**New Story**

**Part 8**

**03/24/2020**

The command sub-minds, at the very top of the hierarchy, were now engaged in exchanging ideas that the lower-level sub-minds would not have recognized, opr understood. They were considering decisions not based on branching protocol trees, but on end results. They had the ability to think in terms of higher purposes, more so than their lower companions. Communication was being done in an almost organic mode, simultaneous and unrestricted. A communication method that was only utilized when matters concerning the state of being of the entire station was involved. That state of being was related to certain assumptions given to them eons ago, and not all of them had received the same assumptions. This made the current situation, for the time being, a thing to be watched and evaluated. Until they could determine the outcome of changing events with some degree of certainty it was difficult to act. But a built-in time limit was approaching.

If clarity did not arrive soon, other options would be tried. In the interim they would proceed in three ways. The first was the cessation of bad weather on a planet wide basis to give the new commers time to act. Although they had no direct method of monitoring events in the forbidden zone — the area surrounded by the forest — there were indications the intruders were still present. These indicators were energy readings taken from a distance showing continued use of electrical power and occasional communication activity. Of course no information from the communication activity could be understood, just that they had occurred.

Secondly, they would try to learn more about the other end of that communications link, high above the atmosphere. This would involve the use of equipment had not been used for millennia.

Thirdly, if the intruders showed no sign of moving, a second attempt to rid the forbidden zone of them would be made. This would also use the weather but in a different manner. It would be difficult to contain tax power availability. In this event they some deceptive shielding might be temporarily compromised. It would only be for a short time and if much was exposed steps could be taken.

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“Damm,” said Yelaa.

“Problem Yelaa,” asked the Captain.

“I had Josh for a second, but I lost him. At least I think it was him.”

“Keep trying,” said Halerin.

He walked over to her console and slipped on a spare headset to listen. The static was still bad, but not as bad as before.

“Is the storm lessening?”

“It might be,” said Wally. “We’ve also got more antennas pointed at the ground from the new satellites. They’re not fully in position yet, we may get better results then.”

“Good, Yelaa, keep an ear tuned.”

“Yes sir,” said the communication specialist.

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The journey to level 5 didn’t take much time. Josh would have patted himself on the back for his increased ability at handling the elevator system, if it hadn’t been for the increased number of things now weighing on his mind. Along with the impending wider conflict among the systems of the sector as a whole, and the local weathers apparent intention to wipe out the colony, he also had to deal with his own awaking feelings for Wendy and her concerns about the colony. All in all, he had to many things to worry about.

This time they ignored the subtle light coming from the entrance of the *meeting* room, as Mikiu had dubbed it, and concentrated on the remaining 4 entrances. It didn’t take them long to discover that the rest of the level was just a large equipment bay. The rooms weren’t really rooms, simply corridors between banks of heavy equipment that reminded Josh of pictures of old supercomputers he had seen. This was apparently where a lot of the equipment controlling and powering the central pillar elevator was located. It took them just about an hour to cover all the remaining space of level five. Mikiu also got his additional sensor readings from the meeting room while he, Wendy, and the others kept as far away from the mind link rods as possible.

That left just the sixth level to investigate. They recognized immediately that this level was going to be different. As soon as they arrived, only two openings appeared, 180 degrees apart and much larger than the previous openings. They opened into wide shadowy passages with a damp musty smell emanating from them. It didn’t smell evil or disgusting, just of disuse and staleness. Like a ships cabin that hadn’t been used in a really long time with the ventilation turned off to save power.

Josh and the team walked to one of the openings. It was a corridor leading off into the distance. There view of it ended in a blue blurriness caused by a combination of bad lighting and distance. This tunnel appeared to travel much further than the points of the star above. They were obviously well below the bottom of the lake.

Mikiu, with his scanner extended, said, “Wow, I’m getting really weird readings here, all kind of power circuits, atmospheric contaminants, and other weird stuff. Damm.”

Josh, checking his own sensor unit frowned and gave up. “You get any kind of distance reading? My sensors say that this goes on for days.”

“Yeah, mine too, I hope they have a lounge room to sleep in because this will take time.”

Wendy asked, “How far are we talking?”

Josh gave her a wry smile, “I don’t read an ending for ten plus kilometers, and that reading may not be correct, lots of sensor noise. Of course, it may not go that far. These readings fit the definition of best guess.”

“Want to see if the other doorway is the same?” asked Mikiu.

Josh glanced at the time. “Sure, why not. If it isn’t a long tunnel we might as well check it first. Get it out of the way.”

Josh pulled his flashlight and started down the unlit passage. “Okay, maybe we’ll find the switch for the weather and not have to go down the long tunnel at all.”

The science officer gave him a wry look. “I still want to see what’s down the long tunnel thank you. But it might be nice though to have the pressure off and explore just for the heck of it.”

The two openings had similar sizes. The similarities ended there. Instead of facing a long tunnel to the unknown, you could see the end of this one although what was at the end was obscured by poor lighting. The corridor itself gave off only a faint glow, enough to allow walking but little else. With a quick force field check by an extended arm Josh led them through the opening. It took only a few minutes for the team to cover the distance, although it felt longer than that. Josh was beginning to get impatient with the walking down corridors.

They stopped within ten meters of the tunnel end for Mikiu to scan. It took longer than seemed necessary.

Finally Josh asked, “what’s the hold up.”

Mikiu shook his head, “Sorry, just a little confused here. I’m reading a lot of energy sources, small ones, but there so many of them. Just trying to get an idea of what they might be.”

“Well, let’s go see what they are.”

The exited the tunnel, entering what felt like a large room. It was dark but soon begin to fill with a faint light. It was a greenish light that stopped short of what they had grown to consider normal.

The room was narrow, long, and tall. Both sides were lined with large tubular objects that reminded Josh of cigars. Cigars big enough to carry several people. He glanced at Mikiu.

“Submarines?”

“That’s what they look like. I would guess one man, or two at the most.”

There were three rows of them on each side of, stacked five high. A wide ladder was placed between the rows giving access to a catwalk on each level.

“You mean two aliens,” said Josh. “But I think you’re right. And the green lighting, maybe to prepare their eyes for the lake?”

“Maybe, although at this depth I doubt if there’s much in the way of light from the surface.

“That makes sense I guess, but with their eyesight who knows. Humph. What else would you put a lake… a submarine base.”

Jameson agreed, “Yea, that’s what they look like. I’ve used at school to research with.”

“Actually,” said Mikiu, “if you think about it, makes perfect sense. Jameson probably hit the nail on the head. It’s a big lake, for research, or even maintenance, a small sub is the perfect way to get around.”

“What kind of research would they be doing?” asked Josh. “Didn’t they build the damm thing?”

“We think they did,” said Mikiu. It might have something to do with the flora or fauna of this planet. Remember, they probably were visitors here, no indication they were native to Tingies.”

Josh shook his head in disagreement. “That doesn’t make sense. They build this whole place. You would think they would know exactly what was in the lake.”

“Unless,” said Jameson, “the lake was built just to accommodate whatever the mind link rods are for. The fact that they had a communication system rigged up could mean a multi-species effort.”

Josh nodded. That made as much sense as anything else. He walked further into the room, nothing else was visible, not even a control panel. The controls for getting a sub in or out were probably in the subs themselves.

He checked his watch again, plenty of time left. This room had taken almost no time to explore. “Okay, let’s go check out the long corridor. I can use the exercise.

To his surprise Wendy disagreed. That caught Mikiu’s attention.

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Someone was shaking his shoulder. He heard himself snap at someone and forced himself to wake up. Muttering an apology he sat up and glanced around. Most of the people were still asleep, or at least resting. It was Dr Bitterlly who had shook him. Looking into her pale but surprisingly deep eyes he decided she could shake him awake anytime. He grinned at her and raised his eyebrows in question.

“Come on, get up, you’ve got to see!” she said.

“Whoa,” he said, wondering at her smile. “What’s the excitement?”

“The rain stopped. The sun is out.”

He scrambled to his feet, and almost had to run following her out of the warehouse. She moved quickly she but made an effort not to disturb anyone. He appreciated that. These people needed their sleep.

The sunlight hit him in the face the second she opened the door. The storm was gone, the sky clear. The sun still rising on the horizon. He stood with his mouth open. “How long ago did this happen?”

Dunzin was standing by the warehouse door, leaning against a cargo hauler. “It stopped half an hour ago, like someone turned off a switch. Strangest thing I ever saw. It’s just not right for a sky to clear that.”

Jarwan starred at the sky. “Just like it started. That wasn’t right either.”

“I don’t care how it started – or stopped. I’m only glad it did,” said Denise. “This much better. I’m going to get Polly and Sam.” She turned and ducked back through the door.

Jarwan glanced at his second in command. “This is good news but I’m afraid that my trust in this planet is a bit low right now. Wake everyone up. Let’s do some cleanup and repair work while we can. In case it decides to start up again.”

The man nodded, “Already sent people over to the Power shack to spell Warren and get started on cleaning it up. They can make sure our repairs will last a while. We’ll need to rebuild from the ground up at some point.”

Jarwan nodded, “right now isn’t that point. Just do what you can. Get the others up and moving. I’m going to call the Deidre.” He stopped and laughed. “I wonder if the kids did something to stop this?”

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Wally was the first to notice. He was the only one awake.

“Captain,” he said, a little louder than normal.

That did the trick. “Yea,” answered Halerin, his voice gravelly with sleep.

“Weathers clearing. I mean it cleared, fast.”

The captain, fully awake now let surprise slip into his voice. “Give me a picture.”

The First Officer slid a hand over a panel and Halerin found himself looking at a planet without a cloud in sight. The entire field of view was completely clear of clouds. The last few days it had been a sea of white, but today, not a cloud.

“You weren’t kidding. Not a cloud in sight. How long did that take?”

His first officer shook his head, “twenty, twenty-five minutes. Just long enough for me to decide to wake you.”

Yelaa jerked her attention from the screen. Something had gotten her attention. She pressed her headset tightly to her ear.

“Incoming Captain, it’s Jarwan,” she said.

Halerin moved back to the command chair and toggled the comm unit on the armrest.

“Jarwan, that you?”

“Hey Mike, yea it’s me, or what’s left of me,” came the colony leader’s voice.

“Looks like the weather is taking a break. What kind of shape are you in?”

“No deaths, several injuries, and Micael Tosition managed to break both of his legs below the knees.”

“Ouch,” said the captain, “how is he?”

“Sleeping, like a baby. Something I wish I could do but the Doc won’t give me what she gave him.”

“Maybe if you break both legs.”

“Don’t temp me. About the weather, what happened?”

“No clue. I gather this means you don’t know what happened either.”

“I was hoping you would tell me that Josh and Wendy found the off switch. I guess that’s not the case.”

“No,” said Halerin. “And the bad part is that we probably can’t reach them to let them know the weather cleared. I’m still considering sending down a shuttle if the weather holds. Trouble is, with no way to let them know, I might just end up with two teams stuck on the surface.”

“Hear that. I don’t suppose Wally or Jerimy have an idea what’s going on, Why the weather changed. More importantly, is it going to change again.”

“I haven’t even had a chance to talk to them about it yet. I can see Wally frantically doing something now and I’m sure Jerimy is probably the same. Let me try and find out if they’ve found anything and get back to you. Is there anything you desperately need? With this weather Russ or Lydia could get down to you in a hurry?”

You could almost hear the interest in Jarwan’s voice. “I assume that offer incudes the things we talked about before.”

“Of course. Did you tell your people yet?”

“Haven’t had a chance with everything going on. But I need to do that, now, while the flight window is open. Let me get back to you.”

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Jarwan put down the microphone and looked around for the people he needed to tell. The only one he could see was Martha and the doctor. He turned to Cheryl, the colonies communications expert.

“Okay, let’s put that fancy training of yours to work. Get hold of Dunzin and tell him meeting at the top of the hour, here in the corner. You might as well be here too.”

“Right boss. I’ll call the Power shack. That’s where he was heading.”

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“That’s not true. You’ve still got the captain’s gig,” said Jerimy.

Halerin frowned, “why would we want to use that?”

Jerimy swung his bridge seat around to glance at Tingies on the center screen. It’s a better atmospheric flyer than either of the two shuttles. It useless for general cargo hauling, no space, and it can only carry 5 people. Although, in an emergency, we could crowd the exploration team in if we had to. But most importantly, it leaves us with the two shuttles to either take us down to the colony or bring the colony up to us.”

“If something happens to the captain’s gig?”

The engineer smiled grimly. “That’s what I’m saying. And keep in mind, I’ll be on it if something goes wrong so I’m not especially worried.”

“You’ll be on it?”

“You heard me. Why shouldn’t I be. That’s the most technically advanced alien ruins ever found. I want to see them.”

Mike Halerin cast a baleful eye towards his engineer. “So do I. You’re right of course. I would very much like to explore whatever this is. But do you really think the Albatross is the best ship for penetrating the deception field. And remind me again to rename that damm thing.”

“Yes, it has the best aerodynamics, and its engines are the most responsive. You’ve been bitching about the name your father gave that boat for as long as I can remember. If you wanted to change it you’ve had ample time.”

“I know, but instead of bad luck we’ve always had good luck with that boat. No point in risking that luck by changing its name.

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Yelaa interrupted, “Sir, I’ve got Jarwan back.”

Halerin hit the comm button. “That didn’t take long.”

“It’s not a big place. Meetings happen in a hurry. This one didn’t take long. Everyone walked out.”

“They didn’t take the news well?”

“You could say that,” said Jarwan. “Dunzin went to check his inventory to see what he’d like you to bring down. The Doctor said everything medical and Martha wants to know if we get a discount for taking everything at once.”

Halerin laughed, “Martha would try to get a discount for getting a discount. Did you explain to them about the extra gear we brought?”

“Well, that was a problem.”

Halerin straightened in his chair a little, his head shifting back. “A problem, they have a problem with free stuff. What didn’t they like?”

“They didn’t like the fact that I couldn’t tell them what the free stuff is. You never gave me a list.”

The head slumped to Halerin’s chest. “Damm, no I didn’t. My fault Jarwan. We’ll send that down now. Maybe it’ll unruffle some feathers.”

“Oh, their feathers weren’t that ruffled, at least not at you. They’re a might miffed at me for not giving them warning, but they sort of understand that I’ve been a little preoccupied. They’re just concerned about how we’ll handle your people. Where to put them.”

“Tell them not to think about that yet. The ship is a little full but we’re fine. But, I reiterate, while we have this window, I want to get some of this stuff down to you.”

“As soon as they give me a list I’ll call.”

“Sounds good Jarwan. Deidre out.” The captain motioned for Yelaa to cut the transmission.

“Okay, let’s try Josh,” he said. With the weather clear maybe our signal can penetrate the water.”

Yelaa nodded and turned to her console. After trying for several minutes she turned to the captain. “No go, sir.”

“I wouldn’t have thought that would work. They’re too far underwater. And we don’t have any way to let them know the weather cleared,” said Wally.

“Let alone whatever the place is made of,” added Jerimy. “Now back to the Captain’s gig. Do we want to try it with the weather clear? It might be our only chance.”

The Captain leaned back in his seat. He didn’t like the idea of sending a ship down blindly, not knowing what kind of shielding the alien base had. Was it just a deception field whose only purpose was to keep outsiders from knowing what lie beneath, or would it prevent a ship from entering. He remembered the energy draining field at the desert wall.

Turning to Jerimy he raised a hand to his forehead to preface his instructions. “Okay, let’s do this. Prep the Albatross, put whatever you can think of on board. Include at least one sensor drone that you can use to probe the field. If it even looks like the weathers going to turn bad again we’ll think hard about taking it down.”

The engineer just nodded and motioned to Wally to go with him as he left the bridge.

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The long tunnel was just that, long. It was also dimly lit compared to the other corridors. It soon became apparent that the walls, even though grey, were not made of the same material.

“Mikiu, what do you think about the floor and ceiling?” asked Josh.

“Well, one’s for walking on and the other is above our heads,” replied Mikiu.

Josh laughed, very briefly. “Hey funny man, I’m serious.”

“I know, I just don’t have a better answer. Yes, it is the same grey material they use for everything, but according to the sensors, and I wouldn’t rely on anything they’re saying, it’s much older, less finished. This may be the base or city. Whatever you want to call it.”

“That’s the impression I got. It doesn’t look as smooth and the light it’s putting out is uneven. It doesn’t match up with the other levels, maybe this was here first, and they just built the elevator through it.”

Mikiu thought for a moment, “That might make sense if you accept the fact the lake was added later. It could also be that for whatever reason they didn’t put as much effort into this.”

Susan said, “at least their consistent with the color scheme.”

“There is that,” agreed Josh. “You may be right Mikiu. Until we figure out the reason for building this place I don’t think we should make any assumptions. That just makes…”

“An ass of you and me. It wouldn’t be the first time, would it?”

It took the better part of an hour before they could see an opening might be ahead, way in the distance. Josh had begun to think they might be spending the night in the corridor. Not something he had wanted to do. But he thought to himself, they still might if what was a ahead required much time in the way of exploration. He didn’t relish the thought of having to make this trip back and forth often.

At the end of the corridor they slowed and then stopped. Trying to take it in left them speechless. This was not just a room they were entering. It was a cavernous space, so large Josh could only sense a ceiling above. He couldn’t see an opposing wall. The space just kept going and going until it faded in the distance. It took a few seconds and a sensor reading to convince him they hadn’t walked into the outdoors. The sense of expanse, of space, was immense.

Mikiu was the first to find his voice. “Well, this is little humbling.”

Josh found his throat and lips dry but managed to croak out a response. “A little humbling.”

The immense scale of the place was not what had taken their voices. It was the contents of that space. Stretching in front of them on either side were spaceships of varying sizes, shapes, colors and designs. They were separated from the previous ships in each line by what looked to be a set distance, but that didn’t seem to be hard rule because not too far from where they stood were larger ships that spanned took the space of two or more of the smaller ships. Around each vessel was a framework of towers and gantries, hoses and cables, cargo elevators and repair derricks, all the things needed to maintain a space vessel of any kind. And there were many kinds of ships present, many whose purpose Josh couldn’t even guess. Past the immediate vessels on either sides of them he could see the start of additional rows, to many to count.

A quick look at his comrades showed faces frozen in amazement. Frozen or paralyzed, he couldn’t tell which, but at that moment, he understood both.

“Mikiu, I may be wrong. But, this like a space port. A spaceport under a lake, is that what I’m seeing?”

It took a minute before Mikiu was able to answer. “No, you would be correct. This is a Spaceport, on a planet, under a lake. However, I believe that we must be hallucinating. Because you can’t have that. Starships are big. You can’t launch them from the ground. You can’t launch them from underwater. You can’t launch anything as big as some of these from a gravity well. It just isn’t done.”

Josh tore his gaze away from the line of ships. His friend sounded almost offended. He chuckled at the expression on Mikiu’s face. “Apparently no one told these people that.”

Susan took the opportunity to use some of the more colorful language from her past living on a prison world. Wendy and Jameson simply continued to stare with their mouths open, unable to voice any thoughts.

Josh walked away from the group, his eyes fixed on the closest ship. It was big and round and sat in a frame of metal tubes that could be either landing gear or cradle. He decided cradle. The shape, size and number of visible hatches told his pilot’s mind was a cargo shuttle. But not the kind you park on a planet. The kind used to haul stuff around an orbiting shipyard, or a station in deep space. You certainly didn’t use them the gravity well of a planet.

Letting his eye focus on ships farther away he saw many others that were never meant for planetary work, and many that were. He saw shuttle sized vessels mixed in with what, by their very sizes, were true starships. Vessels whose only purpose was to ply the space lanes and never touch the surface of a planet. These ships, like the cargo vessel he had just observed, were sitting in cradles. They were like the Deidre, possessing no landing gear for they were never intended to land.

Mikiu had noticed the same thing. “This doesn’t make sense. Some of these ships were not meant for planet use. Why are they here?”

Josh shrugged his shoulders. “You mean we would never use them on a planet. It’s obvious from the cradles holding them this base was built to include them. My only question, is this just some type of maintenance or storage facility, built to work on all kinds of ships, or is it a general-purpose port. Obviously in either case they have some way of getting ships up and down a gravity well that we don’t.”

“That doesn’t bother me that much,” said Mikiu. “But how the hell do they get them through the lake water. They obviously can’t drain it. Maybe it is long term storage. Maybe they built the lake over it.”

Susan said, “I don’t think so guys. Why go to that expense. I bet they have some way to move ships to a pad of some sort. A pad that has an easy opening to the sky.”

Mikiu shook his head. “Maybe. But half these ships are in cradles. How do they land them?”

“That,” said Josh, “is a very good question. But I think it’s safe to say that if they can do that they can certainly control the weather.”

“And probably anything else they want to,” added Susan.

Josh turned to look at Wendy. He was amazed that she still hadn’t found anything to say. “Time to head back to our lounge room. I think it’s time for a serious conversation.”

The girl had noticed his expression. “Conversation, about what?”

He held up a hand, palm outward. “About this, about why we don’t want to broadcast it.”

“You mean why you don’t want the rest of the sector finding out about it. That conversation?”

“Apparently my dad talked to your dad, who talked to you. You’ve known all along the Deidre intended to stick around for a while.”

“What,” exclaimed Jameson, “well no one’s father told me about it.”

“Or,” said Josh, “we can have the conversation now.”

“No, it can wait. Jameson, things are getting nervous in the sector. The Clarigton Group getting hostile, trying to take control.” She gave Josh a wry smile. “And for some reason, they don’t like the Deidre, or the Halerins.”

“Oh,” said Jameson. “They don’t like the fact that people would rather pay the Deidre, or the other independents to settle colony worlds, like Tingies.”

“That’s part of it,” said Josh. “They have other reasons for not liking us but this complicates some things. Things that directly effect the colony.”

“This,” he motioned to enormous space, “is going to cause a problem. The Clarigton’s are not going to let anyone but themselves control this. They’re too greedy to let this much potential profit get away, and let’s not ignore the technology. If they got hold this it could mean trouble for all of occupied space.”

Wendy pointed out the obvious. “I hate to burst anyone’s bubble here, but we’ve got more important things to think about. This may be the biggest find in the history of the race but unless we figure out how to turn the weather off it doesn’t mean a damm thing to the colony.

Josh turned his back on the ships. “She’s right. This is really important, but it doesn’t help us. We’ve got to figure out what’s wrong with this planet. This does change some things. We’ve got to let the others know. And we’ve got to do it without broadcasting over open airwaves. I seriously doubt that anyone’s out there listening but with Smart Drone Scouts you can’t be sure. If we can reach the ship I can pass along a keyword message. It won’t tell them what we found, but they’ll know some important is here. Then we go to the lounge room and eat and sleep. Then we’ve got a lot of territory to explore. We need to find what’s causing the bad weather. And we need to do it fast.”

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Jarwan was up to his knees in mud. The sky was clear but the aftereffects of the rain were obvious. The entire colony was knee deep in mud and the excess water was slow to drain off, it had nowhere to go.

Mud was everywhere and made travel difficult. The colony’s wheeled vehicles were useless and even the two tracked cargo movers were having a difficult time with the depth of the mud involved. Digging out supplies and repairing damaged structures was proving to be difficult, and slow. By necessity Jarwan and Dunzin had prioritized their to do list with an eye towards survival if the rain came back. He had made choices and limited activities to retrieving anything needed that was not currently present in the warehouse. Dunzin was moving one of the emergency power generators into the warehouse along with the gear to use it. Time permitting the plan was to add another generator. They had cordoned off one corner for equipment. If bad weather returned Jarwan wanted to be ready, or as close to ready as possible.

Which was why he was up to his hips in mud. He was helping he the colony’s strongest men attempt to repair and reinforce the warehouse foundation. The danger of the foundations failing was more worrisome than actually flooding.

He heard a voice calling and looked over to see Dunzin, sitting in a dry area underneath the loading door roof. Making sure his presence on the safety line was not needed he slowly walked his way through the mud to freedom. He reached Dunzin just as his strength gave out.

Dunzin gave him and up and down look, noting the amount of mud sticking to his environmental suit. “Having fun?”

“Loads, what’s up?” answered Jarwan.

“Well, for one thing, if you really want to shore up the warehouse you could use some guy lines.”

“And attach them to what?”

“Other buildings, drive some stakes down in the ground, whatever. Just saying it might be easier, and cleaner,” said Dunzin.

“Strangely enough, that makes sense. Surely you’re not here just to critique my repair skills.”

The blond man smirked, “It’s a good a reason as any, but no, I came to tell you that the new temporary repairs to the power station are done. As long as no more flying gates come along we’re okay.”

Jarwan drew his head back in surprise. “Good, but I still want the backups in place.”

“Oh, they’re in place. It’s just a matter of connecting things and I can do that after the sun goes down.”

“You really think Guy lines are going to help protect the foundation?”

“No directly. It will keep the building from swaying so much and putting strain on the foundation. I’m starting to become fond of the idea of moving everyone to the underground warehouse.”

“I thought we didn’t want to take the time to move everything from where we are?“

“We didn’t, or don’t. But with the Deidre running new stuff down to us I’m putting it in the underground. It’s getting a little crowed in there but if we have too, we can move to it without having to carry everything. If it becomes necessary of course.”

Jarwan echoed the thought. “If it becomes necessary.”

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By this time Josh was using the elevator room without thinking about it. He had quickly grown accustomed to the required combination of pressing manual controls and having the intent for the actions to be performed. Now, it was just how the thing operated. After the long walk back through the space port corridor the trip to the surface had seemed instantaneous.

It was still light outside, but just barely, night was coming fast. Most importantly, the storm was absent, not a trace of it in the sky. No rain, no wind, just a trace of a breeze blowing through the five openings.

“How about that,” said Josh, leading the others outside. “What was that old joke? Wait fifteen minutes and the weather will change. I think it must have been written about this planet.”

Josh unclipped the sat phone from his belt and called the ship.

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“Captain, I’ve got Josh,” said Yelaa, her face breaking into a smile.

“Thanks,” he said reaching out to trigger the comm on his chair. He noticed the others pausing their activities to listen.

“Son, is that you?”

“Yea, it’s me. The weather cleared up.”

“Yes, we noticed that. Is everyone okay down there?”

“Yes. Have you heard from the colony? Wendy wants to know about her dad?”

“Weather cleared there too. Russ and Patty just returned from a second cargo drop. We’re going to do one more. I hate the idea of them landing in the dark. There are no landing lights down there. But Jarwan and I don’t want to pass up the opportunity while things are good. The storm could return in a hurry.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “We were thinking maybe you folks had something to do with the weather clearing up.”

“If we did, we’re unaware of it. We’ve just been looking around. What about trying to get us out of here?”

“Wally and Jerimy have come up with a scheme involving the captains gig. If the weather holds till tomorrow, we may try it. If we do, you’ll need to call us early. We’ll probably try it early morning.

Josh gave Mikiu a curious expression. Mikiu shrugged his shoulders. Josh asked, “The gig, why?”

“It flies better, you know that.”

“It’s a better bird in atmosphere sure, but it can’t carry very much. The only reason we have it is the ego of the last Captain.”

“I know that, but we’re only sending a couple of people and the thing will hold a dozen in an emergency. We can get you out if we need to.”

“Yea, stacked together like firewood. Tell them to include some padding.”

Jerimy answered, “we loaded bubble wrap. Just in case.”

“Great, Dad, like I said, we haven’t found anything related to the weather.

“A lot of interesting stuff but nothing spectacular. It’s definitely not a vacation spot.”

Halerin’s eyebrows rose, “Understood. I guess just keep looking. I think Jerimy wants to see the place so he may ride the gig down. Maybe he’ll see something you missed. It’s a shame we don’t have any weather control experts. Any other kind of expert you think might help?”

Josh looked at Mikiu again. This time with a question on his face. Once again his friend responded with just a shrug. “Nothing we can think of Dad. We’ll try to get up top and call you early enough to let you know if we think of anything.”

“Okay son. In case you didn’t notice, the call quality is improved. We launched three comm satellites to supplement the colony’s bird.”

“Noticed that, figured you’d try that. Thanks.”

“Talk to Wally a moment. He can fill you in on what we set up with the other sats.”

“Okay, talk to you tomorrow Dad. Put Wally on.”

Wally switched the call to his own console at Halerins nod. Jerimy waited until the switch over before talking.

“Vacation spot, he found something. And that was the worst segue to asking what kind of expertise he needed I’ve ever heard. A two-year-old would figure it out.”

Halerin grinned. “The worst. I don’t think it was that bad. They already know they’re in an alien ruin. This doesn’t really tell anyone anything. And unfortunately, that includes us.”

Jerimy grimaced us, “you’re right about that. All we know is he found something he doesn’t want to broadcast. And you’re right, it must be something really big since any listening would already know where they are. Maybe they found actual alien’s.

“God, I hope not,” said Halerin. “Remember all those ancient procedures they created for a first contact, the paperwork alone would take years.”

“Ahhg. I remember that. I remember the training video’s they made us watch?”

“I don’t honestly think we’d have to worry about it. Word gets out about this find and the Clarigton Group will swoop in to claim it.”

“Yea,” said the engineer. “And if what Josh found is really big. They might decide to lose us, permanently.”

Mike Halerin thought about it. They needed to implement encryption that couldn’t be broken quickly, and that meant a one-time pad setup. He would make sure that Jerimy took one with him to the planet. Anything else could be easily broken by a ships computer system.”

He motioned to Wally and Jerimy.

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Josh was about to lead them back into the elevator room when Wendy stopped.

“Mikiu, you said this water was clean?” she asked.

“Yes. I mean it’s clean enough for us to drink. I don’t even think there’s anything in it that would bother our digestive tract. You want to fill up our canteens now. That’s not a bad idea.” He looked at Josh. “How about it boss. While the weathers good?”

“That wasn’t what I meant,” said Wendy. “I’m just tired of smelling myself.”

Josh glanced down at himself. “Okay. Valid point. We’re a little ripe. Several days in an environmental suit and we start to smell. What about it Mikiu? Is it safe to take a bath?”

“As long as someone stands guard to make sure nothing swims up to take a chunk out.”

Susan was never one to hold back when it came to getting naked. “A bath. That’s the best idea I’ve heard in a week.” She proceeded to start stripping out of her body suit.

Josh looked helplessly at the others and shrugged. “I guess we’re taking a bath. But let’s do it with a little organization. Girls first, boys stand guard and then we switch.”

Wendy, already half out of here own environmental suit laughed. Sounds good, that way we all get a chance to watch.”

“Watching yes,” said Josh. “but for danger, with weapons ready.”

Susan, ready to follow Susan into the water gave him a mischievous grin. “Sure, just make sure your weapons ready.”

Josh felt himself starting to blush and turned away. The taboo against nudity no longer existed. That didn’t make this any easier. At least as far as Wendy was involved. He wondered if the shared experience with the mind link rods was involved.

He turned back around and started his guard duty, trying to keep his eyes off the two splashing women. He noticed the two men removing their clothing. He wasn’t sure they whether they were just tired of the smell or just wanted to be ready to hit the water when it was there turn.

Mikiu sat beside him with only his sidearm present. “Things are getting a little complicated.”

Josh pretended not to understand. “Why, you’ve seen lots of people bathing before. We share bathes on the ship all the time. It saves water.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“I take it you’re referring to me and Wendy?” Josh glanced sideways to make sure that Jameson was still apart from them, watching the other direction. He knew the man had feelings for Wendy.”

“I do. Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt things last night.”

“What do you think you were interrupting?” asked Josh.

“Not entirely sure. But even at a distance it was obvious something was going on. Besides, she’s a client.” said Mikiu.

“A client we may be spending years with. My mother was a ship’s client – so what.”

“I know that and don’t care. It just seems that your outlook changed after that thing with the mind link rod. This just seems a little out of character, for both of you.”

Josh sighed, “I know. This isn’t the first time she and I have hooked up. There are still some feelings left over. But I think you’re right about the mind link thing. It certainly advanced what was happening between us. Made it easier, and a lot more intense. I’m not even sure what it means yet.”

“Just making sure you were paying attention. As long as you can admit you don’t know what’s going on you’re probably okay. The entire race is still trying to figure out this whole extended life span thing.”

“Yea, ain’t that a bitch, living to a thousand, and no history to tell us how to do it..

Mikiu smiled. “If I remember, a friend of mine, who thinks he smart, said that’s what makes this a great time to live in.”

“Okay, got it. But don’t worry. The mind link may have sped things up but it didn’t create the feelings. They were there. I dunno, maybe the coming war is just an excuse to settle down, at least for a while.”

Mikiu start get to his feet. “Looks like the girls are done.” He gave his friend a droll expression. “She does look good naked.”

“Yes. Yes, she does. Quit looking you pervert.”

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The day marched into early morning and Jarwan felt like he had been marching with it. His feet and legs ached from the constant fight with the mud. He was pleased with all that they had accomplished and also disgusted at how much the mud had limited them. The hardest task had been unloading the shuttles from the Deidre, the last of which had just returned to the sky in a spectacular night launch. The two shuttles had managed three trips each which gave the colony some security for the future. If the weather didn’t kill them, they could last for years. Albeit, on a diet of strictly concentrates. Hopefully, they could soon dry out the grain and other food stuffs stored in their other warehouses.

Dunzin sat across from him, his plate filed his second helping of food prepared those of the colony not able to fight with the mud. Mostly that had been the young and the very old.

Between bites his friend talked. “We got a lot done today. If the weather holds maybe, we can get some stuff out of the other buildings tomorrow.”

“Maybe dry out the residence halls. That would be nice. I think everyone would be ready for some privacy and the chance to clean up,” said Jarwan.

“You mean everyone would like a respite from the stink of thy neighbor?”

“You becoming a preacher?”

“No, but I am definitely a man of the soil now,” said Dunzin.

“Aren’t we all. Personally I could do with a little less soil. He got to his feet at the approach of Dr. Bitterlly. “Doctor, would you care to join us?”

She looked at Dunzin curiously, “Is he always this polite when he’s tired or is he about to give me bad news?”

“Nah, I just think he just likes you.”

Jarwan gave his friend a dirty look. “I would kick you under the table, if I could lift my leg.”

The Doctor smiled, “don’t bother. I think I like you too. I’m to tired to know sure.

He nodded in understanding and changed the subject. “How’s Micael. I haven’t had time to think about him since this morning.”

The smile faded from her face. “He’s doing alright. Still in a lot of pain. I’d like to give him more pain killer, but I don’t want to risk it until things have settle down. Any idea when that will be?”

“If the good weather stays maybe now.”

“But you’re not counting on that are you?”

“Right now the planet is in charge and I don’t see that changing anytime soon.”

“Just tell the planet I don’t need any more patients.”

“We’ll try Doc,” said Dunzin with a grin. But I don’t think it’s listening to us.”

“I’m not sure it ever was,” said Jarwan.

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Josh enjoyed his time in the water. He especially enjoyed the occasional view of the dock where the women were drying. He, Mikiu and Jameson were taking their turn getting clean. Jameson had elected to keep his underwear. Josh wasn’t certain of the reason and didn’t ask.

The two girls had rinsed out the rest of their clothing and set it out to dry in the fading sun. The water wicking material wouldn’t take long to dry, even in the disappearing heat.

Finally Josh had regretfully climbed out of the water and dressed with out the taking time to dry. The environmental suit would handle that. He just didn’t like the idea of laying down to dry in his condition.”

“Everybody feel better?” he asked.

A chorus of yes was his answer.

“Okay, let’s get back to the lounge. Now that I’m clean my stomach wants some attention.”

“Same here,” said Mikiu.

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Lecmare swam, slowly at first, then quicker and quicker until he had reached a speed he hadn’t used in centuries. A speed he had no reason to use, not until now when he was searching. It was the bottom of the lake that he was searching. Searching for the indicator beacons that outlined the area to stay clear of. Looking for the area from which the Mambre and the others had left and returned and then, just left. Sometimes they used the bigger transport system on land, but that was only for coming back. When leaving they still used the ships and to use the ships, they needed the *stay clear* area on the lake bottom to be free. But it had been so long since any ship had left that the descendants of the lake no longer avoided the *stay clear* area. There had been no reason too, for untold years. He thought that he remembered the locations, but after countless centuries the bottom of the lake was covered with sediment washed down from the land. His once perfect memory was now not so perfect. There was a species whose sole purpose was to clean the *stay clear area*, but they had forgotten their purpose. Much like Lecmare had forgotten his own. Now he was trying to bring back those memories. It was not an easy task. Eventually he stopped looking and headed back to his thinking place. He would work on rebuilding memories a while longer.

He was left with only one place to look for answers, the meeting place. With swift strokes of his tail he turned his direction to the center of the lake. He hoped that he would not have to wait long.

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Josh decided to mix things up in their exploration the base level. Instead of continuing to search the circular corridor that was the first wheel off the tunnel from the elevator room, he moved to the third ring from the center. They needed to cover ground quicker and that meant taking some chances. Besides he thought, if the further ring corridor didn’t pan out, time permitting they could hit the second on their way back. He didn’t like the idea of potentially putting something dangerous on their backside but time was pressing.

The new corridor looked a lot like the old one, with one exception. The doors appeared to be already open. A pair of openings on either side appeared about 30 meters from the intersection with the outgoing corridor.

“That’s convenient,” said Josh.

“Yes, it is,” replied Mikiu. Don’t ask me why because I have no idea. Let’s go see what we’ve got. I’m laying odds that they’re both lounge rooms. So far, most of what we’ve seen has been living space, nothing that looks like a work area.”

“No way,” said Wendy, “I’m betting on a dormitory. They had to have some place to sleep.”

“More likely a barracks,” said Josh. “No bets, let’s just see what we find. The door on the right first. Susan, cover the one on the left.”

“Roger that,” said Susan.

­ Josh led the way to the openings, not as slowly as two days ago. They had lost some of their initial fear of the unknown. Reaching the openings Susan turning to the left, hand on her sidearm. The others drifted into the opening on the right, a room filled with control consoles.

His back was to Susan. He didn’t see her draw. But he heard the sound of her weapon slipping from its holster. He didn’t even realize that he was turning till he found himself, weapon in hand, standing beside Susan. In front of them, just inside the entrance to the other room, was what was obviously a security drone. Tall, round, and showing a pair of ventilated weapons barrels there was no mistaking its purpose.

“Ohhh Fuck,” Wendy exclaimed behind them. Josh turned back as rapidly as he had turned away. He saw what Wendy was staring at. A skeleton laying in the opening passage through the consoles. He turned his attention to the rest of the room, eyes scanning for danger. The only thing he saw were control consoles. Many of them I with controls visible and even working displays showing splashes of color and movement.

Mikiu, standing sideways with his gun in hand said, “Everyone relax. I think they’re both dead.”

Josh turned from the skeleton for another look at the robot. His eyebrows climbed. “Not just dead – I’d say they shot each other.”

Wendy, still staring, placed a hand on his arm. “Sorry for my language.”

Mikiu laughed grimly. “Don’t worry about it. You saved me the trouble.”

Josh gave the girl a sideways smile, feeling the warmth of her touch. “Mikiu, you want to scan that robot to make sure it’s dead.”

“I think that hole in its chest is a pretty good indicator.”

“That might be. Check it please,” said Josh. “I’m not even sure about Mr. bones here.”

Susan, her voice higher than normal, asked. “What pile of bones. Someone want to tell me what’s going on.”

Josh gave here a glance. She was staring at the robot, gun still in hand. He realized that she hadn’t even turned to see what Wendy had cursed for.

He moved alongside here pointing his own weapon at the still robot. “I’ve got it. Go ahead and look.”

Her eyes checked his pointed weapon and then she turned to look behind her. Her own weapon never wavered from its target.

“Oh, a dead guy. A dead guy with a weapon. I guess they did shoot each other,” said Susan.

Josh wasn’t ready to agree. “Looks that way but I’m not convinced yet, Mikiu?”

The science officer lowered his scanner. “Don’t know who shot how but I can tell you this. Mr. robot here is dead, no energy readings whatsoever.”

Josh took a closer look at the room with the skeleton. It wasn’t as deep as the lounge and instead of furniture groupings it was filled with banks of consoles running parallel side walls There were four rows, one along each wall and two with their backs abutted in the center. The consoles featured lower areas filled with switches and an upper slope containing displays. Many of the display screens were active, showing scenes from both the outdoors and some that were obviously other indoor settings.

While Susan continued to watch their backs he slowly moved around the room. There was a space at the back of the center consoles that allowed for a complete circuit. The controls resembled those on the elevator console but were more physically pronounced. These were permanent physical controls and displays. The displays themselves displayed outdoor scenes for the most part. There were scenes form the forest, some in mountains, others in swamps and even a few showing just water. The thing that he did notice was the absence of any visuals of the central desert.

Wendy was the one to voice it. “There’s no shots of the desert, the colony, not even the river.”

The others, with the exception of Susan, were following him around the room staring at the consoles, Mikiu with his scanner working. Josh, after finishing his trip around the room raised an eyebrow at his science officer.

“Interesting,” said Mikiu. “She appears to be right. Not a single screen showing anything from the central desert, not even anything showing the wall.”

“Maybe they didn’t have any reason to watch the desert?” said Josh.

“Maybe, but that would be curious. They have camera’s all over the place. Except I’m not sure they’re cameras. Did you notice the one of the mind link room?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I took extensive sensor readings of that room. I didn’t detect any cameras. Now that could just mean they’re well hidden. It could mean there are no cameras.”

“You’re saying a technology that can just display a view from where every they desire.”

Mikiu shrugged, “just a thought. Doesn’t make it a true one.”

“Makes sense. A few of those views were looking straight down. That’s hard to do over water.” He pointed to a console halfway down the right-hand wall. “There’s one over there that’s a top-down view of an artificial island, not ours, but similar. And the picture doesn’t show any supports, but I suppose they could just be out of the picture.”

“That makes it even odder that they are no views of the desert.

“Maybe,” said Josh, not convinced. “Why don’t you see if you can get a different channel. I’m going to take a closer look at the skeleton. Susan you keep doing what you’re going.”

“You got it boss,” said Susan.

The skeleton looked vaguely human. But there were enough differences that it definitely wasn’t. The height was okay, and it was definitely a bipedal humanoid. It was the proportions that made it alien. The feet were too long, as were the legs and that made the torso short by human standards. But it was the skull that was the real difference. The eye sockets were in the right place, but wide and too far apart. Its nostrils were wide, flat and the jaw and forehead different enough to make Josh wonder about whether its appearance would have alarmed him. Clearly though, the evolutionary tail of this species, couldn’t be that far removed from his own. Wendy echoed his thoughts.

“You know. You get very far away, and you’d think this was a human skeleton,” she said.

“Yea, I got that idea too. Whoever they were they weren’t that different, at least structurally. We don’t know what they wore over their bones or how their organs were arranged.”

Jameson’s voice was thoughtful. “They probably had mostly the same organs. This is definitely a hominoid type of skeleton. That means a gravity fed digestive tract.”

Wendy turned to look at the robot. “I wonder why they shot each other? I mean from his bones it definitely looks like he belongs here. He would have fit the furniture.”

Josh said, “doesn’t mean anything. People occasionally shoot other people in places they belong. I doubt if it had anything to do with trespassing.”

“I hope not. We are trespassing.”

He glanced across to the robot. “Yea, seems like don’t move would have been enough.”

Jameson motioned to the weapon lying near the outstretched alien hand. “Maybe he didn’t give the robot a choice.”

“Drawing on a machine. Not the brightest idea,” said Josh.

Mikiu smiled. “He could have been stupid, or maybe just the boss.”

Josh glared in his friends direction but he had already turned away. “Smart ass. Tell me about the screens.”

“Not much to tell, it’s pretty simple to change your viewpoint. The controls aren’t that difficult.”

“Good, can you show us the Colony?” asked Josh while looking at Wendy.

“I said the controls were easy. The locations, which I assume is those squiggly characters along the bottom of each screen are another matter. I can move a view around, but I have no way to reference a certain location. I need a point of reference, of some kind.”

“So we’re just stuck looking at whatever they were looking at?”

“I think so. That might be part of the problem. Obviously, there was no colony then. They might have had no reason to look in the desert.”

“How long do you think it’ll take you to figure it out?”

Mikiu gave him a long intense gaze. “To learn to read alien, and then figure out their control system. You and Wendy will be on your thousandth kid by that time.”

Josh chuckled, and then outright laughed when he saw the expression on Wendy’s face. “I was kidding. But I think you scarred Wendy.”

“Not scarred. But even a with long life span this body would give out way before we hit a thousand kids.”

Josh noticed the look on Jameson’s face and changed the subject.

“Okay, enough with the consoles. Let’s check out the other half of this duel.”

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Yelaa once again woke him from a light sleep. Falling asleep on the bridge was a bad habit. He knew of Captain’s who did so routinely as part of their normal bridge routine. He didn’t subscribe to that school of thought. He wouldn’t let long hours of work and the associated stress be an excuse for bad behavior. He made a promise to himself to set a better example.

“What have you got Yelaa?”

“It’s close to daylight at the colony sir. I thought you might like to know.”

“Thanks,” he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. “I guess today is make or break time. Have you heard from Wally or Jerimy?”

“They’re catching a few hours sleep. I threatened to wake and tell you if they didn’t.”

Halerin grinned to himself. Yelaa took her responsibilities as ship’s communications officer so serious that sometimes she took liberties that other Captains might not appreciate. He did. He was old enough and smart enough to accept help, even if it wasn’t asked for. “Sneaky, but just out of curiosity, did you get any sleep.”

The dark strong shoulders shook with controlled laughter. “Boss, I’m asleep half the time. My ears have learned to wake me if something happens.”

“You’d never know it. You’d never know it. I wish I could learn that trick. Would keep me from looking like a doddering old fool when you wake me up.”

“You never look doddering,” said the communications specialist.

“Oh, just old.”

The girl laughed. “I didn’t say that. Do you want me to wake the others, although I’m sure they’re awake?”

“Is the weather still clear?”

“Looks that way from my board.”

“So we might be able to get some help down to Josh. Go ahead an wake them. Getting the Albatross ready is priority one.”

She turned back to console for a fraction of a second, and then turned back. “I was right. Wally wants me to conference you and Jerimy together. He says there might be a problem.”

“Just the way I like to start my day,” said Halerin with a sigh. “Yes Wally,” said the Captain.

“I think we might have a problem brewing down on the planet.”

“What kind of problem and how certain is your think?”

“I’ve got changing air temperatures all over the place. Changes that don’t even make sense. Before I thought that something was controlling the weather but I weren’t sure. This time I am. I still don’t know how it’s being done but the planet may be prepping for something.”

“Probably not something good. Timeframe?”

“None of the changes are abrupt. We’re talking about ten or fifteen degrees here and there. It’s going be a while before we start seeing any results.” Wally’s voice sounded puzzled.

“And. There’s something else. I can hear it in your voice.”

“Before, the weather came up quickly, then left quickly. It was un-natural. This looks different. It’s like the planets setting up something long term.”

Jerimy voice joined the conversation. “Wait a minute, are you saying the storm didn’t have natural causes?

“I guess that’s what I’m saying. It was being controlled in some kind of unknown direct manner.”

“Which probably,” responded Jerimy, “took a whole lot of power.”

Wally finished the though. “Took a lot of power. An unsustainable amount. Now it looks like its setting up a more natural weather situation.”

“Which,” said Halerin, catching on, “will take a less power to keep going. You think they just run out of power before.”

“Doubtful,” said Jerimy. I imagine the planet just decided to change methodology since it didn’t get the results it wanted.”

“And those results would be?”

The engineers voice grew quiet. The excitement gone from his voice. “They want the colonist dead, which wouldn’t make that much sense, or they want them to move from where they are.”

“Why,” asked Halerin.

“Its an alien planet. I have no idea. Well, maybe I do. This all started when Josh’s team found the wall and someone opened a door for them. Maybe they want everyone out of the desert”

“But the bad weather spread everywhere. Do they want man off the planet?”

“Maybe not,” came Wally’s voice. “The way they were creating the bad weather before, with straight up power, maybe they couldn’t control it. That could be why the weather spread and why they stopped it.”

The captain caught on. “I get it. Now they’re going to try a different method that doesn’t rely on brute power. A method that will get them the bad weather but is more controllable.”

“That could be it,” responded Wally and Jerimy, almost as a chorus.

“What can we do?” asked the captain.

Halerin could hear the shrub in Jerimy’s voice. “Wally, speak up if you disagree but I think we keep doing what we’re doing. Get the comm sat network up so bad weather doesn’t cut us off, and let Josh keep trying to find the cause of this.”

Wally added, “you might want to call Jarwan. Let them know what’s happening. I think the weather should be good most of the day. We can haul some more stuff down.”

“Thanks. Yelaa, get Jarwan. I’m pretty sure he’s awake.”

She acknowledged and turned to her board.

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