**Part 6**

**03/07/2020**

Wendy volunteered. “I’ve already been through it once. I don’t think twice will kill me.” She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and took a steopped out into the sunlight. Nothing. She gave herself a quick once over and turned to face them.

“No pain, the fields gone.”

Mikiu said, “apparently we’re not trespassers anymore.”

Josh led the rest of them into the daylight. “Or, we just weren’t smart enough to turn it off before. We still may not be smart enough.:” He looked around, everything looked the same as yesterday. The air was blowing but not at a harsh clip and the sky was clear. He was relieved to see that the blanket of blue that had chased them away was gone. Unfortunately, so was their boat.

“Boats gone,” said Josh.

“No, no it isn’t,” said Jameson looking to his left.

Josh followed Jameson’s gaze to the next point over and there still, tied to the docking ring, floated a boat, apparently right where they’d left it. Without a word they all moved towards it. Silence reined until the bottom of the boat was in view.

Wendy broke that silence, “That’s our boat alright. My binoculars are right where I left them.”

Josh gave her a look, “Leave them for now. Apparently, we’re going to have to label things ourselves. Including which point we’re on.”

She nodded, “I think I’ll swap them for a piece of colored rope. I’ll tie it around the center seat. I might need the nocs.”

“Good enough. Tie a piece around one of the docking rings to. Just in case the boat decides to untie itself and leave.”

Mikiu felt his curiosity rise. “What good does it do to know which dock if the boat’s gone.”

“Probably not a thing. But we need to start setting some reference points. All this grey is going to drive me crazy.”

Mikiu checked his watch. “The Deidre should be directly overhead.”

“Okay, I’ll check in,” said Josh. “Wendy, why don’t you tie in. I imagine my dad will get your dad on the line too.” The girl hit the sequence of buttons to link her personnel comm unit to the sat radio while Josh made the call.

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Yelaa put Josh through right away. Halerin was eager for a report. He was even more eager to see his son okay. He imagined Sunderson felt the same way about Wendy. After checking that the team was okay he told Josh to wait while Yelaa linked Jarwan into the conversation.

It took a few minutes to get Jarwan Sunderson on the screen. He had been busy with a last-minute effort to tighten the water proofing of the colony’s warehouses. He was sweaty and tired, looking like a man to whom sleep was a distant memory.

“Jarwan, sorry to bother you. Know you’ve got your hands full and all. But I’ve got the exploration team, thought you might like to join in.”

The man smiled, “that would be great. I hope they’ve found something. I don’t know how much more of this we can take.”

“Is it betting worse? I thought that it had crested.”

“The river stopped going up but the water is still seeping outward. We don’t know how much farther it’s going to go. And the rain, this incessant rain is really putting a strain on everything.”

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Josh put the radio on speaker and fought impatience waiting for his father to get back on the line. Normally he preferred audio only when on a mission but in this case, he wished he could see what was going on, especially at the colony. It might not put Wendy’s mind at ease, but a picture of home might help. At least she would know her father was okay and vice versa. On the other hand, he thought, it might just make things worse. He was still pondering it when his father returned.

“Josh, you still there?”

“Yea, I’ve got Wendy with me too.”

“Reading my mind son. I’ve got her dad on the line too.”

“Dad,” yelled Wendy.

“I’m here girl. You don’t have to shout. Are you okay? Are you still on the boat?”

Wendy asked just as quickly, “Is the colony okay? Is it still raining.?

Josh started to interrupt but Yelaa beat him to it.

“Hold on everyone. Let’s try to do this organized like. Josh, you said everyone on your end is okay, right?

Josh answered affirmatively.

The comm officer continued. “Jarwan, I know it’s still raining but everyone is still okay health wise, is that right.”

The colony leader answered. “Yes, everyone’s in good health. Tired as hell, but still kicking.”

“Great,” said Yelaa. “Now everyone’s up to speed health wise. Let’s go from there.”

The captain took over. “Thanks Yelaa. Okay Josh, are you still on the dock?”

“Well, we’re back on the dock for now. That’s not where we spent the night.”

“You’ve got our attention, give us the story.”

Josh, with occasionally asides from the others, documented the story of the last day and night. He didn’t try to go into exquisite detail, instead just filling in the high lights. The details they could get form video and sensor recordings later. He did use the phone’s limited data capabilities to send a bunch of still photos, enough to give them some reference points. He finished with their planned activities for the day. “So, in a nutshell, our plan is just to keep exploring. Hopefully, we’ll find something that’ll give us a clue to what’s messing with the weather. It would really help if you could send down some more people. This place appears to be huge, It’s going to take a while to cover.”

On the Deidre Halerin and Jerimy exchanged glances. Alien ruins is not something they had expected t find. There had been no clues that Tingies 0017 had every been occupied. Sure the circular central desert had been a bit odd. But it wasn’t anywhere near a perfect circle and the amount of debris that had been involved in forming a system with 20 some planets led to a lot of collisions. Collisions formed areas like the center clear area and the weather changes caused by such strikes could impact weather systems. Those changes in weather could form a desert.

The captain responded to Josh’s report. “Okay, underground alien complexes with functioning tech, that’s certainly something. Unfortunately, we’re kind of stuck until we figure out what kind of shield is keeping us from seeing this lake of yours. Even using manual optics, a telescope, the entire area looks like the top side of a big forest canopy.”

Jerimy broke in, “it takes some really fancy tech to present the same data to different sensor types. This isn’t camouflage, it’s a full-fledged disguise. Maybe we can fly though it, maybe we can’t. Right now, we’re thinking about landing outside the forest, at the edge where you came in, and trying a high attitude drone from there. Try and see if we can fly it through the disguise. Trouble is the severe weather, it covers most of the desert area. But it’s concentrated around the colony and we’re not sure about conditions farther out. We’ll have to see if we can fit a shuttle at the edge.”

Captain Halerin said, “what he means is that we’re working on it. I don’t want to risk a shuttle until we know if the weather’s going to get worse over the colony. We might need to try a rescue mission and the means I need both shuttles. And we don’t know if we can land and takeoff under these conditions.”

The captain paused for a second. “You’re the head pilot Josh. Who would you pick for bad weather flying?”

Josh didn’t hesitate. “Patty Forsht, she used to fly commercial atmo before she moved into space. She’s the best we’ve go at it. And dad, I understand. If you have to use the shuttles for a rescue getting the colonist out first is your only option. After that, you can worry about us. If it comes down to it I think we’ve probably got better protection form the elements anyway. Might have to do some fishing.”

Halerin nodded to himself, “you like to fish son. Jarwan, how much worse do you think it’s going to get?

On the planet below Jarwan Sunderson glanced at his second in command. Dunzin Watersun shrugged his shoulders. “The water’s going down, but it may just be seeping under everything. If this doesn’t let up it’s eventually gong to dig the ground out from under us.”

The colony leader nodded. “And we don’t have any idea how long that will take.” The colony leader opened the line to the Deidre. “We’re in an unknown state here Mike. We know the water is eventually going to collapse the ground around the river, but as to when and how bad, you’re guess is as good as ours. Right now the water levels going down, but it’s still raining just as hard. I guess the only thing we can is to keep on top of things and be prepared to move out, somewhere, even if it’s just away from the river. Other than that I guess we just let the kids keep doing what they’re doing. They’ve got the best chance, maybe the only chance, to figure out what the hell’s going on.”

Halerin, starring at the image of the planet on one of the bridges screens said, “I agree. We’re in the same position you are Jarwan. All we can do is think about and prepare for our next move. Josh, you catch all that?”

“Got it dad, so as far as today we’ll go on exploring. Then talk tomorrow about the same time?”

Jerimy answered. “Sounds good Josh. Even if we want to try the drone option It’ll be tomorrow before we’re ready. If we decide to try it we can figure out how to coordinate things then.”

With that Josh signed off, put the radio back on his belt, and checked his watch. “Well, unless someone wants to go fishing, I suggest we eat, and then maybe get an hours sleep without having to worry about wayward robots. Then we can start exploring. Starting with”

No one spoke up although Josh could tell that Wendy was thinking hard about something. He decided to give her time to process. He led the team back into the central structure before taking a seat against the wall and breaking out food concentrates. He chose inside for the impromptu camp just in case the blue haze from yesterday was to return. They still didn’t know if it was dangerous but he had no intentions of finding out.

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The Dory felt uncomfortable, something that had never happened at its thinking spot. It was puzzled about this, but puzzlement gave way to something else, the memory of a memory. It could remember that there was an action that needed to be taken, something that had been foreseen long ago. The memory swam just below the level of consciousness. Eventually it would surface, and the Dory would act, or not. For now, it did the only thing possible in such a time. It thought, in its thinking place.

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Josh finished eating and glanced around. He was seated with Wendy with their backs against the outer wall midway between two of the openings. Susan and Jameson were similarly positioned to their left. Mikiu had chosen a position in the middle of the floor so he could face both groups, and Josh suspected, keep an eye on the outside. He liked that about his friend. He undoubtably had picked up that Wendy had something on her mind and gave Josh the opportunity to sit with her instead of sitting where he could watch the entire group and the outside. As they had entered after the radio call Jameson had called their attention to the clouds beginning to gather to the north. By the time they had finished eating the rain had started to fall. Then it became bullet like, crashing into the floor inside the openings, driven by the increasingly violent wind.

Josh looked around as the snap of lightning rang in his ears.

“I was wondering when that would start,” said Mikiu. “It’s really getting nasty out there.”

Josh glanced to the opening. It had gotten much darker. “Yea, this looks like it’s settling in for a while. I think, when everyone’s ready, we head back down, and start that exploring we told the ship about.”

The others looked at each other, apparently everyone was ready. They soon found themselves clustered around the central pedestal. This time it didn’t take Josh long to bring up the controls. He was getting better at communicating with the alien tech. That was a thought which startled him a little. He wasn’t sure that he liked the idea.

Shaking his head to rid himself of such thoughts he started to just hit the down button, but then pulled his hand back and thought about it. Their original, and probably still most important job was to find out why the planet had decided to go insane. That meant checking every possible thing along the way.

He glanced at Mikiu, “Want to do some recon?”

“Hit the other levels on the way down?”

“At least long enough to determine what there’re about. They’re probably just maintenance levels but you never know. It would suck if we missed the answer by just going past it.”

Mikiu nodded, “yes it would. And this elevator column might be a good choice for a field generator or weather controller. Maybe it’s just a big antenna.”

“Right,” said Josh, “and the lake is what, coolant.”

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Jarwan’s green eyes took in the large, at least for the colony, dry goods warehouse where the entire colony was now taking up residence. This was his first time since the day began with the conference call with the Deidre and the Expo team that he had a chance to evaluate the changes from the night before. Dunzin gotten more pallets into use and restacked some of the warehouse contents. That provided more room for the colonist and opened up space for more storage, provided they would be able to move it from current locations near the river.

He was sitting at the pair of tables they had placed in a corner as a makeshift office. Turning to the other occupant of the table, Marth Genos, he said. “The power generators, they all running?”

“Yes and no, Number one is splitting duty with Two and Three’s in standby mode. Micael wants to rotate them tomorrow.”

“Distribution?”

“Everything is going through Distro One, although if we rotate, we’ll use Distro Two. Power looks as far as supply goes. Michael’s a little nervous about some of the buried power lines. He’s afraid is the ground starts to settle it’ll pull loose some of the connections.”

Jarwan laughed, “the reason we buried them was to protect against the spring winds. We figured bury them in drainage piping, that’ll be fine. Even during the rainy season any water that gets in the line will just drain out. I wonder how much years of drainage have eaten away at the soil.”

Marth, elected to the position of colony leader once Jarwan’s twenty-year term expired, gave her boss a sympathetic look. “Don’t beat yourself up. I agreed with the idea, and in any case the lines wouldn’t have been any safer in the air. I’m not sure we could have done anything to prepare for this.”

Jarwan laughed, “we could have started the colony in the forest, like you wanted.”

The woman’s dark skinned, dark haired and dark eyed face lite up with a smile. “And given what we now know about the forest. Who knows, we might not even be alive. That forest has some secrets.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “And hopefully one of them is how to turn off the weather.”

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Mikiu said, “sarcasm aside, that actually could be close to the truth.”

Josh decided he didn’t have a response to that and turned to the others, “Okay, we’re doing the trip down a little different.”

“How so?”, asked Jameson.

“Simple, this is an elevator. We’re just going to make a few stops. I don’t know how many of you noticed but the control for the elevator has six stops, or at least what I think are stops, between here and the bottom.”

Susan looked puzzled, “Isn’t the answer we’re looking for more likely to be at the bottom. I mean, how big can these other levels be?”

Josh shrugged, “That’s the reason to check them out, we don’t know what we don’t know.”

She nodded and none of the others seemed to object.

“Good”, he said, “let’s do this in an organized manner. I’ll handle the controls, Mikiu the scanner of course, and the rest of you make sure that every entrance is covered.”

Mikiu added in, “It may well be that all five doors are not present on every level, chances are these are maintenance related levels, but you never know. The answer we’re looking for could be on any one of the levels.”

Josh stationed Wendy, Jameson, and Susan as points on a triangle around the control console. He and Mikiu stood on opposite sides within the triangle. He figured that would allow at least one of them to be watching every entrance, if there were no more than the original five.

Josh put his right hand on the butt of his sidearm, and with his left hand he touched the setting for the first level while thinking about his desire to go there. Like the last time, nothing happened for a second until once again all five openings vanished. Then he felt the floor pull away from his feet. This time the trip took only a few seconds.

Mikiu was wrong, at least about this level, all five openings returned. Each opened out into a dimly lit space. What light there was came through transparent walls in the shape of the upper island, a large round center and five extended points. Beyond were sea creatures of many differing shapes and sizes, all illuminated by a dull glow apparently coming from the island shaft itself. Josh wondered if the faint glow was to warm the lake denizens that the island shaft was there. No one said a word as they walked up to the invisible walls. They were all mesmerized by the variety of aquatic life before them.

“Aquarium?” someone asked.

Mikiu, laughed, “I would say we found the observation deck.”

“It’s very pretty,” said Wendy, a look of amazement on her face.

Susan and Jameson quickly echoed the comments of their peers.

Josh stepped back and looked around the rest of the space, as he suspected, it appeared to be an exact match to the top of the pillar as far as the layout was concerned. He did a quick recon to his left and right, going far enough in each direction to see the pattern was followed all the way around.

Jameson, the biologist, said quietly. “That is unexpected. We expected a variety of life of course, but this. This we were not expecting. The survey records indicate some life in the seas but not this amount.”

Mikiu understood the biologist wonder. The man had expected few chances to practice his profession on this planet. He probably expected most of the life he worked with to be colony raised or created. “I think we’re going to have to start forgiving the survey guys. I’m betting that the tech that makes the lake invisible is responsible for them missing so much.”

Jameson wasn’t quite so forgiving. “They didn’t even find the wall. I bet they didn’t put down probe teams anywhere but at the colony site.”

“Maybe not, but remember this planet was surveyed hundreds of years ago at a time when space travel took longer and lifespans were shorter. They probably didn’t spend a lot of time here.”

Wendy, with a touch of anger in her voice, said, “and we pay the price.”

Josh said, “literally. If you’d wanted up to date information that’s what you would have done. Pay for another survey sweep, and those aren’t cheap. Colonization is still a leap of faith endeavor.”

The girl gave him a look, “yea, a leap right into the frying pan.”

Josh gave her a grim smile didn’t respond. Instead he addressed them as a group. “Okay guys,” he said, “let’s check out the next floor down.”

They moved back to the elevator room. He noticed that Wendy was the last to pull herself form the view of the water. Clearly, despite her anger, she found the window into the life of the lake interesting.

He would have like to have stayed longer himself and watched the underwater theatre with the girl. That was a thought he hadn’t expected. Internally he chastised himself, but he knew the reason behind the thought. If the Deidre was forced to hide here, away from present circumstances, it might be nice to have someone to spend it with.

It took them the better part of the day to cover the next three levels. Each level apparently had a distinct purpose. Level 2 was a laboratory of some kind. Josh surmised that samples from the surface were brought here for testing. He didn’t want to consider what they were testing for, but Mikiu set his mind at ease by declaring that none of the lab area appeared to be setup for the testing of dangerous items. He decided that if the aliens hadn’t been concerned, why should he.

The third level was closer in style to the lounge room down below, in fact, it had its own miniature version of that room. The rest of the level appeared to be individual living quarters along with what Mikiu claimed was a cafeteria. He took his word for it. The place was replete with what appeared to have once been foods of some type but were now just dried up containers of variously colored and evil smelling dust. Whatever maintenance robots still at work obviously didn’t consider this part of their responsibility. There was also the possibility that whatever AI was in charge simply didn’t bother with things that were no longer of use. That would explain why the maintenance robot below had been sent to see who turned on the lights. It also told josh a little about the beings who had built this place. Evidently, they had no need for internal surveillance if they relied on physically sending an agent, the robot, to investigate. Of course, he didn’t expect his interpretations of their actions to be at all accurate. He suspected that aliens, by virtue of the fact that they were not human beings, would have different responses and motives. He just hoped that they could figure out the motive for trying to drown the colony.

The fourth level was a wash out. All five entrances were open to narrow corridors and small rooms. There were no automatic lights, no windows to the water, and no accommodations for any life forms of any kind. The small rooms filled with vertical, horizontal and diagonal control consoles, but none of them were placed for convenient access. No attempt had been made at any kind of aesthetics. The controls were visible in form and available in function. This level was clearly for getting things done, and Mikiu surmised that its attendants were most likely all robotic. The control consoles were obviously placed where space permitted, and likely intended for emergency use only.

“This place gives me the creeps,” said Wendy.

“It shouldn’t,” said Josh, “this is the most honest environment we’ve encountered so far. Nothing elaborate, no fancy hidden controls, this where the real work was done.”

Mikiu asked, “You don’t think anything got done on the other levels?”

“Sure, maybe even the majority of it, but these consoles here, on this level, they were designed for work — not showing off, not doing anything fancy, not meeting someone else’s expectations of what controls should look or act like.”

“What you’re saying,” said Susan, “is that this is the honest work level, and the others are for show.”

“I don’t think show is the right word. I think a different design philosophy was present. It’s like the difference between the,” Josh paused, at a loss for words.”

“I know,” said Wendy. “It’s like when you wear new clothes to impress a date instead of the ones that you’re comfortable in, you put on a false front.”

Mikiu asked, “You think they had VIP’s coming through or something?”

“No,” said Josh, “think of it like the A students were the marketing designers and the C students were the Engineers.” He looked over at Wendy, “And I wouldn’t care whether you were wearing new clothes, old clothes,” a smile tilted up the right side of his mouth, “or for that matter, no clothes.” He turned and walked back to the central control room.

Susan chuckled in surprise at Wendy’s expression. “You better watch it girl, he don’t kid around with just anyone.”

Mikiu noticed Jameson’s face, there was turmoil there, no anger, but he could tell the man was not happy. He decided to keep an eye on the man and talk to Josh about it. He knew his friend liked the girl, had liked her years ago and was plainly warming to her again. He could see the attraction.

Waiting by the elevator controls Josh wondered where the words he had just spoken had come from. Ten years ago things had been different, she had made most of the advancements and then became angry when he had to leave. Now he had started the dance again and he didn’t like the reason why. Yes, he was attracted to her, always had been. But now wasn’t the time and he was pretty sure a private conversation was needed. Something difficult to pull off in a team setting. Checking the time he decided to check the surface weather before taking on the remaining two levels.

“Okay, guys we’ve got a little more time left, I think we can get in one more level, maybe all of them if there’s nothing exciting, but first, we’re going up and check the weather.”

Mikiu nodded, “You going to check with the ship.”

“No,” he replied, “they won’t expect us till morning. Might as well save on the battery.”

Mikiu laughed, “I’ve got an emergency solar charger.”

Josh grinned at his friend. “Fine, if it’s still raining you can go outside and charge the phone.”