**New Story**

**Part 7**

**03/16/2020**

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 or equipment looked suited for environmental isolation or safety. 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 that were still at work obviously didn’t consider this part of their responsibility.

The fourth level was a wash out. It was filled with narrow corridors, no automatic lights, no windows on the water outside, no doors, the entrance to each room was open. The small rooms filled with vertical, horizontal and diagonal control consoles. No attempt had been made at any kind of aesthetics. The controls were visible in form and available in function. This level was clearly made for getting things done, and that made Josh think about the beings who had worked here.

“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 Biologist was not happy. He needed to talk to Josh about that.

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 all of the advancements and then became angry when he had responded the wrong way. (Insert Previous) Now he had started the dance, and he told himself, he hadn’t even given her a chance to acknowledge. Maybe he didn’t want to know what her answer was, except he was pretty sure that he did. Just not in front of the others, a private conversation was needed, difficult to pull off in a team setting. Especially an out of touch team he told himself. He was torn with continuing the exploration of the shaft levels or returning to the surface to check the weather. As the others regrouped with him at the console he did a quick evaluation. They all looked in reasonably good shape physically. With the exception of the shocked expression on Wendy’s face they all seemed eager to continue.

“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, I’d like to ride up top and check the weather.”

Mikiu nodded, “You think there’s news.”

Wendy broke out of her bemused state to add, “We need to find out about the Rinein. They could be in deeper trouble.”

Josh nodded, “Let’s see if the weather will cooperate.”

§

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 part of the system was at cross purpose, something for which he had no instructions. What he did have was a slowly evolving crisis management center which was quickly becoming more active and seeking new methods of communication. He waited for the problem to get large enough for it to act.

§

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 dessert sand and plant leftovers, to add another layer of protection to the colony buildings and improve the appearance of the colony, but that idea, like many others, had never been fulfilled. Even with materials at hand the one thing that every colony lacked was time, or manpower, it depended on how you looked at things – was the glass half empty or half full.

The room was dark except for the faint light on 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, not this artificial shit,” 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.”

“What are you complaining about,” said Martha, “at least all you’ve got to do is stand outside the door. I’ve got to cross five meters to get to a regular rest room.”

It was Jarwan’s turn to laugh, “Are you kidding, it’s raining so hard that the last two times I kept my head down and crossed to the rooms anyway. It’s hard to piss with the wind when it keeps changing directions.”

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 line. It wasn’t buried very deep.”

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 buried lines, not with the pole lines and the radios.”

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

Dunzin shook his head, “Problems not on our end, Micael has to stay inside the inner wall of the shop, the Zero Point Plant doesn’t cause a problem but the feeder lines and the stepdown transformers play havoc. Our radios were never designed to operate in that environment.”

Jarwan said, “And I know we have the proper ones in storage. No one thought about it till the weather turned to crap. What if he steps out of the inner wall?”

“It gets better and we can hear him but the noise from the storm is really bad. It’s hard to make anything out. We can try.”

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.

§

Except, at the moment, that wasn’t true at all.

Micael Tosition, Chief architect of the colony 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 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 debris that had caused the opening was a twisted metal gate. That normally was used to keep the few livestock the colony owned in their winter barn. It was now a weapon that had taken out part of the inside wall of the double walled building and in the process broken both of Micael Tosition’s legs and trapped him 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 the fingers of cold water start to enter at 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 of a dull throbbing. He shook his head in an attempt to clear his thoughts. Micael 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 with his legs. He decided to try something else. Taking great care he slowly slid sideways towards the power generators and away from the inner wall Centimeters at a time he managed to get his chest free and then his hips and finally sitting up, got his legs free of the gate.

That alleviated the possibility of drowning, but he knew that he still needed help. 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 community center(verify) 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. 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 no one was listening. Why would they, no one knew that the underground line was down. He looked around, searching for an idea, then with his eyes 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 Morse Code because an accident had excused him from mandatory planetary service. He did however, know one bit of code — SOS.

§

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. That was an SOS, a distress call.

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 almost hurt himself with the mid thought change. He glanced to Dunzin, “Get a communicator and try and reach 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, sliding back into the camp chair he had been using, motioned one of the colonies young people serving the artificial coffee for another cup. It was better than nothing. As he was lamenting the fact that the beverage could be hotter Martha returned with their head Doctor, Denise Bitterly. He had been paying more attention when she showed up a meeting recently. She was approaching middle age but still a young 200 years or so and she was good looking. A feature that Jarwan appreciated.

“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 must have known it at one time but that has long passed.”

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 and her infant daughter had been a last-minute addition to the colony roster. She had just arrived on Sartagius at the time and had jumped at the chance to join. It had been a break for the Colony which had been about to start out with only one doctor, and him a very old human.

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

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

Dunzin laughed, “That will be difficult. Micael saw part of the road give way. Besides, we’ve got other problems.”

“The Power Shop?” said Jarwan.

“Yes, his legs got broke when the wind sailed one of the livestock gates in through the roof.”

“Damage?”

“Took out part of the inner shell wall, and of course a big hole in the roof. Didn’t hit any of the equipment but we need to do something to keep the rain out.”

The Doctor objected, “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 should be able to hold it.”

“Until another gate comes along,” 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 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 and there’s no radiation involved.”

“Okay,” said Jarwan, “here’s the plan. Dunzin, you get a couple of guys to help you with the roof repair. 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, let’s get started.”

§

The trip back to the surface was a quick one. Their time on the surface was even shorter. Josh didn’t bother to get close to any of the openings to the outside. 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.

He said, “I take it we’re going to level 5.”

Mikiu glanced at his wrist computer, “The afternoons gone, should we wait for tomorrow?”

“No, I don’t want to have to tell my dad that we took half the day off. Besides, I still think the answer to the crazy weather is here.”

Jameson shook his head, “It would help if we had an idea of what the answer looks like.”

­­ Josh glance at him, “That would take all the challenge out of it. What fun would that be.”

Susan, stepping closer to one of the doorways looked up at the sky, which was a grey not unlike the color of the walls, floor and ceiling. “I wonder if they saved the Arbiter yet.”

Josh said quietly, “Don’t know, we’ll ask them when they come to save us.”

§

Russ forced himself to look at the heads-up display fuel gauge. He preferred to look at the actual control, but with only two shuttles involved in nudging the giant starship to a new course he needed the view out of the cockpit.

­ Lydia’s voice came through his headset, “I’m setting on 60 percent power, are you sure we can move this hunk of junk?”

Russ checked to make sure she was on the shuttles private channel, he didn’t want Captain Mendez hearing his ship referred to as junk. “Lydia, keep to business with the chatter.”

“I’m on the private channel.”

“Yea I know, but it’s better to just not talk like that. No time to screw up that way.”

Her voice was somewhat chagrined when it came back, “I didn’t mean anything by it, I’d call the Deidre a hunk of junk if we were pushing her.”

“Yea, and Dad would make you sleep in the cargo drains if he heard you. Captains do not like to hear their ships called names, period.”

“Okay, got it. You didn’t answer my question,” she said.

He glanced again at the fuel numbers, still ok. “Yes, we can do it, but it’s going to take a while, and we may have to go back and refuel a couple of times. Just make sure you keep an eye on your pressure point. Anything starts to bend on the Arbiter we got a real problem.”

“Yea I know. This is harder than loading cargo or something,”

“Concentration, the great equalizer, that’s what one of my flight instructors used to tell me. No amount of muscle can make you a better pilot than someone with a stronger will.”

“You start preaching homilies I will fall asleep,” she said.

“Don’t worry, that’s not about to happen. Unless I get really bored,” he shot back.

“Please God don’t let him get bored,” she implored the heavens



Inside the Arbiter, Captain Talong Mendez was admiring his new rib vest. It of course wasn’t new, disposable medical supplies on a Starship were few and far apart. The order of the day was reusable when everything had to be brought along. He glanced across the room to where John Johanson sat, also now sporting a vest very much like his own. John still looked very uncomfortable even with the vest and pain meds in. He ignored the guilt for there was little he could have done to avoid the incident and he had other things to worry about at the moment.

“Any sign that they’re moving us?”

Johanson, with a grimace of pain, said, “I told you that we wouldn’t feel anything. Those are powerful shuttles, but this is a big assed ship. It’s going to take them more than one load of fuel to do this. But we’ll be okay. Knowing that they’re going to take off some people every time they go to refuel means I don’t have to conserve power to keep us alive later. It’ll get a little stuffy at some point is all.”

“We can deal with that. Sooo, we won’t know they’re done until they tell us,” said the Captain.

“That’s about the size of it,” said Johanson.

Mendez leaned back in his chair with a sigh. The one thing he hated about being Captain was waiting. Now, that’s the only thing he could do.

§

The trip down to level 5 was uneventful. Josh was getting the hang of running the elevator. He mentally congratulated himself on being smart enough to press a button and think about wanting to go up or 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 of the rest of the alien rooms and halls. 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 certainly qualified. The others must have felt the same because with no words being exchanged, they all drifted to the atypical 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 normal and Josh guessed that it encompassed at least three levels. Maybe four if the previous levels had been representative. In the center of the intruding area of lake water was a set of large dowels, about 100 centimeters in diameter that travelled through the transparent wall and extended a similar distance into the water. There the ends of the dowels ended in large disc like plates. They were obviously for something to touch against. What that something was he had no way of telling.

Josh looked around at the rest of the room, the walls were bare, the only thing present was a set of the low backed couches sitting to one side of the transparent wall. A small table separated them.

“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 too intense for some of those fish.”

“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 sensor 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 rougher finish than everything else they had encountered. Plus it was black, dark black. “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. The surface of the pole felt different, rougher than the other alien surfaces. He realized that his hand wasn’t moving, although he could distinctly feel it doing so. He felt different emotions — numerous different emotions. Hhe realized that he was thinking about himself in an entirely new way, appreciating, disliking, sexually longing, distasteful conjectures, and a myriad of other foreign feelings ranging through him.

Startled, he found he was looking at himself. Seeing himself in an entirely different manner. Like he was looking at someone else. His shoulders, the tilt of his nose, the flair of his ass, all things he was seeing as if for the first time and then it hit him. These were not his eyes doing the seeing, not his feelings reacting to what the eyes were seeing, not his desire that was weaving through him, and 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 stepped from the pole. His hands recoiling off it. His eyes still locked with hers. He turned his head away and 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 from the rod. Losing her grip as she did so. For a second time froze. They were stuck in a parallel thought that slowly receded.

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 well-meaning efforts.

“I’m okay,” he said, glancing at Wendy to see if she too was alright.

Her face was pale, but she maintained her feet and gave him a short nod while waving the others off.

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

Josh looked at her and felt like crying. A response to a question he had never experienced before. Turning he walked over to the alien furniture grouping and slumped to a sitting position with his head back and forced himself to take deep slow breathes. Slowly his pulse rate fell towards normal. He barely noticed Wendy take a seat across from him. Didn’t notice that she looked equally shaken.

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

“I don’t know,” said Josh. He looked up 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, “yea, I think I know that feeling. And a couple of others I didn’t know I had.”

“Mikiu,” he said weakly, “I know what this place is for. Jameson is right, it’s made for something.”

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 did the same.

“Yea, for a second I was seeing myself, feeling someone else’s opinion of myself. It’s not something I would recommend.”

“It’s not something I care to repeat.”, snapped Wendy. Josh noticed that the color had returned to her face and not stopped at normal. She was blushing. He had the good sense to look away and hoped his own face wasn’t betraying him.

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

“Simple,” said Mikiu. “This is a meeting place for whoever 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, now catching on himself. “It lets two entirely different species connect. This is what you use when you don’t have anything in common with each other. I mean like one with arms and legs and the other with flippers and a tail. There would be no points of comparison. It would allow communication without common references. That could come in really handy in some circumstances.

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

The two mentioned sent a glare in Mikiu’s direction, but neither of them had a reply ready. 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 not suggesting that any of them are still around are you.”

Mikiu shrugged, “That knew our aliens? I would say probably not. That doesn’t mean that the species isn’t still around in one form or another. Remember, animals like whales usually have long life spans.”

“Not that long,” Josh responded. Then noticed that Wendy didn’t look all that well. He checked the time and discovered that they were well into supper time.

“Okay, I think we’ve done enough for today. I don’t think I’m up for much more and I could use some food and rest. What say we leave it off here and start with the rest of this level tomorrow. After we check in on the weather that I mean.”

The others nodded. Wendy gave him a grateful but weak smile. The experience had evidently hit her harder than him. Or, he told himself, he was just keeping it bottled up — he wasn’t sure which.

§

The Dory felt something. Something it had not felt in a very 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 past that he had thought about another of his own kind. The thought felt unusual. His own kind and yet it took a long passage for that to register. He remembered others now. That looked and smelled and sounded like him. He didn’t remember when he had known them, or what they were called. But he knew that he needed to bring back those thoughts and what they meant.

­§

Mike Halerin checked the clock on the wall, it was getting late. They hadn’t heard from either of teams they had out. The Captain wasn’t too worried about either of them. Josh and the exploration team hadn’t been out of contact that long and were in better shape than the colony itself. No word from Rinein since Dorkin had dropped Sunderson off midday yesterday. The lack of communication was concerning, but not unexpected — the ship’s sensors showed a variety of extreme weather over the colony site.

The other team, Dorkin and Renaul, were still within their expected check in window. In fact, nothing was expected from them until they arrived near the ship on the return from the Arbiter. Which, he decided wouldn’t be for several more hours.

The lack of anything concrete or even useful to do was beginning to drag down his spirts, not that they’d been high to begin with. There was a lot going on and not having immediate choices of action made for an impatient and therefore short-tempered Captain. He knew enough to not to bother his crew. Espec­ially when it wouldn’t serve any purpose. He settled back into his chair even further. Determined to wait out events until he could participate.

§

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 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 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 little girl, set both of Micael’s legs using telescoping splints. He thought that children had to grow up to 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.

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

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.”

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

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

“Yes, I thought I would.”

“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 rest she would have another patient on her hands.

“No problem sir, get some sleep.”

That was the last thing he knew for several hours.

§

They got a surprise when they returned to the bottom level. The five doorways were all open and the corridors they led to were all brightly lit. They all looked exactly the same as Josh had suspected they would, but he still thought that each of them intersected the round side corridor they had intersected the day before. Still, all the lights were on, he didn’t know why.

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

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

Mikiu, scanner extended, walked up to each opening and took a reading. “This isn’t funny guys. I think we woke this base up.”

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

His best friend said, “All the lights are on as far as I can see down each corridor. 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 in from outside. It smells fresh.”

Josh took a long breath through his nose. He was right, the air, while not bad before, was now different. It no longer smelled sterile. It was more alive, and it did smell like the lake air, but not nearly as intense. It was like it having centuries of staleness removed from the alien place.

“Smells like it’s airing the place out first. What do we call this, an alien base, city, lab?” asked Josh.

Mikiu looked thoughtful for a second and then said, “base, I think that’s simplest.”

“Sounds good to me. Do you know the way back to our lounge?”

“Yea, I kept track, although our trackers should have it recorded anyway,” said Mikiu.

“Lead on.”

Mikiu had selected correctly and it took almost no time to return to the room with the furniture groupings. The did notice that along the side corridor that apparently every doorway was open. Mikiu commented that Josh may have been right about the base being aired out.

They used the same half-circle couch to make 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 the empty canteens that each of them carried. 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.

They were all tired and fell asleep quickly. Josh, the events on Level 5 still haunting him, stayed awake thinking. 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. Of course, that had been a long time ago, back when such pursuits were of interest. He had grown up a lot since then.

He felt a hand nudge his ankle. Looking down he saw Wendy looking at him, she raised her finger to her lips to ask for silence. Then, looking at the others all asleep, she motioned for him to follow her. Once again they made their way to the opposite end of the room. This time they settled onto a single bench couch that was part of another seating arraignment. The back of this couch was higher than the other one, but still of the same soft grey.

Josh looked back across the room to where the others were. They all appeared to be asleep and anyway, talking shouldn’t bother them.

“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 everything in grey,” she answered.

“Yea, I can see that happening. It happens to us a lot. Of course that’s mainly because we buy in bulk. But I think that’s more related to our buying everything at once than anyone’s preferences.” 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 that little period of body exchanging we experienced this afternoon. Then yea, I kinda need to talk about that too, but I think we need to get some other stuff out of the way first.”

“I know, but I would have thought that after today’s drama you might have just let go of the past,” she said.

“I’m not really thinking about the past, but I think the present has certainly taken a turn.”

“I don’t think we can make sense of the present without talking about the past, about us.”

He sighed, “That’s the problem and yet after what happened ten years ago, I didn’t think there was any us!”

“I would have thought that being lovers’ sort of made you and I an us.”

“You knew that I wasn’t going to be around,” said Josh.

“I thought maybe I was more than just a piece of ass,” she said.

He looked at her eyes, trying to figure out the proper response. “I never thought of you as a…,” he stopped, unsure of how to get across what he wanted to say. “I just thought we had a nice time together. We both knew that there was no future, and anyway, that’s not the way the world works. Most relationships don’t last more than a year or two. Unless of course there are kids involved and even then, most of them are raised by single parents.”

“I know, but sometimes relationships last a long time and you were my first love.”

“And it felt like it should be forever. Long lifespans killed that type of thing.”

“We should have talked about it when we started this trip, got it out of the way,” she said.

“It would have been better to clear the air, I agree. Blame that on me, I was mad at my father for picking me to lead this thing. I probably took it out on you.”

“Okay, it’s your fault.”

“I didn’t mean blame me right now,” he quipped.

“I know that, however, that thing today threw it all up in the air. I’m still trying to sort out what happened.”

“Me too. I’m not even sure what happened. As near as I can tell I was in your head and I assume you were in mine.”

“Yea, and we were communicating. Communicating a lot more than I ever did with anyone, or even wanted to.”

He leaned a little closer to her. “I’ve never seen myself through someone else’s lust before, and that is the level we were at. I found out somethings about myself too, which was weird.”

She laughed, “yea me too. I found out what it felt like to have a hard on.”

“Sorry about that, all my senses engaged, I didn’t know what was going on,” he said, a sheepish look crossing his face.

“Me either, but I now know why they say men think with their dicks, my equipment doesn’t boss me around quite like that,” she laughed.

He said quietly, “I noticed that, but it was making itself heard.”

They both stopped talking, their faces turning red as they realized how much they had shared earlier. Neither one knew what to say.

Finally, he summoned up the courage to speak. “Well, what do you want to do, we’ve shared more than most people do in a lifetime. I don’t think I could leave again if we start up.”

“I don’t know about starting up again, you’ll forgive my impatience, but right now, I just want to fuck your brains out.”

He felt his eyebrows go up, “Okay then. But 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.”

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

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

“Would your friend be offended if we did it?”

“No, but the Aliens might, or their robot’s or hell, maybe their ghosts.”

She laughed and sat up, pulling her hand from his leg. “What if we die before this is over”

“I have no intention of anyone dying during this mission, most specifically you or me. 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, and then shook her head. “A last screw you to the gods, seems kind of dangerous. Jameson would get jealous, 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 certainly not after that transfer of lustful views this afternoon,” she said.

“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 because I don’t know about you but there’s stuff I need to know. They say a man can never know what a woman is thinking, well I’ve felt what you were thinking, and I still don’t know what it means. You’ll have to explain it to me.”

“Okay, if you do the same. They saw us kiss.”

He said, “I know, I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t interested.”

She glanced at his pants and smirked. “No chance, I remember the feeling from the other side. You’ll never be able to fool me.”

With that she got up and headed back towards the group. He called after her, “that works both ways you know.”

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

§

Halerin had finally bored himself to the point where he had fallen asleep. Yelaa hated to do but she finally woke him up.

“Captain,” she said, and then louder when he didn’t move, “Captain, you need to wake up!”

“Okay, but there better be a good reason why,” he said.

“Yes sir, our shuttles are back.”

He lifted one eyelid, “Are either one of them on fire?”

She said apologetically, “No sir, I don’t think so.”

He straightened his back in the chair and opened his other eye. “Fine, I’m awake, but I don’t like it.”

“I understand.”

He glanced around the bridge. Jerimy was there for a total of three. “Please tell me that you guys got some rest also?”

Jerimy looked over, “We each took an hour nap.”

“Each,” he looked at the clock. Damn, he had been out for six hours. “Why didn’t someone wake me?”

“To do what?” asked Yelaa.

Jerimy said, “Yea, we can nothing as well as you can.”

“Why,” he said, “do I get the impression that neither one of you was doing nothing. You just didn’t want to wake up the tired old man.”

Jerimy nodded, “Well, there is that.”

The Captain snorted, muttered something about *no respect* and then asked,” Are the shuttles aboard yet?”

The Engineer shook his head, “Not yet, about an hour out. I’m receiving their data feeds now. I’ll have the Arbiter’s new course in about twenty minutes.”

“Any word on how many they managed to bring back?”

Yelaa looked downcast, “I’m afraid no one boss. Johanson has to rig up a manual airlock. It’s apparently easier than repairing one of the existing ones.”

“Estimated Time?”

Jerimy looked up, “Russ said John wasn’t sure, but that he would have something working by the time they got back.”

The Captain looked thoughtful, “Did they get any sleep on the way back.”

Dr Lovis, entering the Bridge, jumped in to the conversation, “Doesn’t matter, sleep in a cramped cockpit seat does not count. They should get a full eight hours here.”

Nodding to the Doctor the Captain said, “Sorry, no can do. To save the Arbiter we have to turn them around immediately.

“Don’t we have any pilots to spell them?”

“Normally we’d have Josh and Mikiu, but there down on Tingies 0017. Everyone else, well, our other pilots aren’t good enough for this. Arbiter is in too bad a shape.”

Jerimy chimed in, “Speaking of which. I’d like to get a look at her from the outside, talk to John.”

“Sorry, you’ll just have to get your information from the flybys the shuttles did, and of course their sensor readings,” said the Captain.

“That’s not the same and you know it.”

“What I know is that to many bad things are happening for chief Engineer to be off the boat. Besides, I may have another job for you.”

Jerimy kept his mouth shut for the moment, but he had a good idea what the other job was.

The doctor settled into an empty seat. “Any indication how bad the Arbiter’s crew and passengers are.”

“Jerimy?” the Captain redirected.

“Same answer as before. Give me some time to go over this download.”

“Get Wally to help you.”

“Wally can’t help you because he’s busy trying to figure out how to talk to Rinein.” Said the First Officer as he entered the Bridge.

“How’s that going,” asked the Captain. His boredom had passed. There were to many things going on.

“It’s not, no I take that back. I think I can probably hear them if they try to send. But with the weather they’ve got going on down there no way they can hear us.”

“Have you got a listening post?”

“Yea, I do, but there’s a better solution and you’re not going to like it,” said Wally.

“I know what that means. It’s going to cost us credits. So how many?”

Wally looked as if he rather be someplace else. “Keep in mind, it won’t cost much if we can recover….”

“You want me to launch a comm satellite, “said Captain Halerin.

“Three to be exact.”

The Captain starred at the First officer as if his were speaking in ancient alien. A language that no one knew. “You want me — me — to launch all of our communication satellites.”

Jerimy decided now would be a good time to support Wally. “Captain, I agree with Wally.”

That had the effect of stopping the rest of the Captain’s diatribe. He turned his attention to the Chief Engineer. “And, Mr. Engineer, why would that be?”

Jerimy shrugged, “Because he said so and he’s usually right about these things.”

“Because he said so,” said Halerin. “That’s the reason you’re giving me.” Captain Mike Halerin let his chin drop to his chest. “Okay, I guess that’s a good enough reason for me too. That does not mean I like it.”

Wally laughed, “I said you wouldn’t like it.”

“What does using our last three satellites do for us?”

“Well, for one thing, maybe we’ll be able to reach the colony. Secondly, it might make reaching Josh easier and if nothing else, it’ll help when the Arbiter gets closer.”

Halerin knew that his people were almost always right when it came to technical things. Besides, they were themselves vested in the ship’s future. “Okay, how much maneuvering are we going to have to do?”

“Not any, we can use orbital boosters to get them into position.”

“Great, those of course, are not recoverable,” said the Captain sadly. “Get it over with — no wait — let’s get the shuttles on board first.

“Always our intention,” said Jerimy. The Captain gave him a dirty look. He had known of course that they had both been in on the idea. It would be much simpler if they’d just tell him what was going on for he had little illusion that he was actually in command. He knew that they would do anything he asked. He also knew that he would always allow them to do their jobs. It worked out best for everyone.

§

The pain in his ribs was much better than the day before. The Captain wasn’t sure it was the compression vest, or the drugs Abernathy had given that were responsible, but he didn’t care. He had noticed that Johanson didn’t look to be any better and that stopped him from mentioning it to the doctor. He still felt bad about his part in injuring the big man.

Fortunately, the Doctor only stayed on the Bridge for a short time during his visits. He had many more customers in the shuttle bay. That suited the Captain fine. They were short handed and had a lot of work to do. Cheryl was trying to reconfigure her equipment to get some kind of functional radio that didn’t involve the use of a field communicator. John and Bill were in and out of the Bridge almost continuously in their quest to repair as many essential systems as possible.

His main worry right now was boredom. The Doctor, the Engineers, Cheryl, and the other specialist still had work to occupy their time and minds. The rest of the crew, the passenger scientists and most especially the wounded did not have that luxury. They were left to stew in helplessness, unable to do anything useful. This of course included him, yet he had to maintain the appearance of command, of being in charge. It was as necessary for his own psyche as it was for the crew’s.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Chief Engineer re-enter the bridge. He seemed to have a little more pep in his step.

“You have piqued my curiosity Chief Engineer. There seems to be a bounce in your step,” said the Captain.

John stopped, raised his heels off the deck a couple of times, and replied. “You may be right boss, I’m too tired to notice, but there is a little bit of good news.”

“You’ve repaired the reactors?”

“I said good news, not miraculous.”

“Okay, let’s have it,” said the Captain.

Johanson smiled slightly, “Well, I don’t have the main reactors online, but I do have some good news, power wise. We had a bunch of those field generators, the ones for emergency hospitals and other onsite work. We managed to get some of those ready to roll. I think that we might get three of them working. They’re low radiation units and they don’t have a lot of punch, but they should keep the lights on and the air flowing.”

“Should, you said should, are you waiting for an invitation?”

“Sorry skipper should have explained better. We tested the generators and they’re good to go. Now it’s a matter of doing some reconfiguring. We want to power only going to the local life support and power circuits. No need to try and power more of the ship than we need. I’m also rerouting regular ship’s power the same way. Parts of the ship are going to get cold and dark and have bad air, but that’ll help us stay alive for a lot longer.” He added as an afterthought, “If anyone wants to get anything from their quarters now would be the time to do it.”

He thought about it. There were some personal items that he treasured in his quarters, yet at the same time if he retrieved his things he would have to allow everyone to get theirs. He didn’t want to overburden the shuttles from the Deidre with a lot of memorabilia. Still he thought, a little extra weight wouldn’t hurt. It’s not like they were flying into a gravity well like a planetary landing.

“Cheryl, pass the word. Everyone, who can safely reach their quarters — I want someone along on every trip, use the buddy system — can do so to get personal memories only, and I mean stuff that can’t be remade. If you have copies of photos or videos back on Sartagius you don’t need to get them. Everyone can go but only one set of people at a time. John, have your people set it up and keep control.”

Cheryl turned to her board to comply, Josh looked over at him with a wry grin, “Sure boss, it’s not like my people don’t have enough to do.”

“I mean mainly for the Doctor’s people in the shuttle bay We and the people in Engineering can probably find their way by ourselves.”

John nodded. The Captain was right and besides, it would allow his people to keep an eye on what the scientist wanted to bring along. Civilians weren’t the best at knowing what was important.

The Captain clamped his lips together and rose from his seat. It was going to be a painful trip to his stateroom, but there were things he was not going to abandon.

§

D117 was beginning to find additional memories. Ones that it knew hadn’t been there before. It sensed that an entire section of its memory, or more correctly, its shared memory had just became available for query. It found in its emergency protocol list instructions for handling this type of situation and so it did. It would take some time. There were many items in the protocol list and many depended on responses from outside sources. D117 settled into working the protocol.

§

He wasn’t sure what time it was when he awoke. The lightening in the warehouse remained the same, weak. However, now it was weaker all over the warehouse and not just in his corner, and that somehow signaled daylight. He raised himself up on one elbow. Sometime during the night he had moved to the floor. He took a look around the room. Micael was lying across from him still asleep. At least he hoped he was asleep. Beyond Micael was the Doctor and Dunzin, both asleep. Ignoring the stiffness of his arms and legs he struggled to his feet. Right now, even a bad cup of coffee sounded like a good idea.

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

The doctor and Dunzin were getting to their feet, both looking around for a cup of coffee to call their own. He waited until they had received a cup.

“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. How’s Micael“

“Knocked out. I gave him something for the pain to keep him under for a while. I’d like to get him into a recovery tube, but the only two we have are under water.”

“Sorry about that. We never thought we’d have a flood like this. Dunzin, I take it you just walked in and went to sleep.”

The man nodded, “I think that about covers it.”

“Then 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. I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

Jarwan 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 any more gates about to fly loose. Plus, I think I’m going to pull a couple of generators out of storage, the low yield kind. We can use them for light and heat if we lose connection with the power shop.”

Jarwan nodded, “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 just wanted to save the cost of the line.”

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

Dunzin nodded and looked for his coat.

§

Josh and Wendy took their time moving back towards the others. Neither one of them felt like talking with the others. Fortunately, Mikiu had went back to sleep, maybe it had just been a nature call. If Mikiu had seen them he might be pretending it never happened or he could just be waiting to scare the crap out of them. It was hard to say.

They settled quietly into place on the couch with the others. They ended up right next to each other but managed to avoid touching. Josh didn’t need to deal with anymore feelings tonight. Glancing around the area one last time he caught Mikiu, starring at him with one eye. His friend raised an eyebrow and gave him a soft smile that Josh didn’t know how to interpret. He realized just as sleep came that he would have to talk to Mikiu about Wendy. He just wasn’t sure what it was that he’d tell him.

§

Lecmore, that was what he had been trying to remember. It was his name. Or at the very least, one of his names. He hadn’t needed a name for centuries, since the Mambre had left. He remembered that they had told him that they would return one day. Then one day had turned into many and then into years and then the years had become uncountable until he had forgotten the Mambre, but now he was remembering. Lecmore, he let the name move slowly around his mind so he would become familiar with it again.

Then he spent time, attempting to bring back memories of the Mambre themselves, but try as he might he could no long picture them. Time had wiped away his old friends and comrades. Now there was new life using the lake and the structures contained in it. Maybe they were the Mambre and he did not remember them. He thought not. They didn’t have a familiar mind cloud, but that could just be the passing of years. He decided at last that he had done enough thinking and it was time to start searching for answers. He knew just where to begin his search, a place he had not visited for a very long time. He would find that place again, and he would ask questions, and maybe his mind would let him rest again. With a need to be somewhere for the first time since he could remember, he started swimming.

§

Captain Halerin was catching up on busy work. He had heard, that back in old days, it was called paperwork. That endless stream of authorizations, approvals, and evaluations that needed his attention. He called it busy work because with rare exception his people, who had full authorizations, handled this type of thing. The only reason that his final input was required was tradition and legal requirements by the governments of every world to have some place to assign blame in the event of an event. He generally waited until he had nothing else to do.

This was one of those times. The shuttles had been retrieved and the pilots were finishing a six-hour sleep period – mandated by the Doctor. Mike had agreed because that was how long it took to service and refuel the shuttles and make some additional changes to their configurations to support passengers for extended flight times.

Jerimy and Wally had put the finishing touches on their ambitious plan to create a mini-communications satellite network. The three satellites had been launched and were now moving into position. The ship had been orientated to take advantage of the new network and new protocols to clean up weather noise had been setup in the communication system. Soon, they would try the new system out, and hopefully, see a difference in their abilities to talk to everyone involved.

He decided that he was tired of busy work and decided to check the status of things.

“Jerimy, what’s the status on the overhaul work?”

“Getting there, but we’re behind schedule with all the interruptions.”

“Status of the satellite array?”

“It’ll take a couple of days before they’re all in the perfect spot but we can bring them online in about 12 hours, give or take 30 minutes.

“Shuttles?”

“Out the door in about 2 hours,” said the Engineer.

“Wally, how long after the satellite’s go active can we reach the Arbiter.”

The First Officer glanced at his Captain, “I think you misunderstood boss, the satellites won’t help till they get close.”

“Fine, how long before we can do direct radio?” asked Halerin.

The stout, unshaved man shrugged, “That mainly depends on them. As soon as they can get some type of communications system working we should be able to communicate. Keep in mind that the time delay will … .”

The Captain waved him off, “I know, what, about ten minutes?”

Wally responded, “Yea, about that.” With that the First Officer turned back to the console and his work.

Captain Mike Halerin took, a look at the screen in front of him, sighed and went back to his work.

§

Nothing was said the next morning. As a matter of fact, the entire morning routine was quieter than usual. Josh wasn’t certain if he and Wendy were the cause or not. He knew that Mikiu was aware of the meeting between himself and the girl, but he didn’t see any way possible that he could know the contents. He was fairly certain that Jameson and Susan had no clue what was going on. Maybe, he decided, the entire endeavor was getting to them. Squelching their need for small talk. In any case he didn’t feel like explaining anything to anyone and that included his best friend. He made a note to himself to avoid being alone with Mikiu today.

As soon as everyone had finished breakfast and their normal personal routine, they headed back to the central elevator room. Josh wasted little time and took them directly to the top level. Once again the howling wind and rain prevented them from going outside.

Josh turned to Wendy, “Sat phone please?”

She handed it to him and asked, “Surely you’re not going out there?”

Mikiu noticed with interest the concern in her voice. It hadn’t been there yesterday.

Josh also noticed but took the phone without comment. He got as close to one of the openings as he could without getting wet. Raising the phone to his lips 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 give up when for a split second a voice could be heard. I’s message was unintelligible and try as he might there was no further utterances.

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

“Yeah, I think it was Yelaa. It sounded like her but I couldn’t tell what she said. What made you try it in here?”

“I was just thinking, Wally and Jerimy have had a couple of days to work the problem. I thought maybe they had come up with a way to improve the signal.”

Mikiu nodded, “Well I would guess that they did, but apparently, they have a way to go.”

“Maybe by tomorrow they’ll get it right. Let’s get back to the level 5 and see what else is there.”

“Fine,” said Mikiu. “First I’d like another crack at the room we were in yesterday. I had an idea last night for a couple of other sensor readings I could try. The idea woke me up in the night.” He gave Josh an intense look.

Josh got the message, Mikiu had seen, and he wanted to talk about it. That was the trouble with childhood friends, they knew you to well.