New Story

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02/09/2020

With the naming taken care of they headed deeper into the forest maintaining their marching order, Follower bringing up the rear. It didn’t take long for them to pass the farthest point reached yesterday and begin the slower process of descending down the ever-increasing slope. Eventually they reached a point where the ground just disappeared in front of them. In an abundance of caution, Josh attached a rope to a tree and himself, before advancing to the edge of the drop off. He could see that the land ahead stayed at the same level at the bottom of the cliff, this was not a ravine cutting through the forest; it was an abrupt change in height.

Surprisingly, the tree trunks seemed to stretch to the same point in the sky, regardless of their starting point. It was like the forest was an ocean, flat on the top, irrespective of the depths below. And the below was different, unlike the bare dirt floor they had been travelling thus far, the depths revealing a lush light green carpet of plants everywhere, a green that didn’t contain itself to the soil, but crept up the side of the trees, leaving them looking as if they’d just been pulled from a sea of green. The difference between where they were and what they were looking at was surprising, startling and in Josh’s mind suspicious.

“Well, this is interesting”, he said.

The others, following his example had tied themselves off the same way and made their way to the edge. Now they could all see what he found interesting, Mikiu was busy recording everything, the others were simply staring. Only Follower didn’t seem impressed by their discovery, he stood of to the rear looking puzzled.

Wendy broke the silence, “well, now we know what Follower eats.”

Susan frowned, “what the hell made this, this plant doesn’t have any geological history that would explain this kind of altitude change.”

Jameson, doing some recording of his own, responded. “At least nothing that we’ve discovered. That doesn’t mean there were not events in the past – he broke off – this is by far the most radical geological change we’ve encountered since we’ve been here. Course that doesn’t mean much, we haven’t seen one percent of this planet.”

Josh backed away from the edge to a safe distance and sank slowly to a seat. He needed to think for a moment, decide what to do.

“Mikiu”, any thoughts on getting down?”

Mikiu peered back over the edge before answering. “Well, its fifteen to twenty meters down, we could do it with a rope easy enough. But I would recommend using the ropes as a guide and using the grav-packs, lot easier on the arms.”

“Yea, that would be fine except we only brought one grav-pack.”

“One person at a time and then haul the pack back up by rope.”

“Why don’t we just look for a way down, there has to be one?” asked Wendy.

“Oh,” Josh thought for a second,” you mean that Follower uses. Yea, there has to be a path down somewhere because he sure as hell can’t climb, but we have no idea where it is, and I’d rather keep our path a straight line from the entrance.”

Susan asked, “do we all go back to get the grav-packs?” They had left them just inside the wall again.

“Yes, and we can get something to eat while we’re there and send data to the Deidre.”

Susan nodded, “fine, but I’m leaving my rope here. It’s a pain in the ass to get back in the pack.”

Josh nodded, he felt the same. “Okay, we’ll leave the ropes here. We won’t be gone that long anyway.”

In the control room the Captain, Jerimy and Wally reviewed the arriving data.

“That is a big change in elevation”, said the Captain. “Are you telling me we can’t see that from up here.”

Wally shook his head. “No, the tops of the trees are level, there is very little difference in height.” He was puzzled, even if the trees had all been planted at the same time they shouldn’t have grown to the same height, there should be some differences.

The Captain asked, “Is it possible for genetics to cause a tree to grow to exactly a certain altitude?”

“Not that I’ve ever heard”, said Wally, “but I’m hardly an expert. There are some under water plants that do this sort of thing, but they’re triggered by temperature gradient levels in the water.”

“Could it be temperature levels in the atmosphere?”

Wally shook his head, “to large an area. We could be looking at another dampening field of some type.”

The Captain’s voice was exasperated, “keep after it Wally, we need to figure this thing out.”

Sometime between getting their grav-packs and returning they lost their companion. It was Wendy of course who first missed him.

“Hey, what happened to Follower?” Her voice had had a hint of surprise in it.

The others looked around, Follower was indeed gone.

Josh couldn’t decide whether to be relieved or anxious. “Did anybody notice when he slipped away?”

Mikiu interrupted sardonically, “I would say as long as it took him to get down there”, he pointed to the bottom of the drop off.

Sure enough, Follower was there starring up at them, his head tilted as if he was puzzled by their surprise at his appearance.

“Okay”, said Josh, “how the hell did he do that?”

Wendy smiled an I told you smile, “I told you he had a way down.”

“Not exactly, you hinted at it, but, you were right, there is to be a way down and it has to be close. He had time to get to it, get down, and make his way back to our spot here.”

Mikiu looked at Josh, “do we spend time looking for it. We can’t follow tracks, our weight barely leaves a mark in this soil.”

“Can’t you do some kind of magic with the scanners, look for residual heat or something?”

“I can try, the trees do keep it pretty cool down here and I checked his body temp, it’s fairly high, almost as high as ours.” With that Mikiu fiddled with his hand scanner before starting to walk slowly back along their path. He covered about two meters before he stopped. “He went that way”, he pointed to the right of their line of march facing the direction of the drop off. He started off into the woods, Josh made sure to stick a yellow flagged tent pole in the ground as a marker, before following with the others. It took only a few minutes before they came to a narrow ravine.

Josh looked it over, apparently it started not far from where they were standing and cut deeper and deeper into the ground. From here it was only a few feet to the bottom, and it clearly ran downhill towards the lower level of the drop off.

Before descending into the ravine Josh deployed another yellow flagged marker to let them find their way back in case the inertia nav unit failed. Soon they were again walking single file downhill, but this time the banks were slowly rising around them. Before long they were in a deep narrow chasm and the temperature began to drop.

Strange muttered Mikiu, “it really shouldn’t get cooler this quickly.”

“Unless”, said Josh, “we’re approaching water, and I mean a good bit of it.”

Mikiu nodded in agreement as they continued downwards, before long the ravine opened into open ground and they found themselves at the bottom of the drop off. They also found Follower there waiting for them.

Josh looked at him with a frown, “you could have just showed us the way down.”

The four-legged animal looked quizzical, as if he knew that he was being addressed.

Wendy noticed. “He knows you’re talking to him.”

“As long as he doesn’t start answering.”

They spent some time looking around, the forest floor was now covered with a thick carpet of wide bladed grass, a few inches in depth. Scattered around were small clumps of various underbrush varying in height from mid leg to waist high. None of it appeared difficult to move through. Follower, having lost interest in listening to Josh, was now busy grazing on the thick grass, while still keeping an eye on the group. He appeared quite hungry and Josh wondered if he had spent so much time on the upper level watching them that he had been unable to eat.

“He’s hungry”, looking around Josh noticed what appeared to be swirls or trails through the grass that might indicate more wildlife. The air itself, while not exactly thick with them, did have a number of the birds that resembled the one they had seen earlier, still, the thing that he would normally associate with a forest, bugs - of them there was none. He said as much.

Mikiu, as usual taking sensor readings, agreed. “Yes, I find it strange too. Have you ever noticed insects at the colony”, he asked Wendy?

She replied quietly, “no, but we just thought it was because we were in the middle of a desert. We never imagined that there would be no bugs anywhere.”

“Well”, said Josh, “you still can’t imagine it. For all we know this planet is ripe with bugs, just not here.”

“Actually,” said Mikiu, “there should be insects around the colony site, you have a river there. That should provide ample opportunity for insects to thrive.”

Wendy just shrugged, “sorry.”

A time and distance away, D117 was continuing to observe. The carbon based life forms it was observing had had little trouble in exploring past the boundary and D117 was beginning to put together a list of conjectures concerning their behavior. It was obvious that they were determined to proceed further into the nursery of the forest. They appeared to refer to each other by individual sounds, names, that was something D117 recalled. That construct had meant something at one time, sometime in the past it thought - maybe in the past.

It was now midday, at least that’s what his wrist comp said, and Josh wondered if anyone besides himself was hungry. The trek down the ravine had been more physically demanding then anything they had done so far. He looked around at the others, who were standing in a circle around him.

“Okay, I know none of you want to stop right now, so let’s drink some lunch and then we’ll move on.”

Everyone pulled a small canteen from their belt and took a large drink. It contained a liquid equivalent of food, it had almost no taste and was thin like water but served up a large amount of calories, protein and supplements, it also helped with hydration. They of course carried separate canteens for water, three of them each as a matter of redundancy.

Since they now were looking for a source of the water cooling the air Josh changed up the marching order. He led with Wendy and Mikiu to either side of him and Susan and Jameson behind them, Follower took his normal place bringing up the rear. It wouldn’t affect their progress, but Josh felt a little more secure with the group bunched, now that they knew there was wildlife about.

It took only a short march before they began to notice the scent of water in the air, it wasn’t like the smell of an Ocean or Lake, more like that from a standing body of water, not unpleasant, but not bring any excitement to the lungs.

And soon, they were looking at it. Stretching out in front of them was a large body of water, as far as the eye could see to the left and right, straight out there was just a hint of a far shoreline, an inkling of a line on the horizon. The water itself presented as grey, like a sky on a rainy day, a fog in the distance, and then Josh saw the reason for the color. Just a few meters in front of them was the edge of the water, the grass growing straight up to the edge. The edge itself was a barrier of what appeared to be the same material as the wall, grey, featureless, rising twenty centimeters above the surface of the liquid. And from the greyness of the water Josh realized that the this was more than an edging, the water itself was contained in a bowl lined with the same dull grey. Even more startling, two hundred meters to their right was a pier, jutting out into the water about fifty meters long, with sides of the same grey that ran down into the water. Large rings lined the sides of the pier about every ten meters, obviously for mooring vessels of some type.

Josh felt his cheeks fill with air as he slowly exhaled into a closed mouth. With a gasp he broke the silence, “well, this is a lot more water than I anticipated.”

“This is a hell of a lot of water”, said Mikiu. “I know damm well this was not on any of the satellite pics. How the hell could we miss this?”

Wendy, with her mouth hanging open, was starring in disbelief, her face a cross between wonder and disgust. “We never saw anything like this from survey. Hell, we would have picked here for the colony if we’d known about it. Dad’s going to be pissed.”

Josh just shook his head. “I wouldn’t complain, if anyone had known this was here they never would have opened this planet for colonization. The academics would go crazy for this. Mikiu, what have you got?”

Mikiu lowered both arms, he had doubled up on the hand scanners. “It’s all made of the same stuff as the wall; near as I can tell anyway. My sensors won’t penetrate the water very far, but I’d say that this is just one big oblong bowl.”

“How far across do you think?”

Mikiu glanced at his wrist computer, shook his head in bewilderment, “I would say, about 1500 kilometers.”

“Are you serious, I can see the ground.”

“You can see the top of the tree line”, said Mikiu. “It’s a long way to the other shore.”

Josh squinted in the direction of the far shore, “okay if you say so, I guess that extends all the way around. What do we call this, a lake?”

“For now, anyway, the water appears to be just plain water, virtually nothing else in it. That, in itself, is highly suspicious.”

Wendy, starring at the pier asked, “what about the pier. What is it doing here?”

“Pier, dock, whatever, I assume that it’s for boats,” said Josh. “The purpose of those boats and who they belonged – anybody’s guess.”

Jameson looked at Josh, “now what.”

His expression twisted to one side as he considered the problem. “I don’t know. We didn’t bring a boat.”

Susan spoke up, “yes we did. In fact, we brought two of them.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Serious, they’re inflatables, three persons each, we’ll have plenty of room”, she responded.

Josh could only curse, “I’ll be dammed.” He thought for a second, “Mikiu, see if you can reach the ship.”

“With the comm badges, if we couldn’t reach the relay before we’re sure as hell not going to reach it from down here.”

“Didn’t you bring a satellite comm?”

Mikiu shook his head, “no, it wouldn’t do any good, we don’t have a satellite network in orbit, just the ship. I didn’t bring anything with a directional antenna.”

Wendy coughed and looked unsure of herself. Josh prodded her, “you got something.”

“Well, I have a sat phone, it works with the colony satellite. I don’t know if it’ll reach from here. We’ve only got that one satellite right over the colony.”

Mikiu spoke, “yes, but it has a wide field receiving antenna, if we get out from under these trees it might be able to punch through.”

Josh blew air into his cheeks, “you mean go out on the pier.”

Mikiu shrugged, “unless you’ve taken up walking on water.”

Josh didn’t give up, “What if the pier has an absorption field like the wall.”

“For what, to keep people from going swimming.”

Josh gave him an exasperated look before walking to the edge of the pier. The grey surface extended about two meters back from the water, its height the same as the lip bounding the water, the two blending together seamlessly. With a reluctant sigh he stepped onto the surface gingerly, he expected it to be of the same slippery consistency as the wall. It wasn’t. Surprisingly the surface felt more like smooth concrete, not rough, but with enough bite to provide easy footing. He walked out about five meters before turning to look back at the others.

“I guess you’re right Mikiu, no field, or if there is – it’s a slow one.”

Wendy, rummaging in her pack pulled out a standard issue field sat phone. It was rugged, simple looking, and used on hundreds of worlds. It was also extremely reliable, if the satellite could be reached this should do it, provided nothing interfered. She walked it out to Josh.

He looked it over before glancing at Mikiu, “will the ship hear this or do I need to have the colony relay?

“Should work either way, I left the Deidre’s comm on all mode. No reason that anyone would change it.”

“Good, but I’ll talk to whoever answers.” He started walking along the pier, he estimated that his best chance for success was to get as far from the tree line as possible. He was at the halfway point when he realized that he had a companion, Wendy Sunderson was a step behind him. He stopped short as did she, obviously expecting his reaction.

“Going somewhere”, he asked?

She had an answer ready, “it is my comm.”

He thought for a second, turned, and resumed walking towards the end of the pier. She was the client and he really didn’t mind her company, besides, at this point he didn’t see any real danger. All they had really encountered was a fence. Granted, the fact that someone had provided a means of ingress was a little startling, but nothing so far had seemed hostile. He stopped a couple of meters short of the end before trying the phone unit.

It took only a minute to get a response; but it was a very broken response, it sounded like the Deidre. “You’re breaking up, can you clean it up a little?” What sounded like ‘standby’ came through and he let his arms descend to his sides.

Glancing at Wendy he muttered, “give them a minute.”

“I heard, I didn’t hear the satellite transponder beep, you must be talking direct.”

­ “Your satellite may just be out of range, but if the Deidre can clean up the signal, we can do a three way comm again.”

She nodded, satisfied that Josh intended to keep the colony itself in the loop. She was beginning to get a queasy feeling about the entire expedition. The things they had encountered so far were enough that someone, somewhere, might begin to question a human colony on Tingies 0017. It wasn’t only a question of damaging a historical alien world, there was also the value of the technology. No one had really ever been able to profit from ancient tech, it was too far removed from the science of men to easily adopt, but that didn’t stop those of a certain mindset from trying. Plus, even if no one objected to the colony being here, it would draw those seeking to learn from the ancients from all over known space. People on the more civilized worlds had little to do as far as keeping themselves alive, they needed, and sought out purposes. She didn’t want her home to become a purpose, or a destination for religious pilgrimages.

Josh made a stab at what she was thinking. “Does no good to worry, besides, I don’t think anyone is going to kick you folks off this rock for what we found so far. For that matter, if we do find anything of value it would belong to you, or you could least make a good fight of it in court.”

“We couldn’t afford a long court battle.”

“Well, there’s an old Earth saying that I’ve heard lawyers use, at least the ones in the vids. ‘Possession is nine tenths of the law’, or something like that. Anyway, the Deidre would be on your side.”

“You mean you would want some of our credits.”

“That’s a crude way of putting it but, it is in the contract, consider it a bonus because we really only break even on these exploration missions.”

Her rejoinder was cut off by his Dad’s voice from the comm. “Josh, can you hear me?”

The voice was much clearer, although, still not the kind of clarity Josh was used to in surface to ship communication. “Yea Dad, that’s a lot better.”

“Wally says you’re broadcasting from well inside the forest. Did you find a way around the problem we had yesterday?”

“Yes and no, if he’ll look I’m on the colonies satellite band, and as for the forest I’m not standing among any trees.”

His dad, sounding puzzled, asked, “then where are you standing because you’re definitely not in the desert anymore?”

Josh looked around, blew air into his cheeks for a second, and then answered. “I’m standing 40 meters or so out on a pier stretching out into a very large lake. A lake that is roughly 1500 kilometers across and I have no idea how wide it is.”

There was silence, a long silence, finally broken by Jerimy. “Are you pulling our leg Josh”.

“No, wish that I was, but that’s the story. Are you telling me you can’t see a body of water this size?”

“Wally’s verifying now.”

“What do you mean verifying.”

His Dad’s voice sounded sardonic, “he’s looking out the forward observation bubble.”

“Well, he should be able to see the lake because I see no cloud cover. I don’t think I’ve seen a cloud since we’ve been here.”

Wendy said, “it’s not the rainy season, at least not In Rinein’s.”

“Hello Wendy”, his dad answered.

“Hello Captain Halerin. At least one of the Halerins is polite.”

Mike Halerin chuckled, “Step up son.”

“Right dad, now what about this huge lake you people can’t seem to see?”

§

A time and distance away, sub-mind f2311 became aware that someone was standing on the structure it was tasked with protecting. It received this information from a G level sub-mind. After noting the length of time that had passed since the incurrence of the act, it first fired off a quality event notice to its immediate D level supervisor, then it examined the situation to judge the severity and veracity of the event notification. It found that the report of an invalid use of the structure was indeed true. Nothing had been cleared to use the structure in this manner for a very long time. However, it did appear that the structure was being used in a manner that was inconsistent with its purpose. F2311 decided to check with its supervisor to receive instruction.

D23119 immediately sent out an issue resolved response to f2311. Then it examined its own options, the first response seemed to be the correct one. Somebody had walked to the end of the pier, someone had used a communications device, not a known device, however that concern was judged not germane. It surmised that a call summoning a vessel had been made, and since it didn’t understand the language being spoken it defaulted to its standard response. It sent a boat.

§

It was Jameson, waiting at the foot of the pier that first noticed. He shook his head to make sure he was not imagining it before grasping Mikiu by the arm and pointing.

Mikiu, startled, stood frozen for a second and then looked out to Josh, noticed that he was still busy in communication with he assumed, the ship.

He yelled, “Josh”, and pointed to the left side of the pier where halfway down, there now floated a large canoe like boat, attached to one of the rings by a line of the same greyness as the pier and the boat.

Josh, turning to see what Mikiu was yelling about, let his tongue free for a second, “What the crap.” He then proceeded to walk slowly towards the boat, ignoring the sounds of his father yelling from the comm unit, behind felt Wendy walking with him.

It was a canoe, a large canoe shaped boat, around three and a half meters in length and 1.5 meters across at its widest point. There were seats at each end and a large double width one in the middle but, no paddles. Each end rose to a point that reminded him of the front end of a Viking ship from old Earth.

Wendy muttered as she starred, “no paddles.”

By this time all five of them were clustered around the boat and Josh’s dad was still yelling over the comm unit. “Hold on dad”, he said. “Something just popped up.”

His father’s voice betrayed his exasperation over being ignored for the last couple of minutes. “What. What the hell is going on down there?

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me son,” said his father.

“Someone sent us a boat.”

“Someone did what.”

“Somebody gave us a boat”, said Josh. “It was just here tied to a docking ring. Did anyone see where it came from?”

Jameson nodded, “I didn’t see where it came from, but I saw it first. It was just there, floating, no sign of movement on the water or anything.”

Mikiu agreed, “that’s when I yelled for you.”

His dad and Jerimy both heard this over the comm. His dad, his voice calm and collected said, “Five of you there – and no one sees where a boat comes from. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yea Dad, that’s about the size of it.”

“What do you intend to do with this gift boat,” asked the senior Halerin?

Josh let a grin cross his face. “I don’t exactly know dad - tell you what. You guys think on it awhile,” he glanced at Wendy, “and let the colony know. We’ll see if we can figure out where this came from and call you back.”

With that he put the sat phone into standby mode and handed it back to Wendy. Sliding his feet over the edge of the pier he let his legs trail down as he studied the boat.

“It would seem, that whoever opened the door in the wall, wants us to keep going.”

“The question,” said Mikiu, “where exactly is it that we’re going?”

Wendy, a silly look on her face now, repeated, “no paddles.”

“Mikiu, you said just plain water, right?”

After hearing a confirmation Josh slid sideways on the pier and then slipped over the edge into the boat, which moved hardly at all, in fact, it was remarkably stable. Holding on to the edge of the pier he twisted his legs bringing the boat parallel. The boat remained completely stable, no moving underfoot like most vessels on water.

“This thing is really solid. It’s almost like standing on dry land.”

“I think it has some kind of inertia dampening field, this thing may look simple but it’s not”, said Mikiu, studying the water around the boat.

“These people seem to have a thing about fields”, muttered Josh. He felt the material of the boat, once again it looked the same grey as everything else they had encountered, but like the pier and the wall, had a different feel, on a hunch he tried the outside, it was slippery; he noticed that the water didn’t appear to stick to it where the two met.

Mikiu noticed his actions, “yes, they seem to build everything from the same stuff, just with a different surface tension.”

“Well, they could use some help in the color department. If everything they make is the same color it would get boring real fast.”

“Maybe”, said Mikiu, “it may be a difference in what they see, where we discern colors they may just see the differences in the surface’s. It might be like color is to us.”

“We can usually tell that visually too, but not with this stuff.”

“Like I said, they may just see different.” “Seen differently”, he corrected himself, whoever built these articles were long gone; otherwise, man would certainly have met them by now. It didn’t occur to Mikiu that the aliens involved might have been limited to just the one planet, mankind had long ago lost their one world sense of self.

Wendy said, “he doesn’t want to come on the dock.”

Josh looked back, indeed Follower had stopped short of the surface of the pier and was looking at it apprehensively. He seemed afraid of touching it.

“Do you think it’s dangerous in some way?” He directed the question to Mikiu.

“I doubt it, at least not to us, but there may be some mechanism that keeps the wildlife at bay.”

Wendy frowned, “you mean like an electrical shock or something. That would be cruel.”

Mikiu responded, “it may be for the animal’s safety, to keep them out of harm’s way. If this the only body of water in the forest they may not know how to swim.”

“Oh”, she seemed slightly mollified.

Josh nodded, it sounded like a sensible precaution to him, of course, whoever the aliens were, they may just have wanted to keep their deck clean.

He continued his inspection of the boat, there we no notches or brackets for oars and as far as he could tell, no means of controlling or initializing motion. That, however, didn’t make sense, he was pretty sure the problems lie with him and not the builders.

“I don’t see any way to move this thing.”

Wendy got the idea even before Mikiu spoke and slid into the boat herself. “Maybe it’s what Mikiu said, differences in the surface. We can’t see them but maybe we can feel them.” She was in the opposite side of the vessel from Josh, sliding her hands over the edges of the boat when, with a sudden leap the boat jumped away from the dock. Josh was forced to grab both sides to prevent himself from being thrown overboard, Wendy wasn’t so lucky, she tried to keep her feet, tripped over the center seats and fell. Josh was able to regain his balance and catch her upper body before her head slammed into his feet.

On the dock Mikiu and the others, though startled, quickly raced to the end of the pier. The boat had angled away from the pier enough that no one had been able to react in time to attempt a grab. Not Mikiu thought, that doing so would have done any good. He found himself shouting at Josh and realized that the other two were also yelling. He raised his hand for silence.

“Wait a minute guys, one at a time.” As Susan and Jameson fell silent he continued to shout to Josh, stopping for moment when the boat stopped moving.

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Further away, and deep under the water, another heard the boat motor come to life, silent as it was the vibration was something it had felt for many years. With curiosity awakening he twisted his enormous body away from the bottom and begin to slowly swim towards the sound.

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“Whoa, what did you do?” asked Josh.

Wendy quickly struggled to her feet, the boat was moving at a moderate but constant rate after the initial hasty start. “I don’t know, I think I felt a rough patch just as we started.”

He moved around her with the ease of someone familiar with various gravities and environments to the front of the boat.

“Where, on the top, the inside, the outside, where did you feel the rough spot?”

“On the right side, with my thumb – it’s on the inside rim.”

Josh quickly ran his thumb over the inside edge of the boats nose on the right-hand side, it all felt the same to him. He did the same on the left-hand side, same result.

“Are you sure, I don’t feel anything.”

Wendy yelled, “I felt it, a rough spot!”

He continued his examination of the boats edge down each side, a meter at a time, turning to face Wendy when he reached the center of the boat. He continued his way back, eventually engulfing her between his arms as he checked to the pointed end. At last he felt a rough spot under his left thumb and pressed it. Immediately the boat stopped powered movement and begin coasting to a stop. He let out a sigh and glanced back at the dock, their three companions stood at the very end of the pier looking out at them. He realized that they had been yelling but had been so engrossed in stopping the vessel that he hadn’t noticed.

Wendy squirmed. “You can let me go now.”

With a start he realized that he was indeed, loosely holding her. “Only if you promise not to touch anything else.”

She felt his breath on her cheek and quickly agreed.

With a bit of reluctance he slowly backed away to the center seat.

They were about a hundred meters from the end of the pier and slightly off to its right side, left side, he quickly corrected himself keeping his point of view to that of the end of the pier. He waved at Mikiu and the others to signal everything okay, and tried his shirt comm. To his relief he saw Mikiu touch his own chest and heard a reply.

“Okay, apparently out comms work fine between us, they just won’t reach out of the forest.”

“Yea, we should’ve tried that earlier”, said Josh, “my mistake.”

“Nah, we both should have thought of it, “replied Mikiu. He heard Susan agree in the background, she hadn’t activated her own comm.

Mikiu asked, “I take that Wendy had the right idea. Differences in surface feel.”

“Changing differences in surface feel, whatever she pushed is no longer there, but I found another spot at the other end of the boat. I think I felt it turn smooth after I pressed it.”

“Like a control switch’s light going off you mean.”

“Yea, like that. I guess you may be onto to something about their vision. These controls probably stand out to them.”

Mikiu, sounded sarcastic, “Thanks, you think you can find the steer that thing back to the dock.”

“Steer it”, laughed Josh, “I don’t even know how to turn it back on.”

“We could run a line out to you with a grav-pack.”

Josh had a pained expression, “that would work fine but if you end up in the water we’ll have to come and get you, we’d have to haul you in by rope.”

“That’s okay, as long as there’s nothing dangerous in the water,” said Mikiu.

“You’re the sensor guy, is there anything” asked Josh?

“Not that I can pick up, but keep in mind, I didn’t really anticipate doing any deep water scans. I didn’t bring the equipment for it.”

Wendy broke in, “can you guys just figure some way to get us back. Otherwise, I’m going to swim.”

“No, I think we’ll avoid that option for right now,” said Josh, although the thought had crossed his mind too. He knew he could swim the short distance but he didn’t know Wendy’s water abilities.

He gave her a quizzical look. “Can you even swim that far?”

“I swim across the river all of the time and it’s farther that this, plus there’s a current to fight against, we have none here.”

“Okay, you can swim, but let’s try and stay dry.”

He noticed that on the dock Mikiu was strapping on one of the grav-packs. Josh hated using them over water, it always seemed to end in disaster. But it was a far better idea than swimming, they had no idea what of threats the water possessed, or what size they might be. Anything from microscopic to very large could exist in the depths, thankfully they wouldn’t have to find out.

Wendy interrupted his chain of thought. “I wonder where it was taking us?”

“We don’t know that it was taking us anywhere, I think you just hit the go button.”

“I don’t think so,” she responded. We were going somewhere.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said, “but I don’t think we want to go on a long trip without supplies and this is a big lake. Who knows how long it might take to cross it.”

“Does that mean we’re going to try it after we get supplies?”

He shrugged his shoulders, “I don’t know. This was to be my last expo mission for a while.”

“I thought this was your specialty, your thing.”

He smiled ruefully. “It was my thing, but anything gets old when you been doing it for to long. I’m ready to switch to something else. Learn something new.”

She nodded understanding, “but don’t you know how to do everything aboard ship?”

“I can do everything, if needed, but I’m not an expert at more than a few. Anyway, I’m getting tired of ship life – thinking about taking a break.”

“What about your family, or is it families.”

“Contrary to what you hear, all spacers do not have families or partners on every planet. And besides, Deidre only lifts out of Sartagius, except for the odd cargo run. Anyway, I’m not with anyone at the moment.”

“Not even casual?”

“Well, I have a couple of close friends, but that’s just physical, no emotional junk.”

“I wouldn’t know, I’m only twenty.”

“That’s old in some places,” he said. But then took kindness on her, “but not most places, it’s about average.”

“Average for what,” she asked, a smile locked between her stiff expression.

“Funny, for being in a sexual relationship, twenty is about average, give or take a few years.”

She fought back the smile, she had succeeded in making him blush, she didn’t know why that was satisfying but it was. “This isn’t a, what did they call them, a monastery. But there are only a few people here that aren’t already partnered or grouped and none of them has tempted me yet.”

It was his turn to hold back a smile, he was only partially successful, “I don’t really think you’ll have any trouble attracting attention if and when you want.”

She started to say something but thought better of it. That’s when they heard a sound and looked up to see Mikiu dropping quietly out of the sky to a gentle landing in the opposite end of the boat.

Mikiu lowered himself to a seat before switching off the grav-pack. “Sorry to intrude but you weren’t paying any attention to my yells, course it’s hard to yell while using one of these things without knocking yourself off balance.”

They both apologized at once, tripping over their words as they did so. Mikiu gave them an odd glance as he handed the end of the rope to Josh.

Glancing around Josh looped the rope under one of the center seats and tied it off to itself, and then looped it around the pointed end a few times.

Mikiu keyed his comm badge, “okay guys, reel us in, slowly”

On the dock, Susan and Jameson had tied the line to one of the dock rings and looped it though another. As soon as Mikiu signaled readiness they started to slowly pull the boat in. It took them about five minutes to bring it to the dock, avoiding building up speed for ease of grabbing the vessel when it reached them.

As soon as they bounced against the pier a couple of times, the three occupants scrambled out, Josh helping Wendy go first with Mikiu bring up the rear.

“Well, that was a nice ride, I think I’ll check in with Dad”. Josh looked to Wendy for the sat phone which she handed over.

After reaching the ship he quickly brought his Dad, Wally and Jerimy up to date. After a short discussion it was decided that they would pull back to base camp outside the wall for the night. Once there they would set up a conference comm with the ship and colony to decide what course of action to take next.

§

A time and distance away, D117 saw that the guests, he had decided that was what they would be called – although they were in truth, intruders, were preparing to leave again. This would increase the time needed to study their intentions. With some thought, he sent a message to C43211 requesting permission to accelerate the process.

The answer came back almost immediately, he had thought it would, C43211 had no more patience than it itself did. The order was to proceed. After running through a list of options it made its choice. It would entice them to a place where it had resources for this kind of investigation.

§

It took only a few moments for Mikiu to pack up the grav-pack, the rope they left to keep the boat moored to dock. Josh suspected that wouldn’t really prevent something from moving it. He hoped that nothing would disturb it.

As soon as the group had finished packing they started back up the ravine, again Josh in the lead, the others spread out behind him. Follower, as always, was bringing up the rear. Josh knew that they all dreaded the trudge back up hill but it couldn’t be helped, and anyway he was sure that everyone would appreciate sleeping outside the forest.

As he led the way into the cut of the ravine he felt a lightness come over him, he began to feel a weariness that hadn’t been there seconds before. Then, before he even realized, he felt his knees hit the ground and blackness fade across his vision. Consciousness had left him before his face hit the firm but forgiving ground.

He had no idea how much time had passed but the world was curtained by impending nightfall when he opened his eyes again. He was lying fully stretched out, something soft under his head. Slowly his vision sharpened and he found himself looking into the faces of the team. The soft thing under his head moved as Wendy’s face moved forward in his field of view and he realized that the soft thing he was lying on was her thigh. He would have appreciated that if he hadn’t felt foolish as the center of attention.

“What the hell happened,” he asked?

Mikiu answered, a puzzled look on his face, “you fell down.”

“Anyone else,” he quickly glanced at each face, they all appeared okay?

“Well, when you went down I had enough time to grab your feet and drag you backwards, fortunately it was downhill. I got you out of the field just in time; my own lights were getting kinda dim. It passed quickly.”

“How long was I out,” asked Josh?

Wendy answered, “almost four hours, we were getting worried but the med kit said you were okay. We let you come out of it on your own - the kit said that was best.” Her face looked concerned and irritated at the same time. He got the impression that she didn’t like being told what to do by the med-computer. That was okay, he didn’t like them either.

“How do you feel,” asked Susan?

“Like a dumbass. Should have been doing sensor scans continuously.”

Mikiu shook his head. “Don’t think it would have done any good, I can’t read the field now and I know where it’s at.” He tilted his head, “that’s assuming of course that it’s still there but I don’t want to find out bad enough to find out.”

“Okay,” said Josh, “somebody doesn’t want us going back.”

“Well, they at least don’t want us going up the ravine,” said Mikiu. “We could always try the grav-pack on the cliff but, well, I wouldn’t want to risk passing out in the air.”

Josh sat up, reluctantly removing his head from Wendy’s lap. “In other words, we appear to be stuck down here.”

“Those would be the exact words,” said Mikiu.

Gingerly, and testing each limb as he did so, Josh go to his feet. Other than a brief second of anxiety, which he suspected was more mental than anything physical, he judged himself to be okay, other than a reminder from his stomach that he was both hungry and thirsty.

“Well, I guess we get to try out our emergency gear after all. But first, before it gets any darker, I want to try and call the ship while I can still see the pier to walk on.”

The Captain was surprised when Yelaa summoned him to the bridge in the middle of the night. That wasn’t something he expected when the ship was in orbit in a friendly system.

She merely motioned to the communications panel when he entered, “Josh”.

He frowned, after the planet team had missed their call in for the conference with the Colony he had assumed that they had been tired and decided to wait for morning. He slid into the seat and put his hand on the mic button before looking at Yelaa. “Did you by any chance call Jerimy?”

The dark, big boned girl from Yantzing, shook her head. He hasn’t slept in two days. I figured if you needed him you could wake him.”

He nodded, “good thinking, he’s been putting in way too many hours. We need him functioning, not exhausted.”

He pressed the comm button to open the channel. “Deidre here, Josh, are you there.”

His son’s voice came back quickly. “For the moment, but it was close earlier.”

Mike felt his anxiety level rise, “what happened earlier?”

He sat patiently and listened, interrupting only a couple of times with questions. At some point Wally came in and sat listening, his face crossed with a frown. Soon, anticipating the Captain’s orders, he moved to the sensors and started looking for the newly found absorption field.

“I think you are right son, someone wants something else out of you, question is, what?”

Josh voice sounded exasperated, “I don’t know dad, the only thing we can think of is that they really want us to continue that boat ride.”

His dad frowned, this is the one part of being Captain he hated. Not only did he have to occasionally put people in danger, sometimes those people were family members. He shook his head and sternly reminded himself that every shipmate was family. You had to think of them that way when you lived and worked in such close proximity for years at a time.

“It’s your mission Josh, what are you going to do?”

“I have no clue Dad. We can’t sit here forever but I don’t like going out on the water with no escape plan in mind. Normally I’d leave a couple of people behind to watch the pier and the ravine but with the colonist’s I don’t want to risk splitting up the team. What do you think Dad.”

The old man shook his head, a gesture that he knew his son couldn’t see, but would know he was doing. “You know the rules son, I don’t like to override people on the ground. This is your call.”

One the planet Josh sighed. “I know Dad. I’ll let you know before I make that call.” He turned off the sat phone and handed it back to Wendy.

She glanced at it and then handed it back to him. “Maybe you should keep it. You’re the only one using it.”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” he said, “at the rate today’s going who knows what’ll happen next. The things probably safer with you.”

She laughed quietly, “hey, you didn’t almost face-plant in the boat. It’s probably not safe with either one of us.”

He nodded and clipped the phone to his belt. Fortunately the device was build with tough use in mind, it was crush proof and water proof, the only danger lie in the ­­unlikely event of the miniature fuel cell dying. Otherwise it was good to go for months.

“Okay guys, we need to make camp tonight, any ideas?” Josh asked.

Mikiu glanced in the direction of the water. “Well, we could sleep on the dock, the wildlife seems to avoid it.”

The others shook their heads. Susan and Wendy both said “no”.

Josh chimed in, “I don’t think so, whatever wildlife there is in these woods probably uses that lake as a water source. By the same token, we don’t want to stay near the ravine, absorption field or not that wildlife probably uses it to get to the water. And for all we know the field only affects humans.

Mikiu agreed with him, “let’s move a along the base of the cliff a couple hundred meters. We can use one of the tree trunks as the base for a lean-to, that’ll make better use of our tents and give us any easier way out if something does nose around.”

Wendy shuddered, “I don’t like the way you said that. Besides, Follower doesn’t appear to be alert for anything.”

“You don’t know that,” said Mikiu. “Besides, you’ve all missed an important point. For all we know he’s here just to keep an eye on us.”

“A spy?” demanded Wendy. “Or do you think he’s running things.” Josh noted that a whiff of sarcasm had entwined itself into her voice, the girl seemed to have a little disdain for some kinds of authority.

Mikiu raised his hands in mock defense. “Not a spy, an observer, maybe not even that. It just seems funny the way he stays near us.”

Josh broke in, “considering that bird’s the only other living thing we’ve seen maybe he’s just bored. We could be the most interesting things he’s ever seen. As far as running things,” he raised a hand, “no opposable thumbs.”

“Opposable thumbs are our requirement for developing intelligence, even on Earth that didn’t really hold true – remember the whales?” Mikiu asked.

“Remember them, I’ve met them. They may be intelligent, but they don’t like talking to us.”

“Don’t like too, or just don’t bother too. They may be waiting to see if we turn out to be worth it.”

Wendy brought them back to the subject at hand. “Yea, well some thing here apparently wants to talk to us; what are we going to do about it?”

Josh was still thinking on that, to forestall an argument he turned to making camp. “We’ll worry about that after we have a place to sleep. First, we go back to the ravine. Mikiu, can leave a marker there. I’m not sure I trust anything to stay put in this place. We’ll go a couple hundred meters to the right and rig up something. Let’s do that now before we lose the light.”

It took them an hour to build a kind of lean-to between two closely space trees, the openness of the upper forest was not as strict here. They build the lean-to opening outward from the cliff, taking the chance that if attacked it would be from the open of the forest.

After a cold meal of concentrate ration bars and hydration fluid from their canteen’s Josh opened up the conversation about what their next move should be.

“It’s a matter of supplies. We’ve only got enough food and fluid to keep us going for four, maybe five days. We could probably stretch that out but means trusting the water from the lake. After that, we find something to eat.”

“Or”, Mikiu prompted, “we take a chance on the boat and see where it takes us. I don’t like either option. We don’t even know if the boat was going somewhere, Wendy may have just hit the throttle.”

“No, we moved out from the dock and started on a particular course; we were going somewhere. I think.” said Josh. He wasn’t sure why he felt the need to back Wendy’s actions.

Susan added, “the question is where, and how do we get back. There’s no guarantee that the boat will bring us back.”

“Right,” said Jameson, “and we don’t know how long it will take to get where we’re going. If it’s all the way across the lake that could take a couple of days. Plus, we don’t know what the weather out in the middle is going to be like. “

Josh stood, walked around for moment, turned to face them. “Jameson is right in that we don’t know how long a journey it will be. That’s a good reason to leave while we still have all our supplies; make sure that we get too wherever it is we’re going on a full belly, not too weak to take action if needed.”

“I don’t relish telling that to my father,” said Wendy, a look of impending combat on her face. “He’s going to say no.”

Jameson piped in, “he can say NO all he likes kid, we’ve got no place to go.”

“That’s not quite true,” said Mikiu, a weary expression in his eyes, “we could try to get up the cliffs with grav-packs or wonder along the base here until we run out of food and water. Maybe the forest will let us go if it thinks we’re not going to cooperate. But I wouldn’t count on alien intentions or moods. No, Josh is right, if we’re going to see where the boat takes us, we need to do it now. While we’ve still got at least a chance of not starving.”

Josh knew the solution to keep Wendy from hashing it out with her father, it was the same one he planned to use with his father. Tell them after it was too late.

He put up his hands in a bid for silence. “Okay, Wendy you and I are going to do the same thing. We’re not going to tell our fathers until we can’t see the shore anymore.” He waited for her response, surprisingly it took a moment, he could see various scenarios running around in her mind before she finally nodded.

“Yea, that’ll work, he’ll be pissed, but it’ll save a lot of loud discussion.”

The others looked at each other, a look of agreement on their faces. It worked well for them, they really didn’t have anyone to argue it out with and Josh and Wendy were their superiors on this mission. They were covered from blow back.

Mikiu asked Josh, “you want to stand shifts?”

He looked around, they weren’t in the best defensive position, but it was better than nothing, still he reasoned, it would not hurt to keep a watch. They could always catch up on sleep in the boat.

He assigned a simple watch, himself, followed by Mikiu and then Susan. He knew the others probably felt a little left out, but they were still an unknown quantity, in time, they would prove themselves. With the watch set he sat and watched outward, to his left, still within the little circle of light given off by their single camp lamp, Follower, had laid down to rest himself, but Josh noticed that he kept his eyes towards the forest and his ears perked.

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