**1426New Story**

**Part 8**

**03/24/2020**

The upper sub-minds, the ones ranked level A, were now engaged in a different type of communication than there lower level subordinates used. They were exchanging ideas, very quickly and without the need to index through lists of options. This 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 were being discussed.

A decision had to be made. The original option for this event, which they had been following, was not yielding results, or at the very least, not results that they could analyze or validate. Something new was needed, and with no viable options in the prescribed list they had switched to this manner of communication. It was thought that this might enable then to come up with an alternate solution. Eventually a consensus was arrived at and things were set in motion.

They proceeded in three directions. The first was the cessation of bad weather on a planet wide basis. Although they had no direct method of monitoring events in the forbidden zone — the area of and surrounded by the forest — they were able to conjecture that the intruders were still present from the amount of electromagnetic energy being monitored.

Secondly, they made an effort to achieve more data about what was happening above the atmosphere. This involved the use of equipment that had not been used for millenia.

Thirdly, a second attempt to rid the forbidden zone of the intruders would be made. This would also use the weather but in a different form. It would be difficult to contain to the area encompassed by the forest and might overtax power availability. In this event they might have to drop some of the deceptive fields presented to prying from above. It would only be for a short time and if much was exposed steps could be taken.

§

John Johanson made his way back to the auxiliary control room that was being used as a command center. The real bridge of the Arbiter was at the bow of the ship and in no condition to be used for anything. He glanced around the room as he came in. Cheryl, bless her heart was slumped in sleep, her slender frame nestled into the contours of an acceleration couch. Something that the Arbiter would likely never have use for again.

The others were also asleep. He took care not to wake anyone, especially the Captain. The man hadn’t had a full nights sleep for weeks maybe longer. The only other occupants of the room was his Engineering mate Anderson and Dr. Allsop the scientist, who were also asleep. He also needed the rest, they all did. With a quiet sigh he settled into one of the hulking acceleration chairs himself. He needed sleep too but figured that one of them should stay awake as a token officer in charge, not that there was a lot to do right now. They were awaiting the return of the Deidre’s shuttles and he and Anderson had completed much of the work they set out to on the power and communications front.

The new generators had been tested and were ready to bring online and they had rigged a new communications unit, taken from a destroyed escape boat, into place at Cheryl’s station. It was now a matter of bringing up the power one step at a time and testing everything. Something they would need everybody awake for.

Glancing around he decided what the heck. He wouldn’t be much good during the testing if he himself didn’t get some rest. He let his head slip to one side and his eyes to close. He was asleep in seconds.

§

“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 in. 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 antenna’s pointed at the ground from the new satellites. They’re not in position yet, we may get better results then.”

“Good, Yelaa, keep an ear tuned.”

“Yes sir,” said the communication specialist.

§

The journey to level 5 didn’t take much time. Josh patted himself on the back. He was getting adept at handling the elevator controls and no longer had to strain to get his meaning across. Now it just happened easily with a casual thought.

This time they ignored the subtle light coming from the *communion* 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 part of the level and allow Mikiu to get his additional readings from the *communion* room.

That left just the sixth level to investigate. They almost immediately realized that this level was going to be different. For one thing, as soon as they arrived, only two openings appeared, 180 degrees apart and much larger than the previous openings. They open into wide shadowy passages with a damp musty smell circulating through the room. It didn’t smell evil or disgusting. Just a hint of disuse and old staleness, like a long unopened room.

Josh and the team walked over to the closest, it was a half-circle tunnel leading off into the distance. It appeared to end in a blue blurriness caused by a combination of bad lighting and distance, for this tunnel appeared to travel much further than the points of the star. They were obviously 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.”

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

Josh though about it. If the other entrance was easier to explore it might make more sense. “Yea, maybe save ourselves some walking.”

“You mean put off some walking,” said Susan. “We’re going to have to check them both out.”

Josh grinned, “Not if we get lucky and solve the mystery in the other tunnel.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” said Mikiu. “Besides, we would still want to take a look. At least I know I would.”

Josh, more out of a sense of humor than anything else, defended himself. “Hey, I didn’t say we would never look. It would just be a lot easier if there was no pressure.”

The other entrance was the same size and had a similar shape. The similarities ended there. Instead of facing a long tunnel to the unknown this one only stretched for about a hundred meters and was not well lite at the end. With a quick force field check with an arm Josh led them down the opening. The tunnel itself was faintly lit from the ceiling, but not as intensely as the corridor lights they had grown accustomed too.

It took only a minute for the team to cover the distance, but it felt longer than that to Josh. They stopped within ten meters of the tunnel end for Mikiu to scan. It seemed to take longer than 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 seem to be a lot of them.”

“Well, let’s go see what they are.”

With that he led them through the tunnel exit and into what felt like a large room. It wasn’t exactly dark and Josh realized with a start that it was growing lighter. The light however was not normal room light, it was a dark, greenish light, as if under water.

Soon they were able to see clearly around them. It was not a long room, but it was a tall one. Both sides were lined with large tubular objects that reminded Josh of cigars. Cigars big enough to carry several people. There were three rows of them on each side of the chamber, stacked five high in each row. A wide ladder was spaced between each row and stopped at a platform on each level. Each platform gave access to one of the ‘cigars’. Suddenly Josh realized what they were and Mikiu was right with him.

“Submarines, “They both said,” and then glanced at each other.

Wendy looked from one to the other, “If one of you says Jinx they’ll get hurt.”

Josh laughed, noticed that Mikiu grinned. “It makes sense I guess. What else else would you put under a large body of water, a submarine base.”

Jameson agreed, “Yea, that’s what they look like. We used them occasionally when I was studying biology. Those were remotes though, not something you could ride in.”

“Actually,” said Mikiu, “it makes perfect sense. It’s a big lake, you want to do research, or maybe even maintenance, a sub is the perfect way to get around.”

“What kind of research would they be doing. 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 the lake.”

Sally said, “I guess the lighting is to prepare your eyes for out in the water.”

Josh agreed, “That would be my guess.”

He walked further into the room, nothing else was visible. It was his opinion that the controls for getting a sub in or out were probably in the subs themselves because no control consoles were evident.

“Okay, let’s go check out the long tunnel,” he said.

§

Someone was shaking his shoulder. He heard himself snap leave me alone and forced himself to wakefulness. Muttering an apology he sat up and glanced around. Most of the people were still asleep, or at least resting in place. It was Dr Bitterlly who had shook him, and he decided then and there that she could wake him anytime. He grinned at her and raised his eyebrows in question.

“Come on, get up, you’ve go to see!” she said. He like the tone of her voice.

“Whoa,” he said, “what’s the excitement.”

Her face was lit up with a smile. “The storm stopped, the sun is out,” she said whispering.

With that bit of news he scrambled to his feet and followed her out of the warehouse. He noticed that although she walked quickly she made an effort not to disturb anyone. He appreciated that, these people were exhausted, they needed sleep.

She had been close to correct. The storm had stopped and the sky was clearing, but the sun was still rising on the horizon. What the hell he thought, it was in part of the sky and that was good enough.

Dunzin was standing by the warehouse door, leaning on the side of a cargo hauler. He turned to face them as they closed the door behind them.

“It stopped, like someone turned off a switch. Strangest thing I every saw,” he Dunzin said.

Jarwan starred at the sky, “Just like it started, right out of nowhere.”

“I don’t care how it started, just that it stopped,” said Denise. “I like this much better. I’m going to get Polly.” She turned and ducked back through the door.

“Dunzin, this is good news but I’m afraid that my trust in the planet is low. Wake everyone up and have them start cleaning up, and repairing anything that can’t wait.”

The man nodded, “Got it boss. I’ll send someone over to spell Warren at the Power Shop. I turned it over to him a couple of hours but he was dead tired then.”

Jarwan nodded and thought about what his next move should be. That was easy he realized. Contact the Deidre. Turning he went back inside the warehouse just in time to avoid being run over by a stampede of people rushing out.

§

Wally was the first to notice. That in itself wasn’t difficult as he was the only one awake.

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

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

“Weathers clearing, and I mean it’s clearing fast.”

The Captain, fully awake now snapped, “Put it on the big screen.”

The First Officer made a wave with hand and Halerin found himself with a view of the planet looking directly down on the Rinein’s location. The entire field of view was almost completely clear of clouds. The last few days it had been a sea of white, but today the planet’s true colors were shining through.

Yelaa jerked her attention from the screen. It was obvious what had got her attention as she use one hand to press the headset against her ear.

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

Mike Halerin watched as she responded to the upcoming message. Moving back to the command chair he toggled the speaker/mic function on the armrest.

“Jarwan, is that you?”

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

“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, something I wish I could find the time to do,” said Jarwan.

“Hear that, we’re running behind on it ourselves.”

“No doubt, well, I’ve got people doing a status check now. How are things on your end?”

“Shuttles are headed back to the Arbiter. We still can’t talk with the kids yet, but I’m hoping that with the weather breaking we can,” answered Halerin.

“Yea, on that subject. How does the weather look from up there?”

“From what I can see it looks good, but that’s just my opinion. As you know the only guy who knows anything about weather is Mikiu, and he’s stuck in the middle of it.”

“No, he’s in some cozy Alien labyrinth. I’ve actually been out in that storm. It sucks.”

“Hear that, is there anything specific that you needed Jar?”

“Nah, just wanted to check in. See if you’d heard from the kids. Like I said, Dunzin’s finding out how bad things are, not that it matters, you don’t have anyway to send things down.”

“That’s not true. I’ve still got the Captain’s gig,” said Halerin.

“You have a what?”

“That’s just what it’s called. It’s a small shuttle. Doesn’t even have a cargo bay, but if need be we can stuff some gear in it.”

“Okay, thanks. If we need anything real bad I’ll call.”

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

“Okay, let’s try Josh,” he said.

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

“They are probably still underground. They might not even know that the weather had cleared,” said Wally.

“And we don’t have any way to reach them.”

“Maybe, when all the satellites are in place. Until then, there’s not a lot we can do unless you want to move into a low orbit.”

“And can we move into a lower orbit?”

“Sorry boss, I wasn’t thinking,” said Wally sheepishly.

“That’s alright Wally. I’m not sure any of us is thinking very well. We all need some sleep, not in a chair, in a bunk, a regular no light on in a bunk.”

“Second that,” returned Wally.

The Captain slid back into his seat and wondered about it. He could order shifts for the Bridge, but no one wanted to be away from the action. Bringing some cots up might help, yet there was still the problem of noise and lights. In the end he decided it wouldn’t hurt to try and had Yelaa request someone bring up three field cots. It had to be better than the seats.

§

Unfortunately the long tunnel was just that, long. It was also dimly lit, the light came from the ceiling but unlike other places they had explored it was not even. The walls and floors were made of the same grey material, yet somehow, they seemed less finished.

“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, his eyes still on his scanners.

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

“Sorry, couldn’t resist. If you’re talking about their age, the scanner can’t tell, of course it’s been reading the same for all of this material. It can not tell. My personal opinion, this stuff looks like it could be older. We may be entering the original part of the base or city. Whatever you want to call it.”

“That’s the impression I got. Plus, you’ve got the fact that the layout is different. It doesn’t match up with the other levels so maybe it was here first and they just build the elevator through it.”

Mikiu thought for a moment, “That would make sense, if you were trying to retro fit to an existing structure, sure, why not.”

Susan said, “At least their consistent with the color scheme, or the lack of one.”

“There is that,” said Josh.

It took the better part of an hour before they begin to draw to what looked to be an opening ahead. Josh was beginning to think that they might indeed spend the night here. He didn’t really want to do that and since their almost communication with the ship earlier he wanted to try again.

They walked to the end of the tunnel and stopped! This was not a room they were entering. It was a cavernous space, so large that Josh couldn’t even tell exactly where the ceiling or far wall were. It was almost like walking into the outdoors. The sense of expanse, of space, was immense. It reminded him of the huge interior space of orbital drydocks, but this was different, instead of just a skeletal grid work around them this appeared to be solid walls Josh glanced at the wall near the tunnel opening, it wasn’t grey. The immense space appeared to be carved out of the true bedrock of the planet.

Mikiu said it for all of them. “Well, this is humbling.”

Josh looked around, as his eyes become used to the immense scale of the place his mind begin to register the other things in the space. It was very evident what they were.

“Mikiu, Susan, these are Starships. This is a god damm space port,” said Josh, his voice raising with each word.”

He got no response, a look in the direction of his comrades showed faces frozen in amazement. That is, every face except Wendy’s, she was watching him with a look of wonder on her face and then he realized what the meant. She was more amazed at his response than the room itself, that shocked him back to reality, but just a little.

Finally, Mikiu was able to speak again. “You’re right. This is a Star Port, on a planet, on the ground. You can’t do that. Starships are too big. You can’t launch them from the ground.”

Josh chuckled, “You know that, and I know that. Apparently these people didn’t.”

Josh started walking slowly around the outside of the chamber, 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 a cradle. He couldn’t tell, the lighting intensity was too low. It wasn’t the only type of ship on display. He counted at least three different styles of ships and in the distance was one roughly the size and shape of the Deidre. He noticed Mikiu looking at it too.

“It would take us the rest of the day to get over there,” he said.

“Yea, I know, but we’ve got check these out. This is huge.” Said Mikiu. “There’s never been anything like this ever found.”

He heard a female voice say “Crap.” He turned and looked at Wendy. She had a look of fear in her eyes.

“It might make Rinein a lot of credits,” he said.

She looked ready to cry as she looked at him. “Screw the credits, when word of this gets out every treasure hunter in the Galaxy will be here.”

“Along with every academic and businessman,” added Mikiu. “This is big.”

Josh felt the urge to protect Wendy, and he wasn’t even sure from what. Still, he tried. “That isn’t necessarily a bad thing. You guys own the rights to this.”

She laughed bitterly, “How long do you think those would last with a find like this. And if they couldn’t get it legally they’d use force. We can’t fight anyone.”

He didn’t even realize that he was moving until he discovered that his arms were around her and she was crying into his chest. Susan and Jameson were starring. Mikiu simply turned away. He realized that there was no use in pretending that nothing was going on and tightened his arm around her. He wanted to say something, but he didn’t know what — she was probably right, the vultures would swoop in once they heard about this. That’s when he chose the only course of action he could think of.

“Okay,” he said, looking over Wendy’s shoulder, “from right now this is a secret. We keep it to ourselves until my dad and her dad can decide what to do about it.”

Wendy was looking at him with growing understanding. “You mean, keep It a secret.”

He moved back from her but with his hands still grasping her arms. “Just for now, until we can figure out what to do with all this.”

Jameson was eyeing Josh with something approaching open hostility. “Okay, we can do that, but somehow we’ve got to find a way to make some credits off this. If nothing else we’ll need a lot of materials to repair the damage caused by the storm.”

Susan broke in, “I hate to burst any one’s bubble but we’ve got more important things to think about. Let’s save Rinein before we decide who to tell what. Otherwise it’s a moot point.”

Josh turned to look back at the ships in the cavern. “She’s right. This is important but it doesn’t help us with our main objective. Figuring out what is going wrong with the planet. It does change some things however. We need to go back and see if we can reach the ship, and then head down to the lounge room to sleep. There’s a lot of territory down there that we haven’t explored. We need to do that.

With that, he put an arm around Wendy and started back up the tunnel.

The others followed, with Mikiu starring curiously at his sensor display.

§

Jarwan was up to his knees in mud. For all the worry about the amount of water pouring down the one thing he hadn’t thought of was the effects, the mud. The desert was basically sand, on top of compressed sand, on top of even more tightly compressed sand. They knew that at some level there had to be bedrock underneath the sand, but in their ten years here they had never had cause to drill a hole to find out how deep it was. That wasn’t the problem, the problem was that you take a lot of sand, add a lot of water, and you get mud.

It was everywhere and made travel, even for a person on foot, difficult. The colonies wheeled vehicles were useless and even the two tracked cargo movers were having a difficult time. The only saving grace being that the most used pathways in the colony were compressed enough from use and the occasional addition of more sand. Still, trying to dig out supplies or repair damaged structures was proving to be difficult.

So he had made a choice and limited activities to retrieving anything needed that was not present in the warehouse. That and he had ordered Dunzin to move one of the Power generators and the gear needed to use it to the warehouse. They had cordoned off one corner for the equipment. If the bad weather returned before they could repair the rest of the colony Jarwan wanted to be prepared.

That was why he was now up to his hips in mud as he and the colonies strongest men attempted to repair and reinforce the foundation of the warehouse. He wasn’t worried about direct damage from the weather but if the foundation washed away they would be in dire straits.

He heard a voice calling him and looked over to see Dunzin, sitting in a dry area protected by the roof. Checking that his presence on the safety rope line he was holding was not needed he managed to slowly wade his way to freedom. As he walked to where Dunzin sat he decided his pant legs had picked up ten kilograms of mud.

Dunzin nodded, “Having fun in the mud?”

“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 power station inside is up and running.”

Jarwan drew his head back in surprise. “Already, I didn’t even think you would have gotten it over here by now, at least not in this slop.”

“Didn’t bring it over from the Power Shop. Had an older model we retired in the recycle warehouse. The only thing wrong with it was the control board and Deidre just brought us a couple of replacements.”

“So, it was easier to fix the old one?” asked Jarwan.

“Yea, didn’t take all that long to cart over here either. Thought maybe you could use some help with this project.”

“You don’t think I’m being overly cautions?”

“Nah, you don’t trust the weather now. Neither do I.”

Jarwan laughed, “I guess it’s true. Great minds think a lot. Come on, show me this guy wire idea of yours.”

§

Josh wasn’t sure but along with the ease of using the elevator room it appeared to getting quicker. He put that down to familiarity because starting and stopping appeared to be the same. His imagination came up with the idea that now that it was being used that some type of maintenance program was in effect. He wished he had timed the ride on the first day, but of course at the time that thought had never came up.

It was still light outside, but more importantly, it was quiet. There was no wind, no rain. Just a slow breeze blowing through the room.

“Damm,” said Josh.

They all walked outside to look at the sky. A sky missing any trace of clouds and with a bright sun shining through.

“Well,” said Mikiu, being the weather expert, “that certainly cleared up in a hurry.”

Josh, looking out at the now calm water, said, “In too much of a hurry if you ask me. What the hell happened Mikiu?”

His friend shrugged, “I have no idea.”

Just then Wendy jumped.

Josh stuck out a hand without thinking, laying it lightly on her shoulder.

“Whoa, why the jump?”

She managed to look embarrassed and pleased at the same time, and then she just looked embarrassed. She pulled the satellite phone from her belt. “Sorry, I had it on vibrate.”

Josh took the proffered phone and answered it.

§

“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 gather around to listen.

“Son, is that you?”

“Yea, its me. The weather cleared up.” Came Josh’s voice.

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

“Well, we’re tired of grey walls and rations but other than that I think everyone’s okay. How about up there.”

The Captain laughed, “Everyone here’s okay, not much that can happen to us here. Tell Wendy that I’ve talked to her dad. They’re all okay, well mostly okay, Micael broke both his legs. I didn’t get the details, but he’s going to be okay.”

“Copy that Dad, she heard. We’ve found some interesting things down here.”

“Anything interesting?”

It took a second for his son to answer. Just as Halerin was beginning to think that maybe he wasn’t heard Josh’s voice came back.

“A lot of interesting stuff but nothing spectacular, nothing like a jeweled shoulder bag or anything.”

The Captain’s eyebrows rose, “Okay, well I don’t know how long this window in the weather is going to last. I’m going to let you finish your talk with Wally about getting communications working better.”

“Okay dad.”

Wally nodded and headed to his own console to take over the call. Jerimy waited until the switch over had been made before talking.

“Jeweled bag?”

Halerin grinned, “you remember, at the market on Sartagius, Josh bought that bag for me that was all glammed up.”

“I remember, it turned out that the stones were really valuable,” laughed Jerimy. “What do you think he’s trying to tell us.”

“That turned into a running joke for him and I over the years. I think he found something really special down there and doesn’t want to talk about it in the open.”

“Wendy’s with him.”

“Which means it not something he’s trying to hide from the colonist.”

Jerimy got it, “Something worth keeping a secret to any prying ears, out here. It must be something big.”

“Something big, on an Alien installation, it could be anything,” said the Captain.

Jerimy looked thoughtful, “We need to finish working out the usage of the satellites. With them we can open a secure channel.”

Mike Halerin thought about it and then nodded. Jerimy went over to Wally to get to work.



Captain Talong Mendez let his breath out slowly. He looked around him at the expectant faces, the Engineers Johanson and Anderson, Cheryl the communications officer, and their guess Dr. Allsop. Everyone else was still in Engineering or the Shuttle Bay. They were about to test the hastily put together emergency power and communications system that Johanson and Anderson had created.

“Okay, is everybody ready?” he asked.

One by one everyone acknowledged their readiness. Some how this was more dramatic than it should be, then he remembered the last several weeks. Fine, he told himself. Let’s see what else the universe can throw at us.

Thirty seconds later he wished he hadn’t had such a thought. Alarm indicators started lighting on several of Johanson’s consoles accompanied by a chorus of beeps and whistles.

“I didn’t say start,” he said.

John Johanson, his voice raising in pitch said, “We didn’t, something else is going on.”

Anderson, shouted the one thing that spaces hated to hear, “We’ve got a fire.”

“Where?” asked John.

“Tunnel assembly three. The wiring channels. The backup wiring channels. It’s all over the place,” Said Anderson, his hands bouncing over controls.

Mendez stiffened, a bubble surge of panic in his gut trying to get out. Like the sea Captain before him, fire was the Captain’s worse nightmare. Even in a metal ship there were a surprising number of things to burn, not to mention the high concentration of Oxygen in the air. Part of the trouble with fires on a Starship had to do with gravity. The gravity on a ship was induced by the plating of the decks, but it wasn’t real gravity, and flames did not respond in a normal fashion. Worst of all, it caused fire to burn fast, very fast. Flames were channeled along tight corridors and small spaces seeking what fire always seeks, fuel.

He kept quiet, satisfied to let his people do their jobs. Anyway, nothing he could say or do at this moment was likely to change the outcome. The only thing to do was wait, and deal with the outcome, bad or good.

Cheryl snapped, “I got through to Engineering and the Shuttle Bay, and they’re initiating fire procedures.”

“Good,” said the Captain, “John, how bad is it?”

The Engineer didn’t answer at first. He was far to busy to interrupt himself to give a status report. He knew the Captain would wait. Finally, the number of telltales showing red began to dwindle and the air gradually become silent again. Then he took the time to answer.

“It was bad and getting worse. Something burst into flame, but don’t ask me what it was. I have no idea. Anyway, it’s under control. I just vented the entire tunnel unit to space,” said Johanson.

The Captain saw the two engineers beginning to relax and let out a held breath himself. “I take it that the fire is out?”

Anderson leaning back in his chair nodded. “Has to be, it has no fuel left. But, unfortunately, we’re cut off from the rest of the ship.

“That was going to be my next question. Are we sure they’re okay?

Cheryl shook her head, “They were warned. But I have no way of telling if they’re okay or not.”

Johanson answered, “We might use the portable comm for the shuttle bay. They’ve got plenty of those down there. Engineering, the shielding may block us from them.”

Mendez nodded, “Cheryl, try a comm unit. John, Bill, find out what the hell happened.”

§

Russ Dorkin saw the flash on his console screen. A quick glance at it’s setting bar told him where it had come from.

“Lydia, did you see that.”

“Yea,” she answered. “Was that a fire vent?”

“I think so, to far away to tell for sure,” said Dorkin.

“You think they’re okay?”

“I’m going to assume so. That was a big assed flash for us to have seen it.”

“Roger that. Guess we’ll know how bad when we get there.”

§

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

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

“Yea, I mean it’s got some microorganisms in it and a few minerals, but considering the tree growth around the lake I’m surprised it doesn’t have more junk in it,” Mikiu said.

“But it won’t hurt us?”

Josh cut in, “Why the sudden interest in the lake water?”

“I’ll tell you why, because I’m tired of smelling like a transient. I can barely stand myself. Not to mention that my skin feels like the inside of a sausage tube. I’m taking a bath,” she paused and gave him a look,” and I suggest that you do the same.”

Josh, without thinking, self-checked his own underarms. The girl might have a point.

Susan, never one to hold back when it came to getting naked, said “That’s the best idea I’ve heard in a week.” She proceeded to join Wendy in stripping her gear, quickly getting the confining outside body suit off.

Josh turned to look helplessly at Mikiu and Jameson. His friend simply shrugged and started removing his own gear, but Jameson stood, with a confused look on his face. Obviously trying to figure out what just happened and a way out of it.

He felt the need to reassert some control, not to mention that Wendy’s rapidly vanishing clothing was becoming a distraction. “Whoa, folks, let’s get a little organization here. Since they’ve already gotten almost naked we’ll let the women go first and then we’ll switch.”

“And we can dry off why you guys bathe,” said Wendy.

“Correction,” said Josh, “you’ll do the same thing we’ll be doing while you’re in the water. Standing guard, with a weapon, but no shooting unless Susan says so. There are some parts I’d rather not have to get replaced.”

Wendy grinned, “I wouldn’t want that either.”

Josh felt himself starting to blush and turned away. The taboo against nudity had long since vanished from the everyday hang ups of human beings. That didn’t make this any easier. He suspected that the intimacy of the shared telepathic experience had made him vulnerable to public excitement. At least as far as Wendy was involved. Before he turned around he heard the two women enter the water with a splash and couple of squeals. He forced himself back to the moment. Public nudity and in some cases, even public sex might be normal now, but he would be protected from comment from Mikiu and Jameson by the still common decency of not checking out another man’s condition.

He settled into guard duty, weapon drawn, and tried not to stare to obviously. Jameson moved somewhat to their left to watch from a different angle. His sidearm was also drawn but he was scrupulously keeping his finger out of the trigger guard. Mikiu sat down beside him. Apparently intent on not letting this opportunity to talk privately pass by.

“Thinks are getting a little complicated,” said Mikiu.

“Are you talking in general, or are you referring to me and Wendy?”

“Didn’t mean to interrupt things last night.”

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

“Well, I’m not entirely sure. You realize of course that she is a client,” said Miku.

“So what, my mother was a client.”

“Yea I know, but you’ve always kept work and your personal life separate. It’s just out of character.”

Josh sighed, yea I know, but this isn’t the first time she and I have hooked up.”

“I know that, that’s what has me worried. The last time didn’t end to well if I recall,” Mikiu said, giving his friend a questioning look.

“Okay, she was young then, it was a little messy.”

“You’ve still got 70 years on her. It’s not like she’s going to catch up.”

“People live to a thousand now, seventy years isn’t anything,” countered Josh.

“Well yea, but she’s still young, she may want a family and stay in one place man.”

He looked at his friend needing to see the expression on his face as he asked that question.

“Okay, I get what you’re asking and yea, I may be thinking of settling in place for a while. At least that’s what I was thinking about when I saw her again.”

“And now you’re thinking something different?” asked Mikiu.

“Sort of, to tell the truth buddy, I’m really confused. That communications rod did a real number on us. It’s like we touched brains. We felt each other’s thoughts, wants, and desires. It, well I don’t know what it did, but I’m pretty sure I’ll never get that close to another human being,” said Josh.

“So, this is like love or lust on steroids?”

“Problem is, I don’t know which is the chicken and which is the egg.”

“You might consider that it’s going to take some time to work out,” said Mikiu soberly.

Josh shook his head and laughed, “What is it with you and me and girls with names ending in ‘’Y’?

Mikiu laughed with him, Josh of course was referring to Cindy. A woman that he kept returning to time after time and had three children with. None of whom he got to see very often. “I don’t know, maybe we just like two syllable names.”

“Nah,” said Josh, “I don’t think that’s it.”

Mikiu looked over at his friend, “She looks good naked.”

“Yes, she does, quit looking.”

After that the two of them sat quietly, keeping an eye on the surrounding water. Jameson appeared to be in world of his own. Josh wasn’t sure exactly what he was watching, if anything. They patiently waited their turn.

§

The day was marching into early evening and Jarwan felt like the had been marching with it. His hands and feet ached from constant pulling as they had added support lines to the corners and sides of the warehouse. For good measure, and Jarwan privately thought because he didn’t want to put the line back, Dunzin had even had them strap the roof of the building down. It was overkill but was one of the few things the colonist could accomplish with amount of mud present in every step. The ground around the building had been packed pretty tight from usage and that had made the job a lot easier than some of the others that needed tackling. They could do more after a drying out period.

They had dusted their clothing off as best they could before staggering tiredly back inside for a hot meal. The older men and women of the colony and some of the children had made good use of the few portable stoves they had brought together. It was a nice change from the last couple of days.

Dunzin sat down across from his, his plate filed with a second helping.

“We got a lot done today. If the weather holds and things dry out maybe we can get some buildings open tomorrow.”

“That would be nice. I think everyone would like a little more privacy,” said Jarwan.

“You mean everyone would like a respite from the stink of thy neighbor,” quipped Dunzin.

“You becoming a preacher?”

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

Jarwan rose 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 think he just likes you.”

Jarwan kicked him under the table, which took most of his remaining energy.

The Doctor smiled at him. Jarwan decided to change the subject. “Doc, how’s Micael. I haven’t had time to check on him since this morning.”

The smile faded from her face. “He is doing alright but there is still in a lot of pain. I’d like to give him something stronger, but I don’t want to risk it until we’re sure things have settled down. Taking everything into consideration he’s doing well. I might be able to set his legs better in a few days. Maybe get him back on his feet although he wouldn’t be able to do much.”

Jarwan laughed, “Yea, with that mud out there I don’t think he could get around very well. Thanks for taking care of him.”

“That’s my job. Just don’t bring anymore patients. I’m having enough trouble with scraps and bruises.”

“We’ll try Doc,” said Dunzin.

§

The Captain opened his eyes, “Damm.”

Cheryl looked over, “Captain?”

“Sorry, how long was I asleep?”

“About half an hour, but don’t worry, you didn’t miss anything other than our two engineers going crazy because they can’t get our of here.”

With that Mendez looked around. “Well for two people who can’t get out of here they seem to have done just that.”

“Oh, they can go down the corridor, in fact to anyplace before the vertical shaft. After that they’re screwed and that apparently presents some problems.”

“What kind of problems?”

Dr. Allsop answered, “As near as we can tell, with the controls for the new power system they were working on. They quit filling us in right after you fell asleep. I didn’t understand much of it anyway.”

“They get like that, lost in their own little world,” said Mendez.

“Speak of the devils,” said Cheryl as Johanson and Anderson came back into the room single file.

“You talking about us?” asked John.

“Yes,” said the Captain, “status report.”

“It’s not as bad as we thought, its worse,” said Anderson.

“Are you trying to be funny Bill?” asked Mendez.

Johanson broke in, “No he’s not. What he is trying to say is that the damage from the fire is worse than we thought, but that really doesn’t matter. We knew we were going to be blocked off from engineering and the bay. However, it looks like all the work we did setting up the new generators and radio system are intact.”

“Can we still get power to everyone?”

“Well, we set up one of the generators in engineering, the shuttle bay, and one in here. They’ll wired into the emergency life support for each area. If the main ship system completely fails we have a fall over. The new radios just wired into Cheryl’s console so it wasn’t effected by the fire.”

“Great,” said the Captain, “now what started the fire.”

Anderson answered, “We think a crushed coolant tube. It got smashed from outside at some point or another and eventually one of the systems it was supposed to be cooling got to hot, boom.”

“Bill, I don’t like booms.”

“Yes sir, sorry.”

“How soon can we test?”

John looked at Bill and then said, “Give us another half an hour. We’ll be ready then.”

The Captain nodded and settled back into his chair to wait. The only trick now was staying awake.

§

Josh enjoyed his time in the water. He especially enjoyed the occasional view of the dock when Wendy would roll over or sit up while drying. Both the women were still naked but he kept his attention on Wendy. He had seen Susan naked before on the ship. It was impossible to keep complete modesty while living in essentially a metal can for the better part of decades even if no intimate relationship never happened. And he wouldn’t swear that it never had, there were port calls of dubious recollection.

He and Mikiu had shed their clothes to bathe without a second thought. Only Jameson of the entire group maintained his underwear. The rest of their underwear was drying in the fading sun. Josh had pointed out that it because of the water wicking material used it wouldn’t take long to dry. A clean body went much better with clean garments.

When the men were ready to come out Josh did let the women know to give them time to start dressing. Nudity didn’t bother people anymore but there was no point in being an exhibitionist. The girls returned the favor by finishing their dressing with backs turned while the men clothed themselves.

“Everybody feel better?” Josh asked.

A chorus of yes and thank you was his answer.

“Now, that we’re clean and it’s getting dark I think we return to the base level. Check out a couple more rooms quickly and then eat and get a good night’s sleep. Mikiu?”

“Yes boss?” said Mikiu.

It occurred to me that a Star Base, even one buried that far down, should have a communication pass through of some kind to the surface. They had to have been able to talk with ships on approach.”

Mikiu gave him an interesting look. “You reading minds or does your brain just work better when it’s clean.?”

“Excuse me.”

“I was going to review some of the readings I got earlier. I got just a glimpse of what looked like radio noise from the surface. Just when we were leaving the place, but you may be right. There may be an antenna lead from the surface somewhere,” said Mikiu.

“Good, we’ll check for that tomorrow. We’ll call the ship back in the morning.” He didn’t want to add that he didn’t want to talk to his dad right now, not with his head in a swirl.

§

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. Looking for the tunnel doors that he knew to be there. The doors from which the Mambre and others had left, returned and left again. Sometimes they used the bigger transportation system on land, but that was only for incoming. For leaving they still used the ships and to use the ships, they needed the doors. 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. Once there had been species whose sole purpose was to clean the lake. When the Mambre had left the colorful cleaners had slowly dwindled until none were left. Now, no one cleaned the lake bottom and he was having trouble finding the doors through which the big ships had come and went.

Eventually he made the decision to stop looking. A part of his massive but still starting mind told him that if the doors were covered over they had not been used in a long time. The new creatures of the lake, they must have come from the land for it was evident that no ship had visited the lake for a long time. This further confused the Dory. Always others had come via the big system or the smaller ships using the lake doors.

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.

§

Okay thought the Captain, perhaps this time they could test the new systems without everything going to hell. Glancing around the reserve control room everyone appeared to be nervous, but ready with all eyes focused on him. He took a deep breath and leaned forward in his seat.

“Time to try this again. John, are we going to blow anything up this time?”

“I do not believe so Captain, but I’m not going to promise anything,” said Johanson.

“Well,” chuckled the Captain, “that’s certainly a definite answer. Your show Josh, proceed at will.”

He settled back into his seat to watch. This wasn’t a life or death situation, but it would move things further from the death side of the ledger. He watched as Johanson and Anderson went over their checklist for the third time. Cheryl, for her part was observing the notification indicators on all the overhead consoles. Dr. Allsop was going his best to appear uninterested. His fingers tightly gripping the arms of his chair showed the lie. Finally the two engineers were ready.

Johanson looked at Anderson, “Okay everyone, here we go. Bill bring on emergency generator one.”

Mendez watched while they went through bringing up the three power generators, one by one. The interesting thing was that two of them were located in parts of the ship they could no longer physically reach or communicate with. The alternate wiring they had used was not in the damaged tunnel assembly itself. They had used some cables form one of the previously damaged conduits that had been salvageable. The Captain hoped that when they saw the emergency generators come on line that the others would realize that the command crew was alive.

“All units up and running nominally,” said Anderson.

“Just a thought John, will we be able to tell if the guys in Engineering or the Bay start using the power?” asked the Captain.

“That’s actually a good thought Captain. I’ve got a tattle alert on both of them,” said Johanson.

“Good, now how do we test the radio?”

Cheryl handled that question. “Already tested sir. I sent a test signal out as soon as they started bringing up the new generators. Just got a reply back. Russ said they read us 5 by 5.”

“Good, how long till they get here?”

“Well, they have to start slowing down soon. If they don’t waste fuel, I’d say about three hours,” said Johanson.

“Okay, let’s get ready to receive them. I understand John that they’ll be able to tell us about our heading?”

Johanson said, “Yes.”

They all settled down to wait. In three hours they would know how soon they could get off this damaged boat, if ever.

§

Yelaa once again woke him from a light sleep. That was getting to be a bad habit, falling asleep on the Bridge. He couldn’t let the amount of work and stress function as an excuse for bad behavior. He made a promise to himself to set a better example.

“What have you got Yelaa?”

“Just caught a signal from the Arbiter. They got a radio of some kind working. It’s not very strong but we can hear it.”

That caught his attention, “What did they say?”

“It was an automatic query signal. They just want an acknowledgement that someone heard them. I already sent a reply. I expect Dorkin and Renaul already sent one. They would have heard it a lot better than us,” said Cheryl.

“Good, now maybe we can get the full story about what happened.”

He got up and moved around the room. He had to get some blood flowing so he could keep his promise to himself, to stay awake.

§

Josh decided to add a change of direction to their plan to explore more of the base level. Instead of continuing to search the circular corridor that was the first wheel off the tunnel from the elevator room he advance to the third ring off the center. He wasn’t sure why he did it but he felt good after the chance to bath. That provided a second wind and he decided to mix it up a little.

The new corridor looked a lot like the old one. An pair of openings to either side appeared about 30 meters down.

Mikiu said, “Well, let’s go see what we’ve got. I’m laying odds that at they’re both lounge rooms.”

“No way,” said Wendy, “I’m betting on a dormitory.”

“More likely a barracks,” said Josh. “Let’s go see. We’ll check the one on the right first. Susan, you cover the one on the left.”

“Roger that,” said Susan.

­ Josh led the way down the corridor, not as slowly as they would have moved two days ago, They reached the two openings after a minute, Susan turning to the left, while the others drifted into the opening to the right. He didn’t see Susan 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 room, was what was obviously a security drone. It was tall, round and extruded a pair of ventilated weapons barrels. There was no mistaking its purpose.

“Ohhh Fuck,” Wendy screamed behind them. Josh turned back as rapidly as he had turned away. Mikiu, standing sideways so he could eye both doors was holding his weapon in a ready position.

Josh saw what had alarmed Wendy. A corpse, or more correctly a skeleton that used to be a corpse. He turned his attention to the rest of the room. It was filled with rows of control consoles. Some of them had display screens that were operational. Nothing else appeared to be present.

Mikiu said, “Everyone relax. I think they’re both dead.”

Josh turned from the skeleton for another look at the robot. “Not only dead, I’d say they shot each other.”

Wendy walked over to him and without reservation took hold of his arm. “Sorry for my language.”

It was Mikiu who answered, “Don’t worry about it. You saved me the trouble.”

Josh gave here a sideways smile. “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, but check it just the same,” said Josh.

While Mikiu checked the robot with a scanner Josh took a closer look at the room with the skeleton. It wasn’t as deep as the rooms to which they were accustomed, but he didn’t know if that was because of a change in design for the area or for this specific type of room. It was about the sixty meters wide and twenty-five meters deep.

Free standing consoles went were parallel with the front wall of the room, each console about 8 meters wide and a meter deep and tall with sloped fronts. These ran four levels deep with openings between each console providing an isle. On virtually everyone of them were displays built into the sloped parts showing various scenes of the outdoor. The consoles were also adorned with a multitude of various controls. Unlike other places in the installation apparently no mind control was needed to turn things on. These panels looked like they were designed for one thing and one thing only, monitoring stations. Walking around the room Josh managed to go by every console station. The controls appeared simple, there were no chairs or benches for sitting and from the angle of the display he decided that sitting was not intended.

He noticed that the others, with the exception of Susan, were following in his footsteps. Susan, weapon still drawn, was standing guard at the entrance of the room. He noticed that she had positioned herself to keep one eye in each direction and the robot directly across. She obviously didn’t intend to allow another robot to sneak up on them.

“Interesting,” said Mikiu, walking about ten paces behind him.

“Why do you say that?” asked Josh.

“Did you notice anything strange about all of these views on the displays?”

“Other than wondering about some of the camera locations, no.”

“Well, first off, I don’t think they are cameras. Just locations,” said Mikiu.

“Explain?”

“I can’t really. I just think that somehow they’re picking a spot and saying I want a camera view from that spot.”

“You mean they’re pulling pictures of thing air?” said Josh.

“Something like that, look at how the views are aimed. Some of these are looking down on the water, even down on the island above. I don’t remember any poles out there to hold a camera a kilometer in the air.”

Josh took a look at the console Mikiu was referencing. “Okay, provided there aren’t more than one star shaped free floating dock on the lake you’re right.”

“There isn’t, if you look close are boat is there, but that’s not what I meant was interesting.”

Wendy, who had been slowly walking along observing the screens said quietly. “I know what he means.”

Josh gave her a look, smiled, and said, “Okay, you explain.”

“It’s may mean nothing, but I think it does. Look,” she pointed around her at various screens. “You’ve got the forest, the mountains, the lake and even the swamp and the beaches. What you don’t have is anything showing the wall, the desert, the river and especially Rinein. Why don’t they have any views of the colony, or at least of the river. It doesn’t make sense.”

He walked slowly around the consoles again, taking in all of the screens. The girl was right. Everything on the planet was being observed with the exception of the huge circle in the middle of the continent.

“Opinions?”

“It could be coincidence. I’m sure that if we turn some of these controls we’ll get other view points,” said Mikiu.

“Maybe,” said Josh, not convinced. “Why don’t you try that, see if you can find a way to change the channel. Jameson can give you a hand and Susan can stand watch. Wendy and I’ll take a closer look the bodies. Susan, don’t let any of us out of your sight.”

“You got it boss,” said Susan, here voice a little more controlled than normal. The sight of the corpse and the robot must have struck her deep josh decided.

The skeleton had looked vaguely human during first seeing. Now, after taking the time to observe it and take some data with a sensor scan — it definitely did not look human. The height was about right and it was definitely a bipedal humanoid, yet the proportions were all off. The feet were to long and their attachment angle was wrong. The legs were too long and the torso too short, but the real problem was the skull. The eye sockets were in the right place, but too wide and to far apart. Suddenly Josh had an image of too far apart bulging alien eyes and suddenly the all grey coloring of everything seemed to make sense. He didn’t even know why it made sense, it just did. The nostrils were wider and flatter than human standard and the jaw and forehead were off. It’s not that it wasn’t human looking, it just wasn’t human. But clearly, the evolutionary tail of this species couldn’t have been far removed from that of his own forefathers Josh thought. Wendy echoed his thought.

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

“Yea, I got that idea too. Whoever they were they weren’t that different. At least not on the inside. We don’t know what they wore over their bones or how their organs were arranged. Hell, we don’t even know if they had the same organs. It definitely fits the right type of profile for a humanoid.”

“You mean having two legs, two arms and a head?” she asked.

“I was thinking more along the fact of a gravity fed digestive system. You know, food in the top, waste out the bottom. There’s a reason we bend where we do.”

She smiled and gave him a wry smile. “I thought there were a couple of reasons we bend where we bend. I can show you some of them when we have some time.”

It was a straight-out flirt, and she had the good sense to blush a bright red when she said it.

Josh wasn’t sure what to say except he heard words coming out of his mouth. “I know some bends you might not be familiar with.” Damm, he thought, who put his ego in charge of his mouth. With a deep breath he turned to face the rather surprised look on her face. “I’m sorry. I don’t know where that came from. Sometimes my mouth had a mind of its own.” He said under his breath.

He saw an interested look cross her face, starting from her forehead through her right eyebrow and down to the left lower lip. She smiled and turned back to the bones. “Why did the robot shoot him? He definitely looks like he belongs here. That body shape would fit those deep low back couches perfectly.”  
 Josh nodded, “You may be right on that. Physically he would fit the furniture.”

“Maybe he was doing something he wasn’t supposed to,” she said.

“He was at the entrance, either coming or going. Seems like a *freeze right there* would have worked.

Mikiu’s voice slid in, “You’re assuming that they believed in surrender, or he could have shot first.”

“Against a robot like that. Pretty stupid,” answered Josh.

Mikiu smiled, “He may have been the class dummy — or the boss.”

Josh glared at him, but his friend had already turned away and now he was left wondering if Mikiu had heard them talking or was just busting his chops. He decided that he would ask him later.

“Tell me about the screens.”

“Not much to tell, it’s pretty simple to switch to other cameras or whatever they are. And Wendy is right, that big desert and anything in it seems to be completely left alone.”

“Any idea why?” asked Josh.

“Could be anything. The most likely answer is that nothing grows there. But then again with the wild weather you never know.”  
 Wendy asked, “Did they just not observe there or did they just not have their equipment setup to look there. I mean, maybe Mikiu’s right, they didn’t look because nothing was growing, but that’s assuming that things were the same we don’t know how long ago.”

Mikiu looked at Josh, “Did you follow that?”

Josh grinned, “The point I think she was trying to make is we have no idea what this place was like in the past. I don’t suppose you can pull up some old video for comparison?”

Mikiu pursed his lips and looked backwards at the consoles, “Like me to find an indexed list of the recordings library, or will random samples be good enough.”

Josh thought about, “An indexed list would be nice and if you could print that out I’d appreciate it.”

Mikiu shook his head in mock disgust and moved off to look at the consoles some more.

Wendy went to follow him but turned back to whisper to Josh, “That mind of its own that your mouth has, I’d like to talk to it in depth sometime.” With that she walked away after Miku.

Josh stood starring after her, and then realized that his mouth was hanging open and closed it.

Tilting his head to one side and smiling a wry smile, he decided not to try and make sense out of her last statement. He laughed a short shy sort of laugh. She was beginning to interest his funny bone, among other things.

Forcing the thoughts out of his head he called over to her, “Hey, smart ass, we’ve still got the robot to check out.”

She turned, nodded and started his way. Her face was frozen without expression. Josh got the impression she was trying to avoid laughing. He turned and led the way towards the robot.

§

At least this time he wasn’t asleep, just day dreaming.

“Yes Wally,” said the Captain.

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

“Think, as in you don’t know for sure?”

“That’s about the size of it sir. I’ve got changing air temperatures all over the place. It doesn’t make sense. It’s like the planet if prepping for something.”

“Probably not something good. Any indication of a time frame for whatever it is?” asked Halerin.

“Sir, I don’t even know if it is an it yet,” said Wally.

“Well, when you’re sure that its an it, tell me.”

“Yes boss. FYI the satellite network is finishing diagnostics. Fully operational in about 15 minutes.”

“Good, can call Rinein before that?”

Wally Sinclare checked his comm board, flipped a few switches and read the results on a display before answering. “You’re good to go on the new system. Could have just used ship to surface though with the weather clear.”

“Thanks, Yelaa, get me the colony.”

She acknowledged and turned to her board. He wasn’t sure why he was warning Jarwan just yet, but he was tired of reacting. Time to get proactive and handle some of these problems beforehand.

§

§