New Story

2

01/13/2020

Okay, we’ll pick up here tomorrow:

They didn’t arrive back at the camp site until darkness had started to settle in, fortunately the lights they had left on guided them home. Josh and his shipmates took charge and quickly turned their two tents into one large meeting tent. Then they set up two communication screens, one for the ship and the other for the colony; this would be a three-way conference.

After a quick meal Josh had Susan set up the three-way comm 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. After initialing explaining the failure of the drone the conversation started.

Jerimy, being an engineer spoke first. “And 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 anyone to be in one if the same thing happens.”

“Son, was it definitely a cut off after it passed the wall, nothing hit it, beam or solid.”

“A field of some kind, I’m sure of 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 to 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 the 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?”

“Could be, that wouldn’t necessarily show up on sensors, in theory anyway, we don’t know how to make one.”

The Captain smirked, “we don’t know how to make that wall either. This is looking like alien tech, in which case it may be valuable, and it is most likely dangerous.”

Josh asked, “any suggestions on how we investigate?”

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.”

He glanced at the other members of the team. “Mikiu, can we drop over 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 Captain, 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 watch for the camp. He didn’t think they were in any danger but he preferred to be on the safe side.

With the morning they once again ate a quick first meal and then proceeded to pack up the camp. Before long they were headed back towards the wall, following the homing beacon they had planted the day before. It took them about the same amount of time and they once again set up a temporary camp, but this time only about fifty meters from the wall.

They freed a lot more equipment from the Hovers than before. Josh wanted to do a thorough investigation of the wall before attempting anything intrusive and they had several instruments and tests they hadn’t had the time to use before. They set up the three-way comm link to enable quick passing of information. Both the ship, and the colony, had someone monitoring there ends of the comm.

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 sense to any of their gear. And 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”, said Josh, “I can’t figure the sound thing out. I can understand the wall cutting of 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 of a suppression than an absorption kind of thing.” 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 leve.

“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 three feet of 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 wall top and fell on the other side. 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 didn’t feel it hit the other side.”

“It must have, how long do we need to leave it there to tell if the crystal is affected?”

“Let’s give it a few minutes, I want an observable difference.”

Far away, a quarter of light year outside the systems Oort Cloud, sat another ship, this one was very much like the Deidres. A combination cargo and colony ship, designed to carry people, and some cargo, to new planets. But this ship had seen better days, the outside was scarred and blemished from decades of use and abuse, lack of maintenance was prominent. She was clearly on her last legs as denoted by the flickering of her lights and fields as the ship’s equipment struggled to keep running. She would last a little while longer, but the end was in sight.

On board a watch was being kept. A watch on the system now being serviced by the Deidres. But this was no pirate ship, waiting to jump an unexpected ship or colony. This was a ship of desperation, with little of anything left to lose.

For now they just watched the long range scanners, trying to decipher the events occurring, waiting for a time to make their move; and as yet, unsure if the move was to be one of subterfuge, or one of beggary. They had a little time, but not much.

OKAY: This is obviously a new throw in. This is ship of colonist who failed in their last attempt and are now looking for someplace new to go. The ship is not in good repair and probably can’t go anywhere else. The question is, can the planet absorb more people and allow people to live outside the walled in desert area.:

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 make shift net, bouncing lightly a few times before coming to rest. Mikiu dropped the line and grabbed his portable sensor unit and begin scanning.

Josh 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 stopped all growth and movement in the crystal, but technically it didn’t kill it.”

Josh asked a question he knew the answer to. “We wouldn’t be so lucky would we?”

“No, we’d just expire slowly.” Mikiu thought for a moment, “but it might not be fatal.”

Jameson looked sharply at Mikiu, “I might be few years behind in training but I’m pretty sure that death is usually fatal.”

“I meant 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. “Otherwise it would affect the trees.”

Josh turned his gaze back to the part of the trees that stood above the wall, the closest was about two meters back. “Might be at that, question is, how do we test it. I’m assuming no one is going to volunteer to test that theory.”

A chorus of not me answered him.

Wendy said. “Well we have to find a way over, this planet is going to get small at some point if we can’t go beyond the sand.” She looked at Josh, “besides we paid good money for you to explore.”

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 grav-pack.”

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

Josh thought about, 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 a some, for cliffs and caves, how can we test how high it 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.”

It took them an hour to get everything set up successfully for the test. This including a couple of trial runs with Josh going up with the grav-pack – no way he was letting anyone else do this. Finally, he nodded his go ahead. With a four-meter pole rigged out of collapsible tent stakes and new crystals in the slotted glass cylinder he was ready. Mikiu had chosen a set of crystals that would change color from light red to dark red if their life emulation forces were endangered, if they became dead the color would be black.

Josh checked the straps on the grav-pack one last time. “Okay, I think I’m good to go.” He noticed that the colony girl was looking at hm apprehensively. He smiled – she quickly looked away. Bringing his thoughts back to the present he glanced at Mikiu, “tell me again why I’m doing this and not you.”

“Cause you insisted, and besides, I’m the prettier.”

Susan snorted.

“Right”, said Josh, “I knew it was something like that. Well let’s do this.” With that he grasped the control grip of the grav-pack with his right hand and with a slight twist felt himself lift off the ground. He kept the power low until he reached a height of four meters before nudging the control forward to inch himself closer to the wall. Behind, and to each side of him Jameson and Susan took up the slack on their anchor lines. Wendy contented herself with just watching, but the concerned look had returned to her face.

He took his time arriving on station, the pole holding the test crystal extending two meters in front of him and two meters behind him, fastened to both his side and the side of the grav-pack, a small bag of sand on the end serving as a counter weight. He watched as the red of the crystal slowly begin to darken, he was able to see this because Mikiu had placed a splotch of reference red hanging from the cylinder. After waiting long enough to ascertain that the red of the crystal was indeed deepening, he slowly slid the pole out another meter. This made hovering a little harder but his two line minders increased their back pressure to keep him even. He had to wait for couple of minutes but slowly the red of the crystal returned to its light red hue.

Josh glanced down at Mikiu. “It would appear, that you are correct. 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 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 the throwing of a switch. 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.

After lowering himself to the ground and unencumbering himself of the grav-pack, test pole and various attached lines Josh allowed himself to sit. He was tired, this was much harder work than he was used too. He didn’t bother with the use of his time piece, instead glancing at the sky, it was well past midday, he didn’t think they could get anything else useful done today. He certainly wasn’t going to try getting over the wall.

“How about we call it quits for the day and figure out our next move,” he asked.

He was answered by a chorus of affirmations. “Fine, let’s eat something and then we’ll put together a plan.”

The Captain headed down to engineering to check on the process of the overhaul. It was entering the beginning of third shift, which on a starship meant very little other than to people with third shift duty assignments. There were no periods of light or dark, like a planet-based day, crew members worked the shifts they were assigned too. Ships corridors, elevators and ladder tubes were kept to a limited illumination, both to save power and to keep eyes accumulated for the low lighting of control consoles.

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 Jerimys shoulder. “So, are we settling down here or what?”

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t sneak up on 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 may 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 Captain.

“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.”

“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 off world.”

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

Jerimy realized he might be needlessly worrying his friend. “We’ll be okay, everything’s still usable, they just don’t fit as easy.” He turned to look back at the machinery. “It’ll just take 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 this wall is all about.”

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

“You think there’s anything dangerous?”

Mike thought for a second, there’s was always the possibility of danger, that’s what they dealt with. He wondered if repeated brushes with danger had dampened his avoidance response. No, he decided, if there was no danger life would be boring.

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Mike responded, “I don’t know, the colonists have been here for ten years and nothings happened to them.”

“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 call in every other day self.”

Jerimy laughed, “so call and ask him. I know it’s the middle of the night down there, wake his ass up. Unless you think he might be busy.”

“You mean with the Colony girl, I’m not sure he noticed her. And besides, this group strikes me as kind of old fashioned.”

“Didn’t think they were a religious bunch.”

Mike started back to the bridge, “I don’t think they are, just a little wary of outsiders.”

On the planet below, the exploration team was sound asleep. The only one of the group that was paying attention to their surroundings was the security bot they had set on guard. It was a primitive model but it would alert them if anything should approach during the night; it was also programmed to notice any radical changes in the environment or changes in their health. The one thing It couldn’t notice was the ancient intelligence taking a closer look at it.

D117 understood the other ones, the carbon-based ones, they had had visited the planet before. It knew, on a sub-mind level lower than itself, that there was likely a group of them living in the forbidden circle, but it had no way of examining for that. D117’s senses covered the entire planet, and all near space, he could sense others in orbit; but the one thing that was beyond his abilities was the large circle in the middle of the planets largest land mass. D117 didn’t question that lack of ability, such wondering was far higher than its lowly 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 its function. On first observation it appeared to fulfill the same function as D117, albeit in a more primitive manner; but it wanted to test that hypothesis 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 gentle 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, 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.”

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. “Nothing on the sensor log, did it even really fall over?”

Mikiu said nothing for a moment, simply ran the logs back and watched them, then did it again as if unsure of what he saw. “There’s nothing there”, 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.”

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 trouble.”

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 those left from their own arrival from the wall. 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 that someone, way stronger than any of us, reached out and shoved the bot.”

Josh shook his head, “that doesn’t make sense. There are no tracks, and even if there had been, the bot’s sensors would have triggered.”

“All true, all true, but something, and I have no idea what, shoved the robot.”

They all looked around, an invisible enemy was not something they wanted to contemplate, there had been stories of course from other worlds about invisible foes and unseen events. For the most part these were dismissed as stories to frighten children or enlighten a night of drinking, not something that anyone believed. There was enough strangeness in known space not to make any up.

Part of that strangeness was watching with great interest. D117 had been right, the artificial device had been serving as a protector for the others. 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. Take no further action unless intent to breech the barrier was ascertained. He settled back into his role.

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.

Eventually they settled back into the combined tents. There was still three hours left before dawn and Josh didn’t look forward to spending 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 cannot be detected by our sensors, even when we’re up close; I think the robot malfunctioned and mistakenly thought it detected air movement.”

“The robot passed all of its diagnostics.”

“So, you think it would have recorded a malfunction,” asked Josh.

“Yes, and so do you. It doesn’t have an imagination and it’s not capable of lying.”

Josh was not convinced 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.

C43211 had discussed things with other C level sub-minds and even contacted a level B. A course of action had been decided on. Since none of their sub-minds nor they themselves were capable of examining the restricted section they decided to allow the carbon-based entities to come a to come into their realm so that they could learn more about their intent. Intent was the key.

They awoke sheepishly, a little embarrassed by their brief bout of terror the night before. But after a quick examination of the camp and the surrounding area they settled down, and took time for a quick meal. They had decided that since the field only rose to under eleven meters, they could risk taking a Hover that high, steadied by guide lines of course. They would cross the barrier 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. Now that something had attacked, or at least bothered the sentry robot, turning back was not an option, the safety of the colony was now in question. They had to know what was in the forest.

OKAY – break here. Next, we’ll introduce the magically appearing door or opening into the wall.

It was Wendy who noticed first. “What the fu”, she caught herself before finishing the word.

Josh laughed, “We’re all adults, you can curse.” He followed her outstretched arm and resisted the urge to profane himself. Two hundred meters away stood the wall, and in the wall was an arched opening. Josh knew that hadn’t been there before.

Mikiu had pulled out his binoculars, the ones with the wireless sensor feed to his belt computer. “It would appear, that all of our plans are for naught.”

Susan starred, “Are we being invited in?”

Josh looked at the opening with his own binoculars, and then turned to look at the Hovers, they were too wide to fit through. “I think we are, but I don’t think our equipment is.” He motioned toward the Hovers.

Mikiu picked up on it. “Easy passage for a person, not so for our cargo carriers. You suppose that’s on purpose or just an oversight?”

“You find me someone to ask and I’ll ask”, answered Josh. “Let’s take a look up close. We might as well take all gear. If we decide to go through, I don’t want to have to walk back here for something.”

The others nodded and turned to breaking camp. In a matter of minutes everything was packed up and ready to go. Without a word they started the short walk back to the wall. On the way Josh called the ship, his father and Jerimy were both busy in the engine room so he left a message with Yelaa and sent along copies of the sensor logs from the bot and images of the new entrance to the forest.

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 thought that he should work a few more hours, the Captain thought a break would do him good.

Together they had 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.”

Mike shook his head, “are people are too experienced for that and I think Josh has the colony people on a tight leash as far as weapons go. However, you may be right about the knocking over of 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, “well, they can take grav-packs. At the worst they might have to leave some gear behind if they get blocked in.”

Mike knew that was a last resort, the two colonists were not experienced with the equipment, Josh, Mikiu and Susan would have to aid them and even then, it would be dangerous method of escape.

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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. It was not, however, wide enough for the cargo Hovers. And with full equipment packs and carrying extra gear it was going to be single file for the team members.

Mikiu was still studying his sensors, “I don’t understand it. It looks like it has been here forever.”

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

“Then the sensors didn’t see it either.”

“They can’t tell what it’s made of, how can you be sure they really see it at all?”

Josh sat back on his haunches, he had to make a decision, should they try and enter, and what would happen if they tried.

But they had to decide what to do soon and he didn’t feel like waiting for the ship to chime in. “We’ll carry anything we might need through and set it on the other side and that means the grav-packs first, in case this closes up on us. After that we’ll move over any equipment we need for a short exploration. After looking around we’ll come back through and spend the night. If the opening is still there in the morning we’ll get serious about doing some exploring and figuring out where this wall and the killing field come from. First, we’re going to make sure that the field is off through the passage and on the other side.

Mikiu tested the field with the same crystals and three-meter pole they had used earlier - just at ground level this time. The test went without incident if they stuck the pole straight through, crossing next to the wall on either side was a different matter. Apparently they were safe as long as they walked the straight and narrow.

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.

It took slightly longer than he expected for everyone to get ready, the two from the colony were unfamiliar with the concept of allowing the grav-packs to hang by a strap from there shoulders. While a little awkward and unwieldly, it did allow the transport of items for short distances without the trouble of packing them as a long carry burden. Once on the other side of the wall they would simply detach the lines and leave them near the entrance. Josh was really not happy with that prospect either; however, he preferred carrying survival gear, such as food, water, weapons and shelter on their persons. They would leave the grav-packs protected with a small proximity alarm that would sound a loud siren if something bothered them. That was the best they could do short of leaving someone to watch over them and Josh was not willing to divide the party.

They started out with Mikiu in the lead, with his sensors held outward, followed by Josh and Susan with weapons drawn, 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.

The first thing they saw on the other side was the four propellered drone sitting at the base of the wall to their left. Mikiu had prudently warmed them beforehand not to try and retrieve it, the field was still active where it lay. They would retrieve it later.

Unlike some of their predictions the forest floor was not sand but a dark soil that didn’t appear to be moist but also showed no sign of being dry.

Mikiu stopped when they reached the first tree along their line of march. The trunk was a meter in diameter Josh observed, maybe a little bigger, with small bark lines running vertically. Reaching out he felt the surface, it was smooth and dry. He caught Mikiu’s reproachful glance and nodded agreement. He shouldn’t have touched it without gloves or before giving Mikiu a chance to examine it with the sensors.

“I know”, he said, looking at the two colonist he went on, “that was lesson one, touching something before it’s scanned, without gloves, that was my mistake. Don’t do that.”

He turned to Mikiu who had been scanning the tree, “seems to be your standard type tree, found on a hundred worlds, hard wood. And when I say hardwood, I mean hardwood, this stuff is incredibly dense. That’s why it can grow so tall, plus, I think those small bark lines help with the aerodynamics so that wind doesn’t affect it. That’s just a guess of course.”

Jameson asked, “any idea how old it is?”

“No, nothing to base it on and I can’t carbon base with the equipment I have. If you want another guess, I’m thinking several hundred years.”

Jameson asked, “are you basing that on the height or the root system?”

Mikiu glanced at him, “Both, I can’t 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; for all I know their root system is joined.”

Josh took a few minutes to look in each direction. The trees appeared about every three to five meters and while not closely arranged it didn’t quite look natural. “You think these were planted by someone, they’re well-spaced.”

Mikiu shrugged, “no idea, I don’t see anything that looks like a fruit or seed pod on the trees or the ground. This could all be one big plant. But I don’t think so, if that were true you’d think there would be a variety of heights, and from what we’ve seen, they’re all roughly the same. Either they have a nature height limit, or they all were planted around the same time, or at least within a few years of each other.”

Wendy, who was following the conversation, had drifted away from the group to another tree. She had learned from Josh’s warning and pulled on gloves before touching the trunk. “Hey, is that one hot?”

Josh moved toward her, putting on his own gloves as he did so. Reaching out he carefully touched the trunk near her hand, she was right, it was much warmer than the other one.   
 “Mikiu, what’s the temp on that one?”

“Ambient, 21 degrees.”

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

Mikiu moved to where Josh and Wendy were standing and took a reading, then took another before frowning.”

“That’s odd, this tree is at 30, well above the ambient temperature.”

“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.”

Josh 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 kept track of them in reference to its last initialization, no outside signal was required; the last time he had ran the init was at their arrival point in the desert three days ago. From that initial mark they would be able to follow the recorded movements backwards.

Susan spoke up, her voice higher than normal. “I can’t raise the ship Josh. I tried all frequencies and the emergency channels.”

At that Mikiu and Josh pulled out their own communicators. It was soon obvious that Susan was right – communication with the ship was gone.

“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. I say we do a little exploring, take some readings, some photos, and then head back for dinner and a call in.”

The other agreed and they headed deeper into the forest, keeping as straight a line as possible with the wall opening. After a short distance the ground begin to slope downward, and a slight lowering of temperature was noticeable. Soon they noticed that the amount of light reaching the ground was decreasing. Josh, looked up, apparently the leaf density in the canopy was growing thicker. After about a half a kilometer he called a halt.

“Okay, let’s take some more readings from the trees, I want as much information as possible for the ship.”

Wendy said, “and the colony. Everything needs to be forwarded to my dad.”

“Already covered, automatic relay, whatever we send up, they send down.”

“You could have mentioned that before,” she said with a small frown.

It was then, that they saw the bird! It was a large bird, about the size of human head, with bright green and red plumage that made it stand out in the sameness of the tree trunks. It flew right through the middle of them, as if to get their attention. With a graceful up swoop it landed on a branch several trees away, well over their heads, and turned to look at them.

“Mikiu, that seems to be a bird”, said Josh

Mikiu answered slowly as he aimed the sensor unit, “yes it does, and before you mention it, the survey didn’t say a thing about air borne fauna.”

“Well, we’ve already determined that survey did a poor job. 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 embeded grubs in the trunks. Its food source may only be found higher up in the canopy.”

Mikiu smiled, “well for the minute, it appears to be studying us.”

“We’re new”, said Wendy.

The bird was watching them with a tilted head, it appeared to be more curious than anything. Then with an acrobatic leap from the branch the bird turned in midair and headed deeper into the forest. The entire time it had made no sound.

He heard Wendy gasp and turned to find her starring behind them. Five meters away stood a four-legged animal that reminded Josh of an Earth dog. It’s head leaned more towards a horse type creature but it body resembled a dog, a large dog with thick rough looking red-brown fur. It was staring at them intently, a look of puzzlement on its face.

“Well”, said Susan, “Jameson, what does he 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 plants around here somewhere.”

Josh, glanced at his time piece, they still had plenty of daylight left. “Well, we appear to be heading down hill, maybe towards water, we might find some grass.”

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

“He does not, how do you know it’s a he”, she replied.

“Well, he looks like a he,” said Josh.

Mikiu spoke, “He, she, it - we have no idea if our views of sex are even the same, for that matter we don’t even know how many genders are involved.”

The one normal, but not completely, universal truth of the galaxy, at least the part man had encountered to date, was that of all the planets that had life of any type there was almost always two genders, occasionally, like earth, you run into a few species with one or no gender, but for the most part two genders seemed the norm. Physical genders at any rate were limited to two, at various times in history mankind had experimented with various subtypes, still did in some places, but the necessity of propagating the race had reduced any such vagaries to idle past times, which the extended lifetime of the human species provided plenty of. The running theory was that more than two genders made the act of reproduction way to complex and hence unsuccessful in the long run.”

Josh raised his voice a little, “okay people, let’s not waste time standing here looking at him, we got pictures. We only have about two hours of light left before we need to head back. At least for tonight, I would prefer to spend it back on sand.”

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 needed to find out where the bottom of this hill was.

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. As they went on Josh kept track of their distance from the wall, when they passed two kilometers he thought about calling a halt but decided to wait another 500 meters. The ground begin to turn down at an every 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 marker of some kind so we can find our way back tomorrow. We’re going to have to hurry to get back on sand before dark.”

Mikiu settled for using a tent stake with a red flag tied to it.

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 and had no trouble passing though the opening. The animal stopped on his side of the wall, sat, and watched them as they left.

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 a subject, Mikiu, Susan, we should probably stand a guard tonight.”

Wendy looked with disapproval, “that’s not necessary. I don’t think he would hurt us.”

“I don’t think so either; however, in the space of five minutes we encountered two living creatures in there. 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.”

“Fine, after we eat, I’ll take first watch, Mikiu second and Susan, you can take the last slot. For right now, we need to let everyone know we’re all right and get some food down.”

While the others fixed food, Josh contacted his father on the ship and sent data while explaining everything that had happened today. He kept his description short knowing they would review the data log. His father was also short. “You anticipate any trouble son?”

“Not from anything we’ve seen so far. Someone was kind enough to open a door for us.”

Jerimy said, “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 looking for our intent.”

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

“Keep in mind son, I don’t think it’s our intentions that they are interested in, but they have no way of distinguishing us from the colonists.”

On board the ship the Captain looked at Jerimy and Wally. “Wally, are our sensors able to see anything?”

“The forest canopy does a good job screening our sensors. I’m trying to modify the infrared and mini-wave emmiters to get a better view but the leaves on those trees do a number on us. And the trees themselves, they’re just so dammed tall.”

“Can you see anything?”

“Maybe, what could be ancient roads, buildings, even cities, but nothing definite, just hints at what may be there. Josh has a lot chance better of finding something down there than we do of seeing through the forest cover.”

Jerimy asked, “what about the wall, can we see it.”

Wally nodded, “yes, all it took was a narrowing of the scan field. It outlines the entire desert region it even appears to cross the river above and below. You can see the damm thing from space, how the original survey crew missed it is beyond me.”

§

Josh woke up with the dawn, he was eager to get going, eager to see what was at the bottom of that slope. The others were also up, apparently he wasn’t the only one ready to get started. After a quick first meal they double timed it to the wall.

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

There was their companion from the day before, sitting expectantly a few meters inside the wall. Josh noticed that he was directly in line with 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’ll 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 just isn’t ready to be touched. He was waiting for us.”

Josh glanced at Wendy, “I think he likes Wendy.”

She smiled briefly before taking her normal place in line. “Obviously he has good taste. Okay, let’s get a move on.”

He nodded and set out, he noticed the animal fall into place behind them. He decided that they had to call it something. “Wendy, give it a name so we can quite referring to it as ‘it’?”

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

“I said a name, not a description.”

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

“True. Okay, Follower it is.”