New Story

5

02/18/2020

They didn’t have to wait long. Josh felt his feet begin to press into the floor as the room slowed its descent. He balanced lightly, his feet trained by years of varying gravities to adjust quickly. As soon as the room stopped, they all looked at each other, as if one of them had the answer to the question, ‘what now’. But no one did.

Josh, after bouncing a few times to ensure that the floor was indeed stopped, began a slow circle of the room. The wall was seamless, he could find no evidence of the previous openings even when he knew where they had been. He had just about finished navigating the room when he heard Mikiu’s voice from behind him. Mikiu had been following his examination with one of his own using his scanners.

“Pressure’s coming up.”

“Pressure?”, Josh asked.

“Yea, it’s equalizing, it should, we’re down almost a kilometer.”

They all took a step back towards the center of the room as all five doorways suddenly reappeared. Each of them opened into a dark corridor.

Josh realized that he was holding his sidearm again. This time he kept it out. For some reason he checked to see if Wendy had noticed – she had. Forcing his attention to the matter at hand he slowly looked moved around the room, examining each of the dark openings. No light or anything else was visible in any of them.

Mikiu looked at Josh, “well, you found a way in.”

“This is not what I had in mind,” he nodded towards the scanner in Mikiu’s hand, “you get any readings from that?”

Mikiu, still studying the instrument shook his head. Just jumbled readings, signals are bouncing like crazy with the doors and corridors, not to mention the center console. If signal activity is any indicator, this place is huge.”

“Great”, Josh muttered, “if something or someone led us in here the least it could do is give us a straight path to follow.”

“I’m beginning to get an idea about that. We may be reading things wrong,” said Mikiu.

Wendy’s head jerked up, “something’s coming.”

He moved to her side, “where?”

With a trembling hand she pointed through one of the openings, Josh thought it corresponded to the one they had entered on the surface but with nothing as a point of reference in the featureless grey room he couldn’t be sure. He no longer had a reference to the surface.

“Any idea what?”

She sounded uncertain, “sounded like a wheel.”

Josh was about to exclaim, ‘a wheel’ when a small, boxy, four wheeled robot entered the room and proceeded to cross to another of the dark openings. It completely ignored them as it crossed. Josh didn’t know whether to be relieved or offended.

“Huh, didn’t even notice us.”

“You sound disappointed”, said Mikiu.

“I think I am,” said Josh softly. “If that was the welcoming committee it didn’t find us worthy.”

Wendy laughed, now that the robot had come and gone without incident her tension had evaporated.

He smiled at her, “you weren’t laughing a minute ago.”

“I’ll admit it, that blue wave and the ride down scared me. I’m just a farm girl remember?”

Josh laughed, “my ass. You haven’t been afraid of anything this entire trip.”

Susan interrupted, “I hate to break up such a riveting conversation, but shouldn’t we do something. I mean the next bot to show up might not ignore us.”

Josh asked, “Are you nervous or is this your subtle way saying we missed lunch?”

“No. Maybe, we don’t know when we might get to eat again.”

Josh agreed. Susan was right, even though it only took a few minutes to drink some concentrated rations it was best to do so now and keep some type of schedule. He was a firm believer in not doing things on an empty stomach. This was no time to forget the necessities..

“Good idea, but let’s do an inventory first. See what we’ve got and decide how to ration it. I’m not really worried about food, concentrates will last a while, but if the we’re the only non-robot inhabitants of this place we might have a water problem.” He raised a hand, “And Yes, I’m aware that there is a lake over our heads. But for right now that means it’s out of our reach. That is until we figure out how to run this elevator.” He glanced at the featureless surface of the center console. “Which might take a while.”

They soon had a count. Twenty-four tubes of concentrate and three full canteens each was what they had. That would last three days, maybe four, water the determining factor. If push came to shove, they could stretch, maybe double that but it would leave them leave them ill prepared for any kind of action. Hunger, Josh realized, was not something that human beings experienced often. At least not in this day and age.

After a quick meal break Josh sat with his back against the pedestal, the others circled around him, Susan and Mikiu keeping an eye on the corridors. “Okay, let’s say that we have the rest of today and three days past that. By then we need to either find water or a way out of here, preferably the later. We don’t know exactly what’s going on, but I have a theory, kind of.”

“You have a theory,” asked Wendy.

He ignored her. “I think what we’ve experienced so far have been automated responses. We caused them by triggering routines that were left running. Somewhere there’s an AI, with a purpose, running things. Trouble is we don’t know what it’s purpose is.”

Wendy asked, “well, we didn’t think it was live aliens.?”

Mikiu said, “that makes sense. And yes, it’s probably not live aliens. That would in fact get us all kicked off this planet. What Josh is trying to say is that we need to be careful about not triggering automated systems.” He paused to look at Josh. “I wouldn’t make that a blanket rule, we may want to trigger some systems.”

Susan chipped in, “You mean everything that’s happened so far was our fault?”

Josh said, “I didn’t say that. When we started, we had no idea there were any alien systems to trigger. Now we do know. And Mikiu makes a valid point, we may need to use some of those trigger responses to get ourselves out of this mess. Even beyond that, we need to figure out if we caused the bad weather that’s hitting the colony.”

“And here,” said Susan.

“No,” said Josh. “We don’t know for sure that our entering the forest was the trigger for that. It doesn’t matter though. If this is not a random natural weather event, then chances are the way to stop it lies here. We need look for that and apparently we’ve got five directions to do that.”

Jameson laughed and pointed down the tunnel the robot had come out of,” I think we should go that way.”

“Why”, asked Josh.

“That’s where the robot came from, that means it’s no longer there, and besides, I think that’s the direction we came from.”

Wendy asked, “You planning on walking back home, I doubt if goes that far.”

Josh said, “It’s as good a direction as any, unless you guys want to split up and each take your own corridor… I didn’t think so.” He got to his feet. “Okay, practical matters, marching order, me first, then Mikiu, Wendy, Jameson with Susan bringing up the rear. I want everybody keeping eyes open”, glancing at Wendy, “and your ears.”

Mikiu frowned, “I know you’re our fearless leader and all, but I’m running the scanner. Shouldn’t I be in front?”

“It would be a shame to have to shoot through you.”

Mikiu grimaced, “hadn’t thought of that. Okay, you go in front. I’ll record whatever kills you..”

Josh nodded and started towards the corridor Jameson had suggested. “I knew you’d see it my way. But let me know if you pick up anything on that scanner.” Stopping just before the entrance he said, “Everyone do a buddy check on each other’s gear, make sure none of us are liable to lose something.”

Josh elected to forgo his sidearm for a high-powered flash. He preferred seeing where he was going and using the flash in his weak side hand felt strange. Besides, it probably wasn’t a good look to enter someone else’s home with a weapon ready.

One by one the others followed, keeping a spacing of about a meter. Josh hadn’t planned that, but it was suitable. If something got him hopefully it would give the others time to run. And he thought, maybe come back and rescue me.

He moved down the corridor, no he decided, hallway. He moved slowly, in no hurry at the moment. He dialed the lens on his flash to emit a wide enough beam to cover the entire hallway, although this cut down on the distance they could see. The grey surface however severely limited how far they could see. Mikiu, and the others kept their lamps at a low intensity to keep from throwing shadows. The hallway proved to be spectacularly uninteresting, it was like walking into a grey fog without the benefit of the mystery of real fog.

“I’ve got a question,” said Wendy.

Jameson, a little edge to his voice, “you always have questions.”

“Something wrong with that?”

Josh felt his lip quiver in a smile that he hadn’t anticipated, “nothing wrong with questions.”

Her voice sounded warmer than her response to Jameson, “we had lights back in the elevator room. Why don’t we have lights here?”

Susan harrumphed, “we’re probably just not smart enough to turn them on.”

Josh moved ahead another step, “we’re smart enough, we just don’t know how.”

Mikiu said, “well to be honest, we really didn’t even try.”

“Fine, got any ideas on how we do that.” Josh took another step, the hallway was still boring.

“Well, we might have checked around the edges of the entrance.”

Josh glanced back over his left shoulder, “fine, we’ll try that next time.”

He took another step forward and then another and then, a really stupid thought hit him. He stopped moving and thought for a second. His own words came back to him, *automated, triggered*, and then Mikiu saying don’t trigger anything unless you want to – damm, he stopped. He wanted to trigger the lights. Behind hm the others wondering if he had seen or heard something.

He took a deep breath, turned to face, them and said, “okay, this is going to sound stupid, but I want to try something.”

Mikiu shrugged, “okay, doesn’t sound stupid so far.”

Josh held his light above his head so they could all see it, paused to take a deep breath, and turned it off. The others caught on and one by one followed suit, Jameson the last.

For a moment the only illumination came from leakage out of the elevator room they had just vacated. Then, slowly – slowly enough that Josh wasn’t sure anything was happening, the darkness moved back until the greyness of the walls, ceiling and floor became visible. The light didn’t come from anywhere. It came from everywhere, same as the elevator room.

“Ahh”, said Mikiu, “all we had to do was pull the trigger, or throw the switch..”

“I get it,” said Wendy, “as soon as it noticed us in the corridor in the dark it turned the lights on.”

Josh nodded, “yes. The question still remains as to what it is, but I guess we can guess at some of the things that might be available. By the way, I’m now officially calling this a hallway.”

Mikiu asked, “who put you in charge of naming things, I thought that was Wendy’s job.”

Josh shook his head, “she only names strays. Ancient ruins are my territory.”

Mikiu laughed, “and you’ve been in how may alien ruins?”

Josh ignored him and continued down the hall. Looking ahead he could see that it went on for about 25 meters before branching on each side. He estimated that made the section of hall they were in about 200 meters in length, give or take 10 meters. Comparing it to the image of the island overhead they would still be in its shadow.

“That branch up ahead, I think that’s right around the tip of one of the stars,” said Josh.

Jameson asked, “you think the shaft is the size of the island?”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” said Josh. “That would make it awful heavy, difficult to support, even in water, unless of course,” he nodded to Mikiu who had been about to break in, “the whole thing floats.”

“That would make a certain kind of sense,” said Mikiu. “But while that storm was bad for us, I doubt if it had much effect on the island sub-structure. It just needs to be rigid enough to keep the thing from floating around.”

Wendy asked, “what difference would it make if it floated a little?”

Josh answered before Mikiu could, “the boat found it in the dark. I suppose it could have used some type of tracking system, but my guess is it knew where the island was going to be.”

Mikiu qualified Josh’s answer, “I wouldn’t claim ownership of either of those answers, the central stem has some give or we wouldn’t have felt our supposed whale’s collision so clearly. And besides that, even if we didn’t see it the boat may have some internal sensors, or be guided by remote. We don’t know enough to make assumptions. ”

Susan let out a sigh, “are you guys going to talk this to death or should we go see what’s ahead of us?”

Josh growled at himself silently, clearly they were wasting time they didn’t have.”.

“She’s right,” said Josh, “let’s keep moving. We’ll figure out the engineering later. Susan?”

“Yes boss.”

“Remember to keep an eye behind us. Even if it’s just a tiny robot I don’t want to be surprised.”

“Got it.”

After making sure that everybody was ready and alert, Josh moved slowly towards the intersection. The closer he got he realized that there were additional intersections continuing down the hallway, in fact, they stretched so far that the hallway itself appeared to stretch into infinity. The intervals between intersections seemed to remain constant, and he found himself remembering a vegetable from his childhood.

Mikiu interrupted his memory, “looks like an Onion.”

Josh snapped, “get out of my head. That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

They approached the first intersection, the passageways to either side were dark, but Josh was willing to bet as soon as they stepped into one of them that it would be illuminated.

He stopped just short of the intersection and leaned out to get a glimpse down either side. He couldn’t see anything.

Wendy asked, “straight, right, or left?”

Josh tried to take another look – still nothing.

“Is the inertial tracker still functioning?” asked Mikiu.

Josh belatedly pulled it from his belt and checked. “Yes, why?”

“Just wanted to make sure we had a base line reference. If I have enough time, and we cover enough of this base, I’ll build you a 3D model.”

“If we don’t starve to death first,” said Susan.

“There is that,” said Mikiu. “Then back to the question. I say we go left.”

“Any reason,” asked Josh, “you have an angle or something.”

“Not really, I’d like to keep going straight, but it doesn’t look like we’ll discover a whole lot doing that. So, we might as well take a chance and start exploring. Anyway, I’m left handed and that’s my pick.”

“Here I thought you had some reason based on science.”

“No,” said Mikiu. “I just figure that if whoever is running the show wants us to do something else they’ll let us know. Other than that, it’s as good a direction as any other. But I definitely think we should start one way or the other. I don’t fancy just going straight and leaving unexplored territory at our backside.”

“You realize it’s going to take forever to explore everything just so nothing sneaks up behind us.”

Mikiu shrugged, “we can at least tale a look.”

“Yea, that I can agree with. We need to get an idea of what this place is about. What it was built for, and more importantly, who it was built for.”

Josh motioned for the others to wait, then carefully took a step forward into to the left opening. The corridor, unlit, stretched dimly in front of him. As he finished his first step into the new hallway it lite up, but only to a distance of maybe fifty meters, it appeared to curve gently to his left. At the end of the lighted distance a doorway opened on the right-hand side, the room behind it dark. “Okay, we’ve got a door about fifty meters down.”

“Must be a pretty big room,” said Mikiu

Josh said, “maybe. Susan”.

“Yes boss.”

“Anyone following us?”

“Tell you what, I’ll let you know if they do,” she said.

“No reason to be snarky, I’m just making sure I’ve covered all the bases.”

“Sorry boss. You know I get edgy.”

Leading the way, he moved to the newly discovered door. Leaning against a wall just beside it he glanced at Mikiu, who was staring at his scanner.

“Anything?”

“Nothing giving off any power, but the room isn’t empty. And I was right, this looks like a big room.”

Josh took a deep breath, let it slowly expand his cheeks as he exhaled, a gesture from his childhood, and stepped into the room and stopped. This time he held the flash in his left hand but kept the right hand empty – empty but ready. Once again, the lights came on. He found himself in a medium sized room, maybe 15 meters by 30 meters, with rows of shoulder high cabinets running lengthwise away from him. He recognized the space immediately, a locker room.

“It’s a locker room,” he said.

“That’s what it looks like,” said Mikiu, now at his side. “I guess that makes sense. We’re near the exit to the lake, makes sense to have a place to get ready.”

“Yea”, said Josh, “but get ready for what.”

He moved further into the room, the light behaved the same as the light from the corridors, springing evenly from everywhere with no discernable source. Between each row of cabinets ran a single wide bench, evidently for the lockers on each side. The cabinets themselves were like open style lockers, no doors, just empty spaces with hooks and shelves. “They evidently were a trusting bunch. If this were a ship are these things would have doors.

Mikiu said, “Maybe they were more trusting than humans, and besides, they didn’t have to worry about zero-g and floating clothes.”

The others slowly spread out, there were four rows of lockers with additional lockers on the walls. That made five rows to explore. Josh motioned each of them down a isle and then started with the first cabinet of the center. He felt his breath catch for a second, the locker was in use, clothing of some type hung from the hooks and what was obviously some type of head covering sat alone on an upper shelf. He swung his flash around and found indications of other lockers in use.

It was Wendy who stated the obvious, “guys, does it look to any of you like these lockers are assigned to someone?”

Susan nodded, “I was just thinking the same thing.”

“I think we’re all thinking it,” said Josh. “Most of them seem to be in use. So, either we’re wrong about this being a temporary storage area for people going outside, or they went in very large teams. Mikiu, ideas?”

“I just hope that no one shows up and demands to know why we’re snooping around. If I didn’t know better, I’d say these lockers are in current. Course, you think someone would have complained about us trespassing by now.”

Wendy let her hand slid down the interior wall of one of the lockers, it was the same grey stuff that was everywhere. “Maybe,” she said, “they don’t want to offend us.”

“Maybe,” said Josh thoughtfully, “they don’t know we’re here.”

Mikiu reiterated his stance, “I don’t think we have any aliens hanging around. But it is odd that they left stuff in the lockers. You think they had to leave in a hurry?”

Jameson, moving down another couple of lockers, “and just left their clothes behind.”

“May be these are just work clothes,” said Mikiu.

Susan, holding up what looked like coveralls for a very tall wide human, said, “I don’t think I would take a job if I had to wear these.”

“Actually”, said Mikiu, “those don’t look, structure wise, that different from something that we might wear.”

Josh realized that something was off. “Hey, these things are grey.”

Wendy said, “no, but they’re not exactly bright colors either. Everything is still lacking in color. It’s like we’re in a black and white photo.”

Josh was about to respond but just then, from the direction of the corridor, came a squeaking sound, repeating over and over. They all fanned out in a line behind Josh, who impatiently led them over to the furthest row of lockers from the door. He took up a spot halfway into a locker, a spot from which he could see the entrance. The others fell in behind him with the exception of Mikiu who took a spot crouching at his knee. The three ship personnel had their weapons drawn, the two colonists didn’t. The leftover clothing in the lockers had unnerved them a little. Josh wished he could turn the lights out.

The squeak came again, louder, closer, repeating itself every half second. And then a squat, round robot like a half a ball with a transparent head and three appendages lumbering into the room. It paused inside the entrance and slowly rotated just its head taking in the entire room with whatever instruments were present under the clear surface that it used for a skull.

And then, it came rolling straight towards them, one of the short arms pointing straight at them with what looked like a tuning fork. Josh reflexively took a step backwards as Mikiu slowly raised from his kneeling position. They both glanced at the weapons in their hands and decided that they weren’t in the mood for a gunfight. They holstered their weapons.

Josh whispered, “Okay folks, everyone relaxes, nobody shoots, – or gets shot without my say so.”

With great care he stepped away from the lockers and raised both his hands above his head, palms out. The robot was old, and he generally didn’t trust old machinery. To his right he noticed Mikiu following his actions, and then the others slowly followed suit.

For what seem like several minutes, although Josh knew it was only a few seconds, the five humans stood, surrendering to the singular robot. The robot starred, as if uncertain what to do. Josh said, “Mikiu, what do you suppose it’s doing.”

“My best guess,” said Mikiu, “is that it’s going through a list of protocols to determine what it should do. We, are apparently, something it wasn’t prepared for.”

Josh said, “I know the feeling.”

Finally, even though only scant seconds had passed, the robot went back in the direction it had come from. It did so without turning its upper body. Leaving the room with the tuning fork instrument still pointed in their general direction.

Wendy let out a long breath. “Was that a weapon?”

Mikiu said, “I don’t believe so. Some kind of tool would be my guess. That was a maintenance robot. Probably came to see why the lights came on.”!!!!!

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High above the short-lived standoff Captain Halerin was engaged in a situation he didn’t like. He was talking with Colony director Sunderson and neither of them were happy. Fortunately, they weren’t unhappy with each other. “Jarwan,” he pleaded, “please calm down. Your people need you to keep your head.”

Jarwan looked away from the screen. It looked to Halerin as if the man was checking to see if he was alone. “I know that Mike, and sorry about the drama. I just need people to think I’m doing something. The Deidre makes a fine scapegoat. I know there’s no way you can get a shuttle down in this mess.”

“Things getting a little rough with the folks?”

“Only a few of them. Fortunately, they don’t carry much weight with the others. I just don’t want them stirring things up.”

“Understood. Oh, if it came right down to it, in an emergency we could get a shuttle down to you, but I doubt very much if it would be able to take off again. Going down in bad weather is easier than going up, we just have to stop the fall. Takeoff is a bitch in bad conditions, at least for a shuttle. You’ve got to worry about staying stable until you get some speed. I wouldn’t want to try it. Especially just because a few of your people think it would be safer up here.”

Jarwan Sunderson laughed before answering. “Like I said Mike, it’s only a few nervous types. They’ll settle down. They haven’t got a lot of options.”

The captain laughed back, “let’s hope they have a sense of humor. Okay, that just leaves us the problem of figuring out the weather and how to fix it.”

“Sorry Mike. That’s your department. Right now, as you pointed out, I have to figure out how to keep my people alive. But if you need me to do something, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Same here. Like I said, if we have to, I can send a shuttle down.”

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The Dory, after swimming off to the far end of the lake, settled itself on the bottom for a good think. This was its favorite spot for thinking. With considerable effort he]]it had wormed and squirmed its way to the pale grey surface beneath the ages of sediment and debris that had settled from the forest above. It remembered when the entire bottom and sides were covered with the grey material. It did not remember what it was called, but it liked resting on the cool smooth surface, it made thinking less work. The Dory hated work, at least physical work. That’s why the Dory had refused eons ago to climb out of the teaming oceans of its origin planet. Sitting and thinking was slow but led to much cleaner answers. The one thing that the Dory had was patience; the one thing they lacked was urgency. They relied on other species for that particular trait. A fact that made communication with a Dory a frustrating and sometimes slow experience.

It was remembering. Remembering a time very long ago, a time when the Dory had been young and had happily taken up the young one’s offer to explore new worlds. This had been such a world. The Dory and the Mambre had used it as a starting point to explore countless other worlds, and the worlds of other worlds, it had been a glorious time. And then, for reasons that it now couldn’t easily remember, it had ended. It needed to remember that time - for reasons it couldn’t enumerate. It knew that it had reasons, and hoped that this thinking spot would return those lost memories.

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They listened to the squeak of the robot as it went down the corridor, going Josh assumed, to whatever place it had come from. Shaking his head in an effort to jar himself into action he looked at the others, hoping to find an action to take.

Mikiu interrupted his head clearing, “I think that was a maintenance robot. A damm maintenance robot.”

“Fine”, Josh asked, “what was it maintaining, and what thing it pointed at us?”

Mikiu was looking around the room, a curious expression on his face, “well, on the surface, there doesn’t appear to be much here to maintain, but I’ll willing to bet it came to do a diagnostic.”

“Of what?” asked Susan.

“The lights, no one’s turned them on in heaven knows how many decades. Then, all of a sudden, someone tripped the lights, some program got curious.”

Wendy frowned, “I didn’t think normal programming had emotions.”

“This is just maintenance stuff, some system doesn’t get used for a long time it makes sense to see if something happened. I’d say this room was way overdue for a checkup.”

Josh looked at Mikiu. “Are we a maintenance problem?”

“I’m guessing no. Although why an advanced system would rely on a physical check by a robot instead of diagnostics is beyond me.”

Josh said, “just guessing but I bet the diagnostics don’t register us as people and the robot came to see if something else was going on. Be that as it may, we need to get back to finding a way to shut down the weather and get out of here. And not necessarily in that order.”

“You got that right,” said Jameson. It doesn’t matter how safe we are, if we don’t figure something out, we may be here awhile.”

Mikiu snapped his fingers, “we should have followed that bot.”

“Why,” asked Josh.

“It might have taken us to a control center, or at least an auxiliary control center. We might be able to get an idea of what this place is all about.”

Wendy spoke out, “I can still hear it in the hall. It’s not very fast.”

Josh nodded, “Okay, we can check this out later. Let’s go.”

The five, with Josh in the lead quickly moved out of the room. He noticed Susan still had the alien overalls, she had thrown them her shoulder. She noticed his glance.

“I thought the sensors here might react better if they sense familiar fabrics.”

“Can’t hurt,” said Mikiu. “But I doubt if it’s going to fool an AI smart enough to bring us here.”

In the corridor Josh held up his right hand to cut off conversation. Wendy listened to locate the robots squeaky drive system. Josh heard it but couldn’t tell where it was coming from. Wendy had no such trouble, she immediately pointed opposite the direction they had arrived from.

“That way.”

“No light, wouldn’t the robot have turned them on?” asked Josh.

“Why?” why asked Mikiu. “The robot probably has a map of the place built in. It would just be a waste of power.

“Power’s cheap.”

“For us, we have no idea what they were using for power. Nor do we have any idea what they were using it for. Remember all the effect fields, especially that one that keeps the lake invisible from space. That one alone must require terawatts to maintain.”

“Or,” said Susan, “it may require almost no power. Aren’t you the one always preaching about making assumptions about technologies we don’t understand?”

Mikiu gifted her with a glare. “Since when did you start listening.”

Josh hushed them, “everyone be quiet so Wendy can hear the bot. We don’t want to lose it.”

They started off into the dark corridor, which immediately became a lite corridor, something Josh wasn’t used too. Such power saving feature were almost never used on Star Ships. Humans, at least those on a ship, were safest in an environment that didn’t change often. Day and night were never a factor aboard ship, except in quarters. Power savings were accomplished by simply keeping the lights low, but always on. This also made it easier to read control displays. Crew members who spent a lot of time planet side kept their eyes in shape by using higher illumination in their quarters. All crew members were exposed to daylight light levels in the mess and exercise areas as a matter of convention. People needed to see and be seen, at least some of the time.

With Wendy and Josh leading the way they travelled down the gently curving hall, the degree of curvature was not severe, but Josh suspected that it indeed surrounded the outer perimeter of the star island. He was beginning to get an idea of how things were laid out. That ability was part of what made him a good pilot, spatial awareness.

Soon they could all hear the squeaking of the travelling robot ahead, the sound slightly distorted by the two cross corridors they had passed. Josh guessed those connected back to the elevator room and corresponded to other points of the star. He began to wonder If they were going to make a full circle when the sound changed dramatically. First, it got louder and more expansive sounding, as if in a larger room, and then, it simply stopped.

They paused mid-step, waiting, but the squeak did not return.

Mikiu stated the obvious, “I think a door just slammed.”

“I don’t know about slammed,” said Josh. “But it shut, or else the robot froze.”

“I’ll be dammed,” responded Mikiu.

Josh gave him an interested look. Mikiu was looking at his scanner screen.

Josh asked, “Do you see something or are you just stating the obvious.”

Mikiu was not amused, “Funny. The scanner back trace showed an opening about 300 meters ahead, then it didn’t.”

“I take it that you’re getting better at reading the Inside of this place.?”

“I switched to active sensors. The one thing this material is good for is reflection.”

“Inside or outside wall?”

“Inside, I think. It’s still hard to tell.”

Susan said, “I don’t remember seeing any door handles.”

Josh said, “that’s no surprise. Everything these people did is apparently invisible to us.” Josh moved forward at a quicker pace, “Tell us when we get there.”

They moved in silence, out of habit Josh put his hand on his gun butt. Finally, after a few minutes, Mikiu called a stop and indicated the wall to the left.

“Here, give or take a few meters.”

Josh pulled out his belt lamp, even with the corridor lighted he thought the more intense light might reveal an outline or a handle. He realized that at this point he’d settle for a doorbell. The extra light was simply reflected back into his face. With a growl he shut the light off and leaned against the wall and pounded the hand holding the flash into it. He knew that the robot had crossed this wall seconds earlier, where were the controls?

His face was pressed up to the wall and his hand was drawn back to pound the wall again when he felt the solidness of the wall vanish. He fell face first into an opening. He managing to get his left hand up to avoid landing on his nose, but he couldn’t avoid the injury to his pride. He rolled over and found himself sitting in the opening to a large room filled with a multitude of robots of all sizes, shapes, varieties and colors – and sounds, so many sounds as the robots all noticed him. He quickly rose to his feet in a crouched stance and tried to look all directions at once..

Behind him he heard Wendy whisper, “Well, you found the door.”

He slowly relaxed. None of the robots, after their initial reaction, seemed to be overly concerned with his presence. The room quickly got quieter, the only sounds from a few bots that were obviously working on their fellows.

Mikiu walked up beside him, moving the scanner in his hand slowly, sweeping the room from left to right and back again. His face was showing surprise at the readings he was getting. Josh figured his own face also showed some surprise. “I think we found the robot lounge.”

“Lounge, repair center, waiting room, whatever you want to call it.”

“You learning anything?”

His friend looked sideways at him, “yeah, not to let you pound on the walls.”

“Worked didn’t it?”

“Yeah, it did, but don’t try to tell me that’s what you expected to happen.” said Mikiu.”

“Well, no, not exactly. I wasn’t expecting anything to happen. Just out of curiosity, what did happen.”

“Don’t know. Don’t even know what happened to the door or the wall or whatever it is?” answered Mikiu. “It just vanished. All I know is you stuck your face against it, pounded and muttered something about opening the damm door.”

“Which one of the three do you suppose did it.”

“I’m pretty sure the sight of your face caused it to jump out of the way.”

He heard the two women snicker behind him. He’d forgotten about having an audience.

“I suppose somebody got that on body cam.”

“I certainly hope so”, smirked Susan.

“Good, I want to see it later, much later”, said Josh. “Okay Mikiu, where exactly did the door go?”

“The same place the doors up top went. Maybe they have a door room.”

Josh looked at him. “A door room, that’s the best you could come up with.” The science officer shrugged.

Josh felt Wendy’s breath from behind as she looked over his shoulder at the robots. “It just went away,” her breath on his ear now, “and then you fell down.”

He looked at her and found her face a little close, “You think it’s funny, don’t you?”

She smiled mischievously, nodded, and then stepped back.

Josh turned his attention back to business, the robots. Having lived with robots of one type or another his entire life he was not uncomfortable with them. But after looking around the room he sensed the alien DNA of these machines. Still, there were shapes and styles that felt familiar. These were obviously machines of the same nature as those used by men. Form apparently followed function in this case.

“What have we got here Mikiu? If I didn’t know better, I’d say we were in a bot depot back on Sartagius”

“I think you’re looking at the Alien equivalent,” said Mikiu. “The room is about the same size as the last one, but instead of rows of lockers we’ve got rows of robots.” Mikiu smiled at himself, “rows of robots. I like that, think I’ll put it in my report.”

“Let me know when you’re through amusing yourself. Then maybe you can tell me more about the rows of robots.”

His friend shook his head, “There’s nothing to tell. These are probably just what they look like, maintenance robots. Your standard, keep everything running, behind the scenes hardware. Tell me about the door, did feel anything, you were getting intimate with it?”

“Intimate with it,” said Josh.

“Well, it did look like you were leaning in for a kiss.”

Josh heard Wendy giggle behind him and started to say something, then thought better of it. He didn’t need a distraction from the past and he remembered some of the things she used to find funny. Now was not the right time or company. Instead, he replayed the door incident in his head. Both his hands had been resting on the wall, a wall that had felt like a ships bulkhead, no give, no softness, and then it hadn’t been there. He remembered something else.

“There was no feeling of movement, no air rushing into fill the space if it had just disappeared.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean anything, you were caught by surprise. Besides, if you weren’t looking for that you wouldn’t have noticed. Not that big a vacuum to fill.”

“I was surprised, but I think I would have noticed. All I know is that I tried to catch myself with my left hand.”

Mikiu pursed his lips, turning them inward for a second. “It’s possible that the door, wall, whatever, was never there. This could all be done with force fields, and these people like force fields.”

“The problem is that all their fields look alike, invisible.”

“You can’t see invisible. But that’s not what bothers me. It’s the amount of power that would be required. I mean, power is relatively cheap produce, but not on this type of scale. The handling logistics alone would be ridiculous.”

Jos thought about it. Realized that they were making assumptions again. “Based on our technology you mean. We don’t know anything about their technology other than we’ve seen several examples of it that we can’t explain.”

Susan broke up the discussion, “guys. Our friend is getting his squeak oiled.”

They followed her pointed finger and saw squat three armed robot being given the once over by a similar but five armed robot.

Josh said, “Good for him. Has anyone seen anything in here that will help us?”

Mikiu shook his head no. “These are all maintenance bots,” he pointed around, “cleaning, wiring, and I don’t even want to guess. Point is, none of them are made to interact with anything but the infrastructure. They don’t know how to deal with living things. That may tell us something about the culture of the builders or it may just be we’re in the wrong room. I tend to go with the latter.”

Susan broke in, “There’s one difference between these bots and ours. They don’t smell.”

“Neither do ours,” said Mikiu, a little irritation crossing his face. “I keep telling you that it’s all in your head.”

“And I keep telling you that you’re full of.”

Josh broke in, “We’ve had this argument before.” He turned to the others, “Susan is hypersensitive to the lubricant used on most of our bots. Mikiu knows that.”

“I know, it just irritates me for some reason.

Josh saw Susan pull her shoulders back, prepared to continue the argument. The look he gave stopped her. He knew she really was sensitive to the certain chemicals.

“I don’t care whether it irritates you or not. The fact that she can’t smell anything means that the alien technology, at least as far as oiling things, is based on something completely different. When we have time to think about it that may be of help. For right now, let’s look around, see if we find anything interesting – but no one touch anything.” He glanced at Susan, “or take anything.”

They spread out, making sure to keep their distance from the robots. Some of them Josh could guess the purpose of, others he didn’t even try and some he decided, he didn’t want to know. Mikiu and Susan were taking careful readings and all five were recording with their body cams. Per his instructions no one touched anything. Josh was glad to see that they paid attention. He didn’t want anyone injured, not when they were out of reach of the ship.

After a slow and studious trip they eventually reached the back of the room. Finding nothing they returned to the entrance.

“I’ll say this,” said Mikiu, “this is the cleanest bot depot I’ve ever seen, not even grease on the floor.”

“Come to think of it,” said Susan, “I don’t think I’ve seen a speck of dirt since we’ve been here.”

“Easy”, said Josh with a grin. “No’s been around to get anything dirty for God knows how long.”

“Hey,” Wendy snapped, “let’s keep God out of this.”

Belatedly he remembered that the Rinein Colony was a little bit of a religious concern.

“Sorry,” he told Wendy, “didn’t mean anything by it.”

She smiled a quick little smile, “that’s okay, just don’t do it in front of my father.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Anyone have an idea of what we should do next. Don’t think we’re gonna accomplish much just wondering around pounding on walls looking for the next door.”

Mikiu said, “Why don’t we try something simple?”

Josh gave his friend a hopeful look. “Fine, I can handle simple.”

Mikiu said, “you said it, not me. Let’s assume, since all two of the rooms we’ve seen so far have been of the same size that perhaps a standard design is in play. So, by extension the room opposite this one is the same size.”

Josh finished for him, “Then maybe the door to that room is in the same place. We just need to march across the corridor.”

“After you,” said Mikiu.

Josh nodded and led the way back and across the hallway. None of the robots paid the slightest attention to their departure. However, as soon as the last of them, in this case Jameson, cleared the room the grey wall snapped back into place without a sound, not even a whoosh of air movement. Mikiu reached out and touched it briefly before turning to Josh.

“Force field.”

“And you can tell that how?”

“Magic.”

“You’re just guessing, aren’t you?”

“Anticipating would be a better word.”

“I can think of some better words,” said Josh.

Mikiu grinned and motioned to the wall. “Kiss the wall, pound on it, call it names, do whatever you did to the last one.”

Josh thought for a second, trying to remember the sequence of events in his mind. He started to touch the wall and then stepped back, additional memories coming back. He remembered pounding the wall but had that been why the door opened. No, he had wanted the door open, was that the key. Could the alien tech somehow sense his thoughts or was it simply inferring his intentions. Both were Interesting idea, and easy enough to test.

Letting the air plump out his cheeks he slowly exhaled he stepped up to the wall but didn’t touch it. Closing his eyes, he concentrated hard, forming the image of the wall before him turning into an opening, thinking hard about the concept of opening, thinking about stepping forward into a room. For a second nothing happened, and then the wall was gone, another room before him. He didn’t see the wall vanish but the abrupt intake of breathes from his friends told him it had done so.

Mikiu gave him a surprised look, then turned to scan the new room. “Okay, so now we’ll add omnipotence to your list of accomplishments.”

“Nothing like that unfortunately. That would be a real time saver. I could just wish us out of here. I’m guessing the alien tech can sense what we want. Although how it can do that with human brains I don’t know.”

Wendy was looking at him incredulously. “How it can work with your brain is an even bigger question.”

Josh gave her a grin and stepped inside. The room did indeed appear to be the same size as the others. There the similarities ended. This room was filled with furniture of various types. There were what looked to be couches and chairs, surrounding taller flat surfaces that would do for tables. Each group appeared to be a seating area. It reminded him of a ships lounge where people got together in their own little groups. He said, “I think we found the non-robot lounge.”

Mikiu nodded, “That I think, would be a safe conclusion. Their taste in furniture leaves something to be desired.”

“I’ll say,” said Wendy, “the color scheme is out of the bland section of the catalog.”

Josh had to agree. All of the furniture was in subdued colors, muted blacks, browns, and other dim shades with nothing really standing out. It was if everything was chosen not to clash with the grey of the walls, floor, and ceiling. “Bland would be the term for it.”

Susan said, “I think this is proof of Mikiu’s theory about the range of their eyesight.”

“Either that,” said Jameson, “or they really didn’t want anything to clash.”

Josh asked, “Mikiu?”

“Nothing on scanner except what you see if front of you, furniture. Looks to be artificial textiles over some kind of framing, except for the tables of course. Those appear to be made of our universal grey material. At least with this and the clothes in the locker room we know they have colors other than grey.”

“Yea,” said Wendy, if dull is a color.”

As a group they walked over to the first furniture arrangement. It consisted of a round table about two meters across and a low backed couch that ran around two thirds of it. The upholstery of the couch was unbroken by design or patterns, but it wasn’t grey, more of a blackish brown. The dimensions were close enough to human to make it usable. Josh decided that he’d been walking long enough, and with some trepidation, lowered himself to a seat. The couch, even with the deep seat and low back, fitted itself to his backside like a glove. Attempting to lean back resulted in a semi-reclined position because of the seat depth. Still, it was the most comfortable thing he had sat in since leaving the low gravity of the ship. All in all he decided, he like it.

Wendy plopped herself down a couple of feet away, not exactly close, but she didn’t try to get to far away. “This isn’t too bad. I could get to like this.”

Mikiu, looked down at Josh, “before you get too comfortable, I have a question.” Exactly how did you open the door? For a second there it looked like you knew what you were doing, we both know that can’t be it.”

“Funny,” Josh said. “I’m not sure exactly what worked. I just thought hard about how I wanted the wall to open. I figured I’d try the thinking part before the heavy knocking and it worked.”

“So, you did it backwards of your usual method, hit something and then think about it. You think this place responds to what we think.”

Josh answered slowly, “maybe. I mean we walked out on the pier, used a comm, and a boat showed up — someone might have assumed that we wanted to go somewhere. In this case maybe the wall just assumed that I wanted to go through it. But I think, and this is just guessing, the alien tech somehow interprets what it is that we want to do. I could of course, be full of it.”

“Both things could be true. Some of these responses, like the boat coming or the elevator going down after the big fish hit, could be automated response systems. But the doors, no. If it were an auto respond type of thing it would have opened when you walked directly up to it. You obviously weren’t going down the corridor. No, it didn’t open until you told it you wanted it too by thinking about it.”

Mikiu paused for a second, thinking. “We have systems like that, but they have to be tuned to a particular brain to work. You’re right about the alien tech, working with generic brains, that’s impressive.”

“The elevator was an automatic response?” asked Jameson.

“The blue field,” said Wendy, “that was to drive everything off the island, either into the water or the elevator. I bet the doorways wouldn’t have shocked us if we were the aliens who built it.”

“Conjecture,” said Mikiu, “but I think you’re probably correct. There may be marine life they don’t want around.”

“Fine, what do we do now?” asked Josh. “We’ve still got to find a way out of here. Figure out what all of this stuff is for, stop the bad weather and save Rinein.”

“Provided there is a way that we can help them.” Said Mikiu, he sounded unsure.

Wendy, with a look of *ah-ha* on her face, said excitedly, “Josh, do you think you can run the elevator?”

He thought a second, realized the others were staring at him, and deferred with a question. “Mikiu, do think that pedestal thing controls the elevator?”

“Could be, although that’s a lot of control surface for an elevator. My guess is that it has other functions as well and we have no idea what they are. But I think it’s worth a shot to try.”

“Besides,” said Jameson, “there have to be multiple safeguards to keep someone from doing something really stupid.”

Mikiu responded, “you’ve never seen Josh do stupid. But I have to agree, I don’t see how trying is going to cause a problem.”

Wendy jumped to her feet, “let’s go find out.”

Mikiu looked at Josh, his eyebrows raised, “You want to try it now?”

Wendy said, “I want to talk to my father and I’m sure the Deidre is listening for you.”

Josh nodded, “probably. But we’ve already used most of the day and after the ride in that storm we all could use some sleep. I say we finish exploring this room and call it a night. There’s probably a bunk room nearby but these couches are wide enough to crash on. Then we can start early and see if we can get to the surface.”

Wendy twisted the left side of her mouth up and sat back down on the alien couch. Josh knew she was disappointed, but she didn’t say anything. The others spread out and found their own spots.

Josh realized that they were all tired. “Or, we can eat something. Rest for a little bit, and then finish exploring the room.

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The work of bringing systems back online was nearing completion, of course it was only a limited number of systems. That concerned Halerin a little, but the only assistance they could provide to the colonist involved the shuttles anyway. The ships systems might be important if things got bad enough that they had to flee the Tingies system. He rather doubted that, so far everything bad had been down on the surface. However, he reminded himself, alien technology was involved, and that meant nothing could be ruled out.

The only system not close to being usable was the ION drive system and even that was progressing at twice the speed Jerimy had predicted. Or course, Mike Halerin was aware that the Chief Engineer always padded his estimates, all chief Engineers did. If things got really bad, they could boost away from the planet with the chemical fueled rocket system. Halerin was loath to do that because of the cost of refueling, but in an emergency, it was an option.

He glanced to Wally at the systems status console. Wally and Yelaa were taking all the communication watches know along with other duties. Halerin wasn’t exactly sure how much sleep, if any, they were getting. He disliked seeing his crew push themselves this hard, but the Deidre was a family and part of that family was in trouble. Plus, the Deidre had brought the colonist to this world. They felt a responsibility for them.

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Jarwan stood atop the colonies main dining hall, which also doubled as the colonies main meeting hall, dance hall and sometimes school, for those rare instances where computer learning was supplemented by actual classroom experience. It was also the only legitimate two-story building in the Colony.

He was standing with Dunzin Watersun, his second in command, watching the new flow of the Only River. The Only was so named because it was the only bigriver on the planet they were aware of. Jarwan fully expected there were other rivers in the mountains and most certainly in the huge forest and southern lowlands. Those rivers hadn’t been discovered or named yet — so they had the *Only* River. It had been a play on words that the colony had stuck with, and now, that river was way over its banks. It was over its banks and had engulfed fully half of Rinein.

They were both soaking wet, water streaming off the hoods of the coats covering their environmental suits. Neither was worried about being wet. They both were exhausted by three days of nonstop physical work, no sleep, virtually no rest and only occasional stops for food and water. Jarwan knew how his tired his friend was. He was just as tired, maybe even more so. He carried the extra weight of responsibility on his shoulders.

Dunzin finally raised the energy to speak, “I think it’s crested. Now it’ll start to recede.”

Jarwan, loathe to contradict his friend, quietly said, “I agree that it has stopped rising. I don’t about the receding part. I think maybe it’s just found itself a new leveling off place. It’s not dropping, not yet anyway.”

“I don’t understand it. This is a desert, you would think it there would be an almost infinite thirst in the soil. Maybe it just saturated for now, can’t take anymore.” The man sighed, to confused to come up with a really good reason for things happening. He changed the subject. “What does Mike say?”

“He thinks — that he has no idea. They still can’t find any reason for the water flow to have increased. As near as he can tell, the ice caps melted to their normal level months ago, when they were supposed to. He has no idea where the extra water is coming from, the weather, as observed from the Deidre since she’s been here, has shown nothing out of the ordinary as far as rain patterns in the north or the forest. It’s like a hidden compartment of water opened up and emptied itself.”

“So, we just sit and wait for things to go back to normal?”

Jarwan shook his head, “No, I think it’ll take quite a while before we get back to something approaching normal. What condition are we in.”

“Checked about three hours ago, everything in the new warehouses is ok, the last ones we built, the ones with the floor liners, they appear to holding. The ones from our first couple years, what we didn’t get emptied out is now soaked. Some of the stuff it doesn’t matter, it’ll be fine after it dries out. The rest of it, will have to be accessed for damage. Somethings we can fix or repurpose. Some of it’s just finished, doesn’t even make good trash for the landfill.” The land fill was a project to stabilize parts of the colony area with packed waste in order to provide a firm foundation for building in the future.

Jarwan Sunderson nodded, he had expected nothing more.

Dunzin asked, “The explorers?”

“No word since yesterday, Mike’s getting worried, but he got his hands full. The ships trying to finish or reverse all the maintenance work they started.”

Dunzin asked, “he’s trying to get the ship ready to bail us out?”

“He’s preparing for that. I don’t think it matters if this weather doesn’t let up. Even if the shuttles can land, we’ll have to leave everything behind. We’d be lucky to get everyone to orbit. I’m afraid we’d lose people, and if both shuttles were lost. Everyone still here would be trapped with no chance of rescue.”

He turned to face his second in command. “Dunzin, pass the word, I want whoever’s had the most rest to stand watch tonight. That means everyone else, and that includes you and me, sleeps. None of us are any good otherwise.”

His friend nodded, “I’m not going to argue with you. I don’t have the energy to argue. It will be done, if I can remember how.”

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He woke with a start, and a kink in his neck. He quickly saw the reason for the kink, Wendy’s head was cradled to his side, forcing his head awkwardly against the short back of the couch. This was getting to be a habit, waking up with the girl. He found that maybe didn’t mind. Looking around he realized that the others were still asleep on the alien furniture. Apparently, it was more comfortable than they had anticipated, or perhaps, they were just that tired. He realized that he was hungry, they all probably were. He considered waking everyone to eat but didn’t. They probably needed the rest more than food.

With a sigh he slowly tried to slide out from under Wendy’s head. She woke up, groaned and fixed her eyes on him. He raised a finger to his lips for silence and motioned her to come with him. Together they managed their feet without disturbing the others.

Leading the way, he quickly led her to the back end of the room, ignoring the furniture in between. As soon as they got to the last set of furniture the illumination directly over them came to what Josh assumed was normal brightness. Wendy noticed it too.

“That’s handy,” she said, “what are we doing back here.”

“We’re the only ones awake, I figured maybe we explore the rest of the room and let the others get some sleep.”

“Okay”, she said, “but I know the first thing we should look for, waste extraction.”

“A john.”

“Whatever you call it, I have to pee.”

“That’s why we don’t throw our empty bottles away, rations in, waste out.”

“What if you have to do more than — what if it won’t go in a bottle.”

“The concentrated slurry we carry really isn’t supposed to produce any solid waste, at least not for several days.”

“I knew that, I think, anyhow, I don’t really don’t like the idea of peeing in a bottle.”

“There’s always the floor.”

“No thanks,” she said. “I get the impression a janitor bot from hell would show up and bitch.”

Josh liked her sense of humor, he always had. “Wouldn’t matter. You wouldn’t understand it. Look, if you need some privacy I can go back to the front of the room.”

She looked at him in apparent indecision, “Thanks, I appreciate that. Normally I don’t have a shy bladder but this whole setup here is just a little spooky.”

He smiled, “you got that right.” He liked the little hint of shyness, even if it was bodily functions.

Leaving her to her business he moved to the right front corner of the room, furthest from the door. Wendy’s need to use the facilities had given him an idea. If this was a true lounge there had to be some kind of hygienic chamber around. The aliens might be different, but everything he had seen so far told him they were related to humans, at least in matters of function. That meant a top-down digestive system. It was almost universal among life forms, fuel and water in one end, waste out the other. He also realized that he had no ideas what the aliens might make a bathroom look like but there were only so many things you could do to get rid of waste. He felt certain that he would be able to recognize it, or smell it, when he found it. He reminded himself that he might have to think the door open and that might complicate matters. Then he realized maybe that was how to find it.

In fact, it might prove useful to practice controlling things by brainwave with a little experimentation. If he had any real chance of learning to control the console in the main room tomorrow the more experience, he got with the technology the better. He reminded himself, he didn’t have to understand how any of it worked, only how to make it work.

With that in mind he moved along the side wall, his hand gently touching as he thought about having to pee. He realized with a chuckle that it took an effort to concentrate on something so ingrained into normal behavior. As he turned a corner of the room he noticed that Wendy had finished and was now walking with him. She didn’t say anything to disturb his concentration. She must have figured out what he was doing, she had been good at that before. Several meters after turning the corner he felt the wall open. This time he was expecting it, but still almost lost his balance. Wendy grabbed his belt and stopped him from hitting the floor again.

She said, “You’ve got to get better at this.”

“Tell me about it.”

They took a quick look around the interior of the new space. It wasn’t a large room, more of a short hall with a door in the side. But it was definitely a toilet facility with one entire end consisting of a bench with holes in it. It reminded Josh of pictures he had seen of ancient Roman toilets. The opposite end of the room end was lined with what appeared to be sinks, located somewhat higher. The entire effort was rather spartan in appearance.

Wendy echoed his opinion, “They certainly weren’t ones for frills. I’ve seen camp toilets that were prettier than this.”

He laughed, “Yea, worse yet I don’t see any cleaning paper.”

“Maybe it’s automated, why don’t you try it.”

“Thanks, but I’m good.”

Josh heard a sleep voice from behind them.

Mikiu had woken from his slumber. “What’s going on?”

“We found the toilet.”

Mikiu walked into the small room.

“Damm, these people don’t decorate anything do they.”

“Worse yet,” said Josh, “no magazines.”

Wendy said, “Maybe they just don’t like fancy. Maybe this is a low budget affair. This complex has to have a purpose of some kind.”

Josh said, “Yea, that’s evident. You figure out what it is, let the rest of us know.”

To Mikiu he said, “Let’s wake the others, eat and look for more rooms off this corridor. We’ve got a couple of hours and then back here for some more sleep. He glanced around the little room. And if necessary, someone can try out the facilities here.”

Mikiu nodded and they went back to get the others.

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They spent the next few hours exploring until by the time they arrived back at the lounge room they were at the point of exhaustion, the few hours of sleep earlier hadn’t been enough. They settled onto the same half-circle couch they had used before.

The half days exploration had yielded some results, but none of them were particularly useful for their purpose of figuring out what the compound was for, and it certainly didn’t get them closer to solving the destabilization of the eco system. They did find things that would be of interest to future explorers and researchers.

Jameson was the first to voice their frustration., “Okay, this has been a waste of time. So far we’ve found a locker room, lounge room, robot storage area, two completely empty rooms, a room filled with evenly space large grey blocks, and what looks like, a clothing store.”

Josh noticed that even Wendy gave the man a reproachful look. For some reason Jameson had spent the entire exploratory session growing increasingly grouchy, it seemed that he had got up on the wrong side of the bed, or couch. He himself didn’t really feel all that chipper, his reluctance to be in underground rooms was beginning to reach annoyance levels. He hated losing the tight control he normally kept on his fear of enclosed underground spaces. But this was beginning to wear thin, and he didn’t know how much longer he could keep it in check. Fortunately, keeping his mind busy distracted him from his fears.

Mikiu, sensing his friends growing frustration and knowing the cause, decided to step in.

“Easy Jameson, this is beginning to get stale for all of us. True, we didn’t find anything helpful, but we found plenty of things that increase our what we know. And that truthfully is about the best we can do right now. We don’t even know enough to know what it is we don’t know.”

Jameson glared at him for a second and then sighed. “Sorry, I have blood sugar problems, it shows sometimes when I’m under stress.”

Josh took pity on him, he was feeling rough himself. “Nothing to worry about. I’m stressed too. I have a type of claustrophobia.”

Wendy asked curiously, “you have a fear of small spaces?”

“Technically it’s called Taphephobia, the fear of being buried alive. I don’t like being underground, but it only bothers me if it’s in a manmade space, regular caves don’t’ bother me.”

“You live in a metal tube, and this gets to you?”, she said. The look on her face was disbelief, but you could see understanding trying to break through.

“I know, it doesn’t make the most sense in the world. It’s not too bad when I have something to do, like now. If I was alone with nothing to do this place would drive me crazy.”

She thought about it and the glared. “You never told me this before.”

Josh managed to look uncomfortable. Their prior relationship, on his end at least, had been casual. After all, he really didn’t expect to have much contact with her later. Her desire to be on the exploration mission had been a surprise.

“Sorry about that. Things were good. I didn’t see any reason to complicate them.”

She gave him a wry smile. “You mean you were getting what you wanted. I guess I was too. And anyway, I’m way to tired to think about it know. Good night.”

Josh, confused, and confused about why, watched quietly as the others fell asleep. Wendy was the last and he went under still watching her.

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The next morning, they got an early start. They got to the central control room just at sunrise, at least that’s what their watches told them. Everyone, including Jameson, seemed to be in a good mood. Josh didn’t know whether to attribute that to the rest they had gotten or the prospect of seeing the sky again. He didn’t really care. He just wanted out.

Mikiu was busy with his scanner, trying to trace some of the energy currents he could read in the central control pedestal, so far, he was having no luck. He could tell that they were there, but not exactly where they were. As far as what they did, the science officer had no clue.

Josh watched him for a while. Wendy, Susan and Jameson were also standing around watching. They had discussed splitting up to cover more ground. Josh had vetoed the idea, he wasn’t willing to risk splitting up the team. Maybe later, after they got a status report on what was happening at the colony.

“Any luck,” Josh asked Mikiu. He was morning patience wearing thin?

“No. I register energy currents doing things, but I’m not even going to attempt to guess what those things are. I’m not even sure if I’m looking at power circuits, information circuits, or a combination of both. We’ve toyed with that in the past. Send the power to do something in the instructions to do it. We’ve never had much luck with it. Theoretically it would simplify the number of things you have to connect.”

Mikiu stepped back from the console, and gave his friend a long look. “You wanna try that voodoo of yours?”

Wendy asked, “Voodoo?”

Josh laughed. “It’s an old term, a form of magic or religion or both. I’m not really sure.”

Okay, he thought to himself, it’s time to pay the piper, that was another old saying that he had no idea what it meant. Studying the sloped console for a minute he looked for something that would provide a point of reference, either on the pedestal itself or somewhere in the room. If there were individual controls there had to be a starting point to know where they were, but he could see nothing. This might be more difficult than finding the bathroom. Then he thought, it really shouldn’t be. Unless the base had been built in stages everything should operate on the same basic principles.

Standing straight he placed both hands on the sloped surface of the console with his legs pressed against the sides of the platform and his eyes closed. He concentrated on needing to see the controls, on needing to operate the elevator. He projected that feeling of need as hard as he could.

Then he felt something. Something that wasn’t a physical thing. It was like a thought from a different part of his brain had acknowledged something. Opening his eyes he found himself still staring at a blank grey console. Instinctively he that he had a live board in front of him, but he still could see nothing. Taking a deep breath, he changed his thoughts slightly. He changed his need for controls to one of being able to see the controls. He imagined the board with visible controls and screens, not of anything he knew, but just of controls he could see.

It happened suddenly. The grey space came alive with color. If he hadn’t had his legs pressed against the pedestal he would have fallen over. The controls didn’t mirror what he had been thinking exactly. But they were controls everywhere, except where his hands rested. At a thought he lifted his hands, and the space underneath immediately filled with color. A safety precaution he thought – very nice.

“Damm,” said Mikiu, “you’re getting good at this. That’s kind of unnerving.”

“I’ll say,” said Wendy. The young woman had taken a step back. She had been standing to Josh’s left in moral support.

Josh looked at Mikiu. “Unnerving. Yea, I guess you could call it that.” He paused to lick his lips and think. “I had to do it in two stages.”

“Two stages?” asked Mikiu.’

“First I thought about needing the controls to the elevator. And then I felt something, like a switch falling into place. But the panel was still grey so I thought about needing to see them in color and poof. There they were, in color.”

Mikiu responded, “interesting. That means the controls are self-modifying, to an extent. That put into question the nature of the builders. If you can’t see color why have the ability to do that.”

“Or”, said Jameson, “you have to consider that maybe there were more than one species involved.”

Mikiu put his hand to his head. “Of course, that maybe why you don’t see any default controls. They depend on who wanted to operate them. That means that at least one of the species had senses close to ours.”

“And,” said Jameson, “from the furniture I’d say that the basic shape was bipedal humanoid.”

Josh had been studying the controls, walking slowly around the outside edge of the console. He soon noticed something, the controls repeated, three times. He glanced at Mikiu, “the controls are repeated, three times.”

“Three times,” said his friend, “flexibility. Allows three people to operate at one time. Which means this thing operates more than the elevator movement.”

“Or, this is the default configuration and they choose to use all the available space,” said Josh.

“That still leaves the possibility that you could configure other controls sections differently.”

“I wonder if all their control systems are multi use. That might make our job easier.”

His friend looked at him and smiled. “You mean we might be able to fix the weather from here.” The science officer’s expression took on an aura of seriousness. “You know. You could be right. The problem is I doubt you have the security clearance.”

“And I don’t know what controls to wish for. Let’s table that for the moment and see if I can figure out how to run the elevator. I’ll tackle the weather after that.”

Mikiu laughed. “Good a plan as any other. It stands to reason that the elevator should be easier.”

“You would think so. Let me give it a try.” Josh moved to the center of one the control groups and studied it closely. Several small screens mixed with a multitude of what might be switches for sliders. There were no markings for any of them. Not that it mattered he realized. He wouldn’t be able to read them. He had hoped for function-based icons. “You would think they could have thrown in some picture icons.”

“You mean like up and down arrows?”

“That would have been nice. Or,” he pointed to a long vertical graduated control that reminded him of a fat thermometer. It was the width of a human thumb and was marked by six lines between the top and bottom markers which were conveniently finger sized circles. The bottom marker was lit in red. “I could just try this.” Reaching out with his right thumb he pressed the top circle of the control, currently blue – nothing happened.

He glanced at Mikiu, shrugged, and tried again, but this time he visualized the button being pressed. “Maybe I’ll just think about pressing it too.”

For a second, nothing appeared to happen again. Then all of the room’s openings vanished, just as they had on the surface. There was a loud beep, and the room began rising, slowly at first, quickly increasing in speed.

Mikiu said, “and he continues to amaze folks.”

Josh’s space trained reflexes adapted to the upward motion. This time he was prepared for the quick decrease in movement. As soon as motion stopped Josh turned towards the wall and watched, as expected, five openings appeared, filled with early morning sunlight. The others all let out a soft cry, glad to see daylight again.

Mikiu grinned, “smooth.”

“I aim to please,” said Josh. What do you suppose the other six levels on the control are for?”

“Could just be other stops or maybe for some kind of maintenance. Who knows. So far you’re the one who seems to know the most.”

He turned to face the others, “okay, folks, it’s someone else’s turn to fall through a door.”

“In other words,” said Susan, “you want one of us to get shocked.”

“No, those would be the exact words,” said Josh.