member with that specialty had elected to travel to halfway across know space to study alien ruins. Halerin reflected on the irony of that for a second before asking another question.

“Let me refine the question, surely you can see the wall?”

Wally nodded, “yes, now that we know it’s there. All it took was a narrowing of the scan field. It outlines the entire desert region and even appears to cross the river. You can see the damm thing from space, or at least tell that the boundary is artificial. How the Survey crew missed it is beyond me.”

Jerimy said, “no, I understand it. Remember, our planetary sensors are a lot new than what the survey patrol would have. They might not have shown exactly how sharp the edge of the desert, forest divide is.”

“Right,” said Halerin. “You guys work your magic. Yelaa, relay this stuff down to Jarwan. I’m sure he’ll be interested in what our wayward children have found.”

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Josh woke with the dawn as was habit, unusual given that aboard ship there is no dawn. He was eager to get going, eager to see what was at the bottom of that slope. The others quickly rose as well, apparently, he wasn’t the only one eager. After a quick breakfast they double timed it to the wall.

Wendy exclaimed, “he’s waiting for us.”

There companion from the day before was sitting expectantly a few meters inside the wall. Josh noticed that he was directly in front of the portal. He wondered if the creature knew about the absorption field.

Mikiu seemed to have the same thought, “I think he knows where the field is.”

Wendy moved quickly through the opening in an effort to reach him, but the beast gave a repeat of yesterday’s avoidance.

Josh moved up to her side, “hey, he’s a wild animal, not your friend. You trying to get bite?”

“I don’t think he’d bite me.”

Susan laughed, “I don’t think he’s going to give you the chance. He’s pretty nifty on the evasive action drill.”

Mikiu looked curious, “and yet, I don’t think he’s afraid of us. He doesn’t want to be touched, but he was waiting for us.”

Josh glanced at the colony girl. “I think he likes Wendy.”

She smiled briefly before taking her normal place in line. “Obviously he has good taste.”

He nodded and set out, he noticed the animal fall into place behind them. He decided that they had to call it something. “We never did get around to giving it a name last night. It was your idea Wendy, got any ideas?”

She thought for a few second before replying, “Dryad.”

Josh gave her a curious look, “so you’ve given up on him being male?”

“No, why, it means wood nymph.”

“Nymphs, from my understanding, are female,” he replied. “A male is called a Drus, I think.”

Mikiu added, “I’m not sure about that. Drus is just the root for Dryad, but it’s a good a name as any.”

She defended her choice, “I like it, and sides, we don’t know boy or girl.”

“True. Okay, but how about we just go with Dry.”

The girl thought for a second and then nodded, “works for me.” She turned to look at the animal. “Does it work for you.”

Josh half expected the creature to answer, but it didn’t. Smiling he glanced at his wrist comp to point him at the beacon and resumed his path into the forest.