New Story

01/13/2020

Plink.

Sub mind D117 raised his attention level, something had tripped a sensor.

Plink.

There it was again.

With some effort D117 raised his attention level again and stepped down the automatic endeavors he was pursuing. His 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 over a 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 it was being watched by a curious intellect that was trying to determine exactly what the shuttle was doing. With a shrug it finally 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.

“Dad, why can’t we just ask for our money back”, the girl asked as she struggled to hold the storage door open, she should have anchored it.

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

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

“Then how would they make anything? This is what they do for a living.” The tall, weathered face, starred at the girl as he sat down, finished with loading. His face was beginning to show age, not from getting old but from the efforts of work and uncertainty, the cumulative effects of colonization.

She nodded in understanding, her own face still young and uncluttered with the lines of adulthood. Sensing that pressing the point would gain her nothing she let the door swing shut and turned her attention to the Carrybot. “Ford, field 17”, eyeing the stacked bales she added “slowly.” She watched until the bot moved out before following it, her father falling into step beside her.

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 after they arrived. That money had long been spent, it had been paid years ago before the colony left Sartagius. It was a necessary expense. They were in no position to explore the rest of Tingies. It wasn’t a question of personnel as much as time spent away from making the colony self-sufficient. Being able to stand on their own was something that had to occur relatively soon, the cargo drops were getting closer to being done. 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.

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 were, of course, also paid for in advance.

That was the trouble with running a colony mission as an independent. Everything had to be paid 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 represented. Of course, education computers and robots could replace a lot of talent, but they failed in providing experience. That was something the one hundred and twenty three members of the colony had learned the hard way and the expense had been great; they had lost four people in the first ten years. Jarwan was determined not to lose another.

It would be nice to see the crew of the Diedres again, they were the same ship and crew that had brought the colonist to their new home. They had grown to know them fairly well during the year long process.

Colonist, he hesitated to use the word pioneer because he didn’t think of himself as one, were often trying to escape the highly advance technical worlds that man now called home, live in a simpler, slower paced way. Of course, there were colony members who just wanted a place to call their own. Both types had to survive and that meant some use of some outside technology technology, like an exploration team and an initial survey.

A beep at his breast caught his attention, his comm, 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”.

A voice, “Hey Jar, just got a Comm hit, the ship is coming in early. Should be here mid tomorrow.”

“Are we ready”?

“As ready as we’re going to get. 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 echod that thought internally. Getting the right stuff down first would be essential.

“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, I’ll be back in in a couple of hours.”

Some place away from Tingies’ surface other minds had noticed the approaching ship. They watched and probed it with interest. It was the same as the last one, just not as many souls aboard. They collectively thought about this and decided that a closer look was warranted.

By the time the man and his daughter had gotten back to the small Quonset hut that served as the administrative office of the colony the dusky yellow-reddish sun was well on its way to the horizon. The day was a little longer than the old standard of Earth Standard but man was if anything, adaptable.

01/17/2020 Okay, let’s jump ahead here, nothing’s happening.

Five hundred kilometers overhead the Cargo ship Deidres orbited. The crew was in a state of relaxed preparation, getting things done, gear unstowed, shuttles readied, the more intense part of the trip over. They had arrived where they were supposed to without incident, no missed vectors, timing, or pirates. The ship’s Captain was in a good mood; for a deadhead trip. He really didn’t like making non-paying voyages but as this one had been paid in the past, he would honor the arrangement. 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, 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 someone to find us.”

“That would be true. Okay, if we’re in a hurry we can get done in about twenty days, but that’s putting us over on the engine rebuild hours, 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 a month Sartagius time from the date of their return. He shook his head, “Can we do it here”?

Jerimy took a second to answer. “Cap, no problem, we’ve got the material, besides, 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, “fine, we’ve got plenty of food laid in, maybe get some fresh stuff from the planet. Get your repair crews ready.”

“Yes boss.”

He turned to Josh, “how long is it going to take you to rough out this continent.”?

Josh, his large shoulders hunched down in concentration, thought for a second. It was his job to do the exploring the colonist had paid in advance for. But there were constraints, he was limited by the original contract.

“Dad, take as long as you want on 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, I live on this bucket too.”

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 low local gravity. He knew that all his hours in the ships high gee gym would soon be tested. 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.

Heading for the aft shuttle tube he went over his expo team members in his head. They were all experienced and had served with him before, Josh Halerin, himself, the pilot and team commander, Susan Diety the geologist, and Mikiu Szateer, the science guy, archivist and weather expert. Actually, they all filled more than one role, that was part of the drill of being a spacer, you needed several talents to crew a ship, or a dirt side mission.

He wasn’t really looking forward to this expedition, as he had told his boss this was a boring planet from all appearances, nothing to get excited about. 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. Life on the civilized worlds was way too comfortable and easy, work was a simple chore that you did to take up time, tech provided everything one needed. The only bright spot would be seeing the colonist again, they had brought this group here some ten standard years ago and were close to them, at least as close as any crew could be to land siders that were not family

He supposed that was one of the reasons that people joined colony missions, the chance to actually do something, provide for one’s self. But he was young, barely over a hundred, he wasn’t ready to give up all the creature comforts 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 tube. Only thing left for today was the ride down and meeting those unlucky enough to be 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 then him, what with all the work they put in, but not nearly as professional. His job was a high-speed survey of a world he’s likely never going to see again, their job was to learn as much as they could about the only world they would see for a very long time.

/1/20/2020 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 hated, although every colony planet used them, being underground was something he didn’t like, at least in artificial structure, natural underground, such as caves didn’t other him. It was a strange fear for someone who spent more than half of his time in a moving metal box surrounded by nothing. Space flight didn’t bother him, being underground unnerved him.

This one didn’t even have a proper building above it, just a shed for the freight elevator and the entrance to a ramp. The rest of the above ground space was covered with with a garden - an efficient use of land he decided.

He felt like he was submerging in water as he walked down the ramp, which was at least wide enough for four or five to walk abreast. The interior was brightly lite, apparently the colony wasn’t starved for energy. Then again being a ship dweller make one conscious of conserving energy. Planet side with a Zero Point plant, you really didn’t have to worry about it. To bad Zero Point didn’t function well in space.

They were with the colony boss, Jarwan Sunderson, a tall man with the look of someone in charge, used to be a ship man, an engineer, and from his manner Josh thought – a good one. The rest of the group consisted of him, Susan, and Mikiu. They were about to meet the rest of the team, meet then again, they had met on the arrival trip.

Sunderson motioned to a man and woman sitting around a large conference table in one corner, obviously this was a normal meeting spot. The man had the look of some age on him but obviously used to be military, Jameson Maleef, the straightness of his spine and the breadth of his shoulders told the story. The girl, Wendy Jameson, was another matter, she was young – and very pretty. That was a distraction he could do without in a camping situation. He thought back to the briefing given by the Captain eleven years ago on this group, he could not remember anything if anything had been said about the sexual mores they practiced.

He nodded as they crossed gazes, Wendy, Jameson, it’s good to see both of you again. He remembered Wendy the best, the colony leader’s daughter, he hoped she wasn’t still spoiled.

“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?”  
 Jarwin 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 them at night, so regular hours are still sixty minutes.”

“A short hour at night, not a problem, just means a little more sleep.” 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, someone bang on our door for breakfast and we’ll go from there. Our ships going to be doing a lot of work in orbit so we’ve got some time to spare. A couple extra days to acclimate us to planet side and we’ll be in good rhythm. That’ll give us plenty of time to look over the sat map and photos and decide where we’re going to go.”

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

Josh nodded, “great, you guys know what you’re looking for. I’m just here to help you find it”. With that he nodded at Jarwan. “If someone could show us our digs, we’ll settle in and unload our gear from the shuttle.”

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

“Sure,” with that the meeting broke up. Jameson led them to the small dome house they would be using.

OKAY, lets jump to start off day:

The air was definitely a little chilly as the dawn broke. Thankfully the temperatures on this time of year, didn’t have that far of a range. As Josh had told the Captain, a rather boring little world. He glanced around, the team had assembled outside the warehouse where they had been planning. All five of them were dressed in full body suits that would maintain their temperatures at a comfortable level and adjust for exertion, behind them were two hover carts loaded with gear and each person was carrying a small pack. The team members from the ship were in blue, from the colony in red, this was to enable Josh to quickly locate them in an emergency. Against his better judgement all of them were armed, he would have preferred the colonist to leave the weapons to his people, but it was their money and their planet. Fortunately, 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. He glanced at his wrist comp, the time display was set to show both local and ship time, as well as other useful information.

Wendy looked at the two carts disdainfully, “you sure that’s enough food.”

Josh gave her a sideways glance, “we’re only going out for sixty days, and we’re packing concentrates for 150 days, that’s plenty going out and coming back. Unless of course you’re planning to make a pig of yourself.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, in the three days since they’d reunited he’d definitely learned to get under her skin. “Our pigs don’t eat that much, and besides, they recycle”.

“Is that what you call it. I thought they were a food source.”

“Not yet, we didn’t get them until the last cargo drop, be a few years before the herd gets to any size. Sides, we’ve still got plenty of stock rations and concentrates.”

“Not growing the population very fast, seems like you should be helping with that.”

She changed her disdainful glance to a glare. “I’m not breeding stock, 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.”

He felt a little uncomfortable, she had said that they weren’t strict about things. That still didn’t mean that she wasn’t off limits; she was technically a client. And he remembered from when she was six years old, it was hard to reconcile the good looking young woman he saw now with the spindly little girl she used to be.

He glanced around, “everyone ready, let’s go”. With that they started towards the landing field where a transport carrier awaited. Since all of the surrounding terrain was sand he was going to eliminate a large portion of it .

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

The problem with exploring planets Josh decided was that even the most unusual ones were boring, at least after the first couple of hundred anyway. He shook his head as the carrier transport set down. Thinking like that could get you killed he reminded himself, every planet was different and dangerous in it’s own way. He disembarked and used his binoculars to scan the horizon, it was the same in pretty much every direction. The colonist had elected to settle a in the center of a huge flat desert. The major reason being, it was crossed by a wide and deep river that wondered down from the mountains on one side to the ocean on the other. This provided them with a year round source of water for both drinking and irrigation. The other two directions from the colony were deeply forested and the settlers had high hopes of finding and utilizing natural resources. The data they had from orbital scans made a hundred standard years ago suggested a wide variety of materials in the forest and the mountains to the north.

They had chosen to settle in the center of the desert, ease of irrigation and the buffer it placed between them and the surrounding wilderness was a selling point. The calculation was that this would give them time to get up and running before bringing on any additional worries. And, it had given them peace for ten standard years now, now was the time to see what else was out there. This would give them time to make changes to the final two prepaid supply orders yet to be filled.

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

He spoke without putting down the glasses, “trees, a lot of trees, nothing but, trees. 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. How long do you think it’ll take use to get there?”

“Hours. We won’t start today. 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, we passed the point of no return for our cargo haulers a couple of hours ago. I don’t care you’d like to loan us that transport till the next time?”

He frowned, “not likely. You don’t have any air assets at all.”

“None. With nothing but desert around Dad never thought we’d need any 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’ve 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.”

“Not happy, yes – but not with you. I would have spent the money differently, but I was only six at the time, nobody listened.”

“I remember, you were a pain in the”, he left the word unsaid.

“I still am, 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.”

“Your Dad’s the Captain right?”

“Yep.”

She gave him an intense look before turning away and heading back to the others. She noticed that he followed. It wasn’t like he was a whole lot older than her she thought, feeling a small amount of resentment coarse through her for the perceived slight of being considered too young.

She changed the subject. “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 as they arrived to where the others had been setting up camp. “It is, yes.” He looked around, the two Cargo Hovers were set to each side and two tents had been setup between. A small camp light was set up in front of the tents. Since the climate was moderate and their clothing self-adjusting there was no need for a heat source, the light served as a stand in for a campfire. 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 any kind of emergency. It would also keep track of them by triangulating with the comm satellite they had placed in orbit. They also left a

communications relay station. The satellite comm gear in the Hovers could reach the high orbit of the ship but it was simpler to use the relay, especially once they got under the cover of the forest.

Overhead, as soon as they shut down the reactors to begin the overhaul process, a very brief blip occurred in the ships sensor readings, the data was immediately recorded but didn’t last long enough to trip any threshold alarms – unfortunately, no human eyes caught the short discrepancy. In orbit the only watch that much attention was paid too was the out-system sensors. They didn’t fear anything from the planet, but something from out of the system could catch them at a vulnerable time, with power down and the engineer cold. The chances of that happening were slim, but a watch was manned at all times.

Mike, the Captain was concerned with other matters, the off loading of the cargo was a straightforward but time consuming matter. The cargo was only good for the colonist if It arrived in good condition, and the biggest chance for damage came during the unloading from the holds. The Captain thought to himself, for not the first time, that his only real job was as extra cargo hand at times when robots doing the work but had to be directed with care.

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 systems were now their only chance for flight or fight if the unthinkable happened. 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. Didn’t matter if you knew where you were going if you couldn’t breathe or fly.

Down on the planet the sleeping arrangements were simple, ship slept with ship and colony with colony. Josh tried to rest but even as an experienced campaigner he still had trouble getting to sleep. You’d think that 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. The planet smelled different, but then they all did. They said some old timers were able to identify the world they were on by the way it smelled. Josh didn’t really think that was true, even planets differed from area to area, city to city or even continent to continent.

After a quick morning meal the group started off. Josh took the lead with Wendy to his right side, Susan took up the middle and Mikiu and Jameson minded 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 from the ground on anti-grav units. They could run for days on their battery packs but absorbed solar energy along the sides of their bodies. Unless they were out of the sun for several days they would be fine. Still, that was something that Josh was mindful of since they were headed towards heavily forested land.

The day became progressively warmer as they moved towards the tree line. Since the surface was spectacularly flat Josh maintained a vigorous pace, hoping to get near the tree line before nightfall, he balked at wasting time. Only an occasional soil examine and communications check interrupted their time during this phase of the trip.

He didn’t feel like talking and apparently the others felt the same. Even when they stopped for a middle 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 broke the late afternoon silence. “How close are we going to get?”

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

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

“At least for now, our data from last night says that the wind shifted a couple of times. Of course, that could have just been where we were. I don’t see any reason for it to be different 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 together, does not mean that 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 kid, the only thing that initial scans really look for is to make sure we’re not intruding on someone else’s block. The Federation and the Church only care if we try to muscle in on previous occupants. They don’t care about the future of these planets or the past, unless of course there’s something of value, and that’s only happened three times.”

“First, don’t call me kid. I’ve grown up, and if we did find Alien tech we sure as hell wouldn’t tell anyone about it.” She eyed him curiously, “would you tell?”

“Not going to happen so it doesn’t matter, and no, unless we find fully operational gear with already translated instructions, no one’s going to care.” He paused, “and I wouldn’t call exactly call twenty grown up. But I will admit you’ve made a nice start of it.”

Wendy had the good sense not to acknowledge the complement, no use giving this temporary intruder into her life any encouragement. She did wonder about his answer to the alien tech question.

During the first few bursts of expansion, alien technology was the big treasure that everyone looked for- now, not so much. Their own technology had reached the point where people moved to other worlds to get away from it, or at least some parts of 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. They had yet to find intelligent life, remains of it, yes; but life itself, no. And the sighs of life that they had found were old, there was nothing recent. The lack of current indications of aliens was one of the mysteries of the times. Some took it as a sign that intelligence was fleeting and not long lasting, others took a darker view, maybe something, or someone, had led to the downfall of civilizations. Wendy 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, she thought that they just didn’t have a clear picture yet.

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.

He lowered the binoculars from his face. “Okay guys, the range finder says we’re just outside of two klicks. 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 the tents since the weather was good and the rainy season, such as it was, 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. But whatever the cycle was, they knew it was longer than ten planetary years.

After eating Josh examined the video recorded by his binoculars during his last scan. His computer decoded the additional embed information, but there was not a lot. Occasional infrared bright spots of some animal, slightly cooler spots under the deep shade of the trees, nothing that stood out. Josh decided that it might be the most boring forest he had ever seen, even parks exhibited more life variety than this. Then again, he thought, maybe everything just stays away from the desert. He thought he saw a line at the bottom of the tree line but in the fading daylight it was impossible to say for sure, the heat off of the desert sand played havoc with the infared.

After another quick first meal, they started on, same marching order as the previous day. It took about an hour and a half to reach the tree line. Josh called a halt about two hundred meters away. From here the trees reached straight up to the sky, he estimated that they averaged close to a hundred meters or more, normal for a lower than normal gravity world.

Without a pause his team members broke out their respective quick instrument cases from one of the Hovers. Szateer quickly set up his bio scanners, Susan did the same with her ground analyzers. Wendy and her companion occupied themselves with pictures and binoculars. Josh, with nothing of scientific interest to do, joined them.

Jameson Maleef spoke for perhaps the third time since Josh had met him.

“Is it just me or is that tree line to damm straight?”

Josh had thought the same thing himself. “Not just you. It looks like someone took a knife and just cut the forest off from the desert. Anybody got any thoughts?”

Susan spoke up. “Looks artificial to me. Any ideas on what caused it.”

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, “initial surveys usually aren’t very accurate, if there is no intelligent life and you aren’t likely to die an hour after you disembark the shuttle they consider it a safe planet.”

“We paid a lot of money for that report.” Wendy retorted. She hated that they had spent so much money for what she perceived to be of little value, of course, she counted the current expedition of little value also. 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. She expected the only reason her father had agreed was his guilt about leaving her friends back on Sartagius. That and the fact that she was stubborn as hell; something she had gotten from her barely remembered mother.

“Give the survey teams a break, they have limited time and resources and a whole lot of worlds to examine. Although”, Josh said thoughtfully, “they probably should have at least put a note in the file.”

Jameson nodded. “A note 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 closest they had to a 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 the day and then return here and camp. I’d rather learn a little about the forest before we spend a night there.”

In the few minutes it took to approach the forest they all saw the reason for the clean-cut break from the desert. Hidden under the shade of the tall branches that leaked out over the sand was a wall, about three meters in height, made of some grayish material, and showing no openings, cracks, mason lines of other clues about its construction. 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, maybe you can help. You’ve seen the planet scans, we found something that didn’t show up, sending videos to you now.” Josh triggered the forward button on his vest cam.

A minute later, “okay, that is really different. 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 area. The question is; is it for keeping something in or keeping something out.”

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

“Yea, I get the picture, but I assume that it’s old. Survey scan does not indicate anything for which you would need a wall that tall.”

“Yes, I know. But even if it is from the past would be nice to know the purpose somebody went to the trouble of putting it up. Let the others know and see if anyone has any ideas, we’re going to backtrack a couple of kilometers back into the desert 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 three hours left so let’s do a little exploring and take some samples before we head back.”

Miuki asked, “you really want to go back that far?”

“I think so, survey missed the wall, they might have missed something else.”

Miuki nodded. He was a little worried himself. He understood how survey could have missed the wall, a planet is a big thing to examine in a hurry. Especially if you’re relying on remote sensing to do most of the work. Landing examines were usually nothing more than spot checks and there were an awful lot of spots on a planet.

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 involve no surface tension, it was hard to hold one’s hand still on it. He looked closely at the gray surface, almost no reflective index, 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 substance. At least not one I’ve ever seen or 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 else had been here first, it 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 like it either.

Jameson rose from where he had been trying to dig the sand away from the wall’s base. “Goes down a ways, we should hit it with the ground penetrating radar.”

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

“Sure, give me a moment.” She turned to one of the Hovers and begin sorting through cases.

“Want me to send a drone up”, asked Mikiu.

Josh nodded again, “might as well. I’ll run a full scan with the spectrum analyzer.”

For the next several minutes they were all engaged in setting up equipment, taking readings and further documenting the wall. It would be nice to have other people look at their collected data and Josh meticulously set up a data relay with a second portable comm unit. Maybe someone would have an idea at of what they were facing.

Josh, an experienced hand with the spectrum analyzer, a small device with a pistol like hand grip and a read-out screen along the top, 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 couldn’t even make a guess.

“Damm, the machine can’t even make a guess, whatever this is made of we don’t have anything like it on record.”

“How up to date is that scanner”, asked Wendy with a bit of attitude?

“From the Fed 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.”

Mikiu chimed in, “and that makes this Alien tech. Could be useful if we can figure out how to manufacture it.”

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

She was already sticking her gear back into the Hover, “goes down as far as it goes up.   
Someone was pretty specific about putting this thing up. I think, although I can’t be sure, that there are cross anchor bars at the bottom edge. I don’t know if this stuff will break but it would take the devil to tip it over.”

“Still doesn’t answer the question, keeping something in or something out?  
 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 to a half meter above the top of the wall and put it hover mode, aiming the camera down on the other side as he did so.

At first it was difficult to see anything in the darkness of the forest floor, but then the system auto corrected and the picture came into focus. The tree trunks went straight into the forest floor, no hint of roots spreading out, the trunks didn’t even get wider near the ground.

Josh looked 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 silly looking trees. He glanced back to the monitor, something else off, there was no underbrush, no young tress, in fact, no ground cover of any kind.

There we no leaves, none, Josh knew that some trees kept their leaves year around, but he’d never seen a tree that never lost a leaf.

Jameson noted the same thing, “no leaves, no undergrowth, nothing. You could eat off that floor.”

“No thanks, you’re a biologist, right?”

Jameson nodded, “yes”.

“Good”, said Josh, “what kind of trees 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 leaf changes but these seem 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, “well that answered 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.” With that Mikiu nudged the drone forward from its position above the wall, as soon as the silver circle of the drone crossed the top of the wall it abruptly stopped, frozen for a second before falling straight behind the structure. There was no sound of a crash and Josh realized that the entire time they had been at the wall the only sound had been the desert breeze, 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 all contact.”

“All.”

“All. The remote can’t even tell the drones there. Anyone see anything happen, I was watching the screen”?

The others looked at each other in the hopes that someone had noticed something that would explain the drone’s actions. The expressions on their faces told Josh they hadn’t.

“Power failure, something hit it, can you review the log”?

Mikiu nodded, “I can check the sensor log but I’m not going to see anything. It’s like it flew through a field of some kind. It just totally lost power”

Josh blew air into his cheeks and let it slowly escape 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 a plant he had anticipated, but this was not something natural; it was something foreign to his senses.

“A 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, could be a localized field.”

“If that’s the case we’ve still got an unanswered question, is the wall intended to keep something in, or out.”

“At least we know it has a purpose,” said Susan.

“Either way, we need to back off and do a rethink.” Josh looked around, “anyone want try anything else tonight”?

There was a chorus of noes. “Okay, everyone pack up, I’ll let the Deidres know what’s going on. They can let the colony know.”

With that the team packed up their equipment, placed it back on the sled and headed back to their camping spot of the night before.