Island

The island has eight thousand kilometers of coastline, but it really isn’t that big. It has hundreds of reaches, sounds and fjords, many of which penetrate far inland. The channels around it are deep and navigable, which doesn’t matter much, since there is only one ship on this world, and it hasn’t come round in 427 years and 156 days, standard. If they didn’t have complete specs and photos of what it originally looked like, it might have been completely forgotten by now. They know it’s still out there, still moving, but they have no idea whether anyone’s still alive on board, or if they are, how to contact them. The relay satellites shut off, all of them at once, ages ago, and though the orbiter still keeps track of the ship, the radio gets no answer. Whatever ended the satellites also seems to have taken out their onboard communications.

The island is built around a central mountain, with deep valleys splitting the sides right to the base of the mountain. The mountain itself is far too high to climb, and there isn’t enough oxygen on this planet to climb more than a thousand meters. If they could get high enough and still have the energy to work, they could install lasers all around the heights and signal the ship when it came close.

In fact, they have twice done just that, and it has availed them nothing. They lost climbers each time, and when the batteries failed, there were no volunteers to replace them. Once a body dies the brain-death, there is no jump-starting it. The project was added to the long list of things they might try again someday.

The village is starting to look run down, as the concrete weathers and spalls, and the roots of the incipient jungle creep in around the edges. That’s not to say that it won’t last hundreds of years more, maybe even longer than the scientists who inhabit it, even though the life support systems work as well as they ever did. The brain, irreplaceable and hard to repair, wears out eventually, axons worn down to nubs, synapses polluted by dirt and plaque.

The world is relatively young, as far as worlds go. Vegetation has long since crept out of the swamps onto land, but there are no flowering plants yet, few insect-things, and the land animals are on the order of primitive reptiles. They’re so stupid that you can step on them before they move — no concepts of land-based predation yet. They still spend most of their time in the shallows. The tree-things grow huge, perhaps 500 meters tall on some islands — there is almost always at least one sun in the sky, and the soil is well-watered.

Across the main channel, the scientists can still see the remains of the other settlement. They never go there unless they have to. There’s still lots of equipment to salvage and cannibalize, but it comes with heavy emotional baggage. There’s no one alive who didn’t lose someone there. The jungle has claimed most of it, growing right over the road and the now-roofless buildings, and even splitting the reinforced concrete with its inexorable roots.

From time to time, the chairman brings up the idea of building a wooden vessel to attempt to reach the other settlements, but without radio, no one is very enthusiastic about the idea. In fact, the likelihood of other settlements having survived, without the ship to resupply them and bring new parts for their technology, is next to nothing. It would really just be something to do. The orbiter shows them pictures from time to time of buildings out in the unknown, but they haven’t seen anyone in the films. The day the satellites fell was the end of any real chance for civilization on this world.

Occasionally the orbiter relays messages from the homeworld. *Chin up, we’re still aware of you, no money to build a ship right now, economy bad, war’s still going on, maybe later, talk to you next year*. The messages take many decades to arrive — humanity could have erased itself from history by now, for all they know. Still, they celebrate each time a message arrives, and the equipment is never turned off.

There are only a handful of children on this world. The chairman regrets this, as it means that there is unlikely to be anyone left to continue the species when the oldsters wear out. His own daughter disappeared a few years ago, or was it decades? He has no stomach or heart for replacing her. He has only one hopeful idea what could have become of her: the ship passed within a few dozen kilometres of them, near enough for hope, too far for luck. How the girl got to the ship remains an unsolved mystery which he uses to occupy his deeply depressed mind.

The girl, of course, was typical of the children who have been born on this world. The radiation of three suns produces mutations, children who neither speak nor age quickly enough. A twenty-year-old is practically the same as a seven-year-old. The boys never reach puberty, and the girls don’t reach it until decades have passed, but they remain too stupid to be parents. Conception is frowned upon, although it does happen from time to time. People need sex, and you can’t outlaw it. The hospital keeps their bodies young, even after hundreds of years, and their libidos, while weak, are still functional.

Nowadays, little scientific work is being done. They have pretty much discovered everything they can with the technology they have, and they’ve pretty much built everything they could. If they could get to the orbiter in the escape vehicle, they could, conceivably, return to the cruiser, somewhere outside the solar system, frozen in waiting, but the only power source big enough is on the ship. It, if handled incorrectly, would suck this whole world in like a black hole drinking light. They still know how, just not whether they can do it. It must be done right the first time. There will never be a second chance.

They do, however, keep watching. The orbiter has told them that the ship is approaching at last, but it has approached many times before, always turning aside when it reaches the main channel. They have no effective way of signalling, and the island and channels being naturally impassable without vehicles, they’ve spent hundreds of years relying on blind chance to deliver them. The ship holds spare parts they can’t make or cannibalize, and maybe even a working missile they might convert to a radio satellite somehow. The chief technician is nominally in charge of the watch.

The chief technician, who hasn’t had anyone to supervise in three centuries, still lives above the largest lab, its machinery mostly wrapped in plastic and carefully dusted once every year or two. Dusting day has become sort of a holiday for the small population, when all the labs are inspected, windows that had broken boarded over, the circuit breakers thrown. A cheer goes up when the lights come on, but that’s all. There is no research to do, nothing to build, no point in redesigning objects or systems that will never be built. The chief, a fact well-known to the rest of the scientists, has twice attempted suicide with sleeping drafts immediately after dusting day, when the futility of his position sinks in yet again. Now the medic stays with him for a few weeks after each cleaning. The chief technician’s funk, while deep, never lasts.

The medic, on the other hand, can go months without speaking to anyone. He can go so long without communication that people have pretty much given up on him, when he isn’t needed. His implants still work, and he lives on DC power, so he is fully functional and capable of doing his job. He just isn’t any fun. Occasionally he sits on the edge of the dock, his feet inches from the slimy water, and imagines great creatures emerging from the depths, carrying him off and ending his slow misery. There are no great creatures on this world, a fact he well knows. He can sit for days, until his batteries run down and he returns to his alcove. It is his one and only secret that he remains tortured by guilt for the part he played in the disappearance of the girl, years ago. Still, a man can only wait for so long, and none of the women here wanted anything to do with a man only half man. And it wasn’t as if he hadn’t waited for decades, or that the girl was really a child. He knows that he is the only man who understands the children, courtesy of his implants.

The chief technician and the chairman are standing on the roof of the observation tower, using the multi-wavelength telescope to peer through the heavy cloud layer at the stars. There is no good reason to do this, other than its entertainment value. They have discovered thousands of interesting celestial objects this way, and on occasion they believe they have sighted the homeworld, until the computer tells them that it’s the same star they thought was the homeworld twenty years ago. If they ever do find the homeworld, they’ll send a burst of gamma rays in its general direction, a meaningless message, begging for rescue.

The chairman catches a glint of light from the corner of his eye. He knows already that it’s the ship, sailing slowly toward the entrance to the main channel. He pulls on the chief’s arm, but the chief is unexcited and slow to respond. They reorient the telescope, and see the helmsman behind his glass, steering in the direction of the main channel. They attempt to signal with the laser, but there is no response. They go down the stairs and eat fish. Again, fish, always fish.