New Story

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02/09/2020

It didn’t seem to take as long to reach the area of the beacon as yesterday. Josh realized that they were familiar enough with the forest now to move faster than the tourist pace of yesterday. They still took the time though to be alert and observant; however, the level of caution was lower. The newly named Dryad maintained his position in the rear. And again, Josh couldn’t decide whether he felt watched or herded.

It didn’t take long for them to pass the farthest point reached yesterday and begin the slower process of descending the ever-increasing slope. Soon, they were reduced to almost sliding on their backsides to keep from falling, not an easy thing to do with full packs. Eventually they reached a point where the ground disappeared stopping their forward progress. In an abundance of caution, Josh attached a rope to a tree and himself, before creeping slowly to the edge of the drop off. He could see the land below some distance below. It returned to a flat plain, stretching from the unseen bottom of the of the of the cliff to the point where the forest became a curtain of brown and green that cut off his view. This was no ravine cutting off their path, it was an abrupt change in height that stretched to each side as far as he could see.

Surprisingly, the trees seemed to stretch skyward the same, regardless of their starting point. Josh couldn’t tell whether they still rose to an even height. Looking upwards, into what he assumed was the sky, make it difficult to judge distance.

It was like the forest was a calm sea, flat on top, jagged and uneven at the bottom. The bottom below was itself different. Unlike the barely covered dirt floor they had traveled thus far, the depths below revealing a lush light green carpet of plant cover, 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 can of green paint and the color had stuck. The difference between where they were and what they were looking at was surprising, startling and in a stark difference.

“Well, this is interesting”, he said.

The others, following his example had tied themselves off the same way and crept their way to the edge. Now they could all see what he found interesting. Mikiu busied himself recording everything. The others simply stared, curiosity coloring their faces. Only Dry didn’t seem impressed by the discovery. He stood behind them and looked puzzled and Josh noticed the animal made no attempt to approach the drop off. That didn’t surprise him, he felt certain Dry knew what they were seeing.

Wendy broke the silence, “well, now we know what Dry eats.” Then she started laughed, “dry eats. I didn’t think of that.”

Josh groaned, “that makes two of us. Let’s go with the other option, Drus.”

Mikiu, looked up from his scanner, “yes, please.”

Susan wasn’t laughing, “what the hell. This plant doesn’t have any geological history in this region that would explain this. You’ve got to have a major fault line to have this big a change in attitude and you’ve got no mountain piled up here from crust over run. I don’t get it.”

Jameson, doing some recording of his own, responded. “At least no history that we’ve aware of. Remember, this is our first foray out of our safety zone. For all we know, we don’t know anything.”

Wendy nodded with a grunt, “you got that right. Someone built a wall around our entire town and we’re just finding out about it.

Josh backed away from the edge to a safe distance and sank slowly to a seat. The others, with the exception of Mikiu followed suit. The science officer was still intent on his sensors. Josh needed to think for a moment, decide what to do.

He tackled the obvious first. “Mikiu”, any thoughts on how we get down there?”

Mikiu peered over the edge before answering. “Getting down is easy, gravity will handle the whole thing for us, coming back up, that’s another matter.” He thought for a second, “well, its measures a shade under fifty meters down. We could do it with rope easy enough, but I would recommend grav-packs with a rope as a guideline. That would be a lot easier on the arms.”

“And,” added Josh, in an emergency we could climb the rope.”

“You might,” said Jameson, “but I know Wendy and I aren’t in that kind of shape.”

Susan said, “and neither are we. We’re in a full, even if light, gravity field Josh and I don’t see any of us climbing that far. I guess we could rig up a climbing sling to use for rest stops.

Josh nodded, “it would be slow. We could rig a couple of ropes in a loop, that way everyone top and bottom could lend a helping hand.”

“Except,” said Mikiu, “that whoever was on the rope would still have to hold on. That could get tough if it takes too long. I think we’d better hope the grav-paks work.

“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 the one that,” he paused for a second to remember the name, “Drus uses. Yea, there has to be a path down somewhere because he sure as hell can’t climb and I have yet to see him fly. Trouble is we have no idea where the way down is, and I’d really rather keep our path straight as possible from the arch. For all we know it could be kilometers to a place to get down.”

Susan asked, “do we all go back to get the grav-packs?” They had left them just inside the wall again. Josh had insisted on removing them on the way-out last night in case the magically appearing entrance had decided to leave.

“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 fact,” he looked around, “we might as well leave some of our emergency supplies here. Chances are they’ll be fine, and we can restock at camp. Probably wouldn’t hurt to build up our stock here in the forest. We don’t know about that arch. I don’t trust that it’s going to stay open.

As before, Drus, newly named, stepped out of the way for them to pass and then took his place in the rear as they walked out. There pace going up the slope markedly different from going down it earlier.”

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The Captain, Jerimy and Wally reviewed the data as it arrived from the ship’s receivers.

“That is a big change in elevation,” said Halerin. “And you’re telling me we can’t see that from here.”

Wally shook his head. “No, the tops of the trees are level, there is no indication of change 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 had to be some differences to account for the ground beneath them, but there were not.

The captain asked, “Is it possible for genetics to cause a tree to grow to exactly a certain altitude? And what kind of environmental situation would develop that type of behavior.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like it,” 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. I guess there could be something in the atmosphere, a change of pressure or content at a certain level. Out sensors haven’t detected anything that we can understand that would cause something like that.

Jerimy asked, “could it be something in the past. The effects of cloud cover from a volcanic eruption or something.

Wally shook his head, “We don’t see any sign of something like that. Of course, it would be hard to detect from orbit, most findings like that are made on the ground, or below it.” He looked at Jerimy, “The only thing I could think of is another dampening field, could that be possible.”

“To what end,” said Jerimy, “you’d have to have reason to cover an area that large with any kind of field. God, think of how much juice that would take.”

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

Jerimy shook his head, “like I told you before. I think Josh has the best chance of answering these questions. He’s a lot closer to the source.”

“I know,” said his father.

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It wasn’t until they got back to the drop off, that Wendy noticed that they had lost their companion. “Hey, what happened to Drus?” Her voice had had a hint of surprise in it.

The others looked around. The newly named Drus 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 about as far back as the time required to get down there,” he pointed to the bottom of the drop off.

Fortunately, Josh thought, he had insisted that everyone re-attach their safety line, else one of them would have fallen as they all crowed the edge to look down. Sure enough, Drus was at the bottom of the drop off, staring up, his head tilted as if wondering why they were still up there.

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

Wendy smiled an ‘I told you smile’, “told you he had a way down. He’s smart.”

“Well, smart enough to figure out that we wanted down, but if he was really smart, he would have told us how to do it. Okay, there’s a way down and it has to be close. He didn’t have all that much time to get down and make his over to here.”

Mikiu looked at Josh, “do we spend time looking for it. We probably aren’t going to find tracks, our own weight barely leaves a mark.”

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

“I can try. The trees keep it pretty cool down her, but his body temperature is fairly high, almost as high as ours, so maybe I can find where he left us. Trouble is, don’t know if you’ve noticed, he’s a hooved animal. He’s got a built-in insulator to keep body heat from the ground.”

Mikiu fiddled with his hand scanner before starting to walk slowly back along their path. He covered about twenty meters before he stopped and pointed to his left. “He went that way.”

Josh said, “well that wasn’t that difficult. Josh nodded to Mikiu, “your lead I believe.” The engineer nodded and set off ninety degrees away from the path.

It took all of six minutes before they came to a narrow ravine crossing their path. A glance showed steep sides to a bottom that sharply sloped towards the drop off. They were forced to follow it backwards for a considerable distance before the angle of the sides was shallow enough for them to easily get into the ravine proper.

Josh said, “I believe we found your way down Wendy.” He glanced at Mikiu, “this looks easier than the grav-paks.”

“Yes, yes it does,” said the Science officer. “But, just to be safe, I’m going to take one with me. Might come in handy.”

“Let’s make it two, we’ll leave the others here. You and Jameson go get them. The rest of us will fix lunch.”

“You mean get out a set of ration tubes,” said Mikiu. “Thanks.”

Jameson said, “I can get the grav-paks.”

Josh shook his head no. “Sorry, the no person alone rule is now in effect. We do everything in teams and yes, two people is a team.”

After the two left Wendy asked, “everything?”

“Everything,” answered Susan, aware of what the girl was referring to. “I know that rations take a lot longer to go through but eventually, they will get to the other end.”

“I know,” said Wendy. “I just don’t have to like it.”

Josh laughed, “no one does. But this is not your polite colony life.”

“Polite colony life, we’re hardcore pioneers here. We didn’t have working toilets for almost a week at first.”

“Sorry, I thought you were spoiled for a second.”

“Not hardly,” she said with a laugh. “Tell me the truth. How bad are we going to smell by the end?”

He glanced down sheepishly, caught in a memory, before answering. “Depends, if we’re lucky we’ll find water clean enough and deep enough to swim in, or at least bathe in. If we don’t, we have a spray to deaden the nose, but.”

“We don’t like to use that,” said Susan. “You need all your senses in the unknown, and your sense of smell is just as important as your other senses.”

“Especially,” said Josh, “if we’re forced to eat native foods, which happens on occasion.”

Mikiu and Jameson returned quickly and soon they were walking single file downhill, but this time with banks on either side rising around them. Before long they found themselves in a deep narrow chasm with a noticeable drop in temperature.

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

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

Mikiu nodded in agreement as they continued downwards until the ravine opened into the forest. They also found Drus 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 examining this new bit of forest. Unlike above, the floor was 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. Drus, having lost interest in listening to Josh, was busy grazing thick grass, still keeping eyes on the group. He appeared quite hungry. 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”, said Josh as he looked around. He noticed wondering traces of trails through the grass, apparently Drus wasn’t the only wildlife here. Drus however, was the only one choosing to show itself. The air on the other hand, while not exactly thick with them, contained a decent number of birds either in flight or at rest observing. They all had a superficial resemblance to the one they had seen earlier, some however, were obviously different. Still, he noticed after kneeling to examine the ground, the thing that he would most expect among the trees, insects - of them there was none. He said as much out loud.

Mikiu, taking his usual sensor readings, agreed. “Yea, that is strange. 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 didn’t think about their absence anywhere else

Josh glanced at Jameson. “You’re a biologist. You didn’t think that was odd.”

“As a matter of fact, yes. I did find it odd. But the one thing they drilled into us in training is that every planet is different. You can expect certain things based on what you know from other worlds. That doesn’t mean you’ll find them. Our desert has no native plants, hence no insects. There is no natural food chain, not even at the microscopic level. We just assumed that the desert was sterile for some reason.”

Josh said, “Well, you could be right. For all we know other parts of Tingies are ripe with bugs.”

“Maybe,” said Mikiu, “but there should be insects around the colony site. You have a river and a river usually denotes life. And when you have life you have insects, they’re almost always part of the food chain.

Josh said, “Goes back to what he said before, every planet if different.”

Wendy shrugged, “again, that’s what we are paying you for. To find answers to questions we don’t know enough to ask.”

Josh gave her sly smile, “we’ve found plenty of questions you didn’t know to ask. Now let’s see if we can find some answers to them.”

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A time and distance away, D117 continued to observe. The carbon-based life forms he was observing had showed no hesitancy to exploring beyond the barrier, a fact that he had immediately passed up stream. It was obvious they were determined to proceed further into the nursery. It had observed that they appeared to communicate through sounds with specific sounds referencing each of them. Names, that’s what they were called. D117 remembered that concept, it had meant something, sometime, in the past it. It put a request to services for a memory search. It would take time. Such a request had not been needed for, it didn’t know. That information would also have to be requested.

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Josh glanced at his wrist comp, it was midday. “Okay, we’ve solved the day’s major problem, getting down, without half the drama we expected. Let’s eat lunch.”

The others looked at each other. Mikiu shrugged, “I would like to get started but I guess eating now would make sense. Give us the rest of the afternoon to work.”

“None of us really want to stop right now so let’s just drink lunch and get it over with,” said Josh. He pulled the small canteen containing liquid food his belt. He was careful not to drink too much of the mixture. It was extremely concentrated containing a balance of protein, vitamins, and everything else needed for a person on the go and of course helped with hydration. Fortunately, restraining the quantity one drank was easy. It had all the taste and consistency of liquid dirt, and no amount of added flavoring would every make it desirable. To help with hydration of course he carried separate canteens of water, three of them. The entire party was equipped the same.

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, Drus taking his normal place in the rear. It wouldn’t affect their progress, but Josh felt a little more secure with the group bunched a little more tightly, now that they knew there was wildlife about.

They quickly left the cliff face behind them, now using the ravine as their guide point. The clift itself had proved interesting for it’s lack of uniqueness. It didn’t look artificial, like the wall, but there was definitely something weird about its smooth vertical surface. It displayed nothing in the way of niches or protrusions that could serve as handholds.

Mikiu echoed his own thoughts, “damm. We’d never be able to climb that.”

“It looks natural though,” said Jameson.

Josh wasn’t sure, “the material looks like real stone, but the way it’s cut off, that doesn’t look right.”

Mikiu said, “could just be the way it fractures. I’ll admit, it’s awfully clean looking.”

Josh took one last look up the ravine before leading them, in the new marching order, away from the cliff.

It took only an hour’s march before they began to notice the scent of water in the air, it wasn’t like the smell of an Ocean, more like a standing body of water. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it didn’t stir the senses.

Soon, they were looking at it. Stretching out in front of them as far as the eye could see, to the left, to the right, and straight ahead. The water was grey, like a sky on a rainy day, and Josh couldn’t tell whether he was seeing a fog in the distance or an optical illusion. Then he saw perhaps the reason for the lack of color. Just a few meters in front of them was the edge of the water, the grass growing straight up it. The edge was a barrier of same material as the wall, grey, featureless, rising twenty centimeters above the surface of the liquid. Josh walked slowly up to the edge and looked down.

“Damm, is this a bowl?”

Mikiu, ever present scanner in hand, laughed, “You would be correct, I think. At least as far as this thing can tell. This is a really big bowl of water.”

Susan added, “I’ve never seen a bowl with a pier before.”

Josh looked in the direction she was looking. Two hundred meters to the right was a pier jutting out. It was about fifty meters long, with sides and deck of the same grey material. Along its edges large rings stood every ten meters, obviously for mooring vessels. The greyness making it difficult to see and Josh found himself squinting to make sure he wasn’t imaging it.

Looking back to horizon he let his cheeks fill with air as he slowly exhaled mouth closed. Finally, with a gasp, he broke the silence, “I got to tell you. This is a lot more water than I expected.”

Mikiu’s face twisted into confusion. “What the hell, 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, the alien part of it I mean, not the water. They never would have opened this planet for colonization. The academics would go crazy for this. Mikiu, what have you got?”

Mikiu lowered his arms, a scanner in both hands. He had doubled up. “It’s all made of the same stuff as the wall near as I can tell. And that doesn’t really mean a whole lot. I can’t even tell if this stuff is just along the edge or is a complete liner underneath the water. Whatever this stuff is, it really messes with our sensor tech.”

“How far across do you think?”, asked Josh.

Mikiu glanced at his wrist computer, shook his head in bewilderment, “again, can’t say.”

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

“At best, you may be seeing the top of a tree line”, said Mikiu. “It could just be an illusion. My best guess is that it’s a long way to the other side.”

Josh squinted in the direction of the far shore, “okay if you say so. I guess if the ship can’t see it, we have no way to judge its size. What do we call it, a lake?”

“For now, 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’s doing here?”

“I would assume that its waiting for boats,” said Josh. “The purpose of those boats, and who they belonged too – 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 hand comms we brought, don’t think so. If we couldn’t reach the relay from on top 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 to add.”

“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 smacked himself with the back of his hand and said, “yes dammit. I didn’t forgot about that. It has a wide receiving array. If we get out from under these trees it might be able to punch through.”

Josh blew air into his cheeks again, “you mean 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,” asked Susan.

Josh gave her an exasperated look before walking to the edge of the pier. The grey pier was about two meters wide and extended an easy fifty meters, its height just a little higher than the lip bounding the water. The point where the two blended together was seamless. 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 or textureed, 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, rummaged through her pack pulling 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 had Yelaa leave the Deidre’s comms open on all modes, even the commercial ones we don’t normally watch. I’m sure she has a tattle-tail setup to catch it.”

“Good, I guess I’ll just 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. At this point he didn’t see how it would hurt. If something happened to her chances were that it would happen to him too. Besides, all they had really encountered so far was a wall and some not so fierce wildlife. The fact that someone had provided a means of ingress was a little startling, but so far, nothing seemed hostile. He stopped a couple of meters short of the end. With the girl waiting he tried the phone.

It took only seconds to get a response, but it was a very broken response. It sounded like the Deidre. He shouted, “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 so 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 if you want to talk to your father.”

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 historical alien ruins, there was also the value of the technology. No one had ever really 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.” ??? check against prior.

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

The voice was much clearer, although, still not the clarity Josh was used too. “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 looks, he’ll find I’m on the colonies satellite band, Wendy had more brains than we did and brought a sat phone, as for the forest, I’m not in it right now.”

His dad, sounding puzzled, asked, “then where are 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 so big that we can’t see the shoer no matter what direction we look. It has to be visible from space.”

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

“No, no I am not. I’m standing on the edge of what looks like an ocean. Are you telling me you can’t see a body of water this size?”

“Wally’s verifying now.”

“What do you mean he’s verifying.”

His Dad’s voice sounded sheepish, “he’s looking out the forward observation bubble with a pair of binoculars.”

“Well, he should be able to see it because there is no cloud cover. Come to think of it, I haven’t 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 about this huge lake you can’t see?”

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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 consistent 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 and that someone had used a communications device. 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.

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Jameson, waiting at the foot of the pier, was the first noticed. Shaking his to make sure he wasn’t imagining it he grasped Mikiu by the arm and pointed.

Mikiu looked, shook his own head in disbelief, and then out the pier to Josh, noticing that he was still using the sat phone. He yelled, “Josh”, and pointed to the left side of the pier where halfway between them floated a large canoe like boat. The boat and the line attaching it to one of the large rings was the same grey shade as everything else.

Josh, turned to see what Mikiu was yelling about. He let his tongue slip free for a second, “What the hell.” He walked slowly toward the boat, ignoring the sounds of his father’s voice yelling from the sat phone. He felt knew Wendy was walking with him.

It was a large canoe shaped boat, around five and a half meters in length and maybe a meter and a half wide at its widest point. There were bench seats at ends and a wider one in the middle. He could see no paddles. Each end curved upwards to a point that reminded him of the a Viking ship from old Earth.

Wendy muttered, “no paddles.”

“I noticed that. You know about boats?”

“Sartagius, we lived on a lake. I love the water. That’s one of the reasons my dad picked the spot on the river. But we only have a couple of small canoes, nothing this big.”

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 betraying his exasperation over being ignored for the last couple of minutes, yelled, “what! What the hell is going on down there?”

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

“Try me son,” said his father, his voice calmer now that he’d gotten a response..

“Someone sent us a boat.”

“Someone did what.”

“Somebody sent us a boat”, said Josh. “It’s just here tied to a docking ring. It wasn’t here a minute ago.” Turning to the others he asked, “did anyone see where it came from?”

Jameson said, “I saw it first, but it was already there when I noticed.”

Mikiu said, “that’s when I yelled for you. I was running sensor scans, but in the other direction. Didn’t pick up anything.”

Susan shrugged, “I was watching the forest, in case something tried to sneak up on us.”

His dad, having heard this exchange over the comm said, “at least someone remembers there training. Good job Susan. Now, with five of you there, no one saw a boat float up?”

“Worse than that dad. It’s tied to one of the dock rings.”

The senior Halerin’s voice was now a lot quieter, “you mean someone brought a boat in, tied it up, and then walked off without anyone seeing anything? “

Josh grimaced as he replied, “you’d think one of us would have noticed.” He subconsciously sunk his head into his shoulders in anticipation of the response.

Surprisingly, after a pause during which he imagined his father was discussing his stupidity with Jerimy, a calm question came.

“What,” asked the senior Halerin, “do you intend to do with this gift boat? That someone so thoughtfully has placed at your disposal.”

Josh, feeling relief said, “I don’t exactly know. Way I figure it, however opened the wall for us probably provided the boat so we can keep going.” He glanced at Wendy, “You should let the colony know about it. See if they want us to go for a ride. Meantime, we’ll see if we can figure out where this came from.”

“That makes a little sense at least. I imagine that even concerned about his daughter’s safety Jarwan is gong to want answers, and that probably means getting some help to you guys. This mission is getting a little more complex than we anticipated. I think I’d feel better if you had some added manpower.”

“I sure my dad will want to send some people,” said Wendy. “In fact, I’m pretty sure he’ll want ot come himself.”

“Maybe,” said the captain, “but this is sort of our job, and anyway, it looks like a storm is brewing over the colony, a big storm. Your father may have his hands full. Let us kick it around and talk to Jarwan. You have enough battery to leave that phone on?”

“Uh, that’s a good question that probably doesn’t matter. I’m out in the open. I doubt that under the trees if you could reach us. I’m going to head back to the campsite. I think we can get there by dark and I’d rather spend the night there. Now that we know the way it won’t take us long to make the trip either direction. I’ll call you on the regular comm when we get there.

After signing off with the Deidre he put the phone into sleep mode and handed it back to Wendy who asked, “who does he want to send down?”

Mikiu answered, “Probably some of the ex-military guys.” He glanced at Josh, “maybe Jerimy.”

“You mean to take over?” asked Josh. He thought about it for a second. “He might, not because he doesn’t want me in charge, but because Jerimy is probably wanting to see this stuff. He’s studies anything he can find on alien ruins.”

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. They’re certainly making it easy for us.”

“The question,” said Mikiu, “is what exactly do they want us to find. I mean, it’s gotta be an AI that’s doing this?”

“Why,” asked Wendy?

Josh gave here a surprised look. “Because if it’s actual aliens were up a creek,” he stopped and looked at the boat.

Wendy, with a silly look on her face, finished, “without a paddle.”

The others shared a look of disgust. Susan asked, “you guys forming an act?”

Mikiu said, “I hope not. The reason it’s got to be an AI is, as Josh pointed out, the alternative is live aliens, and I don’t think that’s likely. Our sensors can’t tell what this material,” he gave the deck a touch with his toe, “is, but we can judge that it’s old, very old. The way things are laid out, with the separated desert and forest, tells me that there’s some overall picture here that we’re not seeing yet. My guess is that some AI wants us to see at least part of it. The question is whether it’s making its own decisions or following ancient protocols.”

Josh said, “or maybe we’re lunch. Mikiu, you said just plain water, right?”

After hearing a confirmation Josh slid sideways over the edge of the pier into the boat. It hardly moved at all under his weight. In fact, it barely bobbed in the water. Holding on to the edge of the pier he twisted his legs bringing the boat into full contact with the pier. It remained completely stable, and he felt no uncertainty under his feet.

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

“Some kind of inertia dampening field,” said Mikiu. This thing may look simple, but I’m guessing it’s not. That’s a sign of really advanced technology when it doesn’t look advanced.”

“These people seem to have a thing about fields”, muttered Josh. He felt the material of the boat, once again it had a different texture than either the wall or the deck. The color remained the same grey. On a hunch he felt the outside of the boat and wasn’t surprised to find it smooth to the touch.

Mikiu noticed his actions, “yea, I noticed that. The surfaces all feel different even thought everything looks the same The properties appear different, everything designed for a specific function.

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

“Maybe,” said Jameson, “it tells us something about their physical structure. There visual spectrum range could have been limited.”

“Maybe”, said Mikiu, “or they just discovered a really useful grey material. Seriously, it might not be the spectrum they could see but what they saw. Everything has a different type of surface, although to us it all looks the same. Maybe they saw texture the same way we see color.”

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

“Like I said, they may just see different. “Seen differently”, Mikiu corrected himself “Whoever built these structures are long gone, and we’re going to be lucky if we can find enough to learn anything about them. I’m actually hoping that we do find an AI, one advanced enough to be able to get some answers from. I don’t think we’re looking at anything dangerous, whatever it is had had plenty of time to hurt us.”

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

Josh looked back, Drus was stopped just off the entrance of the dock. He was peering at them alternating between looking down at the edge of the deck and peering at them. He seemed afraid of actually touching the pier’s surface.

“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. Maybe he doesn’t not know how to swim.”

“Oh”, she seemed slightly mollified.

Josh nodded, it sounded like a reasonable explanation, of course the aliens may just have wanted to keep the pier 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 didn’t make sense.

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

Wendy slid into the boat with him. “Maybe it’s what Mikiu said about differences in the surface. Maybe we see them, but we should be able to 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 the bottom.

On the dock Mikiu and the others jumped backwards. Reacting quickly, he raced along the pier, attempting to keep up with the rapidly moving boat. Unfortunately the boat had angled away from the pier and was out of reach way before the pier’s end. Mikiu found himself shouting at Josh and realized that the other two were also yelling. He raised his hand for silence.

“Wait a minute, yelling isn’t going to do much good Let’s see what direction they go, maybe we can find some way to follow them..

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Much further away, but still in the lake, deep under surface, another mind felt the boat motor come to life. The sense that alerted the mind felt a vibration not felt for many years. With curiosity awakened, it twisted its 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 after getting his balance back. He was sitting on the middle seat holding firmly to the sides of the moving craft. Wendy 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.”

“Sit down before you fall out.” He grabbed one of her hands while she took a quick seat beside him. Feeling the warmth of her leg against his he quickly let go of the hand. Rising quickly he moved around her with the ease of someone at home if different gravities and environments. Reaching the front of the boat he started feeling around the inner lip where she had been exploring.

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

“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, briefly engulfing her as he continued checking the boat’s rim to the other end. Finally, felt a rough spot under his left thumb and pressed it. Immediately the boat stopped powered movement and coasted to a stop. He let out a sigh and glanced back at the dock. The three remaining members of the team stood at the very end of the pier looking out at them. He realized that they had been yelling but had been so engrossed he hadn’t noticed.

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

With a start he realized that he was indeed, holding on to her left hand. Apparently he had grabbed it on his way from the other end of the boat. He quickly let go. “Okay, but don’t touch anything else.”

She nodded, still a little surprised by the situation. “Sorry, I was just trying to find it. I didn’t mean to press it.”

He slowly rejoined her on the center seat, careful to keep his balance. “That’s a problem. If we can’t see the controls, we can’t avoid triggering them. Worse yet, we’ll have a hard time finding them to use without triggering something else. I don’t suppose you know how to turn this thing around?”

She shook her head ruefully, he enjoyed watching her blond hair move around. She said, “sorry again. I’m better with sail boats.”

He laughed, “I don’t know much about boats, but I don’t see anything resembling a sail.”

She laughed back, “and no paddles.”

Well, it’s not exactly a creek we’re up. He glanced back at the pier, now about a hundred meters away. 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.” He had neglected to try the comm badges in intercom mode. “Then again, I don’t remember a situation where it would have made a difference until now.”

“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 said, “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.”

“Makes sense, like a toggle switch. They must have be able to see textures and who knows what else that we can’t.”

“Yea, otherwise, they’d have spent all day looking for a control. I guess you were right about their vision. These controls probably stand out to them.”

Mikiu asked, “Thanks, you think you can find a way to get that thing back to the dock.”

“Oh, probably, might take a few days”, laughed Josh. “I don’t even know how to turn it back on let alone steer it.”

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

Josh had a pained expression, “that’ll be fine’ but you better let Susan do it. She’s a swimmer. I If I remember correctly, you’re not.”

“Fall of a parasail one time and, okay Susan it is.” said Mikiu. “But there’s nothing in the water that our sensors rate as dangerous, so a fall into it isn’t going to be dangerous.”

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 was certain that both he and the girl could probably swim back to the pier with no trouble, but the one thing that their exploration suits, although waterproof, were not good for was swimming. They tended to weight one down even if they wouldn’t let you sink. It make even a short wim tiring and long.

He noticed that on the dock Mikiu was strapping on a grav-packs. Josh hated using them over water, it always seemed to end in disaster. But, in this case, it was a better idea than swimming, even if the water was safe.

While they were waiting Wendy asked, “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 or whatever. 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.” He sighed, “this was to be my last expo mission for a while.”

“I thought this was your specialty.”

He smiled ruefully. It is my first love, but anything gets old when you been doing it for what seems forever. I’m ready to switch to something else. Learn something new, or maybe I just need a vacation.”

She understood, “That happens with anything. 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 a family on every planet. And besides, Deidre only lifts out of Sartagius, except for the odd cargo run. So I really couldn’t maintain multiple families, not very well. Anyway, I’m solo 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. My last boyfriend abandoned me.”

“I did not. I left you on a colony planet.” He paused for second. “You are talking about me aren’t you. “

“Yes, I was kidding of course. You didn’t really abandon me. I did miss you.”

He smiled, “I missed you too. I sort of got the idea that you and Jameson were in teamed up.”

Wendy laughed, “he thinks we’re in negotiations. I’m not sure what gave him that idea. Like you said, just a close friend.”

“Who’d like to be more.”

“I’m not ready for that. I’ve told him, but he doesn’t seem to get the idea.”

Josh said, “you can’t really blame him. You’ve got a small population here. It’s not like he had a lot of choices.”

She turned serious, “that’s why he better not mess up what he’s got by wanting more.”

She started to say something else but was stopped by Susan 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.”

They both apologized, tripping over their words as they did so. Mikiu gave them an odd glance as he handed the end of the rope to Josh. “I guess you’re going to half to tie around one of the seats.”

“Isn’t anything else to tie it too,” said Josh as he looped the rope under the bench seat closest to the pier. He double tied it and tugged to make sure it was secure.

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

On the dock, Susan and Jameson had looped the line through one of the dock rings and tied it to another. Grabbing the line, they slowly begin to walk towards the shore. Susan had pointed out that walking the boat in would be easier on their arms than simply reeling in the line. It took about five minutes to bring it to the dock. The two were careful to avoid building up speed so the impact with the pier was minimal.

As soon as they bounced against the pier, Josh jumped from the boat and hastily tied the line off. The other two scrambled out aided by Josh.

“Well, that was a nice ride, I think I’ll check in with Dad”. Josh looked to Wendy for the sat phone. She handed over, thought about telling him to keep it, but decided no.

Josh quickly brought his dad, Wally and Jerimy up to date. It was decided to follow the original plan and return to the base camp.

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A time and distance away, D117 saw that the guests, it had decided that was what they would be called – although they were in truth, intruders, were preparing to leave again. It still needed time to study them and had yet to receive instructions from a higher mind. With some thought, he sent a message to C43211 informing it that D117 was accelerating the process.

The answer came back almost immediately, he had thought it would, C43211 had no more patience than itself. The order was to proceed with caution. 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.

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It took only a few moments for Mikiu to pack up the grav-pack. They left the boat tied to the pier. The slim line wouldn’t prevent something or someone from taking the boat, but it would keep it from slipping away.

As soon as the group finished packing they crossed the level ground and started the climb up the ravine. Josh took the lead, the others spread out behind him, Drus as always, in the rear. Josh dreaded the trudge back up the hill but was sure that everyone would appreciate sleeping in the tents. It hadn’t taken long for the base camp to become a sort of anchor for the team.

As he led them into the cut of the ravine a feeling of lightness come over him, then a weariness that hadn’t been there seconds before crept into his legs. He was puzzled, he hadn’t thought himself as out of shape, at least not this far. Then, before he realized it, he found himself on his knees – and then he found darkness. Consciousness left him as his face hit ground.

He had no idea how much time had passed, but it was nearing 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 face of Wendy. He realized the soft thing under his head was Wendy’s lap. He appreciated that, and wished he didn’t feel so foolish. His awakening caught her attention.

“He’s awake,” she said quickly, the relief in her voice palpable.

“What the hell happened,” he asked?

The other team faces came into view. Mikiu, a puzzled look on his face, said, “you fell down.”

“Anyone else,” he quickly glanced at each face, they all appeared to be 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, I wasn’t exposed as much as you.”

“Exposed to what and how long was I out,” asked Josh?

Wendy answered, “Mikiu says another suppression field. You were out 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. “By that logic we should have been doing then all along. I Don’t think it would have done any good. Our sensors can’t read the field now even thoughI 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 try walking in it.”

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

“At least they 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. I knew we should have put a rope down.”

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, testing each limb, Josh got to his feet. Other than a brief second of anxiety, which he suspected was more mental than anything, he judged himself to be okay. His stomach remined him he washungry, and thirsty.

“Well, I guess we get to try out our emergency gear after all,” he lamented wryly. But first, before it gets any darker, I want to try and call the ship. Someone better come with me, with a flashlight, so we don’t step off the end.”

“I’ll go,” said Wendy, ‘I’ve still got the phone.”

Josh nodded, “okay. You guys want to rig up some kind of shelter, since we’re spending the night.”

Mikiu said, “sure, we’ll see what we can come up with.”

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The captain was surprised when Yelaa summoned him to the bridge in the night. That wasn’t something he expected in orbit around a friendly planet.

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

He frowned, after the planet team had missed the conference linkup 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 need him you can wake him. Josh said it wasn’t an emergency. I asked.”

He felt a shiver of relief wash over him, “good thinking. And you’re right about Jerimy. He’s been putting in too many hours. We need him functioning, not exhausted.”

He pressed the comm button. “Deidre here. Josh, are you there?”

His son’s voice came back quickly. “For the moment. But it got a little dicey earlier.”

Mike felt his anxiety rise again, “what happened?”

He sat patiently, listening, interrupting only a couple of times with questions. At some point Wally came in, his face crossed with a frown. 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 would prefer you stay. The question is, why?”

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

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, sternly reminding himself that every shipmate was family. You had to think that way when you lived and worked in close proximity for years at a time.

“It’s your mission Josh, what are you going to do?” He wasn’t on the ground, it was his son’s mission.

“I have no clue Dad. What I do know is that we can’t sit here forever. But I don’t like going out on the water with no escape plan. Normally I’d leave a couple of people behind to watch the pier and the ravine, but I don’t have enough people to split up the team. We could always try going up the cliff with a grav-pak, but as Mikiu pointed out, meeting a suppression field in the air would be a bad thing. You got any ideas 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.” He glanced at ships time on the bulkhead, “you can’t do anything till morning. That’ll give us some time to think it over, see if we can come up with anything.”

“He hesitated for a second, he didn’t want to load anymore on the exploration teams shoulders, but he loathed the idea of keeping the two colony members with them in the dark. “Something else son, we had our call with Jarwan. It was pretty short. They’ve got a developing problem with the weather. You’ll remember I told you it was acting up.”

Wendy’s voice responded, a trace of fear in it. “How bad?”

“Nothing really severe. But it’s getting worse. They just have somethings to get done. We’re monitor the weather from here of course. I might release a satellite or two to help with that, and maybe clean up the comm link for you guys.”

One the planet Josh said. “Thanks Dad. I’ll let you know when we set out.” He turned off the sat phone and handed it back to Wendy. “I take it bad weather this time of year is really unexpected?”

She glanced at it and then handed it back to him. “You should keep it, and yes, bad weather this time of year never happens. You don’t suppose it has anything to do with us? I mean our being here.”

“I don’t know. You wouldn’t think so but we’re running into things we didn’t expect.” He glanced at the phone is his hand and clipped it to his belt. “This thing’s 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. I go the impression your dad is more worried than he let on.”

“Well,” said Josh, a little quietly, “he is putting out a couple of satellites. That’s not something he would normally do. The standing rule is if we have to deploy them, we don’t take them back aboard. We just give them to the colony. And before you ask, no charge. We figure if we need them to do our job it’s not the colonies fault.”

She nodded, “even the weather satellite? That’s not exactly your fault, or at least we don’t know at this point.”

He laughed, “My dad’s not one to waste money but weather and comm satellites are pretty common. They’re not a high price item.”

“They would be for us.”

“Sure, you’re on the wrong end of a gravity well. We just push’em in the right direction.”

By this time they had made their way back to the others. “Okay guys, come up with anything for making camp tonight?” 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 all shook their heads. Susan and Wendy both said “no”.

Josh chimed in, “I don’t think so, too out in the open. Besides, everything that lives in this forest probably uses that lake as a water source and all of them may not be afraid of the pier. By the same token, we don’t want to stay near the ravine. Absorption field or not wildlife probably uses it to get to the water from up top. For that matter, the field may only effect humans.”

Mikiu agreed with him, “that leaves the base of the cliff. I was thinking we just move a hundred meters and 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, Drus doesn’t appear to be worried about anything.”

“You don’t know that,” said Mikiu, “and he may not count. I think he’s probably here to keep an eye on us.”

“A spy?” said Wendy. “Or do you think he’s running things?” Josh noted a whiff of sarcasm in her voice. The girl seemed taken with the creature.

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.” He changed the subject. “What did the ship have to say?”

Josh filled the others in on the weather situation over the colony and Captain Halerin’s decision to release additional satellites.

It took them an hour to build a long puptent between two closely space trees with rope and canvas from their field tents. The result was a long tunnel like tent, open on the ends and with no floor covering. The lack of insects made the thought of sleeping on the mashed down ground cover acceptable. This arraignment left them no place for even a symbolic campfire. They settled on using a camp lantern to light up the space between the tent and the cliff itself. It wasn’t an ideal setup. It would have to do.

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 got enough food and fluid to keep us going for four, maybe five days. We can stretch out the food of course, but that means trusting the water from the lake.”

“What happens then? Asked Jameson.

Mikiu answered, “we find something edible, or we get real hungry.”

Josh nodded in agreement. “That’s the situation. I think we have no choice. We use the boat. See where it takes us. If someone is trying to get us somewhere let them do it.”

Susan asked, “how sure are we that the boat was taking you somewhere. Maybe Wendy just hit the on button.”

Josh shook his head. Wendy and I have talked about that. She thinks that it was heading somewhere. I agree, nothing else makes sense.”

“One thing we know for sure,” said Mikiu. “We all agree that the boat wasn’t there when we found the pier. It came from somewhere. I’ve got to believe the way it started out it was heading back to wherever it came from.

Susan added, “the question is where exactly is that, 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 days. Plus, we don’t know if the bad weather is going to show up here to. It’ll be bad if we’re caught in a storm on the open water.“

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 wherever we’re going with supplies. I, don’t think it will be a long trip. It didn’t take that long for the boat to show up. Granted, it may have come from a close by depo and that may not be our destination. But I think that whoever’s running this show has an interest in getting us to destination. If all they wanted was us dead they’ve had ample opportunity for that.

“I don’t relish telling that to my father,” said Wendy, and I would like a chance to talk to him before we start. Maybe if your dad gets the new satellites out in the morning, we’ll be able to communicate from on the water.

“If we can reach the ship from the dock,” said Mikiu, a weary expression in his eyes, “we should have no trouble on the water. Depends on how far we go of course but yes, the new sats should help. I gather this means that trying the cliff with a grav-pak is out?”

“You said it before,” said Josh. “Halfway up the cliff is no place to run into a suppression field. Like I said, I don’t think something, or someone is trying to kill us. But I wouldn’t guarantee that we aren’t capable of doing it ourselves.

The others looked at each other, a look of agreement on their faces.

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

He looked around, wasn’t the best defensive position. It wouldn’t hurt to keep a watch. They could always catch up on sleep in the boat.

“Why not.” He assigned the same watch schedule as the previous night, himself, followed by Mikiu and then Susan. He settled into his watch, just on the side of the tent towards the shore. He counted on the cliff to protect the other side. He didn’t really feel safe, he rarely did off the ship.

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