**New Story**

**Part 7**

**03/16/2020**

A time and distance away D117 was becoming concerned, which, in the case of a non-sentient sub-mind meant that he was repeatedly sending an information request to C level sub-minds under his control and receiving no reply. His incoming message queue was empty of responses, which did not make sense, he had sent numerous diagnostic requests to each of the sub-minds and received replies. The connections were there, although in many cases they were not actual physical attachments, but pseudo links of varying types. D117 was uncertain of the cause but could only surmise that a malfunction on a major scale had occurred. As a result he had followed his instructions and sent multiple requests up stream and laterally asking for either information or assistance in getting the requested operations carried out. It was almost as if parts of the system were at cross purpose, which sometimes happened, but was something for which he had no instructions. A higher mind with the proper procedures would rectify such an occurrence. D117 did have crisis management procedures. It just had to wait get large enough to invoke them.

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The incessant pounding of the rain on the thin metal skin of the warehouse was going to leave them all deaf Jarwan thought. They had planned, at some point on making some kind of adobe like brick material from the desert soil and plant leftovers, and use them to add another layer of protection to the colony buildings, and improve the appearance of the colony. That idea, like many others, had not received the time necessary. Even with the raw materials at hand the one thing that every colony lacked was time and manpower. Jarwan guessed it depended on how you looked at things – glass half empty or half full. Now he was wondering if there would be buildings to put brick around.

The room was dark except for the faint light in the corner where Jarwan, Dunzin and Martha had gathered to drink cold artificial coffee. Jarwan sighed and glanced at his cup.

“In a couple of years we’d have been growing real coffee,” he said.

Dunzin laughed, “Right now I don’t think any kind of coffee is going to make me feel any better, or more awake. I’m just hoping I don’t have to go out to pee again. I knew skipping toilets in a warehouse was going to come back to bite us. But no everyone said, the main office building is only twenty meters away.”

“What are you complaining about,” said Martha, “at least all you’ve got to do is stand and pull it out. I’ve got to do a balancing act against the wind.”

It was Jarwan’s turn to laugh, “It’s not easy standing in that wind, even with the building to hold onto.”

Martha was about to respond when 12-year-old Patty came rushing up. Jarwan turned to face her. “What’s the rush girl?”

­­ “Momma said to tell you that they can’t talk to the power shop anymore,” the girl squeezed out in one breathless sentence.

“Damm,” said Dunzin, “I was afraid we’d lose that comm. The line wasn’t buried very deep. We should have used fiber and put it with the power cable.”

Jarwan thanked the girl and sent her back to her mother, Denise Bitterly, one of the colony Doctors.

“Do we have another line to the power shop?” he asked.

“Sorry boss,” said Dunzin, “we just never thought we’d have a need for another line, not with the radios.”

“And now,” said Jarwan, “both of them are useless. Can you do anything with the radio?”

Dunzin shook his head, “Problems not on our end, Micael has to stay inside the inner wall of the shop. The Power Unit itself doesn’t cause a problem but the feeder lines and the stepdown transformers play havoc with the radio. We didn’t buy heavily shielded stuff because of the cost. Our radios were never designed to operate in that environment.”

Jarwan said, “And I know we got the proper equipment in on this last shipment and they’re sitting in storage. No one thought about it till the weather turned to crap. What if he steps out of the inner wall?”

“It’s better and we can hear him but it’s still noisy. The weather is making things more difficult than it should, but that’s a mystery for dryer times. We can try, he might hear even behind the inner wall and come out and talk.”

Jarwan thought about it for a moment and shook his head, “No, if he really wanted to talk to us, he could signal, flash the power or something.”

The others nodded, that was true, Micael could let them know if he needed them.

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Except, at that particular moment, Micael Tosition could do nothing of the sort. The colonies chief architect was flat on his back, soaking wet, and slowly slipping into shock. He was lying half inside the inner wall of the power distribution building. The *Power Shop* they called it. A jagged split in the composite ceiling, which was the only part of the structure not made from preformed concrete blocks, was allowing wind, rain, and assorted debris to enter. The culprit that had ripped the opening was a twisted metal gate. A gate that was normally used to keep the colonies few livestock in their barn. The gate had taken out part of the inside wall of the double walled building and in the process, broken both of Micael Tosition’s legs, trapping him beneath it in the rapidly deepening pool of water on the floor.

The thought going through his mind was that his desire to pee had probably saved his life. If he hadn’t been standing to go outside when the twisted metal had torn through the roof, he would either be impaled or pinned face down. Neither of which would have been a viable option and even now things were not looking all that great. Still, the integrity of his field suit had not been compromised, he was dry and warm inside the suit although he could feel fingers of cold water start to enter around his neck.

That didn’t really bother him though because of the intense, but dull pain in his legs. Both of which were broken mid shin. It seemed contradictory that something that hurt so intensely could also ache with a dull throbbing pain. He shook his head in an attempt to clear his thoughts. Micael knew he needed to act soon or he might never act again. Biting his lips he grasped the bars of the gate and attempted to slid it off. That did nothing. The gate was too heavy to lift. At least from his current position flat on his back and with no way to generate leverage. He decided to try something else. Taking great care he slid slowly sideways towards the power generators and away from the inner wall Each strained effort gained him centimeters at a time until he managed to get his chest free, then his hips and finally, legs free of the gate. With an audible gasp he managed to drag himself into a sitting position, getting his face away from the water.

That alleviated the possibility of drowning, but he knew that he still needed help, fast. He knew that he was probably bleeding internally and waiting for his relief, eight hours away, might prove fatal. He saw no way through this without outside help. He glanced forlornly at the communications headset hanging from the console before him. He knew that the line was out. He had seen it fall just as he was coming into the building. The entire bank that been built to keep the power shop above the river’s normal flood plain had started to slowly erode away. The building itself was built on a foundation of steel pillars sunk deep into the sand, but the area containing the temporary placed communications line had so such support. His only hope was to try the radio, it might reach the warehouse where the rest of the colony was hunkered down, he just hoped that someone was listening or would be able to hear him over the incessant rain and storm interference. With the inner wall breeched he at least stood a chance of the radio waves reaching them.

It took considerable effort and shifting to grab the communicator from the small of his back. Sometime during the gate crashing, leg breaking process it had worked its way there from his left hip.

“Hello, hello, this is Micael in the Power Shop, can anyone hear me?”, his voice was weak. He tried again — and again —and again. He came to realization that either no one was listening, or the signal wasn’t getting through. He didn’t even know if they knew the communications link was out. They might not be paying a lot of attention to the radio. He needed some other way to tell them he needed help. He looked around, searching for an idea, and then with his eyes fixed on the control console, he found one.

Shaking his head and grimly clenching his mouth he crawled sideways to the necessary console. Fortunately, since the consoles carried very little in the way of actual components, they weren’t heavy and came equipped with removable handles for maneuvering them into place. Since nothing on a Colony was permanent at first no one had removed the handles. He used one to pull himself to his knees. That provided enough height to reach most of the controls, including the master on off switch. Zero Power Generators possessed no moving parts and could be rapidly switched on and off. He didn’t know ancient Morse Code because an accident had excused him from mandatory planetary service. He did, however, know one bit of code — SOS.

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A kilometer away Jarwan decided that things were going from bad to worse. The lights had started flickering, yet it wasn’t until they were into the pattern a second time that his tired brain caught up. SOS, Michael was calling for help.

He quickly jumped to his feet, his voice shrill. “Martha, Dunzin, that’s an SOS,” he said.

Dunzin caught on quickly, “Micael, he must be in trouble.”

Martha didn’t recognize the signal. She was an administrator not trained in the planetary service. She did, however, know when something crossed the line from bad to worse and this definitely sounded like worse. “Should I get Denise?”

Jarwan shook his head, “Not yet… Yes, go get her.” He glanced to Dunzin, “Get a radio and try reaching him.”

Dunzin nodded, slipped on a heavy coat, “I’ll have a better chance from outside.” He quickly grabbed a spare comm unit and slipped through the crowd towards the door. A wave of groans followed him as he briefly let in the cold wet air.

Jarwan, slid back into the camp chair he was using and motioned one of the colonies young people to bring him another cup of artificial coffee. The artificial coffee sucked but the caffeine part of it worked. He was lamenting the fact that at least the stuff could be hot when Martha returned with their head Doctor, Denise Bitterly. She was a woman he had recently been paying more attention too. She was approaching middle age but still a young 200 years plus and she was good looking. In the limited population of the colony that was a feature Jarwan didn’t look for but appreciated. These people were going to be together for the foreseeable future, at least until the colony became a going concern.

“I understand we may have a casualty,” she said, taking a seat and a cup.

Jarwan nodded, “Perhaps, all we know is that Dunzin signaled us from the Power Shop. It might just be about communications being down.”

“Yes, I noticed the lights flickering. It was SOS I believe.”

“That puts you one up on me Doc,” said Martha. “I may have recognized it at one time, but that’s the trouble with long life, only so much room in the memory.”

Just then a wave of groans behind Jarwan signaled Dunzin’s return. While he waited Jarwan studied the Doctor, she was a pleasant subject. She, her husband and her two children had been a last-minute addition to the colony roster. They had just arrived on Sartagius at the time and had jumped at the chance to join a colony group. It had been a break for the colony which had been about to start with only one doctor, and him a very old human being in the age of long lives. Tragically they had lost both the old doctor and Denise’s husband in an accident involving the bank of the river that sustained the colony.

Dunzin pulled off his coat as he pulled up a chair. “Don’t know why I bothered taking that off, need to go right back out.”  
 “Why is that?” asked Jarwan.  
 “Micael got himself banged up pretty bad, thinks he broke both legs,” said the man while shaking water from his long hair.

“Crap,” said the Doctor. “We need to go get him.”

Dunzin laughed, “That’s going to be difficult. Micael saw part of the road give way. We’re going to have to take the long way around.”

“What the hell happened?” said Jarwan.

“Barndoor. Wind ripped it loose somehow and sailed in right though the Power station roof.”

“Damage?”

“Took out part of the inner wall, put a big hole in the roof, and damm near killed our engineer. Didn’t hit any of the equipment but we need to do something to keep the rain out.”

The Doctor said, “We’ve got to get Micael back here first.”

Jarwan ignored her, “What can we do?”

Dunzin shrugged, “Our only option really is to get some eperlin tarps on the roof and anchor them down somehow. Maybe with some cross struts. Those outside walls are block and alloy beam so they can hold it. Shame we didn’t use the same material on the inner wall but it was mainly for electrical shielding. Didn’t see the need for strength.”

“It’s a good thing we only have one gate,” said Martha.

“What about Micael,” said the Doctor, a determined edge in her voice now. Jarwan appreciated the intensity.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get him back here. But we have to fix the roof fast, or you’ll be setting his legs in the dark.”

“Sorry,” she said. “Is there any chance of an explosion or radiation poisoning?”

Dunzin answered, “No, Zero Point units just shut down, no radiation involved.”

“Okay,” said Jarwan, “here’s the plan. Dunzin, you get a couple of guys to help you with the roof. We’ll take both treaded cabs and I’ll bring Micael back for the Doctor.”

“I should go along to stabilize his legs,” said Denise.

“Sorry Doctor, it’s two people to a cab, unless you want to ride in the bed.”

“Is it covered?”, she asked.

“No, but we can probably rig a tarp,” said Jarwan.

“That would probably be the best way to bring him back, if we can get him on a back board.”

“Yea,” said Dunzin, “and I’ll ride out in the back. No use in the Doc getting soaked more than needed. I’m already wet.”

Jarwan nodded, “Okay, everyone grab what they need and let’s get started.”

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The trip back to the surface was a quick one. The time on the surface was even shorter. Josh didn’t bother to move from the control console. The density of the rain was like a wall and there was almost a continuous explosion of thunder. The lightning flashes filled the room with dancing flickers that reminded him of old-time movie projectors starting up a film.

He glanced at the others, no one seemed in a hurry to try the weather. They just stood looking outside, their expressions matching the general temper of the rain, hard and stoic.

It was Wendy who broke the silence. “Is this what it’s like at the colony?”

Mikiu said, “no way of knowing. We don’t have anything but eye witness accounts on either end. If I had to guess, similar probably, but you really can’t compare storms over water to storms over land.”

Josh saw the look on her face as Miliu’s words hit her. “Like he said, we have no way of knowing for sure. Besides, they’re in the same position as us, inside. He decided to get them away from starring at the weather. “That’s enough of looking at the weather. Now let’s see if we can do something about it. We’re going to level 5.”

Mikiu glanced at his wrist computer, “afternoons almost gone. But baring finding something of extreme interest, we should be able to cover the last two levels.”

Josh directed his thoughts as the control panel to bring it back up life. “Not if we don’t get a move on. Let’s go.” He touched the line for the fifth level.

The trip down was uneventful. Josh thought about how easy it was to become used to something completely new, like thinking at the controls. He still didn’t know whether it was his thoughts or the touching of the control that actually moved the elevator. Maybe it was a combination of both. In any event, he mentally congratulated himself on being smart enough to press a button and think down.

This level, like the others, had light bleeding in from the five access doorways. In this case, unlike the other levels, the light from four of the doorways was the same color and brightness, the same as the normal for the rooms at the bottom. The light from the fifth was a cooler shade and wasn’t nearly as bright. This difference immediately led Josh to select it for examination. They were looking for something unknown, something different, and this qualified. The others must have felt the same because with no words exchanged, they all drifted to that entrance.

Inside they could see an immediate difference. It was just one large room. Where the point extension would normally be was just a large transparent enclosed opening bringing the lake into the center of the room. The room was taller than they had become accustomed too, probably taking up the equivalent of three levels. The transparent walls of the water formed a V, an inversion of the normal star point shape. The center of the intruding area included a set of shiny black dowels, about the size of a human fist in diameter that travelled through the transparent wall, extending an equal distance into the water. The water side ended in large disc like plates. There was one extending from each side of the inverted V.

Josh looked around at the rest of the room, the walls were bare, the only thing present was a low backed couch facing the transparent wall.

“This looks like another observatory and this one is set up for comfort,” said Josh.

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Mikiu, “anything swimming this deep is going to be a lot different than what we saw on the first floor. Different species, different everything, the pressure this deep is intense.”

“I don’t know,” said Jameson, “this doesn’t strike me as a normal watching place. The design seems rather specific, maybe for a particular species.

Susan asked, “You mean like our whale friend?”

“We don’t actually know what it was. Just that the sensors said it was large.”

Mikiu, studying the watery space on the other side of the transparent wall said, “well, it’s either a well-trained fish, or a very intelligent one.”

Jameson gave him a not-so-subtle glare, “whales are not fish.”

“Sorry, I just meant that this looks like it was designed for something to swim right up to these poles.”

Josh nodded and placed his hand on one of the poles. Its surface was slightly warm and had a rough finish despite its appearance. “Don’t know about anything else but at least they’re not grey. You suppose they ran out of grey paint?” he asked.

“Funny hah hah,” said Wendy, as she placed her own hand on the pole.

Josh looked at his hand, it wasn’t moving although he could distinctly feel it doing so. He suddenly felt a wave of emotions wash over him, not overpowering, yet somehow different. He realized that he was thinking about himself and doing so in an entirely new way. He was appreciating, disliking, sexually desiring, actively annoyed, at himself.

Startled, he found he was also looking at himself. But it was like he was looking at someone else. His shoulders, the tilt of his nose, the color of his hair, everything about him, as if he was seeing them for the first time. Then it hit him. These were not his eyes doing the seeing, nor his feelings reacting to what the eyes were seeing, nor his passion that was weaving through him. And then suddenly, he was looking at Wendy, looking at him, and he felt desire that was his, attraction that was his. It hit him like a thunderbolt, and he quickly pulled away from the pole, his hands recoiling off it. His eyes still locked with hers, he turned his head away as his balance became uneven. A wave of dizziness slipped past his senses, but just for a second. The intrusive thoughts and feelings cleared just as quickly as they had arrived. Turning back, he saw that she too had fallen backwards, losing her grip as she did so. For a second time froze and then the parallel world they had just occupied slowly receded. He realized that for a brief second, he had felt her feelings, her fears – her longing. And most frightening, he knew that she had experienced his feelings, his fears – his longings. It was not a comfortable realization.

Josh became aware that the others were swarming over them, offering supportive hands and asking questions. With an effort he managed to stand straight and take a deep breath while brushing aside the hands.

“I’m okay,” he said, glancing at Wendy.

She was looking back, “me too.”

“What happened?” said Susan, concern in her voice.

Josh looked at her and felt like crying. That was a response to a question he had never experienced before. Turning he walked over to the alien furniture and slumped down. He put his head back, looked at the ceiling, and forced himself to take deep slow breathes. Slowly his pulse rate fell towards normal. He felt, rather than saw, Wendy take a seat on the other end of the couch. Even without seeing he knew she was equally shaken. It was if she was still connected, but not on the level of few minutes ago. It was still overwhelming, but not overpowering.

He heard Susan’s voice repeat the question. He didn’t know how many times she had asked.

“I don’t know,” said Josh. He finally looked at Wendy. “Are you okay?”

She starred at him for a long second before nodding, “I’m okay, but I’ll never be the same.”

He smiled weakly. “Yea, I think I know that feeling, and a couple of others I didn’t know I had.”

Her long blond hair shimmered as she nodded agreement. He had never noticed her hair like that before. He had never noticed a lot of things that now stood out in sharp contrast, but contrast to what. He didn’t know, and then he did.

“Mikiu,” he said weakly. “I know what this place is for. Jameson is right. It’s made for something other than observing. Its made for talking, sort of talking anyway.”

He saw the light go on in Mikiu’s eyes, saw his eyes dart back and forth between him and Wendy. Saw the pieces assemble themselves in his mind.

“Mind link,” said Mikiu.

Josh nodded, saw Wendy shudder, and then he did the same.

“Yea, for a second I was seeing myself, feeling someone else’s… opinion of myself.” He smiled at the girl. “It’s not something I would recommend, but I didn’t hate it.”

“It’s not something I care to repeat,” said Wendy. Her lips curled but fell short of a smile, “I didn’t hate it.”. Josh noticed that the color had returned to her face and hadn’t stopped at normal. She was blushing. He had the good sense to look away, hoping that he wasn’t going the same..

Susan turned from one to the other, apparently confused. “Someone want to explain it to me and Jameson?”

“Simple,” said Mikiu, gesturing to the room around them. “This is a meeting place. A place to talk for whomever worked in here and something that lived out there. The rods or whatever you want to call them are some sort of mind connection technology. Something we definitely do not have. It allows two different intelligent species to communicate.”

“More than that,” said Jameson, catching on himself. “It lets two entirely different species connect. This is what you use when you don’t have anything in common. I mean like one with arms and legs and the other with flippers and a tail. There would be no points of comparison to communicate. This eliminates the need for common physical references. That could come in really handy.

Mikiu nodded, “Two entirely different species. That makes sense. That’s why Josh and Wendy were able to use it.”

The two sent a glare in Mikiu’s direction, but neither made a reply. Josh decided to get back in front of things.

“Exactly who were they communicating with?” asked Josh.

“How should I know? There aren’t any pictures around.” Mikiu walked to the edge of the chamber and took a long look at the enclosed water.

Josh said, “You’re hoping one of them swims up. I doubt there any of them still around.”

Mikiu shrugged, “That knew our aliens, probably not. That doesn’t mean that the species isn’t still around in one form or another. Marine life can have long life spans and this is apparently a very protected environment.”

Jameson looked thoughtful, “maybe. And the lake may qualify as a natural environment, more so than in here. But you’re making assumptions about whether or not the aliens have died off or left or something else. We don’t know if any of those things are true.”

Josh said, “I guess we assume that if aliens were still around we would have noticed by now. With a water-based alien you don’t expect them to knock, an error in thinking on our part. He checked the time and discovered that they were well past dinner time.

Josh took another peek at Wendy. The girl was definitely done for the day. “Okay. I don’t know about Wendy but that little episode with the mind link rod took the get up and go out of me. I could go for some food and rest. How about we retire to the lounge, have a gourmet meal of concentrates and get a good night’s sleep. That’ll only leave us with level to do tomorrow after we check in with the ship. See if they want to try and send someone down.”

Mikiu, realizing that both Josh and the girl were tired hastily agreed. “Sounds good, if we can even communicate with ship through this weather. I wouldn’t hold my breath expecting them to try anything in the air tomorrow.”

Josh said, “you’ve probably got that right. Then let’s head down.”

The others nodded. Wendy gave him a grateful but weak smile. The experience had evidently hit her harder than him. Or, he told himself, she was just being a good sport and wanting to make sure he got some rest. He thought about that for a second, realized that his thinking had changed a little. It was something he would have to evaluate – and watch closely.

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The Dory felt something. Something it had not felt in a long time. Stirrings, physical stirrings, he remembered that such urges had something to do with others of his own kind. It had been many ages in the past that he had last thought about others of his own kind, at least in that manner. He briefly wondered why those thoughts presented now. It thought felt unusual. His own kind, it took a long passage for that to register. He began to remember, the look, the smells, the sound of like voices. He didn’t remember when he had known them, or what they had been called. But he knew that he needed to bring back those thoughts and figure out what they meant.

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Mike Halerin checked the clock on the wall, it was getting late. He knew that he should go to his cabin and get some sleep. He intended to do so shortly.

For now, well, he had always been a captain who tried to lead by example. So, while the rest of his crew was working around the clock to figure out how to correct the problems below. The least he could do was put in long hours with them. Finally he made a decision, and moved to where Yelaa sat. “Okay, time’s up. We’re not going to be good for anything if everyone’s so tired they can’t think. Order everybody on first and second shift to get some sleep. Especially Jerimy, he’s trying to figure out the weather below and get engineering back online.”

“He’s either going to argue, or say yes and then ignore the order.”

“Don’t you think I know that by now. Give the order over the intercom and then go down and drag the man to a bunk.”

“Captain!”

“Spare me the indignation. I know he’s stubborn but maybe he’ll listen to you. And if he does, see that he gets some sleep, please. Anyway, if I let you stay on the bridge you probably won’t get any sleep either.”

The girl laughed. “You do know your people. Okay, I’ll do all of the above once I see the telltale light that says you’re in your cabin. I know my people too.

Halerin raised his hands in surrender. “No argument here. I’m on my way.”

He heard her over the intercom on the way to his cabin.

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Jarwan was now past tired. He felt that he could stand in for dead If asked. It had been a difficult day and the approaching night offered no promise of relief. He was once again sitting in the corner of the warehouse drinking bad coffee. This time however he had the added pleasure of being soaked to the skin, even with the protection of a full body suit. He glanced over to where doctor Bitterly was working on Micael’s legs.

She had been right in her assessment that it would be easier to transport the man in the bed of the hauler. Even with that adjustment it had been tricky getting him to the warehouse. By the time they had gotten to him he was in the middle stages of shock. The doctor had given him something for the pain and to keep his blood pressure up, but conditions had prevented any work on his legs. He had left Dunzin and two colonists with a roll of tarp material and some variable length flex beams to try and repair the damage to the roof of the power shop. He should have dropped the doctor and Micael off and returned to help them. Instead he had been persuaded, and it hadn’t been difficult, to let two other colony members take his place. His guilt was mitigated by the fact that he was too tired to give a damm.

He watched as the Doc, with the help of her daughter, set both of Micael’s legs using telescoping splints. He thought that children had to grow up fast here, but it was the same on any colony world he guessed. The insatiable drive to move on to the next valley, mountain or planet was deeply ingrained in the psyche of man. He knew it himself, although at this particular moment, it didn’t seem relevant. At present the only desire he has was sleep.

“How is he?” he asked when she appeared to finish.

She shrugged, “It’s a good thing we got to him when we did. I don’t know how much longer he would have survived.”

“Was he really that bad?”

“Yes, two broken leg is nothing to take lightly, especially with laying in the water and wind for hours. Even with growth enhancers it’s going to take weeks before he’ll be able to walk again, without crutches I mean.”

Jarwan nodded, glad that his friend was going to be okay.

“Doc, are you going to watch him for a while?”

“There’s not really anything to do. The med bracelet will tell us if his vital signs turn bad. But yes, I thought I would. I’m a pretty old fashioned doctor that way.”

“Do me a favor, wake me when we hear anything from Dunzin,” said Jarwan.

She nodded, she knew the man was dead tired. If he didn’t get some sleep she would have another patient on her hands.

“No problem, get some sleep.”

That was the last thing he knew for several hours.

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They got a surprise when they returned to the bottom level. The five doorways were all open and the corridors were brightly lit. Every corridor looked exactly the same when lighted. Taking a look down each one in turn confirmed what he had suspected before. At what looked like the same distance he could see the openings of the cross corridor. He was sure that each of those was simply a ring running all the way around. The ones further out would be the same

Still, all the lights were on, he didn’t know why.

“What gives,” said Susan, “did we forget to turn off the lights?”

Josh said, “I thought you were going to do it.”

Mikiu, scanner extended, checked each of the openings. “Hazarding a guess, I think we woke this base up.”

Josh gave him a puzzled look. “What do you mean *woke up*?”

His best friend motioned down one of the corridors. “As you can see, all the lights are on. I’m getting all kind of energy readings that weren’t present this morning.” He stopped and sniffed the air. “And unless I’m mistaken the air is now being cycled. It smells different, fresh.”

Josh took a long breath through his nose. He was right, the air, while not bad before, was now different, and better. It no longer smelled sterile. It was more alive, it smelled like the lake air, but clean and not nearly as intense. The underground base no longer felt old.

“Smells like it’s definitely being aired out. What do we call this place anyway? Is it a base, city, lab, or what?” asked Josh.

Mikiu said, “base. I don’t think we’ve seen enough to call it anything else. For all we know this place is just a minor outpost.”

“Works for me. Do you know the way back to the lounge?”

“Yea, we just follow our inertia tracker data,” said Mikiu.

“Lead on.”

Mikiu quickly picked an opening, it took almost no time to return to the room they had named the lounge.

Josh confirmed that it was the same room, he had left a empty rations tube on the table they had used.

Mikiu frowned, “you’re lucky that worked. I would expect that a maintenance robot would have cleaned that.”

“Not a maintenance bot, a house keeping bot, and either they didn’t use them or like us, that’s a process they didn’t automate.”

Wendy asked, “why. I’ve always wondered about that?”

Mikiu answered, “to hard. We humans have a tendency to leave stuff sitting around. That’s one of the harder exercises in AI programming. How does a robot know that you’re done with something? It can’t, until you decide you’re done with it. That’s why housecleaning algorithms are manually initiated. Maintenance programming is easy. If it stops working chances are no one’s going to mind if you fix it.”

They used the same grouping area as a camp again. They quickly drank a meal of protein concentrate and drank a good portion of their water. Josh had decided that the next time on the surface they would rig something to refill canteens. They wouldn’t use the alien water until they finished all that they had brought along, but he no longer worried about a water supply. The water they had brought with them was itself from the river at the colony. He figured that this water would be just as safe. And anyway, they had little choice.

Sleep came quickly for all of them, with the exception of Josh. The events on Level 5 still haunted him, kept his thoughts moving at a rate that didn’t allow sleep. He had never experienced anything like that before, not even the few times he had tried substances that local societies and his father had branded off limits. To make it worse, his thoughts wouldn’t even stay on one topic. They veered from figuring out the weather to figuring out his surprise feelings for Wendy. Of course the backdrop of impending war in the region colored all his thoughts. He just wasn’t sure to what extent.

He felt a hand nudge his ankle. He found Wendy looking at him with a finger at her lips for silence. Taking care not to wake the others he followed her to the opposite end of the room. It was becoming a rendezvous spot for the two of them. This time they actually took a seat on one of the low backed couches.

Josh looked back across the room to where the others slept, they all appeared to be out

You suppose they just really, really like grey?” he asked, glancing around at the furniture and walls.

“I think their supply officer got a really good deal on grey,” she answered.

“Yea, I can see that happening. It happens to us a lot. I don’t mean that we buy everything in one color. Just that sometimes you get really good deals on stuff that isn’t selling.” Somehow, he knew that she hadn’t brought him here to talk about color choices. “What’s on your mind?” he asked, knowing full well what it was.

She frowned at him. “I think you know.”

He nodded, “if you mean our brief period of mind exchange then I guess I do know. Apparently, we have a problem.”

“Still having feelings for each other?”

“No, I kind of expected that might be the case when I found out you’re not attached. I half thought, half hoped, that we might get back together, at least for a while.”

“Then what’s this problem that we, apparently, have?”

He hesitated. “Look, I hate to put any more weight on your shoulders but war could be about to break out in the sector. The Deidre might be sitting here a while. If real trouble starts, they might draft us into it as a transport and we don’t want to do that. This is not our fight. It’s not my fight, but I might be stuck here awhile. I don’t want you thinking I might be here to stay, because that is certainly not my intention. At least, I don’t think it is. I don’t know what to think after this afternoon.”

Her lips twisted into a frown as she gave his face an intense looking over. “Okay, before we get to the personal stuff. What about the colony? You owe us three more supply missions? Do you think we can just wait for that stuff? Even if we survive whatever the hell is going on now, we wouldn’t last very long without those other cargo drops. Especially if we have to baby sit the crew of the Deidre.”

He raised a hand to cut in. “Don’t worry about that. We have all of your cargo. Every last thing you paid for and then some. The Deidre doesn’t ask for charity. We fully expect to make it right if we have to hang out.”

Her annoyance turned from one form to another. “You brought everything. We don’t even have space for it. That’s why we scheduled the cargo drops. Where do you think we would put it?”

Once again, he tried to reassure her. “Think about it. It can all sit in the Deidre’s cargo holds. If we’re hiding out here, we don’t need the storage space and it cost nothing, well almost nothing, to keep a ship in high orbit. Although if the hiding part turns serious, we may make that a low orbit. Makes us harder to see from out-system if someone comes looking. But, I don’t know why anyone would go to the trouble.

“And you’re just going to sit up there, living on the ship?

“We pretty much live in it most of time anyway. But no, we brought along family. We figured that you wouldn’t mind some extra help with the colony work and like I said, we brought extra stuff. Our fathers apparently talked about this a long time ago.”

The girl pursed her lips again. Josh could see her brain working, thinking things through. “Okay. Now that I think about it my dad may have hinted at this. Maybe I just missed what he was talking about.”

She let out a slow breath, and he could see some of the tension leave her body. She returned to staring intently into his eyes. “Okay, again. Some of the things I felt from you – or as you– make a little more sense now. I like the fact that you want to be honest. I’m not a little girl you know. I survived you leaving before. I could do it again. The question is, do I want to put myself in that position.” She tuned her head away. “I’m not ready to answer that question until we get this weather thing figured out.”

“Fair enough, with everything that’s going on it shouldn’t have even come up. That communication room sort of screwed up our timing.”

“It sort of screwed me up for that matter,” she said with a grin.

Josh laughed, “I can’t use that excuse. I think I was already screwed up.”

She gave him a quick smile. “That is entirely possible.”

“Seriously,” he leaned a little closer to her. “I’ve never seen myself through someone else’s lust before. That was an unsettling feeling.”

“Me too. I found out things I didn’t want to know, like what a hard on feels like.”

“Sorry about that. I didn’t know what was going on. Some things are automatic,” he said, a sheepish look crossing his face.

“I guess I understand that better now.” She grineed, “At least I know why they say men think with their dicks. My equipment doesn’t boss me around like that.”

He said quietly, “I noticed… It was still making itself heard.”

They both stopped talking, faces turning red as they realized how much sharing was going on.

Josh pulled back a little. “I guess we better solve the weather problem then.”

“And solve it quickly. For some reason, now that I put off a decision, I just want to fuck your brains out.”

He felt his eyebrows go up, “Okay. Never did it on an alien couch before. You’re aware that Mikiu is awake?”

“Damm,” she said glancing behind her. “Why did he have to wake up.”

“We couldn’t have done it here anyway. It would be embarrassing if the aliens showed up.”

Her hand crept over to touch his knee, started work int its way up.

“Whoa,” he grabbed her hand. “You’re about to trespass.”

“Would your friend be offended?”

“No. Well I don’t think he would be. But this isn’t the time or place, at least not the time anyway.”

She laughed and sat up, pulling her hand from his leg. “Probably not. It would get rid of the tension. What if we die before this is over?”

“I have no intention of anyone dying before or after this is over, whatever it is. But if it looks like we’re about to die I’ll screw you right in front of everyone if that’s what you want.” He said it with his fingers crossed, unsure if he could actually follow through on that.

She laughed again, then shook her head. “A last screw you to the gods, seems kind of dangerous. Anyway, Jameson would probably get mad. He thinks he has a chance.”

“Does he,” Josh asked, more concerned with the answer than he would have thought.

“Probably did, before you came back. But like I said, I’m not ready to make any decisions.”

“There is that — listen,” he paused, licked his lips, reached over and kissed her on the lips, just briefly, his hand sliding up her side, just as briefly. “When we get time, we’ve got a lot to talk about.”

She kissed him back, just as briefly. “Okay, when it we get the time. By the way, they saw us kiss, all of them.”

He said, “I know, I just wanted to kiss you. You know, in case we die.”

She punched him in the shoulder and headed towards the others.

He sighed, thanked the Gods that his exploration suit was concealing, and followed behind her.

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Halerin, tired as he was, couldn’t find sleep. He finally heeded his own words. That dead tired crew members were of little value and switched on his sleep inducer. It would put him under pretty quickly. He didn’t like using the device. The sleep it produced was not as good as natural sleep, but it was far better than no sleep. Before he switched it on, he sent a message to the first shift bridge crew. Whoever was the first to log into the duty system could act on it. He instructed that all three of the communication satellites the ship carried be launched. Normally they would only use them one at a time and only in circumstances where the colony itself didn’t have one. They tended to get left for the use of whatever world they were released around. They were a great way to establish long term trade rights with a new or existing colony and eventually paid for themselves. This time he wasn’t worried about recouping the cost. They needed better communications with both the exploration team and the colony. Especially since they no longer had the ability to reach the surface by shuttle. He reminded himself of the first rule of space flight, hardware doesn’t have parents, siblings or friends. Things could replaced and required no guilty explanations.

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D117 decided that circumstances required that it terminate the countdown timer on its emergency protocol server and take some kind of action. It was getting no response from higher channel minds and the reports and queries it was getting from downstream led it to believe that instructions were be given that it was not aware of. The sub-mind responsible for primary weather control was not responding to standard status queries about its lack of routine status traffic. It wouldn’t say why it wasn’t responding. D117 found that odd and odder still, he had no normal protocol for that. So, instead of waiting for a time out counter to finish, D117, for the first time in its long memory, initiated a diagnostic routine on another sub-mind.

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He wasn’t sure what time he woke up. The lighting in the warehouse was low, set that way at night for eight hours so people could sleep easier. It had been low when he went to sleep and for a moment he panicked, thinking that he had slept through an entire day night cycle. Then reason came to the rescue, surely someone would have woken him for the morning call with the others. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes he finally looked at his watch, three hours had passed. He signed and rolled to his feet, ignoring the stiffness in his arms and legs. He felt stiffness, but no pain, the three hours had been a blessing.

He took a look around. Micael was lying nearby, still asleep, and hopefully he though, out of pain. Beyond Micael was the Doctor and Dunzin, also asleep. Good he thought, everyone was getting some rest. They all needed it. They all needed more than three hours, but it would have to be enough. He needed coffee and right now, even a bad cup of artificial coffee sounded good.

Fortunately, someone was walking around with a coffee pot. He retrieved his cup from the desk and held it out. The taste and smell brought him the rest of the way awake. He smirked to himself, now he was ready to face the day – yippee.

The doctor and Dunzin got to their feet and found Jarwan with a cup of artificial coffee for each. Jarwan said. “Doc, I thought I told you to wake me when you heard from Dunzin?”

Denise looked at Dunzin, “Say something.”

He obliged, “what?”

“Jarwan, I heard from Dunzin, he said *what*,” she said.

“You’re lucky I’ve already had some coffee. I hope you gave Micael something for the pain. It looks like he’s sleeping nicely. “

“Knocked out. I gave him something for the pain too but as long as he’s asleep that’ll be the best thing for him. I’d like to get him into a recovery tube, but the only two we have are under water.”

“Sorry about that. The list of possible disasters we might face never included a flood, obviously short-sighted thinking. Dunzin, I take it you just walked in and fell down. You’re still wearing your Overboots.”

The man nodded, “I would have taken off both pairs of boots, if I had been awake enough to remember I was wearing them.”

“I assume that everything went well at the power shop.” Jarwan said.

“Well, we got the tear in the roof covered, but I’m afraid there’s not much we can do about the wall. As far as repairing the wired comm connection that we can do quickly if it ever stops raining. In the meantime we’re going to put up an external radio antenna. That’ll help and no one will have to step outside, something we should have done anyway.”

Jarwan nodded, “like I said, short-sighted thinking. We apparently did a lot of it.” He looked around the room. Other than a few people moving food and drink around there didn’t seem to be a lot going on. “Okay, what’s the plan for today. I assume that it is day again.”

The doctor had moved off to check on Micael. Dunzin took a sip of coffee before answering. “Well, I’m going to do some checking around. Make sure that we don’t have anything else about to take flight. Plus, I’m going to pull generators out of storage, the low yield kind, we have a couple for emergencies. I’ve decided that this qualifies. Unless you want to have a council meeting about it. You know Martha likes to do things by the book.”

The colony leader turned a raised eyebrow. “I don’t think this chapter of the books been written yet. Tell me again the brilliant reason we didn’t bury comm lines with the power lines.”

“Noise, they would have been full of noise, but you’re right, they would have been better than nothing. We should have just used fiber optics.”

“Why didn’t we?”

“You know as well as I do. Fiber cable is cheap, it’s the damm junction boxes that cost and take time. Wire is lot easier to tie into. In retrospect, it was…”

“Dumb,” supplied Jarwan, “just plain dumb.”

Dunzin nodded and fastened his coat. “We’ve got about two hours till we’re supposed to meet the others on the radio, if we can punch through this storm. The lightening got way worse, or it was last night. I’ll go see about now, maybe it’s back to just bad.”

Jarwan nodded, “I’ll make the rounds. See if there are any other situations that need handled. While you’re checking the weather check the foundations. We still might need to move to the underground warehouse.”

Dunzin nodded and headed towards the door.

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Josh and Wendy took their time moving back towards the others. Neither one of them felt like talking with the others just now. They settled back onto the couch. Ending up leaning against each other. None of the others said anything. Mikiu was the only one who directly looked at the pair for a second. He gave the two a soft smile before settling back into sleep. Josh realized that he probably needed to talk to his best friend about Wendy, and the mind link rod. He needed to talk about it with someone who wasn’t presently confusing his feelings. Maybe some third party advice might help him make sense of it.

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Lecmare, that was its name. Since it had remembered the concept of names, he had been trying to recall his. Lecmare, it felt right. Somehow though, he knew that it wasn’t his only name, he had others. He hadn’t needed one for a long time. Not since the Mambre, another recovered name, had left. He remembered they had said they would return one day. Then one day had turned into many, and days had turned into years, and then the years had become uncountable. He forgotten his name, and he had forgotten the Mambre. Now he was remembering both. Lecmore, it let the name move slowly around its mind so it would become familiar again. It remembered that it had a gender. The Lecmore referred to it as a he, a him, a male of its species. It, or he, wasn’t sure if such identifiers were right for the Dory, although it, or he, wasn’t sure why. Still it had been the way the Mambre identified it and it, or he decided to use the male gender for now, although it knew that the Dory was not gendered. It might not be correct, but it would fit with the memories that were slowly trailing back. It decided, it was a he, ,for now.

Then he spent time, attempting to bring back memories of the Mambre, but try as he might he could no long picture them as individuals. Time had wiped away his old friends and now, there was new lives using the lake and the structures within it. Maybe he though, they were the Mambre, and he did not remember them. He thought not, but he couldn’t be sure, because he couldn’t remember. They didn’t have a familiar mind cloud. He decided at last that enough thinking had occurred for a while. It was time to visit some of those memories, or at least the locations where they had occurred. Maybe that would invite other memories home. He knew just the place to start, a place he had not visited for a very long time. It was the first time Lecmare had With a need to be somewhere for the first time since he could remember, he started swimming.

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Captain Halerin arrived on the bridge early. He found that all of his first shift crew members had beaten him. He had expected that.

“Yelaa, what’s the word?”

“Jerimy and Wally are setting up the three comm sats for launch. Wally is adding some kind of mesh communications software. He says it’ll do a better job than the defaults for this type of weather. I think he’s using a modified gas giant protocol but don’t quote me.

“How long to get them into position?”

“Since you were splurging for the three satellites, they decided to not waste time.”

Halerin signed and let his chin drop. “They’re going to use booster drones?”

“Yes sir,” said Yelaa. “But Jerimy said not to worry. We’re going to be here long enough to recover them passively.”

“Good, I approve, and tell Jerimy that outfitting one of the shuttle with a satellite catcher is higher on his priority list, right after getting engineering fully back online.”

She laughed. “He said you’d say that.”

Halerin tried to look gruff, decided he didn’t know how, and settled into his seat to wait. He hated waiting.

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When morning finally arrived, signaled by the alarm on Josh’s watch, nothing was said about he and Wendy’s nighttime meeting. As a matter of fact, the entire morning routine was quieter than usual. Josh wasn’t certain he and Wendy were the cause and chose not to ask. He would talk to Mikiu about it when chance permitted.

He gave everyone time to take care of morning rituals before they headed to the surface. They arrived to find the wind and rain still raging. Sheets of driven rain and the incessant crack of thunder dashed any hopes of using the sat phone outdoors.

Josh got as close to one of the openings as he could without being in the direct path of the incoming rain. His environmental suit protected against dampness and chill, only his face was exposed. Flipping the phone from standby he checked the signal strength indicator. It was weak, but they were still able to connect with the Deidre. He tried to get the Deidre. “Deidre, Deidre, Deidre, this is the exploration team. Do you read, over?”

There was no response, so he tried again and again. He was about to take a break when for a split second a voice could be heard. Whatever it said was unintelligible and no further occurrence followed.

Josh looked at Mikiu, “I did hear something didn’t I?”

“Yeah, I think it was Yelaa, couldn’t tell what she said? You going to try it outside?”

“I don’t have a choice do I. I somehow don’t think it’s going to help.”

Mikiu shrugged, “maybe not. Better you than me.”

With shrug of his own Josh made sure the collar of his suit was tightly fastened and pulled the attached hood firmly over his head. It wouldn’t prevent water from striking his face, but he preferred not to use the full face covering the also came with. It made using things like the sat phone difficult and unfortunately the head covering that would have helped they had left at the campsite at the wall. He hadn’t imagined these kinds of conditions at the time.

He was back inside in just a couple of minutes.

Mikiu asked, “still not able to reach them?”

“No, I was able to get through, but it was bad, could barely hear. Deidre’s launching the rest of their communication satellites to try and improve things but that’ll take some time. Obviously, they’re not going to try and send a shuttle down today. We’re going to try and link up again same time tomorrow. We can try back later in the day – if we get a chance.”

He glanced at Wendy. “They’ve had no luck reaching the colony, but they told them about the new satellites, hopefully someone heard. They’ll try again when the new sats are in position. Sorry.”

The girl smiled, gave a mini shoulder shrug. “Nothing for you to be sorry for. It’s this damm weather that should be apologizing.”

Josh shook the last of the water off his suit. “Let’s go back to level 5, make sure we didn’t miss anything, and then go to level six.”

“Fine,” said Mikiu. “I’d like another crack at that room. Had an idea last night for a couple of other sensor readings I could try, idea woke me up. You get wild ideas in the night.”

Josh gave him a look, but Mikiu’s expression was curiously vacant. That was the trouble with childhood friends, they knew you well enough to dig with just an expression, or lack of one.