New Story

01/13/2020

Plink.

Sub mind D117 raised its attention level. Something had tripped a sensor.

Plink.

There it was again.

With some effort D117 raised its attention level again and stepped down the automatic endeavors it was pursuing. Its study of planet birthing would have to wait, this slight irritation was an indication of something. The question was - an indication of what.

High above, in a mid-range orbit above Tingies 0017, the shuttle Equinox 007 was starting it’s ILS (Intelligent Life Scan). Detecting life from an orbital distance wasn’t difficult, but it was time consuming, the narrowness of the sensor aperture dictated that. It would take many orbits to finish.

Unknown to the crew of the shuttle it was being watched by a curious intellect. That intellect was trying to determine exactly what the shuttle was doing. Finally, with a mental shrug, it gave up and sent a message through channels describing the event. If something else was to be done a higher sub mind could make that call. D117 returned to its study of planets.

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“Dad, why don’t we just ask for our money back”, the girl asked. She was slightly out of breath from struggling to hold the storage door open. She should have anchored it.

“Sorry Wendy, doesn’t work like that” answered her father as he loaded another bale of Sarsung grass into the Carrybot. “These guys have already spent a lot just getting here from Sartagius.”

“I know”, said his forty-year-old daughter. “But they could refund everything but travel expenses.”

“Then how would they make anything? This is what they do for a living.” The tall man with the weathered face, finished loading the Carrybot, and glanced at the girl as he sat down. He still thought that she looked like a teenager, of course that look could continue for decades in the age of long human life spans. His own face was beginning to show age, not from getting old, but from the effect of work and uncertainty leading a colony party.

She nodded in understanding and sensed that pressing the point would gain her nothing. She let the storage bin lid swing shut, and turned to the Carrybot, “Ford, field 17”. Eyeing the stacked bales on the automated wagon, she added “slowly.” She watched until the bot moved out before following it. Her father falling into step beside her. The day and the colony on Tingies 17 were both young, with lots of work to be done before it was time to rest.

Jarwan Sunderson, thought quietly as they walked along. He knew the exploration team was due to arrive soon. It would do no good to ask for a refund. He was sure that money had long been spent. After all, it had been paid years ago, before the colony left Sartagius. It was a necessary expense of course for any colony mission. They were in no position, personnel or equipment wise, to explore the rest of Tingies themselves. Their time was spent making the colony self-sufficient, and anything outside the initial drop area didn’t help with that. The most important thing now was being able to stand on their own. It was something that needed to occur relatively soon because the prepaid cargo drops were coming to an end. The last shipment was scheduled in about ten years, with one five years before that. Then, there would be no more until they had something to trade with. And that meant that the colony would have to survive without help – or perish. Considering the distance help would have to travel, those were the only two options.

The drop bringing the exploration team would be their second resupply; the first occurred at the five-year anniversary of the colonies founding. These cargo drops allowed the colony to travel in smaller less expensive ships, extend the period of time to become self-sufficient, and of course, make changes to the next order as circumstances warranted. This meant if they overlooked something in their initial load-out they could correct it. It also meant that they might be able to remove some things from the last cargo drops and bank some credits. Credits for a new colony were always a good thing.

Credits, or the lack of, that was the trouble with running a colony mission as an independent. Everything had to be paid for in advance. All the necessities, cargo drops, future cargo drops, future explorations, and of course, transportation and all the things they would take with them. It made financing an independent colony very expensive and that allowed for only the well off to join, which meant that a lot of the talents needed were not well represented. Talent, Jarwan now realized, was just as important as credits, maybe more so. Of course, educational software and robots could replace a lot of talent, but they couldn’t replace experience. That was something the one hundred and twenty-three members of the colony had learned the hard way and the expense of learning that had been great. They had lost four people in the first ten years, and Jarwan was determined not to lose another.

It would be nice to see the crew of the Deidres. It was the same ship and crew that had brought the colonist to their new home. In the voyage here they had grown to know the crew fairly well and Jarwan considered them an unofficial part of the colony process. Albeit, a somewhat distant part of the team, but familiar faces just the same.

Colonist, he hesitated to use the word pioneer because he didn’t think of himself as one, but in reality that’s what he and the colonist were. They were trying to make a life someplace new, someplace where man didn’t yet belong, someplace where man might not survive. The reasons they were here varied. Some were trying to escape the highly advance technical worlds and live simpler at a slower pace. Others, perhaps the majority, simply wanted a place to call their own.

But the fact was, that regardless of their reasons for being here, all kind of colonist needed a little help. Help such as the Initial Survey and the upcoming exploration effort. Jarwan didn’t think that the initial survey had been worth the money, other than the fact that it was a necessary expense to get permission to colonize. At least on Nix, it hadn’t given them any real data or sense of the planet. It basically confirmed what the first-in scouts and said. Nix was a large planet with only one continent with a large desert in the center, mountains towards the North and a swamp to the South. They had chosen the middle of the desert as first-landing because of the wide and deep river flowing through the center of it from mountains to swamp. Both East and West of the desert were huge forests about which they knew nothing other than the fact that both scouts and survey had said the one necessary thing – no intelligent life. They weren’t stealing someone else’s land.

A beep at his breast caught his attention, his comm unit. Even after ten years away from imbedded systems he still had not quite adjusted to the little comm badge on his shirt. He answered, “Jarwan here”.

The voice of his second in command, Dunzin Watersun answered. “Hey Jarwan, just got a Comm hit, the ship is coming in a little early. Didn’t have as much trouble coming in-system as they expected. Should be here mid tomorrow.”

“Are we ready”?

“Ready as we’re going to be. Like I said before, a lot of the stuff will have to sit in the open until we get some more storage built. I hope they loaded in the right order.”

Jarwan echoed that thought internally. Getting the stuff they needed to store first would make things a lot simpler.

“Echo that. How many shuttle trips they going to make a day”?

Dunzins voice answered. “Just one for the first three, you know, the big stuff. After that I think two a day for ten days. That out to cover it.”

“Right,” said Jarwan. “I’ll be meet you at central in a couple of hours and we’ll go over the stowage chart.”

“Okay,” answered his friend. “I’ll see if I can get the some of the others too. Might as well make sure everyone’s on the same page.”

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Some place away from Tingies’ surface other minds had also noticed the approaching ship. They watched it with interest. It was, they decided, one of the ones that had been here before. This time it didn’t carry as many life images aboard. They collectively thought about this and decided that a closer look was warranted.

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The dusky yellow-red star was approaching the horizon by the time the man and his daughter got back to the small Quonset hut that served as the administrative office. Whimsically, it had been named ‘Center’, more for its location than Its function.

The girl headed off to the small avenue of Quonset huts that formed the barracks district of the burgeoning colony. It occupied one of the four spokes leading out from the colony center. The spokes were like a half wheel with the river cutting through where the rest of the circle would have been. The other side of the wide river was generally untouched other than a few sensor stations. Transportation across required the use of one of the three small boats so no major use of the far bank had taken place.

The barracks avenue, usually called the ‘Burb’ in an ongoing joke, was where everyone lived. Some of the barracks were divided into apartments for families and others contained small single room configurations. There were, in fact, several different configurations in the five structures that housed them all. She lived in the single women dormitory with her own room but shared toilet and recreation areas. A similar structure for the single men lay on the other side of the compressed sand street. The only difference between the two was the small yard bed the men had created to mark the front of their building. Wendy had hoped to something similar for the women this year, but the impending arrival of the new supply drop had pushed that to the side. Along with getting all the new items put away there would be a lot of work created by the appearance of the new materials. Things left undone or even not yet started would become a priority.

10/14/2021 Okay, let’s jump ahead here, nothing’s happening. Filled in some more, got Jarwan to the admin office. I’ll decide later how much to fill in here, if any. Might be a good time to introduce more of the colony members. !!!!!

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Five hundred kilometers overhead the Cargo/Passenger starship Deidres orbited. She was not a large ship by compared to the behemoths that used by the large corporations and groups that handled normal Colony missions. The trouble was, there were only a few those huge vessels in existence. They were simply too expensive to build, expensive to crew, and just in general, too expensive to operate. So, most of the work of expanding man’s influence through this region of space was handled by vessels the size of the Deidre. A ship whose primary purpose was to carry cargo but that could reconfigured. Three of the smaller cargo bays could be modified to handle human passengers. This left one small and two large cargo bays to carry the things a new colony needed to support itself for the first five or ten years of its existence. After that It was general procedure to receive prepaid cargo missions to keep the colony going, or if things had gone badly, rescue the survivors.

The crew was in a state of relaxed preparation, getting gear unstowed, shuttles readied and loaded, and double checking the paperwork to make sure that they were handling their side of the mission. Of course, they could have done much of this during the uneventful trip from their home base on Sartagius but Captain Halerin believed a vessel in transit should pay attention to the details of that transit. They had arrived where they were supposed to without incident, no missed vectors, timing, or pirates.

Consequently, the ship’s Captain was in a good mood – for a deadhead trip. He really didn’t like making non-paying voyages even if they had been paid for in the past. He always honored his commitments of course. An independent colony hauler could do nothing else if he wanted to keep working. Mike Halerin preferred to work keep working. Of course, he liked it best when they were actively earning new money, but he accepted the fact that this part of the job also had to be done, and it had to be done well.

Swiveling in his chair fronting the secondary control system he looked at his chief engineer.

“Okay Jerimy, how much work do you have lined up”?

“You don’t really care about the work boss,” answered his Chief Engineer. “You just want to know how long we’re going to be here.”

The captain grinned, “oh, I care about the work you do, it keeps us alive. But I am interested in how long we’re going to be on this dead head trip. The sooner we get back to paying trips the better. Besides, the longer we’re in one place the easier it is for something to go wrong.”

Jerimy Isen, Chief Engineer of the starship Deidre, grinned. “You know of course that bad luck doesn’t happen because you’re sitting still. It’s one case where being a moving target doesn’t help.”

“That could be true,” mused Halerin. “You didn’t answer the question?”

Okay, if we hurry, we can get it done in about twenty days, but that’s putting us over on engine rebuild hours and we’d just have to do it back at home.”

The captain thought for a moment. While it was true that the crew would be happier sleeping in their own bed’s, the economics sucked. They had voyages scheduled to leave shortly after they returned to Sartagius. Fortunately, due to the way space law was based, the clock on those jobs didn’t start until their actual return. He let his breath out slowly and asked, “can we do it in orbit? I mean while we’re here.”

Jerimy took a second to answer. “Cap, no problem, we’ve got the material, and I think I’d like to get it done now. She didn’t sound quite right on the way into orbit. Take about forty to fifty days local.”

The captain nodded, aware that Starships didn’t really have a sound, “fine, we’ve got plenty of food laid in, maybe we can get some fresh stuff from the planet. Get your repair crews ready.”

“Yes boss.”

He turned to Josh, “son, how long to rough out this continent. Mind you I want a good job, these people are friends.”?

Josh, his large shoulders hunched down in thought as he looked again at the figures on his display thought for a second. It was his job to do to lead the exploration mission the colonist had paid for a decade earlier. He didn’t need his father’s reminder to do a good job. That was the only way he did anything.

“Dad, take as long as you want with the ship. We’re obligated to 120 days. “

“That long, I thought we were weather limited.”

“That was the last two planets. The conditions here are a lot milder. That star doesn’t have enough juice to cause any real changes and the planets axis tilt is almost nonexistent Couple that with zero moons and you get seriously boring weather.”

“Okay, good, I can do boring. You hear that Jerimy”?

“Yea, I can take my time and do it right.”

Mike frowned. “Don’t you always”?

“Just kidding,” laughed the Engineer. “I live on this bucket too.”

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Josh sealed his ruck bag and easily tossed it over his shoulder. It wasn’t heavy in the low gravity the ship maintained. It would be considerably heavier on the planet despite the lower than standard local gravity. That was a question that needed to be answered, the reason for Tingies 17 low gravity. From her size it didn’t make sense. Even surveys powerful sensors couldn’t determine the interior make up of the planet. But even with the low gravity he knew that all his hours of work high gee gym would soon payoff, or at least he hoped so. He hated to get tired and sore while exploring. It detracted from the fun of such a job.

With a sigh he closed the door to his cabin and locked it. He trusted his shipmates, but a lifetime of habit had made him cautious and after all, he was going to be gone for quite some time. It was also part of a space persons core, attention to detail, for everything. There was an old saying among those who lived on ships. ‘Better to remember details then to know death.’!!!!! Those who forgot small details eventually forgot something important.

Heading for the aft shuttle tube he went over his exploration team members in his head. They were all experienced, himself as the pilot, Susan Diety, a geologist, and Mikiu Szateer as the science guy, archivist and weather expert. Actually, they all filled more than one role, that was part of the drill, you needed several talents for exploring the unknown. It didn’t matter if you in space or on a dirt side mission. You usually had the same situation, too few people and too many jobs. And or course, there would be additional members provided by the colony. He didn’t really like that, preferring to use all his own people. He could understand it though. They were paying for it, or had paid for it in the past.

He wasn’t really looking forward to this expedition. As he had told his father, the boss, this was a boring planet from all appearances, nothing to get excited about. Other than the mundane he expected nothing to catalog, record or analyze for sale to the academics or the governments. No hot papers to write for publication, or discoveries to have named after you. That was why he had ventured into space in the first place, became an explorer, sloughed through the mundane work of space travel, to find new things and make a name for himself. That at least was what he told himself. Life on the civilized worlds was way too comfortable and easy. Work was a simple chore that you did to take up time. Technology provided everything needed and that was something he couldn’t countenance. Life had to have a meaning. He was sure of that, he just wasn’t sure of what it was.

There was a bright spot. He would be seeing the colonist again, they had brought this group here some ten standard years ago and was close to them, closer to some than others. He didn’t yet know how that would sort itself out.

His own search for purpose he supposed the same reason that some people joined colony missions. The chance to actually do something. Even at his age, and he was still young by contemporary standards, barely over a hundred, he had learned that there was more to living than enjoying oneself. Although, truth be told, he wasn’t completely ready to give up creature comforts or the joys of youth yet.

He was getting closer though, these exploration jobs were a least a beginning. He greeted the rest of the team as they arrived at the hatch to the shuttle tube. The only thing left for today was the ride down and meeting those joining them from the colony. Josh wasn’t a difficult person to get along with, but he had standards and usually found that colony types, while often in better shape than him, were not as well prepared for this type of mission. In this case he knew and liked them. He didn’t think there would be any problems. It was different when it was colony group that he wasn’t familiar with.

In any case his job was the same. A high-speed survey of a world he would never see again. The accompanying colonist job was to learn as much as they could about the only world they would ever see again.

10/18/2021 - 120/2020 Let’s jump to the two teams meeting each other.

The assembly point for the exploration team was a half empty, buried warehouse. That was something Josh dreaded although every colony planet used them, and he had half-expected it. Being underground was something that had always bothered him, at least in artificial structures. Natural underground settings, such as caves were a different story. He had no problems with them. It was a strange fear for someone who spent most of their time in a moving metal tube surrounded by nothing. Space flight didn’t bother him, being underground unnerved him. There were even names for it, cleithrophobia and taphophobia. The similar fears of being trapped, and or, buried alive. An old doctor had told him that he probably didn’t trust man made things on planet surfaces. An odd thing considering he had spent his entire life trusting manmade things in space.

This one didn’t even have a proper building above it. Just a shed to cover the entrance to a ramp that switched back and forth three times. He guessed that the ramp tunnel took up as much space as the warehouse itself. It did provide an easy way to get large amounts of stuff in and out, either by foot or small vehicle. Besides, the rest of the space above ground was covered with a garden. It was he decided, an efficient use of land area. Not to mention, since the entire colony area was in the middle of a desert the ground was comprised of sand. It was easy to dig, provided insulation from seasonal temperature changes and was relatively cheap to work with in terms of material and manpower.

He felt like he was submerging in water as he walked down the ramp. It was wide enough for four or five to walk abreast but the three switchback turns left him disoriented.

The interior was brightly lite, apparently the colony wasn’t starved for energy. Then again he thought, being a ship dweller made one conscious of energy use. The same methods that provided power on a planet were not often used on ships, the reverse was also true. There were some power sources that were equally at home everywhere. The Tingies colony utilized a combination of Gravity Well Generators and Solar Panels. The problem was that neither those methods worked well in space, at least outside of a solar system.

Once inside they moved to a large conference table set in one corner. Josh realized that one of the reasons the warehouse wasn’t fully packed was a full quarter or more of it was being used as some type of office space. Along with the large table there were four workstations lining the walls each with three large displays. Over top of them was a single large display that he guessed was for the benefit of those seated at the table.

He glanced at the colony boss, Jarwan Sunderson, a tall man with the look of someone in charge. He remembered he used to be a ship man, an engineer, and from his manner Josh thought – a good one. “Pretty nice setup you got here Jarwan. But I’m confused, don’t you have a nice colony admin building?”

“Yes, we do. And if you like, we can take this confab over there. Of course, in the middle of the day it gets a little warm.”

“Ah,” said Mikiu, “you’re using the sand to keep it nice and cool down here.”

Jarwan nodded, “yes. At least during the afternoons. We still use Admin in the early morning and evening. We don’t actually need a lot to run the colony. In fact,” he grinned. “We over thought that part of the initial load-out, so we just duplicated things. We’ve got the same setup here and in Admin.”

“With everything tied into one data cloud,” added Josh.

Wendy, Jarwan’s daughter, and the thing from the past that Josh had been unsure of spoke up. “And that cloud is down here.” She pointed off towards the opposite corner. “A little coffin sized data tower with way more power than we need. Then again,” she laughed, “for what we use the system for right now anyone of the workstations could handle. We way overthought that part.”

Mikiu said, “everyone does. Computers are so small it’s a common problem.”

The entire meeting was more of a reunion than anything else. The entire group consisted of him, Mikiu, Susan, Jarwan, Wendy and Jameson Maleef. They had all met before on the colony mission itself. Jameson was the only one that Josh wasn’t really familiar with. He knew he was a Biologist, something handy for a colony, and was making ago of learning to farm. He noticed however, that Jameson seemed to regard Wendy as something more than a fellow colonist. Wendy didn’t appear to notice. Josh decided to take a wait and see attitude.

He nodded as they crossed gazes, Wendy, Jameson, it’s good to see both of you again. He looked around the group. “Does anyone have any questions concerning the schedule I sent?

Wendy gave him a polite look. “Look, it’s nice to see you all again. But, I think you should know up front. I think this is a waste of time and money. I’d rather have some additional things added to the next order to tell the truth. We can go exploring ourselves when we get the time too.”

Jarwan cleared his throat. “My daughter has gotten into the habit of saying what she thinks at all times. However, we paid for a survey, and we need a survey. It’s true that even if you discover something of immense wealth or importance, we’re in no position to even go look at it.” Giving Wendy a strong look he continued. “The fact remains that we still know nothing about this world that we now call home beyond what we can travel in a day. This planet may still hold some distressing things. We need to get an idea of what lies beyond the desert.”

Jameson added in, “yes. If for nothing else so that we can plan for the future. We still have two cargo drops scheduled with the Deidre and it would be nice to target our discretionary part of that budget to things that might actually be useful. Much as I like Wendy I really think this trip is important.”

Wendy gave the two male colonist a look of acquiescence and lifted her arms. “Okay, I just wanted my view on record.”

Josh nodded, hiding a smile. “Okay, we’ll meet here in the morning, at “, he looked at Jarwan, “I don’t even know what kind of time metric we’re on?”

Jarwan laughed, “no worries. The day here is roughly twenty-seven hours standard. We just adjusted to two extra hours and forty-seven minutes. We keep the extra minutes at night, so regular hours are still sixty minutes. That way none of us really notice the extra minutes.”

“An extra forty-seven minutes at night, not a problem. It just means a little more sleep. Not going to argue about that.” He glanced around at the others,

“Okay, we won’t be using time pieces that much anyway. It’ll be mostly up at dawn and go till it starts getting dark. As for tomorrow, if someone can bang on our door for breakfast we’ll get going from there. And,” he glanced at Jarwan, “our ships going to be doing a lot maintenance work in orbit so we’ve got some time to spare. I’d like to take a couple of extra days to acclimate us to being ground side. Get our rhythm and all that stuff.” He glanced at the three colonists, “that’ll give us plenty of time to look over the sat map and photos and decide where you want to go.”

Wendy spoke up, “I’ve already got some ideas on that.”

Jarwan said, “and they’re good ideas. So Jerimy’s going to overhaul a few things?”

Josh nodded, to Wendy, “great, you know what you’re looking for.” Turning to Jarwan he added, “yea. Figures to get it done here instead of back home. Save’s the trouble of dealing with some contract deadlines. You know how it is. So, if someone could show us our digs, we’ll settle in and unload our gear from the shuttle.”

“Not a problem, “replied Jarwan. “You want to marshal everything here?”

“Sure, good a place as any.”” With that the meeting broke up, and Jameson led them to the small dome house they would be using.

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OKAY, lets jump to start off day. Could though any some more stuff about the colony and the incoming cargo.

10/20/2021 Okay, going back to removing the Arbiter storyline, at least for now. We can add it back if we need it.:

The air was definitely a little chilly as the dawn broke. Thankfully, the temperatures at this time of year on Tingies, didn’t have a large range of variations, as winter approached this would change. Josh was thankful that they had arrived on schedule, during the summer. Starship schedules didn’t always allow for such convenience and exploration team contracts were not written to occur in a specific season, at least not for normal fees. As always, extra credits would get you something more exact as far as when. Most colonies, like Tingies, took what they could get for the least expense. Josh was glad that the timing on this one had worked out. He hated exploring the unknown in bad weather.

This world he expected to be easy. As Josh had told his father, it was a rather boring little world. Still, it was the unknown, and that was always fun.

He glanced around, the team had assembled outside the warehouse where they planned the mission. All five of them were dressed in full body suits that would maintain their temperatures at a comfortable level, adjusting for temperature interior and exterior temperature changes as needed. Sitting with them were two hover carts, belonging to the Deidre, loaded with gear and supplies. Each of them would also carry a small pack containing emergency items in the remote chance they become separated from the carts or each other. That was standard procedure and that was something that Josh never varied from.

The team members from the ship were in blue, those from the colony in red. Since the suits all belonged to the Deidre it was a matter of convenience.

Against his better judgement the colony members were armed. He would have preferred the colonist to leave the weapon handling to his people, but it was their money and their planet. Fortunately, according to the initial survey, with the exception of some large lizards, this planet didn’t have much in the way of predators. At least not locally he reminded himself. It was bad form to make assumptions based on the initial survey. They hadn’t done more than a random sampling of landing locations, mostly in easily accessible places. It annoyed him that they had avoided the heavy forests book ending the central desert altogether and relied on orbital sensor scans for most of their work.

He glanced at his wrist comp, the time display was set to show both local and ship time, as well as other useful information. Time to get to work. The first part of the trip would be east. One of the Deidre’s shuttles would fly them most of the way to the tree line surrounding the desert. He had elected to have a couple day trek on foot to actually reach the trees. It would get everyone accustomed to walking and he never liked to delve into a forest with out a chance to observe it first. That was a lesson hard leaned on other worlds, he had the scars to prove it.

Wendy, looking nice in the red he thought, looked at the two carts disdainfully, “you sure that’s enough food.”

Josh gave her a sideways glance, “we’re going out for sixty days, and we’re packing concentrates for 150, but I remembered you as a heavy eater.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. In the three days since they’d reunited, he’d definitely relearned how to get under her skin.

“Funny,” she said. “I seem to remember you being the one with the big appetites.”

“I seem to remember you having a big appetite yourself. But I see that the colony population isn’t growing very fast. I thought you would’ve been helping with that.”

She changed her disdainful look to a glare. “The question hasn’t come up yet, and besides, we’re Methodist’s.”

“Marriage first, single partner for life”, he said.

“Well, that may be the rules on the books but none of this for life stuff. Everyone lives to long, and the only thing we save ourselves for is break days. Which are few and far between.”

He felt a little uncomfortable, she had just said that they weren’t strict about things. Of course, he remembered that from before, but she had been just out of childhood then and things change after a few years of freedom. That still didn’t mean that she wasn’t off limits; she was technically a client. Then he laughed to himself, she had been a client the last time, and it hadn’t mattered..

He glanced around, “everyone ready, let’s go”. With that they started towards the landing field where the shuttle awaited to skip them over the largest part of the boring and burning sand.

OKAY let’s pick up after they’re on the road.

The problem with exploring planets for a living decided Josh, was that after so many planets, you began to lose that drive to see what was over that next hill, the one they were always talking about. He shook his head as the carrier transport set down. Thingies didn’t even have hills proper, at least not here in the desert. The desert floor wasn’t flat but a monotonous weave of small rolling sand mounds, they didn’t even rate being called Dunes.

He shook his head and forced his attention back to the present. Thinking thoughts like that could get you hurt he reminded himself. Every planet was different, dangerous in its own way and always had some novel way to kill you.

He disembarked from the shuttle and while the others were busy guiding the cargo wagons down the exit ramp, he used his binoculars to scan the horizon, it looked the same in every direction.

The colonist had elected to settle in the center of the huge, circular and mostly flat desert. The major reason for that, the wide and deep river that wondered down from the mountains to cross the desert to the swamp on the other side. This provided them with a year-round source of water for both drinking and irrigation. The steady supply of water and sunlight coupled with the initial analysis of the soil had had given them the hope that an agriculture-based colony could survive. And so far, they had. Now they were almost in a position to use whatever riches the forests surrounding the central desert could supply. Not entirely ready, but the timing of the prepaid exploration mission had been determined many years ago. At least Josh reflected, they would have a better idea of what to plan for in the future. It would also give them time to make changes to the two remaining supply orders they had paid the Deidre for, within existing budget limits of course. That was one area the Deidre offered a little flexibility on. After all, they had the use of the colony’s money for several years, and sometimes that allowed the Deidre Corporation, as it was formerly known, to be a bit generous in the end. The one thing that Captain and CEO Mike Halerin insisted on was that no colony would ever receive less than what they had contracted for, regardless of the ups and downs of the markets. It was one of the reasons that made the Deidre a good choice for those who didn’t want to deal with the larger companies.

Wendy came up to him, struggling to get her pack on. “See anything?”

He spoke without putting down the glasses, “Sand, just a lot of sand. You think you’ve got enough in that pack?” He reached out and helped her set it squarely on her shoulders.

She looked amused, “nothing I can’t handle. You can’t see the forest?”

“Yes, but it’s just a green-blue line on the horizon.”

Adjusting her shoulder straps for maximum comfort she asked. How long do you think it’ll take use to reach them.?”

“Probably most of a day, which is why we won’t start till tomorrow. We’ll setup the comm relay first and check our gear the rest of today. Have your people been out this far?”

The girl shook her short cut hair. About half this far. I think. From what you showed me on the map we passed the point of no return for our cargo haulers an hour ago. I don’t suppose you’d like to loan us shuttle till next trip?”

He frowned, “I don’t think my dad would go for that. You have anyone who can fly one?”

“Well, my dad is rated, and a couple of the others could do it.”

He asked, “You don’t have any air assets at all?”

“Just some short-range drones. Dad didn’t think we’d need anything else till we were ready to explore.” She glanced up at him, “that’s where you come in.”

“You don’t seem happy about that.”

“We got a couple of light flitters in this cargo drop. I would have just used them and avoided paying you.” Her voice had a slight edge to it and Josh knew he wasn’t getting the whole story.

“You don’t seem to be happy that we’re here. I noticed it a couple of days ago.”

She thought about it for a second. “Not unhappy, at least with you. I think I’ve made my position clear that I would have spent the money differently. But as my dad had pointed out, this was all done twenty years ago. I was more interested in other things then.”

“I seem to remember that.” He said, a smile playing across his features..

“I still have other interests, not you anymore, sorry, but now that I’m older people sometimes listen, but not always.

He turned to face her, letting the glasses hang on their straps. “Know what that’s like, I’m five times older than you and my dad still doesn’t listen to me, at least not all of the time. And no need to apologize, in the age of long-life spans interests change.”

She gave him a shy smile. “That’s one burden we both share. Being the kid of the guy in charge. My dad says that’s one of the things that long-lives have given us. Parents that don’t fade into the sunset.”

He nodded, “true. But I prefer it this way. Of course,” he added, “in a couple of hundred years I may change my mind.”

She laughed and gave him a quizzical look before turning away and joining the others.

They stood clear as the pilot eased the shuttle off the ground and away from them before increasing the landing thrusters to get distance to engage the mains. The shuttle circled dipping a stubby wing in goodbye before assuming a climb into the sky and headed back to the Deidre.

As she watched the shuttle ascend, she asked. “How may planets have you explored?”

He smiled, “you mean officially, plus a hundred, but I did a whole lot of exploring when I was a kid. I’ve been at this for almost 85 years.”

“Seems like you should have an idea of what we’ll find.”

“Never assume anything, every world is different, and the differences can kill you.”

“Tingies has always been a gentle planet to us.”

“You leave off the ‘17’, doesn’t calling your sun and your planet the same name get confusing?”

She laughed, “we just call the Sun ‘Sun”, we don’t worry about star designations a whole lot. I imagine that is more important in your life.”

He nodded just as the others joined them. “It is, yes.” He looked around, the two Cargo Hovers were set to each side of the two tents. A small camp light was set up in front of the tents to take the place of a campfire. The moderate climate this time of year negated the need for a heat source. Their self-adjusting clothing would take care of minor temperature changes. It was a standard base camp setup they had used on a lot of planets.

The Cargo Hovers would accompany them, the tents and reserve gear would stay here as a backup. A homing beacon would be left for them to find their way back in the event of an emergency of any kind. They would also set up a communications relay station capable of reaching the Deidre either directly, when it was in line-of-sight, or through a communications satellite they had placed in geosynchronous orbit overhead.

The satellite had been figured into the cost of the exploration mission and would be left for the colony to use in the future. Since it was solar powered and capable of orbit correction it should serve them many years regardless of how long it took them to expand to where its use was needed.

Once they got under the cover of the forest, depending on the density of the canopy, using the relay station might easier than trying to reach the ship or satellite directly. As an added bonus, the satellite would allow Wendy to reach the colony without having Yelaa channel it through the Deidre. None of the communications gear they carried was heavily powered. Unlike explorations in the past, they didn’t need a lot of power communication. They relied more on line-of-sight and relays then brute power. It was easier than dealing with the signal paths of different frequencies and the multitude of planetary atmospheric conditions they encountered.

The group pitched into preparing the tents for use and getting the comm station setup and aligned.

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Overhead, as soon as they shut down the reactors to begin the overhaul process, a very brief blip was read by the ships sensors. The data was immediately recorded but didn’t last long enough to trip any threshold alarms – unfortunately no human eye saw the short discrepancy. The ship’s security AI placed a watch on the area of the planet it had come from but sensing nothing on other sensors simply placed a watch and notify order in the system.

In orbit the only security watch that much attention was paid, were the out-system sensors. They didn’t fear anything from the planet, it was a known entity, but something from out of the system could catch them at a vulnerable time, with power down and the engines cold. The chances of that happening were slim. Still, per standing orders by the Captain, an outward watch was manned anytime the engines and/or power generators were shutdown.

Mike, the Captain was concerned with other matters. The offloading of the cargo was a straightforward, but time-consuming matter. The cargo was only good to the colonist if it arrived in useful condition, and the biggest chance for damage came during the removal from the cargo holds. The captain thought to himself, not the first time, that his only real purpose, was as an extra cargo hand. The Deidre did have robots for handling unloading cargo, but they were of limited utility with the exception of bulk materials. They were better at loading the cargo bays from a station than transferring things to the shuttles for delivery. That took a firm hand and attention to detail that required human attention in some form or another. Halerin reminded himself once again that added automation would be nice, but would come at the cost of crew, and he vastly preferred crew. At least, he told himself, most of the time.

The only currently important job on the ship belonged to Jerimy Isen, the Chief Engineer. He had to revamp both the power plants and the drive system, and he had to do it while keeping the secondary systems doing something they were not designed to do, running continuously, for a period of weeks. Those secondary systems were now their only chance for flight or fight if trouble in some form decided to happen. That’s why a ships engineering departments job was never done, and why everyone in the crew was cross trained for engineering and life support. None of the other skills needed on a starship didn’t matter you couldn’t breathe or move.

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Down on the planet the sleeping arrangement using the two tents was simple, ship slept with ship, colony with colony. Josh tried to rest, but even as an experienced campaigner he still had trouble getting to sleep at the start of mission. He thought someday he would get the hang of it, but apparently that day wasn’t today.

Still, he was up, refreshed, and ready to go at dawn. The sky was a streaked with purple, the air crisp and clear. On any planet this was the start of a good day. This planet smelled different, but then they all did. Some old timers were able to identify the world they were on by the way it smelled. Josh didn’t think he was at that point yet. He had always found that planets differed from area to area, city to city and continent to continent. It all depended on where you were.

After a quick morning meal, the group started off. Josh took the lead with Wendy to his right, Susan his left and Mikiu and Jameson minding the Cargo Hovers. The Hovers carried everything but the emergency gear on their backs. Each Hover was two meters square, two thirds of a meter deep and floated about a half- meter off the ground on anti-grav units. They could run for more than a day on their battery packs but complemented that by absorbing solar heat to produce power. Even the undersides of the sturdy carry wagons produced power from reflected ground heat. That made them ideal for desert conditions. Unless they were out of the sun for several days, they would be fine. Still, keeping the Hovers charged was something that Josh was mindful of, especially since they were headed towards heavily forested land.

The day became progressively warmer as they moved towards the tree line. Since the surface was uniform and mostly flat Josh maintained a vigorous pace, hoping to get near the tree line before nightfall. Once one the move he balked at wasting time. That was something he had learned from his father. Only an occasional soil examination or communications check interrupted during this phase of the trip. Of the five only Mikiu, with his duties as science officer, had any real work to perform. He took constant measurements of conditions as they walked and evaluated the soil for differences every so often. He had hoped that the contents of the sand would changed the closer they got to the forest but to his surprise the sand remained uniformly the same, sterile and boring. Josh, in the lead by a half-meter, kept his suits body cam recording as a matter of course. That was standard procedure. On this mission he didn’t figure that anyone was going to want to review the video, but he made it just the same.

He didn’t feel like talking and apparently the others felt the same. Even when they stopped for a mid-day meal not much was said. Josh got the impression that everyone was just waiting for the boring part of the journey to pass.

It was Wendy who finally broke the late afternoon silence. “How close are we going to get before we stop for the night. I take it you’ll want to wait for morning to enter.?”

“One, maybe two, kilometers. I don’t want to get close enough that anything can smell or sense us.”

She nodded, “shouldn’t be a problem, we’re down wind anyway.”

“At least for now, our data from last night indicates the wind shifted direction a couple of times. That’s a little unusual. Normally you get a circular wind pattern in one direction depending on the hemisphere. I don’t see any reason for it to be a problem closer to the trees, but we’ll be on our toes anyway. Just because you guys haven’t run into anything big or dangerous, and those two things don’t have to be tied together, does not mean there’s not something in those trees that wouldn’t find us tasty.”

She answered thoughtfully, “I doubt it. Pre-colony scans didn’t see anything dangerous. The largest animals are in the water.”

He snorted, and then laughed. “Listen, the only thing that initial scans really look for is signs of intelligent life to make sure we’re not intruding on someone else’s block. The Federation and the Churches only care if you try to muscle in on existing occupants. Other life on a planet, regardless of its size, they don’t really care that much about.” He laughed again, “unless of course, they spot something of value, and that’s only happened three times.”

“I know that,” she snapped. “Wait, are you saying if they did find something dangerous, they wouldn’t have told us?”

“Not intentionally,” answered Mikiu. But they wouldn’t have went out of their way to examine everything in great detail. You’ve got to realize after they didn’t find aliens on the first 100 planets they quite being that careful about surveys.

“And,” added Jameson, the Biologist, “with so many planets around people gave up caring about the environment on every world. You have to wait until a colony world get’s a big enough population before they start caring.”

Josh nodded. “Surveys job is to make sure that a colony isn’t going to croak right away. They figure to give you a running start at survival. Past that they don’t have the time or the people to do anything in depth.” He gave a smile, “that’s why you paid us remember.”

“On the plus side,” said Mikiu. If we find something of value, like an alien warehouse, you don’t have to tell survey.”

During the first few bursts of man’s expansion into the galaxy, alien technology was the big treasure that everyone looked for- now, not so much. Their own technology had reached the point where people sometimes moved to other worlds to get away from it. That was why there was such a wide variety of colony worlds. That was something the galaxy had plenty of; worlds that could support human life, albeit with differing degrees of difficulty.

Man had yet to find intelligent life in his travels. Remains had been found, traces of ancient cities, derelict shipwrecks, and other signs from long ago, but, the one thing they had not found, intelligent life itself. And the signs of life that they had found were old, very old, nothing that could even be considered recent. Even more intriguing, in those finds there was no trace of the aliens themselves, no clothes, no skeletons, nothing that indicated what had happened to them. It was like they had all just left decided to leave. .

The lack of current signs of aliens was one of the mysteries of the times. Some took it as a sign that civilization was fleeting, others took a darker view, maybe something or someone, had been the cause of their absence. Most people really didn’t have an opinion. Even though man had been spreading outward for thousands of years they still occupied less than a tenth of the galaxy. The general consensus was they just hadn’t found any aliens yet.

Wendy looked curiously at Josh. “You mean you wouldn’t report it if we found aliens?”

Josh slowly pushed out a breath. “If you mean actual living aliens,” he paused for a second. “Yea, that I’m afraid we’d have to tell someone. But if you’re talking artifacts, ruins, food left in the oven or whatnot then no. We wouldn’t tell survey. That’s in our standard exploration contract.”

“You’d honor that?”

“Of course, we wouldn’t stay in business very long if we weren’t honest,” said Josh.

“That’s good to know,” she said, although there was a tinge of disbelief in her voice.

It turned out that they need not have worried about planning the days stopping point. By the time the light grew hard on human eyes they were a little over two kilometers from the trees.

Lowering the binoculars from his face Josh said, “Okay guys, the range finder says we’re just outside of two klicks. That’s close enough for me. Let’s plant ourselves.”

Mikiu spoke up. “Shouldn’t we look for someplace flat?”

They all groaned. They we surrounded by flat.

“Funny”, said Susan. Josh just glared at him.

They decided to forgo using tents since the weather was good and the rainy season, short as it is, was already over. Even at its peak the colony area received almost no rain during most of the year. The times that it did rain more than a couple of times a month seemed to be governed by some cycle that the colonist had yet to figure out. Apparently, the rain cycle was longer than the ten planetary years of the colonies existence.

After eating Josh examined the video recorded by his binoc-scanner. His waist computer extracted the additional embedded information that wasn’t visual. There wasn’t a lot, some infrared bright spots that might be animal life, slightly cooler spots he couldn’t explain. Nothing that told him anything about the forest itself.

Josh decided that it might be the most boring forest he had ever seen from a distance, even parks exhibited signs of life. Then again, he thought, maybe everything just stays away from the desert heat during the day. He imagined that it must be pretty comfortable underneath the tall forest canopy. At the bottom of the trees, he thought a line he couldn’t explain was visible in the fading daylight. It was impossible to say for sure, the heat of the desert sand played havoc with the infrared.

The night passed quickly. Even though they were all excited about reaching the forest all of them had been somewhat worn out by the unfamiliar trek across the desert floor. After quick meal, they started with the same marching order as the previous day. It took about an about half an hour to reach the tree line. Josh called a halt about two hundred meters away. From here the trees reached straight up to the sky, and he estimated, with the help of his binoc-scanner that they averaged close to a hundred meters and more. Something normal for a planet with lower than standard gravity.

With practiced efficiency the team members from the ship broke out their respective instrument cases from one of the Hovers. Mikiu Szateer quickly set up his bio scanners. Susan did the same with her ground analyzers. Wendy and her companion occupied themselves with getting good video shots and Jameson, Josh noticed, used an old still picture camera to take several shots with different settings.

Jameson Maleef, after taking several shots of the forest spoke. “Is it just me or is that tree line too damm straight?”

Josh had thought the same thing himself. “Not just you. It looks like someone took a knife and sliced the edge of the desert. No starting gradually here. Anyone got any thoughts how that happens?”

Susan spoke up. “Not to bring up aliens again but it looks artificial to me.”

Wendy shook her head. “We never put much thought into it. We knew from the overheads that it was a clean break, we didn’t have any idea it would be this clean a line. The survey didn’t hint at this.”

Josh laughed, “like I said before. Survey isn’t interested in real detailed looks. Those guys aren’t real spacers. They like to get the job done and get back home. After seeing some of their ships I don’t blame them.”

“We paid a lot of money for that report.” Wendy said quietly. This fed into her thoughts that they spent a lot of money for something of little value, of course, she placed the current expedition in the same category.

They could have spent the money on equipment and done it themselves. She knew of course what her father would say, you needed experts and there was no reason to risk colony lives. She had to fight with him to get herself and Jameson included in the mission. She expected the only reason her father had agreed was to avoid further fighting.

Jameson nodded. “A note by survey about how straight this cutoff is would have been nice, but I don’t see how it would have helped us. Maybe the desert is an impact crater of some kind.”

Susan responded, she was the geologist. “Doesn’t fit the profile of an impact event. No walls, no center depression, of course we don’t know if there Is any ejecta until we explore the forest. Normally with this much sand I’d say this used to be a sea or flood plain of some type. But unless the river flooded massively in the past that”, she shrugged her shoulders.

Josh smirked, “and that doesn’t explain the trees, or why the sand just ends here.”

“We don’t know that it ends”, said Wendy. “We’ve had good luck growing stuff in this with just a few added nutrients. It pretty much turns itself into soil after a few crop years.”

“Okay, so we don’t know what we don’t know. Let’s head into the tree line. We’ll look around for a while and then head in. I don’t want to spend much time in there the first day. We’ll just get an idea of what the forest floor is like and what kind of undergrowth we’ll have to fight. Maybe see some animals and insects and collect a few planet samples. Then we’ll go comeback here and setup a base camp.

Wendy gave him a curious look. “Now I know why you packed so much gear, to setup multiple basecamps.”

“It’s a process,” said Josh. “We lighten the load on the way in and gather it up on the way back.”

“Lighten what load? The cargo hovers are doing all the work.”

“Actually,” threw in Mikiu. “It’s me and Jameson guiding the hovers that are doing the work.”

Jameson nodded in agreement.

In the few minutes it took to approach the forest they all saw the reason for the clean-cut break with the desert. Hidden under the shade of the tall branches was a wall, about three meters in height, made of some grayish material, and showing no openings, cracks, mason lines or other blemishes. They slowed down as they got closer, Josh and Mikiu making sure they got everything recorded, the others just starring. Stopping three meters away Josh examined the wall, looking both directions to see if there was an end point in sight, there wasn’t. He looked at the others.

“Okay, this might be a good time to call the ship.” Josh touched the comm unit on his chest, it was far too small to reach the ship but would have no trouble reaching the relay they had setup.

“Expo to Deidres, Expo to Deidres. Sam, you there?

A female voice came back. “Sam’s down in engineering, will I do?”

“Sure Yelaa, is the Captain or Jerimy around.”

“It’s the middle of an overhaul, what do you think. Want me to get one of them?”

“No, you can help. You’ve seen the planet scans. Well, we found something that didn’t show up on them. Sending video to you now.” Josh triggered the forward button on his vest cam.

A minute later, “okay, that is really different. I take it the colony didn’t put that up. Any idea of what it’s made of or how far it goes?”

“No clue, I’m assuming that it runs the edge of the forest all the way around the desert but that would mean it crosses the river somehow. That you should be able to see on orbital scans so get Wally to take a look. Hell, see if you can see it now. And judging by its height, the question becomes, is it for keeping something in, or is it for keeping something out?”

It took a minute, Josh assumed that Yelaa was looking though the ships scan data.

“Yea, I find nothing about it in Survey’s records. I assume that it’s old. I don’t know how they could have missed it. Maybe it’s just there to keep the forest out of the desert, or the opposite of that. That could be another valid reason for its height.”

Josh responded, “That could be. But it would be nice to know why somebody went to the trouble of putting it up. Let the others know and see if anyone has any ideas. We’re going to take a closer look and do some testing. Then I think we’ll backtrack a couple of kilometers to our campsite and come up with a new plan.”

“Acknowledged. I’ll fill in the others. Deidres out.”

He turned to look at the others. “We’ve got about plenty of time left so let’s do a little exploring and take some samples.”

Wendy, shaking her head in disbelief. “Does this come under the we won’t tell anyone policy?”

“Yes,” said Josh. “Unless someone who doesn’t look like us sticks his head over the top and says hello. And what was that crack about having too many base camps.”

She just looked at him.

Miuki said, “Josh, if the people who built this thing do stick a head over the top you probably want to keep your hand away from that gun of yours.”

Josh glanced to his side and discovered that his hand was indeed resting on the butt of his sidearm. He didn’t remember putting it there.

“Okay, that’s probably good advice.” Glancing around he added, “for everyone.”

They all looked sheepish for a second before setting to work examining the wall in their respective disciplines. Josh made himself useful by gathering equipment from the two hovers. Not knowing what they would need he pulled out most of the science gear.

Mikiu looked up from the close hand sensor scan he was taking. “You know you’ll have to put all that back.”

“Not tonight I won’t. You think someone’s going to come along and steal it? Asked Josh.

Mikiu nodded, “Survey missed the wall, they might have missed something else.”

“They most certainly did,” said Josh. “I don’t believe for a moment that someone just showed up and built a wall here. It’s the other things they left behind that worry me. Like I was trying to get across to Yelaa, walls usually get built for a reason.”

Susan pointed out, “sometimes they’re just decoration.”

“Yea, well if this is a wall around someone’s house it’s a damm big house,” responded Josh.

With some trepidation Josh walked slowly up to the wall. Reaching out he found the surface cool, even in the late afternoon sun. It was also smooth, very smooth. It seemed to have no surface tension. He found it difficult to hold his hand still. The gray surface appeared to have almost no reflective index, it didn’t reflect light at all. It appeared almost as an absence of something. No wonder orbiting sensors hadn’t detected it.

Susan, doing her own touch survey, spoke up. “I don’t know what this is but it’s not a natural or manmade substance, at least not one I’ve heard of. Doesn’t make much noise when you smack it either.”

“That’s a real scientific test”, said Wendy. Of all of them she was the most perplexed. Half her life had been spent on this world and now to find out that someone or something else had been here first was a shock to her system, a change in her personal world view. She didn’t like it, and she was pretty sure her father wouldn’t either.

Jameson rose from where he had been trying to dig the sand away from the wall’s base. “Goes down some distance. We should hit it with ground penetrating radar. Maybe dig a test hole or run a borescope down”

Josh nodded agreement, “let’s do that, Susan.”

“Sure, give me a moment.” She turned to the pile of stuff Josh had been unloadings and begin sorting through cases.

“Want me to send a drone up”, asked Mikiu. “Might be nice to know what’s on the other side.”

Josh nodded again, “might as well. I’ll run a full scan with the spectrum analyzer and see if we can get an idea of what it’s made of.”

“That’s easy,” said Wendy. “I believe it’s called magic fairy dust.”

“If that’s the case it’ll be a bigger shock science than if it was build by aliens.” Josh shook his head and pulled the spectrum analyzer and some other items from a case.

For the next several minutes they were all engaged in setting up equipment, taking readings, and making their best effort at figuring out the wall. Josh, after starting his own scans running, meticulously set up a data relay to the ship with a portable comm unit. Maybe someone on the ship would have an idea at of what they looking at here. If nothing else, he would ensure that if something happened to the team that whoever came looking would not be starting from scratch.

Josh spent several minutes slowly scanning a ten-meter section of the wall from top to bottom. He finally quit and reviewed the results. Nothing, the machine wouldn’t even make a hazard a guess.

“Damm, the scanner had no clue, whatever this is made of we don’t have anything like it on record.”

“How up to date the scanner”, asked Wendy?

“From the Main Central Library, probably five to ten years, we updated all our files before we left Sartagius. This things as current as any scanner in the sector.”

She groused, “you know what would really be worth finding. A way to send more that short messages FTL.”

Mikiu chimed in, “well that could be alien tech. And that, I would say, is what we’re dealing with here. This stuff could be useful if we can figure out how to manufacture it, has a lot of interesting properties.”

“I’d settle”, said Josh, “if we could figure out what the hell it’s for. Anything Susan?”

She was already sticking her gear back into the Hover, “goes down further than it goes up, further than I can measure with this gear. We need to dig a bore whole down until we find the bottom.

Josh said, “sure, I’ll have the Deidre send down a drilling rig.”

“Not ours,” said Wendy. “We’ve been waiting on that.”

“I was kidding. We don’t have time for that kind of thing”

Mikiu broke in, “Drones ready.”

They all formed in a semicircle behind him to get a view of the drone’s monitor. With a slight motion of his fingers Mikiu sent the small four propellered drone into the air. He quickly raised it to a half meter above the top of the wall and put it hover mode, aiming the camera down towards the other side.

At first, it was difficult to see anything in the darkness of the forest floor, but then the system auto corrected, the picture coming into focus. The forest floor itself was remarkably clear, covered only with a thin layer of some type of grass. The tree trunks themselves went straight into the forest floor with no hint of roots spreading out. The trunks remarkably didn’t get wider as they entered the ground.

Josh allowed his gaze to move from the drone screen to follow the nearest trunks up. Something he hadn’t noticed before, the trunks stayed the same diameter all the way up. He couldn’t see the very tops amid the branches and leaves, but he hoped the trunks narrowed at the very top, otherwise they would be different than all the other trees he had ever seen. He glanced back to the monitor, something else was off, there were no young trees in sight. Usually at the edge of a forest seedlings would find room and sunlight for growth. He wondered if the presence of the wall curtailed that.

Jameson noted the same thing, “no leaves, nothing but grass on the ground. You could almost eat off that floor. Apparently, these trees are very neat, they don’t drop anything.”

Josh turned to Jameson, “you’re the biologist here. What are we looking at?”

Jameson stepped close to see the monitor better, than looked up at the trees above the top of the wall. “Well, they look like trees, wide at the bottom, narrower at the top. Small leaves for a trunk that broad but that’s not unusual. I don’t know if the temperature range here is enough for seasonal changes but these seem abnormally firmly attached. Can’t tell anything else without a closer look.”

“What about the trunks, how they’re the same size all the way up?”

“Could just be the species, could be a result of the slightly lower gravity, or maybe”, he stroked his chin thoughtfully, “maybe it just means they grow really slow.”

Josh shook his head, “that doesn’t tell us a lot.” He held up his hand, “I know, I know, you can’t tell me anything by just looking. Let’s get a closer look. Mikiu, let’s see what the bottom of the wall looks like on the other side.”

“Right boss.” Mikiu, frowning in concentration, nudged the drone forward. As soon as the silver circle of the drone crossed the top of the wall it abruptly fell out of sight. There was no sound and the picture on the monitor remained frozen in its last position. Josh realized with a start that the entire time they had been here, at the wall, the only sounds had been from the desert side. They had heard nothing from beyond the wall. He was surprised at himself for not noticing before.

They all gasped, Josh glanced down at the drone display, nothing. “What the hell happened?”

Mikiu was fiddling with the drone’s controls, actively seeking to get some response. “Don’t know, I lost contact.”

“Completely?”

“The remote isn’t contact with the drone anymore. Anyone see what happened? I was watching the screen.”

The others looked at each other, Josh was the only one to answer. “It just fell out of sight. Didn’t see anything to explain it. I did just notice something else, and maybe it’s related. The entire time we’ve been here I haven’t heard a sound coming from the forest. I didn’t even hear the drone hit the ground.”

The others all registered a look of surprise on their faces. Apparently, none of them had noticed that lack of sound until he pointed it out.

Jameson said. “You’re right. I was so busy paying attention to the wall that it didn’t register.”

The others nodded in agreement. Susan said, “I should have noticed it. I’m grew up in the woods.”

Mikiu nodded, “Yea, me too. Well, I can check the sensor log but I don’t think I’m going to see anything. I think the reason we lost the drone and the reason we hear nothing is some kind of suppression field along the top of the wall. Although I don’t know why you’d need both?”

Josh blew air into his cheeks and let it escape slowly as he tried to decide on what to do next. This is not something he had expected. Something unexpected with the terrain or the animal life, even something weird with the plants he had anticipated, but this was not something natural, it was something foreign to his senses.

“Suppression field - like a blanking field?”

“Yea, maybe a blanking field, but our sensors show nothing.” Mikiu thought for a moment. “It didn’t happen until the drone crossed the top of the wall, so it may be just a vertical extension of the wall. Like I said, I don’t know why you’d need both.”

Jameson said, “simple, goes back to what Josh was asking. Is it intended to keep something in or something out? Either way, it probably has the visible wall part to let whomever or whatever know it’s there. Means that it’s probably a passive device, but maybe not. It did kill the drone.”

“Well, it has a purpose,” said Susan.

“And we need to back off and do a rethink, figure out that purpose.” Josh looked around. “Anyone have anything else they think we should try tonight? I, personally, think we should go back to the tents, eat some of the special occasion real food we brought along, think this whole thing through with the help of the ship, and then get a good nights sleep.”?

He listened to a cloud of noes – with one exception, Mikiu. “You have a better idea?”

“Well, no. Maybe. I think we should leave a security bot.”

Josh asked, “how many did we bring?”

Susan answered, “three.”

Wendy and Jameson corrected that, “four.”

Jameson gave a quick inhale, “okay, what we brought isn’t exactly a security bot. It’s more of a trail camera type of thing. But it does have enough storage to record the entire night.”

Josh thought for a second. “Okay, we’ll leave one of ours and yours. Ours has a wireless network interface that should be able to reach the camp site, but if there is a problem your bot may catch it on video.

Turing to the others he said. “Okay, everyone pack everything up, I’ll let the Deidre know what we’re doing. They can pass it on to the colony. Let’s get back to camp before dark.”