New Story

4

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Josh sat in one end of the boat, tired and stiff after a long night on the water. Jameson had volunteered for the seat at the other end and Mikiu and the two women occupied the center seats. They had used their tents as barriers from the coldness of the water coming off the lake during the night. It was mainly a mental defense, their protective suits took care of temperature regulation. The only thing not protected had been their faces and that hadn’t prevented them from falling asleep after the long first day one the water.

The conversations with the parents had went as expected. Josh found it irritating that at the age of 102 his father’s voice still had such an ability to make him second guess himself. He was also irritated because his Dad had sounded an awful lot like Jarwan Sunderson, Wendy’s father. He understood Jarwan’s attitude, Wendy was still a young girl, less experienced in the world. Young woman, he corrected himself, he remembered the feeling of her enclosed in his arms when he was looking for the boats controls two days past. She was definitely not a young girl anymore, but she was still a client and he quickly chased some thoughts from his mind.

§

In orbit, 40000 kilometers overhead, Mike Halerin threw his tablet onto the conference table. He was frustrated, despite their best efforts, no one had been able to penetrate whatever shielding was preventing them from seeing the huge body of water the exploration team was currently moving on. They could talk through it, apparently only when the team on the surface initiated the conversation, but still they could communicate. But, they couldn’t see it with any sensors, on any wavelengths, not even with their naked eyes. It was irksome that UHF radio waves could penetrate the fake tree canopy but the same frequency radar could not.

“What if we send down a sensor drone, can we get a reading as it passes through?” he asked the assembled ships technical cadre.

Jerimy and Wally both answered. “It might”, Wally glanced at Jerimy and nodded to concede the floor. Jerimy went on, “In fact it’ll probably tell us how deep the camouflage layer is, but I wouldn’t count on it telling us how to negate it.”

Wally picked it up from there. “Trouble is we have no concept of how this field is working, our sensors see trees, our eyes see trees, we don’t even know for sure that there aren’t trees; it could be Josh and his team that are hallucinating.”

Jarwan Sunderson’s voice came over the speaker, the Captain had forgotten that he was linked it. “If my girl says there is a lake, well I believe her.”

Wally answered quickly, “not doubting anyone’s word Mr. Sunderson. I’m just saying that’s how blind we are, we have no way of judging what’s real – and what’s not.”

“Jarwan, call me Jarwan. I know that, I’m still frustrated that they took action without talking to us first.”

“Same here,” said the Captain, “but right now we’ve got to figure out some way to help them.”

“Can you take a shuttle down?”

“I’d rather not try that just yet Jarwan,” said the Captain. “We don’t know what other effects this field may have. If it’s anything like the one at the wall we could simply loose power and crash.”

Jerimy took the opportunity to break in, “gentlemen, might I suggest something?” He looked around, he had their attention. “Since we’re up here, and Josh is down there, I suggest, that we wait and see what he finds out. Other than Josh being knocked out, and that I suspect was just to discourage them from leaving, nothing of any consequence has happened. I think we need to review everything we know about Tingies the planet, that includes old survey records, the Deidre’s records and everything the colony has learned in the past ten years.”

The others were quick to agree and the Captain did what he did best, organize. He put Jerimy in charge, along with Wally and Jarwan and Dunzin from the colony. They agreed to meet back in six hours, about the time darkness would settle in on the surface, and review everything. The Captain hoped that somewhere in the data was an inkling of what had obviously been missed by everyone.

§

On the other ship, sitting outside the systems Oort cloud, a meeting was taking place. It too, was being held in a conference room, but not one so nice. In this room the table was not so shiny, not that it was the table’s fault, the light from the ceiling came in only from angles, many of the emitters dim or broken, unable to show the scratches and disrepair of the surface.

The Captain of this vessel was also frustrated, had been so for a long time. But his frustration was not caused by the ensuing drama on the planet, he had no knowledge of it – his frustration was from years of diminishing goals, unrequited dreams and the ultimate sin of mankind, righteousness. His ship, his crew, and their passengers were at the end of that proverbial rope he had always heard about.

He turned to his chief Engineer, Johanson, “John, how long have we got?”

The grizzled older man said “Cap, it’s like this. We’re down to about 20 percent of main power, the batteries won’t hold much of a charge and we’re sure as hell not getting any solar out here. If we don’t move in-system in the next day we’re not going to be able to stop once we do.”

Allsop, the head of the small colony the ship was transporting, broke his silence. “We won’t be able to brake?”

The Captain turned to face the colony leader. He studied the old man’s face, noted the years of wrinkles and the unkindness of time spent on a high gravity world, pretty Allsop would never be, however, he was the strongest man the Captain had ever known.

“That’s about the size of it, we don’t have enough life support left for an extended approach; we need to get in there quickly. But that means we need enough power to kill our acceleration, we can use the planet as a gravity brake, but that only helps so much. We need to get started soon, make sure we have a reserve if we need it.”

“And then?” Allsop asked, “what do we do? What if the other ship feels threatened? What if they attack.”

Johanson shook his head pityingly, “they will not shoot at us, we represent no threat to anyone.”

The Captain said slowly, “he’s right, they won’t shoot. We’ve been monitoring them as best we can. We can’t hear their communications with the planet at this range but from what we’ve seen they’ve powered some of their systems down. My guess is that they’re doing some type of work for the colony or maybe just delivering cargo, and while they’re doing it, making some repairs, overhauling some systems. We used to do the same before the Fargonius situation, back when we could afford parts and extra crew.

These people don’t seem dangerous, they’re not heavily armed as far as we can see, and this is a registered colony world. Our best bet,” the Captain raised his eyebrows, “is to be honest and see If they can offer us help.”

Allsop was yet to be convinced, “and what kind of help can they offer us? We have nothing of value to trade, no service we can provide them.” The man licked his lips, his eyes darting, “And worse yet, what if we were followed?”

The Captain looked sour, “It is true that we have nothing of value, however, this ship is going no further. Our voyage ends here, I do not think that we were followed, indeed I know of no method that would allow our enemies to do so. They have undoubtably sent an alert to their agents to report our arrival in any system. This system,” he tapped the table with one strong finger, “is the last this ship will ever arrive at, we either put you and ourselves on this planet with what cargo we can — or we die in space. It’s that simple.”

§

Darkness had fallen again and with it came a hard, cold rain. Josh and the others tried to arrange protection with the tents, but the smooth sides of the boat gave them no way to fashion any type of shelter. The best they were able to do was crowd together on the center two seats and hold the tent covers above them. It kept them from being pelted by the drops, but it did little to buoy their spirits. Josh turned on one camp lamp at its lowest setting to provide some light in the tight confines. It was Mikiu who noticed the obvious.

“Where is the water going?”

Looking down Josh noticed he was right, water that fell in the boat outside their makeshift enclosure should have run to the center where they were seated, but the floor was dry. He stuck his head through a joint in the tents to check the outside. The light was almost gone but he could see enough.

“It’s going right through the bottom.”

Mikiu, shaking water from his hair after his own look outside, said, “fascinating, it’s like the water is being wicked through the bottom material. This material, if it is indeed the same material in use for the wall and pier, appears to be very versatile.”

Josh noted that it was a good thing that it only passed water in one direction, the others chuckled. He himself didn’t feel much like laughing. This entire mission was beginning to get him down. So far, they hadn’t gotten very far, they had a lot more questions than they did in the beginning, and now with this indeterminable boat ride he had no idea what was going to happen next. He was also frustrated by the fact that their actions were now apparently out of his hands.

He slid down to sit on the bottom of the boat. Since he wasn’t in danger of getting a wet seat it provided more room for the others using the boat seats; after a moment, Wendy gave him a smile and slipped down beside him, their backs turned to the others. He missed the glance that Mikiu threw in his direction.

“Mind if I join you?”, she asked.

“No, there’s more room down here. At least we can stretch out our legs easier.”

§

A short distance away, just beneath the surface, swan a denizen of the lake, called in ancient time a Dory. Alerted by the previous journey, two cycles gone by, the large creature watched the bottom of the boat with curiosity. It was not those who had long ago used such vessels he was sure, these beings looked different, felt different, and most telling of all, they had made no attempt to say hello as they were wont too of old. He wondered why they didn’t put up the boats top, it was understood that the surface dwellers had no love of the water, not in the way of the true people with whom he shared the lake. With much thinking the great creature slowly moved with the boat, careful not to disturb the occupants. It decided to give this some great thought, if no answer could be fathomed, the question could always be asked directly.

§

A time and distance away sub-mind D117 watched events unfold. If it could be said that he felt emotion, it would have been mild irritation. The rain, the buffering wind, were not things that it had requested or allowed for. Somewhere, the sub-mind that controlled the atmospheric conditions over the home water, was exercising its abilities. He held no animosity for such action, it had been far too long since any of the lower minds, itself included, had been able to run more than rudimentary system checks. However, it did delay things. He classified it as unavoidable in a message and sent that message up the network. Now, D117 settled into wait, it was very good and very practiced at waiting.

§

It started slowly, the Captain did not even try to bring the main’s online, he used the maneuvering jets instead, to nudge the ship forward. Starting the journey through the cloud of debris that surrounded any star system, he moved the ship slowly, for he had not the power nor inclination to use the protective force shields. Better to save that power for other things, like life support or braking engines. He had lied at the last meeting, well at least not told the entire truth. Only he and John, his chief Engineer had known the severity of their situation and they were unsure. The damage had been great and they had no way of accessing it. Nothing would be known until the time came for things to work one last time and they would have a chance – if things didn’t work one last time, the others would experience the despair that had haunted him for the last several hours for only a few short minutes. He hoped, if it came to it, that they wouldn’t have time to assign blame – he had accepted it.

§

Standing at the edge of the wide river that sustained them, Jarwan felt a small shudder of fear pass through him, this was one of the scenarios that occasionally haunted his sleep and brought him awake soaked in cold sweat. It was the wrong time of year for the river to rise, it did so only in the spring, when the snow melted in the mountains to the North. Yet, he was looking at rapidly flowing water two meters above its normal mid-summer height. It had started rising two days ago, the same time the exploration party had started their journey on the lake. There was no evidence that the two events were related, but Jarwan didn’t believe much in coincidence, there had to be some kind of cause and effect, it just wasn’t clear yet.

Micael Tosition, his second in command standing beside him spoke, “it’s halfway to flood level Jar, 2 more meters and we’re going to have wet grain.”

“I know, but what can we do. All the new warehouses are full from the cargo delivery.”

Micael shrugged, “it’s the middle of summer, we can stack it on bare sand for right now, it won’t rain anytime soon. Even if it does, we’ll cover it with tarps.”

“I don’t like doing that with loose grain, we’ve got the evening winds to contend with. Besides, if it can flood now it can storm now.”

“I don’t see that we have much choice. We can put as much of it as we can in the other warehouses but most of it’s going to have to be outside.”

Jarwan nodded, he didn’t like any of this, but they were out of choices.

He made one last defensive move, “have everyone take home as much as they can, enough for an entire year If they have the room. Better to be cramped than hungry.”

§

He woke with a start, the boat had hit something. He touched the floor, he could no longer feel the vibration of the engine, the boat had stopped. He struggled to move and found a weight on his left side, it was Wendy - she was huddled against him, her head resting on his shoulder. Slowly but firmly he moved her away from him and poked his head out from beneath the tent covers. His eyes were adjusted to the light of the small lamp, the darkness outside the boat was like a black curtain, still, he sensed something in front of him. The boat had come to a stop resting against something. Something taller than the boat and solid, he reached out his hand and touched the surface, smooth like the pier but with not the slipperiness of the wall.

He turned his view to the others, “Mikiu, wake up!” he whispered. “We’re here.”

The lanky science officer raised his head, make a clicking sound, wet his lips and tried again. “Where is here?”

“Don’t know, can’t see a damm thing, night vision gone.” He motioned to the lamp, “hand me that thing.”

Taking the lamp he struggled to find his way out from under the makeshift tent and after making certain that a solid surface waited, stepped out of the boat. His actions brought the others awake and asking questions.

“Shhh, let me see what’s out here.”

The lamp was already on the dimmest setting, filling a barely discernable half circle in front of him. The greyness of the surface now seemed familiar, he wondered if they had any other colors. Maybe Mikiu was right, the unknown builders couldn’t see color, just texture. That thought caused him to examine the surface he was standing on in greater detail. He was standing on a ledge that ran in either direction, another dock he surmised.

He sensed rather than heard Wendy move up to stand beside him. He started to object then realized that he was glad for her company. He turned back to the boat in time to see the others disembarking. He moved forward a meter to give them room.

“Okay, somebody got hold of the line, and is it still tied to the boat?”

Susan’s voice, horse with the night air answered, “I’ve got it. Yes it is.”

Mikiu was now flashing his own light around, “and here’s a dock ring.”

While Susan was securing the boat, Josh motioned for the others to stay put as he turned up the lamp and moved forward to explore. He moved several meters straight forward but found nothing, keeping track of Mikiu’s light he tried the left and right for several meters, also nothing.

“Okay”, he said as he moved back to the others, “nothing within several meters of us and I don’t think we should blunder around in the dark. Let’s set up a mini camp here by the boat. It should be light in just a few hours and then we can figure out where we are.”

They made a semi-circle as a camp with the water at their backs, but not too far away. Josh was more worried about something coming out of the darkness than the water, although, he realized that either was equally possible.

§

The starship Arbiter, already Captain Mendez thought of it as the late ship Arbiter, cleared the system’s Oort cloud, passed the orbit of Tingies 0024, the outer most planet, and continued her descent into the inner system. Clear of the abrasive nature of the Oort cloud she picked up as much speed as Mendez though was prudent. He was in a race, as always, but this time he preferred to be the tortoise, not the hare.

§

Once again Yelaa broke into his sleep, but this time for a different reason. A ship had been detected coming in system - that could not be good news. He took only the time necessary to pull on a uniform tunic, he didn’t bother with his normal work coverall, just the uniform itself would let the crew know how serious he took this event.

He found Wally and Jerimy already on the Bridge with Yelaa, three people in the command center during night shift was unusual, he realized that he made it four.

“Okay Wally, what have we got?”

The short, scruffy First Officer talked over his shoulder while keeping his eyes glued to the display screens. “Just caught sight of it about an hour ago, can’t tell a lot at this range but it’s definitely under power, it’s moving slow, and it accelerated to get to slow – I’d say that it’s been sitting out there.”

Captain Halerin settled into a vacant seat next to Wally’s sensor console, “sitting out there doing what?”

Jerimy handled that, “Can’t have been much, no way their sensors could tell much at that range, not from behind the Oort. I’d say they were just trying to get the lay of the land.”

“What could they have learned? Any attempt to communicate?”

“That this is a colony world with a big assed starship in orbit.” Jerimy shrugged his shoulders, “anything else depends on how long they were out there, and even then, we haven’t done anything to get their attention. They could tell we’re partially powered down, that would be the extent of it. And if they’ve tried to radio us its failed.”

The Captain spoke slowly, “no, not quite, they could guess that we’re doing something for the colonist, something other than just delivering freight. Could they have caught any of our comm traffic?”

Wally answered, “not likely, I doubt if they could tell we were communicating, all of our traffic is very low power.”

“Any sign that we’re being targeted or that they have weapons systems?”

“No,” answered Jerimy, “in fact what power readings we are getting are shaky. I don’t know whether they have a problem or our sensors just suck at this range.”

Halerin took a moment to think it through, they had no way of knowing the intentions of the incoming ship or its capabilities. They were little better than blind, and he didn’t like that.”

“Jerimy, what’s our status?”

“Mains are offline, engines and power. I’ve got all shifts reporting to duty now. I think I can get main power back up by the time they get here; we really hadn’t started any major tear down yet. The engines are another story, Star drive is two months away, main ions are down but we can get them up in four five days, reserve in-system is available but we’re fuel limited.”

“So, we can play hide and seek, but running is out.”

The Chief Engineer nodded.

“Okay, get power and ion back up, just keep working on the Star drive. There’s point in rushing things if it makes no difference.”

He turned his attention back to the First Officer. “Wally, weapons status?”

“You say that like we actually have any, missiles are green across, mining lasers are off. We haven’t used them for a long time. I’ve got a crew running diagnostics. They’ll be powered up in time.”

Wally asked, “you want send out a drone.”

The Captain harrumphed, “loose an expensive drone just to get and early peak, I don’t think so. If we had the option of running maybe.”

Yelaa asked, “should I contact the colony.”

“No, we’ll wait until morning. They have less to get ready than we do, besides why spoil their sleep.”

Mike Halerin headed back to his cabin. He had been summoned before sleep, and with things about to heat up he would need some rest. They all would, but he knew his crew was already working to prepare for whatever encounter happened in three days. He mentally shrugged, he had learned long ago not to let guilt affect his decisions, sleep now would mean better choices in the days ahead. That’s what the crew and the colony would need, the right choice.

§

The morning started with a yell, cut short by a splash, and then another yell. Josh sat bolt upright, his hand reaching for his sidearm of its own accord as he struggled to his feet. Beside him Mikiu and Susan were likewise on their feet looking around. Wendy, he saw was also awake, but still trying to piece things together, Jameson – Jameson was missing.

Josh quickly turned his attention to the source of the noise which had now calmed itself from yelling to urgent requests for help. It was Jameson, somehow he had fallen in the water.

Josh, threw a glance at Mikiu and Susan, “grab hold of me.” With that he holstered his weapon, quickly went to his knees and thrust his hand down to Jameson who with one panicked lunge, grabbed it. He felt himself pulled forward but the restraining grips of the others on his shoulders prevented him from joining the colonist. With a grunt he pulled Jameson to the edge and then to a collapsed heap out of the water.

Josh relaxed and allowed himself to fall back to a seated position, Jameson looked to be okay, his suit of course was waterproof, but he had undoubtably taken in some water around the neck. They all wore their suits a little open for comfort.

They were all talking now, Wendy wanting to know why Jameson was in the water, the others simply wanting to know if he was okay. He raised a hand to bring silence and give the man a chance to catch his breath.

“Sorry,” Jameson gasped, “I got up to see where we were, and”, he stopped for moment, clearly embarrassed, “I took a step back and fell in. It was stupid.”

Josh was tempted to agree, but the man but was already embarrassed, he had been on the receiving end of scolding’s from his father and Jerimy his whole life, he knew what it felt like, deserved or not.

“My dad always drummed it into me, ‘think Josh, before you act’. That includes something as simple as waking up someplace alien, and I mean that literally”

He turned to take in his surroundings. They, were indeed, someplace alien, they were moored to a large five pointed star, hence the straight edges they had observed during the night. They were halfway down one of the points. He tried to make a guess as to the size, it looked to be about 300 meters across, from point to point. In the center stood a round structure about twenty meters in size with an opening facing each point on the star. He turned back to Jameson, who by now how resumed normal breathing and color, he looked no worse for the experience.

“You okay?”, he asked.

“Yea, I think so. I guess I can check shower off my morning list.”

Mikiu asked, “how much water did you swallow?”

“Not much, I was only all the way under for a second.”

Wendy looking concerned added, “he swims all the time in the river. He’s used to getting wet.”

“That may be,” said Josh, “but we don’t know what effect this water has if taken internally. We’ll keep a close eye on him.”

“Of course,” she responded, “I didn’t think of that.”

Susan gave Jameson a mild glare, “Mikiu said it was just water, it shouldn’t hurt him.”

Mikiu, who had been ignoring the chatter, and scanning the star, which was obviously an island, turned to them.

“We’re on an artificial island.”

“No kidding,” said Josh. “Was it the water all the way around us that gave it away?”

“Well, that, and the fact that it’s solid and holds its shape as far down as my scanner will scan, which is only about 25 meters.”

“Is that where the bottom is, 25 meters?”

“Hell no, I have no idea how deep this water is.”

Wendy asked Jameson, “how deep did it feel to you?”

“Very”, he laughed.

Josh eyed Jameson curiously for a second, “maybe I should left you in a while longer, you could done some recon for us.”

“Don’t think it would have done much good, what Wendy didn’t tell you is that I always swim on top, I don’t go under the water if I can help it.”

Mikiu said, “I don’t think it would have mattered, but you could have grabbed a fish or two, this place is crawling with them.”

Josh looked out at the water, “we didn’t scan any fish from the shore.”

“Maybe they don’t like being near the land, I dunno, not my area of expertise.”

“Well, our biologist already took a look.”

Jameson laughed again, “I’m a biologist, not a ichthyologist.”

Wendy asked, “a what?”

“Ichthyologist, or more properly, a Zeno-ichthyologist – someone who studies alien fish.”

Josh, let his lungs blow out his cheeks for a second. It was time to get back to business. He gave the *island* a more studied look, the points all touched each other when they met to form a circle in the center, and from the point of each circle ran a shallow groove straight back to the structure in the middle, entering it through the center of each opening.

He wasn’t sure what he was looking for, but since someone, or something, had gone to a lot of trouble to get them to this point he had to figure why. He didn’t like the fact that his actions were being directed, not even if it was for a good reason. He also didn’t like that he was once again responsible for the lives of other people, some of them friends, and then there was Wendy, he didn’t know what he felt about her. It was coloring his thoughts and possibly, his decisions, that was something he no longer allowed in his life.

“Okay people let’s can the chatter, we’ve got some work left to do. Before Mikiu rushes off to explore the temple over there let’s get some food in and clean up some.”

Mikiu interrupted, “I don’t think it’s a temple.”

“Well, its something, but we’ll get to it in a moment.”

They packed up the tents, miscellaneous line and things they had used to rig a shelter in the boat. Then they drank their breakfast and readied themselves for the day.

Josh walked a short distance away to communicate with the Deidre, it was a short discussion, he described what they had found, and then the ship filled him in on events on their end. He expression was not as sunny as it had been before the call.

“Okay everyone, pay attention. It appears that we’re not the only ones with things happening. The ship has company coming,” he had their attention now, “the only thing we know so far is that it was apparently watching from out-system and is now heading in, should be here in three days give or take.”

Everyone tried to talk at once, he held up his hand. “there’s more,” he starred straight at Wendy, “the river broke flood stage early this morning.”

“What?”, asked Wendy in a lifeless voice, as if she couldn’t rationalize the information. “But it can’t flood now, not in the middle of summer, everything in the lower warehouses will be ruined, our food, our seed, - everything.”

“Not so fast, your father got everything out before the river broke above the banks. Everything is safe, just all over the place.”

“Why didn’t they tell us yesterday? The water must have been raising for days,” her voice no longer sounded lost, now it was angry.

Jameson answered, “if I know your father, he didn’t want to worry you, not when we’ve got our own problems.”

“I’m sure that’s it”, said Josh. “The best way we can help them is to find out what’s going on here so that we can get back.”

He looked at each of them for a second, he needed to get them moving towards solving the problem of how to get out of the forest, not thinking about the people who weren’t in the forest.

“Mikiu, sensors show you anything?”

“No, just more of this grey stuff that I can’t analyze. If there’s anything to find here it’ll be there, in the center”, Mikiu pointed straight down one of the grooves toward the center structure.

“What about these grooves, any idea about what they’re for?”

“For all I know they could be blood troughs to clean up after human sacrifices.”

They all glared at Mikiu. “Funny”, said Josh.

“They might have a purpose, might not, may be just for decoration, but you never know, it’s the first thing we’ve seen of their architecture that isn’t strictly functional.”

“Yea, that’s what worries me, that and the blood trough idea.”

“Well, I don’t really think that’s what they’re for – they’d be wider.”

Josh gave him a side eyed frown as commentary and started off, following the groove. Behind him the rest fell in, not spread out like they had been in the forest. This felt more exposed, nothing but water in any direction, stiff breeze blowing from what Josh assumed was the North, the blandness of the canvas they were walking on, this felt naked, and not the good kind of naked.

He stopped about ten meters away from the center structure, from here he could see through the doorway opening into the structure and out through two other openings, offset to either side by about 15 degrees. The view he saw through those openings he guessed was the same as the one behind him, a groove running to a point on a giant 5 pointed star. The interior of the structure looked to be close to his original estimate of the diameter, about 20 meters. He could see clearly that all of the grooves met at a meter wide pedestal in the center. A pedestal with a beveled edge around its upper lip, it looked suspiciously like a control console except for the lack of controls, its face the same plain grey as everything else.

Josh glanced at Mikiu, who was busy scanning the interior of the structure, “does that look like a control console to you?”

He answered distractedly, “I don’t know what it looks like, but it sure registers like one.”

“Pardon me,” said Josh.

“Gotta get closer,” he responded. And then proceeded towards the opening at a half trot.”

Josh reacted, grabbing Mikiu by the shoulder to stop him. “Wait a minute – explain.”

Mikiu, looked up from the portable scanner, “sorry, got a little carried away. But this is the first thing we’ve found on this planet that I can make sense of, or at least take guesses about. That console is showing all kind of energy readings, instrument signatures and, well, what they used to call doodads.”

“Doodads, in other words you can tell there’s junk there but not what it is.”

“Not from here.”

“What the hell is a doohdad,” said Wendy, managing to mispronounce it.

“That’s doodad,” said Josh, “and it’s an ancient word for doohickey.”

Wendy looked like she wanted to hit him but let it lie.

They were standing about 5 meters away from the entrance now, the interior appeared larger and for the first time Josh noticed the lighting. It took a minute to figure out, but then he had it, the inside was well lite. What should have been a back lighted cave was a well lite room.

“It’s got lights,” he said.

Mikiu turned his attention back to the structure, this time using his own eyes instead of the sensor units. You’re right. How could I have missed that.”

“Sensors,” threw in Susan, “you forget to use your eyes.”

With Mikiu leading the way they walked to the edge of the entrance, there was indeed light coming from the rooms ceiling, just not from any particular place.

After a brief pause for Mikiu to sweep his scanner in an arc around the entire room, or at least all that they could see of it, Josh took a step forward – and immediately regretted it.

The feeling started in his feet, or his hands – it didn’t matter where – in a split second he felt consumed by fire. It was if his body had been flayed into a single sheet and then cast into flame, every cell internal, external or in between screaming with pain – and then it stopped. Almost stopped, he realized that his feet were still burning and pulled them to him. He was able to do that because he was lying down, inside the building. The others were standing outside, staring at him with open eyes, and in the case of the two women, open mouths.

Mikiu sputtered, “Josh are you okay?”

He started to speak, realized his mouth was dry, wet it, and weakly asked, “what happened?”

Mikiu raised his arm to the doorway but didn’t quite touch it. “You got inside the opening and boom, you screamed like I’ve never heard you scream before, your body jerked and then you fell inside. Soon as you quit twitching you yanked your feet in.”

Josh struggled to his feet, and examined himself, no injuries he could see, the skin on his hands was as pink and rough as ever and the pain that had existed everywhere just seconds ago was completely missing. It felt like it had never been there, but it had been.

“Okay, that was distinctly unpleasant. I would recommend not coming through that door.”

Mikiu was carefully tracing the edges of the opening with his scanner. “I don’t register anything here, not in any spectrum.”

“Well, believe me, there’s something there, and it’s not fun.”

Wendy kneeled to look along the bottom of the door, her head tilted to the left as it did when she was puzzled. She appeared lost in thought.

“Wendy, you got something?” asked Josh.

Startled she rose to here feet. “Maybe, I was just thinking, what if this is what kept Follower off the pier. It didn’t seem to do you any permanent harm, maybe it’s just a warning.”

Josh nodded, “I see what you’re saying, but that is one hell of a warning.” He looked around the interior, “anybody else want to join me. How about you princess?”

“I told you not to call me that, “her voice had a combination of anger and surrender in it. With a quick glance towards the sky she stepped back, took a deep breath, and threw herself into the opening.

Josh reacted, moving to stop her, pulled himself up sharp as he remembered the pain of entry. Instead he caught her as she barreled into the room and pulled her to the ground making sure her feet cleared the doorway.

He found himself face to face with her and quickly got up, pulling her with him.

“Was I screaming?” she asked.

“No, but I think you really wanted to. You had your lips clenched like you were trying to hold your breath.” He paused for a second, “You know, you’ve got to quite this acting without thinking bit. It’s going to get one of us killed.”

“That doesn’t mean it’ll be you,” she snapped.

“No,” he replied, “but I always seem to be the one around.”

Mikiu broke in, “the field isn’t very deep, you want the rest of us in there?”

Josh thought about it for a second. Looking around the room he decided that there wasn’t a lot to look at, if they found something the others could chance the entrance. A feeling nagged at him from some recess of his mind, he ignored it, it was a small room, and no one, that meant Wendy, was going to touch anything.

“No, you guys wait for right now, no use in everybody getting the crap shocked out of them.”

All three muttered assent and acted a little disappointed, Josh couldn’t tell if they were being honest. He motioned to Wendy to follow him and he began exploring the rest of the room.

She asked, “what can I do?”

He gave her a sharp glance and stifled a chuckle, “you video and don’t touch anything, especially that console in the center.”

“Don’t trust me?”

“Oh, I trust you, I just don’t trust you.”

“That make no sense.”

He thought about it for a second, “you’re probably right. I often don’t make sense after falling through alien force fields. But the point is, I don’t want to experience it or something like it by accident.”

She thought for a moment and then said, “you realize of course, that getting shocked again is probably the only way to get out of here.”

“Yes, I know. I’m just not thinking about it for the moment.”

During this time he managed to do a quick scan of the interior wall.

“Mikiu, nothing on the interior wall that I can see, are you getting this?”

“Yea, mirrors working fine. All the activity is in that center console.”

“Okay”, said Josh, “Wendy let’s check the center. Remember no touching.”

She gave him a brief but not serious glare. Standing beside him she followed him around the console, one step at a time.

Josh found the height interesting, reaching out his left hand he found that the sloped part of the panel was perfect for controls, however, he made sure to not actually touch the surface.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think that this was made for humans, it’s the right height, the right tilt, if it just had some controls it would be perfect.

Mikiu responded from outside, “remember it’s differences in texture or better yet, differences in feel that we’re looking for.”

“And how am I supposed to find something that I can feel on something I can’t touch?”

“That does present a problem,” acknowledged the Science Officer. “Try a harsh light from the side.”

“A what from where?”

Mikiu answered, “you need to try your hand light, with the beam tapered way down from as close to 180 degree angle as you can get, it’s called,”

“Oblique lighting, I know what it’s called. I don’t know if the differences in the surface texture are real or generated by some kind of tactical field. Is there any way to figure out what visual range the builders used, some way we can see what they saw.”

“Sure, with a lot of time and research – not to mention a lot of smarter people and tons of credit.”

Wendy asked, “so not in the next five minutes?”

Josh glanced at her in surprise, that sounded like and a response he would have given.

Apparently Mikiu thought so too, he asked, “Is your voice changing Josh or are you rubbing off on that poor girl?”

Just then he felt the floor shake, subtly, just a vibration, but it was definitely something that hadn’t happened before.

He was not the only one to feel it.

Mikiu, looking back over his shoulder towards the water, asked, “did you guys feel that?”

“Of course, was that a quake, a bomb, what?” Josh asked.

“Don’t know I heard a small splash, I think. Did something hit the platform?”

“You’re supposed to be answering my questions.”

Mikiu had his scanner out again, aiming it at the water. “Okay, got it, damm!”

The console was forgotten now. “Exactly what are you damming?”

Mikiu looked back into the interior at Josh, a look of surprise on his face. “We just got bumped, by — I guess you would call it a whale.”

§

He had hit the cylinder on purpose. To let those who arrived in the boat know that he was there. Even though it was not the same peoples as those who used to ride the boats, he felt somewhat neglected by their failure to at least say hello. The others had always taken the time to say hello, throw him a morsel of food. He didn’t like bad manners. He had hit the cylinder on purpose, to show his displeasure. But know he needed to eat and these were not good feeding grounds, the very little ones, the ones who provided substance, did not like it here. He must go elsewhere. He slowly picked a direction and started off, he would come back later, when he was not hungry, to see If these non-people wanted to play.

§

Josh looked at Wendy to make sure he had heard right, he mouthed the word ‘whale’.

“That’s what he said.”

“Just double checking, thought maybe I was hearing things.”

He turned his attention to the three outside, “Mikiu, did you just say whale?”

“Yes.”

“As in very, very large fish, that kind of whale?” asked Josh.

“That’s what I said alright. Except if my scanner is right this thing is a good bit larger than an Earth whale.”

“What’s it doing now.”

Mikiu reluctantly lowered his scanner to his side. “Swimming slowly away.”

Josh pulled his head back slightly, “did we do something to scare him away?”

“Not that I noticed, unless you guys did something in there.”

§

A time and distance away. Sub-mind D117 received a report sent up the chain from three levels down. A Dory had banged into the lakes central control structure. Not that such an action was unusual, they used to do it all the time as a means of communications with the Old ones. D117 certainly didn’t recognize the current beings on the control deck as Old ones but maybe they were Old ones of a different type. The Dory were very ancient and had great knowledge. After pondering options for a few ticks D117 sent the report up stream along with its own observations, a sub-mind higher in the network could make a determination.

Sub-mind C432211 received the stream report, ran it through its automatic matrix options routine, and then sent it laterally to other C level sub-minds for a consensus evaluation poll. Unfortunately, an old option in the matrix options list, a holdover from when it was used to initiate emergency responses while waiting for guidance, sent out a downstream action order that by-passed several layers of decision verifiers. This action was routed by predetermined pathways through hardened channels that eliminated any possibilities of outside interference. It arrived at sub-mind G072 and was initiated. It was purely a protective procedure, designed in the days when the lake had been teaming with aquatic life and newly arrived life forms might injure themselves or others on the free-standing central control pier. It to, however, had a safety feature, which was activated first.

§

Josh glanced at Wendy, she shook her head. “We didn’t do anything, at least anything we’re aware of,” he said.

He turned back to the console, the others outside had turned their attention back to Josh and Wendy – so it was only Wendy who saw the change.

Josh heard a strangled ‘uhh’ come from her before feeling her right hand grip his forearm, painfully. He looked at her in question, noticed that her attention was not on him but on something happening outside. He turned to look. At first he missed it, a faint bluish tint, barely discernable from the natural gray of the alien material, was moving inward from the tip of the point towards the center, moving evenly as it came at the pace of a running man. He knew instinctively what it was.

“Crap,” he said.

Mikiu, seeing Josh and Wendy’s expression, and hearing his utterance quickly turned to face the water.

He echoed Josh, “crap”.

He brought his scanner up, aiming it at the encroaching field of blue, and swore again.

Josh didn’t hesitate, “everyone get a running start and get in here, now!”

Mikiu didn’t need much convincing, the oncoming blue carpet was already passing the end of the point. He and Susan grabbed Jameson by his tool belt and threw him bodily into the interior. He and Susan followed on their own.

After getting over their shock from passing through the entrance force field they quickly stood with Wendy and Josh to watch the blue cascade right up to the entrance.

Josh, expecting the worse, did the only thing he could – he pulled his sidearm. The color stopped at the doorway, and then slowly the doorway turned into solid grey surface, indistinguishable from the walls and floor. He glanced around, all the openings had vanished.

Josh heard Mikiu say, “I don’t think shooting was going to solve anything.”

He glanced at his hand, realized that he indeed was poised facing the now gone doorway with his pistol. “Reflex,” he said.

“A dumb one,” said Wendy.

He gave her a quick glance, unsure from her tone whether she was serious or sarcastic. He couldn’t tell.

“What in the hell was that?” asked Jameson, who also nodded to Mikiu and Susan, “thanks for getting me through the door.”

Susan said, “We didn’t give you much choice about it.”

Jameson laughed, “saved me the trouble of finding the courage myself.”

Josh broke in, “I liked his question, what the hell was that.”

Mikiu grinned sardonically, “you tell us, you were the one yelling order.”

He shook his head, he had reacted without thought, “I just knew that it couldn’t possibly be a a good thing.”

Mikiu looked thoughtful, “I don’t suppose anyone took the trouble to look out the other openings?”

Susan answered, “I saw the blue moving along the point to our right, I don’t know about the others.”  
 “You can bet that it was the same for all five points,” said Josh. “All the openings closed the same way, if closed is what they did, they just vanished.”

Mikiu was halfway through muttering, “same thing,” when Josh felt the floor move.

For a brief second he thought that the whale had returned for a second shot but quickly realized that the motion he felt was controlled falling, like down a grav shaft, except the floor, walls, ceiling and pedestal were falling with them.

Mikiu said, “elevator.”

“What.”

“We’re going down.”

Josh said, “that I figured out, you would figure that these people were advanced enough to have grav-shafts.”

“Maybe they do. But this is an old-fashioned elevator.”

Wendy shrieked, “our boat.”

Josh laughed, “I don’t think we have to worry about that know. It’s either floating free or being towed down with us.”

“The question is, how far down are we going?” Josh decided to answer his own question, pulled the inertia tracker out of his belt.

“Tracker says we’ve moved down 160 meters and counting. “

Mikiu nodded, “Funny, no change in air pressure that I can sense.”

Susan said with a grim expression, “I hope this thing has brakes.”

Josh decided to be reassuring, “I’m sure it does, otherwise it’s a lot of trouble to break our legs. Either way, there’ll be brakes involved.”

Wendy punched his shoulders, the others simply looked askance at him.

Josh waited, no point in asking questions until they had something to ask about. They were definitely in deep now, no pun intended he thought. There would be no communicating with the ship from wherever they ended up, of that he was sure. They also didn’t have any idea of what they were about to face and he had no plan of action – except wait and see what was presented to them. He thought about drawing his weapon again but decided that would most likely be a dangerous thing to do, even if the builders were dead and buried they might have left automated defensive systems in place. Besides, his father had always taught hm that weapons solved very few things that brains couldn’t.

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