New Story

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02/18/2020

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, Mikiu and the two women occupied the center seats. This was there second morning on the water. They had no trouble restarting the boat. Wendy was able to easily find the spot that started the thing. Josh knew that it hadn’t been there when he had searched for it before. His guess was that the start button was only available when you were stopped or docked. He had to admit that it made a certain amount of sense.

The night had not been as comfortable as the previous spent by the cliff base. The air coming off the lake was wet and cold, causing a chill that Josh knew was mainly in their minds. Their protective suits took care of temperature regulation and did so well. The only thing not protected were faces and they had rigged a kind of shelter by lying a couple of tent tarps over themselves and anchoring it to the two end seats. It wasn’t that effective, but they managed to get some sleep, albeit, not good sleep. Josh had intended to stand a watch again, but the planets lack of a moon meant no light to watch with. There small lanterns didn’t really cut very far into the darkness. He had thought about using one of the high-powered flashlights they carried but what was the point. The boat was going somewhere, and they didn’t know how to change that, so eventually sleep took them all.

The last conversation with the ship and the colony, the morning they embarked, hadn’t produced anything useful. What it had done was introduce an urgency to the mission. The weather at the colony was getting progressively worse and there was a scramble to get newly delivered items brought by the Deidre undercover. Normally they would be fine right where they were off loaded giving the colony time to separate them out and assign or build storage. That was not so this time. The change in weather had caught them all by surprise. Supply unloading had stopped of course, but the bad weather also prevented the Deidre’s shuttles from taking back any of the material in danger from the sudden rain onslaught. The colony was working all hands to desperately get everything someplace safe. Unfortunately, this mean dangerously overcrowding available space.  
 There was no hard evidence that linked the exploration mission with the unexpectedly bad weather. However, the only explanation that any kind of sense was that Josh and his team had disturbed or set into motion something – or someone. Josh didn’t believe in a someone. He did think it was possible that whoever was guiding their actions could indeed be responsible for the untimely weather.

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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 on. They could talk, but apparently only when the team on the surface initiated the conversation. That was good, at least they could communicate, even if only in a limited fashion. They couldn’t see anything with their sensors on any wavelengths. There naked eyes didn’t work any better.

He was also frustrated by the out of nowhere bad weather belting the colony. He felt for the people below. They had waited many years for the items the Deidre had brought and now a large number of those items were in danger of being ruined. And most frustrating of all, there was nothing the Deidre could do to help. The ships two cargo shuttles were simply useless in this kind of weather. The Deidre, at one time, had possessed a heavy weather lifter, but its limited use and capacity had resulted in replacing it with another cargo shuttle, one of the two they now had. This had given them a backup that was sorely needed, but Halerin was now regretting that particular decision.

“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. Plus, we’d lose an expensive drone, and we don’t have a backup.”

Wally picked 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 in. “If my girl says there is a lake there’s a lake.”

Wally answered quickly, “not doubting anyone’s word Mr. Sunderson. I’m just saying that’s how blind we are. And we can’t help them if we blind.”

“Jarwan, call me Jarwan. I know that, I’m just frustrated with this whole thing.”

“Same here,” said the captain, “You did say that you had the weather at bay.”

“Yes, but like I said, eventually this constant downpour is going to start causing problems. We need to get a handle on this, and josh and Wendy seem to be the only ones in any position to actually do something other than what we’re doing – complaining. Have you thought anymore about taking a shuttle down?”

“I’d rather not try that just yet Jarwan,” said the captain. “We don’t know a shuttle can fly through whatever field is generating this illusion we’re all seeing. Your suggestion to take a shuttle down to the wall and walk in is still under consideration, but I just don’t see how that would help them any. We’d have no way of finding or reaching them out on the water.”

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. Not in the forest at any rate. The impending weather problem is a different story. And if it’s caused by our venturing into unexplored territory then we better hope that Josh finds the answer quick. In the meantime, I think we need to review everything we know about Tingies the planet, that includes reviewing old survey records, the Deidre’s records, and everything the colony has learned in the past ten years.”

Agreement was quick 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, when darkness would arrive on the colony, and review anything they might find, or the lack of anything. The captain hoped that somewhere in the data was an inkling of what had obviously been missed by everyone. If not, then things could get dicey, for everyone involved.

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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 made it difficult fashion any type of shelter than what they already from the night before. The best they were able to do was crowd together on the center two seats and hold the tent covers tightly. 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. This material appears to be very versatile.”

Josh didn’t feel like praising the alien technology at the moment. “If it only came in something besides gray. It’s a good thing it only passed water in one direction.”

This entire mission was beginning to get him down. They hadn’t gotten very far, they had a lot more questions, 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 actions were now apparently out of his hands, someone else was controlling his exploration party. That bothered him a lot for reasons unknown to him.

He slid down to sit on the bottom of the boat. Since he wasn’t in danger of sitting in a pool of water he might as well provide more room for the others; after a moment, Wendy slipped down beside him. With 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.”

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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. It was sure of that, these beings looked different, felt different, and most telling of all, they had made no attempt to say hello. It wondered why they didn’t put up the boats top given that surface dwellers didn’t favor water as much as the Dory. 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, and if no answer could be fathomed, it could always ask directly.

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A time and distance away sub-mind D117 watched events unfold. If it could be said that it 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 atmospheric conditions, was exercising its abilities. Its reason for doing so was unknown. D117 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.

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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. He knew that meant the unexpected rainfall wasn’t local, that by itself wouldn’t have caused the river to rise like this. The rain was also falling heavily in the mountains, and that signified a much wider weather event. That made him wonder if this was indeed something triggered by the exploration team’s foray into the forest, or if this was simply an ill-timed natural event. A cyclic weather part of the planet’s patterns that they had not experienced yet. He realized that the answer to that question, regardless of what it was, would impact the colonies survivability on this world.

Micael Tosition, his second in command, said, “it’s halfway to flood level Jarwan, 2 more meters and we’re going to have wet grain.”

“I know, but what can we do? We’ve already packed every bit of empty space we’ve got.”

Tosition nodded, “and every empty space we’ve got, even under my bed. I’ve got a couple ideas. You’re not going to like any of them.

Jarwan nodded, “oh, I’m pretty sure you’re right about that.”

Tosition nodded, “yea, I figure. Anyway, what I was thinking. We’ve got a whole lot of construction material just sitting in storage. We can move some of it out on the sand, cover it with tarps. The rain won’t hurt it. The only reason most of it’s in storage anyway is to justify all the warehouse space we built.”

Jarwan said, “Yea, I know. We figured that since we built the space we might as well put something in it.” He paused for a second, glancing at the rain filled sky. “What about the rain. I’m not worried about stuff rusting but if this keeps up isn’t some of it going to sink in the mud?”

“I thought about that. I figure it’s better to have to dig stuff out of the ground than lose perishable supplies. What worries me is whether we even have to time.”

Jarwan, wiping his eyes with a sleeve, returned his attention to the river. “What about the river. Is that going to cause us problems?”

“I don’t think so, at least not right away. We may have built some of the earlier structures too close to the edge, but we knew that. And the river dock is probably going to take some damage. It floats but we didn’t put in whole lot of room for movement, not for this amount of rain, if it keeps up.”

Jarwan said, “that’s the question isn’t it. How long is it going to keep raining.” He started back towards the warehouse they were using as a command center. “And how high is the river going to get. We’d better expect the worse, and hope for the best.”

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He woke with a start. The boat had hit something. 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, and the darkness outside the boat was like a black curtain. Still, he sensed something in front of him. The boat was resting against something. Something taller than the boat and solid, reaching out he felt the surface. It was slightly textured, like the pier, not the slipperiness of the wall. He had no doubt it was the same gray stuff that the aliens had used for everything.

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

The lanky science officer raised his head, made a clicking sound with his mouth, 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.”

Grabbing the lamp he shone it towards whatever they had stopped against. He was right, it was gray. With the aid of the feeble light, he was able to see the edge of the surface just slightly above the edge of the boat. Struggling his way out from under the makeshift tent he stepped onto the surface of what he assumed was another dock. Rising slowly to his feet he held the lamp high. Its weak light showed nothing but a floor of gray running out in front of him. It barely showed the edge he had stepped over. He glanced in the boat. The others were awake and asking questions.

“Shhh, let me see what’s out here,” he whispered, and wondered to himself why. Whoever sent the boat undoubtably knew that had arrived.

He sensed rather than heard Wendy move up to stand beside him. The gray material didn’t really provide much sound either. He started to object then realized he was glad of her company. He moved forward a meter to give them room to give the others room to join them..

“Okay, somebody get 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, and yes, it is.”

Mikiu was now flashing his flashlight around, “and here’s a dock ring to fasten it too.”

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 as a reference he tried the left and right for several meters, also nothing, just more gray deck surface.

“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’ll be light in a few hours and then we can figure out what we’re tied up too. I don’t think we have much choice telling where we are, unless Mikiu can do something with the inertia tracker.”

The science officer, stroked his beard, shrugged his shoulders, said nothing.

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. He realized that at this point any defensive strategy was just for their own comfort. He didn’t think whomever or whatever was orchestrating things really cared.

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Jarwan sat with his back against the wall farthest from the door in the warehouse they had turned into a command center. The regular building used as a colony administrative office was far to small to handle the number of people mobilized for this situation. He preferred to keep enough people around to send out as teams, when necessary, without having to wait for them to arrive from where they normally slept, the three residential structures. Those three buildings were actually more than the colony actually needed at the moment. But conventional morays had dictated separate men and women’s dormitories, along with a separate building complete with miniature apartments for family groups.

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The morning started with a yell, cut short by a splash, followed another yell. Josh sat bolt upright, his hand at 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, the water. The voice behind the yells had now calmed from yelling to requests for help. It was Jameson, he had fallen in the water, but appeared unhurt. Josh quickly surveyed the water around him in the early light, looking for anything responsible for Jameson being in the water. He saw nothing.

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.

“What happened?

The others were also asking. Jameson raised a hand to bring silence and give himself a chance to catch his breath.

“Sorry,” Jameson gasped, “I got up to look around.” he stopped for moment, shaking his head, clearly embarrassed. “I guess I took a step because all of a sudden I was falling. It was stupid. I didn’t realize how close to the edge I was.”

Josh agreed with the stupid part, but he didn’t say anything, the man was already embarrassed. That was a feeling he was familiar with. Having been on the receiving end of scolding’s from his father and Jerimy, he knew better than to run his own mouth. The next time the stupid part might be his.

Instead, Josh turned to take in his surroundings. They, were indeed, on another dock type structure, this one shaped like a very large five-pointed star. They were moored to the narrowing end of one of the stars, hence the straight edge they had observed during the night. They were halfway down from the center of the structure, which in itself was large and impressive. It was a circle with each of the point’s edges meeting at a junction with the next points. He tried to make a guess as to the size, it looked to be about 400 meters across, from point to point. The very center was occupied with a round structure about twenty meters in diameter with an opening facing each point on the star. He could see through openings to the other points through the opening facing them. He decided to call the radiating extensions that formed the points on the star piers. They could be nothing else. He turned his attention back to Jameson, who by now how resumed normal breathing. He appeared no worse for the experience.

“Okay?”, he asked.

The man laughed, “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 under for a second. Which, by the way, is not a method of waking up that I recommend.”

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, regardless of what Mikiu’s sensors say, know what effect this water has if we drink it. We’ll keep a close eye on him.”

“Of course,” she responded.

Susan gave Jameson a mild glare, and then grinned. “Mikiu says the water is fine. We can use Jameson as a canary. See if it kills him.

Wendy and Jameson both looked confused. “What”, asked Wendy.

Josh said, “that’s canary in a coal mine Susan.” He glanced at the confusion on the others faces.   
“In the old days, before we had sensors to warn us, they used to take caged canaries into underground mines. The birds are more sensitive to bad gases than humans so if the bird started getting sick, or died, it was time to get out.”

Jameson said, “so I’m a warning indicator. If I croak, the rest of you’ll know not to drink the water.”

Mikiu, who had been ignoring the chatter while scanning, said, “it would certainly make us think twice about it. We’re on an artificial island.”

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

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 have left you in a longer, we could have used the recon.”

“Don’t think it would have done much good, what Wendy didn’t tell you is that I’m a surface swimmer, never liked getting water in my nose.”

Mikiu said, “I don’t think it would have helped with the depth, but he could have grabbed a fish or two. According to my sensors this place is crawling with them.”

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

Mikiu shrugged, “I’ve had time to fine tune since then. Anyway, maybe they don’t like being near land.”

“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, time to get back to business. He gave the structure they were on a more studied look. He noticed something he hadn’t noticed earlier, possibly it hadn’t been visible in the slanted early morning light. From the tip of each star, at the least the ones he could see, ran a groove all the way to the circular center building and in through the opening facing each star point. He was guessing of course that the other points were the same.

He wasn’t sure what he was looking for. Someone, or something, had gone to a lot of trouble to get them to this point. It would be nice to know why. Also, 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 presently was trying to keep out of his life. As if guessing his thoughts the blond haired girl gave him a quick smile as she looked around. He avoided returning it.

“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, it’s something. Besides, there doesn’t appear to be anything else here to explore.”

“Point taken.”

They packed up the tents and other miscellaneous things they had used to rig a shelter in the boat. Just to be safe Josh ran a second line from the boat and tied it to another ring embed in the dock surface. The rings lined both sides spaced about the same as those on the pier they had left from. Josh wondered if this was an indication of normal boat sizes or just a building standard.

After eating, Josh walked a short distance away to communicate with the Deidre. It was a short conversation. He described what they had found, and then the ship filled him in on the continuing bad weather at the colony. He expression was not as sunny as it had been before the call.

“Okay everyone,” he starred straight at Wendy, “the river is at flood stage and it’ s still raining. Your is trying to get everything stored near the banks moved away from the river.”

“What,” said Wendy. “Move stuff to where. We don’t have any warehouses very far from the river. We certainly don’t have anything that qualifies as high ground.”

“You got me. I’m just relaying the news. I guess he’s just doing the best he can. The important thing is that everyone is safe. They wanted me to tell you that.”

“That’s my dad, not wanting to worry me. Why didn’t they tell us yesterday? The water must have been raising for days,” her voice was angry.

Jameson answered, “like you said. Your dad just 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 and find some way to turn it off.”

She snapped at him, “and if there is no way to turn it off.”

He held out an upraised hand, “hold on. Think about it. If someone, or something just wanted you people off this planet they could have handled that find with just the weather. But, that’s not all that’s going on. Someone is going to a lot of trouble to get us somewhere for something.”

Mikiu chimed in, “and we have no idea what that something is. But, Josh is right, whatever is going on I think we’ll find the answer here.”

Jameson added, “they’re right Wendy. And it’s not like we have a choice in the matter.”

“True enough,” said Josh. He looked at each of them for a second, he needed to get them thinking about solutions, not conditions.”

“Mikiu, sensors showing you any new?”

“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 it would be the first thing we’ve seen that you label that way. Then again, this gray color might be considered high class by whoever built this. We have not way of telling.”

“Yea, that’s true. Although I don’t think the grooves are for blood. I’m sure that they serve some purpose.”

“Well, I don’t really think they were for blood,” said Mikiu. They’d be wider.”

Josh giving him a side eyed look started off following the groove. Behind him the rest fell in, single file, not spread out like they had been in the forest. This felt more exposed, nothing but water in any direction, stiff breeze blowing, the gray blandness of the surface, this felt naked, and not in a good way.

He stopped about ten meters away from the center structure. From here he could see through the arched opening and out through two other openings on the other side that corresponded to the other openings on this side. The interior of the structure looked to be close to his original estimate of twenty meters with a height of about three. 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 looking suspiciously like a control console, except for a lack of controls. The entire console and interior of the room were the familiar gray.

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 to tell for sure,” 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 three meters away from the entrance now, 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 with crossing shadows from the five entrances 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,” said Susan, “you forget to use your eyes.”

With Mikiu leading the way they walked to the entrance, light was coming from the rooms ceiling evenly, not from any particular spot.

Mikiu said, “diffuse lighting at that.” The science officer turned his attention back to his sensor unit as he swept it in arc.

Josh watched for a second and then stepped forward into the entrance – 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 sheets and then cast into flame, every cell internal, or external burning 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 rolled over, started to speak, realized his mouth was dry, wet it, and weakly said, “watch that first step.”

Wendy asked the question again, “are you okay?”

He laughed, realized that was a bad idea, but said, “No. No I’m not okay because I’m an impatient idiot.”

Mikiu finished his sentence, “how’s going to get himself killed some day and leave me to explain it to his father.” The science officer raised his arm to the doorway but didn’t quite touch it.

“You got inside the door, screamed like I’ve never heard you scream before, and then you jerked and fell inside. Soon as you quit twitching you yanked your feet in. I’m guessing that this was different than in the ravine.”

Josh struggled to his feet and examined himself. He could see no injuries, 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. And yes, it was completely different than the field in the ravine. This one hurts, it hurts a lot. I would not recommend 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. You know, I hate to criticize, but you might want to stop running into these things.”

Josh gingerly got to his feet. “Thanks, I’ll try to remember that. Can you scan me through whatever it is?”

Before Mikiu could answer 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 her feet. “Maybe. I was just thinking, what if this is what kept Drus 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 a little angry. 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, pulling her to the ground and 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.”

Mikiu, a little irritation in his voce, said. “I really wish the two of you would quite jumping into things before I have a chance to finish evaluating them.” He continued his scan, “the field isn’t very deep apparently. I’m going to try it.”

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, Mikiu disappointedly. Josh knew his friend was eager to examine the room. “Just give us a minute Mikiu. He motioned to Wendy to follow him as he began exploring, “let Wendy and I see if we can wonder into anything else dangerous.”

“Okay, but if you do, I’m coming in.”

Wendy asked, “what can I do?”

He gave her a sharp glance and stifled a chuckle, “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 you do have a habit of finding controls I don’t see.

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, you finding anything?”

“Nothing that you’re not. Everything I register is the center console.”

“Okay”, said Josh. “Wendy let’s check the center console. 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. “I would say that however built this was approximately the same height as we are.”

Mikiu responded from outside, “We sorta knew that from the boat, remember. The main difference seems to be the way they use texture instead of color. That would explain why that console appears blank.”

“How am I supposed to find something that I can only feel, on something I can’t touch, for fear of throwing a switch?”

“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 narrowed way down from as close to a ninety-degree angle as you can get. It’s called,”

“Oblique lighting, I know what it’s called. What I don’t know is 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 would have seen?”

“Sure, with a lot of time and research – not to mention a lot of smart 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 the floor shook, subtly, but it was definitely a vibration of some sort. “What the hell, you guys feel that?

Mikiu answered, “we all did. I wouldn’t swear to it but I think I heard a splash.”

“You saying something hit the platform. You see anything?”

“Something could have hit the platform, and I would have probably mentioned it if I had seen something.”

“Don’t get snarky.”

“Sorry,” said Mikiu. “Let me scan.” They science officer held his scanner as high as he could reach and moved in in a half circle. After glancing at the screen, he said, “Okay, got it. Damm!”

Josh moved back to the doorway, taking care to stop short of it. “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 — a whale.”

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It had hit the cylinder on purpose. To let those who arrived in the boat know that it was there. It knew that these beings were not the ones who had ridden the boats in the past. That didn’t stop the fact that it felt neglected by their failure to say hello. The others had always taken the time to say hello, throw a morsel of food as a gift. It didn’t like bad manners. It had hit the cylinder on purpose, to show its displeasure. Know, unused to such exertions, it needed to eat, and these were not good feeding grounds. The little creatures, the ones that provided sustenance, they did not live here. The Dory knew it must go elsewhere, slowly remembered a direction, and started off. It would come back later, when not hungry, to see If these new-commers wanted to play.

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

“That’s what he said,” she responded, an air of disbelief in her voice.

“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.

“Not a fish, whales are mammals. But that’s what I said alright. Except if my scanner is right this thing is a good bit larger than an Earth whale.”

Josh glanced towards the gun on his waist, realized how silly that was, and asked. “What’s it doing now?”

Mikiu lowered his scanner. “Swimming away, slowly.”

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.”

He glanced over at Wendy, “no, we didn’t do anything in here. You suppose it was just an coincidence?”  
 Mikiu laughed and scratched his head as he turned back towards Josh and Wendy. “On this trip. I doubt it.

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A time and distance away. Sub-mind D117 received a report sent from three levels down stream. 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 the Dory may. The wisdom and knowledge of the Dory was respected by the sub-minds. After pondering options, 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 too, however, had a safety feature, which was activated first.

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Inside the center building Josh had turned his attention back to the center console, so had the three outside the entrance. It was only Wendy, thinking about what a whale might want with them, who was still staring towards the water.

Josh heard a strangled ‘uhh’, before feeling her right hand tighten almost painfully on his left forearm. Her gaze was fastened in the direction of the outside, past their companions, towards the water. He looked. At first, he missed it, then he saw it. A faint bluish tint, barely discernable from the natural gray of the alien material, moving inward from the tip of the point towards the center. It was moving evenly at the pace of a trotting man, a blue line stretched across all the points, moving towards them. Somehow, he knew what it was.

“Crap,” he said loudly.

Mikiu, seeing his expression and hearing his utterance, quickly turned. He brought his scanner up, aiming it at the encroaching field of blue, and echoed Josh’s statement, “crap”.

Josh didn’t hesitate, “everyone. Get in here, now!”

Mikiu didn’t need much convincing, the oncoming carpet of blue haze was already halfway to them. He and Susan grabbed Jameson by his belt and threw him bodily into the interior. They took a step back and threw themselves after him.

After getting over their shock from passing through the entrance they quickly got to their feet, and with Wendy and Josh watched the blue haze slid right up to the entrance – and stop.

Josh, caught off guard pulled his sidearm and watched as the opening before him turned into a solid grey surface, indistinguishable from the walls and floor. The opening simply wasn’t there anymore, none of them were.

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

He glanced at his hand, realized that he had drawn his weapon, and quickly returned it to his belt. “Reflex,” he said.

“A dumb relex,” said Wendy.

He gave her a quick glance, unsure whether she was serious or sarcastic. He couldn’t tell with her. A fact that was beginning to intrigue him.

“What in the hell was that?” asked Jameson, while nodding 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 orders.”

He shook his head, grinned and said, “I just knew that it couldn’t possibly be a good thing. Actually, that’s not true. As soon as I saw it, I found myself back in that ravine. Somehow, I knew its purpose was to get living things off the surface of this thing. I think the ‘whale’ or whatever it was, triggered an automated system.”

Mikiu looked thoughtful, “That would make sense. I don’t think any of us did anything to cause it. Anyone happen ot 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 more like going down a grav shaft, except the floor, walls, ceiling and pedestal were falling with them.

Mikiu said, “elevator.”

“What.”

“The floors going down – elevator.”

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

“Maybe they do. But this is an old-fashioned elevator. And you just promoted whoever or whatever to people.”

“Too many words, people is easier.”

Wendy said, “our boat.”

Josh laughed, “I don’t think we have to worry. 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 and pulled his inertia tracker out. “Tracker says we’re 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 stopping involved.”

Wendy punched his shoulders, the others just glared.

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. 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 other automated defensive systems in place. Even on Sartagius grav-shafts were monitored by security AI’s. It was a logical choke point to check for weapons. The only question was whether said systems were smart enough to tell the difference between drawn and holstered weapons. If such a system existed, he reminded himself. And besides, his father had taught hm that weapons solved very few things that brains couldn’t. Then again, his father was occasionally wrong on such things.

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