



ARRIVAL

RYK BROWN

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ARRIVAL

RYK BROWN

Arrival

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PROLOGUE

He watched from a distance, as the tall, slender man braced himself against the jet wash of the approaching shuttle. The lone man had arrived only a few minutes before, driving up in an open-cockpit, all-terrain vehicle. The shuttle bounced once, then settled gently onto the hard-packed ground and began to spin down its engines. The slender man straightened his jacket and prepared himself for his next task.

From the safety of his hiding place, he watched as the shuttle's hatch swung open and the smiling face of a woman appeared in the open hatchway. The slender man offered greetings to the smiling woman, helping her down to the ground. She opened a small panel and deployed a boarding ladder, her smile fading as he whispered in her ear.

Startled by another distant sound, the watcher sank lower, remaining hidden as another vehicle approached from the access road to his right. It was the same type of vehicle as before, but this one carried several people. He felt he knew them all, yet chose to remain hidden as their vehicle pulled to a stop next to the first one. Climbing out, they strode across the tarmac to join the others at the shuttle.

He poked his head back up from hiding as he strained to hear their distant voices. Now that the shuttle's engines were shut down, it was unnaturally quiet in the surrounding valley. The native wildlife avoided this unfamiliar patch of hard, unnatural ground. Strange things happened here. Frightening beasts falling from the sky on fiery tails with a cry so loud it echoed throughout the entire valley. He listened as the newcomers joined the tall slender man at the

bottom of the shuttle's ramp. The man seemed surprised, yet grateful, at their arrival. The young woman with the sandy hair spoke to him first, offering a sympathetic greeting. They exchanged sounds that seemed familiar, yet the watcher did not understand their meaning.

The slender man looked up at the brilliant topaz sky for a moment, as if searching for something, perhaps gathering strength, then exchanged more sounds with the young woman with sandy hair.

The second woman, older, with darker hair, reached out and touched the slender man's shoulder, making soothing sounds... Sounds perhaps meant to strengthen and encourage the slender man. He looked anything but, as he straightened to regain his composure and prepare himself.

He watched from a distance, his heart pounding as a woman stepped into the open hatchway at the top of the ramp. As she stepped out into the light, her long blonde hair turned even more brilliant in the afternoon sun. Even from afar, he watched her green eyes large with anticipation, her chest rising and falling in an exaggerated breathing ritual, as she took in her first breath of natural, unfiltered air. She was breathtaking and elegant, with a natural grace that he could not remember seeing before, and was sure he would never see again.

The blonde woman's eyes narrowed as she scanned the surrounding area from her vantage point at the top of the ramp, searching desperately for something. He shrank further into his hiding place, watching as her eagerness turned to worry, realizing that the one she searched for was not there. She proceeded down the ladder, met at the bottom by the tall, slender man and his companions.

He watched from his hiding place, straining to control himself as the slender man led the beautiful woman away from the shuttle and several paces away from the group. It was a terrible moment. As her expression turned from one of worry to one of shock and grief, his own eyes welled up with tears for the first time in longer than he could

remember. As the woman nearly collapsed into the slender man's arms, he wanted to call out to her, but could not. As she wept without restraint, he wanted to run to her, but could not. And as she pounded the slender man's chest with her fists, refusing to believe the horror, he wanted to go to her, to hold her and tell her that everything would be all right, but could not.

Then came the children. A boy, maybe eight years old, and a girl, even younger. They had the same expression of excitement and wonder that had adorned their mother's face only moments ago. But that too was short-lived as they saw their mother in the distance, crying in the slender man's arms. The boy somehow knew what it all meant, as he took his little sister's hand and helped her down the ladder. His eyes were narrowed and his expression troubled, but he would not let himself cry. The older, dark-haired woman met the children at the bottom of the ramp, greeting them with all the normalcy and joy she could muster, trying to distract them from the anguish their mother was experiencing only a few meters away.

Seeing her children, the blonde woman composed herself and turned to face them. She knew she had to be the one to tell them. But as she looked into her son's knowing eyes, it was all she could do to keep from falling apart again. She went to them, kneeling down and embracing them, telling them the awful truth.

Their father was gone.

He watched as the others collected the grieving family's bags from the shuttle's cargo bay, below and slightly aft of the ramp. The slender man assembled them together, making sure they were ready to move. He crouched down low behind the bushes to avoid detection as the group began to move toward him, walking to the vehicles that would take them back to the strange collection of buildings further up the valley. The slender man led the way, followed by the beautiful woman, her arms around her stoic son and confused younger daughter, and finally the others carrying

their bags. As they came closer and climbed up into the vehicles, he could see the pain in their eyes.

The slender man glanced toward him as he hid, nestled among the colorful, fragrant foliage, as if he had known all along that he was there, hovering on the edge of their reality. Once again, he yearned to leap from his hiding place and go to them, to snatch them all up and carry them off to some faraway place where he could protect and love them... But could not.

He watched from a distance, feeling utterly helpless, punished for crimes he did not commit, cursed to spend eternity alone. He watched them depart from his life forever, and did the only thing he could.

He wept.

CHAPTER ONE

The ship rumbled as they rode out the last few minutes of their tenth and final braking burn on approach to Tau Ceti Five. Jack looked down at the display at the center of his forward console. He didn't like the numbers he was seeing, and a discreet glance to his right told him that his pilot didn't like them either. "A little fast, Lynn?" he asked.

She responded with only a nod, her concentration focused on the task at hand.

Jack turned his head slightly toward the rear of the flight deck, as if to speak to his engineer. It was a completely unnecessary gesture, since everyone was required to wear their comm-sets during any condition other than green. "Frank, what's our estimated speed at the end of the burn?"

"Estimated speed at end of burn will be..." Frank paused for a moment as he glanced at his displays to be sure. "Four nine one zero five meters per second," Frank answered, "give or take a meter."

Jack scowled. At that speed they'd still be going too fast to safely perform an aero-braking maneuver and achieve a stable orbit around Tau Ceti Five. And they didn't have enough fuel to burn the main engines any longer than scheduled. Jack thought about it for a moment, weighing his options. "That's not good enough," he concluded. "Take the reactor up to one hundred and ten percent."

"The flight manual says no more than one zero five." As usual, Lynn was putting in her two cents.

"One hundred and ten percent, Frank," Jack repeated firmly, annoyed at Lynn for questioning his decision.

"It's too risky, Jack," she objected. "You know what happens if the reactor fails, don't you?"

"Yes, I do, Lynn." Jack was biting back his anger through gritted teeth.

"Then why not just burn the engines a little longer?"

"We don't have the fuel for it."

"We can make it up..."

"Just fly the damn ship, Lynni!" Jack snapped, cutting her off mid-sentence.

Lynn instantly fell silent, her mouth still open as she returned her attention to her console. Jack rarely yelled at her like that, and he never used that awful nickname. Only Frank used it, and only when he wanted to irritate her.

"Reactor at one one zero, Jack," Frank interrupted, trying to ease the tension. "Thrust levels are coming up."

Jack stared at the ship's speed readout on the display. The numbers slowly began to decline as the ship's rate of deceleration increased.

"Revised estimated speed at end of burn; four seven, five zero zero." It still wouldn't be enough for Jack. Frank knew that Jack wanted to finish this burn with room to spare.

"Take her up to one-fifteen, Frank," Jack ordered, glaring at Lynn before she could object any further.

Frank took a deep breath, blowing it out slowly. "One one five, aye," he responded, trying to sound formal, hoping that Lynn might take the hint. Frank scanned the reactor's status displays, watching intently for any anomalies. Satisfied that the reactor was operating within safe tolerances, he turned his attention to the flight dynamics display, knowing that Jack would ask for another estimate any second. "Revised estimate, forty-six, nine-fifty. Fifteen seconds to end of burn."

"Very well," Jack replied, trying not to show the nervousness in his voice.

The remaining seven members of the crew were secured in their flight seats in the narrow passageway between the inner airlock and the habitat module of the land and return

vehicle. The passageway was only two meters wide at the deck, and one meter wide at the ceiling, with two rows of four seats, each row stuffed under the inboard edge of the LRV's forward turbine housings.

Tony, the mission's computer and electronics specialist, sat at the forward end of the compartment, in the only center-mounted chair, watching the flight status monitor on the forward bulkhead above the hatch. It was his responsibility to supervise the evacuation of the rest of the crew in the event of an emergency. He was glad that the braking burns were almost over. They had been going through this for the last two weeks. Burn for an hour, break for fifteen, and repeat, sometimes for more than half a ship's day. Then flip the ship over again, and spend a day or two scooping up interstellar hydrogen to process into fuel. Today's series of burns had lasted only four hours. But it had been a boring four hours, stuck in his couch for thirty minutes at a time, sometimes with no more than a few minutes rest in between. But it was no small feat to decelerate a vessel from nearly forty percent the speed of light to a speed safe for aero-braking.

Frank carefully watched the reactor's status displays. He had never seen a reactor run at one hundred and fifteen percent of normal. Hell, he had never seen one run at one hundred percent, before this mission. The reactors back on the Daedalus had never been taken higher than seventy-five percent, as far as he knew. "Reactor is running a tad hot, but otherwise it still looks good," Frank reported. "Ten seconds to end of burn." He looked at the back of Lynn's head. As usual, her hair was tied up in a bun. He noticed beads of sweat forming on the back of her neck. He glanced at Jack's neck, noticing it was bone-dry. "Five seconds," he reported, turning back to his console.

Jack hovered over his display. Their speed was down to forty-seven point two five kilometers per second. It was

going to be close.

"Four..."

Lynn's gaze was fixed on her flight path display, still furious with Jack for snapping at her.

"Three..."

Jack checked his flight data display again. Their speed was forty-seven point one two five.

"Two..." Frank glanced at the primary propellant gauges, quickly verifying that they would finish with exactly the amount of propellant they had intended. Jack was taking his ship to the limit, squeezing every milliliter of propellant out of her.

"One..." Frank's right hand hovered over the flashing main engine cutoff button located on one of the three touch-sensitive screens placed in a shallow arc across his console. "Zero," he announced, his hand still in position, ready for Jack to give the order.

A second passed, but Jack said nothing, his eyes still fixed on the display. Finally, after another second and a half, he spoke up. "MECO," Jack instructed, calmly.

Frank's hand tapped the main engine cutoff button.

Silence fell over the Icarus as her main engines instantly shut down. Jack looked over at Lynn, noting what could be a satisfied look on her face. Their speed was forty-six point seven five kilometers per second. Jack would have preferred to be below forty-six, but this would have to do. He was still within the limits set forth in their flight plan. Besides, he had already encroached on their max-propellant usage for the burn. He was now a few hundred kilograms short for their trip from Tau Ceti Five to their next assignment at Tau Ceti Six. He wondered how late that might make them. *A day? A week?* He'd have to remember to ask Frank to make the calculations for him later. Maybe he'd get lucky, and they'd finish up their work on TC Five a few days ahead of schedule. That would give them a few extra days for the slightly lower transit speed they would need during the next leg to accommodate the additional propellant expenditure.

"Shutdown of main engines confirmed," Frank announced as he reached for the reactor's control panel.

"Reactor back down to fifty percent," Jack quickly ordered.

Frank had started rolling down the reactor output levels before Jack had given the order. "Reactor coming down," Frank reported. "Mains are cold, master arm is safe, fuel pumps are off. Reactor plant, nominal." Frank turned his chair forward and announced, "Show's over, folks."

"Set condition green," Jack directed. "And standby to pitch over, Lynn."

"Aye, sir," Lynn replied, her emphasis clearly on *sir*.

Frank laughed to himself, shaking his head as he selected 'ship-wide' on the comm-panel.

"All hands secure from condition blue, set condition green," Frank's voice crackled over their comm-sets. *"Six hours to aero-braking."*

Back in the passenger compartment, the rest of the crew gladly began unbuckling their restraint harnesses.

"That last burn was the worst," Laura complained as she unfastened her harness. "My back hasn't been this sore since training."

Mac, the mission's mechanic, wasted no time leaving his seat. "I'm getting something to eat," he announced as he quickly moved forward between the aisles.

"You can't possibly be hungry *again*?" Sara asked as she stood sideways in the aisle, pressing her hands against the overhead and stretching her arms upward.

"Hey, it takes a lot of food to fuel this fine specimen of manhood."

"Oh, please," Sara retorted, rolling her eyes in disgust.

Mac knew that his obsession with his physical condition was lost on the rest of the crew, but he especially enjoyed irritating Sara. He floated sideways down the aisle, purposefully brushing his chest up against her arms as she

stretched. "Oh, baby," he sneered as he glanced down at her breasts.

Sara grabbed his shirt and pushed him forward, away from her. "Get lost, Neanderthal." She had spent the last four months locked up with the man. She had been subjected to sexual innuendos, unbridled chauvinism, lewd remarks, and even the occasional grope. And it had not been much better during their year-long training regimen before the mission began.

"She wants me," Mac whispered to his considerably less offensive cohort, Tony, as he passed by him near the forward hatch.

"One of these days I'm going to blast that jerk out an airlock," Sara grumbled.

Maria, the mission's medical officer, rose from her seat. "He just behaves that way because he knows he can get a rise out of you. If you just ignored him..."

Sara pushed past Maria as if she were chasing after Mac. "Thanks, Doc," Sara replied dismissively, "but I think I can handle it."

"Honestly, Maria, I don't know why you even bother with her," Laura protested as she drifted over the tops of the seat backs, heading forward.

"What can I say? She's a challenging case."

Laura drifted forward toward the airlock between the flight deck and the passenger space. Tony was already in the airlock, securing some equipment. "Torpedo?" Laura asked him, turning into an excitable child for a moment.

Tony laughed. It was a private game that he and Laura played at the end of each burn series. "Standby to launch torpedo," he agreed, shaking his head in dismay. This woman was thirty-two years old, a mother of four, and an expert in biogenetics. And yet, here she was, pretending she was a torpedo.

Laura flipped over one hundred and eighty degrees in the middle of the airlock, inverting herself and positioning

her head just above the hatch in the deck, her feet nearly touching the overhead. "Clear the tube!" she announced.

From deep down within the Icarus below her, Mac's faint voice could be heard from the galley. "*Tube is clear!*"

"Torpedo ready for launch," she responded gleefully.

Tony positioned himself next to her, hooking his toes under the hatch ring. He grabbed her ankles, feeling her legs stiffen as she prepared herself for launch. He pushed down on her ankles, propelling her down the transfer tube. "Torpedo away!" Tony announced as he pushed her toward the midship airlock of the Icarus.

The tube was nearly ten meters long, with a smooth handrail running along its starboard side. It connected the Icarus and the land and return vehicle, allowing transfer between the main ship and the landing craft affixed to her topside.

Laura squealed with delight as she quickly traversed the length of the tube. As she approached the bottom, she saw Mac step into the airlock below her and release a two-liter container of water, the fluid separating into several large globules that floated directly into her flight path. "Mac!" she screamed as she fumbled for the handrail. But it was too late. Entering the airlock at the bottom of the tube, she collided with the water globules, drenching her head and shoulders as her outstretched arms touched the airlock's padded deck plates in a clumsy attempt to stop her momentum. "You jerk!" she cursed as she bounced off the deck, spinning clumsily, flinging water droplets about the airlock.

"*Torpedo destroyed!*" Mac boasted from beyond the galley hatch.

Laura wiped the water from her face as she floated in the airlock. "You knew he was going to do that, Tony!"

"I had no idea!" Tony defended from the top of the tube, as he tried not to laugh. "Honest!"

"Look at this mess!" Laura complained. "How am I going to clean..." Before she could even finish her sentence, a

small towel came floating in from the aft hatch, obviously sent there by Mac from the galley next door. "Oh, thank you very much," she said, grabbing the towel as it floated by.

Adia entered the airlock next. It was still difficult for her to navigate in zero gravity, even after four months of practice. She gingerly made her way past Tony, excusing herself as she passed. Unlike most of the others, she preferred to go down the tube feet first, always keeping her head in the direction that she interpreted as being "up" in order to maintain her bearings.

Suddenly, the attitude thrusters fired, pitching the nose of the ship downward, throwing Adia toward the ceiling. She reached out to grab the side rail along the equipment lockers, but grabbed a handful of Tony's shirt by accident. "Sorry," she apologized, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she withdrew her hand.

"Wait," Tony warned, grabbing her arm and surprising her. "It's not over." The thrusters sounded again, and the pitch over suddenly stopped.

"I guess I still haven't gotten my space legs yet," she admitted as Tony let go.

"That's alright," he consoled her. "After all, you didn't have nearly the training time the rest of us had."

She knew he was only being polite. The others had been just as nice at first, but had soon grown tired of her difficulty adapting. "And yet, here I am," she said without thinking.

"Here you are," Tony replied with a broad smile.

Adia stared at him for a brief moment, taken aback by his wide, genuine smile. But the moment soon became uncomfortable and she felt the need to retreat. "Excuse me," she dismissed politely, quickly lowering herself into the tube.

Tony watched as she descended, her long ponytail swaying about unnaturally in the microgravity environment. He positioned himself for descent, then noticed Will was still in the passenger space. "You coming, Will?" he asked as he dove down the tube.

"In a moment," answered the quiet geologist.

"Pitch over complete. Pitch attitude zero relative to course. Maneuvering thrusters off," Frank reported.

Jack unlocked his seat base and pivoted to face Lynn. Frank winced, knowing what was coming next.

"Good work, Lynn," Jack praised her calmly. "But the next time we're in a maneuver and you don't agree with my orders, I suggest you keep it to yourself."

Frank was surprised that Jack had delivered the line so sedately. He knew that Jack was angry. He had been putting up with Lynn's disrespectful questioning for some time. And although Jack could be aggressive in his decision making, Frank had complete confidence in him. Jack had been training for this mission far longer than anyone else on board, and had spent countless hours immersed in simulations, reacting to every crisis scenario the programmers could throw at him. No one knew more about the overall mission than Jack, not even the mission designers themselves. Yet Lynn had questioned his decisions nearly every step of the way, ever since they had awakened from suspended animation.

"I was only trying to help," she responded.

"There's a time and place to offer an opinion, Lynn," Jack advised her, again biting back his anger, "and there's a time and place to follow orders... *Without* question."

"And I suppose," Lynn shot back, "that if you were about to make a dangerous error in judgment, that would not be the time or place?"

"I'll tell you what, Miss Blakely," Jack seethed, "once you have two years in command training, three upper-level degrees in mission-applicable disciplines, and fifteen hundred hours in the simulator, *then* you can question my judgment. In the meantime, I suggest you shut the hell up and follow orders, or I'll toss you out the airlock and fly the fucking ship myself! Is that understood?"

Lynn recoiled in her seat, her mouth agape. "Yes, sir," was all she could say in response.

Frank stared at his console, calling up routine diagnostics and trying to stay inconspicuous and out of harm's way as Jack passed by him.

Jack entered the airlock just aft of the flight deck, nearly colliding with Will as he dove headfirst down the access tube, all without saying another word. Will, who was already nervous around Jack, turned around and retreated into the passenger compartment.

Frank, upon witnessing his friend's rapid exit, turned his attention back to his console, letting out a long sigh.

Lynn just stared at her forward console in shock, trying to find the nerve to speak. "Well, you're the engineer, Frank," she finally said. "Was I right or wrong?"

"You don't get it, do you?" Frank sighed. "It's not a question of who's right and who's wrong. It's a question of responsibility. Jack is the one who is responsible...for *everything*. It's his decision, Lynn, not yours."

"I *am* second in command, technically..."

"Technically, yes, you are. But that doesn't mean that you are anywhere near as qualified, *or* experienced as Jack."

"*And* I'm a lot younger than he is."

Frank shook his head in amazement. "You really need to stop beating that drum, Lynn. Age has got nothing to do with it. It's about experience and training, and you know it."

"I've got quite a bit of sim time, too, you know."

"A few hundred hours is nothing," Frank replied. "And there's more to being in command than just time in the simulator."

"It's not my fault that I was added to the crew at the last minute," Lynn protested.

"Yes, you were," Frank agreed. "And no, it's not your fault. But you'd be better off just following Jack's lead. You might even learn something."

"So I shouldn't say anything, even if I think there's a better way?"

Frank stared at her for a moment. He wasn't sure if she didn't understand the extent of her transgression for lack of maturity or because of the rapid fashion in which she had been trained. Lynn had been called to serve as mission pilot and second in command, after Dorrel Ishkin had passed away from complications of radiation exposure. The poor girl had been tossed into a simulator only a few days before their launch date. "Your job isn't to suggest alternatives," Frank explained. "Not unless you're asked for them, and especially not in the middle of a mission-critical maneuver."

"I was told that Jack *welcomes* advice from his crew," Lynn said.

"Of course he does. Jack knows his stuff, but everyone is capable of forgetting something now and again. You just have to develop a little tact...and better timing."

"I see," she responded somewhat half-heartedly.

"Command is a lonely business, Lynn." Frank turned back to his console. "Someday, you'll understand that."

Lynn turned back to her station and began silently running down her post-maneuver checklist. Frank had said a lot, maybe even too much. She was young, and her ego bruised easily. But she had bent the rules too far, and had been punished for her sins.

Frank knew that both his and Jack's words hurt her. He wanted to offer her a shoulder to lean on, but understood that her ego wouldn't accept that. She needed the truth, and that's what he had given her.

* * *

By the time Jack got to the midship airlock, his anger at Lynn had subsided. He was sorry he had yelled at her, but she had cost them several seconds of time during which the reactor could have been running hotter, maybe getting their speed down even further. Then he might not have needed to burn those last few extra seconds, wasting precious propellant.

“Hey, boss,” Mac greeted him from the food prep area along the port side of the galley. “You want some of this?” he offered as he pulled the spout of the feeding tube off of the blender’s transfer spout.

“No thanks,” Jack declined as he floated through the galley on his way aft.

Mac squeezed the tube and forced a large globule out of the tip. It filled the room with a foul stench as it floated in the air, quivering like a small handful of pudding before being sucked into his mouth. “Ya sure?” Mac tempted, smacking his lips. “It’ll put hair on your chest.”

The nauseating aroma reached Jack’s nose, causing him to recoil. “Oh, jeez, Mac. What the hell is that stuff?”

“I call it a ‘Protein Cream Dream’,” Mac boasted. “It’s the most complete food source on board.”

“And the smelliest,” Jack added, holding his nose. “I’m definitely going to pass.”

“Suit yourself,” Mac shrugged, not the slightest bit offended. “But you don’t know what you’re missing.”

Jack pulled himself along the handrail, heading into the wardroom. The entire crew habitat was designed as a long, flattened, octagonal tube, with overhead rails that ran along either side of the ceiling for the entire length of each compartment. There were shorter runs of railing placed strategically along the sides of the compartment, making it easy to navigate along any of the eight walls. Hand and footholds were set generously, along with fold-out anchoring arms that could attach to one of four sockets on a crew member’s belt to hold them in place while they performed tasks.

Laura and Maria had become quite adept at using these devices. They were both anchored to the wall opposite the view screen. Between them, a plastic container, constructed by Maria, was also anchored to the wall. It held various snacks inside plastic bags that they could push their hands through to access the contents within. With food and drink handy, Maria and Laura appeared to be spending their free

time as usual, anchored in place, eyes fixed on the view screen, chatting away. This time, however, rather than old Earth movies, they were watching their most recent video-mail from their families back on the Daedalus, getting one last fix before going down to the surface.

Jack passed through the aft hatch of the wardroom, traveling into the berthing corridor. This smaller octagonal passageway had berthing tubes on each side: four on the right and five on the left. Each tube was two and a half meters long by one and a half meters in diameter, giving a person just enough room to squat or lay down. Each berth had plenty of small lockers and storage pockets located strategically in every nook and cranny. There were climate controls, ventilation fans, overhead reading lights, a fold-out desk, and a zero-gravity sleep sack. There was no room for clothing storage inside the berths, but larger lockers accommodated that necessity near the bottom of each berthing tube's entrance. Such close quarters had led to less modesty among the crew of the Icarus, and the berths had been designed as a sort of hideaway where the occupant could be guaranteed some private time. Of course, Adia had been the exception to that rule, being the most bashful of the group. She was also the most petite, and probably the only one who could change her clothes inside a berthing tube without bruising or dislocating something.

Jack continued aft, requiring only one pull at the forward end of the compartment to give himself enough momentum to travel its length, arriving at the door to his cabin on the port side. It was the only truly private cabin on board, and more than three times the size of the standard berthing tubes. But it came with a price, as it was right next to the bathroom.

He drifted past Sara's cabin, where she was busily preparing her belongings for transfer to the LRV. *Typical*, Jack thought. *Always waiting until the last minute.*

She saw him pass by, and stuck her head out of her berth. "When are you going to say something to that ape,

Jack?"

"Right after we get down to the surface," Jack replied, as he drifted by. Across from Sara's berth was Will's, the mission's Planetologist. Will spent most of his time in his berth, and had been somewhat reclusive for the duration of the mission. He was a brilliant scientist, but Jack wondered if Will lacked the motivation and can-do attitude required for such an assignment. Jack was also curious about what Will did in his berth. He sometimes spent full days in there, only coming out to eat and use the bathroom. Jack knew from the ship's logs that he had downloaded many books from the ship's digital library onto his data pad. But that was a hell of a lot of reading, even for someone like Will. Jack had once overheard Maria telling Laura that Will had some sort of journal that he wrote in. A physical journal, with actual paper. Even though they all knew how to write by hand, and occasionally used a stylus on data pads, no one had used paper and pen for centuries. Jack couldn't imagine where Will had gotten any paper to begin with. It certainly wasn't manufactured on board the Daedalus, and he was sure that their predecessors hadn't brought any with them when they left Luna Station.

Jack opened the door to his cabin and floated inside, pulling it closed behind him. At first, he had wondered why the designers had felt it necessary, in a vessel that maximized every cubic centimeter of space, for the captain to have a larger berth. But now, after months of dealing with equipment malfunctions, calculation errors, childish pranks, petty crew squabbles, and other minutiae, he appreciated the designers' wisdom.

Jack reached the port bulkhead opposite the door and pulled down his fold-out desk. Swinging out the small seat from the forward bulkhead, he assumed a sitting position and placed the restraining belt across his lap. He slid the keyboard out from under the view screen, which came to life automatically, and began typing. As many as ten times a day, Jack would venture back to his cabin to record entries

into his log, lest he forget an important detail of that day's actions, operations, and decisions. It was an annoyance, but one that he shared with the ship's engineer and the ship's medical officer.

Just as he was finishing his log entry, a familiar knock came from his door. Jack knew what was coming. "Enter."

"Can I speak with you a moment, sir?" Frank requested rather formally, probably for the benefit of anyone listening from the corridor.

"Of course." Jack gestured for him to enter.

Frank closed the door behind him, and suddenly dropped his formality, wedging himself into a corner above the cabinet that ran along the aft bulkhead. "How's the hand?" Frank asked.

"Fine. Maria says the closures can come off in about a week." Jack rubbed the bandage wrapped around the palm of his right hand. "Still can't grab anything very well, though." He looked at Frank. "But you didn't come in here to ask me about my hand, did you?"

"Well, not really," Frank admitted.

"I suppose *you* think I was too hard on her."

"Yeah, a little, maybe."

"You know she deserved it," Jack said, his tone raising the statement to a question.

"I'm not saying she didn't," Frank agreed. "I just think you could've been more, uh, what's the word I want here..."

"Tactful?" Jack suggested.

"Then you've heard of this word?" Frank teased.

"Yeah, smart-ass, I've heard of it."

"Just checking."

"Point taken," Jack conceded. "It's just every damn time I make a decision, she's spouting off against it. How much of that am I supposed to take, anyway?"

"Like I said, Jack. She had it coming, no doubt about it." Frank let out a long breath. "She's just young, you know. And she knows that she didn't come to this mission through normal means. She's just trying to prove herself to you."

"What am I, her big brother or something?"

"More like a father figure, I would guess," Frank corrected.

"Great, I have to be a father figure, as well," Jack lamented. "That's all I need."

"You know, Jack, when she got the position, it really upset her father. He wanted her to follow in either his or her mother's footsteps, just like everyone else has always done. It was pretty difficult for her. I mean, she's only the fifth person who didn't follow in their parents' footsteps in choosing a career. It's been our way for over sixty years. The council takes procedure seriously. Hell, they all but caused the Luyten movement."

"Yeah, I know."

"You know, I don't think her father even said goodbye to her when we left."

"I *didn't* know that."

"I think she's just looking for acceptance. She doesn't really fit in with Laura and Maria in the 'mother's club', and Adia and Will are too reclusive to hit it off with anyone. And the testosterone twins..."

"Who?" Jack asked.

"Mac and Tony," Frank explained. "Sara nicknamed them 'the testosterone twins.' Kind of fits, actually. Anyway, they're too macho for her. And I think Sara scares Lynn. Hell, Sara scares me."

Jack was surprised at Frank's assessment of the crew. He had never known his friend to play the psychologist. "I guess I see what you mean." Jack rubbed his sore right hand through the bandage. "So what do you suggest?" Jack asked. "How should I handle her?"

"Maybe the next time you have to cut her short, you can take the time to explain your logic to her. If there's time, of course. Help her learn."

"Practical advice," Jack agreed, "but I still think it would be easier to toss her out the airlock."

"She'd probably put up too much of a fight," Frank laughed.

"That she would," Jack chuckled. "I just have one question for you, Frank,"

"What's that?"

"When the hell did you become such an expert in psychology?"

Frank laughed, straightening up from where he had wedged himself in and turned to leave. "I had a few discreet conversations with Maria."

"Oh, great!" Jack objected in mock anger. "So now the ship's physician knows about it!"

"Hey, what are friends for?" Frank joked as he drifted out the door.

Jack let out a long breath. *Crap*, he thought to himself. He was tired of dealing with everyone's problems and insecurities. This position was akin to babysitting a bunch of children, not at all what he had expected. Being in command of a mission of exploration was supposed to be challenging, exciting, and adventurous. So far, it was proving tedious and boring.

He thought back to the stories his great-grandfather used to tell about his days back on Earth, flying a rescue helicopter for the Navy, first off a carrier and then out of San Diego. On his "bird," as he called it, he had plucked many a downed pilot out of the ocean, often in the midst of storms. When he took his first command in San Diego, his great-grandfather had a whole squadron under him. He had even flown, and eventually commanded, the space shuttle. That had led to his most exciting assignment; commanding Luna Station for the Eden Project. He had been in charge of the very facilities that would later build the Daedalus *and* the Icarus. It was no wonder that Jack's great-grandfather had ended up commanding the Daedalus for the first thirty years of its journey.

Jack had been fascinated by his great-grandfather's stories when he was a young lad. Fascinated and inspired. It

had been his great-grandfather's ramblings—as his father referred to them—that made Jack want to become a pilot, and then to seek command of the *Icarus*. It had upset his mother and father to no end. Jack's grandfather, Alex, had died as the result of being in command. And at his widow's request, Jack's father had followed in his mother's career path instead of his father's, and great-grandfather's. Thus, Jack's parents had expected him to follow in *their* footsteps and become a teacher. It was a role that was well respected in Daedalian society. Unfortunately, it wasn't for Jack. He wanted something more exciting... He wanted to command *this* mission.

Some excitement, Jack thought, almost bitterly. He removed his lap restraint and rose from his seat, floating in the center of his room. He stuck his fingertips inside the ventilation ducts indenting the edge of the ceiling's dome light fixture. Hooking his toes into the floor restraints, he twisted his body around, stretching out the muscles in his back, shoulders, and chest. He repeated this ritual at least three times a day; it felt so good. He knew he must be at least three centimeters taller after four months in zero gravity and wondered how long it would take for his spinal column to compress back to normal once on the planet's surface.

Finished with his stretches, Jack kicked off his deck shoes, leaving them floating on the other side of the room. He pulled out his sleep sack from a locker, hooking each end to opposite bulkheads. He unzipped it and climbed inside, zipping up only the interior netting to hold him floating in place. He reached up and turned off the overhead light, leaving the bunk light on behind his head. He looked at the pictures on the wall to his right. His wife and children, his parents, and great-grandpa, still alive after all these years. The old guy was one of only three original crew members still living, and would be celebrating his one hundred and eighth birthday on the surface of the new world, whichever one they ended up choosing.

Jack switched off the light and turned the room ventilators on high to drown out extraneous noises from elsewhere in the ship—a trick old-man Wilkins had taught him many years ago. In the darkness, he worried about all the personnel problems he had dealt with in the last few months. *Oh well, I'm sure everyone will find it easier to get along after we get down on the surface and get a little more elbow room,* he thought as he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Tony passed gracefully through the hatch from the forward section of the Icarus, which contained various laboratories, agricultural bays, and storage lockers. Once inside the midship airlock, he pivoted in mid-flight and gently pushed off of the aft bulkhead of the airlock. He carefully closed the hatch and checked the seal, then slowly turned, scanning the other three hatches that led to the port airlock, aft habitat bay, and starboard auxiliary docking airlock. Satisfied they were all properly secured, he made his way up into the transfer tube that led to the LRV, closing and securing the hatch at the bottom of the tube behind him. As he pulled himself along, hand over hand, it occurred to him that he would not pass through this tube again for at least two months. It seemed funny that even though they had all complained about their cramped living space, he would miss the familiarity of the Icarus after they reached the surface.

Once inside the small airlock of the LRV, he secured the outer hatches of both the transfer tube and the LRV, then ascended one more level into the midship compartment between the flight deck and the passenger corridor. *One last hatch to close*, he thought as he sealed the airlock's inner hatch.

As he moved aft into the passenger corridor, he could see the rest of the crew securing themselves into their flight seats. At the back of the compartment, Mac, who minutes earlier had made a similar inspection of the Icarus from aft to midship, was settling into his seat in the last row next to Will.

Tony looked at each of his crewmates, ensuring they were all strapped in, with helmet visors closed and locked, and life-support packs in standby mode. Each of their faces betrayed their varying levels of stress. From Adia, who was scared to death and strapped in so tight she could hardly breathe, to Mac, who, at the back of the compartment, was either too aloof or too stupid to be nervous.

Tony turned and pulled himself down into his seat, attaching the thigh straps across his legs, buckling them into their receptacles just in front of his crotch. Pulling the tails of the thigh straps snug, he tucked them into their belt loops to keep them from floating about. Then he twisted his arms through the shoulder harness, first left then right, and attached both the waist and chest buckles, pulling them snug as well. "Everyone ready?"

"Ready as we'll ever be," Maria responded with strained enthusiasm.

"Let's start this ride, already!" Mac insisted with gusto.

Tony looked up at the flight status display on the forward overhead monitor. There were less than five minutes left before the Icarus would make contact with the upper atmosphere, and begin its aero-braking maneuver. He was suddenly very conscious of the emergency escape tube to his right. If they had to abandon both the Icarus and the LRV in the event of a catastrophe, it was his responsibility to activate the system and get everyone to the emergency escape pod in the drop pod bay on the underside of the aft end of the Icarus. The entire evacuation process was supposed to take less than two minutes, after which the system would shut down, permanently sealing the fate of anyone left behind.

That would be the hard part, of course. He wasn't supposed to wait for the flight crew. His job was to get the six other crew members into the chute, and immediately follow them. Those were the rules, and he understood them. He just hoped he would never have to abandon the flight crew.

Tony switched his comm-set to the primary channel.
“Frank, this is Tony.”

“Yes, *Tony*,” Frank’s voice crackled through the comm-set.

“The Icarus is secure, LRV set at condition yellow. We’re ready to go back here.”

Frank looked at the ship’s status board. No red lights. “Copy that, Tony,” he called through his comm-set. “Standby...” Frank looked at the mission chronometer, checking it against the LRV’s chronometer. “Ship is set at condition yellow, Jack. The board is green and all systems show ready. One minute to terminal course change.”

“Very well,” Jack responded. “Execute insertion burn.”

“Executing insertion burn,” Lynn replied.

There was a slight jolt that sent a shudder through the LRV, followed by the low hiss of chemical jets spraying their exhaust out into the void of space, causing a slight change in the ship’s attitude.

“Deceleration engines are ready to burn,” Frank reported.

“Insertion burn in five...” Jack started.

It was the last burn they would execute on their approach to Tau Ceti Five. It was also the only burn that would be done with their dedicated deceleration engines, instead of flipping the ship over to use their main engines.

“Four...”

Without this burn, the Icarus would be traveling too fast to execute her aero-braking maneuver, and instead would loop around the planet and be flung out the other side.

“Three...”

“Fuel pumps are on...”

“Two...”

“Decel is armed...”

“One.....execute,” Jack instructed.

Frank activated the Icarus's deceleration engines. He immediately felt a low rumble throughout the ship. It was nowhere near as intense as the deceleration burns they had conducted using the main engines, but it was coming from the front of the ship rather than from the back, so it felt more pronounced.

All three of them watched their displays as the Icarus slowly altered her course and speed, coming to align itself with Tau Ceti Five's upper atmosphere.

Thirty seconds into the insertion, Frank made the announcement. "Coming up on PNR."

Jack glanced at his flight display, checking that all the numbers were correct before committing to the insertion.

"Point of no return in five..." Frank warned.

Everything on Jack's flight display looked correct. "Continue the burn," Jack ordered.

"I concur," Lynn replied.

There was no turning back now.

"Continuing the burn," Frank acknowledged.

For another sixty seconds, Jack watched the ship's speed decrease at the expected rate.

"Decel engines cutoff in five seconds," Frank announced.

Jack smiled. They were going to end their insertion burn on schedule, at the exact target speed for aero-braking. The week long process of deceleration was nearly complete.

"Three.....two.....one.....DECO," Frank announced, as he tapped the button to kill the deceleration engines. The low rumble stopped, and the flight deck again fell silent.

"Insertion burn complete," Lynn announced calmly.

"Deceleration engines off. Fuel pumps off. Decel engines confirmed cold," Frank reported.

Jack turned to Lynn. "That was perfect, Lynn. Absolutely perfect."

"Thank you, sir," Lynn replied, a small smile forming at the corner of her mouth.

"Four minutes to aero-braking," Frank's voice announced over the comm-sets.

Maria checked her restraints again and glanced over at Adia, who was looking a bit pale. Adia reminded Maria of her own daughter—small and fragile. It saddened Maria to think of how long it had been since she last saw her family, and how much longer she would still have to wait to see them again. Sixteen months was an eternity to be apart from those she loved. Her children would be a year and a half older, a dozen centimeters taller, and a few kilograms heavier by the time she saw them again. She just hoped her husband wouldn't be a few kilograms heavier too. He had been finishing off the children's leftovers from dinner when her back was turned. He was already getting thicker around the middle, which was a sin on the Daedalus. Food was strictly rationed, especially since they had begun to allow more offspring per family, in preparation for their arrival.

"Let's open the balloot bay doors, Frank," Jack ordered.

Frank called up the balloot control display on his console. He activated the power for the doors, harnesses and inflation systems, waiting for them to show ready. "Balloot system shows ready, opening balloot bay doors," he announced, tapping the button on his console.

There was a moment of silence from both the crew and the ship. Then, from deep inside the bow of the Icarus, a low, grinding sound transmitted from the bay door motors through the frame of the ship as they struggled to open the doors for the first time in over sixty years.

Jack leaned forward slightly to see the bow of the Icarus jutting out below them. He watched as the topside doors sank slightly, kicking free the dust that had collected in their seams over the decades, and began to roll open from the center line outward. With the sun behind them, he could see nothing but dark shadows inside the bays as the doors parted. When the doors opened wider, sunlight reflecting off

one of the approaching planet's two moons began to illuminate the deflated balloons' gold and silver metallic surfaces, causing them to shine brightly.

"Balloon doors open and locked," Frank reported. He refrained from letting go a sigh of relief.

"Inflate the balloons," Jack instructed.

Frank activated the sequencer. The inflation rate of all five balloons had to be carefully monitored to ensure they would be set properly when finished. If they ended up out of alignment, the red-hot plasma created during aero-braking might leak through between the balloons and wreak havoc on the rest of the ship. "Inflation systems charged, sequencer activated, pressures are coming up."

Jack continued to watch through the forward windows as the balloons began to flap, as if blown from deep within the ship. Then, slowly, they began to rise. It was gradual at first, with the subtlest of surges, but soon they began to peek out from within their coffins, bulging outward as they took shape. He glanced over at Lynn, who was also watching, her mouth slightly open in awe of the view from the bow. The balloons continued to grow, their folds disappearing as they rounded out into smooth patterns of gold and silver, with black bands covering their seams.

"Wow," Lynn whispered, "it's beautiful."

The balloons continued to expand as the pumps filled them with inert gas. Five of them, one on each side, on the top and bottom, and one around the bow of the Icarus. Frank watched his displays carefully as the balloons filled out, ensuring they were inflating evenly. Finally, the inflation was complete. The pumps went into standby, and the silent ballet came to a close.

"Balloons at maximum pressure, alignment looks good, harnesses look good, all systems show ready for aero-braking," Frank announced confidently, letting out a barely audible sigh of relief.

The port balloon shifted slightly, its alignment marker offset from that of its neighbor. As Frank was about to point

out the discrepancy, it spontaneously fell back into alignment. *Probably just settling in*, he thought.

"Very well," Jack commented as he and Lynn settled back into their seats.

"One minute to aero-braking," Frank added, tightening up his harnesses.

Jack's mind began to wander as he tightened his own harness. His thoughts drifted down to the planet's surface below. In a few short hours, he would be the first human being to set foot on an extrasolar planet. The moment had not been important to him before. After all, his people had set new records every minute of every day, since their voyage began over three generations ago. None of them, with the exception of the few remaining original crew members, had ever known a life outside of the Daedalus. All of their lives had been leading up to this moment in time. All to get to this system, perhaps even *this* planet.

Lynn ran the aero-braking procedures over in her head. She thought about the things Frank had said to her after the last deceleration burn. He was right, she *did* lack experience, and the rushed manner in which she was trained for this mission also left her at a disadvantage. But she *was* the best pilot on the Daedalus. Better than all the Ishkins combined. Her sim scores had proven that. She still couldn't understand what the others had against her and longed for an opportunity to show them what she could do, what she was *capable* of doing. If they would just give her a chance.

"Fuel pumps on standby." Out of the corner of his eye, Frank noticed the ballouts shifting again. But before he could turn to look closer, they once again quickly fell back into place. "Reactor plant safe at two percent." Frank looked up at the mission chronometer.

"*Thirty seconds to aero-braking*," their comm-sets crackled.

Maria reached across the narrow aisle and took Adia's hand. It was pale, even for Adia, and it was trembling. Adia accepted her hand without hesitation, her helmet still pointed straight ahead. Maria wasn't sure, it was difficult to see Adia's face with her helmet on, but she suspected her eyes were shut.

Sara was also scared, but she wasn't about to let the others know, especially Mac. Surprisingly, she thought of her husband. Brad was a nice enough guy, not too bad looking either. He subscribed to the same traditions to which the previous generations clung so dearly, but at least he understood and respected her beliefs, even though he had tried to change her point of view on more than one occasion.

Still, he wasn't really a husband. At least not in the true sense of the word. But then, the others weren't either. Most of them had learned to amiably live together after being assigned respective mates based on the genetics tables. But after two years of marriage, they had drifted apart, just as she knew they would. Sara suspected that Brad was having an affair with his co-worker in the biogenetics lab. But at least he was being discreet about it. He even came to see her off, keeping up appearances for her sake.

A few seats over, Laura wasn't necessarily calm, but she was under control. She wasn't the type to worry about things over which she had no control. She had grown up on a sixty-year-old spaceship hurtling through the cosmos at nearly twenty percent light speed. There were so many things out there that could have killed them without warning, so worrying about the unknown could drive a person to insanity. Instead, she chose *not* to contemplate every possible danger ahead of her.

Of course, she did think about her family. She and her husband had volunteered to bear extra children after the Daedalus had lost nearly one third of its population to the Luyten Separatists over two years ago. Their fourth child had been born only one year before she had left on this

mission. She hadn't wanted to leave her daughter at so young an age, but Dr. Wagner was just too old and weak to make the journey. And Dr. Wagner's son had joined the Luyten Colony. That left only her, and so here she was, about to ride along into history with the rest of the crew as they set foot on another world.

"Ten seconds to aero-braking," Frank's voice announced through their comm-sets.

Mac noticed Maria holding Adia's hand. He reached over to Will and grabbed his arm. "Hold me, Will?" he teased.

"You're a pig," Sara commented, more as a reflex than out of real anger.

"Stop it, babe. You're gettin' me all hot," Mac sneered.

"Five seconds..." Frank's voice warned.

Sara's defense of Adia was needless, as Adia hadn't heard Mac's teasing.

"Four..."

Adia gripped her armrest even tighter.

"Three..."

Tony shook his head in dismay at his friend's antics.

"Two..."

Everyone braced themselves for the shock of atmospheric interface.

"One..."

Lynn braced the palm of her right hand against the butt of the control stick, not wanting to bump it during interface.

Jack clutched the armrests of his seat as he continued to scan the instruments in front of him.

Frank watched the mission chronometer as it ticked away the last second. "Zero."

There was a slight bump. Then a distant rattling, lasting only a second or two. Then it came: a heavy thud that threw them all forward into their harnesses, nearly knocking the wind out of Jack.

“Interface!” Frank announced, the word forced from his mouth by the sudden jolt.

Jack glanced at the navigation display. A constant low rumbling followed the thud, reverberating throughout the ship. “How’s our course, Lynn?” Jack asked.

Lynn examined the navigation display carefully but quickly. “Down the middle,” she reported calmly. “Attitude is good, altitude is holding steady.”

Adia was now squeezing Maria’s hand so tightly it almost hurt.

Laura shifted slightly after the initial impact with the planet’s outer atmosphere threw her forward against her chest restraints. She decided to tighten them.

Sara’s eyes widened. She was having second thoughts.

Will wasn’t moving or reacting. He just held on tight, his gaze fixed straight ahead on the back of Laura’s helmet.

Tony watched the flight display from his seat at the front of the compartment. He rolled his eyes and smiled as he heard Mac cry out from the back row.

“Yee haw!” Mac exclaimed as the intensity of the vibrations rose.

Frank watched as the external balloot pressure and temperature increased rapidly. His eyes danced across his critical monitoring displays—from balloots, to reactor, to maneuvering, and back again. As the vibrations grew, it became more difficult to read his displays. He noticed the balloots shifting out of alignment again. This time, it stayed shifted long enough for him to be concerned before they settled back into proper alignment. Wanting to be sure that it was an instrumentation problem, he initiated a quick calibration check on the alignment sensors. It took only a few seconds. Unfortunately, the sensors reported to be in perfect calibration.

Another thud hit the ship without warning, even harder than before. It was so pronounced that Frank glanced at the collision sensors, afraid they might have actually hit something solid as they plowed through the upper atmosphere of Tau Ceti Five.

"Jesus!" Jack exclaimed. "What the hell was that?" Jack had spent a lot of time in the simulator back in training. The sim operators had rattled their bones on more than one occasion, but it was nothing like this. The ship was shaking wildly, lurching from side to side, up and down, twisting and rolling. It felt as if it would come apart at any moment.

Frank knew what Jack was asking. "Everything is holding up so far," he promised.

Jack could hear the strain in Frank's voice. "What's the problem?"

"Upper port ballout has shifted a few times, only for a second or two at the most."

"Should we be worried about this, Frank?" Jack asked, already worried.

"I'm not sure yet," Frank confessed. "It's not an instrumentation problem; I checked the calibration on the alignment sensors and they're fine."

"Is there anything we need to do differently at this point?" Jack asked the question before Lynn had an opportunity to chime into the conversation.

"Not yet," Frank assured him. "Not as long as it keeps shifting back into place within a few seconds."

"Keep an eye on it," Jack ordered.

Tony tightened his harness. That last thud scared the hell out of him. *Probably even scared Mac a little*, he thought.

"Damn! This is one kick-ass ride!" Mac pronounced.

Guess not, Tony mused. But Mac was the only one of them who seemed to be enjoying himself. The others were white-knuckled and pale-faced.

The shaking grew steadily worse. Something wasn't right; Jack could feel it. It shouldn't be this violent, not according to the aero-braking trial reports from seventy years ago, which he had spent hours studying. "Frank, verify our altitude by radar."

"I can try, Jack. But it probably won't be accurate with the plasma wake out there," Frank warned.

I should have known that, Jack thought to himself. "Can you get through it with penetrating-Doppler?" he asked, pretty sure that Frank could.

"Uh, yeah, should be able to," Frank replied. "Give me a minute. I've got to write an interface loop to allow the nav computers to read the Doppler data."

"Make it fast," Jack ordered. The ship rattled and groaned, the extreme force of the super-heated atmosphere blasting away at the surface of the balloots.

"On it," Frank assured him as he began entering code at a frantic pace—a difficult task, since the ship was shaking so violently. A few moments later, Frank was ready. "Penetrating-Doppler coming online," he reported. Frank called up the Doppler display on his left hand console. Using the auto-sequencer, he called up a series of six pulses. It was more than double what he needed, but he wanted to be sure about the results. "I'm sending down six pulses. Should be enough for the nav-com to get at least two separate readings on our altitude," he explained as he activated the sequencer. "Pulsing now."

At the tail of the Icarus, on her underside, the Doppler dish unlocked itself from its safe position for aero-braking and maneuvered itself to point at the planet below. At its position, well aft of the plasma wake being plowed by the balloots up front, the frequency-compressed, high-energy beams the dish projected had the best chance of getting a clear reading through the highly-charged ions being thrown off by the plasma wake.

The first invisible energy pulse shot out of the Doppler emitter, bounced off the planet's surface, and returned to the dish. Even though the cycle was repeated five more times, the series was over in less than two seconds.

Frank's mouth dropped open when the computer displayed the results as an expression of altitude. "The altimeter is way off! By at least a few kilometers!" Frank turned to face forward. "We are *way* too deep!"

"Shit!" Jack cursed. "How the hell did that happen?" It was a useless question at this point, and Jack knew it before he finished asking. "Lynn! Get us higher!"

"How much higher?" she asked.

"Just start climbing!" Jack ordered.

"We can't just pull up, just like that..."

"...I know," Jack replied, cutting her off. "I'll get you some new numbers as soon as I can, Lynn. In the meantime, just start pulling up, slow and easy." Jack looked at her. She was scared, and she wasn't trying to hide it this time. "You can do it, Lynn," he assured her in his most confident tone. "Just fly the ship."

Lynn had never before heard such encouragement from Jack, and was surprised at how comforted it made her feel. She took a deep breath as she deactivated the auto-flight system, letting it out as she flexed the fingers on her right hand and gently gripped the flight control stick. "Pitching up," she announced with renewed confidence.

She gently pulled the stick back, releasing it almost as soon as she had touched it. The thrusters fired, but the ship didn't move. She looked down at the attitude thruster's status display. Even over the rumbling of the ship, she had heard *and felt* the thrusters fire. Looking at the display confirmed it. Still, they hadn't moved. She tried again, this time giving the stick a definite, less subtle tap. Again the thrusters hissed, but still their attitude didn't change. "It's not working!" she exclaimed.

Jack was busy punching in numbers for a new aerobraking trajectory. If he didn't get the trajectory right, they would either bounce off the atmosphere and go hurtling off into space, or burn up in the steadily thickening atmosphere of the world below. "Pull her up harder, then," he ordered as he continued to punch the numbers into the nav-com.

She tried a third time, pulling the stick back and holding it for a second. Then a fourth time, for a full two seconds. Then three seconds, then four. "It's no use, Jack," Lynn insisted. "The attitude thrusters just aren't powerful enough."

"Okay, okay," Jack accepted as he finished entering numbers. He thought for a moment as the nav-com calculated a new trajectory. "Try the OMS pods."

"The OMS pods?" she said in disbelief.

"Yeah, just like we were climbing to a higher orbit," he explained. "Orbit is a matter of speed, not altitude."

"Yes, but we're not even *down* to orbital speed yet," she objected. "We'll shoot off the other side, even at our current speed."

"But if we increase our speed, we'll climb up into thinner atmosphere and reduce the stress on the ship."

"Yeah, and skip off into space!"

This time, Jack didn't mind her comments and objections; it helped keep him focused as his mind raced, trying to take everything into consideration.

"Once we get into thinner atmosphere, the attitude thrusters should become more effective. Maybe then we can shallow out our trajectory and make this approach work."

"Maybe?" Lynn objected.

"Better we skip off into space than burn up down here!"

Lynn knew he was right. She also knew that debating the issue would only cost them valuable time. This wasn't like the braking-burn incident. This wasn't a matter of ending up with just the right amount of fuel. This was a matter of life and death.

Jack saw the resignation in Lynn's eyes. "Spin up the OMS pods, Frank!"

"OMS pods goin' hot!" Frank answered back as he switched the OMS master arm on and spun up the fuel pumps. "OMS in three.....two.....one.....burn!" The sound of the orbital maneuvering engines rumbled through the ship, as they struggled to accelerate the Icarus against the drag of Tau Ceti Five's atmosphere against her balloots. "OMS pods are burning!"

"New trajectory coming up on the nav-com," Jack announced.

The new trajectory outlines danced across Lynn's screen, painting over the old lines. Lynn watched the flight dynamics display as the OMS pods burned, waiting for their speed to increase. "Come on," she mumbled, "come on." But the numbers didn't increase, only decreased slightly as the friction of the balloots continued to drag them down.

The shaking was becoming unbearable. Even with the comm-sets, they had to yell to be heard over the intense rumbling of the plasma wake streaming past them outside.

"Jack! We're still losing altitude! Even with the OMS pods burning!" Frank told him.

Damn! Jack thought. *There has got to be a way out of this!* His mind ran through all possible options. "Frank? How much more of this do you think she can take?"

The question caught Frank off guard. Jack knew as much about the Icarus and her tolerances as Frank did. "If we can hold this altitude? Maybe ten minutes, twelve tops." It was a conservative estimate, and he was sure that Jack knew it. "I'll tell you one thing," Frank added. "If we go much deeper, we'll fry for sure."

Jack searched his mind desperately, looking for some way out. But he kept coming back to only one option. "Spin up the reactor, Frank," Jack ordered calmly. "Full power."

Frank wasn't sure what to say. He really wanted to caution Jack against bringing the reactor into play while the ship was being tossed about so violently. Anti-matter was a

difficult thing to contain, even under the best of circumstances. A breach in the electromagnetic containment field would end their worries once and for all, wiping all evidence of their ship out of existence. *But Jack surely knew what he was doing, didn't he? Had they thrown this same scenario at him in simulation runs?* Still, despite his preaching about timing to Lynn only a few hours earlier, he felt compelled to remind Jack about the risk. "Uh, Jack?" he asked meekly.

Jack didn't even let him speak, he already knew what was on Frank's mind. It was on his mind as well. "I know," he responded as he continued to punch numbers into the navigation computer. "I know."

"Reactor coming up," Frank answered back, trying to hide the uncertainty in his voice.

Lynn said nothing. This time she had no idea what to do except try to maintain some degree of control as the ship plunged through the thickening atmosphere.

"Bring the main drive online," Jack added. He looked over at Lynn. "We'll have to blast our way out of this, Lynn."

Lynn silently nodded agreement. Either she understood the situation better than Jack had expected, or she was too scared to object. At the moment, it didn't matter.

"Reactor at one hundred percent, mains are online," Frank reported.

"Let's do it," Jack ordered. "Light'em at twenty-five percent."

Frank set the main engines as instructed, braced himself, and gently depressed the main engine start button. "Firing mains."

The main engines at the tail of the Icarus lit up in a brilliant yellow-white flash, their exhaust nozzles squeezing into a tight cone to increase their thrust. The main drive of the Icarus was quite powerful. Usually, it was not lit at more than ten percent, the sudden acceleration considered

unsafe for human occupants. But their situation was desperate.

The force of the main engines pushed them all against their seats, although not as much as they would have expected. The atmosphere was fighting the ship's efforts to accelerate, the friction of the balloots working against them. "Mains at twenty-five percent!" Lynn reported as she struggled to regain the air that had just been knocked out of her lungs. "Speed still dropping!"

"Bring them up to fifty percent!" Jack ordered.

She slowly pushed the main throttles forward until the display read fifty percent. The increased thrust pushed everyone back deeper into their seats, and the shaking grew even more violent. "Mains at fifty." She again watched the display. "Speed holding steady!"

"Seventy-five percent!" Jack ordered.

Lynn moved the throttle up a quarter more. "It's working!" she announced. "Speed increasing! Slowly, but it's going up!"

It's working, Jack thought. "That's it, baby. Come on."

There was a terrible shudder, followed by what felt like something being torn away from the ship. Frank looked over at the balloot display. The port balloot had shifted nearly twenty-five degrees. "Jack! The upper port-side balloot!"

The entire flight deck lit up as the upper port balloot began to tear away from its mooring points, allowing red-hot plasma to spill out over the Icarus and under the nose of the LRV. The plasma splashed across either side of the Icarus's upper hull plates, instantly burning away any unprotected protuberances on her surface.

"The harness must be giving way!" Frank hypothesized.

"Condition red!" Jack ordered without hesitation. "Back off on the throttles, Lynn! Keep her at just enough to hold our speed so we don't sink any deeper!"

"Condition red! Condition red!" Frank's voice sent shivers down their spines. *"Set ship's condition red! Visors down! Life-supports to internal! Hold on, people!"*

Back in the passenger bay, each of them switched on their internal life-support systems. They were now sealed in their own private worlds, the sound of their own breathing interrupted by the occasional comment made over the secondary comm-channel. They exchanged looks of fear and concern. Their looks all conveyed the same thing.

Alarms began sounding all over the flight deck as numerous control and data feeds between the LRV and the Icarus began failing due to the tremendous heat of the plasma that was now spilling across the side of the Icarus.

"I'm losing Icarus feeds right and left!" Frank declared. "Plasma must be seeping in between the LRV and the Icarus! Hull temp on her topside is rising fast!"

Jack punched a few buttons on the navigation display, calling up the orbital position display. He commanded the nav-com to overlay the landing site locations on the display. The primary site was already behind them. *No good.* They would need almost an entire lap around the planet to make that one, and at their current speed, they would definitely shoot off the other side of the planet and out into space long before coming back around. Laps were not an option.

The secondary landing site was coming up too fast, and Jack wouldn't have enough time to put his plan into action. The tertiary landing site was just about to break the horizon. He queried the computer to display their ETA to the entry window for the tertiary landing site. The nav-com flashed a warning message at him in bold, red letters. 'Entry approach profile not recommended. Unsafe.'

No kidding, Jack thought. "Just give me the damned ETA!" The navigation computer granted his request a moment later.

Confident that he had a plan of action, Jack straightened up in his seat and took a breath. "Frank, do we still have control of the cargo pod deployment systems?"

"What?" Frank asked as his eyes darted back and forth across his displays, trying to keep track of what was happening to both the Icarus and the LRV.

"The drop pods, Frank! Do we still have control of the drop sequencer?"

"Doubtful," Frank responded as he double-checked his displays. "I've got data feeds but no controls!"

"Lynn," Jack said as he began to unbuckle his harness. "Try to hold her steady for eight minutes, then separate and make for the tertiary landing site whether I'm here or not."

"What?" Lynn asked, completely confused.

"Here," Jack said, pointing to the entry point on the nav-com display situated on the center console between them. "Follow this entry profile, and try to make it to that landing site," he explained as he clumsily made his way up and out of his chair amidst the turmoil. "Understood?" He didn't wait for an answer, turning to head aft.

"Where are you going?" Frank asked, surprised to see Jack out of his seat and moving toward him.

"Send a mayday to the Daedalus," Jack instructed as steadily as he could. "Tell them we're dropping all pods, abandoning the Icarus and trying for the tertiary landing site on TC Five."

Frank couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"I'm going down to the pod bay to manually release the cargo pods when we get to the entry window," Jack explained as he passed behind Frank. "With any luck, their internal nav-systems will set them down near the tertiary site. Then we'll at least have a fighting chance."

"What? Get your ass back in your seat, Jack!"

"Sorry, Frank. We need those pods."

"And what about you?"

"Wait until the last second before you separate. I'll drop them early enough to get back up here before you reach the

end of your entry window," Jack promised.

"Bullshit!" Frank argued. "This is a really dumb fucking idea, okay?" Frank's voice grew desperate. "Are you listening to what you're saying here?"

"Frank, that wasn't a request!" Jack was done waiting, and disappeared through the aft hatch.

Tony was watching the display when he caught a glimpse of Jack in the compartment just forward of them, where he opened the inner hatch and dove down into the airlock. Tony strained to see what was going on, but could not.

Maria also noticed Jack's departure, but said nothing, afraid to alarm Adia, who still had her eyes closed and her right hand clenched firmly onto Maria's left one.

Jack made his way precariously down the transfer tube, bouncing off the walls as the ship continued to shudder and shake. The sensations of aero-braking were much more severe in the Icarus than on the LRV. He swung open the hatch at the end of the tube and passed through into the midship airlock compartment. Grabbing the handrail along the outer edge of the hatchway ring as he dove through, he held tight, and let his body fold at the waist, dropping his feet down below him. With his right hand still holding tight, he swung the hatch closed with his left and spun the latch into its locked position.

He moved across the compartment to the aft hatch leading into the galley and wardroom. After spinning the latch free, he pulled the hatch open and pulled himself through. He purposefully left the hatch open, wanting a quick return path to the LRV after his task was completed in the pod bay. He would've preferred to leave the hatches in the transfer tube open, but that would impede the LRV's quick getaway should their situation get worse.

"We've got an outer hull breach on the port side, section twelve," Frank reported.

"Where is section twelve?" Lynn asked, embarrassed that she couldn't remember.

"Just above the galley!" Frank acted quickly. "Jack!" he called across the comm-set. "We've got an outer hull breach over the galley! Where are you?"

An explosion to Jack's right shook the entire ship, tossing him across the galley. He bounced off the starboard bulkhead, and careened back across the galley toward the fire spewing out of the port wall.

"We've got a fire in the port side fuel transfer lines!" Frank announced. "I'm shutting them down and blowing the sep-valves closed!" Frank frantically tapped at his console, ordering the pumps to shut down, and the valves at the forward and aft ends of the line to permanently close.

"What will that do to our fuel status?" Lynn demanded frantically.

"I don't know yet," Frank replied. The Icarus carried almost two thirds of her fuel in large tanks located in the aft section. But the electromagnetic ram scoop and the fuel manufacturing machinery was located in the nose, along with several large storage tanks that automatically transferred their load aft when the main tanks in the tail section were more than one third expended. "I can transfer using the starboard lines, but..."

"They can't match our fuel burn rate, can they?"

Frank didn't reply.

Jack managed to catch the overhead rail again with his left hand. The sudden pull transferred his momentum and caused his feet to swing under him and over toward the

raging fire. He could feel the heat through the boots of his pressure suit as he struggled to pull himself away from the jet of flames. Having regained control, he quickly pulled himself around and continued aft along the rail until he reached the doorway into the wardroom. He positioned himself at the door frame, reached out, and slapped the fire suppression system activation button, but nothing happened. He pressed it repeatedly, but still nothing.

Jack looked at the fire. It had a bluish hue, which told him that it was coming from the fuel transfer lines. "Frank!" he called over his comm-set, "shut down the fuel transfer lines by the galley and seal them off at the valves," he ordered, wondering why Frank hadn't already done so.

"I already did, Jack," Frank's voice crackled across Jack's comm-set inside his helmet.

"Well, they're still burning!" Jack shouted as he watched the inner walls begin to melt around the blue fire. "And the walls are starting to melt down!"

"My board shows them closed, Jack!"

"Well they're not!" Jack insisted.

"I'll leave the transfer pumps on so the fire won't creep up the lines and blow our nose off!" Frank decided. *"Jack! Has the fire suppression system activated?"*

"Negative! And I already tried the manual override! The whole thing is down!"

"Is the compartment still pressurized?" Frank asked.

Jack looked across the room at the compartment pressurization control panel on the forward bulkhead next to the midship airlock hatch. Through the smoke, he could barely make out the little green light. The panel had its own sensor and didn't depend on any remote sensors to detect the compartment's pressure status. If that light was on, there was pressure in the compartment. "Affirmative!" Jack replied, "but if this fire burns much longer, the whole compartment will go!" Jack turned and floated through the doorway into the wardroom. There was nothing he could do about the fire right now. He had to get to the pod bay as

quickly as possible. "I don't have time to work this fire, Frank. I've got to drop the cargo pods!"

"Tony! Mac!" Frank called over the comms after switching to the secondary channel. "Fire in the galley! Get on it!"

"How's our fuel?" Lynn asked.

Frank looked at the fuel level indicators on the main engine status panel.

"About ten minutes at this rate of consumption!" Frank reported after a few quick calculations in his head.

"On our way!" Tony reported as he flipped open his chest harness and pulled his thigh straps free. He floated up out of his seat, his head striking the ceiling as another vibration sent the ship lunging downward. He wrestled with the side handrails running along the inside edge of the port and starboard turbine housings, steadying himself against the constant, violent, and unpredictable motions of the ship. He pulled himself forward to the hatchway, turning sideways to see if Mac was coming. Despite his massive size and bulk, Mac moved gracefully in zero gravity and was right behind him.

"Let's do it!" Mac declared.

Whether or not Mac's bravado stemmed from stupidity or real courage, Tony was just glad that his friend was right behind him as they moved into the airlock.

Jack pulled himself along the overhead handrail, across the wardroom, and into the berthing corridor. He made his way to the far end, across from his cabin to the access tube hatch leading to the pod bay. He opened the hatch and entered the long, narrow tunnel that led to the bay in the middle of the aft section of the ship, along her bottom.

The tube was nearly fifteen meters long and less than one meter wide. It was not designed to be accessed while wearing a pressure suit, and he bounced off the tube walls every time the ship shook. It was poorly lit, with a handhold every two meters, so making his way through the tunnel safely was difficult as the ship buffeted about in the planet's upper atmosphere.

Tony was the first to arrive in the midship airlock bay after opening the access hatch. Mac, who was closing the LRV's outer hatch, was only a moment behind Tony as he made his way to the fire suppression apparatus locker in the compartment's corner. He pulled out a fire extinguisher and sent it floating across the compartment to Mac who came out of the transfer tube and into the middle of the compartment. Pulling another extinguisher out of the locker, Tony maneuvered himself over to the hatchway. The hatch was open, and smoke filled the midship airlock compartment as well.

Tony peered around the corner of the hatch into the galley to peek at the fire, but all he could see was smoke. "Frank, this is Tony!" he called through his comm-set. "Can you vent the compartment? We can't see a thing in there through all the smoke!"

"*Standby,*" Frank responded. A moment later, the smoke whirled around and cleared as it was sucked out of the cabin and vented out into the vacuum of space. After a few moments, Tony could see the fire more clearly, although the purge fans were not powerful enough to keep the compartment completely clear of smoke. The hole in the wall continued to spread, devouring the food prep counter as well.

"That'll do!" Tony called out. "But keep them going so we can see what we're doing down here!"

"*Copy!*"

Tony moved into the compartment, positioning himself as close to the fire as he could, the heat radiating through the thin layers of his pressure suit. "Brace me!" Tony called to his partner.

Mac moved in behind him, extinguisher in his left hand. Mac placed his feet on the floor deck plates and activated his mag-boots, securing himself to the deck. With his right hand, he grabbed the handle on the back of Tony's life-support backpack and braced himself.

Tony pointed the extinguisher's nozzle at the base of the flames and pressed the trigger, sending a white chemical spray at the fire. But it had no effect on the flames jetting out of the ruptured fuel line inside the wall. "It's no good!" he yelled over his comm-set to Frank. "You've got to turn off the fuel flow!"

"No can do!" Frank objected. *"If we do that, the fire will burn the remaining fuel in the line all the way up to the forward tanks! Just try to keep it from spreading into the surrounding structures!"*

"Christ!" Tony exclaimed. "We're gonna need more bottles!"

The ship rocked as another explosion erupted from the aft end.

"We've got a burst oxygen tank on the port side, aft end!" Frank announced. "Plasma must've burnt through the hull there as well!"

"Why didn't we get a hull breach warning?" Lynn asked.

"Are you kidding? I'm losing shit all over the place! We're lucky the flight control systems are still functioning!" Frank made a quick glance across his systems status board, wondering how long they would hold together. *Hurry up, Jack*, he thought.

The explosion of the oxygen tank hit Jack's area of the ship a lot harder than it did the LRV. It was like someone was shaking the tube from the aft end. He bounced off the walls, his helmet striking one of the handrails. The buffeting eased back into its regular pattern, and Jack paused to regain his composure. He pushed the large button on the top edge of his chest piece to activate the HUD display. Instantly, numbers and gauges were painted on the inside of his helmet's visor. Suit pressure was holding, temperature still in the safe range. *Good*. That bump to his helmet had left him none the worse.

"Frank! What the hell was that?" Jack called into his comm-set. But there was no response, not even the usual pops and clicks the system usually had in the background. "Frank? Do you copy?" Jack reached down to the comm-set control pack mounted on his belt, fumbling to feel the channel-select knob through his suit gloves. He changed channels. "Anyone copy me? Anyone? This is Jack! Hello!" He switched channels again and again, calling out to anyone who could hear him, but he got no response. He pulled the control pack off his belt to check it. It wasn't an easy task in a pressure suit, but he managed to get it off his belt and hold it up to look at it. The case was cracked, and the little red power light was out. *Shit! No communications!* Jack tossed the broken comm-pack aside and continued on through the last few meters of the tube, opening the hatch and exiting at the end.

The bay was dark; even the emergency lighting was off. It wasn't a place that was usually occupied by humans. It was only kept pressurized for occasional maintenance trips into the engineering spaces above the bay. Even then, the crew wore thermal suits to keep from freezing to death. The air in the bay was so cold that you had to wear a mask to warm it up before you inhaled to prevent your lungs from freezing.

Jack could feel the temperature in his suit dropping already, but he didn't have time to deal with the discomfort.

It would take at least ten minutes before his inner suit temperature would drop low enough to cause hypothermia. And he planned on being long gone by then.

Jack reached up and turned on his helmet light. The narrow beam pierced through the darkness of the bay, shining down the empty corridor. It was twenty-five meters long and about three meters wide across the floor, and slightly less along the ceiling as the walls angled in. Every seven meters, the walls bulged into the corridor, wrapping around the cargo drop pod capsules in their holding bays.

At the far end of the bay was the multi-purpose satellite. Once placed in orbit, the MPS would provide communication with the Daedalus and serve as a scanning platform and long-range surface communications adjunct. At the front of the bay on his left was the emergency escape pod. If the ship and the LRV were disabled, the escape pod could carry all of them to safety, hopefully to the surface of a habitable planet where they could await rescue. Jack hoped they wouldn't need it.

Deciding that the cargo pods containing the equipment they would need on the planet's surface were of a higher priority than the MPS, Jack decided to start dropping them first. He could drop the MPS last. Besides, the cargo pods had to be dropped in the entry window in order for them to land within a recoverable distance from the LRV's landing site. The MPS had its own propulsion system and could be positioned anywhere in orbit through the command console on the LRV's flight deck.

Jack opened a small utility locker on the forward bulkhead to the right of the hatch and pulled out a data pad. A small handheld device, the data pad could scan internal systems for inspection and link into the ship's mainframe to provide remote access to systems status information. It could even be used to issue remote commands. But Jack was only interested in its ability to link into the ship's navigation information displays. Without voice

communications, it was the only way he would know when to start dropping the cargo pods.

Jack moved over to the first drop pod, activated the data pad, and called up the nav-display. He only had thirty seconds before they reached the leading edge of the entry zone. Then he would have about five minutes to drop the pods and return to the LRV before the crew would be forced to leave him behind. He activated the manual override for the first drop pod and armed the release charges.

The first three pods all carried the same manifest: equipment they needed to survey each of the three presumably habitable planets in the Tau Ceti system. Upon arrival at a survey planet, one pod was to be dropped to the selected landing site, unpacked, and its contents left behind after each survey mission ended. The last three pods contained the equipment they would need to prep the selected site for colonization.

He quickly assigned the tertiary landing site as pod one's landing target, and then watched the data pad as the seconds ticked away.

"Jack, it's almost time to drop." Frank called into his comm-set. He waited for a response, but it never came. "Jack?" he queried, growing concerned. "Jack, do you copy?" Frank began switching channels and calling Jack's name. But there was no response.

"What's wrong?" Lynn asked.

"I can't raise Jack on comms!"

"Could the system be malfunctioning?"

"No way," Frank told her. "Each unit is independent. It doesn't rely on any ship-board systems to operate. If he can't hear us, then his unit has the problem."

"Or worse," Lynn added pessimistically.

Frank hadn't even considered that possibility. Not Jack. Ever since they were kids, Jack had always managed to get by intact, through one scrape after another. If Jack couldn't

hear them, then it meant that his comm-set was malfunctioning. Frank was sure of it. "Five seconds to entry window," Frank announced as he watched the drop pod status board. If Jack was still alive, the first pod would drop on cue.

Jack watched the data pad as it counted down to zero. On cue, he pulled the manual release handle, activating the explosive bolts that held the pod in place in its berth along the bottom of the Icarus. Immediately, there was a sharp crack like a gunshot, and a tremor erupted within the pod's housing wall. That was followed by a larger, more definite vibration as the jettison charges ignited. Jack peered out the access hatch window as the drop pod left its receptacle, dropping down to the planet below.

The first drop pod's release changed a status prompt on Frank's display from a green "SECURE" to a flashing red "POD AWAY". "Yes!" Frank hollered. "I knew it! Jack's alive! The first drop pod is away!"

Lynn said nothing, though she was also relieved. She was busy with her own problems behind the Icarus's flight controls. The ship was sluggish to respond, and the damaged balloot was trying to drag their nose down into the plasma wake. It was a constant struggle to keep the nose up, and they were running out of fuel.

Suddenly, a sharp increase in the orange-red glow from the plasma spilling out from between the balloots, lit up the inside of the flight deck. This caught Frank's attention. "We've got trouble here," he announced grimly. "That balloot is not gonna hold much longer. And when it goes, I doubt we'll last more than a minute before the plasma cooks us." Frank didn't realize it, but with Jack out of communication, he was looking to Lynn to make command decisions.

Lynn, however, did realize it. After all, she was technically second in command. Without thinking twice, she made her first command decision. "We've got to get Jack back up here, now!" she decided. "Send someone to bring him back. We can't wait for him to drop all the pods!"

Frank reacted without hesitation. He wanted his best friend back in the command seat where he belonged. "Tony!" Frank called over the secondary comm-channel. "Can one of you fetch Jack? His comm-set is down and we're running out of time."

"No way!" Tony answered over the comm-system. *"We're barely holding our own here! One of us leaves and we'll lose the whole compartment in less than a minute!"*

From his seat at the back of the passenger corridor, Will overheard Frank's request and Tony's response over the comm-set. He looked at the back of his fellow crew members' helmets, almost hoping that one of them would rise to the occasion. *Maybe Sara would like to go*, he thought. *She is always trying to prove that she's as capable as anyone else*. But he knew he was kidding himself. He knew it would be his responsibility. Eden Project ethics dictated that men should avoid putting women in harm's way. He had been raised to believe this. His grandfather had given his life to remain true to this edict.

Besides, Sara wasn't budging. Will summoned his courage and unbuckled his harness. "I'll go," he announced over his comm-set as he removed his thigh straps and pulled himself forward.

Laura and Sara both twisted in their seats to look as he passed between them. They all understood why he was going. Nevertheless, it was still a surprise to see Will rise to the challenge without even a moment of hesitation.

Will couldn't see their expressions, but he could feel their respect. It was an unusual sensation for him. He had felt the respect of others for his knowledge as a scientist. He had

felt the respect of his wife for his honesty and loyalty to her. But he had never felt respect for his bravery.

"Make it quick, Will!" Frank's voice crackled in Will's helmet. *"We're running out of time!"*

Will passed between Maria and Adia, breaking Adia's grip on Maria's hand. Maria reached up and took Will's arm. Will turned to face her and saw her worried look through her helmet visor. He had seen this look several times before. Once, when his wife had been ill, after the birth of their first child. Maria had been there by her side, the most loyal of family friends. And when Maria's brother joined the Luyten Separatists, she had that same look for weeks afterward, until they had received a transmission from the fledgling outpost on Luyten Seven, and she learned that her brother was doing fine.

"Hurry back, Will," Maria pleaded.

"Don't worry," Will assured her, patting her hand with his own. "I'll be back before you notice I'm gone." He gave her a half-hearted smile before he turned and continued toward the airlock compartment.

Maria watched him as he entered the next compartment. She couldn't believe he was going. Of all the people she had worried about, of all those whose safety she had questioned, she never thought that she would fear for Will. He was such a quiet, diminutive man. So unassuming, polite, and trustworthy. So careful and safe—not at all the type to volunteer for something like this. She thought about Will's wife, Abigail. She had been her closest friend for as long as she could remember. She had been Abby's maid of honor at their wedding. Maria had delivered both of their children, and had nursed them all through various illnesses. And she had watched as Will and Abby became what every pre-selected couple on board hoped to become: a real, loving family. She couldn't imagine what Abby would do without him.

Jack moved across to the other side of the corridor. The pods were arranged in a row—three pods on each side of the corridor, each offset from the other. He reached the second pod, and activated the manual override system on the wall next to the pod bay's access hatch. According to his data pad, he had to wait at least twenty seconds between each pod launch to avoid any collisions during their planet-fall.

Will couldn't believe it had been so easy. All he had to do was get up and start moving. And just like that, his crewmates saw him as brave. But Will knew that the first step was probably the easiest. After all, he hadn't been left with many choices.

"How much time do I have, Frank?" Will asked as he opened the hatch to the transfer tube.

"You're not back yet?" Frank's impatient voice crackled over the comm-system.

"Understood."

The status indicator on the second pod changed on Frank's display. "Pod two away!" Frank glanced at the ship's status board. "Plasma must be reaching the engine cowlings on the tail. Their surface temperature is rising sharply."

"Change your stance, Tony!" Mac yelled. Tony shifted his torso sideways as Mac reached down and activated Tony's mag-boots. "I'm gonna recharge this bottle." Mac launched himself gracefully through the midship hatch into the airlock bay and stuck the fire bottle into the recharge fitting in the wall next to its storage locker. The recharging system hissed as it filled the bottle with pressurized, fire-suppressive chemicals. Within seconds, the bottle was filled, and the red light on the recharge mechanism turned green. Mac

released the locking mechanism from the bottle's base and pulled it from the wall.

Will came floating down out of the transfer tube overhead as Mac spun around to return to the fire. "How's it going?"

"Like shit!" Mac confessed. "Get Jack and haul ass back here before there's no *here* to come back to!"

"I'll do my best!" Will promised. Mac patted him on the back as he moved through the hatch. Another strange sensation for Will. Bravado. Male bonding. Not something he would have expected. Especially from Mac.

Will glanced briefly at the fire as he passed behind Tony. He was scared to death of it, and the less he saw, the better. He moved quickly along, hand-over-hand along the overhead rail, across the wardroom and then aft through the berthing corridor. His arms strained as he struggled to pull his own mass, as well as his pressure suit and life-support pack. He found himself wishing that he had spent more time working on his upper body strength, especially his arms. Movement in zero gravity was all about arm strength, and he had concentrated more on overall body conditioning during their journey, striving to combat the detrimental effects of prolonged living in microgravity on his cardiovascular system and overall health in general.

Jack pulled the release handle on the third drop pod. Time was critical, so Jack didn't watch the pod drop away. He immediately moved back across the corridor to the fourth pod's control panel, holding up his data pad again to watch the timer.

Will entered the access tube carefully to avoid jamming the top of his life-support pack in the hatch frame. He always felt so fragile inside his pressure suit. Only a layer of fabric encased him in his private little atmosphere. His very

life was dependent upon a few high-tech machines on his back and the strength of the fabric around him. He drifted out of the tube and across the floor of the pod bay. Stopping his forward momentum, he righted himself and looked down the corridor. This place was unfamiliar to him. In the limited amount of time the science team had available for training aboard the Icarus, prior to the start of this mission, he had never actually been inside this part of the ship. He knew where it was located, how to get to it, and what it was for. But only from the plans, not from actual experience.

It was dark inside. Apart from the glowing control lights on the walls, there was only the light on Jack's helmet, halfway down the corridor. Will reached up and turned on his helmet lamp and headed off down the corridor. It was cold in here. He could feel his suit temperature dropping, and his faceplate was already fogging up.

Jack was positioning himself in front of the fourth pod's control panel. For some reason that Will didn't understand, Jack was upside down, floating in front of the control panel. It was funny to Will how the flight crew seemed to pay little attention to the orientations of up and down, while the rest of them needed to do so half the time just to avoid getting sick. Will assumed that it must've been from spending far more time in zero gravity than most people back on the Daedalus.

Will rotated to his right and saw the green light on the compartment's status panel. The compartment was still pressurized with breathable air. He unlocked and swung up his faceplate to call out to Jack. "Jack!" he hollered. But Jack didn't react. "Jack!" he said even louder.

Jack flipped open the clear plastic plate covering the control box. He was getting cold, even after being in the pod bay for only a few minutes. At least he wasn't sweating. In zero gravity, the sweat didn't drip off of you or run down your body like it did in normal gravity. It just sort of clung there, which was a very uncomfortable feeling if you couldn't dry yourself off with a towel.

Sequestered in his own little world within his pressure suit and unable to communicate with the others, Jack felt very isolated. All he had to listen to was the sound of his own breathing, and *that* was fogging up his faceplate. In a few more minutes, he wouldn't be able to see anything. And although he didn't want to open his faceplate and let even more cold air inside his self-contained world, he had no choice; he had to be able to see.

Jack unlocked and slid open his faceplate just in time to hear Will shouting from the forward end of the bay. He turned in midair to look at Will, who was motioning for him to come toward him. But Jack still had work to do. He turned back around to drop the fourth pod, which he did with a quick pull of the manual override handle.

What the hell is he doing? Will thought. *He must see me.* "Jack! Let's go! We've got to leave, now!" Jack still didn't react. Will had no desire to go any deeper into the dark bay. This place was more than alien to him. It was frightening. But Jack wasn't coming toward him like he requested. In fact, he appeared to be moving away from him, toward the next pod.

Against his better judgment, Will pushed off the forward bulkhead with his feet and launched himself down the long drop pod bay corridor, in the same fashion as he had seen Mac and Tony do many times before. He sailed down the corridor, and as he neared Jack, he reached out and grabbed one of the structural members to stop his momentum. His hands caught hold, and his feet passed under him, twisting his torso until he was facing the opposite direction from where he came.

Another explosion inside the port wall of the galley blew half the interior wall away, sending pieces of sheared metal and flames spewing across the cabin. Mac took the fire bottle he was about to hand Tony and sprayed it around them, repelling the streams of fire and the razor-like shards

of metal away from them before they could damage their pressure suits.

"It's no use!" Tony yelled. "We're not going to stop this thing with fire bottles!"

Mac changed his comm-set to the primary frequency. "Frank, this is Mac! You gotta decompress this section and suck all the air out! This fire is outta control and there's no way we can stop it!"

"I can't do it from here, the system is down!" Frank's voice came back. *"You'll have to do it manually!"*

Mac spun around to face the bulkhead between the galley and the wardroom. The climate and life-support interface panel for the entire compartment was there by the doorway. But there were no lights showing at all, not even red ones. He moved over for a closer look and found a large shard of metal embedded in the face of the control panel. The entire control panel was dead.

Will pushed off from the support and caught Jack's shoulder, coming to rest next to him. "Jack! Frank says we have to go now!"

Jack spun around to face him. "My comm's busted, give me yours!"

Will reached down and removed the small comm-set control pack from his utility belt on his pressure suit. After unplugging his own comm-set line, he handed it over to Jack.

Jack plugged his comm-set into Will's control pack and switched to the primary channel.

"The control panel here is dead! It got clobbered by flying debris during the last explosion," Mac explained.

"You're gonna have to get to the manual override unit inside the bulkhead to purge the compartment!" Frank

advised him.

Another explosion rocked the ship as blue-white flames lashed out at Tony, instantly super-heating the skin of his pressure suit, transferring tremendous amounts of heat through the suit and onto Tony's skin.

Tony screamed in pain. "My arms!" Mac instinctively spun around and launched himself across the compartment toward Tony.

The azure flames continued to whip toward Tony. He could feel the hairs on his arms singe inside his suit as he instinctively held them out in front of his face. He was hit hard on his left side by something big and bulky flying across the room. He thought he was dead until he realized it was Mac knocking him out of the path of the flames. They both flew across the room, striking the forward bulkhead.

Mac grabbed the open hatchway ring to keep them from bouncing off the wall and back into the flames. Regaining control of his body in the freedom of zero gravity, he maneuvered himself through the hatchway and into the midship airlock, dragging Tony along behind him.

"The fire has ruptured the secondary fuel transfer lines!" Frank exclaimed. "We'll lose our main engines in two minutes, max!" Frank immediately tried to shut down the entire fuel transfer system—valves, pumps, the works. But nothing worked. "The main control umbilical must be damaged!" he added. "I'm still getting data, but nothing in the Icarus is responding to my commands! All we've got are the flight controls!"

"Frank, this is Jack! Can you hear me?"

"Jack!" Frank responded, relieved to hear his friend's voice again.

Mac secured himself to one of the vertical handrails with the large carabiner on his utility belt. "I'm gonna blow the

airlock before the whole damn ship goes up!" Mac announced as he attached Tony's carabiner to the same handrail.

"Wait! Don't do it!" Jack cried over the comm-set.

"Mac! Don't blow the hatch! If you do, all the compartment doors will automatically seal and they won't be able to return to the LRV in time!"

Flames surged through the hatchway from the galley into the midship airlock. In seconds, the fire devoured most of the oxygen in the galley and was now searching for more in neighboring compartments. In a few more seconds, it would find Mac and Tony, and consume them as well.

Mac reached out and slapped the emergency hatch-blow button. The lights in the midship airlock compartment instantly turned red, and small warning strobe lights flashed, warning them of the impending decompression. In each adjoining compartment with open hatches, the lights turned red and *their* strobes began to flash as well.

There was a five-second delay built into the system to allow the person activating it to brace themselves. Mac reached up and pulled the pin out of the automatic hatch closure mechanism on the galley hatch to prevent it from closing automatically. He had heard Frank warning him not to do it but Frank wasn't down here amongst the flames, about to be burned alive. It was decompression or death. They could deal with getting back to the LRV after they survived decompression. Through the roar of the fire, Mac and Tony couldn't hear the sound of hatches closing in the distance.

Jack and Will heard a loud clang from the access tube at the forward end of the pod bay.

"What was that?" Will wondered, turning clumsily to look forward in the direction of the sound.

"Shit!" Jack cursed. "Will, get to the escape pod!"

"The what?" Will asked, turning back toward Jack.

"The emergency escape pod!" Jack reminded him as he grabbed his shoulder and turned Will to face forward. "At the head of the bay! Get inside and get it fired up and ready to eject! I'll join you in a moment!" Jack gave him a push and then returned to his business.

The outer hatch on the port side opened first. Small explosive bolts inside the hatch frame ignited, causing them to split in half, the charge sending the hatch spinning away from the outer hull of the Icarus. A split second later, the process was repeated and the inner hatch disappeared as well. Flames, smoke, and loose debris flew past Mac and Tony, as they huddled in the corner of the airlock bay, hanging on for dear life, hoping their harnesses would hold as the vacuum of space sucked everything out the wide-open hatch and into the void. The decompression seemed to last forever, although it was only a few seconds before most of the air pressure was gone and the suction began to subside.

Frank had his own problems. Systems were failing all over the Icarus, and there was nothing he could do about it. Without the control umbilical that connected the LRV's flight controls to the Icarus' flight systems, all he could do was watch as their ship fell apart under them. "We've got to get out of here, now!"

"What about the others?" Lynn asked as she struggled to control the flight path of the Icarus as it threatened to come apart beneath them.

The status light on the fifth drop pod flashed, indicating that it had been jettisoned along with the previous four pods.

"Frank, get Mac and Tony back inside and get the hell out of there!" Jack commanded over the comms. *"That's an order!"*

"Not without you and Will!" Frank insisted.

"We'll get out in the pod!" Jack explained. "With any luck, we'll land close enough that you can come pick us up once you're down and secure!"

Frank couldn't believe what was happening. His ship, his world, was falling apart around him, and now his best friend was going to bail out in the emergency escape pod. He wanted someone to stop this simulation, open the door, and let them all out. But that wasn't going to happen. This wasn't a simulation. This was real.

"Mac! Tony!" Lynn called over the comms. "Get your butts back up here, pronto!"

"Copy!"

"Maria!" Lynn continued, "think you can work the airlock controls?"

"Uh, yes, I think so," she answered nervously.

"Then get in there and close the inner hatch and depressurize the airlock so Mac and Tony can get back."

Will opened the hatch to the escape pod and dove inside headfirst. Sensing that its hatch had been opened, the pod's interior lighting came to life, and her systems began to spin up in preparation for launch. Will looked about the interior. Along the floor of the six-meter diameter capsule were eight flight couches arranged in a circular fan fashion, the head of each couch near the center of the capsule. Overhead were two more couches, situated behind control consoles and flight sticks. Struggling to remember the procedures he had read about in training, Will pulled himself up into the pilot's seat and searched for the proper switches to enable the launch sequencer.

Maria moved quickly into the center compartment, positioning herself over the hatch in the floor of the compartment. Remembering the procedures she had read in

the training manuals weeks before, she hooked the toes of her boots under the hatch rim, bent over and pulled the hatch up and over. Seating it firmly on the rim, she pushed the latch over and sealed the hatch. Straightening up and twisting to her right, she pushed the depressurize button and waited. She could hear the hissing in the airlock below as internal pumps sucked the air out. Twenty agonizing seconds later, the airlock was decompressed.

"I can't hold the nose up any longer!" Lynn warned. "She's dipping down on me!"

"Just keep her up for one more minute!" Frank pleaded. "We've got to get them inside the airlock before we separate!"

Lynn pulled the flight control stick back hard and held it there, forcing the Icarus's attitude thrusters to fire continuously. She looked at the pitch indicator on her flight dynamics display. Their nose was still dropping, but more slowly than before. She glanced at the fuel readout on the systems display. "Forty seconds of fuel left!" she cried. "Then the Icarus becomes a tumbling fireball, and us with it!"

Jack pulled the manual release handle on the sixth pod's control panel. Nothing happened. He reset it and tried again, but still nothing. There was no power in the system. *The system must be automatically shutting all remaining power to her primary systems!* Jack realized.

Jack quickly opened the cover plate over the pod controls and yanked the power feed wire out of the connector to the ship's power feed bus. He pulled the comm-unit that Will had given him from his belt and smashed it against the bulkhead, cracking the plastic casing. He quickly pulled it apart and removed the battery, attaching the hot wire to the

last pod's control panel and pinched them together between his gloved fingers.

The control panel lit up, flickered out, and then lit up again. Wasting no time, Jack pulled the release lever one more time. The pod bay shuddered as the explosive bolts fired, and the last pod jettisoned. Jack let go of the wires, allowing the panel to go dead, then headed aft, battery still in hand.

"Mac! Tony! Get in here!" Frank ordered over the comms.

Mac grabbed the latch and pushed it over with ease, moving the hatch up into the LRV's airlock. He shoved Tony in ahead of him, following him up and closing the hatch behind them.

Watching through the window in the inner hatch, Maria saw that they were inside the airlock with the outer hatch closed once again. She quickly pushed the pressurize button. Once more, they heard the hiss of pressurized air as the airlock below her re-pressurized. "They're inside the airlock!" Maria announced.

"Is the outer hatch secure?" Frank asked, knowing they couldn't separate unless the outer hatch was secure as well.

"It's secure! It's secure!" Mac yelled over the comms.

"Hang on everyone!" Frank replied. *"Separation in five seconds!"*

"Wait!" Maria yelled through the comm-system. "They're still in the airlock!"

"Ten seconds of fuel left!" Lynn announced over the comm-set.

"Jesus!" Maria begged, "hurry up!" It took just as long to pressurize the airlock as it did to depressurize it. Finally, the yellow light turned green. She bent over and unlatched the inner hatch, swinging it open.

Mac pushed Tony up through the airlock. Tony's hands had thermal burns and he was afraid to touch anything because of the pain.

Maria caught Tony as he floated up into the compartment, propelled by Mac from below. "Are you alright?"

"My hands, they're burnt," Tony reported, his voice calm despite his obvious pain.

"We'll take care of it later," she promised him. "Let's get you strapped in."

"That's it! We're out of fuel!" Lynn announced.

"Switching flight controls from Icarus to LRV," Frank announced. "Disengaging mooring clamps!"

The ship lurched as the release clamps blew open under the LRV. Lynn fired the separation thrusters, giving them a gentle push away from the top of the Icarus. She peered out her forward window as the nose of the Icarus, now without any attitude control thrust, rapidly pitched down and away from them, and pulled into Tau Ceti Five's atmosphere by the drag of her balloots. "Her nose is going down fast now!"

Maria buckled Tony's restraints as the separation thrusters fired, causing her to shift backward and into Adia. Regaining control, she turned around and opened the first-aid box on the forward bulkhead next to the hatch and pulled out some burn pads.

"Get your gloves off," she told Tony as she tore open the first packet. She placed the first burn pad over the palm of Tony's left hand, wrapping it around his hand and securing it with plastic tape.

"What do I do if we have to decompress?" Tony asked as Maria applied the second dressing on his right hand.

"Rip these off and put your gloves back on," Maria answered with a smile, "quickly." She pulled his harness over his shoulders and buckled him in, tucking his gloves between his legs.

Without warning, Mac pushed Maria firmly down into her flight seat. "Get secure, Doc!" he ordered as he turned to check on his friend. "Hang tough, pal," he winked at Tony.

Jack arrived at the satellite bay at the aft end of the corridor. Repeating the same process as before, he attached the battery from the comm-unit to power the satellite's manual launch control pad. But instead of the control panel lighting up, it shorted out, sending small sparks shooting out of the panel.

"The Icarus's tail is pitching up fast, Lynn!" Frank reported. He pressed his console to feed the image of the Icarus's flight orientation into Lynn's console display.

Lynn gasped in horror at the line drawings of the Icarus as her tail pitched up toward them. They were falling back, up and away from the Icarus, in a standard separation trajectory. But now, with the Icarus's tail pitching up so rapidly, they would back right into her.

Frank activated the collision alarm. "Brace for collision!" he called through the comm-system.

Lynn moved the control stick to the left, rolling the LRV quickly to port as the tail of the Icarus passed under them with less than a meter between them. It felt good to finally have something reacting properly to her control stick inputs. "Hold on!" she cried out, as she pitched the LRV's nose up and rolled back to starboard to get their shielded belly in front of them before they passed through the Icarus's red-hot plasma wake.

Frank watched the sensor images of the Icarus as it began to break in half midship, the friction from the planet's atmosphere proving to be too much for her without the protection of properly positioned ballouts. "She's breaking in half!" he screamed. "Get the hell out of there, Jack!"

Jack's desire to come up with another way to release the multi-purpose satellite was interrupted when the ship lurched violently upward. His chest slammed into the overhead, and life-support status indicators on the inside of his helmet visor turned red, then disappeared. He fumbled at his chest pack, tapping the systems display button to repaint the indicators across the inside of his helmet visor, but nothing happened. Everything electrical in his suit was dead.

The ship continued to tumble violently. Jack could hear the screeching of twisted metal and the moaning of structural beams being torn apart.

Jack spun around clumsily and placed his feet firmly against the aft bulkhead behind him. He then pushed off with all his might, sending himself forward up the corridor, grabbing the handrail and pulling himself along, hand over hand, as everything around him threatened to come apart at any moment.

Will also felt the straining metal from inside the escape pod. Becoming impatient, he moved out of his seat and back to the hatch, poking his head out enough to see down the corridor. It was full of smoke, and dark as night. He looked for any sign of Jack's head lamp but saw nothing. *Where are you, Jack?*

Jack could feel his pulse racing, and his breathing picked up its pace inside. He couldn't see a thing ahead of him through the smoke. The ship shook even more than before, and the corridor became slightly misshapen as the compartment was suddenly flooded with red light. *Decompression!*

Will panicked, ducking back down inside the capsule, closing the hatch behind him. He was getting out of here, with or without Jack! He climbed back into his seat behind the control console. He knew the capsule could fly itself if necessary. *All I have to do is punch the biggest button on the center console*, he thought.

The slow, gentle suction of the decompression helped Jack along as he did his best to control his thoughts. If the compartment suffered explosive decompression, the strobe lights would flash. If that happened, Jack would have to keep from being sucked forward and out into space. Jack closed his visor and locked it in place.

The sounds of his ship's destruction disappeared as his faceplate closed, and now, Jack was enveloped by the sounds within his own helmet. Without the comforting whirring of the oxygen circulation fans, the sound of his breathing was nearly deafening. He had never felt more alone in his life. If the ship would only hold together for another minute, he could reach the escape pod and abandon ship. Jack prayed that the pod would still be there, with Will waiting inside it.

I can't do it, Will thought to himself desperately. As much as he wanted to live, he couldn't leave Jack behind to die. In an instant, he thought about his children. He thought about the new life they would start a year from now on the new world, the world that his ancestors had given up so much to reach. He thought about his wife, and their last moments together the morning he had departed. He remembered the promises he had made to her. *Stay safe, my love, promise me you'll stay safe and we'll be together again*. It was as if she were standing next to him, speaking those same words at that very moment.

"Forgive me, Abby." Will unbuckled his harness and maneuvered himself back to the hatch on the side of the capsule. He opened the hatch and poked his head out again.

The compartment was red. Suddenly the strobe lights began to flash. Will quickly attached his carabiner to the hook on the inside of the hatch, securing himself against the forces of sudden decompression. He peered out into the corridor, straining to see through the smoke, hoping to see some glimpse of Jack. *Is he still alive? Should I close up and go?*

Then it happened. A terrible moan, a screech, and then the sound of tearing metal to his right. And a sudden *whoosh* of air as the midship section pulled away from the aft section of the Icarus, leaving a huge open wound at the end of the bay, just across from the escape pod. Everything came flying toward him, sucked forward along with the last of the massive compartment's atmosphere. Bits of debris, railing, cables, billowing clouds of smoke... *And Jack!*

"Jack!" Will cried out. But without his comm-set, his voice never left the confines of his helmet. Will instinctively reached out for Jack as he came tumbling down the corridor toward him, surrounded by the debris of the collapsing Icarus.

Jack saw Will out of the corner of his eye as he tumbled down the corridor toward him. As he flailed, Jack managed to push off the ceiling with his left foot, just enough to change his course slightly, causing him to collide with the side of the escape pod and bounce off toward the gaping hole to his left.

Will reached out and grabbed Jack's hand as he passed by him. Jack felt heavy. Will reached out and grabbed him with his other hand and pulled with every ounce of strength he had left. But as hard as he tried, he just wasn't strong enough to pull him inside the pod against the suction of sudden decompression. *Where the hell is that super human strength that people are supposed to get in a crisis?* Will

thought angrily. He continued to pull as Jack dangled at arm's length. *Christ, don't let it end like this!*

Frank watched the Icarus's telemetry feed as they approached her plasma wake. She was breaking apart. Her bow, dipping down deep into the plasma wake, had snapped off completely, instantly burning up in the atmosphere. The midship section followed, tearing away from the aft section as she twisted up and over. Secondary explosions could be seen in the aft section as various systems failed, fuel cells exploded and oxygen tanks burst. *Jesus, Jack, get out of there, please!* He watched the telemetry, paying close attention to the emergency escape pod, hoping that at any moment, he would see it jettison away from the doomed Icarus to safety.

The LRV lurched violently as they entered the Icarus's plasma wake. Frank held on tight as he watched the Icarus break apart. He watched for the escape pod to jettison after losing contact with the Icarus. But it never did. No escape pod, no Will, and no Jack.

CHAPTER THREE

The LRV broke through the plasma wake just as secondary explosions ripped the Icarus to pieces, all of them destined to burn up in the atmosphere of Tau Ceti Five. Lynn's hands were full now that the LRV was no longer hidden in the wake of the Icarus. Now they were hitting the atmosphere themselves, and much faster than in the simulations. It was all she could do to keep their nose up and their heat-shielded belly between them and the atmosphere. Still, she couldn't help but ask. "Frank?"

"No," Frank answered solemnly, "no sign of them."

Those in the passenger corridor could see the breakup of the Icarus as well.

"Oh my God," Maria exclaimed, as the LRV shook violently.

"Shit, you don't think..." Mac couldn't bring himself to finish his sentence.

"Frank, is it too late to abort and take another lap around?" Lynn queried.

"I'm not sure." As brilliant as Frank was, he really wasn't sure. Jack was the expert on orbital mechanics. "Doesn't matter anyway," he continued. "I don't think we'd hold together that long. I'm losing systems right and left back here."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure, but I don't think the control umbilical released correctly. I think it was ripped out of us when we

separated. Probably yanked some wires out and short-circuited a few systems in the process. I just don't know..."

"How bad is it?" she interrupted. She needed to know if they could land.

"We've still got flight controls and propulsion, but we've lost a lot of status sensors on things like landing gear, hull temp..." Frank paused as his eyes danced across his display panel, trying to assess the damage. "It's like every sensor along our bottom side has been shorted out."

"Will we have landing gear?"

"We should. Those power systems are all good, but I won't be able to tell you if the gear is down and locked. I won't even be able to tell you if the gear doors have opened."

"Great," Lynn muttered dryly.

"But that's not the worst of it," Frank added. "I've lost all sensors for the life-support systems as well. I can't even tell you how much longer we'll have cabin pressure."

"Do you have any good news?"

"Yeah, we're still here to worry about it."

Lynn didn't laugh. This was going to be her second command decision, and it was just as difficult as the first one. They were coming in fast, too fast for their heat shields to protect them. Lynn wanted desperately to abort planet-fall and take at least one more lap around Tau Ceti Five, and maybe use their main engines to slow them down before they tried again. But if she used their fuel to decelerate and de-orbit naturally, they might run out of fuel before touchdown. The last thing she wanted to try was a dead-stick landing on an alien planet. And as Frank had pointed out, they probably did not have enough life-support to survive another lap around the planet.

Since they were already making planet-fall, there really weren't any options. It was now or never. "I guess we're going in," Lynn decided.

Frank was already preparing for descent. He began transferring his displays and controls to Jack's station to

Lynn's left. When he finished, he unfastened his harness and struggled to shift forward, as the LRV bounced violently through the turbulent upper atmosphere.

"What the hell are you doing?" Lynn asked, as Frank nearly fell into Jack's seat beside her.

"You're gonna need some help up here if you want to land this busted-up ship," he explained as he struggled to fasten his shoulder harness.

"And I need you back there, too!" Lynn exclaimed.

"Don't worry. I slaved most of my stuff up here."

"Most?"

"Most everything that's still working."

Lynn chose not to argue with him. He wasn't a pilot, but he could help keep an eye on the flight data for her, and it was comforting to have someone in the seat next to her. Even if it wasn't Jack.

"Hang on tight, everyone," Frank announced over the comm-set. "It's going to be a rough ride down."

"Frank?" Tony asked through his comm-set, "Did they..."

"*It doesn't look that way,*" Frank's voice responded. There was a long pause. "*Hook up your butt-packs in case we have to bail out,*" Frank continued. Then, after another moment of silence, he added, "*Hang on back there, we're not outta the woods yet.*"

Tony fastened his harness to the parachute pack underneath him. One yank of the mode handle on his left strap would release the harness from its attachments to his flight seat and instantly convert it into a parachute harness.

He looked up at the flight status display, but couldn't make sense of anything. The majority of the symbols were flashing, indicating that they were expecting to receive updated data sets that never came. Many of the symbols had three dotted lines where numbers were supposed to be. All the flight data seemed to be there, but Tony wondered if they were malfunctioning as well. They couldn't possibly be

coming in that fast. He wasn't a pilot, but he could tell they weren't on a proper entry trajectory. They were on a collision course.

They continued to plunge through the steadily thickening atmosphere of Tau Ceti Five. They had no clue whether their heat shields would hold out or not. Lynn tried to balance between trajectory and temperature, keeping their angle of attack steep enough so they wouldn't bounce off the atmosphere and out into deep space, yet shallow enough that their heat shields didn't melt. Of course, she could only guess heat shield temperatures, since those sensors weren't working either. Luckily, the temperature sensors on the top side of the hull were working, and she knew the projected temperature differences between them and the heat shields along the LRV's underside. She just hoped that Jack had been right when he said that designers were always conservative when setting maximum performance specifications.

Finally, having slowed down to a respectable fifteen times the speed of sound, the orange-red plasma wake subsided and the outer hull temperature began to fall.

"Atmospheric entry complete," Frank announced with a sigh of relief. "Standby for transition to atmospheric flight mode."

The LRV was now a falling rock, with a little pitch, yaw, and roll control to make it interesting. The RCS and OMS engines they had used in space could do little to provide lift in an atmospheric environment.

Frank activated the atmospheric engines. Located on either side of the LRV at the fore and aft ends of the ship, these powerful jet turbines would provide enormous amounts of jet thrust through their four, variable-vector exhaust ports. This gave the LRV vertical takeoff and landing capabilities, which was important since they were unlikely to find a runway waiting for them.

"Deploying turbines," Frank announced. The two aft turbines deployed first. Since they were both larger and more powerful than the two forward turbines, they took a little longer to spin up to full power. As soon as Frank received two green lights indicating that the aft turbines were fully deployed and locked into place, he deployed the two forward turbines. Although he could not hear the aft turbines due to their position at the rear of the ship, Frank could see from his display that they were spinning up.

Another green indicator light popped on, but only one. The port forward turbine light stayed red.

"Shit! Front port turbine is stuck!" Frank exclaimed as he strained to look back and left out his side window.

"Can you see it? Is it deployed?" Lynn asked, hoping it was only a sensor malfunction.

"It looks like it's stuck about one third of the way open," Frank detailed as he turned back to his console and tried to recycle the deployment motors on the stuck turbine. "Damn! I can't get it to recycle and retry! Son of a bitch is stuck good!"

"That, or the motor's burnt out," Lynn suggested.

"Why not?" Frank cried in desperation. "Nothing else around here is working!"

"Tell everyone to hang on back there," Lynn warned, "I've got an idea."

"Hang on tight, people." Frank's voice called over their helmet comms. *"It's gonna get hairy for a moment."*

Everyone in the passenger corridor began to cinch down their harnesses, even though there wasn't much room left to tighten them. It was noisy inside their compartment, not at all what they were accustomed to in the vacuum of space. They could hear the air rushing past the hull outside, whistling as it rushed over various irregularities on the surface of their hull. They could hear the whine of the

turbines as the air slammed into their intakes and forced them to spin.

But something was wrong. Tony reached out with his right hand and placed his burnt palm against the curved bulkhead that wrapped around the starboard forward turbine. It was vibrating. Despite the pain in his hand, he tapped it with his knuckles. The sound was resonant, empty now that its cargo had been deployed into the slipstream. He reached out with his left hand in the same way, but the sensation was different. The vibration was minute in comparison, and it made a dull thud when he tapped it. For a moment, he was confused.

The LRV rolled sharply to the left without warning... One full rotation, stopping level again with a decisive snap. It startled Tony, not to mention the others, several screaming in surprise. Now he understood what was wrong. But before he could explain it to his stunned crewmates, the ship rolled again.

"It's still stuck!" Frank exclaimed. "Just keep rolling until it pops out!"

"Or until I pass out," Lynn said to herself. She jerked the stick hard to the left again, this time holding it there. The LRV rolled rapidly in succession, over and over again. The flight deck was well above the LRV's aerodynamic longitudinal centerline, but the turbines were not. Lynn felt the blood rushing to her head, forced by the same centrifugal force that she was hoping would push the stuck turbine to fully deploy.

Frank tried to watch the turbine through his window for as long as he could, but it was too uncomfortable with the ship rolling so quickly. He turned his head forward and fixed his gaze on that last red indicator light, waiting for it to turn green. His head felt like it was about to explode.

Lynn began to get light-headed, and her vision blurred. In a few more seconds she would lose her ability to

concentrate, become disoriented, and eventually suffer ruptured blood vessels in her eyes and face due to increased arterial pressure in her head.

“Green light!” Frank finally announced.

Lynn yanked the stick back to the right, completing the violent roll. They ended on their starboard side, and Lynn let the LRV settle back into an upright position before she pushed the nose down slightly.

Frank knew the next step and didn’t wait for her to tell him what to do. Opening the fuel flow valves and activating the turbine control systems, he gave all four engines the little sparks they needed to come to life. In only a few seconds, the thunderous roar of jet thrust replaced the whine of the spinning turbines.

Lynn brought the throttles up slowly after Frank announced that all four turbines were at normal operating speeds. And at that moment, the LRV changed from a falling rock into a powerful aircraft.

“How’s everyone doing back there?” Frank asked over the comms.

“A few bloodshot eyes, but other than that, we’re okay, I guess,” Tony answered weakly. “But let’s not make a habit of that, alright?”

Maria was shaking Adia by the shoulders to revive her. “Adia? Adia? Can you hear me?”

“Damn, that was something else!” Mac cheered. “I thought my head was gonna explode!”

Suddenly, Sara lurched forward. Laura unbuckled her harness and turned around just in time to witness Sara vomiting in her own helmet, covering her face shield with emesis.

“Oh my God,” Laura exclaimed as she reached over to help Sara.

“What?” Mac queried.

“Help me get her helmet off, she’s puking!”

Mac unfastened his harness and reached forward over the back of Sara's seat. Unplugging the comm-line from her helmet, he lifted it up and off after Laura unlocked the retaining ring at the front of the collar. Chunks of vomit spilled out of her helmet across her head, face and chest, filling the cramped compartment with a foul stench.

"Oh, man. That's *got* to suck."

"Shut up and get me a towel or something!" Laura scolded as she wiped Sara's face.

"She's handling pretty well...considering," Lynn reported, pleased with the way the LRV felt in her hands now that it was flying under its own power.

"All flight systems seem to be holding together so far," Frank confirmed, scanning his displays carefully. "But I'll have to run a few diagnostics to be sure."

"First things first. Call up our landing site on the nav-com. I'm gonna need a heading."

A few moments later, Frank's face turned sour. "Well, I've got good news and bad news."

"Frank!"

"Sorry. We're already past the tertiary site. We can make the secondary if we come hard to port, but it'll be a stretch."

"What about the primary site?"

"No way in hell," Frank refused.

"How far past the tertiary site are we?"

Frank glanced down at his screen, then made a quick calculation in his head. "We can make it if you come about in the next thirty seconds. But that'll be a stretch as well."

Lynn weighed her options quickly. "Load the coordinates into the auto-nav system, we're coming about."

"Are you sure?" Frank asked. "The second site is an easier approach."

"Maybe, but the cargo pods are on their way to the tertiary site, and we need those pods."

"We could pick them up later with the ship."

"Assuming we get down in one piece."

"Good point," Frank admitted as Lynn brought the LRV around one hundred and eighty degrees. "Coordinates entered, trajectories and flight paths coming up now."

"How much fuel will we have left on approach?"

"How are you at dead-stick landings?" Frank replied without missing a beat.

Lynn looked at him in horror. "You're kidding, right?"

"Okay, maybe a little fuel. After all, we *will* have a pretty good tailwind."

"Wind? What wind?"

"Oh, did I forget to mention that there's a cold front over the tertiary site?"

"Jeez, Adia, you scared the hell out of us," Tony exclaimed. He was out of his seat, kneeling in front of her, his bandaged hand holding hers to offer comfort. He struggled to keep his balance as the LRV bounced about.

Maria had taken Adia's helmet off, as well as her own. "Well, you've got a few ruptured capillaries in your sclera, but that should clear up in a few days," Maria explained as she checked Adia's eyes. "I'll take a closer look after we land."

"Jesus, what did you have for lunch, Sara?" Mac asked as Laura handed him the vomit-soaked towel to dispose.

"Mac," Laura said disapprovingly, shooting her best angry-mother look at him.

"What?"

"This is so embarrassing," Sara moaned as she picked pieces of vomit from her hair.

"Nonsense," Laura assured her. "Could've happened to any of us."

Sara glanced over her shoulder in Mac's direction. "I'll bet *he* just loved it," she complained, rolling her eyes.

"Not at all. In fact, he seemed quite worried," Laura assured her.

"Yeah, worried that I might get some of your barf on me," Mac teased from the back of the compartment.

"Mac," Laura scolded again, "you're such an asshole!"

"Yeah, ain't it great?" Mac laughed.

"You see what I have to deal with?" Sara complained.

A few minutes and a few hundred kilometers later, they were once again buffeted by severe turbulence.

"How's our approach look?"

"So far so good," Frank scanned his instruments. "But remember, we're going to be coming in from the wrong direction. It's a box canyon, with high ridges on three sides, opening into the ocean. Unfortunately, we won't have enough fuel to fly past and approach from the ocean end as planned. So you're gonna have to come in low over the inland ridgeline, and then shave off a whole lot of altitude in a hurry before we run out of room."

"Piece of cake," she replied sarcastically. A flash of light in the distance caught her eye. "Did you see that?"

Frank checked the sensor display. "We're picking up a little electrical activity in the storm just ahead of us."

"Should we go around it?"

"Of course we *should*, but..."

"Not enough fuel," Lynn finished for him.

More flashes from outside lit up the interior of the flight deck with brilliant blue-white light. Every time the lightning flashed, Frank's displays flickered. He knew that they would stay up, but the flickering made him nervous nonetheless.

Suddenly there was a loud crack along with a simultaneous thud on the hull above and behind them. The ship dipped sharply, forcing Lynn to compensate abruptly for the shift, bringing the LRV back on its approach path.

"What the hell was that?"

"I think we took a lightning strike!" Frank shouted.

"Did we lose anything?"

Frank desperately scanned his primary systems. *Propulsion, flight controls, electrical...* everything looked intact. "I don't think so," Frank said. Then he noticed the dark screen at the top center of the console in between him and Lynn. "Oh shit, TFS is out!"

Lynn felt her skin become cold as ice. Without the terrain-following sensors, they were blind. She couldn't see a thing through the darkness, let alone in a storm raging outside the ship.

"Frank, I don't think I can set her down safely under these conditions." She looked at him. "I really don't."

"You're gonna have to. We're all out of options."

"The crew could bail out over the LZ," Lynn suggested, trying to convince herself that it was a better option. "I could probably hold position for a few seconds to give everyone..."

"...And with that wind outside, where do you think they'll end up?" Frank didn't even look at her as he began punching commands into his keyboard. "Besides, this ship is our habitat, remember? Without it, our chances of survival drop dramatically."

Lynn said nothing. She knew that he was right.

"Besides, I think I can slave the Doppler signal to the TFS. It'll have to run through a conversion algorithm which will slow display refresh down considerably, but it'll be better than nothing.

"How slow?" Lynn asked.

"Once every two or three seconds probably, if we're lucky."

"Great," Lynn groaned. "So at our current speed, by the time it shows what's ahead of us, we'll be about to hit it."

"Something like that." Frank glanced over at Lynn, noting the concern on her face. She had never been under this much pressure.

"Just keep your eyes glued to that screen for me," she sighed.

The storm continued to rage outside as the rain pounded against the ship. Lightning flashed every few seconds, startling Lynn nearly every time it flashed in the forward window. After a few minutes, she became accustomed to the flashes, only flinching at the ones that seemed unusually close.

Frank kept his eyes glued to the TFS display, calling out changes to Lynn, allowing her to keep her eyes focused on the flight dynamics display. Frank had enlarged the TFS display to fill most of his center display screen, moving the critical engineering displays to the sides of the screen in much smaller windows. As much as he wanted to scan his engineering systems more intently, he had to keep his attention on the terrain display.

Lynn traded her concentration on the flight dynamics display for occasional glances out the forward window, hoping that the exterior view would give her a sense of orientation to the planet below. But there was nothing to be seen outside except gray-black clouds, heavy rain, and frequent flashes of lightning. She knew her peeks outside were of no value, but her instincts seemed to draw her gaze in that direction, despite her best efforts to keep her attention focused on critical flight instrumentation.

“Ground level twelve hundred, twelve-forty to port, eleven-sixty to starboard.” Frank was calling out the elevation of the ground directly below them, and on either side. Since Lynn was watching their altitude, she could quickly discern their distance above the constantly shifting terrain. After a few maneuvers, Frank had managed to estimate the reaction time available for flight corrections, but with it being only a few seconds at best, many of Lynn’s maneuvers were abrupt, causing the LRV to lurch like a small ship being tossed about on an angry ocean.

“Ground level twelve-twenty, port same, starboard coming up, eleven-eighty.”

The mountains below were getting taller. Lynn reluctantly added to the four turbines to gain some extra altitude. Still,

she didn't want to burn any more fuel than necessary.

"Ground level twelve-twenty-five, twelve-forty port, twelve hundred starboard."

Lynn strained to see through the mist. "Damn these clouds! I can't see a thing out there!"

"Ground level twelve-sixty-eight!" Frank announced more urgently. "Twelve-fifty port, twelve-twenty starboard." Frank glanced over at the navigation display on the center console. "One thousand meters to the ridgeline." Frank noticed Lynn glancing out the forward windows. "Don't worry about what's out there," he advised. "Just fly the line."

Frank's attention shifted back to the TFS display, his eyes widening in alarm. "Ground level thirteen hundred meters! Twelve-eighty port, twelve-forty starboard! I think it's the ridgeline!"

Lynn eased the throttles forward a bit, adding more lift to their flight profile. They still had at least fifty meters between the LRV and the mountains below. So even with the slow performance of the TFS, short of a sudden, vertical face directly in front of them, they should be able to avoid any accidental impact with the mountainside.

Frank thought he heard a subtle, scraping sound beneath him. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"There it is again," he commented as the noise repeated.

"I didn't hear it."

Frank looked back at the TFS display. "Ground level holding at thirteen hundred meters, twelve-eighty port, twelve-fifty starboard." Frank scanned his engineering displays briefly, concerned about the strange noises he was hearing.

"What was it?" Lynn asked.

"I don't know," he answered. "It was like something scraping." The noise came again, but louder and several times in rapid succession before it stopped. "There it is again," Frank said, still puzzled.

This time, Lynn heard it as well. "I heard it that time!" she announced, her eyes still fixed on the flight instrumentation in front of her.

"It sounded like it came from outside." The noise sounded once more, and Frank straightened up in his seat to get a better look outside as a frightening suspicion suddenly came over him. Another flash of lightening lit up the ridgeline below and confirmed his fears. "Trees!" he shouted, pointing out the front windows.

Lynn looked up from her displays to check the front window. The gray-black mist outside had lightened up just enough to reveal a sea of pointed treetops, poking their tips through the dense mist. Lynn slammed the throttles forward to climb, as the tallest of the treetops appeared from behind the curtain of mist directly in their flight path. But it was too late; they wouldn't be able to climb quickly enough. Lynn pulled the LRV up to avoid taking a treetop directly in the nose. The LRV's nose lurched upward, though her flight path continued with minimal incline.

The first tall tree struck them in the belly, just aft of midship and slightly to port of centerline. The monstrous tree, probably undisturbed for hundreds of years, bent at first, then cracked and toppled to give way to the massive kinetic energy contained within the mass of the sixty-meter long spacecraft. But as with all things of mass, the tree had energy of its own, and the tail of the LRV leapt upwards, a jarring sensation unfamiliar to everyone on board.

Lynn found herself and her ship in an extreme nose-down attitude, at an angle of over forty-five degrees. This meant that only half of the thrust being provided by the turbines was going to lift, while the rest was adding to their forward momentum. The computers that controlled the thrust vectoring compensated a second later, but the momentary loss of lift was already causing them to descend.

Lynn could see the treetops more clearly now as they raced under her, growing ominously closer as the LRV slipped downward toward them.

Although it meant burning extra fuel, Lynn pushed the rising tail of the LRV back down using full RCS thrusters to fight the upward energy transferred to their tail by the tree. The tail slid back down as violently as it had risen, and just as quickly, the ship leveled out. Lynn glanced at the sluggish TFS image on her display, and saw that the ground level was falling rapidly. They had passed the ridgeline.

Lynn let the LRV continue to fall, trimming the throttles until she was comfortable with their rate of descent as they closed on the landing area. She turned to look at Frank. He looked a little pale, but with good reason. "I never thought about the trees," she admitted.

"Me neither," he confessed. "Nice flying, Lynn."

"Thanks."

Frank turned to look at her as he realized the implications. "Holy shit, there are trees here!"

Back in the passenger compartment, pulses were racing, breathing was quickened, and complexions were pale.

"Okay, *that* was scary!" Mac admitted as he tightened his shoulder straps.

"Range, fifty kilometers," Frank announced. "Altitude eleven hundred meters and falling at four meters per second. Speed at two hundred seventy-seven meters per second. We've got to lose speed or increase our rate of descent."

"Turbines to forty percent," Lynn announced as she backed the throttles on the turbines down a bit. "Standby on the mains, we'll cut them at ten seconds out and let our inertia take us the rest of the way." Lynn peered out the window again. There was still nothing but the swirling gray mist outside. She wished she could see even the slightest hint of ground color.

"Range, forty-seven kilometers, altitude one thousand thirty. Looking better, but still a tad high."

Lynn ignored him. It was better to be too high than too low. If they ran out of fuel a few meters above the deck, it wouldn't kill them. It wouldn't be fun, but they'd survive. Given the current situation, living to see the landing was the only thing on her mind.

The wind continued to buffet them, jerking the ship from side to side, and occasionally shoving them forward a little quicker than expected. Lynn fought the urge to counter the effects of the wind with the RCS thrusters to save fuel. No one was grading the accuracy of her landing this time around. It made no difference to her whether she was right or left of the target. All she wanted to do was get on the ground and shut everything down. The last thirty minutes of adrenaline dumping into her bloodstream had worn her out and left her nerves frazzled.

Two minutes passed, and nothing had improved. Frank continued to call out range and altitude so that Lynn could keep her attention on the ship's attitude. It was a constant struggle to keep the LRV level in the strong and erratic winds outside. The rain continued to wash across the windows, and the lightning flashed in the distance, causing the mist outside to illuminate briefly with each strike.

"Range, seventeen kilometers. Altitude, three hundred and sixty meters, down at six meters per second."

Lynn wondered why they had never thought to include a foul-weather landing in her simulation training. She surmised that no one thought they would be stupid enough to try.

"Prepare for landing," Lynn announced. "Landing lights on?"

"Landing lights on," Frank answered as he flipped the switch. Outside, the fog became brighter.

"Gear?"

"Coming down." Frank activated the landing gear. "I hope."

"Emergency fuel cutoff?"

"Auto."

"Gear locked?"

"No idea," Frank admitted in stride. "Fuel is down to eighty kilos," Frank added, trying to warn her of their fuel status without sounding too alarmed.

They rocked in their seats as the ship was tossed about. Swaying to-and-fro, bouncing up and down, occasionally rolling from side to side. Gusts of wind struck the LRV time and again, feeling as if they had been struck by something solid. It was nothing like the simulator.

Lynn was getting good at just letting gravity and aerodynamics do their work, instead of fighting them and wasting fuel. "Here we go," she announced in a surprisingly calm voice.

"Range, ten kilometers. Altitude, two hundred meters." Frank glanced at the time display. "Twenty seconds." A red light suddenly flashed on to Frank's right. "Critical fuel warning," he reported. He reached over to the comm-panel and added the secondary circuit to his comm-set. "Range, five kilometers, altitude one-twenty, fifteen seconds out."

"Cut all forward thrust," Lynn ordered.

Frank punched the button, cutting off fuel flow to the main engines that provided their forward momentum. Without the fuel flowing into its reaction chambers, the thrust stopped and all forward propulsion ceased. "Mains are off, three out, ninety up, speed falling."

"Stand by to flare," Lynn announced.

"Ten seconds, brace for landing!" Frank wanted to use the word "impact", but decided against it, even though it was more accurate.

Lynn pulled the nose up sharply, bringing the ship to a high angle of attack, and allowing the downward thrust of the four turbines to act as braking thrusters. It wasn't the usual way to slow their forward speed just before touchdown. That was usually accomplished with the

maneuvering thrusters, but there was no more than a trickle of fuel left in their tanks. "Flaring!"

The flare only lasted a few seconds. The ship's speed had dropped to only one hundred meters per second after shutting down the main engines, and her flare out had brought that down to less than one meter per second. Lynn pushed the nose back down to level.

"Two hundred out, twenty up, speed less than one!"

Lynn began reducing power to the turbines. "Turbines at thirty!" She could have left them as they were, since they were already falling at seven meters per second. But she wanted to get the ship down now, before they ran out of fuel.

"One-fifty out, ten up, forward point five!"

Lynn waited, motionless, until just the right moment. The red low-fuel light began flashing.

"We're outta fuel! Three up!" Frank reported nervously.

That was the moment. Lynn knew there had to be at least a bit of fuel left in the lines, and she pushed the throttle up to seventy-five percent. The four turbines screamed as their thrust intensified, jet exhaust blasting the rain-soaked surface below them. Then, the mighty roar of the turbines dropped in pitch, their thrust disappearing as the last of the fuel ran out.

"We're falling!" Frank braced himself as the LRV dropped the last few meters.

The LRV came down nose high. The left main gear struck the surface first in a squish of mud, rain, and grass. The right gear made contact immediately afterwards. The hydraulics in the gear absorbed most of the impact, but the relatively high force made the LRV bounce up slightly, both main wheels coming at least half a meter off the ground while the nose was still coming down. The main gear made contact a second time, simultaneously, and they continued to roll forward.

Lynn watched as the nose came down. Their angle of attack quickly went from fifteen degrees to ten, then to five,

zero, and then negative five. "We're on a hill!" Lynn realized.

The forward gear struck next, with only a slight bounce. The gear settled down and the LRV began to roll down the hill. Lynn tried the brakes, but they were of no use on the muddy surface. The forward gear locked up, and they slid down the hill.

Frank looked out the forward windows and thought he could see the ground ahead where it leveled out. Then something caught his attention as they slid down the hill. Something in the fog. "Cargo pod!"

Lynn looked up in horror. Her mind raced frantically, searching for a solution. The front brakes were already locked up. If she tried the main gear brakes, they might start sliding sideways, and possibly roll. If they only had some fuel left, she could use the maneuvering thrusters to slow them down. But that was it; she had nothing else to try.

The conical shape of the cargo pod became clear, the fog parting from around them as they slid closer. The marker strobe at the top was flashing red. She could even see the parachute lines trailing off to one side, being tugged on by the wind that was filling the pod's chutes beyond their view.

"We're gonna hit!" Lynn cried out.

"Brace for collision!" Frank announced over the comm-set.

The LRV slid down to the bottom of the hill, which formed into a small gully filled with water due to the heavy rains. The right forward gear struck the gully first, and the soft mud at the bottom of the gully allowed the gear to sink in and get stuck.

Frank and Lynn could hear a groan from the right forward gear as the kinetic energy from the LRV's forward speed was instantly transferred into the gear strut, which snapped under the strain. The LRV lurched down and right, the right side of her nose driving into a small rise on the other side of the gully. The soft mud of the rise was no match for the LRV's momentum, and they plowed right through it, sending dirt and grass flying in all directions.

The LRV pitched up and left, off the rise, causing a slight change in course to port... Just enough to miss the cargo pod. The LRV came to rest with her nose slightly to the left of the pod, which was no less than a meter off their starboard side.

Suddenly, it got much quieter. Lynn could still hear the turbines as they wound down. She could also hear the sound of the rain striking the hull, and several alarms were blaring in the cockpit. But the familiar noise of thrust spewing from the turbines was gone. The sound of exterior wind rushing past them was also gone. And thankfully, the beat of Lynn's own pulse thumping in her ears was beginning to subside.

"Damn!" Frank exclaimed as he looked across Lynn out the starboard window at the cargo pod sitting next to them. "I can't believe we didn't hit that pod!"

Lynn snapped back to reality. They were down, yes, but there was still work to be done. "Emergency shutdown, all systems!" Lynn began madly flipping switches and punching buttons.

"Power to batteries, reactor to emergency shutdown mode, fire suppression systems on safe, transponder on battery." Frank followed suit. Finally, after a few more seconds, he felt sure that all systems were safely shut down. "That should do it," he announced. "We made it." Frank turned and looked at Lynn. "Nice flying," he congratulated her.

Lynn realized that Frank was back to his jolly old self again—despite all that had happened—which meant they were relatively safe...for now. She relaxed back into her seat for the first time in what seemed like forever. "Secure from red," she told Frank softly. "And set ship's condition to yellow."

Frank smiled. Lynn was settling into her new role nicely. "Set ship's condition to yellow," Frank announced over the comms. He paused for a moment, and then continued. "And

welcome to Tau Ceti Five.” Frank turned off his comm-set and pulled it from his head.

Lynn smiled, exhausted, pulling off her own comm-set and dropping it on the console next to her.

“Which pod is that?” Frank asked, gesturing toward the pod outside Lynn’s starboard window.

Lynn glanced out the window, noting the big red and gold number *four* on the side of the pod. “Pod four, why?”

“Figures,” Frank groaned as he closed his eyes and dropped his head back against the headrest. He opened his eyes again, turned his head and looked at Lynn. “We added the excavation explosives to pod four.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

* * *

There was no cheering in the passenger bay. The last thirty minutes had left them all both emotionally and physically drained. Although some of them felt a measure of relief at their safe landing, for most, the shadow of death hung over them with the loss of two of their friends.

Maria unfastened her harness and leaned forward, feeling unsteady in the unfamiliar environment of normal gravity. She turned to Adia, who had her eyes closed and appeared to be crying. “It’s okay, Adia. We’ve made it, we’re safe.”

Adia looked at Maria with wide, tear-filled eyes. She knew they had landed safely, she just couldn’t believe it.

Maria slid forward to the edge of her seat, reaching out to touch Tony’s shoulder. Her limbs felt incredibly heavy, after four months of weightlessness. It was a welcome feeling, but tiring nonetheless. She knew the gravity here was the same as it had been aboard the Daedalus, about seventy-five percent of Earth’s gravity. But it still felt different than she had expected. She wondered if it had anything to do with the implants that had been removed from all of them just prior to departure. The implants had protected them from the vertigo normally caused by the

massive, rotating habitat ring on the Daedalus, so there should not have been any difference in sensation between that and the natural gravity on Tau Ceti Five. However, that question would be left for future studies. Right now, there was work to be done. "How are your hands, Tony?"

"With everything that's been going on, I almost forgot, Doc." Tony pulled his left dressing off. The burn pad was already beginning to dry out. Underneath, his hand was cherry-red, but without blistering. "It still hurts quite a bit, but I guess it's not that bad." He held it up for her inspection.

"Yeah, looks like first-degree burns, mostly. Some cream should take care of it. Let's see your other hand."

Mac stood up from his seat at the rear of the compartment. "Man, this feels weird!" Mac bounced up and down on his toes a few times, getting accustomed to gravity once again. "I mean, it's like a lot of effort just to stand, you know?"

Maria turned to look at Mac. "Just take it easy, big fella. Don't wear yourself out just yet."

"Are you kidding? Come on, Tony. Let's get the habitat opened up so we can start working out. It's gonna take a few weeks to get our strength up to par!" Mac and Tony had worked out on the Icarus's resistance gym three times a day during their journey. But training in zero gravity had never felt like training to Mac, and now he was chomping at the bit to get back to some *real* workouts.

Mac had taken off his gloves and was already bending over to disconnect his flight couch from the deck to stow it away. "Man, I can feel the burn already!"

Laura pulled off pieces of her pressure suit, wanting to get out of the uncomfortable garment as soon as possible.

Sara was also dying to get out of her suit, but for different reasons. She wanted to get cleaned up. A shower would be great, but she doubted that it would be forthcoming, especially since they were on battery power at

the moment. She would have to settle for a damp towel, at best.

Frank appeared at the forward hatch. "How's everyone doing back here?"

"We're okay," Maria assured him.

"What the hell kind of landing was that?" Mac teased from the back of the compartment.

"The kind you can walk away from." Frank turned his attention to Tony. "How are your hands?"

"Minor burns," Maria answered.

"I'll be okay," Tony added. "How's the ship?"

"We were just about to go outside and take a look at her," Frank explained. "Care to be one of the first humans to set foot on an extrasolar world?"

Tony looked at Maria with pleading eyes.

"Go ahead," she conceded. "Just rub some of that stuff on your hands before you go out."

Tony nearly leapt from his seat, his expression full of boyish exuberance.

"And wear some gloves to protect your hands!" Maria added.

"Yes, Mother!" Tony shouted back jokingly.

"Mac!" Frank called. "You coming?"

"You kidding?" Mac replied as he stowed his seat in its compartment beneath the deck plates.

"Everyone else, secure your suits and seats," Frank instructed. "We'll crack open the habitat bays once we're sure the ship is secure."

Mac bounded forward, squeezing between the seats, and disappeared through the forward hatch behind Frank and Tony.

"How come they get to go outside?" Sara asked no one in particular.

"You want to go outside in that?" Laura wondered, pointing at the rain beating against the side windows. Sara didn't respond. Laura just shook her head in wonder. "You're dumber than I thought."

Sara was shocked at Laura's directness, but it didn't bother her. Laura was just one more brain-washed female as far as Sara was concerned.

* * *

It had been nearly thirty minutes since their crash landing on Tau Ceti Five. The storm continued to rage outside, although the rain had eased somewhat. The storm was now mostly wind along with the occasional lightning in the distance. Frank surmised that the weather front had passed over them and was probably headed out to sea. Of course, if Will were still alive, he could have told them for sure.

The starboard nose section of the LRV rested atop the small rise that had served to stop its forward momentum, leaving the first five meters of the ship suspended in the air out beyond the small hill upon which it rested.

The outer hatch under the starboard nose cracked open slightly, then fell the rest of the way open, striking the rise and splattering mud. A booted foot came out of the hatchway and kicked at the partly open hatch, forcing it deeper into the muddy embankment in order to open it further.

Mac wiggled through the hatch, dropping the last meter and landing on his bottom, then slid down the hill toward the base of the rise. It was a clumsy way for the first human to set foot on an extrasolar world, but it worked.

As he stood, he was overwhelmed with unfamiliar sensations. Wet mud beneath his feet. Rain and wind on his face. The smell of wet grass and foliage. The feeling of being outdoors in general was completely foreign to him. They had all been born and raised aboard a spaceship, never feeling the warmth of the sun or the chill of the night air on their faces.

Mac brushed the wet mud from his butt as he looked around, checking as best he could to see if it was safe for the others to come out. But he couldn't see more than four

meters in front of him. "Uh, I guess it's clear out here," Mac called as he adjusted his comm-set microphone.

"What do you mean, I guess?" Lynn demanded over the comms.

"I mean I can't see squat out here!" Mac explained. "There's nothing but smoke as far as I can see!"

"That's not smoke, dummy. It's called fog!" Tony chided.

"Well, whatever it's called, it's everywhere!" Mac looked around, squinting to see through the dense mist surrounding him. He felt a shiver go up his spine. "Is this stuff always gonna be here? Cuz' it's really creepy."

Lynn was the next to drop down through the hatch, sliding down the rise and landing at Mac's feet.

"Fun, ain't it?" Mac stated as he helped her to her feet.

Lynn looked around for herself. Mac was right, the fog seemed awfully thick. Gray and mysterious, it hung motionless, except for a slight swirling as the wind rose and fell. The ground was wet and muddy, and it squished beneath her boots in a strange way that she had never experienced. It didn't feel solid. She had never walked on anything but a solid deck before now, and she found the sensation unsettling.

There was some sort of grass covering the ground. A bizarre greenish-blue color, it sprawled out across the ground in uneven patches. It wasn't at all like the grass she had walked on in the garden deck of the Daedalus. It was much stiffer and more resilient, refusing to remain flattened against the ground after she stepped on it with her boot.

The wind was warmer than she had expected. She had never experienced a storm firsthand, but she had seen many photographs and watched old Earth movies, most of which depicted storms as being quite cold.

The rain was especially intriguing to her. Water was a carefully controlled commodity where she came from, with every drop counted and carefully dispersed. But here, it came down in buckets, unrestricted, unencumbered, and unmeasured. And it wasn't the sterile, bio-electrically

cleansed water to which she was accustomed. It had its own smell, its own taste. In fact, it made everything feel fresh and clean. And it seemed to activate something; a pungent aroma that filled her nose, overpowering everything else.

Tony slid down the hill, startling Lynn, almost knocking her off her feet.

"Jeez, Tony!" she exclaimed. "You scared the hell out of me!"

"Sorry," Tony apologized as he got to his feet. "Man, would you look at this." The sensation of being outdoors, with no walls anywhere near him, was overpowering, leaving him feeling incredibly small and insignificant. He suddenly felt unsafe, and swung his rifle around off his shoulder and held it ready at his side.

"What do you need that for?" Lynn asked.

"I don't know," Tony admitted, "but it makes me feel better."

Frank dropped down through the hatch and slid down to join them. "First thing in the morning, we're gonna have to break out a shovel and dig out a better access path than that!" Frank shook the back of his rain jacket to get off the mud that had accumulated during his slide. He pulled his hood back and looked up at the sky, letting the rain strike his face. "Wow!" he laughed. "Isn't this something?" Frank lowered his head once more, and looked at the others, all wet and muddy. "Well, we're quite the rag-tag group, especially on this auspicious occasion."

They looked each other over for a moment. It was indeed a momentous occasion in the history of humanity. As far as they knew, they were the first humans to set foot on an extrasolar world.

Lynn wondered if it would have felt as unusual had she been born and raised on Earth. Living her entire life on a spaceship whose only purpose was to get here, it didn't seem such a strange idea to her that they actually *were* here.

"Maybe we should take a picture, or something?"

Lynn looked at him with reproach. "Maybe later, Mac. For now we've got work to do." She turned to Frank. "Why don't you go aft and do a quick scan of the reactor systems. Make sure the anti-matter containment bottle is still intact."

"The reactor displays show that it's fine."

"Just humor me."

"No problem," Frank answered.

"Mac, do a visual check of the starboard side for damage," Lynn continued. "Tony, you take the port side."

"Gotcha," Mac replied.

"What are you gonna do?" Frank asked Lynn.

"I'm the smallest one here, so after I check out the nose, I'll crawl around underneath and check out the gear and the underside as best I can."

"Sounds good."

"Everyone stay on comms, and stay as close as possible to the ship. We don't need anyone getting lost in the fog."

"Yeah, and let's not forget, we *are* on an alien world, here," Frank added.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Tony commented. "But aren't all worlds alien to us?"

Lynn smiled. "Let's get to work, and make it quick. We'll assemble back here in twenty minutes, okay?" Lynn checked her watch. "It's thirteen-forty now, so fourteen hundred?" Lynn looked at the others to see if there were any questions.

"If it's thirteen-forty, why is it so dark outside?" Mac pointed out.

"That's a good point, actually," Tony said. "How are we going to measure time here?"

"We can figure that out later, guys," Frank suggested.

"TC Five has a twenty-seven-point-four hour day, which we'll eventually switch to. For now, we'll just stick to the shipboard time on our watches," Lynn instructed.

As the others dispersed, Lynn briefly examined the nose of the LRV. Satisfied that it was intact, she moved to the other side and inspected the port forward gear. It was jammed into the small rise where the LRV's nose was

resting. It looked a little bent, but otherwise appeared sturdy enough, for now.

Dropping down to her hands and knees, Lynn crawled under the nose of the ship just aft of the port forward gear's back strut. The mud was deep here, and she sank several centimeters with every move. It was an unusual feeling, the mud squishing between her fingers. Just like everyone else raised on the Daedalus, Lynn had spent her share of duty hours in the agricultural bays, tending the crops that made up the bulk of their diets. She had felt dirt and mud before. But that mud had been very smooth, filtered, and free of most imperfections. The mud here was quite irregular, clumpy and soft at the same time, packed with small rocks, pebbles, and pieces of dead vegetation. For a moment, she wondered if it was safe to be crawling around in the muck on this alien world.

She and Frank had discussed this prior to exiting the LRV a few minutes earlier. The nature of their arrival would not allow them to take the cautious step-by-step approach outlined in their mission protocols. With their ship in an unknown state, they had no choice but to venture outside for inspection before extending the habitat bays that were designed to give them a living and working space safe from the planet's environment. And until they located and retrieved all the cargo drop pods, they had neither the equipment nor the facilities to maintain a separate living environment while they awaited either colonization or rescue. If they were going to survive, it would have to be out here on the planet's surface. So they had agreed to jump in with both feet and expose themselves to the natural elements of this planet with far less regard to safety than the mission protocols dictated. Short of drinking the water or eating the plant or animal life here, they would treat this planet as if it were Earth itself. There would be ample time to test the food and water here before they ran out of consumables.

Lynn crawled over to the starboard forward gear strut. It was snapped clean off, as if someone had bent it back and twisted it until it broke. The back strut had been jammed up into the gear well in the fuselage, and shorted out the bay door motor. No matter, as she doubted they would be trying to get the LRV airborne anytime soon.

Frank arrived at the aft end of the LRV after trudging through the rain, mud, and wind. If this was what living on a natural world was going to be like, he wondered why anyone would ever want to leave the comfortable interior of the Daedalus.

He pulled his data pad from his shoulder and opened it up. After turning it on and setting it to scan mode, he adjusted the scan beam to a narrow field and pointed it at the back end of the LRV. A maze of multicolored lines and shapes appeared on the data pad's screen, a confusing jumble of geometric patterns that were impossible to sift through. Frank adjusted the depth of the display, filtering out layers until he reached the depth of the reactor's antimatter containment bottle.

Now, the image on his screen was discernible. Frank scanned across the reactor plant, checking the containment bottle across every depth layer. The electromagnetic bottle that separated the anti-matter from all the other matter around it was intact, powered by a battery that would last several decades before losing power.

Satisfied that the reactor was stable, Frank began scanning the other systems. Power distribution, communications array, sanitation systems, reserve fuel cells, all of which were as critical to their survival as the reactor plant itself, and Frank knew it. Lynn was just afraid of a reactor accident. Everyone who didn't understand how the containment system worked was afraid of it. True, a sudden collapse of the containment bottle would be catastrophic, but the odds of that happening were slim,

considering all of the safety back-ups that had been designed into the system by the Eden Syndicate back on Earth more than seventy-five years ago.

Mac looked over the starboard side of the ship, checking for anything that looked out of the ordinary. Mac wasn't a flight mechanic, but he was a general systems mechanic, and he could tell if something was not right. He had also spent countless hours studying the ship's schematics and technical specifications, just like everyone else, during their long voyage.

Tony checked the port side, looking for the same things as Mac. Cracks in the hull, signs of severe stress, internal fires, or other damaged systems. Mac was the real mechanic, but Tony had enough training to handle this simple external inspection. Besides, they weren't planning on taking off again tonight. They just needed to be sure that the LRV was safe for the night. If not, they would be forced to ride out the storm somewhere else.

Suddenly, something startled Tony. A rustling noise, like something moving in the distance. Tony spun around, tipping his head up to point his headlamp into the foggy night, toward the direction where he heard the noise. "Mac," Tony whispered into his comm-set. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Mac responded.

"I heard a noise off the port side."

"All I can hear is wind and rain."

"Well I heard something," Tony insisted as he continued to search the fog with his headlamp. "It sounded like something was moving out there."

"Try scanning in the direction of the noise, Tony," Lynn instructed, joining the conversation.

"Yes ma'am." Tony pulled out his data pad and set it to long range area scan. "What should I scan for?"

"Start with infrared," Frank advised.

"Copy that." Tony set the scanning parameter on his data pad to infrared only and began sweeping from side to side. A few small red blips appeared and quickly disappeared, but mostly the display screen stayed green and blue, indicating that nothing was giving off significant heat. "Nothing hot out there that I can see," Tony announced.

"Maybe it's not warm-blooded," Frank said as he stepped up beside Tony.

Tony nearly dropped his data pad. "Jesus, Frank! You scared the shit out of me!"

"Sorry." Frank reached over to Tony's data pad and made an adjustment. "It is an alien world, after all. Maybe you should set it to detect movement. If it isn't moving, it's probably not a threat."

Tony continued to pan back and forth, but the scanner showed no signs of movement, and he heard no more noises.

"Find anything?" Lynn asked as she crawled out from under the ship.

Frank looked Lynn up and down. She was covered with mud from head to toe. "Jeez, Lynni. You're a mess."

"Nothing," Tony answered. "No movement, and nothing on infrared." Tony turned off the data pad and slung it back over his shoulder. "Guess I'm just hearing things, sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Lynn assured him. "We're all gonna be a little nervous here until we get used to it." Lynn wiped her hands on her shirt and turned her attention to Frank. "How's the reactor look?"

"Fine. No reason we can't fire it up right now. In fact, the whole engineering section looks undamaged. How's the gear?"

"Right nose gear is gone, probably behind us somewhere. The strut got shoved up into the wheel well and jammed the door motor as well."

"So I guess we won't be going back up into space in this thing anytime soon."

Mac came around the tail to join them. "Find anything, Tony?"

"Nope," Tony admitted, still a little embarrassed.

"Well, there's not much use in standing around getting soaked," Frank said. "How about we go back inside and set up housekeeping?"

Lynn pulled off her head-cover and tipped her head back, allowing the rain to spill across her face. It was such an unusual feeling; little cold droplets pelting her forehead and cheeks. It felt similar to a shower, only colder, and it was more refreshing and natural.

"Lynn," Frank urged. "Shall we?" he added, gesturing toward the nose of the ship.

"Yes, of course," Lynn answered. "Let's get back inside." Lynn put her head-cover back on and turned to head in. "We can go over our inspection results after we open up the habitat bays."

They trudged through the mud and rain, groundwater splashing under their boots with every step. The squishy, sloshing sound was new to them, and Mac found it quite delightful to stomp forcefully downward, splashing water in all directions.

Lynn watched Mac splashing playfully a few steps ahead of her. She felt exhausted, and a bit apprehensive out in the open. She was soaked right through to the bone, and cold. It was all rather uncomfortable. She had never felt cold before. Where she lived, the temperature was a constant seventy-two degrees. Not too hot, not too cold. She remembered once, when she was working in the galley to earn extra simulator credits, going into the walk-in freezer to fetch a box of synthetic beef. That was cold, but it wasn't wet. And being wet somehow made it even colder.

The last hour had been grueling for her, the most difficult time in her young life thus far. The adrenaline that had gotten her through it all was beginning to wear off, and fatigue was creeping in behind it. The physical exertion of their first EVA in normal gravity in four months was making

matters worse. At only one hundred and sixty centimeters and fifty kilograms, Lynn was the smallest of the group next to Adia. She watched the men ahead of her in line as they trudged easily through the mud and water, and envied their physical strength and endurance, even after four months in microgravity. She felt like she couldn't take another step, but she refused to show any weakness, especially now that she was in command. She would have to be strong if she was going to be a leader. Jack was strong. Strong and decisive. She wished he were here now. She had never really wanted to be in command. She just wanted to be a pilot.

* * *

By the time the others had returned from their EVA, the rest of the team had all of the flight seats stowed under the deck plates. They had stored their pressure suits in their lockers, and finished converting the passenger compartment into an access corridor. The path led from the inner airlock compartment directly behind the flight deck, to what would become the habitat bay, once they opened it up and extended the individual bays.

The EVA party stripped out of their foul-weather gear downstairs in the outer-airlock compartment, and secured all equipment in the appropriate lockers. The men joked and laughed as they ascended the ladder behind Lynn, towels hanging around their necks after drying off their heads.

"Don't worry, Tony," Mac teased. "I'm sure we can rig up a night-light so you won't have to be scared of things that go bump in the night!"

"I'm telling you, I heard something out there," Tony insisted as they entered the corridor.

"What did you hear?" Laura inquired.

"Nothing," Tony lied.

"He heard some scary creatures in the fog," Mac jested as he held his hands up like claws.

"Bullshit," Tony insisted. "Why do you have to be such an ass all the time?"

"See," Sara interrupted. "It's not just me! Everyone thinks you're a jerk."

Mac just blew Sara a kiss, taking the slander as a compliment.

Laura rephrased her question, "What do you *think* you heard, Tony?"

"Nothing," Tony insisted, trying to play the incident down. He didn't want to give Mac any more ammunition. "I just thought I heard something moving, that's all." Tony could see the alarm in Laura's face at his statement. "Probably just the wind."

"Are you sure?" Laura asked.

"I'm sure," he insisted, but he could tell it was not enough by the concern on her face. "I scanned the area and there was nothing out there." Tony pushed Mac down the corridor. "Come on, asshole. Let's open up the bays so we can get some rest."

"Rest? Hell! Let's open them up and get to working out!" Mac argued as they headed to the hatch at the aft end of the bay. "We're gonna need to be in shape if we're gonna have to fight off all the ferocious Cetian creatures out there!" Mac laughed as Tony pushed him through the aft hatch.

Lynn leaned against the bulkhead to rest, drying her hair with a towel. Maria noticed how ragged Lynn looked and moved over to her.

"How are you holding up?" Maria asked.

"Do I look that bad?" Lynn asked, already knowing the answer.

"A little drained, maybe."

"That's about how I feel. Drained."

"It *has* been a rough day."

Although Lynn was comforted by Maria's concern, she somehow felt it was no longer appropriate. She straightened up and tried to appear more stoic, more commanding. "Yes,

it has. But there's still work to be done." Lynn turned away and headed for the flight deck. "Let's get the reactor back online, Frank," she ordered.

Laura, witnessing the exchange, stepped up. "She sure has grown up rather quickly."

Maria watched as Lynn left. She was worried that Lynn was trying to take too much in stride. "Yes, maybe." Maria turned to face Laura. "I think we should give her a little room, to grow into her new shoes, I mean." Laura nodded, and turned to follow Mac and Tony into the habitat bay.

* * *

Frank appeared at the head of the corridor. "We've got full power again," he announced as he moved aft to join Mac and Tony at the end of the corridor. "Let's open her up."

"How's it looking back there, Tony?" Mac called down the narrow space that ran aft between the retracted habitat bays.

"All restraints are clear!" Tony replied from deep within the aft end of the LRV.

Mac began turning the hand crank in the bulkhead. There was a creaking sound, followed by a low rumble as the two forward-most habitat bays struggled to roll outward under the weight of gravity for the first time; the science lab to starboard, and the med-lab to port. Mac continued cranking until the bays stopped moving, then locked them both into their fully-extended positions, after which Tony connected multi-cables that connected each bay's power and signal wiring into the main habitat's central bus.

Mac removed the hand crank from its fitting, then turned to the others standing behind him. "Ladies."

The rest of the crew moved into the first two extended bays and began to unpack and position the equipment and furniture, all of which were stuffed strategically into every nook and cranny of each habitat bay.

The crew worked their way aft, extending and unpacking each bay. The galley, wardroom, and the sleeping berths on

either side, just before the laundry and bathroom facilities at the aft end of the habitat section. Working together, they quickly made the habitat fully operational, with all the amenities of home to keep them safe and cozy on this strange new world.

* * *

Frank felt like he was going cross-eyed. He had been staring at status displays for the last hour, checking various systems for damage and running diagnostics on everything that ran on electricity. And although he normally was somewhat reclusive when he worked, he welcomed Lynn's interruption as an opportunity for a break.

"How does it look?" she asked, trying to cover up her own signs of fatigue.

"Well, we've got a lot of little stuff, blown fuses, melted circuits, stuff like that. But all that is easy to repair, just time consuming." Frank leaned back in his seat, ran his hands through his hair, and sighed. "The worst things are the sensor array and deep-space communications. Those are both fried. I can't even begin to guess if they're repairable."

Lynn sat down and thought about it for a moment. "Well, the Daedalus won't be entering the system for at least another eleven months, so we can live without communications for awhile. And since we won't be flying this thing anytime soon, I don't think that the sensor array is terribly important either."

Frank looked a little shocked by her remark. "But without the array, we can't search for Jack," he reminded her.

"You mean Jack and Will," Lynn corrected.

"You know what I mean. If they made it down alive, they could be waiting for help right now."

"Frank, I want them back as much as anyone, believe me. But you know better than anyone that the odds are astronomical."

Frank looked her straight in the eyes. "We've got to try." After a pause, he added, "even if only to prove that they

didn't survive, we've got to be sure." His tone was almost pleading now.

"Don't you think you're grasping at straws, Frank?"

"Look, I played back the telemetry log, and the way the Icarus was breaking up, I think they might've had another minute or so to get out after we lost the telemetry signal."

Lynn took a deep breath, trying to think of what Jack would say at a time like this. "Ok, but we've got higher priorities right now, the first of which is survival."

Frank looked down at the floor. He knew she was right. They were down and safe, yes. But that was a long way from surviving. There were five more cargo pods out there that contained the equipment and supplies they would need. Especially if they were going to search for their lost friends.

"And let's not forget the mission," Lynn reminded him. "Even though we are stranded here until the Daedalus arrives, they'll still be expecting us to at least survey this planet."

Frank didn't respond.

The look in Frank's eyes told Lynn that he knew she was right. "We survive, first. *Then* we see that the survey gets completed. You know better than anybody, Frank. It's even more important now that they will have no way to survey the other planets before they commit to orbit." Lynn hated to throw facts in Frank's face. She knew he only wanted to find his friend. But she feared his loyalty was interfering with his judgment.

"But what if they *are* out there somewhere?" Frank pleaded. "What if they're injured? Hell, they could be just on the other side of those mountains for all we know!"

"Come on, Frank." Lynn knew he was really reaching now. "What are the odds?"

"What?"

Lynn decided to take her stance. "What are the odds that Jack and Will escaped the Icarus before she broke up and

made it down alive?" She was challenging him to use his intellect and not his heart.

"I don't know," Frank admitted. "One hundred to one, maybe?" Frank looked at Lynn for an answer. "A thousand to one?" She still wasn't buying it. "Alright, so it's a long shot."

"And you want to risk our lives, and possibly the lives of everyone else on board the Daedalus, *just* to be *sure*?"

Frank hated being wrong, especially if it meant that Lynn was right.

"Look," she offered, "if there was any evidence that they really might have made it, I'd be on your side." Lynn felt badly for him. He was desperate. "You told me once that Jack always knows what he's doing. So if by some miracle he managed to make it down safely, wouldn't you agree that the odds are better that he'll find a way to get back to us?"

Frank had not thought about it that way. She was right, Jack was a survivor, and nobody knew that better than Frank. "Yeah, you're right." Frank looked around the flight deck to avoid making eye contact with Lynn.

"So we agree that for *now*, we have to concentrate our efforts on our immediate survival?"

"Agreed," Frank responded reluctantly, finally looking at her.

"Good." Lynn hated to give him false hope, but she needed him focused on the matters at hand. "Come on, the others have got the habitat opened up. Let's get some rest. We can start *surviving* tomorrow."

Lynn turned and headed through the hatch. Frank was tired, and sleep sounded pretty good right now. And he knew that with their time cycles being so wildly out of sync, sunrise on this planet would come sooner than expected.

* * *

Lynn entered the habitat bay and headed aft. She was ready to sleep. Maria was in the med-lab, checking her equipment for damage. Adia and Laura were already in their

berths, and Sara was in the bathroom cleaning bits of vomit out of her hair.

Lynn squeezed past Mac and Tony, who already had the portable gym station out, assembled, and were doing a light workout before bed. On the way to her berth, she noticed that someone had made up both Jack and Will's bunks, as if they would be coming in late after everyone else had fallen asleep. The sight almost made her cry, and she paused to gaze upon the empty berths longer than she realized, drawing the attention of Mac and Tony.

"You okay, Skipper?" Mac asked.

The moniker surprised her. It was the first time anyone had formally recognized her as the new mission commander. "Yes, fine," she responded, trying to covertly wipe the tears from her eyes. "You guys finish up and hit the sack."

"Yes ma'am," Mac responded, somewhat uncomfortable at witnessing her moment of weakness.

Frank watched from the galley as Lynn climbed into her own bunk and pulled the curtain closed behind her. He also saw the empty berths. They only reminded him of how helpless he felt, and that he couldn't accept his friend's death until he was sure of it.

Lynn stretched out on her bunk without even removing her jumpsuit. It felt strange after four months of sleeping in zero gravity to actually lie on a bed again. But she was exhausted by the day's events, as well as the new responsibilities that had been dropped on her shoulders. She turned out her light and cried softly to herself in her dark little berth, until she fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

The early morning sky was a brilliant azure. The air was clear and crisp, and a light dew covered the surface. Overhead, a long, slender, golden-brown creature with massive, near-transparent wings lazily sailed the currents of the Cetian winds as it eyed the ground below. The subject of its attention was a strange, unfamiliar, silver object. Much larger than the bird itself, the object reflected the morning sunlight, further luring the soaring creature to investigate. After circling several times, it confidently dove, swooping down for a smooth landing atop the strange silver object.

The bird took its perch along a rail that ran around the top of the object. There were many long ropes, twisted like the vines in nearby trees, running from their attachments on the circular rail. They cascaded down the side of the silver object, which was about five meters tall and of conical shape, and equally wide across its base. The ropes led to large red and white sheets of translucent fabric on the ground, occasionally swelling with the breeze and threatening to fly away, had they not been attached to the silver object.

The object itself had once been smooth and perfectly symmetrical, but now was battered and sheared, with black charring from its bottom up along its dented and misshapen sides.

The bird hopped about the top of the conical object with far less grace than it had possessed when airborne. The creature found it difficult to get a good grasp. Its surface did not give, or allow the creature's talons to get any traction, forcing it to flap its massive wings intermittently to maintain its balance.

Atop the center of the object was a flashing red light, which had a near hypnotic effect on the creature. It pecked at the light several times, but found it inedible, and therefore undeserving of its attention. It moved to the opposite side, which was facing up the hill that the object rested precariously upon. On the uphill side was a small square, about one meter, with a smaller, clear, see-through square located in its center. The ungainly creature found this more interesting, and hopped down to stand on the small square's indented rim. The black rim was somewhat softer and easier for the creature's gangly talons to grab.

The curious winged creature peered through the small, clear square, looking inside the silver object. It was hollow inside, with many long, flat, grey and black objects arranged in a semi-circle, their ends meeting at the center of the floor where they were arranged. Many multi-colored vines were hanging down from above, seemingly chaotic and without purpose, and a grey lingering smoke filled the compartment, obscuring the creature's view.

Suddenly, something moved inside the object, a large creature clad in silver and grey and black that suddenly fell from inside the top, causing the smoke to swirl about. The bird jerked its head back and flapped its wings to keep from falling, startled by the movement. Then, the whole square suddenly swung open and away from the conical object, causing the bird to give flight.

The hatch swung open and clanged against the side of the battered capsule, nearly falling off its weakened hinges in the process. Jack half-fell out of the hatchway, choking from the acrid gray smoke that billowed out of the hatch behind him. He fell to the ground, coughing and sputtering. His head was throbbing unmercifully. His vision was fuzzy at best, and the morning light was so bright that he could barely keep his eyes open.

There was something wet at his temple. Jack reached up and felt the left side of his head. His hair was soaked. He brought his hand back down in front of his face and saw that

it was covered with blood, but he didn't care. He tried to straighten up, fighting back the dizziness that threatened to topple him over. Leaning back against the side of the emergency escape pod to steady himself, he held up his right hand to shade his eyes from the morning sun and scanned the immediate area.

They appeared to be sitting on a small shelf on the side of a large hill, which stretched out about fifty meters above them. The hill was charred and black uphill, apparently from a brush fire caused by their landing. There were trees nearby, most of them located further down the hill.

There was life here as well. Jack could hear it. In fact, there was a large bird-like creature sitting in a tree not ten meters from him, squawking angrily at his presence.

Through determination alone, Jack managed to force his body to cooperate. The situation, the need to survive, caused adrenaline to dump into his bloodstream. The hormone gave him the strength he needed to fight off his dizziness and function with some semblance of normality. He turned to look at the capsule that had carried him to safety. It was charred and dented, and looked like it had flown through an asteroid field. No longer a sophisticated escape capsule, it was now a hunk of junk, burnt and broken. It was amazing the thing was still intact at all. From the looks of the gorge cut into the side of the hill by their impact, Jack was convinced that they must've hit very hard. If they hadn't hit at such an oblique angle and slid—or rolled, he wasn't sure which—down the side of the hill, they undoubtedly would've been crushed by the impact.

Jack rose to his feet and stumbled back to the hatchway, poking his head partway inside. "Will! You alive?" he called out. He could hear coughing from inside. Then Will's arm fell, dangling from the seat above the hatch, his fingers twitching.

"I'm not sure," Will responded weakly. "Are you?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I am," Jack coughed. "Are you okay? Are you injured?" Jack could hear more movement

from Will's position, as he tested out his extremities.

"I don't think so, wait," Will groaned. "Oh, my head."

"Yeah, mine too. Must be from all the smoke. We must've been knocked unconscious on impact." Jack sat down on the edge of the hatch rim. "Must've had a pretty good electrical fire as well. At some point, the suppression systems must've kicked in and the ventilation fans purged most of the smoke. Otherwise we'd be dead right now."

"I'm still not convinced we aren't," Will responded with a groan.

Jack smiled. It was the first humorous thing he had ever heard from Will.

"My shoulder is killing me," Will continued, still coughing in between words.

"Well, climb down and come out here, the air is much better." Jack looked around again, squinting in the bright morning sun. "And the scenery is spectacular!"

Will climbed down out of his seat to the deck below and made his way clumsily to the hatch. With Jack's assistance, he crawled out and sat on the ground beside the capsule.

"Oh my," Will exclaimed as he looked about, also with narrowed eyes. "I can't believe this. It's so... So *big*." Will was beside himself with wonder as he looked across the valley below and beyond to the hills on the far side. "I mean, *look* at it all. It's huge!"

"Yeah, it's a bit overpowering, isn't it?"

"Overpowering is a considerable understatement, I'd say." Will felt his breath quickening, his pulse racing. "It's frightening. It's so vast."

"Are you okay?" Jack asked, noticing Will's increasing respiratory rate.

"I don't know," Will admitted, his breathing becoming faster and deeper. "I feel sort of, panicked, as if, I, I..." Will grasped at his chest. "I can't, breathe, Jack!"

Jack bent over to help. Will's face was twisted with terror, his breathing rapid and deep. "Take it easy, Will. You're hyperventilating. Just try to breathe slow and easy, normal

breaths, in and out," Jack demonstrated, taking a few slow, deep breaths himself. Will tried, but was still panicked.

"What's wrong...with me?"

"It's just the wide open space, that's all," Jack insisted. "You're not used to it. None of us are." Jack was doing his best to be comforting. "You grew up on a spaceship, remember?"

Will's breathing was beginning to calm down. "So did you."

"Well, I spent a little extra time in the environmental sims." Jack lied. The fact was, the mission planners had expected everyone to react differently to being out in the open for the first time. Some people would become anxious, others would hyperventilate. Some might even become psychologically incapacitated by the mere thought of going outside, while others would not be affected in the slightest. There was no way for them to know for sure until they got there and experienced the area for the first time.

Will looked at Jack, knowing he was just trying to make him feel better. "Hey," Jack defended. "Feel my pulse! I'm not completely unaffected by all this open space!"

Will smiled, appreciating the effort. He knew he was not as stoic as Jack. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on his breathing. Soon it was back to normal, although his pulse continued to race for some time. Finally, he was able to open his eyes again without panicking. He looked over at Jack, who was sitting next to him. "Did you know you're bleeding?" he asked, noticing Jack's head.

"Oh, yeah. I must've banged my head getting out," Jack said casually as he reached up to touch his wound. "I think the bleeding is slowing down, though." Jack rose to his feet and extended his hand to Will. "Come on, let's get out of these suits."

An hour later, Jack and Will were out of their pressure suits and into the light-blue jumpsuits that were stowed

aboard the escape pod. They had pulled out all of the survival gear the escape pod carried, and spread most of it out on the ground in front of them for inventory.

"I think that's the last of it," Jack said as he dropped the last bag. Jack took off his cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead, sitting down to rest. His head wound had stopped bleeding long ago, and Will had taped a small bandage to the laceration on his left temple. "I can't believe I'm so tired already," Jack exclaimed. "I should've spent more time in the gym with Mac and Tony."

Will sat down as well, grateful that he wasn't the first to complain about the overwhelming fatigue. He was still dealing with occasional feelings of panic over being in the great outdoors for the first time since birth. And while the human part of him feared the unknown, the scientist in him was fascinated. He knew it was only a matter of time before his fears would subside and the scientist in him would take over. He just hoped it would happen soon.

Jack on the other hand, was already getting comfortable in his new surroundings. Reclining against one of the survival bags, he settled in to enjoy the view of the valley below. "You know, after seeing this firsthand, I can understand why we wanted to get here."

"Of course, it wasn't necessarily *here* that we wanted to get to, you know."

"You know what I mean. Not *here*," Jack said, pointing at the ground in front of him. "I mean, *here*," he continued as he gestured at the entire landscape with both arms. "Land, a planet surface, not the inside of some spaceship hurtling across the galaxy." Jack took a deep breath of fresh air. "I mean, just look at it! If Earth was *anything* like this, I don't know how the hell our forefathers ever left."

"They believed in something, something better than what mankind had on Earth."

"Of course. I'm just saying that it must've been hard to leave it all behind, knowing that you, your children, and

your children's children, would never know anything but the inside of a spaceship."

Will had no response. He had contemplated this before; all of them had at one time or another. But now that they were here, it was no longer an esoteric thought.

"It's a shame they can't see this for themselves," Jack added.

"Well, a few of them probably will get to see it, Jack. Hal Ishkin is still alive, and so are Annie Gentry and Ray Wilkins. They were all there in the beginning, and they'll get to see this new world."

Jack had almost forgotten about them. "That's right. Well hell, that's something, isn't it?" Jack exclaimed, snapping back to reality. "So, let's see how we're doing!"

Will straightened up to take stock of their supplies. "We've got plenty of food and water, probably enough for months. The capsule was stocked for ten people for two weeks, so we should have enough for say, ten weeks. And we've got plenty of water filters too."

"Yeah, and ten sleep sacks, so we're not gonna freeze to death! What about the science kits?"

"Plenty of test kits. And we've got a portable video-player and several library disks. Everything from Anthropology to Zoology, along with a complete survival encyclopedia and a set of classic books to pass the time."

"Good. We've also got a tool kit, several medical kits, two solar-recharging kits, a data pad with a multi-purpose scanner head, several handguns and rifles, and about a thousand rounds." Jack took a long drink of water from his bottle. "All things considered, I'd say we're in pretty good shape."

Will also took a sip of water. "So, how far away do you think we are from the landing site?"

Jack frowned a bit. "I'm not really sure. I know they had to have separated before we did. Since we were orbiting west to east, if we separated after them, we should be east of them, along pretty much the same latitude."

"How can you be sure?"

"Well, I have all the survey maps from the deep-space probe in my data pad. Between the star charts and the landmarks, I should be able to get a fix on our position. It may take me a few days, though." Jack took another drink of water. "In the meantime, I think we'd better make camp here for awhile. We're still pretty weak from living in zero gravity. And if we're going to have to hike out, we'll have to get our strength back, first."

"You think we should hike out?" Will was concerned. "Not wait here for them to rescue us?"

"We don't know that they *can* rescue us." Jack didn't feel it necessary to burden Will with the knowledge that the others probably didn't even know he and Will had made it out alive. "I'm sure they got down okay, Lynn's a great pilot. But I doubt it was an easy ride. They probably have troubles of their own to deal with."

"But surely they'll be worried about us."

"Of course, but they have their own survival to worry about, not to mention the mission. Everyone on board the Daedalus is depending on them. And if Lynn is doing her job properly, she's concentrating on those priorities first."

"Can't we contact them?"

"Not without the comm-sat in orbit. Without it, the comm-sets won't be much better than line-of-sight down here. They could pick up our transponder signal, if we had one. But that electrical fire did a lot of damage, and the transponder is toast." Jack could see the concern on Will's face. "Don't worry, Will. If they can, I'm sure they'll do something to help us out. But I still think it's best for us to assume the worst and take care of ourselves."

Again, Will didn't have a response. He wanted to crawl into a hole and wait for the others to come and get him, or for the Daedalus to arrive and rescue them. He couldn't imagine hiking cross-country. But if Jack was right, they might not have a choice.

* * *

Lynn sat in the command seat on the left side of the flight deck, sipping a cup of tea as she gazed out of the forward windows. The Cetian sun was peeking over the mountains as it climbed up into the morning sky, spilling brilliant white light into the valley. It bathed the horizon in brilliant amber, decorated with the glowing, purple clouds left over from last night's storm.

Lynn scanned the edge of the forest thirty meters beyond them. Tall trees, strong and majestic, reached toward the sky with outstretched, tan branches. Their blue-green canopies created a roof over the ground below that was so thick she imagined she could walk across it without falling through.

Lynn had seen trees before. They had many of them in the agricultural bays on board the Daedalus. But those trees were only a few meters tall, neatly pruned, and arranged in perfectly spaced rows. These trees were scattered randomly and their leaves and branches were unkempt, free to spread out as they made their way upward and outward.

With many of the branches twisting and turning around their neighbors, the forest, while graceful, had an almost mystical appearance. Gazing upon it from the safety of the flight deck, Lynn was reminded of a tale she read as a child, about a band of rebellious men hiding in the forest, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor.

Frank entered the compartment, a mug of tea in hand. "Good morning," he greeted, maneuvering himself into the right-hand seat across from her. "Wow, look at that," he exclaimed as he gazed out the window.

"It's really beautiful, isn't it?" Lynn took another sip of her tea. "Remember that story we all read in school? Robin Hood?"

"Sheriff of Nottingham, Friar Tuck, Little John?"

"Yeah, that's the one. What was the name of that forest they hid in?"

"Oh, jeez," Frank thought. "Sherwood, Sherwood Forest, I believe."

"That's it." Lynn looked out the window again. "That's Sherwood Forest."

"Huh?"

"Just look at it. It's mysterious, foreboding, just like in Robin Hood."

"Okay." Frank sipped his tea, enjoying the sunrise. "Look, Lynn, about last night. I just want to apologize for my attitude."

"What attitude, Frank? You were just concerned about Jack and Will." There was another moment of silence. "I want them to be alive too," Lynn tried to assure him. "I hope you understand."

"Of course, Lynn. I know you were right," he said with resignation. "First things first." Frank rose from his seat to depart. "Well, I'm going to go check out the galley systems," he announced on his way out. "There's going to be some hungry people wanting breakfast pretty soon. Don't want a mutiny on our hands our first day out."

Lynn said nothing, looking back to the sunrise. It would be over soon, and she didn't want to miss a single moment.

* * *

An hour later, the crew was gathered around the wardroom table enjoying breakfast. Scrambled powdered eggs, fried protein strips that were supposed to taste like bacon—which Mac referred to as *faken*—and toast. It was the first normal breakfast they had enjoyed in four months. They laughed about the difficulties of becoming accustomed to normal gravity again, and teased each other about their faces and reactions during the previous day's descent.

After effectively taking command during last night's crisis, Lynn had expected the leadership role to be easier today, but she found the opposite was true. Their banter only masked their concerns about what lay ahead. Survival. Command had been thrust upon her, despite the fact that she was the youngest of them. It would be her job to see

that they not only survived, but that the mission, or at least the Tau Ceti Five portion of it, was completed.

"Excuse me," Lynn said meekly. The others continued to talk, ignoring her as they were deep in their jubilant discussions. She tried again, "Excuse me, people!"

Frank noticed her difficulty in getting things rolling, and decided to give her a hand. He stuck two fingers in his mouth and let out a loud, shrill whistle. "Hey! Pipe down and listen up!" Frank gestured for Lynn to take the floor.

"Okay," Lynn began uncomfortably. "Let's start our morning briefing." Mac and Tony were giggling about something. "Boys," Lynn scolded, "if you don't mind?"

Mac, the instigator as usual, quieted down. "Sorry, Skipper," he apologized, motioning for her to continue.

"Thank you." Lynn took a breath and cleared her throat. "I think our priority should be a full inspection of the ship, all systems, sub-systems, the works. Let's make sure we won't have any problems in the immediate future that might jeopardize our safety. Frank and I will start with the engineering systems. Laura and Maria, you start with the habitat's internal systems."

"What about me and Tony?" Mac queried, wondering why he, the mission's lead mechanic, hadn't been assigned an inspection task.

"I need you and Tony to plant sensor stakes around the perimeter at about a one-kilometer radius from the ship. We need to establish a monitored zone as soon as possible to ensure our safety."

"Yeah, in case Tony's boogeyman returns," Mac teased.

"Hey, who knows?" Lynn admitted, rolling with the punches as best she could. "Sara and Adia will go with you to help."

"Excuse me," Maria interrupted. "But I need to get the med-lab operational, and I'll need to get post-arrival physicals and body chemistry work-ups on everyone, ASAP."

"Can't it wait?" Lynn asked.

"Sorry, no. I need a baseline to compare all future exams against so that I can monitor our health and detect any changes during our stay here. Protocol says I was supposed to get them before anyone set foot outside the ship."

"I didn't realize," Lynn admitted, embarrassed by her unintentional breach of protocol.

"It's alright. Given the situation, what choice did you have?"

Lynn tried not to appear relieved at Maria's dismissal of her error. "How long does it take to do a physical?"

"Well, the physical isn't as important as the blood work. So if it's not too much trouble, if I could at least get a blood and urine sample from each of you before you get started this morning, I can probably work the physicals in around the work schedules."

"Thank you, Maria." Lynn turned her attention back to the group. "Okay, everyone see Maria before you get started this morning. We'll have another briefing at lunch."

"Everyone remember to stay on comm-sets," Frank added. "And take plenty of water and snacks."

"And take lots of breaks, especially those of you working outside," Maria advised them. "Not only have we not worked outside before, but we've all been in zero gravity for four months. Even though most of you have been working out regularly, you're still going to be a little weak, so you'll tire more easily than you might think."

"Don't worry about me, Doc," Mac boasted proudly, as he flexed his muscles.

"I'm not worried about you, ya big ox," Maria teased. "And anti-radiation cream. Use it, or you'll be sorry. None of us has ever been exposed to sunlight before."

"I thought the ozone layer on this planet was supposed to protect us?" Tony asked.

"To an extent, yes," Maria agreed. "But better not to take the risk, for now. And one more thing, it's a very big world out there, and it's bound to be overwhelming at first. Under normal conditions, we would've taken the outside in small

doses until we got used to it. Unfortunately we don't have that luxury, so if you start to feel panicked or anxious, find some place to hide. Under a tree, in a corner, or better yet, inside the ship. Eventually, you *will* get used to it."

"Any questions?" Lynn asked, more to end the meeting than anything else.

"Yeah, what time is lunch?" Mac joked.

"Jeez," Sara commented under her breath.

"Actually, that brings up a good point," Frank said. "The ship's timekeeping system is designed to reset to zero six hundred each sunrise. Then it pushes the recalibrated time to all your watches, so that we're all on the same time. That should take care of us until an official planetary timekeeping system can be established, assuming the council decides to colonize TC Five, and not one of the other two worlds."

"The day is longer here, though, isn't it?" Tony asked. "Won't we get tired before the end of the day, especially after four months in zero gravity?"

"It's only three and a half hours longer," Maria said. "We'll get used to it."

"More time to workout," Mac decided.

"Any more questions?" Lynn wondered. She looked around the table, but everyone appeared satisfied with the day's plan. "Great, let's get to work," she ordered.

Adia rose, standing at the table as she waited for the others to disperse. Finally, she turned to Lynn. "Excuse me, ma'am," she asked quietly, as Lynn was about to depart.

"Ma'am?" Lynn was surprised at the title. "Adia, we went through school together. In fact, you're a year older than I am."

Adia paused for a moment, waiting for the others to leave the table before speaking. "I'm sorry, I just thought that because of your position..."

"Please, it's still Lynn. What can I do for you?"

"I'm embarrassed to ask, but I really don't think..." Adia stopped mid-sentence, too ashamed to continue.

"It's okay, Adia," Lynn assured her, recognizing her fear. "What is it?"

Adia summoned up her courage. "It's just... I don't think that I can, I mean... I don't think that I'm ready to go outside I mean. Not yet... Not so soon." Adia looked down at the floor, expecting disappointment from Lynn.

"Is that all?" Lynn asked, surprised it wasn't something much worse. "That's okay, Adia. You don't have to go outside until you're ready."

"This is terribly embarrassing for me."

"You should have seen me last night, I was scared to death," she told her, relieved to be able to admit it to someone. "I'm still a little nervous about going outside today, in fact. It's even scarier in the daylight when you can see so much further." Lynn laughed. "Don't worry about it."

Adia breathed a sigh of relief.

"When you're ready, you'll go outside. You just let me know, alright?" Lynn tried to be as comforting as possible. Adia was so tiny, so fragile. She still could not believe Adia had been assigned to this mission. And she was not surprised that she was so afraid of going outside. "I'll talk to Laura, maybe you two can trade places for now."

"Thank you very much."

"It's my pleasure," Lynn assured her, happy to be of help. Somehow, it made her feel even more in command, having one of the crew confide in her. "Just one thing, though," Lynn continued, "you *will* have to go outside eventually," she warned. Lynn wasn't trying to scare her, she just wanted her to be realistic about the future. "I mean, you are the biologist here. Your work will eventually be out there."

"Yes, of course," Adia replied, nodding before turning to leave.

* * *

Lynn dropped through the hatch to the ground, and slid down the embankment.

"Skipper," Mac said, offering his hand to help her up.

Lynn took his hand and rose to her feet. "First thing after lunch," she instructed, as she brushed the mud off her bottom, "I want you and Tony to dig out something resembling a normal entrance."

"Yes, ma'am."

Lynn finished brushing herself off, then looked up. The morning sun was brighter than she expected. She donned her sunglasses, like the others, and then marched out a few meters from the LRV. She stopped and looked around at the valley behind the ship. It stretched out for at least a hundred kilometers. It was bordered on all sides by mountains, the steepest of which lay behind them to the west. On the northern and southern sides of the valley, the mountains rose more gradually, but to nearly the same elevation. The central valley floor was predominantly level, with a few shallow hills rolling across the floor. It was covered with a brownish-green grass, tall and tough, that crackled when you stepped on it, and then snapped back to its original shape with ease.

There was a low-hanging fog bank hovering over the valley, covering almost all of its three edges. It seemed to have rolled in from the west end of the valley, past the grove of trees they were all now referring to as Sherwood Forest, where the canyon opened out onto the shore of a small bay. It was light and patchy, and allowed most of the sunlight to shine through.

"Okay, Mac and Sara," Lynn began, "you two head west, Tony and Laura will head east. Go out one kilometer, then circle clockwise, planting and activating a sensor stake every ten degrees. When you reach the other team's first stake, come back in for lunch."

Sara detested the idea of having to spend the next few hours with Mac, but before she could protest, the teams began to depart. She turned to pick up the bag of sensor stakes, only to find that Mac had already picked it up and

was slinging it over his shoulder. "You want me to carry that?"

"Get real," Mac scoffed as he adjusted the considerable weight of the sensor stakes on his shoulder. "Besides," Mac added, "I figured you would want to lead this expedition," he added as he tossed her the data pad.

"Very well," Sara agreed as she caught it. She switched the unit on and got a quick directional fix. "Due west is that way," she announced, pointing toward the tall mountains directly astern of the ship.

Mac rolled his eyes as Sara went marching off ahead of him, triumphant in the fact that he had willingly handed command of their little expedition off to her. Mac fell in line about two meters behind, smiling as he watched her awkwardly navigate the uneven terrain.

* * *

Tony and Laura were headed due east, with Tony carrying the stakes and Laura watching the data pad. After a few minutes, Tony noticed that Laura's eyes never left the data pad's display screen. She even came close to tripping over uneven ground a few times due to her intense concentration.

"Uh, Laura, it's okay to take your eyes off the screen once in awhile," he reminded her politely. "I don't think we'll stray off course too much."

Laura's hands trembled, and her breathing was rapid. "I can't," she whimpered.

"What?"

"I can't!"

"You can't what?"

"I can't take my eyes off the screen!" she insisted.

"Why not?"

"I'm too scared!" Laura stopped in her tracks, her eyes still fixed on the data pad's display screen.

"Scared of what?" Tony asked as he stepped up next to her.

"Everything!" Laura exclaimed.

"What?" Tony asked again, looking around for something he obviously must have missed. "What do you mean, everything?"

Laura closed her eyes. "It's all so big!" she cried. "So open!"

"I don't understand," Tony admitted, still confused.

"I need some damned walls around me!"

"Oh!" Tony finally understood. "I get it!" He moved around in front of her, taking hold of her hands. "Look," he stalled, trying to think of something. "Um, tell me why you're scared."

"Because there are no walls!"

"What do you need walls for?"

"I don't know, protection?"

"Okay, that's understandable. So you don't feel safe out here, right?"

"Right," she admitted.

"And you felt safe back on the ship, right?"

"Yes," she nodded.

She was beginning to calm down. Tony knew he was going in the right direction. "Well, think of this planet as one big spaceship."

"What?"

"Yeah, just pretend like you're back on the Daedalus, and you're in the garden bay, going for a stroll to unwind after a long day in the genetics lab."

"This isn't the garden bay, Tony," Laura said skeptically, raising her eyebrow.

"Yes, it is. When you think about it, this is *all* one big spaceship."

"Tony, you're being silly. You don't expect me to think of this planet as one big spaceship, do you?"

"Why not? The atmosphere forms its walls, its ecosystem is its life-support. It's just one big spaceship, and it happens to be in a stable orbit around the Tau Ceti star. You're just standing in one of the ship's *gigantic* garden decks."

Laura opened her eyes and looked at him. *He is a dear boy*, she thought. He was trying awfully hard to make her feel better. And she *was* feeling a little better. Not because she was thinking about the planet as one big spaceship, but because this kind-hearted boy, young enough to be her son, was trying so hard to *help* her feel better.

His words did have some truth to them. The planet had been here for millions of years. Living creatures had been born, lived out their lives, and eventually died here. She was probably safer here than she was hurtling through the galaxy on a seventy-year-old spaceship. Suddenly, she felt rather silly. She closed her eyes again and took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. She lifted her head up and opened her eyes, looking out bravely across the land for the first time. Sherwood Forest was beautiful, sprawling out not ten meters in front of her. She could hear the waves crashing beyond the forest. Strange bird-like creatures soared overhead. She could hear the buzzing of insects and the cries of distant animals as they went about their daily activities. She still felt uneasy in such wide open spaces, and was unsure that she could continue.

Laura closed her eyes again, breathing deeply as she listened. There was a symphony of life all around her. Her lungs filled with clean and crisp air each time she inhaled. After a few moments, she opened her eyes again and looked up. The sky was brilliant and pure, and stretched from the mountains on either side, and to the tips of the forest in front of her. She could easily imagine the brilliant blue dome over the gardens on the Daedalus, their edges painted with the very same mountains. She lowered her eyes and surveyed the area briefly. *What a marvelous collection of specimens I will find here*, she thought.

Tony let go of her hands and took a step back, letting her stand on her own. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she assured him, a genuine smile warming her face. "I'll be fine, thanks." She lifted the data pad up and pointed herself in the right direction. "This way," she

instructed, as she dropped the data pad to hang at her side and began marching off carefully toward the forest.

* * *

"Nine hundred ninety-nine... One thousand!" Sara counted off, stopping dead in her tracks. "That's one kilometer, plant the first stake right here," she commanded, pointing to the ground at her feet.

Mac dropped the bag of sensor stakes to the ground and bent over, panting.

"Are you *tired* already?" Sara challenged.

"Yeah, a little," Mac panted.

"Really? I'm not tired at all." She was lying. She wasn't winded, but she was tired, mostly in her legs and calves. But she couldn't pass up the opportunity to take a jab at him.

Mac looked at her out of the corner of his eye with resentment. "Try carrying that bag for awhile," Mac suggested.

"Well," Sara mocked, "I thought a big strong man like you wouldn't have any problem carrying such a small bag."

Mac just looked at the ground and smiled, she was baiting him, and he knew it.

"Maybe you should've spent a little more time on the treadmill and less time on the resistance machines?"

"Yeah, maybe," Mac admitted, too out of breath to argue. He reached down and pulled the first stake out of the bag on the ground. Holding the stake with both hands at the top of the shaft just below the scanner head, Mac raised it up as high as he could, then drove it into the ground with a loud grunt. Sara couldn't tell if it was the grunt or the force with which the stake pierced the ground that startled her, but she stepped back.

The ground was still soft from last night's rain, and the stake drove at least half a meter into the ground. Mac adjusted the stake using the built-in leveling bubbles, ensuring that the stake was standing perfectly straight. Next, he folded out the driving handles, positioned himself

with his feet on either side of the stake, and pushed down on the driving handles with all his might, twisting the stake clockwise to screw it into the ground.

Once the stake was at least one meter into the ground, Mac folded up the handles again and extended the scanner head until it was at eye level. "It's all yours," he announced, stepping back from the stake.

Sara looked stunned. "What are you talking about?"

"I've taken care of the hard part. Now it's your turn," Mac announced as he plopped down on the ground next to the bag of stakes to rest.

"Very well," she agreed, stepping up to the sensor head. She examined the device for a moment, pretending to inspect it, as if she were following some sort of protocol.

Mac pulled out his water bottle and took a long drink as he watched Sara try to figure out the scanner head. "Problem?" he asked.

"No problem," Sara lied. She flipped a switch on the control panel, hoping it was the activation switch. The sensor head let out a loud, beeping alarm, and she quickly switched it off. She tried pushing a few other buttons and then switching on the device, but still the same annoying alarm sounded. "Shit," she grumbled under her breath.

"Do you even know what you're doing?" Mac asked skeptically, already knowing the answer.

"Of course... Well, no, not exactly," she finally admitted. She turned around and looked at Mac. He was lying on his left side, propped up on his elbow. He was holding his water bottle in his hand and looking very smug.

"God, I hate you!" Sara exclaimed in frustration.

Mac threw back his head and let out a hearty laugh. It was actually an attractive laugh, Sara thought. Not his usual smug snicker, more genuine and warm. "That's no way to ask for help, Sara," he chuckled as he hopped to his feet.

Sara stepped back from the stake to give Mac room.

"Stay here, you might as well learn how to do this."

Sara hesitantly moved close enough to see what he was doing.

"First, check the frequency number on the display against the one printed on the side, they've gotta match," Mac explained, pointing at the numbers. "Next use the mode button, and the increase and decrease keys to set the various parameters. That's why it was beeping at you, because you hadn't set those yet."

The stake was a little high for Sara, so she stood on her tip-toes to see, placing her left hand on Mac's right bicep to steady herself.

"First set the scanner deployment pattern, one-kilometer radius, ten-degree increments. The unit will automatically set its range based on the deployment pattern you select." Mac advanced to the next parameter. "Then select the control mode, individual, chain, auto, or remote. We'll use the default so that it can be controlled from the ship."

Sara was surprised that Mac actually sounded intelligent as he explained the apparatus to her.

"Then we set the scan mode, sweep, pulse or wave," he continued, selecting sweep. "And finally, we set the report mode, periodic or alert."

"I understand periodic, but what's alert mode?"

"It means it only reports when it senses something within its scan area. That's what we'll use."

"If we want it reset to something else, do we have to come back out here to reset it?"

"No, but only because we selected 'remote' as the control mode." Mac finished setting the scanner, closing the cover over the buttons. "Okay, we're all set," he announced as he flipped the switch. "Voila!"

The light on the scanner head display began to flash every two seconds.

"One down, eighteen more to go," Mac said, stepping back from the scanner head.

Sara stepped back from the scanner's stake, watching the light flash. "So this will tell us if there's something

moving?"

"Yup," Mac assured her as he picked up his bag of stakes. "As long as it's within range."

"How far is that?"

"It's set for a half-a-click."

"Click?"

"Kilometer. Once all the scanners are in place, we'll have a monitored area of a click and a half around our camp. Nothing will be able to sneak up without us knowing," Mac explained as he slung the bag over his shoulder.

"Pretty slick little device," Sara commented.

"Yup," Mac agreed as he stepped up next to her. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah," Sara agreed.

"Okay, set that thing for a circular course, and let's head out. I don't wanna be late for lunch!"

"Of course not," Sara laughed.

* * *

Tony and Laura marched along through the tall grass, their breathing a little heavier than expected. Laura kept peeking at the data pad every other minute or so, making sure they were staying on a circular course.

"So, you're not married?" Laura asked in between breaths, even though she knew he wasn't.

"Nope."

"Got a girlfriend back on the ship?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"No reason, why do you ask?"

"Just seems strange, a young, good looking guy like you. I figured you'd already be paired off."

"Nope," Tony answered bluntly as he trudged through the wet grass. "I guess they didn't want to pair us off before we left...to make it easier on us, I suppose."

"Us?"

"Mac and I. He hasn't been paired off yet either."

"I just figured it was because he's such a jerk."

"Oh, Mac's not that bad," Tony defended. "He just likes to see people react, that's all."

"I see," Laura stated as she stopped to look at the data pad again.

"Why so many questions?"

"Just curious," Laura said casually, continuing on. "We've got about another twenty meters to go."

Tony pulled out his canteen and took a drink. Laura was going somewhere with this line of questioning, he just wasn't sure where.

"So, how old are you?" Laura asked.

"Twenty-one. And you?"

"Not twenty-one," Laura laughed.

Tony was getting curious, and decided to take a stab in the dark. "Well, do you have a daughter you wanna set me up with?"

Laura stopped in her tracks and spun around to face Tony. "I'm not that old!"

"That's not what I meant," he assured her quickly.

Laura continued walking. After a few moments of silence, she decided she had danced around the issue long enough. "So, Tony," she started. "Have you given much thought to who you would like to be paired off with?"

"No, not really. I mean, there are a few girls back on the ship I have thought about, but no one seriously."

"What about Adia?" Laura boldly asked.

"Adia?" Tony responded, surprised.

"Don't tell me you haven't noticed how she looks at you."

Tony was shocked. He hadn't noticed. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, it's true. I've seen her."

"Really?"

"I'm sure she is quite fond of you," Laura continued. "I think you would make a cute couple."

"I don't know," Tony said dismissively, trying to play down his interest. "I've always pictured myself with someone a little more...independent. Someone a little more outgoing. I mean, Adia seems so reserved."

"She's not as reserved as you think. I know her mother quite well. Adia's just intimidated by the rest of us. She was thrown into the mix at the last minute, remember. And she doesn't have the training the rest of us have."

"I guess it would be a little intimidating," he admitted.

"You've never thought about her? As a partner, I mean?" Laura stopped and glanced at the data pad. Noticing he had not responded, she turned around to look at him. "So you have!" Laura exclaimed, noticing Tony's complexion turning red.

"Well, maybe once or twice."

"Good. Just don't overlook her, that's all I'm saying." Laura looked at the data pad again. "This should be good enough. Let's plant another stake."

Tony pulled the bag off his shoulder, removed a stake, and dropped the bag to the ground. "Adia, huh?" he said to himself as he positioned the stake for insertion. *Mission accomplished*, Laura thought to herself.

* * *

"The power bus for the radar set is fried," Frank reported as he approached Lynn. "It'll take months to repair, if it even can be repaired."

Lynn pushed the access panel closed and turned the latch to lock it in place. "Could you reroute it, maybe use a redundant bus from another system?"

"Maybe, but I'd have to find one that matched perfectly," Frank sighed. "Not likely." He sat down on the side of the hill to rest, drinking from his water bottle.

Lynn continued scanning the fuel lines she was inspecting. "You know, Frank. This morning made me realize something."

"What's that?"

"I could probably use your help in making decisions now and then." It wasn't an easy thing for Lynn to admit. But she knew it was true. She didn't really want this command, but she was afraid that if she handed it over to someone else, she would be sabotaging her career.

"I'd be happy to help whenever possible," Frank assured her.

"Thanks."

Frank took another drink of water. "Mind some advice, as long as you're asking?"

"Not at all," Lynn assured him, a little surprised. She hadn't meant immediately.

"In the future, it might be a good idea not to assign Mac and Sara together on the same detail."

"Why?"

"She's been complaining about Mac the entire trip. Jack was putting her off, hoping that once we got down to the surface, the extra elbow room would help cool things down."

"Really? I didn't know," Lynn admitted. "I'll try to remember that," she promised.

"Well," Frank said as he rose back to his feet. "I've gotta get back to work if I'm gonna finish these inspections by lunch time."

"Okay." Lynn watched as Frank walked back around the tail of the LRV. She had never thought about possible personal conflicts between crew members before. It only served to remind her of how many things she didn't know about command.

* * *

After realizing he would not be able to repair the transponder, Jack had set his mind to constructing some sort of base camp instead. He had constructed a canopy by draping one of the escape pod's parachutes over the top of the capsule, and securing it to the ground with stakes and rocks. The other chutes he used for ground cover, anchoring them with rocks.

Will had stripped all of the flight couches from the floor of the pod, leaving it bare. Using only the seat backs, he constructed two makeshift beds on the floor of the pod, covering them with the extra sleeping bags to cover seams between the cushions.

Jack rigged a couple of solar collectors on top of the capsule, attaching them to the pod's batteries, providing them with light and a little heat at night. The inside of the capsule still smelled like burnt circuitry, but it was better than sleeping out on the hard ground.

They had enjoyed a lunch of protein bars, bland dehydrated synthetic beef, and dehydrated fruit, along with copious amounts of water. Jack was surprised at how much water they were drinking. He couldn't remember the last time he had been so thirsty.

After assembling the campsite, Will ventured out a little to collect some rock samples, curious to get a look at the planet's geology. While he was gone, Jack decided to review the survival encyclopedia on the video-player. He was unusually tired, and decided that he would wait until tomorrow to continue work on the camp. Before he knew it, he had fallen asleep, lulled by the warmth of the afternoon sun.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Okay, everyone ready?” Lynn asked. They were standing at the bottom of the debarkation ramp, under the nose of the ship. Lynn checked her utility belt. She was carrying the standard water bottle and a pouch with two energy bars and a few pieces of dried fruit. Along with the usual comm-set pack and side arm, she was also carrying a large tool pack containing several specially designed hand tools.

Slung over her shoulder was her data pad, which she would use to locate the pods. Unfortunately, in the original crew’s rush to leave Luna station decades ago, no one had thought to include an identification signature in the cargo pod’s transponder signals. Instead, they would have to check each pod one at a time, starting with the closest pod, until they found the one with the all-terrain utility vehicle inside it.

Mac, who was standing to Lynn’s right, had insisted on carrying the standard field pack. Weighing about ten kilograms, the pack contained everything they could possibly need. From first-aid kits to emergency rations, portable radiation shelters to spare battery packs, the field pack had all the supplies essential for a long excursion. Lynn didn’t really think the packs were necessary, as she planned to keep each journey away from the LRV as short as possible. However, the packs were standard operating procedure, and as long as she didn’t have to carry them, she had no objections.

Frank and Tony were similarly outfitted. In addition, they each carried a standard rifle, also standard procedure when away from the LRV.

"We need the transportation pod first. We've got four signals, all west of us," Lynn reminded both of them.

"Tony and I can take the one to the southwest," Frank offered, looking at Lynn's data pad display. "And if that isn't the one we want, we'll go to the next one due south."

"Sounds good," Lynn agreed. "Mac and I will take the other two. First one to find the transportation pod, call in, and we'll join up on that pod so we can get the ATUV assembled as quick as possible."

"The book says two people can assemble an ATUV in two hours," Mac pointed out.

"Yeah, well, we've only got five hours of daylight left, and the closest pod is at least two clicks away. So I'd prefer not to take any chances and get everyone back here as soon as we can."

"Where's the sixth pod?" Tony asked.

"Don't know," Lynn answered. "It's not broadcasting a transponder signal for some reason."

"I hope that ain't the one with the ATUV inside," Frank commented.

"Okay, let's head out," Lynn ordered, ignoring his comment.

* * *

An hour later, Lynn and Mac spotted the first cargo pod.

"There it is," Mac announced as he broke into a jog, his field pack bouncing up and down against his back.

"Frank," Lynn called across the comm-set, "we've spotted the first pod."

"Copy that; let us know what you find inside."

Lynn wanted to run as well, but she was already tired. "Hey, Mac! Wait for me!" It was to no avail, as Mac was running toward the pod like a child chasing a ball. Reluctantly, Lynn also broke into a jog.

By the time she got to the pod, Mac already had his latch tool out and was twisting open the latch bolts around the

hatch seams. After a few minutes, he had all the bolts removed from the left hatch.

"That should do it!" he announced as he grabbed the latch handle and pulled out and down. The hatch creaked slightly, but didn't open. "I think it's stuck!" Mac complained.

"Well, it's been sealed for over six decades."

Mac planted his right foot against the right hatch and pulled on the left hatch handle with all his strength. The hatch creaked and moaned as Mac grunted and pulled. After a few moments, there was a sudden hiss of escaping air, and the hatch stopped resisting and swung open. A strange, stale odor came out of the pod as Mac pushed the hatch aside.

"What's that smell?" Mac complained as he struggled back up to his feet.

"Ancient Earth air, I imagine," Lynn presumed as she stepped up to look inside the pod. It was packed as tightly as possible, wasting not even a single cubic centimeter of space. Everything was bundled in plain, white cloth, and was bound with special high-tensile, lightweight plastic cord. Lynn looked for some sort of markings, something that might identify what was wrapped up inside the cloths. But the only markings she could find were packing numbers. "How are we supposed to know what's inside?"

"With this," Mac told her, holding up a flat, clear plastic pouch containing a single sheet of paper.

"What's that?"

"*Packing manifest*," Mac read.

Lynn moved next to Mac for a closer look. "Is that paper?" she asked.

Mac pulled the paper out of the pouch and handed it to her. "Looks like it."

"Wow, I've never seen paper before," she remarked in awe, holding it gingerly in her fingertips. She examined the paper, rubbing her fingers along its surface. It was smooth and cool. Jet-black printed letters decorated a stark white

background, listing out every item with descriptions, identification numbers, even reference manual numbers to tie into the instructional database carried in the LRV's computer library. "I can't believe they made this out of trees. It seems like such a waste." She scanned the page, matching the I.D. number of the first item with the number stenciled on the outside of the cargo item just inside the hatch. "It looks like the list is in the order we should unpack it." She continued searching, hoping to find the entries identifying the ATUV parts they were looking for. "No ATUV, I'm afraid." She finished scanning down the page, turning it over to scan the back side. At the bottom, she found a signature, presumably by the man responsible for loading the pod. Below the signature were the handwritten words, 'Good Luck'. Lynn smiled as she handed the list back to Mac, "Button her up, Mac. Let's go find the other pod."

* * *

"Nothing but survey equipment," Lynn's voice reported over their comm-sets. *"We're heading for the next pod now."*

"Copy, Lynn," Frank replied. "We've spotted our first pod, about fifty meters uphill from us. We should be there in a few minutes."

"Too bad," Tony commented. "I'm sure Mac is dying to get his hands on an ATUV."

"Oh, yeah?"

"That boy loves to put things together."

"Lucky for us," Frank commented drily as he continued trudging up the hill.

* * *

"You can get dressed now," Maria informed her.

Sara hopped down off the exam table and walked across the cold, metal floor. "Thank God, it's freezing in here!"

"Sorry about that," Maria apologized. "I can't seem to get any heat out of that thing," she complained, pointing at

the climate control system.

"I thought you checked the lab out this morning?"

"I did. It was working fine, then."

"Would you like me to take a look at it for you?" she offered as she pulled her jumpsuit up over her shoulders and zipped up the front.

"What do you know about climate control systems?" Maria challenged, surprised at Sara's offer.

"We used them in the ag-labs back on the Daedalus. Worthless hunks-of-junk used to break down twice a week. And you know how slow maintenance could be. We finally decided that fixing them ourselves was faster."

"Be my guest," Maria invited.

Sara pulled on her deck shoes and went over to the unit hanging in the corner of the compartment. "Got any tools?" she asked.

"Locker four," Maria told her as she stepped over to the doorway. "Next!"

Laura, next in line to get her examination, entered the lab.

"Sorry for the chilly temperature in here," Maria apologized immediately.

"What's she doing?" Laura asked quietly, nodding her head toward Sara in the corner of the lab.

"Claims she can fix the climate control system," Maria explained as she passed the scanner head over Laura's body.

"Oh, really?" Laura turned her head to the right to see what Sara was doing. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" she asked Maria.

"What can it hurt? It's already broken," Maria laughed.

"I heard that!" Sara called out from the corner.

Suddenly there was a loud pop, and a blue spark shot out of the climate control unit. Sara screamed as she jumped backwards. Laura leapt off the table, using it as a barrier between herself and the sparks.

"Sara!" Maria called out as the room went dark.

"Oh my God!" Laura exclaimed.

"Sara! Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine!" she insisted.

"What happened to the lights?" Laura asked.

Suddenly, the door flew open, nearly hitting Laura from behind. The wardroom's ambient light spilled into the lab.

"What happened to the power?" Adia asked from the open doorway.

"The power's out?" Maria interrupted.

"Yeah, that would be my fault," Sara admitted.

"Great, Sara!" Laura scolded. "Now what do we do?"

"Take it easy," Maria cautioned her. "I'm sure it's nothing serious. Probably just a loose wire or a tripped breaker, or something. Right Sara?"

"Yeah, right."

"So, where's the breaker panel?" Laura asked.

"I have no idea," Sara said meekly.

"Jesus, Sara! What were you thinking?"

"Hey, I was trying to help," she protested as she rose back to her feet.

"Some help!" Laura scoffed.

"That's enough!" Maria commanded. "Let's just deal with the problem, alright?" The compartment went quiet. "Okay, the panel can't be too hard to find. So let's start looking."

"Maybe we can look it up in the ship's manuals on the data terminal?" Sara suggested.

"Uh, excuse me *Miss Fix It*, but didn't you hear? The power is out all over the ship, thanks to you."

"Oh, would you shut up!" Sara was done putting up with Laura's insults.

"Both of you need to shut up!" Maria yelled, fed up with the bickering. "Laura, go get dressed. Sara and I will start looking for the breaker panel. Every compartment has a sub-panel. The one for this room is behind the door. Start there, while the others look for the main panel."

* * *

"Lynn! We found it!" Frank called over the comm-set.
"We found the transportation pod!"

Mac was already changing course and picking up his pace.

"Great, we're on our way!" Lynn responded.

"You sure you don't want to continue on to the next pod? Tony and I can probably assemble this thing ourselves and come pick you up in a couple of hours."

"No fuckin' way, Tony!" Mac hollered over the comm-set as he ran across the meadow. "Don't you assemble that thing without me!"

"I guess we're headed your way, Frank," Lynn laughed. "Besides, I don't think I could stop Mac now even if I wanted to."

"Damn right!" Mac agreed, stopping to turn around to see if Lynn was coming. "Come on, Skipper! Let's go build us an A-Tuff!" he yelled, waving his arms for her to follow.

"Slow down, Mac!" Lynn pleaded as she chased off after him. "It's still over a kilometer away!" she reminded him as she began to pant. "You planning on running all the way there?"

A few moments later, Lynn heard Maria's voice calling over the comms.

"Mac! Stop a minute!" Lynn ordered as she adjusted her headset. The transmission was garbled and full of static, but she was sure it was Maria's voice. She looked at Mac, who had also stopped and was holding his cupped hand over his earpiece, trying to understand the broken transmission. Lynn reached to turn up the gain on the comm-set control pack on her utility belt, hoping to clear up the reception.

"Ly.....is Mari.....copy m...?"

"Maria," she said over the comm-set, "is that you?"

"...irmati.....an you he.... You're.....ly read.....!"

"What's wrong? Are you on the comm-set?"

"Affir...ve!"

"We're too far away for comm-sets! Go to the flight deck and use the ship's comm-system!"

"What the hell's going on?" Mac asked as he approached Lynn. "I can barely read them."

"Ca.....ip's.....ystem.....power!"

"What did she say about the power?" Lynn asked. Mac only shook his head.

".....repea.....o pow...!"

"I think she said, 'no power'," Mac guessed.

"Well, that would explain why they're not using the ship's comm-system."

"Maria, this is Frank! Do you copy me?"

Lynn struggled to hear Maria's transmission, but it was even worse than before.

"I've got her, Lynn," Frank called over the comm-sets.

"Standby one, go ahead Maria."

Lynn and Mac waited impatiently as Frank listened to Maria's account of what had happened to their power.

"Lynn," Frank called. *"The LRV has lost all internal power."*

"You can copy her?" Lynn asked, stunned.

"We're on higher ground here, maybe twenty meters up."

"What happened? How did they lose power?"

"Something about Sara trying to fix something in the med-lab, I'm not sure. But they've got nothing inside. No juice at all, if I'm understanding her correctly."

Mac laughed out loud.

"Is the reactor plant alright?" Lynn asked worriedly.

"Yeah, it's fine. It's gotta be something simple, like maybe in the interior power distribution bus or something."

"The one on the starboard side, you think?"

"Yeah, that's the one I'm thinking. Access panel forty-two, right behind the turbine wash planes. I can have them up and running in ten minutes, if that's the problem."

"Negative," Lynn ordered. "Stay put! If it's that easy, better that I go back and fix it. If I can't, then we're gonna need the generator on that ATUV to provide power for us."

Better you stay there and get that thing running." Lynn turned to Mac. "Get over there and build that thing."

"The book says we travel in pairs, Skipper," Mac reminded her.

"You're the equipment mechanic, Mac. Besides, it's only four kilometers back to the LRV, and all of it downhill."

"You're sure you can find your way back?"

Lynn held up her data pad. "I can use the ship's reactor signature as a homing beacon," she explained. "I'll be fine. Now go. That's an order."

Mac didn't have to be told twice, and was off and running once more.

"*Are you sure?*" Frank asked.

"Yes, I'm sure. Mac's on his way to you. I can be back at the LRV in less than an hour if I hurry. I'll check it out and get back to you. If I can't fix it, you'll still have time to get back before dark."

"*Copy that!*" Frank responded. "*We'll finish unpacking the ATUV kit and wait for Mac.*"

"*Don't wait for me,*" Mac argued, "*start building!*" Mac knew the situation, and he didn't want them to delay completion of the ATUV for his sake.

* * *

Lynn had moved at a brisk pace nearly all the way back, stopping only once to answer Frank on the comm-set when he reported Mac's arrival at their location.

As she approached the LRV, she could see dark clouds drifting in over Sherwood Forest from the shoreline. She slowed her pace back down to a fast walk just before she reached the LRV, trying to catch her breath before she arrived. Every muscle in her body ached.

She immediately circled around the tail of the ship to its starboard side, heading straight for the power distribution panel Frank had mentioned. "Maria? This is Lynn. I'm outside the LRV now, starboard side. I'll check it out."

"Great!" Maria responded. *"Do you need us to do anything in here?"*

"Yeah," Lynn teased, "don't let Sara touch anything." She was kidding, even though there was probably a little bit of truth in there somewhere.

"Very funny," Sara retorted.

Lynn opened up the access panel on the side of the ship. Inside, she found at least eight of the fifteen main power bus circuits had been tripped. "Jesus, Sara! What the hell did you do?"

"I, uh, I think I crossed the polarity on the hot leads. Accidentally of course."

"Of course," Lynn snapped back. "What were you thinking?"

"I used to fix these things all the time back on the Daedalus," Sara said defensively.

"Well we aren't on the Daedalus, now are we?" Lynn quipped as she reset the tripped breakers. "Maria? Make sure everything is turned off in there before I try turning the power back on."

"Already done, Lynn."

"Okay, I'm going to turn the main power back on." Lynn pushed the reset button next to the circuit panel, and then flipped the cover back over the button. A few seconds later, there were several noticeable clicks as the main buses opened up and sent electrical energy back into the interior of the LRV. Lynn could feel the humming of the circuits functioning properly as she closed the access panel and locked it down. "Go ahead and start turning things back on," Lynn announced confidently. "You should have power now." Lynn stepped back from the ship and looked up to see inside the habitat bay windows. It was getting cold outside, and the wind was picking up. Lynn looked up at the clouds passing overhead, wondering if it was going to rain again.

"We've got power in here," Maria announced happily. Lynn could hear the cheers of Laura and Adia in the background as lights started flickering to life inside the ship.

* * *

Mac's arrival had not helped. They were completely confused. The assembly instructions made little sense, as they had been written by the Japanese firm that designed and manufactured ATUV's back on Earth decades earlier.

Mac had managed to separate the parts into groups: power plant, drive train and engine, control mechanisms, and finally, frame and body.

"Frank, Lynn."

"Go ahead, Lynn," Frank responded, relieved to have an excuse to be away from the ATUV, even if only for a moment.

"You were right about the main distribution panel. The power's back up now."

"Great!"

"How's it going out there?"

"Well," Frank answered, scratching his head. "We're having a little trouble. Seems the ATUV doesn't go together exactly like the plans say they do."

"Can you finish it up today?"

Frank looked at Mac and Tony, who were arguing about which pile a wiring harness belonged in. "It doesn't look that way."

"Maybe you'd better come in and start fresh in the morning. It's getting cloudy, and I'm afraid it might start raining again."

"Copy that. We'll secure the site and head back."

"Copy that."

"Okay, boys. You heard the lady. Let's pack it up and head home."

"Shit, Frank!" Mac complained. "We just got this crap organized! And now you want us to put it back?"

"Hey, it wasn't my idea."

"There's no way we're gonna get everything back inside that pod, Frank," Tony pointed out. "That thing was packed by a whole team of professionals who had a packing plan to work from!"

"Yeah," Frank thought aloud. "You might be right about that." He considered their options for a minute. "Okay, let's move just the electrical stuff back inside. There's not very much of that, and they're the only things we *don't* want to get wet...at least not until they are installed. We can leave the rest of it out and cover it up with the packing cloths. We're on high ground anyway, so it's not like they're gonna get flooded or anything."

Within thirty minutes they had everything covered up, the electrical hardware back inside with the pod hatch closed and latched. Picking up their packs, they began their hike back to the LRV, moving quickly to try to beat the sunset.

Ten minutes later, it began to rain. None of them had thought to bring foul-weather gear along, as the skies had been sunny with only broken clouds when they had first left the LRV just after lunch. The rain slowed their progress, especially since they were walking against the wind. The biting gusts chilled their wet bodies, and the rain felt like tiny needles stinging their arms and faces.

Before they were even a third of the way home, the weather had gotten so bad that they could barely see five meters in front of them. The wind was so strong that it was all they could do to keep from being blown over, let alone make any headway along their course. They weren't even sure they were still on course half the time, as the lightning was interfering with their ability to track the LRV's homing signal. To make matters worse, it was rapidly getting dark.

"This is insane!" Frank cried above the howling winds. "We're never gonna make it back to the LRV at this rate!" He pulled out his data pad to get a reciprocal heading back to the cargo pod. "We're going back to the pod! We can hold up inside it for the night, and hope this blows over by morning!"

"Are we gonna be able to find it?" Tony asked.

It was a good question. "We'll fan out! Tony, you go to the right! Mac to the left! Just to the edge of visual range!

Watch me for course corrections! And keep your eyes peeled for the pod's flashing red strobe on top! If you see it, call out!"

"Got it," Mac responded.

"Now let's go find that thing before we freeze to death!"

They turned around and started back, the wind coming at them from behind now instead of stinging their faces. Mac and Tony each veered away from Frank until they were flanking him on either side, about ten meters, afraid to venture further away for fear of losing sight of him.

Frank could feel his fingertips going numb from the cold as he clutched the data pad with both hands, holding it up in front of him. He knew that if they didn't find their way back to the cargo pod, they might not last the night. Inside the pod, they would at least be sheltered from the storm. But first, they had to find it.

* * *

Will immensely enjoyed collecting samples. He had at least twelve good chunks of surface rock, and a few samples of soil that he was just dying to get under the scanner head on Jack's data pad.

He was awfully tired, however, and as he approached the campsite, he wondered if he might be better off to just eat dinner and go to bed. As he trudged up the hill, the red and white parachute canopy dyed the sunlight and bathed the campsite in colors of pearl and red, giving it a predominantly pinkish hue.

As he closed the distance, Will looked around for Jack, finding him asleep in the grass just beyond the canopy's perimeter. Will walked up to him, waking Jack from his nap with the sound of his approaching footsteps.

"Are you okay?" Will asked.

"Uh, yeah, fine," Jack assured him as he woke. "Why do you ask?"

"You look kind of red."

"What?" Jack suddenly became aware of a strange stiffness in his face.

"Around the face."

Jack cautiously poked at his face with his fingers. It was abnormally hot, and painful to the touch. "Oh shit. I think I've got a sunburn."

"A what?" Will asked, unfamiliar with the term.

"Sunburn. A first degree thermal burn, caused by prolonged exposure to solar heat or radiation," Jack explained, quoting straight from the medical emergency training manual.

"Never heard of it," Will admitted.

"It was pretty common back on Earth," Jack explained. "Especially in the middle latitudes and on beaches and such. Anywhere the sun shone brightly."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes, actually. It does."

"What can you do for it?"

"Not much, really. Drink a lot of water. If we were back on the Daedalus, I could put a topical cream on it, I suppose."

"If we were back on the Daedalus, this wouldn't have happened," Will pointed out.

Jack rose to his feet. He felt a little weak, and a little dehydrated. He followed Will back to the camp to get ready for dinner. There was only about an hour of sunlight left, and Jack preferred they get everything secure for the night before it got so dark that they needed to use the battery-powered lights. Energy was a valuable commodity, even with the solar panels he had deployed on top of the capsule. Better to conserve every drop rather than to squander it.

Jack wasn't looking forward to dinner. Energy bars and dried fruit were not his idea of an evening meal. However, he was anticipating a good night's sleep. Every part of his body felt tired. He had no idea how much of it was gravity-induced fatigue, and how much of it was trauma-related due to their abrupt landing early this morning. Whatever it was,

he hurt. He only hoped a good night's sleep would be enough to make him feel better.

* * *

Sitting in her usual seat on the flight deck, Lynn watched the rain outside. The sun had set nearly an hour ago, and the downpour had steadily grown heavier. She had expected the men to return before dark, but hadn't heard from any of them in spite of her repeated hails over the comm-set.

"You know," Maria spoke up as she stepped through the hatch, "you're going to hurt Laura's feelings."

"Excuse me?" Lynn responded, not expecting a visitor.

"She made a superb pasta salad for dinner. I'm sure she'll be insulted if the 'Captain of the ship' turns her nose up at it."

"Oh. I guess I'm just not hungry yet."

Maria knew she was lying. She made her way forward, ducking under the various monitors and conduits running along the abnormally low ceiling of the flight deck. "I'm sure they're alright," Maria told her as she sat down in the left seat. "They're all capable, well-trained men."

"Yeah, I know," Lynn agreed, still staring out the forward window. The heavy rain was making it difficult to see any detail outside the LRV. Sherwood Forest was a distant blur of tall, entangled shadows. "You know," Lynn started without looking toward Maria, "before command fell on me, I was desperately hoping for an opportunity to prove myself, to show everyone what I could do. Then, when it happened, it was so sudden and the transition was so fluid, that I never had a chance to think about it. I just *took* command." She took a deep breath, "God, I was so scared." Lynn turned her head to look at Maria. "Then, after we got down safely, I started to think, 'I can do this, I can lead these people.'" Lynn looked down at the floor for a moment before continuing. "Then I saw how they made up Jack's bed." Lynn paused at the mention of his name. "That's when I realized how truly serious this responsibility is." Lynn looked at Maria

again, hoping to find some comfort. "How can I lead them, Maria? How can I send them out on assignments knowing that they might not make it back?"

"Command is not an easy job, Lynn."

"Jack sure made it look easy."

"Yes, well, I'm sure that Jack also had his doubts now and then. It's only natural."

"I don't know," Lynn disagreed. "I think he knew exactly what he was doing."

"Maybe. But he also had a lot of sim-training that the rest of us didn't have. I'm sure that helped a little."

"I wish we would've brought the simulation software along with us," Lynn joked. "I could use it right about now."

"Lynn, all you can do is your best. That's all anyone can ask of you."

"But I don't have all the answers, Maria. Not like Jack did."

"Lynn, Jack didn't have all the answers. But he did know who to ask to get them. You've got a ship full of trained experts on nearly every relevant area of study. Don't be afraid to use them. Ask their opinion, and they'll give it to you. And they'll respect you for listening to them."

Lynn turned her attention back to the forward window again. "You sound like Frank."

"You know," Maria continued, "if you don't mind my saying, you shouldn't worry so much about appearances."

"What do you mean?" Lynn asked.

"It just seems that you're always so concerned with *appearing* to be in control. Like you're playing the *role* of commander, instead of just *being* in command."

"I'm not sure I'm following you."

"You don't have to prove anything to anybody, Lynn. Nobody is judging you here. They'll follow you because you are in command, not because you look like you should be."

"But what if they think I'm making the wrong decisions?" Lynn worried.

"This bunch? Oh, they'll say something. They're not drones, and they're not blind either. But they *are* smart enough to know that only one person can lead; only one person can have the final decision. And they know that *officially*, that person is now you."

Lynn mulled Maria's words over in her head for a moment, as she watched the rain cascade down the forward windows. "I don't know," she disagreed. "Whenever I questioned one of Jack's decisions, all I got was a scolding."

"That's because your timing stinks. There's a time and place for everything."

"My timing?" Lynn asked, suspicious of where Maria had heard this information.

Maria knew what Lynn suspected, and decided to violate a confidence, just this once. "I'm not just a physician, you know. I'm also the ship's counselor."

Lynn smiled. She couldn't think of a better person for the job. Maria had a motherly quality that made people want to open up to her. Somehow, she was able to get people to discuss what was bothering them without actually asking. Lynn couldn't figure out if it was her warm, friendly face, her personality, or the way that she spoke with you instead of at you. It's also what made her a good physician. "Yeah, I guess you're right," Lynn admitted.

"You're a bright girl, Lynn. And from what Jack told me, you've got a lot of potential."

"*Jack* said that?" Lynn was shocked. As far as she knew, Jack hated her.

Maria nodded. It wasn't really what Jack had said, at least not in that context. But Lynn needed a little ego boost right about now. "Yes, he did." It was a little white lie, and Maria felt badly about telling it. But sometimes it was necessary. "Now, come to the galley and eat some dinner before you insult Laura's cooking."

"I don't know," Lynn resisted as she checked her watch and looked out the window again, hoping that at any

moment she would see Frank and the guys strolling up the boarding ramp. "Maybe I'd better wait here, just in case..."

"They're big boys, Lynn. They'll be fine." Maria rose from her seat to head back to the galley, expecting Lynn to follow her. But Lynn didn't budge. "As the ship's doctor, I *can* order you to eat," Maria threatened in pretense.

Lynn knew she was kidding, but decided not to argue. It might be just the distraction she needed.

* * *

Jack and Will sat by the open fire, enjoying its radiant warmth, hypnotized by the dancing flames. Building it had been rule number one in the survival manual, as fire did more than just provide warmth and illumination. It warded off curious, possibly carnivorous creatures that might prowl during the night in search of sustenance.

Building a fire had not been difficult. After digging a small pit, Jack had spread fire paste across the wood at the bottom of the pile and inserted an ignition strip deep into the paste. Within seconds, the chemical on the ignition strip reacted with the paste, bursting into bright yellow and blue flames that spread quickly across the paste-treated wood. A few minutes later, their fire was burning vigorously, to the point where Jack spent several minutes worrying that they might set their canopy ablaze by accident. His next fire would be started with a bit less wood and paste.

Luckily, he didn't have to endure another meal of protein-energy bars, dried fruit and water. While conducting a more thorough inventory of their supplies, Will had come across an unmarked bag of miscellaneous, vacuum-packed, dehydrated pre-packaged entrees, apparently for use by people back on Earth while hiking and camping in the wilderness. A little water and some heat from the fire turned the packs into a hot meal to enjoy. In fact, it was quite delicious, with an unusual combination of seasonings that Jack could not identify. It had caused him to wonder just how many seasonings there were back on Earth. The Daedalus's

galley had most of the basic seasonings such as pepper, bay leaves, oregano, and even a limited supply of salt. The original chef commandeered a growing table in one of the agricultural bays to cultivate his own herb garden, having brought seeds of his own from Earth for fear that such 'necessities' would be left off the cargo manifest.

They enjoyed their meal by the roaring fire, kept warm by its heat, noisy crackle, and flickering light protecting them from the wild. Jack felt unusually tired. He wasn't sure if it was the trauma of the crash landing, all the hard work he had done today, or the fact that he hadn't experienced normal gravity in several months. Regardless, he was sure that he would sleep well tonight.

"Well, that was certainly much better than I thought it would be," Will remarked as he set down his molded-aluminum dinner plate.

"Not bad at all." Jack set his plate down on the ground and leaned back against the side of the pod. "I'm stuffed."

Will rose and collected their dishes. "We'll have to figure out a way to wash these tomorrow. Maybe we can find a safe water source nearby. I thought I heard running water while I was out collecting my rock samples, but I didn't want to venture out any farther to investigate. At least not by myself."

"I think we could spare some time to do a bit of exploring tomorrow. We've got a good little campsite going here. And it's going to be at least a week before we'll be strong enough to start making our way back to the others."

"So, you really don't think we should stay put and wait for rescue?"

"Well, assuming they got down without any significant problems, and that they're able to retrieve and assemble the ATUV, and that we're close enough for them to reach us within a few days journey, *and* that I can figure out a way to send them a signal so that they know we're alive, *and* that..."

"Point taken," Will interrupted.

"I figure if they don't show up within a week, we should probably take it upon ourselves to rejoin them."

"Why one week?"

"Well, I doubt that we're very far from the landing site. After all, we did bail out only a minute or so after them. So I figure we can probably hike our way to them in no more than a few weeks. And since we have about one month of rations, that should leave us enough to get there in good health."

Will thought about it for a moment, afraid to disagree with Jack. He was the mission commander, after all, and he had been trained for such situations. And even though Will held several degrees himself, he was a scientist, and had no command or survival training.

But he had to say something; he didn't want to appear too meek. After all, one of the reasons he had agreed to go on this mission was to venture out, do something different, and face the unknown. "What if they come looking for us, and we're not here?"

"That's a good point," Jack answered respectfully, a little surprised that Will had spoken up. Jack had heard more from Will in the last twenty hours than he had during the entire journey. "I thought of that as well," he continued. "Don't get me wrong, we're not going to venture out blindly. I should be able to get a relative fix on our position before we leave. That way, I can estimate our course, and leave a note to that effect inside the capsule, just in case."

"I see." Will felt good about speaking his mind. And Jack had taken his comments surprisingly well. Maria had told him that Jack was the type of commander who welcomed comments and suggestions from his staff. But Will never thought that he would be the one giving the comments. "Even so, wouldn't we be safer here?"

"Yes, we probably would be," Jack admitted, "at least for a while. But what happens when our food runs out? If they can't come and pick us up, we could starve here."

"Surely we can find something to eat around here."

"Probably, but I don't want to bet our lives on it."

"What if we make it to the landing site, and they're not there?"

"There's no place else for them to be, really. Knowing Frank, I'm sure they waited until the last moment to separate. That would force them to the tertiary landing site. Besides, even if they never made it down safely, at least we'd find the cargo pods. And with the pods, our chances of survival would be a hell of a lot better."

Will let that sink in. *Never made it down safely.* It was an ominous phrase, one that he had never considered. The thought that he and Jack could actually be the only ones who did make it down safely was a sobering thought. Will was beginning to realize that Jack's plan, as frightening as it was to him, made sense. Besides, what choice did he have? Jack could always just order him to go if he really wanted.

* * *

Frank was the first to enter, nearly falling from exhaustion in a puddle of rainwater on the floor of the cargo pod. Tony was next, with Mac right behind him, struggling to get the hatch closed to shut out the storm raging outside. It was pitch-black inside the pod, and none of them had thought to bring a flashlight along since they hadn't planned on being out after dark. Outside, the light of the planet's two moons had provided more than enough illumination. But the pod had no windows, and no interior light.

"Christ, I can't see my hand in front of my face!" Tony exclaimed. "Isn't there any light in here?"

"Not inside," Frank told them. "There is a spot to plug one in on the outside, though."

"A lot of good that does us."

"There might be something in my pack," Mac announced as he pulled the backpack from his shoulders and dropped it onto the deck. He began opening and rummaging through each compartment one at a time, feeling his way through

them in the dark, trying to identify items with only his sense of touch. "You suppose this is what it feels like to be blind?"

"Do you have a light or not?" Tony snapped, growing impatient.

"Wait, I think I found something." Mac felt a small package with several small tubes inside. He touched them with his fingertips for a moment, struggling to figure out what they were based on what he remembered from the contents of the pack.

"What did you find?" Frank asked, hearing the rustling of the plastic package as Mac pulled it out of the pack and felt it with both hands.

"I'm not sure, it feels like four small tubes."

"Glowsticks?" Frank guessed. "Try cracking them in the middle and shaking them."

Mac pulled one of the tubes out of the bag. Feeling his way along its length, he grasped it with both hands and gently bent the plastic tube until he heard a crunching sound. From between his two index fingers, the tube emanated a pale green glow. "Bingo!" he announced triumphantly as he began to shake the tube vigorously. Within seconds, the tube was glowing brightly, bathing them in ghoulish green light. "Here you go," he offered, handing the glowstick to Frank. Mac repeated the procedure twice more, handing one stick to Tony, and keeping one for himself.

Frank held up the light, looking around the inside of the pod for anything that might be of use to them. Nearly half the pod's contents had been vacated by off-loading of the ATUV parts earlier that day. The rest of it was packed to the hilt with various types of equipment and supplies.

If Frank remembered correctly, this pod was packed mostly with utility attachments for the ATUV, like the trailer kit used to tow the pods back to the landing site, and the crane kit for lifting and moving heavy cargo and equipment. So it wasn't likely that there would be anything to help them

get through the night unless it was shoved into some nook or cranny to utilize empty space.

Mac was busy going through his backpack. The four glowsticks obviously weren't going to last all night, and he wanted to know what was in his pack before he lost the light. "Well, we've got some energy bars, a first-aid kit, radiation shelter, water purification tablets, dried fruit, some flimsy looking blankets, a large bottle of water..."

"Any lanterns?"

"Nope," Mac responded as he rummaged further. "No lanterns." Mac pulled out another package, "but we do have some more glowsticks!" He opened up the package and pulled them out. "Oh, and they're red!"

"Great," Tony said without enthusiasm.

"I might have an idea," Frank announced as he continued to inspect the interior of the pod. "If I can find a hot wire somewhere, I can rig up that exterior floodlight and run it off the pod's batteries."

Mac and Tony joined in the search, holding their pitiful little glowsticks, straining to find a wire in the green-lit pod. "What's that up there?" Tony asked, pointing toward the center of the ceiling.

Frank looked up. In the middle of the ceiling was an opening that led up to the top of the pod. Several wires led into the tube from just under the ceiling. Frank knew there was a pretty good chance that one of them was the power supply to the strobe light on top of the pod, since the batteries were located at the bottom under the deck.

"That just might be what we need, boys." Frank glanced around again. "Let's try to move that package over here so I can stand on it."

After dragging the large package into the middle of the deck, Frank climbed up on top of it. There were at least fifteen wires of various thicknesses in the bundle. If he had normal white light, he could tell which one was hot. But under the green light from the glowsticks, many of the colors looked similar.

First, Frank eliminated the thinner wires, surmising that they were signal lines. Only one wire would be the hot one, probably feeding a power bus on top of the pod, and it would likely be the thickest of them all. But there were two of them, both equally thick. "Well, one of these two wires has got to be the right one. But without a multi-tester, there's no way to tell."

"Can't we just try them both?" Mac asked.

"Yes, we can. I'm just trying to think of a way to keep from getting zapped by the hot one when I cut into it," Frank explained.

"Here," Mac told him, "try this." Mac handed Frank a long buck knife.

"Where the hell did you get this?" Frank asked as he examined the knife.

"It's been handed down through the men in my family. Great, great, great, great grand-pappy carried it with him in the army back on Earth. So don't fuck it up!"

"I'll do my best," Frank promised as he clutched the rubber grip firmly in his right hand. He pulled the first wire down, grasped it tightly with his left hand and placed the knife against the wire's outer insulation. "Here goes nothing."

Frank closed his eyes and turned his head, pulling the knife down sharply, slicing through the insulation and severing the strands of copper wire with ease. Nothing happened, no sparks, no pop, and no shock. "Well, I guess we know which one is the hot wire." Frank pushed the wire he now knew was the ground to the side and pulled down what he was pretty sure was the hot wire. "You guys both passed emergency medical training, didn't you?"

"Yep, aced it" Tony assured him.

"We were supposed to have medical training?" Mac joked.

"You're a riot, you are. Just make sure I'm truly *not* breathing before either one of you tries to give me mouth-to-mouth, okay?"

Tony looked at Mac.

"Don't you worry," Mac insisted. "You're gonna have to be good and blue before I kiss you."

Frank turned his head away again and sliced the wire with one quick motion. This time there was a loud pop and a blue spark bounced off the blade of the knife. But being well protected by the insulated knife handle, Frank felt nothing. "Mac, give me some of that gauze out of the med-kit."

Using the gauze as an insulator, Frank carefully held the hot wire and stripped away some of the insulation to expose the copper wire underneath. Then he carefully twisted it around the hot prong on the floodlight plug. He managed to repeat the process with the ground wire without getting shocked, again using the gauze as protection. Using some nylon cord that Mac found in his pack, Frank hung the light from the center of the ceiling and switched it on, flooding the interior with familiar white light. "Now we're in business," he announced as he climbed down off the package. "Now let's see if we can find anything of use in here," he instructed as he handed the family heirloom back to Mac.

"Hey, what's this black shit all over the blade?" Mac demanded.

* * *

After finishing her meal, Lynn cleared her dishes and handed them to Adia, who had cleaning duty for the night. Back on the Icarus, they had all fended for themselves, since zero gravity didn't lend itself to group meals. But it had been decided they would all take turns doing the housekeeping and galley chores. Maria had even made up a rotation schedule.

Just as she had done every evening after dinner during their journey here, Sara was on the exer-cycle. Maria was finishing up her lab work in the med-lab, and Laura was looking for something interesting to watch on video. In their infinite wisdom, someone had loaded an impressive variety

of old Earth movies into the library's digital database, and Laura was determined to watch every one of them during this mission.

"What are you going to watch tonight?" Lynn asked as she plopped herself down in one of the lounge chairs to let her dinner settle.

"I don't know yet. Any preferences?" Laura asked.

"Doesn't really matter to me. I'm probably going to go back up to the flight deck and wait for word from Frank and the boys."

"Don't worry, I'm sure they're fine," Laura lied. She was also worried about them. The sun had set over two hours ago, and the rain was coming down as hard as the night before.

"Yeah, that's what Maria said."

"What did I say?" Maria asked as she entered the room.

"Lynn wants to go back up and wait for the guys."

"And miss out on girl's night?" Maria said.

Suddenly, the comm-set speaker in the wardroom started crackling, catching all of their attention. Before the others could react, Lynn was out of her seat and on her way forward, with Maria and Laura hot on her heels.

"*L..... thi..... Fra..... do you... py?*" the speaker spouted as Lynn bounded up the ladder and jumped into the engineering seat at the back of the flight deck.

"Frank! Is that you?" Lynn asked even before she had her headset on.

"*Ly....., can you..... me? It's Frank! We're..... pod!"*

"Is it them?" Laura asked.

"Quiet!" Lynn barked.

"Who else would it be?" Maria whispered.

"Frank! I copy you! But you're breaking up! Did you say you were still at the pod?"

"*We had to..... back, couldn't..... it to... ship!"* he explained. The transmission was still scratchy, but clear enough to understand. "*We're go...a stay.....night in the*

cargo ...od! We'll fin... up in the m...ing and come ...ack in the ...UV!"

"Copy that! We'll come out first thing in the morning and give you a hand!"

"Cop.....at!"

"Ask them if they're alright," Maria insisted.

"Are you alright? Do you need us to bring anything?" Lynn asked.

"M...be some ...ry cl...s?"

"An... so... br...kfast!" Mac added.

"They're fine!" Laura decided.

"Copy that! We'll head out at first light!"

"Cop.....at!"

"Keep warm!" Lynn warned. "LRV, out!" Lynn leaned back in her seat as the static disappeared, relieved that they were safe for the night, and not lost somewhere out in the storm.

"Well, that's good news!" Maria exclaimed. "Now, come and join us, Lynn."

Maria made it sound more like a command than an invitation, so Lynn decided to oblige her, figuring that she wouldn't take no for an answer.

* * *

After adding wood to the fire, Jack climbed inside the capsule to go to sleep, while Will remained outside by the fire. He watched the occasional embers floating upwards, their orange glow dying out after they left the heat of the fire. Once he was satisfied that Jack was bedded down for the night, Will pulled out a plain, black, hard-backed journal from his bag along with one of three ball-point pens he had brought with him. He had another box of pens in his quarters on the Daedalus—the last of his great grandfather's supply. There were no pens in their little space-faring group, as there was no paper. So Will guarded his supply carefully.

Opening his journal to the small string marking where he left off, Will put his pen to the blank page and began to write.

Tau Ceti Five; Day 1;

By some cruel twist of fate, I have found myself stranded on this alien world, with only Jack, a man as completely dissimilar from myself as any man could be, as my only companion. Now I find myself having to survive, and despite my better judgment, follow this man on a cross-country trek in search of the other members of our crew, and hopefully, safety. I can only hope the others are alive and well, waiting for us where we expect them to be. If not, I cannot imagine what the following months will bring.

Our commander remains an enigma. Obviously a brave, well-trained, and well-intentioned man, but his decisions sometimes leave me baffled. He seems to care more about the completion of the mission, no matter how impossible it may seem, than with his own safety. He is either

selfless and dedicated, or obsessive; I have yet to decide which.

On the brighter side, in my first day on this planet I have seen wonders I could not have imagined in my wildest dreams. I have seen examples of nature in old Earth movies, documentaries and photographs. But there is no equal to experiencing it firsthand. Everything here is bathed in life. From the underside of rocks that have gone undisturbed for millennia, to the tips of towering trees that reach for the sky. If Earth had once been anything like this place, then our forefathers were fools to allow its gradual destruction. I can only hope, now that we have been delivered to this majestic place, that we are able to overcome this genetic defect and live up to the edicts of our mission.

Will's writing was interrupted by a noise nearby, a rustling sound in the bushes just beyond the trees. He picked up his flashlight and pointed it in the direction of the mysterious noise, illuminating the trees with white light. He searched the area for several moments, but saw nothing but foliage. He went back to his writing, but continued to glance up every now and then, worried that something was hiding in the darkness.

Of course, now that night has fallen, this world takes on a different persona: dark and mysterious, quiet and foreboding. Our firelight seems to hold any potentially dangerous creatures at bay, the danger of the burning wood undoubtedly causing them to fear for their very lives.

If I indeed came here to become a braver man, then I came to the right place. For only a brave man could survive in such a wilderness. I hope, as always, that you and the children are safe and sound, and are not worrying over my fate. If I could send a message, I would send you all my love and devotion, and ask you to hold good thoughts for our eventual reunion.

Will replaced the string to mark his place, then put away his pen and journal. After tossing another log onto the fire, he picked up his pack and went into the capsule to sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

After completing their breakfast of energy bars and dried fruit, and dousing the last embers of their fire, Jack and Will set out to explore the immediate area. Carrying day-packs with food, water, test kits and first-aid supplies, they headed down the hill using Jack's data pad to track their course and find their way back to camp before sundown. Will was reluctant to carry a rifle, but agreed to a side arm after Jack gave him a little training. Jack carried a rifle and a side arm, not wanting to take any chances.

As they reached the bottom of the hill and entered the forest, their environment changed drastically. Gone were the open skies and rolling hills, instead replaced by canopies of blue-green leaves and reddish-tan tree trunks. There were more birds here, flittering from treetop to treetop, squawking madly at the intruders. With every step there was something new to see, and the men's heads were constantly turning from side-to-side as each new discovery caught their attention. The forest was teeming with life, with a variety that was overwhelming at first. And on more than one occasion, Jack and Will heard the sounds of much larger creatures in the distance.

Jack's data pad was operating in dual modes, both *scan* and *track*. The scanner showed movement everywhere, but everything seemed to maintain a safe distance from them. After a while, Jack's fears of being attacked subsided and their pace became more constant.

Will, on the other hand, tended to lag behind, fascinated by each new plant and animal he saw. It quickly became apparent to Jack that Will was knowledgeable in far more areas than the planetary sciences for which he was formally

educated. But as much as Will wanted to stop and sample every plant and rock, Jack had to caution him against it. They had limited testing resources available to them, and he intended to save them to test potential food and water sources they would need to survive until they could reach the LRV.

More than anything, Jack wanted to find a source of potable water. Although they had enough water on board the escape pod to last a few months, he had no desire to lug large amounts of water with them when they set out to find the others.

Following Will's recommendation, they headed down the slope of the valley to its lowest point, assuming that groundwater would collect there. Less than an hour after entering the forest, Jack heard the sound of running water in the distance. Soon after, the forest broke open into a long, narrow meadow of tall, blue-green grass. Through the middle ran a river, winding through the narrow meadow all the way to its far end, about three hundred meters south of them.

They stood at the river's edge, amazed at the sight of so much water. It was a wide river, flat and shallow in most places, with a few large rocks protruding from its surface. Where the larger rocks broke the surface, the water turned white from the force of impact. Along the river's edge, calm, green-tinted water pooled in silent, slow-moving circles, creating separate aquatic environments. Across the tops of these pools, small insects skittered about in search of something, perhaps food. Occasionally, a blue-gray fish-like creature would jump up out of the water to catch one of the insects before splashing back down into the water.

As Will collected samples of the water to test, Jack noticed a brown-furred creature farther down the river on the opposite shore. Just under one meter in height, the creature was standing in the shallow waters, snatching up fish with surprising speed and expertise. *The food chain*, Jack thought, as he watched the animal dine. *The brown-*

furred creature eats the fish, the fish eat the bugs. “Hey, Will. What do you suppose the bugs eat?”

“I don’t know,” Will admitted as he unpacked the test kit. “Algae, maybe? Other bugs?”

“How long will those tests take?”

“A few minutes each. I’ll run several different tests on each sample, then repeat the same tests of several samples to ensure reliability of the results.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“It is,” Will assured him. One sample at a time, Will dropped small test strips into the sample trays. “We’ll probably need to take samples from the faster moving waters. There might be a difference in quality between these slow moving pools and that water.”

“How are we supposed to do that?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know,” Will admitted as he continued with his tests. “Maybe there’s someplace where the fast moving water comes up next to the bank.”

“Doesn’t appear so,” Jack warned as he scanned the banks above and below their position. “I think we’re going to have to wade out there.”

“I don’t know how to swim,” Will confessed.

“Don’t worry,” Jack assured as he dropped his pack and removed his gun belt. “I’ll go.”

Will had no problem with that. There was no telling what lurked under those green waters. He watched as Jack waded out into the shallow water. Then it occurred to him, “Do *you* know how to swim?”

“Nope.” Jack took a few cautious steps out into the river. The riverbed was soft, allowing his feet to sink several centimeters with each step. “Damn, this water’s cold!”

The current here was mild, tugging gently at his pant legs. Keeping an eye on the depth of the water in front of him, Jack made his way across the gentle pool toward the middle of the river. His first goal was a medium-sized rock about five meters out. The water on the other side appeared swifter, and he suspected that the rock would make a good

place to brace against the current. The water stayed about knee-deep across the pool, and within two minutes, Jack was leaning against the rock.

The river bottom further out appeared rockier, requiring much more careful footing than before. After a few steps, Jack was thigh-deep in the river, leaning into the current that now threatened to knock him over. With each subsequent step, the river grew deeper and deeper. Jack tried to make his way to the next rock, which was about twice the size of the first one. The higher the water was, the colder it seemed, and soon Jack was faced with a completely unfamiliar sensation: the shivering of his body and chattering of his teeth.

Finally, he made it to the next rock. The water was waist-deep here, and the river bottom was covered with large, loose rocks, requiring careful footing. The current nearly pinned him against the large rock he was leaning against to keep from being swept away.

"That should be far enough, Jack!" Will hollered from the shore.

"Damn right it is!" Jack placed the sample container on the rock and removed the lid. He scooped up some water from the far side of the rock, and quickly capped it. Then he felt something on his leg, something moving past him. He froze.

"What's wrong?" Will yelled when he noticed that Jack hadn't moved a muscle for several moments.

"There's something moving," Jack whispered, barely audible above the sound of the rushing water.

"What?"

"Something just moved past my leg!" Jack stared down at the water beneath him for several moments. Then he felt it again, between his legs this time. He saw a long, dark, snake-like creature slither out from between his legs. Suddenly, he wished he had his side arm with him. He watched as the creature wiggled past him and disappeared under the rock. He jumped back, nearly falling over as he

began splashing his way madly back to shore, holding the water sample up above his head.

Will watched in fascination as Jack bounded through the shallow water of the pool, passing the smaller rock without so much as a pause. "What was it?" he asked.

"I have no idea!" Jack shouted as he made his way across the pool. "And I sure as hell wasn't hanging around for a better look!" A few more steps and Jack was back to safety, collapsing onto the riverbank next to Will.

"Did you see it?" Will asked, his scientific curiosity overpowering his concern.

"Yeah... I saw it," Jack panted. "It was long... a meter at least. Long and skinny... with little fins... sticking out of its sides."

"Like a snake, maybe?"

"I don't know... maybe. Whatever it was... it sure wasn't afraid of me. It circled around twice... to look me over." Jack handed the water sample to Will. "This better be enough."

"It'll do just fine, Jack. Thanks." Will was fighting back a chuckle. He had never seen Jack afraid of anything, and found it a bit amusing. Of course, he would have been just as scared, if not more so. Still, it was entertaining, and it made Jack seem just a little bit more *human* to Will.

Ten minutes later, they had results. "As far as I can tell, this water *should* be safe to drink," Will announced.

"You don't sound very confident about that," Jack commented.

"Well, these tests are not very conclusive, Jack. They were designed for testing water back on Earth. There could be something in the water here that these test kits were not designed to detect. We *are* on an alien world, here."

"Well, would you drink it?"

"If I had no alternative." Will decided. "I would boil it first, and then run it through a filter, just to be safe."

"How about if we take a couple liters back to camp, boil and filter it, and then re-test it?"

"That's not a bad idea. We could compare the results to see if there are any changes," Will decided.

"Very well," Jack agreed as he pulled two empty bottles from his pack. "But I'll fill them from the shore, if that's alright with you."

* * *

"Man, I'm starving!" Mac exclaimed as he dropped the last container of electronics on the ground next to the rest of the ATUV parts. "Where the hell are they with our breakfast?"

"Let's just get this thing built so we can go home," Frank complained. "My back is killing me."

"These instructions still don't make any sense to me," Tony admitted. "How about we just ignore them and figure it out for ourselves?"

"Sounds good to me," Mac agreed.

"I don't know, guys."

"Come on, Frank. We sure didn't get very far using the instructions yesterday."

"That's right, they just slowed us down," Tony agreed.

"We spent more time trying to figure the instructions out than we did assembling anything."

"Alright, alright," Frank resigned. "You're the mechanic, Mac. Whatever you say. Let's just get to it."

"Okay," Mac announced, happy to be in his element once again. "We'll start with the frame, then the drive train and power plant. Then we'll fit the control electronics. That should give us an operational vehicle. Then all we have to do is fit-out the cockpit and body and we're done."

"It should be so easy!" Frank laughed as he picked up the first section of frame.

* * *

Lynn paused at the bottom of the ramp, scanning the area in every direction. Satisfied that the surroundings were clear, she circled around to the starboard side of the LRV to

start her morning exterior inspection before they headed out to meet the guys.

As she approached the tail of the ship, Lynn noticed something on the ground. Footprints... Longer and more narrow than human footprints, with pointed, claw-like toes. There were two prints, side by side, a little more than shoulder width apart, facing the ship. They were several centimeters in the ground, deeper than the rest of the prints that led away, most of which had faded in the rain.

Lynn stood there for several moments, staring at the imprints. "Maria?" she called over her comm-set.

"Yes?"

"Tell Sara and Laura to wear their side arms."

* * *

A little over an hour into their work, Frank spotted the women coming up the hill. "Looks like help has arrived," he announced, dropping his wrench to go meet them.

"Finally!" Mac exclaimed. He dropped the drive train he was installing and ran off to meet them, with Frank and Tony walking behind him.

They met halfway up the hill, embracing one another. Lynn gave Frank a big hug, which caught him by surprise. Laura threw her arms eagerly around Tony, giving him the warmest greeting he could remember receiving. Mac took the opportunity to grab Sara, lifting her up off the ground and spinning her around in the air, a look of shock on her face.

"Put me down, you big oaf!" Sara squealed, trying to hide her enjoyment from such an enthusiastic greeting, even if it was from Mac.

"God, you don't know how good it is to see all of you again," Laura said happily.

"We were so worried about you!" Lynn added.

"About us?" Tony responded, shocked.

"Isn't that sweet?" Frank teased.

“Enough with all this nonsense,” Mac protested as he let Sara back down. “Where’s the food?”

“So much for the warm welcome,” Sara retorted.

“Sorry, babe. But I’m wasting away here!” Mac whined. Occasionally, it seemed, there were things more important to Mac than women.

“Don’t worry, Mac. We brought plenty,” Laura assured him as she removed her pack and knelt to open it up. Removing a small, covered plastic tray, she handed it to Mac who immediately popped the lid off and began stuffing the food into his mouth.

“Jeez, Mac!” Sara teased. “You want a fork or something?” Mac just waved her off, his mouth too full to speak.

The others sat down as Laura passed out the food trays and utensils. Soon, they were enjoying a cold breakfast on the side of the grassy hill. The men shared their experiences from the previous night, and Lynn shared her discovery of the footprints near the ship. Despite their concern that whatever had made the footprints had not been detected by the perimeter sensors, Tony felt vindicated, positive that the same creature must have been the cause of the noise he had heard their first night.

After breakfast, they returned to their assembly of the ATUV. The women joined in to help, the new sense of camaraderie apparent after a night of separation. With full stomachs, a few extra pairs of hands, and a recharged sense of purpose, assembly went quickly. Soon they were attaching the towing rig to the cargo pod to haul it back to camp. By mid-afternoon, the cargo pod was hooked up to the ATUV, and with everyone aboard, they drove off slowly, but triumphantly, toward home.

* * *

Day 2;

Jack is away now, just beyond the light of our fire. He hopes to calculate our position using the star maps on his data pad. Today we discovered many things, most important of which is that the water here is safe to drink. That, of course seemed of the utmost importance to Jack, since it will aid in his desire for us to return to the LRV and resume the mission. At times, it seems as though our situation is nothing more than a slight inconvenience to Jack. The fact that this place is literally overflowing with life is of little concern to him.

Speaking of life, I am constantly amazed at the quantity and variety residing here. Our hike today revealed more new species than I could count. For lack of more original monikers, we chose to title the creatures we see after the Earth equivalents that they most resemble. We have seen dozens of different birds and rodents, and several small and medium sized animals. They are all colorful and fascinating to watch as they go about their everyday tasks, usually giving us

no more than a curious glance as we pass. I'm sure that Laura and Adia are enjoying themselves as they catalogue each and every one of these amazing new creatures.

I myself have managed to collect a few rock samples, despite Jack's desire to save our resources for the testing of consumables. His comprehensive training aside, he seems oblivious to the scientific impact of every molecule we encounter here. He is a man of single-minded purpose, unwavering in his determination. I'm sure he has no doubt that we will soon rejoin the others.

I, on the other hand, am far less optimistic. Without knowing exactly where we are, I cannot see how we could possibly find our way back to the rest of our team. Of course, as you surely remember, I regularly became lost in the corridors of the very ship where we were raised.

* * *

That evening, the crew celebrated the day's accomplishments laughing and joking over a very basic dinner of prepackaged, dehydrated entrees. Lynn could feel the warmth at the table. They had established the

beginnings of a home on this new world, and now, they even had transportation. With it, they would retrieve the remaining cargo pods and would have everything they needed to survive, and maybe even conduct a respectable survey of their world. For the first time since they had landed, Lynn was feeling positive about their future, as well as their mission.

After dinner, Mac and Tony spent the rest of the evening on the resistance gym, while Sara teased them from the exer-cycle. Laura and Maria watched another movie, while Frank rested in his berth, fatigued from two long days of activity.

Lynn went into the EVA deck to check the outer hatch and ensure the exterior floodlights were on. She noticed Adia, standing at the bottom of the ramp. "Adia. What are you doing out here?" she asked as she descended the ramp.

Adia stood staring out into the night. "Nothing, just looking, I guess."

"You know, it might be easier to take that first step in the daylight. It's kind of creepy out here at night."

"Yes, you're right. I just thought it might not seem so vast at night."

"Maybe." Lynn stepped down off the ramp onto the ground, holding out her hand to Adia. "Come on, one step. You can do it."

Adia took her hand, grasping it tightly. Lynn could feel Adia's hand trembling in hers as she stepped down off the ramp, placing first her left foot, then her right, firmly on the ground.

"It feels different," Adia told her.

"Different than what?"

"Different than the ground in the Daedalus's garden deck," she explained. "Not as smooth... Not as even."

"Yes, it certainly isn't even, that's for sure."

"It feels kind of nice, actually."

"Yes, it does, now that you mention it."

"I don't know what it is, but it feels, well, like this is how it is *supposed* to be." Adia looked at her, "does that make any sense?"

"Actually, it makes a lot of sense," Lynn agreed. "It's a big, beautiful world out there. Scary at times, I'll admit. But beautiful nonetheless."

Adia smiled at her. She was happy to have taken her first step. But her smile quickly faded at the sound of a faraway animal, howling in the night. "What was that?"

"I have no idea," Lynn admitted, shaking her head.

"Maybe that's enough for now," Adia decided quickly as she stepped back up onto the ramp.

"Maybe you're right," Lynn agreed, not wanting to push her too far. "Let's head back inside."

They headed back up the ramp, Lynn pausing halfway up to secure the hatch for the night. "Maybe tomorrow you can try to venture out a little farther?"

"Maybe, yes."

"We'll probably unload the first two pods tomorrow. That would keep you very close to the ship. You can help, if you'd like."

"I'll try," Adia agreed.

"That's all I can ask," Lynn responded as they headed back inside.

* * *

The next day was a flurry of activity. Frank and Sara set out in the ATUV immediately after the morning briefing to retrieve the remaining cargo pods. After assembling the towing rig around a capsule, they would tow it back to camp and park it near the LRV. It was a tedious process taking several hours per pod, thus it took most of the day just to retrieve three.

Lynn and Laura took on the task of checking the sensor stakes. The motion sensors had not alerted them to the approach of their late-night visitor, and Lynn wanted to know why. More importantly, she wanted to ensure it would

not happen again. But after hiking the perimeter and inspecting every stake, she couldn't find any malfunctions. Finally, after much deliberation at the lunch table, they decided that the sensor stakes would have to be reset to operate in multiple detection modes, switching between motion, infrared, bio, and radar modes at ten second intervals in the hopes that one of the modes would detect the creature.

Mac spent the day with the relatively simple task of making ready the two all-terrain cycles that had been packed in the cargo pod with the ATUV, while Tony and Maria began unloading the cargo pod that sat next to the LRV's nose since touchdown. Occasionally, Adia would come out to assist with the unloading, but never for more than a few minutes at a time, before she felt compelled to return to the ship to calm her frazzled nerves.

* * *

Day 3;

Jack spent most of today resting. He stayed up half the night taking star readings with his data pad. With the difference in the Cetian day and night cycles, as well as being weak from four months in microgravity, I'm surprised that he was able to do anything.

While he slept, I took the opportunity to explore the immediate area on my own. Without Jack pushing me on, I was able to linger over interesting geological formations. I even spent an hour watching two little

organisms scurry about, gathering materials to build their nest in a crook between the roots of a large tree. I gathered samples, took readings, and analyzed findings, as I tried to determine what era of development this world is in.

I returned to camp only an hour before sundown to find Jack making preparations for the evening meal. He already had the fire up and roaring, and was carefully stirring a pot of rehydrated stew over the fire's heat.

After dinner, Jack again disappeared with his data pad to take more star sightings, leaving me alone with my journal. With you.

Although I enjoyed my time wandering about with Jack, I don't think I could do the same in the darkness of night. The moons of this world are not visible from wherever we are on Tau Ceti Five, and once you wander beyond the range of the fire's dancing light, it becomes very, very dark, indeed. It is not like the dark on the Daedalus, where you can still hear the sounds of ventilation systems,

comms, and the distant voices of others. Here, the night is filled with a cacophony of alien sounds, as the creatures of the night, great and small, communicate with one another. I have no idea which creatures make what noises, or why they make them. This makes it all the more frightening.

I did wander out a few meters beyond the fire's light to look at the stars, to see what Jack was looking at. While the view is breathtaking, it is not the same as when viewing those same stars from space. The atmosphere here plays tricks with the light, causing the stars to twinkle. It is quite magical.

Although I know the science behind how Jack will calculate our position, it seems a daunting task, even with the help of the data pad. Jack promises it will only take him a few nights, but I honestly do not mind if he takes weeks. We have food, water, and shelter. So for now, we are safe. And with Jack sleeping through most of the day, I am free to explore this wonderful new world. I only wish you were here to explore it with me. Soon. Soon.

* * *

Sara watched the data pad tracking display as the all-terrain utility vehicle bounced over the uneven landscape. Traveling through the forest was much rougher than over the rolling meadows of the open valley. Frank's constant weaving as he snaked a course through the majestic trees left Sara feeling a bit queasy.

"Can you slow down a little?" Sara complained as she tried to keep her eyes fixed on the data pad in her hands.

"Hell no!" Frank exclaimed. "This is great!" he cheered as he swung the steering wheel from side-to-side. Driving the ATUV was great fun, *especially* through the forest.

"Have you ever driven these things before?" Sara wondered.

"You're kidding, right?" Frank laughed. "Only in the simulator!"

"Then maybe you should slow down a bit, just until you get the hang of it!"

"Don't worry! We'll be out of the forest in a minute!"

Sara held on tight with her free hand, trying to see through the thick woods to the rapidly approaching far side. A minute later, the vehicle cleared the edge of the forest, coming to a stop at the edge of a long stretch of beach. The solid land they had been driving upon suddenly gave way to sand, interspersed by large thickets of shrub-like grass. The sand was bright tan in color, coarse and sparkling in the afternoon sunlight. It stretched out below them for at least one hundred meters, gradually sloping down and away from their position at the seaward side of Sherwood Forest until it disappeared under the water's edge.

But the beach was nothing compared to the vast bay that lay beyond its edge. Green and blue, it stretched beyond the horizon to the west. The water was full of motion, rising and falling, rolling toward the shore. White foam capped the tops of the waves as the ocean breeze blew across them. Strange plants could be seen floating, interspersed across the surface of the water. Birds of

varying sizes, shapes, and colorations danced between the waves, bobbing and weaving as they sought their prey amongst the splashing water. The ocean was truly alive.

"Wow," was all that Sara could utter as she stood up in her seat to get a better view. Frank stepped out of the vehicle, walking up to the edge of the sandy slope. He peered out across the water, scanning from left to right. The land wrapped around to both sides, forming a sloppy half circle into which the water flowed.

"It's a bay!" Frank realized proudly.

"A what?" Sara asked, unfamiliar with the term.

"A bay!" Frank repeated. "That's what they called them on Earth. When the coastline formed sort of a bowl, or a cradle around a body of water. I remember reading about it when I was younger. Fascinating stuff. Bays have their own little marine ecosystems, nearly separate from the ocean itself." Frank continued to scan the area. "But I don't see the cargo pod anywhere. Are you sure the signal was coming from this direction?"

Sara looked at the data pad again to check her readings. "It should be right in front of us, only fifty meters," she insisted.

Frank circled around to her side of the ATUV to see for himself. "You're reading the scale wrong! It's not fifty meters, it's three hundred meters!"

"Well that can't be right!" she defended. "That would put it out..."

"In the water," Frank finished, lifting his view-scope and scanning the surface of the waves. He searched back and forth in the direction of the signal several times without seeing anything familiar. Then he saw a tiny flash of light. He fixed his gaze in the direction of the reflection. Again it flashed sunlight at him as its reflective surface bobbed and turned in the churning sea. Frank adjusted the magnification, zooming in on the object. It was less than half a meter in diameter, and had a small metallic box in the center of the object with a tiny antenna protruding from its

center. "It's a marker buoy," Frank reported. "It comes out when the pod is submerged. It's attached to the pod by a tether, and is equipped with a transponder."

"Why didn't we pick it up before now?"

"I don't know, maybe it's damaged," Frank theorized. "Maybe it didn't release at first, or maybe something was holding it down. All I know is that a marker buoy is out there, and somewhere below it is our last cargo pod."

"Any ideas on how we're going to retrieve it?" Sara asked.

"Not a one," Frank admitted.

* * *

"So how are we supposed to get to it?" Lynn asked back in the LRV's wardroom.

"I don't know how to swim," Mac stated as he chewed the last bite of his dinner.

"None of us do," Maria added.

"Actually," Tony interrupted. "I know how to swim... A little."

Everyone's attention turned to Tony, surprised by his confession. There were no swimming pools on the Daedalus.

Tony could feel their disbelief. "My grandfather took care of the fish breeding tanks down on 'D' level. Once a month, he would have to clean the tanks by going inside and scrubbing them down while they were still full of water. But it's been a few years."

"The water in those breeding tanks wasn't moving," Sara reminded Tony. "Trust me. *That* water was moving."

"Doesn't matter," Frank added. "Swimming is not the issue. The pod is at least ten meters down, so the work is *underwater*."

"How are we supposed to work underwater?" Sara asked.

"Actually, I have an idea," Frank announced. "It's a take on the deep-sea diving apparatus they used back on Earth. We could modify two of the pressure suits, make them

submersible. If they can hold air in, they should be able to keep water out."

"How long will the modifications take?" Lynn wondered.

"Not long. All I have to do is reverse some of the seals, and maybe reinforce a few fittings with some sealant. If I get started tonight, we should be ready for a dive by midday tomorrow."

Lynn pondered the plan for a moment, not wanting to commit to it too quickly. "You said earlier that the tide came in, increasing the depth of the water where the pod is sitting. Couldn't we just wait for the tide to go back out? Then at least we'd be working in more shallow water."

"Yes, we could wait for the tide to go out...assuming it ever does. This isn't Earth, and we have no idea what the tide cycles are here. We *think* they have tides here, but both of this planet's moons take considerably longer to complete a revolution around this world. So it could be days, or even weeks before the tide goes back out again. And what effect *two* moons have on the tides is still unconfirmed."

"But we have computer models, right?" Lynn said.

"Yes, we do. But those models show a longer tide cycle... much longer. And we have no idea when the tides started. We just got here."

"Surely we can make an estimate based on the models..."

"There's more. We have no idea how well the pod is holding up down there. If it's leaking, the contents could become damaged. If it fills completely, we may never get it off the bottom."

"What's in there?"

"All of my agricultural equipment and supplies," Sara said. "And all of the seed stock we need to plant in order to feed the colonists when they arrive, not to mention feed ourselves while we wait for them to arrive."

"Assuming they make it here," Lynn mumbled.

"Lynn," Maria scolded.

Lynn looked at her defensively. "Hey, I have to consider all contingencies here. There *is* a reason they sent both sexes on this mission."

Sara turned to look seriously at Lynn. "Exposure to seawater would not be good for that stuff. The equipment might survive, but if the seed stock is exposed to that water, it could be ruined. The whole ag project would be over."

"Okay, then we obviously can't wait for the tides to go out," Lynn agreed. "Get started on the suits, Frank. Mac and Tony can help you."

"Besides me," Tony asked, "who else is going?"

"It has to be me," Frank admitted. "The pod's floatation collar should've activated as well. If we're going to have to trouble-shoot the pod's systems, I'm the logical choice."

"Very well, Frank and Tony are the ones to go."

"Let's get to work," Frank announced as they all rose from the dinner table. "We'll work right here." Frank grabbed Tony's arm and pulled him to the side, away from the others. "You do know how to swim, right?"

"Like I said... A little."

* * *

The next day, Frank and Tony sat on the back bumper of the ATUV as Sara and Mac lowered their helmets down over their heads, locking them in place.

"How do you copy me?" Lynn asked over the comm-set.

"*Loud and clear,*" Frank assured.

"Tony?"

"*Ditto,*" Tony responded as he gave her a thumbs-up.

Maria came strolling up from the water line carrying a test kit. "The water seems pretty normal," she announced. "A little saltier than Earth's oceans and with a few elements the test kit cannot identify, but otherwise it's fairly safe. I wouldn't drink it, though."

"*We don't plan to,*" Frank replied as Sara and Laura began stuffing rocks into the men's utility pockets to act as ballast against the buoyancy of their pressurized suits.

"These rocks don't seem very heavy," Laura observed as she finished stuffing them into Tony's pockets.

"*Holy crap,*" Tony said as he struggled to get up. "*Try standing up with them.*"

"Safety lines are ready," Mac announced. "Here, you better take this," he said, lashing his sheathed knife to Frank's utility belt.

"Are you ready?" Lynn asked over the comm-set.

"*No, but let's get it over with,*" Frank insisted as he attempted to rise. Mac grabbed Frank's left arm and helped him to his feet. The suit was unusually heavy and difficult to move in, having been designed for use in zero-gravity conditions. And the extra rocks they had tied to their belts and stuffed in their pockets to counter their buoyancy only made it worse.

After helping both of them to their feet, with one person on each side, they assisted Frank and Tony down to the water's edge. Behind them, Lynn carried the two floats Frank had rigged to carry their comm-set transmitters on the water's surface. Connected by a thirty-meter comm-line to their helmets, the floats would enable them to communicate with each other as well as with Lynn on the shore, since their comm-sets would not work underwater.

Taking one careful step at a time, the group made their way down to the water. The ocean was calm, the waves seemingly mild as they lapped gently at the sandy shore. Wading into the water to assist Frank and Tony was more frightening than they had anticipated. The water was cold, and the underlying currents were stronger than they appeared on the surface. The fact that none of them knew how to swim and had never even *seen* an ocean didn't help.

Wading in thigh deep, Sara and Laura quickly tied the safety lines to Frank and Tony, and then retreated to shore. Mac handed the tow cable from the ATUV's winch to Tony, and patted him on the helmet to wish him luck.

Tony looked over at Frank. "*Are you sure this is going to work?*" He asked through the comm-set.

"I was five minutes ago," Frank admitted as he took his first step forward. He reached down to his chest control pack and added a little pressure to his suit, causing it to balloon slightly.

"Are you as nervous as I am?" Tony asked.

"Let's see, dry mouth, palpitations, clammy skin. Yup, I think so." Frank looked at Tony, then back at the sea.

Lynn and the others were now back at the ATUV, wondering why Frank and Tony hadn't gone in yet. Only Lynn was wearing a comm-set and could hear the chatter between the two of them.

"What are they doing?" Maria asked.

"They're, uh, talking over their entry strategy," Lynn answered unconvincingly.

"Looks more like they're having second thoughts," Laura observed.

"Man up and get wet, you chickens!" Mac taunted from the shore, even though they couldn't hear him through their helmets.

"Mac!" Maria scolded.

"They can't hear me," Mac defended.

Just then, Tony put his right arm up in the air and raised his middle finger. Lynn and Sara looked puzzled, as they looked up to see what Tony was pointing at.

"What does that mean?" Lynn asked.

"It means he heard him," Maria answered as she smiled at Laura and smacked Mac in the chest with the back of her hand.

"Wuss!" Mac jeered.

Frank and Tony started to move forward, taking small and careful steps. Gradually they shrunk away until only their helmets were above the water. Maria had Frank's safety line and Laura had Tony's, while Mac was paying out slack on the tow cable.

Frank's breathing became rapid and shallow as the waterline crept up his faceplate. And then with one more step, the pastels of green and brown transformed into brilliant fluorescence in every imaginable color. "Oh my God!" Frank exclaimed, his breathing becoming erratic.

"What is it, Frank?" Lynn inquired, "What's wrong?"

"It's incredible!" Frank gasped. "You wouldn't believe this! The colors!" Frank looked around excitedly. Everywhere around him were vividly-colored plants, swaying in the currents. The sound of his suit's ventilation fans became more prominent after he had submerged. It was strangely quiet under the surface, so much so that Frank became aware of his own breathing, forcing him to try to exert some sort of control over his respiratory patterns.

"The visibility is excellent," Frank announced as he looked over at Tony to his right.

"How are you doing, Tony?"

"Fine!" he answered joyfully over the comms. *"Man, this is unbelievable!"*

"You said it!"

"Guys?" Lynn interrupted. *"Maria wants to know if your suit temps are holding steady."*

"Tell mother Maria to stop worrying!" Frank teased. "We're doing great, right Tony?"

"You bet!"

"Okay, guys. Just keep your minds on the task at hand." Lynn urged.

"Party pooper."

"And remember, those are spacesuits, not dive suits. So take it slow and easy."

"Frank, I just saw a huge fish over there! It was red and gray and yellow, and it had long fins on it! It had to be at least a meter long!"

"Hey, all I wanna know is did it have any teeth? And if so, did it look hungry?" Frank laughed.

They continued on their trek across the ocean floor. After about fifty meters, the sand began to give way to coral and

rock. Another fifty meters, and the rocks grew into mountains and canyons.

"Hey Frankie! If we don't find that pod pretty soon, we're gonna run out of rope," Tony warned. *"We're getting pretty deep here. We may run out of tether for our comm-buoys as well."*

"This terrain is getting a little difficult to move across." Frank stopped and looked around, scanning from left to right. He tilted backward slightly looking up at the surface of the water. "The visibility is getting worse the deeper we go." Frank looked at the markings on his comm-buoy tether. "We're about fifteen meters down right now. We must be losing the light."

"How the hell are we going to see anything?"

"Lynn, about how far out are we?" Frank asked.

Lynn went over to the towline and checked the markings. There were colored bands painted onto the rope every meter. A blue ring indicated one meter, red was five, yellow: ten and white: fifty. The set of lines nearest the water were one white, four yellow, a red and two blues.

"Frank? You're about ninety-seven meters out."

"It should be only a few meters away," Frank said as he looked about. "We should be able to see it from here."

"Try moving laterally, maybe something is blocking your view," Lynn suggested.

"Good idea. Tony, you move right, I'll move left."

"Copy."

Frank sidestepped slowly to the left, continuously scanning for the missing pod.

"I've got it!" Tony cried. *"Two o'clock, about twenty meters."* Frank moved quickly over to Tony.

"Where? I don't see it!"

"Over there...wait for it. There's something moving in the water in front of the light."

Frank waited, staring through the silent, murky water. Then it came... Two flashes before it disappeared again. Then another two flashes. "That's it! We see the pod's strobe! We're moving toward it now."

Moving across the ocean floor was more difficult now. They had to pick their course through canyons between the reefs. And they had to think about their tethers as well, to avoid getting them caught amongst the rocky coral.

Five more minutes and they were there. The pod was sitting against the side of a coral shelf at a slight angle. It had struck the shelf on the way down, breaking away large portions of coral that now lay scattered. The main chutes were drifting harmlessly in the current behind and above it.

"Tony, go topside and disconnect the main chutes. We don't need the drag. I'm gonna open up the control panel and see if I can activate the collar."

"I'm on it." Tony climbed up the side of the pod, using the ladder rungs built into the hatch faces. It was tough going, especially while pulling a tow cable behind him. He had to hook the cable onto one of the rungs, use both hands to pull himself up one step, and then move the cable up to the next rung.

Meanwhile, Frank removed the retaining screws from the control access panel on the other side of the pod. Once he got the plate off, he punched in the code on the keypad to gain control of the system. After his command code was accepted, he scrolled through the short command list until he found the command to inflate the collar. Good thing they made it waterproof.

"I'm ready down here, Tony. How are you doing up there?"

Tony had just finished detaching the last of the main chute lines. *"Standby,"* he said as he pulled the tow cable up to one of the chute line hook-eyes. *"I'm hooking the cable up now."*

Frank watched from below as Tony slipped the hook around the eye, and spun the locking collar down tight.

"Okay," Tony announced as he gave the cable a test tug. *"The cable is secure. I'm coming down."* Tony moved down off the top of the pod, making his way down the side. He jumped the last meter, floating down gently to the seafloor. *"Okay, I'm down."*

Frank depressed the enter button. There was a hiss of pressurized gas as the cover plates blew off the lower edge of the capsule just above the heat shield seam. Slowly, the collar began to extrude from the sides of the pod as it inflated. As it neared full inflation, the capsule began to right itself. Dust floated up as it was pushed off the seabed. Then, the pod rose upward, leveling off about three meters above the seafloor.

"Would you look at that!" Frank boasted. *"Lynn! It worked! The pod is floating a few meters off the deck! Start reeling her in!"*

"Why isn't it going all the way to the surface?" Lynn wondered.

"I'm not sure," Frank admitted over the comms. *"The floatation collar may not be fully inflated."*

"Can you fix it?"

"No chance." Frank insisted. *"This will have to do. It's high enough to clear the rocks, at least."*

Lynn turned to Mac. *"Start the winch, Mac. Slow and easy."*

Mac started the winch, slowly winding the cable in. The nose of the ATUV sat down slightly as the cable became taut.

As the cable came up off the seafloor, the pod began to tip over. It stopped at a forty-five-degree tilt as the

buoyancy of the righting collar fought the cable's attempt to pull it onto its side.

The ATUV's nose sank deeper as the weight of the pod pulled against it. The winch complained at the pod's mass, whining loudly as the motor labored under the stress.

The pod moved slowly across the seafloor as Frank and Tony walked along beside it, each with a hand against the side of the collar, gently guiding it over the peaks of the mountains lining the seafloor.

"Keep taking up the slack on our safety lines as we come in!" Frank instructed. "I don't want to get tangled up in them as we go."

As they walked in, Tony heard a strange sound coming from somewhere inside his suit. It was a *squishing* sound. That's when he noticed. "Uh, Frank? My feet are wet. I think I've got a leak somewhere."

"Don't worry about it. We'll be back to shore soon."

"I've got water up to my shins. I don't like this."

"Okay, just stay calm. We'll be out in ten minutes. Just keep an eye on it, okay?"

Back on the beach, Lynn was listening to Tony's concerns. "Something is wrong. Tony's got water in his suit."

"How much?" Maria asked.

"I'm not sure. Up to his shins, I think."

Lynn and Maria exchanged worried glances.

"If he gets too much water in his suit, he's going to get hypothermia," Maria warned.

The pod continued its journey toward the beach, with Frank and Tony acting as its escorts. But Tony was having a difficult time.

"Frank, it's up to my knees. I'm having trouble walking."

"Try dumping some of the rocks," Frank suggested.

Tony reached down and began pulling rocks from his pockets, dumping them on the seabed as he made his way into shore. "It isn't helping, Frank. It's mid-thigh now."

"Don't worry, I'm coming." Frank fell back behind the pod and moved across to Tony, taking care to keep his safety line from tangling with the pod or with Tony's line.

"Stop taking up our slack, a second. We're stopping."

"You want us to stop the winch?" Lynn inquired.

"No, keep it going." Frank reached around to Tony's control module on his chest. "I'm going to turn up your suit pressure, that should slow up the leak."

Frank turned up the pressure, causing the suit to inflate slightly, forcing Tony's arms and legs out to his sides.

"Well, this isn't going work," Tony complained.

"Yeah, you can't walk this way. Damn it, where the hell is that water coming from?" Frank looked around Tony's suit, but was unable to find the leak. "Listen, Tony. I'm going to drop all your counterweight and max out your suit pressure. You'll float to the surface, and they can pull you in. Once you're on the surface, the water pressure will be lower than your suit pressure, so you should stop taking on water."

"But my air will be leaking out," Tony surmised. *"Won't I start sinking again?"*

"They should have you back on shore by then."

"How are you gonna get the pod in by yourself?"

"No problem, the winch is doing all the work. I'm just taking the pod for a little walk," he added as he turned Tony's suit pressure up to maximum, causing Tony's suit to inflate like a blow-up doll. Immediately, Tony began rising to the surface.

"Lynn, Tony's floating to the surface. You need to get him to shore before all his air leaks out."

"Start pulling him as fast as you can!" Lynn ordered. "Mac! Help them pull Tony in! Quick!"

"What about the winch?" Mac asked as he abandoned the ATUV and ran down to the water's edge to help Laura and Sara.

"I'll handle the winch," Lynn replied as she headed for the ATUV at the top of the sandy slope.

Laura and Sara started pulling on Tony's safety line, hand over hand, as fast as they could, with Mac joining them a moment later.

"Start the winch," Frank instructed over Lynn's comm-set.

Lynn arrived at the ATUV and activated the winch again, but its nose suddenly dug in deeper and the entire vehicle started sliding forward. Lynn quickly shut it down.

"Frank! The pod must be stuck, it's pulling the ATUV down."

"Shut off the winch!"

"Already done."

Frank watched Tony float on the surface above him as he was slowly pulled onto shore.

"How are you doing, Tony?"

"I'm fine, go check on the pod."

Frank turned around and looked at the pod. It was stuck in between two coral walls.

"I see it. It's stuck on the reef. I'm on my way." Frank started walking toward the trapped pod. He could hear squishing from inside his own suit as well, and he realized his own feet were getting wet. "Shit."

"What is it?" Lynn asked over the comm-set.

"Nothing," Frank lied, not wanting her to worry. There was enough going on. Frank made his way underneath the

edge of the pod, which was stuck about one meter above the ocean floor. "I'm gonna try to push the pod up a bit. Standby on the winch."

"Standing by," Lynn responded.

Frank pushed with all his strength, but the pod wouldn't budge. "Damn! It's really stuck. I'm gonna get my back under it and try pushing up with my legs."

"Be careful, Frank," Lynn warned. *"That thing is heavy."*

"Most of its weight should be offset by the floatation collar," he reminded her. He moved further under the pod and placed his back against the pod's heat shield. Again he pushed with all his might, groaning as he tried to move the massive pod. But still it would not budge.

"Shit!" Frank swore in frustration. He moved under the pod and out the front end. He climbed up the coral ridge, pulled out his hand pickaxe and started chipping away at the coral. "Lynn, disengage the winch and back the ATUV up to the top of the hill. The winch line should be more than long enough."

"What the hell for?" Lynn protested.

"We need traction under the tires, and the higher angle might give me a little lift to get this damned thing unstuck."

"Frank, maybe you should come in. We can rethink this thing and try again later."

"Just do it, Lynn! I've got water up to my knees and I don't have time to argue with you."

"Frank, get out of the water!"

"Not until I get this fucking pod free! It's now or never, so move it!"

Lynn released the winch brake and climbed into the driver's seat. "Standby on that line, Laura!" she ordered as she started up the ATUV and slipped it into gear.

"Where are you going?"

"I've got to back this thing to higher ground."

“What?” Laura had no idea what was going on as Lynn started backing up the hill full-speed, the winch line paying out as she backed away.

Frank finished chipping away the coral on one side of the pod. He pulled the rocks out of his pockets to decrease his ballast as more water leaked into his suit. It was up to mid-thigh now. He climbed across the pod and onto the other side and began to chip away at the coral again.

“I’m at the top of the hill, Frank!” Lynn announced over the comm-set.

“Standby, I’m almost ready.” Frank finished chipping away the last of the coral impeding the pod on that side. He climbed back over to the previous side and jumped down to the seafloor, landing hard. He was even heavier now that the water was up to his waist. He moved back under the pod and again placed his back against the floatation collar. “Start the winch, Lynn!” he ordered as he pushed his back up against the pod.

The pod slid forward half a meter. Coral broke away from the sides and tumbled down. Frank adjusted his stance and groaned loudly as he pushed as hard as he could with both legs. The pod started to move, only a centimeter at first, then suddenly it broke free, moving away quickly under the force of the winch. Frank fell backward, landing hard on his back. He felt something in his life-support pack give way with a sharp snapping sound, followed by the hiss of escaping air. His comm-set crackled and then went completely dead as the cable yanked away from its connection at the back of his helmet.

The winch started taking up cable normally again.

“Frank, it’s working!” Lynn called out over the comm-set.

The hissing sound was still there. Frank looked at his wrist display. His oxygen pressure was dropping fast.

“Lynn?” Frank called, suspecting that there would be no response. He got to his feet and started chasing the pod toward shore. The water was up to his abdomen now, and it was a struggle to maneuver. He emptied the rocks from his pockets as he moved, and pulled the bags of rocks from his belt. It helped, but only a little. The water was coming in fast.

Mac and the others had gotten Tony to the beach and were opening his faceplate. As they started taking off his helmet, the pod’s nose finally broke the surface of the water.

“There it is!” Laura yelled.

“Frank! We can see the pod!”

Frank didn’t answer.

“Frank? Can you hear me?” Lynn repeated. “Frank!”

The water was now up to Frank’s chest. He was getting cold and could barely move. There was still at least seven meters of ocean over his head. And he had to be at least forty meters from shore. The water in his suit was rising too fast, and he was running out of air.

Lynn couldn’t raise Frank on the comm-set.

“Laura!” she yelled from the hilltop. “Pull him in fast!” Laura started pulling up the excess slack as fast as she could. Mac heard the fear in Lynn’s voice and ran over to help Laura with Frank’s safety line.

Frank’s breathing was shallow, and he was shivering from the bitter cold of the seawater. Frank slowly trudged

along, barely able to make any headway against the weight of the water that now filled his suit up to his neck. *What the hell went wrong?* he wondered.

Suddenly there was a strong tug at his feet as the slack on his safety line was taken up, catching his foot, and sending him tumbling over. He landed on his right side with a thud and a grunt. He tried to get back up, but the tether was pulling on him and kept him from finding his balance. Now that he was horizontal, the water in his suit was leaking up through his collar and sloshing around his face and head. He rolled clumsily onto his back to get his face above the waterline inside his own suit. Coughing and sputtering, Frank accidentally took in several mouthfuls of seawater.

“I can’t pull in the line!” Laura yelled. “I think it’s stuck!” Laura let go of the rope to reposition herself and allow Mac some room in front of her.

Frank knew he had one chance. He hit the release on his life-support pack harness, dropping the heavy pack onto the seafloor below him. Taking in a deep breath and holding it, he twisted his helmet release ring and allowed the helmet to finish filling with water. Then he removed the helmet and dropped it away as well.

Mac stepped in front of Laura and positioned himself on Frank’s tether. “Ready? Pull!”

The rope suddenly pulled at Frank as he tried to untie it from around his waist. The rope pinched his finger, crushing it and ripping the skin, sending a stream of bright-red blood into the water. It was all Frank could do to keep from screaming out in pain and letting the last of his precious air

out of his lungs. He reached down with his left hand, pulling out the knife that Mac had lent him, and cut the rope.

On the surface, the rope suddenly gave way, sending Mac and Laura tumbling backward.

“What the fuck!” Mac cried out as he got back to his feet and started pulling the rope in madly.

The pod was now safely beached, and Lynn shut down the winch and ran down the sandy hill to join the others.

Finally free of the rope, Frank was only seconds from drowning. He spotted his life-support pack only a meter away, still releasing precious oxygen, sending a stream of bubbles to the surface. He grabbed the pack and placed his lips over the leak, carefully sucking in the last little trickle of oxygen as he tried not to choke on the water that came along with it. With a new breath of air, Frank now had an extra minute. He unzipped the torso from the leg section of his suit and removed it, then kicked off the lower section. The water was freezing, and he could hardly think. But the bubbles reminded him what to do, and after sucking in one last breath of oxygen from the leaking life-support pack, he followed them to the surface. Instinctively, he kicked his legs and moved his arms in the way that Tony had demonstrated. It might not have been graceful, but it was working. He was moving slowly toward the surface. In the back of his mind, he remembered Tony saying something about breathing out while you ascended. *Something about my lungs exploding.*

He continued to kick even though he couldn't feel his feet. He continued to move his arms even though he couldn't feel his hands. His mind was starving for oxygen, and he didn't know where he was or what he was doing. All he knew was that something was telling him to get to the surface. His hearing was gone, he was surrounded by

silence. His vision was dimming around the edges, and all he could see were the bubbles he was chasing to the surface.

Mac pulled the last of Frank's tether in, stopping when he reached the frayed end where it had been cut. He held it up and looked at it in disbelief, as did everyone else.

Frank's head broke the surface, gasping for air as he slipped back under.

"There he is!" Laura screamed.

Frank's vision was coming back from the fresh dose of oxygen in his lungs. His head came up again, and he took another breath before he went under.

Everyone ran to the water to help, but he was too far away. Mac went in up to his chest, but couldn't go any further without drowning.

"Get me out of this suit!" Tony demanded. "I can help him!" Maria was closest and began taking off Tony's life-support pack, with Laura quickly joining in. Lynn stood helplessly at the LRV, watching through her view-scope as Frank bobbed up and down, his arms flailing in the surf trying desperately to keep his head above water.

"Don't take your eyes off him, Lynn!" Mac demanded.

Lynn kept her view-scope trained on Frank, zooming in further. "Oh my God," she gasped. "He's not wearing his suit!"

Frank could hear the others yelling from shore, and could see where he was. Unfortunately, with the return of cognitive thought came fear. He tried to think, tried to remember what Tony had told him about how to swim. But he was freezing, and he still couldn't feel his extremities. The best he could do was flop his arms around and kick a little. As the rolling waves raised him up momentarily, he could see that someone was going into the water from the shore. If he could just stay afloat long enough...

Finally free of his suit, Tony ran into the water to rescue Frank. He wasn't graceful, but he was swimming, much to the amazement of everyone on the beach.

"Hurry Tony," Lynn prayed aloud.

"Lynn! Get the ATUV down here!" Maria ordered. She knew that both of them were going to be hypothermic. There were a few jackets in the ATUV, but that wouldn't be enough, they were going to have to get them back to the ship as quickly as possible and warm them up.

Tony swam as best he could remember, but he was tired, and he was also cold. He finally reached Frank and tried to grab him, but Frank was thrashing about like a madman and Tony had to push him away to keep from being pulled under himself. He turned to look at the shore. It was only fifteen meters away.

Tony waved his arm at the shore. Lynn saw him as she pulled the ATUV to a stop by the others, and immediately understood. "Give me Tony's comm-buoy!" she ordered as she picked up his safety line.

Mac grabbed the buoy and handed it to Lynn. She quickly disconnected the tether and then tied the free-end of Tony's safety line. "Can you reach him with this?" she asked Mac as she handed him the buoy.

"Watch me," Mac replied confidently. He ran out into the water until he was thigh-deep himself, while Lynn prepared the rest of the line to keep it from becoming tangled. Mac heaved the buoy, sending it directly over Tony's head.

The buoy splashed down a few meters past Tony. He grabbed it and tied it around his chest. Then he fought through Frank's thrashing and grabbed him around his chest with his left arm. He held him tight, begging him to calm down. Then he waved his other arm at Lynn.

Maria, Laura and Sara pulled on his line, quickly drawing them in.

As they pulled Tony and Frank to shore, Lynn released the clamps holding the winch to the ATUV's bumper, and dropped it to the sand.

Finally, Tony was close enough to stand up in the surf. He managed to drag Frank two steps toward the beach before a wave knocked them back down. Mac and Sara went running out into the water to help drag them to shore and into the ATUV. Maria and Lynn climbed into the back of the vehicle along with Tony and Frank as Mac jumped behind the wheel.

"Secure that pod as best you can!" Lynn ordered as they started to pull away. "I'll send Mac back to pick you up!"

In the back of the ATUV, Maria and Lynn wrapped Frank and Tony in jackets, trying to keep them warm. Both of them were shivering and blue.

"Did you get the pod?" Frank asked through his chattering teeth.

"Yes, Frank," Lynn answered. "We got it."

* * *

Day 5;

This was my third day spent wandering the general area again, collecting rock samples here and there. I have determined that this valley was cut over countless centuries by the river that lay at its base. However, I suspect that some of the surrounding peaks were formed by geological or volcanic forces long before the river did its damage. All in all, it was quite an enjoyable day. I probably won't have another day to myself for quite some time.

It seems Jack has determined our position relative to where he suspects

the LRV would have landed. Unfortunately, it is at least four hundred kilometers away. Jack calculates that we should be able to hike there in about twenty days. Perhaps all those hours you forced me to spend on the treadmill will be of use after all.

Surprisingly enough, when faced with my reluctance to accompany him, Jack offered a compromise, agreeing to return to our camp if the journey becomes too difficult. But I fear history would judge me harshly if I chose not to strive forward and try to rejoin the others. However, despite Jack's celestial navigation capabilities and his orbital surface scans, I worry that we may become hopelessly lost in the vast wilderness of this world.

I'm not sure if it's my fear of history's judgment or my own scientific curiosity that compels me to follow him on this journey, although I suspect it is the latter. The opportunity to study the geology of this planet over a broader area excites me.

Tomorrow, we will spend our day preparing for our journey, departing the following day. As rustic and dirty as our little camp is, I will miss its familiarity. But I suppose, if I can get used to this, I can get used to anything.

* * *

Lynn paced back and forth across the wardroom deck, unable to join the others in their evening meal. They had made it back to camp just before sunset. Frank had lost consciousness along the way, so Mac and Tony had carried him directly to the med-lab as soon as the vehicle had come to a stop.

Fortunately, Tony only needed a hot shower and a little rest. But Maria had been in the med-lab with Frank for over an hour, and Lynn was really beginning to worry.

"Lynn," Laura begged. "Would you please sit down and eat something?"

"No, thanks, I'm not hungry."

"Well, would you at least stop pacing? You're making me nervous. Besides, you're going to wear a hole in the deck."

Lynn didn't notice Laura's attempt at humor or her request.

"If he just would've listened to me," Lynn lamented. "He wouldn't be in there now."

"He'll be alright."

The door to the med-lab opened, and Maria stepped out, closing the door behind her.

Lynn immediately stopped pacing and looked at Maria. "How's he doing?"

"His vitals are stable and his labs look good so far," Maria explained, sitting down.

"What do you mean, so far?" Sara asked.

"He swallowed a lot of seawater, maybe even aspirated a little as well."

"Yeah, but it's just water, right?" Mac wondered, coming in from his workout in the next compartment to hear Maria's report.

"Like I said before, there are a few elements in that seawater the test kit couldn't identify. I don't even know if they were biological or not. Besides, aspiration alone can be a very serious problem."

"What could that do to him?" Lynn asked.

"Disease, systemic infections, electrolyte problems...any number of things."

"When will we know?" Laura questioned.

"I should have a better idea by morning."

"Is he awake?" Lynn asked.

"Yes, but he's very weak right now. His core temp is still below normal, but it's coming up slowly."

"Can I see him?"

Maria looked at Lynn. She knew that it would be better to let Frank rest. But she could tell by the look in Lynn's eyes that she needed to see him. Command was a terrible burden, especially for someone so young. "Okay. But only for a few minutes. He needs to rest."

"Thanks," Lynn said as she headed for the med-lab.

Lynn opened the door slowly, entering the room as carefully and quietly as possible. Frank was lying on the exam table in the middle of the compartment, covered by a special blanket that circulated a heated fluid through it. A clear, plastic oxygen mask covered his face, fogging and clearing with each breath. He had an intravenous line leading from his left arm to a bag of fluid hanging from a bracket attached to the ceiling. The tube was fed through an IV pump that controlled the flow of fluid to his body.

Lynn stood there for a moment, silent in the dimly lit compartment, afraid to say anything. A painful memory from her childhood came to her. She was probably five or six years old. Her mother was dying from low-gravity

deterioration syndrome, an incurable disease at the time. Against her wishes, her father had forced her and her older brother to come to their dying mother's bedside to say goodbye. Her mother had stroked her hair and made her promise to be a good girl, to take care of her father and brother, and to speak of her often to her own children on the new world.

The new world. It was a glorious dream promised to all of the children of her generation, the last generation to be born and raised aboard the Daedalus.

Some new world this is turning out to be, she thought bitterly as she approached the bed. Frank's eyes opened slowly as she drew near. His skin was pale, his hand frighteningly cold in her own.

"Hey, Lynni," he whispered from behind the mask.

"Hey," Lynn fought back the urge to cry. His voice was so weak. None of his booming laughter or humorous quips.

"How's the pod?"

"It's fine. It's sitting on the beach, safe and sound. Mac and Tony will tow it back in the morning."

"Sorry."

"For what?"

"I should've listened when you told me to come back in."

"You're right, you should've."

Frank coughed. The indicators on his monitoring panel jumped a bit, worrying her. But they settled back down after he finished.

"Maybe I'll listen better next time," he promised.

"You bet your ass, you will." Lynn squeezed his hand. "You just get better, you big lummo. We can't afford to lose anyone else."

"Aw, jeez, Lynni. I didn't know you cared."

"Who am I going to get to keep this ship running if you check out?"

Frank tried to laugh, but it only turned into a cough. "Maybe Sara?" he joked.

Same old, Frank, Lynn thought. "Get some rest, Frankie. That's an order," she added firmly.

"Yes, ma'am," he obeyed, closing his eyes.

Lynn placed his hand back at his side and backed away before turning to leave the room. He would be alright. Somehow, she just knew it. He had to be.

She stepped out of the med-lab and quietly closed the door before pausing to lean against it for a moment. She could feel the others in the next compartment, waiting for her to return, waiting for some sign of reassurance that their friend would be all right. So she wiped the tears from her eyes, gathered her composure, and confidently strode back into the wardroom to tell her crew what they needed to hear.

CHAPTER SEVEN

By the next morning, Frank's condition had improved. His body temperature was back to normal, his labs remained unremarkable throughout the night, and he showed no signs of any complications from the aspiration of so much seawater. After breakfast, Maria, dumbfounded by his remarkable recovery, had reluctantly allowed him to get up and move about the habitat. But it would be a few days before he was back to full strength again.

Without Frank to lead a second work team, their productivity was cut in half. Lynn decided to make the best of the situation by getting everyone involved in one project.

The better part of the day was spent erecting the communications tower, one piece at a time. By sundown, the tower was fully functional, increasing their communications range, and adding a full meteorological sensor package that would help them document and eventually forecast the weather.

By the time they sat down to dinner, Frank was strong enough to join them. The conversation was light and cheerful, mostly good-natured teasing about Frank and Tony's adventures in the ocean.

It seemed that they were settling into a routine. As usual, Mac and Tony spent their evening on the resistance gym, while Sara pedaled away for hours on the exer-cycle. Adia had become a member of the movie-watching group along with Maria and Laura. Lynn preferred to spend her evenings reviewing the mission protocols, trying to plan ahead as much as possible. They were still missing two of their crew, and although they now had two fewer planets to survey, and therefore, far more time to complete their mission, the loss

of manpower and scientific expertise would make things difficult.

* * *

Day 6;

We spent the better part of today preparing for our upcoming journey. Jack was quite proud of his makeshift backpack design. He used the straps from a couple of daypacks and a flight seatback as a frame, then attached several small survival kit bags along either side, with one large bag down the center. With the addition of a waist belt fashioned from a few more daypack straps, the packs were ready. In fact, they were actually comfortable to wear, even with a bedroll and tent kit tied across the bottom. Despite how comfortable they felt, Jack warned that they would not feel as comfortable after a few days of lugging them through the wilderness.

I managed to work a few improvements of my own into the design. I added headrest pads, that I pulled from the flight seats, along the bottom of the pack. Three pads, forming a curve, will place the pack's

weight more squarely on our hips, making us able to comfortably carry even more weight. Jack was so pleased with the idea that he quickly incorporated the hip pads into his own pack.

Unfortunately, we will not be able to carry everything, although Jack certainly did try. It took us several hours to settle on a packing list, and despite my protests, we were forced to sacrifice scientific capabilities in favor of the basic needs of life.

Due to the weight, we have decided we must take our chances with the unknown elements detected in all the water samples taken thus far on this world. It is a risk we would have been forced to take, even if we remained here, as we would eventually run out of clean water either way.

After deciding on an initial walk/rest schedule of one hour of walking followed by fifteen minutes rest, Jack has begun mapping out the first leg of our journey. We are fortunate that the first few days of our journey will be across relatively flat terrain, as we are

far from having fully recovered from four months in microgravity.

* * *

"Has anyone seen Frank?" Lynn asked.

"Last I saw, he was headed forward," Maria answered, her eyes glued to the video screen.

"Thanks." Lynn turned in the direction Maria indicated, wondering what Frank was up to. *He should be resting*, she thought. It did appear that Frank was nearly back to his old self, but despite his miraculous recovery, Maria still wanted him to take it easy for a few days, just to be safe. She was worried there might be some residual side effects due to the unknown elements in the water that he had swallowed when he had almost drowned. And those side effects could take days, or even weeks to manifest themselves.

Lynn made her way forward between the science and medical bays and into the passenger corridor. As she was about to head down the stairs to the lower deck—which they had nicknamed the storm porch—she noticed movement in the cockpit. "Frank?"

"In here."

"What are you doing?" she asked as she entered the LRV's cockpit.

"Just tinkering around a little." Frank had removed one whole panel from the aft bulkhead where most of the radar and engineering electronics were housed.

"Shouldn't you be resting?"

"I've had enough resting," he complained. "I *need* something to *do*."

"So you thought you'd tear apart the cockpit?"

"I was just checking out the radar gear, thought maybe I could figure out a way to fix it."

Lynn knew what he was up to. He had refused to accept his friend's death, and although he had apparently set it

aside in lieu of more immediate concerns, she knew his denial would eventually catch up to him.

"You know," Frank offered, sensing what Lynn was about to say, "when I was out there, under the water, no suit to protect me, struggling to reach the surface before my breath ran out... I felt *alone*." He looked directly at her for a moment. "I mean *really* alone, Lynn. Just me against the environment." He looked away, his gaze focused out the windows momentarily before he resumed his work. "I just needed something to do for awhile," he explained, obviously not wanting to speak further on the subject.

Lynn watched him work for a minute, contemplating what he had felt out in the cold sea. She had never known what it felt like to be truly alone. All of her life, there were at least twenty people within range of her voice. No one on board the Daedalus had ever been alone, short of taking a shower or using the bathroom. She tried to guess what he was thinking. He was afraid that Jack was out there somewhere, feeling as alone as Frank had felt in that water. And despite the overwhelming odds against Jack and Will having gotten out of the Icarus alive, Frank didn't want the idea of Jack's loneliness on his conscience. Frank really should have been resting, but his *mind* needed time to recover as *well* as his body. If that meant letting him tinker with the fried radar system for a little while, then that was fine. He would return to his work when he was ready. His conscience wouldn't allow him to do otherwise.

* * *

Although he felt fine, Frank took advantage of another day of rest ordered by Maria to spend more time working on the radar set.

The rest of the team spent the day erecting structures packed in the cargo pods, the first of which was the ag-hut. Like the rest of the structures they were to build, the ag-hut was a kit of carbon-fiber poles and a hollow, plastic shell. After assembling the carbon-fiber arches and cross pieces,

the hollow, plastic shell was fitted over the frame and secured in place. Individual chambers within the hollow shell were filled with a special, pressurized foam that would quickly cure into a hardened, porous fill that served as insulation while offering additional rigidity. Unlike the other utility-huts, sections of the ag-hut's roof were covered with only a clear, plastic film to allow natural sunlight into the greenhouse areas of the lab. The ag-hut itself was divided into several sections to allow various agricultural experiments to be conducted in controlled growing environments. Within this structure, it would be Sara's responsibility to determine which Earth crops would grow in Cetian soil and atmosphere, and which ones would grow in Earth soil and Cetian atmosphere. She would also grow crops to sustain themselves and the other colonists for the first few months of their lives on the new world, assuming they chose to settle on Tau Ceti Five.

They were able to assemble and skin-out two additional smaller utility-huts before sundown. They would outfit the huts tomorrow, giving the crew a tool shed and storage shack by the day's end. After that, they would only have the bio-lab, genetics-lab, and two more utility-huts to construct before their little encampment would be complete. After that, Mac and Tony would be able to concentrate their efforts on establishing a safe water supply and a waste recycling facility. They would not be setting up the main power plant for some time. Since the LRV would not be flight-capable before the Daedalus arrived, they would simply use the reactors on the LRV as their main source of energy for the encampment.

Frank had continued his work on the radar set into the late evening until Lynn had practically ordered him to turn in for the night. Despite Frank's best efforts, he and Lynn both knew that he would not be able to repair the radar set without spare parts. But Maria had advised Lynn that it was therapeutic for Frank, so she had decided to leave it alone for now.

* * *

Day 7;

Early this morning, we loaded everything we could not take with us back into the escape pod and closed it up. Jack said he wanted to protect everything in case we were forced to abandon our journey and return to camp. I was surprised, and I will admit, somewhat relieved to know that Jack was at least keeping that alternative in mind.

A moment of truth came just before departure. Jack wanted to leave a note behind to direct any would-be rescuers to our course. With no other means about, I was forced to reveal the existence of my journal, and allow Jack to use a blank page from the back. Surprisingly, Jack already knew about my journal as, apparently, did the rest of our crew. Even more surprising was that he did not find the idea of a handwritten journal the slightest bit amusing. Jack had actually complimented the effort, and said that it would undoubtedly become a significant part of Eden history in the

future. I admit, I had never considered that possibility. I had always assumed it would remain a family heirloom, continuously handed down from father to son over the decades until the thick journal was filled from cover to cover. The idea of my thoughts and feelings being scrutinized by the masses is a bit frightening, to say the least.

We began our journey by following the same route we had taken a few days earlier when we went down to the river to collect water samples. It was not necessarily the most direct route, but since it was our first attempt at carrying our fully-loaded packs, the route's familiarity had its advantages.

Following Jack's schedule, it took us two rest stops to reach the river. It took us half that time previously without the packs. Jack surmised that the river would run downhill and lead us out of the valley and into the flatlands at the base of the hills. After a third rest break, we followed the river's banks like a trail map all the way down.

After stopping for lunch at the base, we struck out due west across the

open plains. Our progress was slowed slightly by the tall grass, until we came across a migratory path that had probably been stamped out by some yet to be seen large animals.

As we hiked across the plain, it seemed as if the mountains completely surrounded us. Ahead of us in the distance there were more hills, with higher mountain ridges on either side. Based on the orbital scans, Jack is confident that our best course lies across those hills, then between the two mountain peaks on either side. The scans showed another river flowing through those hills, with yet another expansion of flatland on their west side. Beyond that, there is another mountain range of considerable altitude that we will have to cross in order to reach the western coastline. Unfortunately, there appears to be no way around it without at least tripling our transit time.

By dusk, we had traveled a mere ten kilometers, a much slower pace than Jack had hoped. Hopefully, as

time passes, we will become stronger, and we can make up for lost time.

What neither of us had anticipated are the numerous aches and pains associated with cross-country backpacking. As I write this entry, my muscle cramps and aching joints are so severe that the analgesics we both took more than an hour ago have provided little to no relief. I suspect it will take me some time to find sleep this night, but when I do, it shall be most deep.

** * **

Day 8;

Day two of our journey again found us trudging through the tall grass of the plains. Other than a few dozen varieties of annoying insects and the warmer climate of the lowlands, our travels thus far have been uneventful. Surprisingly, the hiking itself has been nearly as therapeutic as the painkillers we took last night.

In the afternoon, we spotted a large, short-haired animal hiding in the grass along our course. After observing the animal from behind a large rock, we

determined that it was an herbivore, thanks to some useful information from the survival guide on Jack's data pad.

This evening we pitched camp beside a small stream. As we dined on another entree from the dehydrated food supplies, we boiled a few liters of stream water to replenish our stock for the next few days. It is an extra burden to carry several days' worth of drinkable water on our backs, but we do not want to get dehydrated.

Even though I now know that Jack is aware of my journal, I still prefer to write in private. Admittedly, I find myself avoiding discussing personal matters. Do not think for a moment that because I say it less, that I do not miss you more and more with each passing day.

** * **

The hour is quite late. I was awakened by a noise in the distance. It was a rustling sound in the distant bushes, similar to what I had heard the first night in our crash-site camp. The noise did not wake Jack, so I took it upon myself to investigate... Imagine

that? With my light I searched the area in the direction of the noise, but found nothing. I suspect the sound was made by some curious animal, intrigued by our presence, yet too frightened by the campfire to approach for a closer inspection. I'm not sure what I would have done if I had seen the animal. If it were a large animal, one that I would have to defend myself against, would I be able to do so? At Jack's insistence, I have been wearing my side arm, but I'm still afraid of using it. Nevertheless, I hope I would be brave enough to use it should the need arise. Fortunately, the rustling stopped rather quickly, no doubt because of my searchlight. And so I sit here, listening. It is quite astonishing how quiet it can actually get at night.

** * **

Day 13;

Today marks the completion of the first week of our journey. Each day has been much of the same. Eat, hike, and sleep. The hiking is getting easier as our bodies grow stronger, and the

aches and pains at bedtime have also grown less severe.

Surprisingly, this journey has been somewhat boring. Nothing but grass, streams, and rocks. We have spotted countless species, both herbivore and carnivore, but they all keep their distance, and Jack is unwilling to pause for observation unless it is necessary for safety reasons.

Although I am not looking forward to the uphill climb ahead of us, I will welcome the change in scenery. I found few geological samples of interest on this vast plain, and I am looking forward to the more varied sampling that the hills and eventual mountain will undoubtedly provide.

* * *

It had been more than a week since Frank's near-death experience. His recovery had been better than expected and Maria had been unable to find any side effects from the event. Frank returned to work feeling better than ever.

Despite Lynn's protests, Frank had continued his work on the radar set every evening after dinner. She did everything short of ordering him to stop wasting time on the hopeless repair effort. But Frank made it clear that his evenings were his own to do with as he pleased. Lynn had reminded him of his obligations to the mission, not to mention the rest of the team, and that he was not to let his work on the radar set interfere with his responsibilities.

* * *

The weather had become hot and dry over the last few days, and they were consuming more water. Will had discovered that his bladder was nowhere near as large as Jack's, and he required frequent stops for relief, much to Jack's annoyance.

The increased temperature also brought more insects. They slathered on some insect repellent, the smell of which Will decided was probably the main deterrent against the pesky winged organisms. It worked to some extent, although many insects were unaffected by the stench and continued to bother them. Will wondered what made the original mission planners think that a lotion formulated to repel Earth insects had any chance of working on an alien world.

Suddenly, Will felt a sharp pinch at the back of his neck, instinctively slapping at what he suspected was another of the bothersome bugs. "Ouch!" Will exclaimed as he slapped at his neck.

"What's wrong?" Jack asked without breaking stride or looking back. Jack was a determined man with a schedule to keep.

"My neck," Will explained as he looked at his palm. There was a long, slender insect squished in his hand. The insect had red and yellow bands around a body nearly three centimeter long, with long grayish wings protruding from its thorax. It was lying dead in Will's hand, surrounded by a small pool of bright-red blood. Will shook the dead organism out of his hand, wiping the remains off on his pant leg. "One of those bugs!" he complained. Will reached back up to his neck, feeling something moist. Inspecting his hand again, he found some of his own blood was on it. "I think it bit me."

"You alright?" Jack asked, turning his head briefly to glance at Will.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Will assured him.

"A few more hours and we should reach the base of the hills," Jack promised. "We can pitch camp there for the night

and start heading up the hill in the morning.”

“Sounds good,” Will agreed. He was tired, and would welcome a good night’s sleep. “Let’s push on and get there,” Will insisted. “The sooner the better.”

They continued their pace, a steady cadence of footfalls, marching closer and closer to the distant hills. Will realized that he was sweating more than usual, undoubtedly due to the heat.

Then Will’s vision began to blur, but only for a moment. He stopped for a second and gulped down some water, figuring it was just a little dehydration. Replacing his canteen in its holster, Will trudged on, quickening his step to catch up to Jack.

Then the wheezing began. Mild at first, then growing more audible with each breath. He noticed that his gait had become somewhat staggered, uneven. Then it hit him, like a vise clamping around his chest, pushing all of the air out of his lungs. “Jack!” he gasped, but it was barely a whisper. Will fell forward, his eyes rolling back in his head as he hit the ground face-first in a cloud of dust.

Jack heard a thud along with the rattling of gear from behind him, stopping in his tracks and spinning around to see what had happened. He froze for a second, shocked by the sight of Will, collapsed facedown in the grass, dust swirling around his unmoving body. “Will!” he hollered, but there was no response, no movement, and no sound. Only settling dust. Jack ran back to him, unbuckling his pack and dropping it to the ground next to Will as he knelt down beside him. “Will!” he repeated, but he did not respond. He rolled Will onto his side, releasing the buckle on his fanny strap and sliding the pack off his back before rolling him over. Will was pale and sweaty, gasping for air in little sucking motions, his lips puckering up like a fish. With each breath, a sickening wheezing sound emanated from Will’s pursed mouth.

Jack’s mind was spinning. His first instinct was to holler for help. But there was no one else around. “Shit!” Then his

training came to him. He tilted Will's head back to open his airway. It seemed to help, but only a little. Feeling for Will's carotid artery on the side of his neck, he checked for a pulse. It was there, but it was weak and rapid. Jack ran through the different causes of difficulty breathing he had learned about in his emergency medical training. The term 'anaphylaxis' stuck in his head.

Jack reached for his backpack, tearing it open and pulling out the med-kit. His medical training had been brief, concentrating on the necessary skills to implement treatment, rather than dedicating limited training time building a knowledge base. He pulled out the diagnosis flip-card chart, thumbing through it until he found the section on respiratory emergencies. Scanning the treatment for anaphylaxis, the memory was coming back to him. "A-Airway, did that," he spoke aloud. "B-Breathing, C-Circulation," Jack read further, then ripped open the medication pouch, pulling out a vial of epinephrine and loading it into the pneumo-jet device. He pulled the plunger back, drawing the medicine into the administration chamber, then twisted the locking hub and rammed the plunger back down, pressurizing the device. He dialed up the subcutaneous setting and pulled up the right sleeve of Will's shirt. Pressing the injection head of the pneumo-jet device against Will's right deltoid, Jack depressed the trigger. The device hissed briefly as the compressed air in the chamber forced the epinephrine out the injection head, piercing Will's skin. The shot forced the medicine into the subcutaneous tissue where it would be carried through Will's circulatory system from the capillary beds under the skin. He quickly reloaded the pneumo-jet with the next appropriate medication, resetting the injection depth to intramuscular as indicated, and repeated the process. The next step was to administer oxygen, which they did not have.

Jack watched impatiently as Will's respirations became less labored. "That's it, buddy." Color was also returning to

his face. Jack knew the treatment he had administered was working, but it was only emergency treatment, and Will might require more long-term care. He broke out the emergency medical guide on his data pad, calling up the medical section. The database had been designed with full knowledge of the medical supplies contained in their med-kits. The database thoroughly covered anaphylaxis, indicating at least twelve hours of monitored rest, with possible repeat dosing of the meds he had given thus far. Jack checked his med-kit. He had three more vials of the two primary medications for anaphylaxis. Will's med-kit was identical to Jack's, so he should have more than enough medication to get Will through the crisis. Unfortunately, the treatment protocols were based on allergic reactions to Earth conditions, insects, and allergens. And this was a bite by an alien insect on an alien world. Jack tried not to think about it, concentrating only on the task at hand. If there was a complication, he would deal with it as best he could.

It had been nearly five minutes since he gave Will the meds. Will's breathing was almost back to normal, as was his complexion. But he was still unresponsive. His pulse was stronger now as well, and down to a normal rate. There was nothing to do but wait, and keep a close eye on Will's condition.

Jack decided to pitch camp. They wouldn't be traveling any further today, and probably not the next day. He was not a religious man at heart. Very few of them were. Organized religion was not allowed in their society, although one could still practice whatever belief system they chose to in private. As a result, religion as a whole had given way to an overall moral and ethical code accepted throughout the colonists. However, that night, over a lonely meal, Jack found himself praying to any God who might exist, for Will to survive.

* * *

Long after the others had gone to bed, Lynn was still sitting at the wardroom table, picking at her dinner, deep in thought.

"A little late for dinner, isn't it?" Maria commented as she entered the room after finishing up some late-night work in the med-lab.

"Huh?"

"What's the matter, not hungry?" Maria asked, sitting down across from her and noticing the full plate.

"Oh, I guess I'm just a little preoccupied," she admitted.

"Want to talk about it?" she offered, going into counselor mode.

"Not really," Lynn resisted. As easy as Maria was to talk with, she still wasn't comfortable discussing command problems with anyone but Frank.

"It's about Frank, isn't it?" Maria surmised.

Lynn picked at her food another moment, then pushed it away. "I just don't know what to say to him," she finally admitted. "He's obsessed with the belief that Jack and Will are still out there somewhere, waiting for us to rescue them."

"And you don't share his belief." It was more of a statement than a question.

"Not really."

"But you admit that it's a possibility, however remote?"

Lynn thought about it for a moment. "Yes, I admit that it *is* possible. *Anything* is possible."

"And that bothers you?"

"Of course it bothers me."

"Let me ask you a hypothetical question, then. If you *knew* that they were still alive, would you be able to do anything about it?"

"I don't know, maybe."

"Like what?"

"Organize a search team, try to locate the escape pod's transponder signal."

"And where would you start looking?"

"Along its probable entry trajectory, of course."

"And where would that likely put them?" Maria asked. "Close to us?"

"Probably not," Lynn decided. Somehow, Maria had gotten her mind off her problem with Frank, and set it to work on a problem that she could solve.

"Why do you think that?"

"We came out of interface considerably past our target. But we had the ability to turn around. The escape pod didn't. They would've been forced to land wherever their trajectory took them. And that would put them considerably downrange of us."

"So you would send us out on a cross-country hike that could take weeks, maybe even months to find them, if we *could* find them?"

"Well, not at first, no. We would have to secure our site, insure our own survival, and determine the probability of our own survival on such a journey. I mean, we couldn't just set out cross-country on a whim! That would be suicide!"

"Exactly. And that's if you *knew* they were alive. You don't even *suspect* that they made it out alive before the Icarus came apart." Maria was silent for a moment, letting the concept sink in. "Do you see what I'm getting at here?"

"Yes," she admitted, a little embarrassed that it had taken her so long to realize it in the first place.

"Part of you knows that you're right," Maria continued, "but the other part wants to join Frank and go storming off in search of them. In your case, logic continues to win the argument. *You* know we still have a mission to complete, despite our being stranded here. In fact, our inability to survey the other two planets makes our thorough survey of *this* planet even *more* imperative."

"I know," Lynn assured her.

"Command is not an easy task. And I'll admit that it's not really fair that it fell on your shoulders. But it did, Lynn. And it's not only *our* lives that are depending upon you, it's quite possibly the lives of everyone else on board the Daedalus as

well. And those are the lives of our families.” Maria leaned back in her chair. It was a lot to throw at such a young woman. “It can’t be easy to abandon the lives of a few to save the lives of many. But you’re not the first person in history who has had to make such a decision.”

Lynn took in a deep breath, letting it out in a long sigh. “I just wish Frank would see it that way.”

“He does. I’m sure of it. Deep down inside, he knows you’re right. He just feels guilty, like he could’ve done something else. Frank will work through it, sooner or later. He’s a reasonable man. Just give him some time.”

“I *have* given him time. The rest of us are already beginning to pick up his slack. He’s driving a wedge between us.”

“Do you want me to speak with him?”

“No, I should,” she objected.

“Nothing personal, Lynn. But he would probably take it better from me.”

This was no surprise to her. Despite Maria’s repeated assurances that her young age had little bearing on how well the crew accepted her as their leader, she knew it was still a factor. But she had no desire to confront Frank at this particular time. “Of course,” she agreed, trying to conceal how much it bothered her.

“Now, get some sleep,” Maria instructed, picking up her nearly-full plate of uneaten food. “I’ll save this for Mac. I have no doubt he’ll be happy to finish it for you.”

“Thanks,” Lynn smiled as she rose from the table. Sleep sounded awfully good to her right now.

* * *

Just after sundown, Will started to come around. He had been out for nearly five hours, and Jack was awfully worried.

“Hey buddy,” Jack greeted Will as his eyes slowly opened. “How are you feeling?”

Will looked around to get his bearings. His first surprise was that he was lying down. The second was that it was

night. And then the third surprise hit him. He was feeling lousy.

"Terrible," he half whispered. "What happened?"

"You were bitten by some bug," Jack explained. "You had a pretty nasty anaphylactic reaction...almost stopped breathing on me."

Will couldn't remember anything. "You're kidding?"

"I wish I was. You scared the shit out of me, my friend."

Even in his hazy, weakened state, '*my friend*' still sounded strange to him, especially coming from Jack. "Sorry," Will apologized.

"It's alright," Jack assured him. "Just don't let it happen again," he joked.

"I'll do my best."

"You feel like eating something?"

Jack moved over to the fire, scooping up a plateful of stew and handing it to Will, who was now sitting up.

"What's this?" Will asked, picking at the strange-looking concoction.

"Something called 'stew'. It's supposed to have real chunks of beef in it. But the beef doesn't taste like any of the beef we grew back on the Daedalus, that's for sure."

Will frowned at the statement, stabbing a chunk of brown meat with his fork and holding it up to his nose. "Smells strange."

"It's not too bad, actually," Jack promised.

Will gave Jack a suspicious look, not sure if he wanted to chance a taste.

"Give it a try. I ate it, and I'm still here."

Will took a bite, chewing it slowly. "Strange texture," he commented as he chewed. "But not bad." Will looked at the stew. "What are these little orange disks?"

"Carrots, I believe."

"Really? I've never seen them so small," he remarked as he tasted them.

"Yeah, that's what I thought too. These meals must've been processed before they engineered the jumbo varieties

back on Luna Station.”

“Hmm, tastes the same.”

“Yeah, there are little onions in there too, along with potatoes, peppers, and beets.”

“Beets?”

“Yeah, beets. My wife managed to get some seeds from the ag-bank to grow on our balcony. She used to make borscht out of them.”

“What’s borscht?”

“It’s sort of like this stew here. But it’s made with beets. You eat it with a dollop of sour cream. My wife’s great, great-grandmother taught her how to make it. It was supposed to be very popular in Russia back on Earth.”

“You’re wife’s of Russian heritage?”

“Yup. She doesn’t speak the language, or anything, and I think borscht is the only thing her great, great-granny ever taught her to make. She used to make it at least a few times a year. It’s pretty good. I’m surprised you’ve never tried it. They used to serve it every once in awhile in the galley.”

“Ah, yes. Guest-chef night,” Will recalled the event as he continued eating. The monthly dinner still gave him chills. With little actual cooking done in their quarters, there were few people on board who could actually create an edible entree. “I usually didn’t get to the galley until late in the evening. They were usually out of guest-chef entrees by then.”

“Well, we’ll have to have you and your family over for dinner sometime. I’m sure Tanya would love to make it for you.”

Will smiled. As reclusive as he was, the idea of a family get-together pleased him. Neither he nor his wife really knew Jack or Tanya very well. But their children were about the same age, and attended school together. “That would be nice, Jack.”

Will took a few more bites. An actual conversation seemed to be developing between them. They had spoken at length many times since being marooned here. But the

topic had usually been about more practical matters. Jack was revealing another side of Will, a human side he had not seen before. Will wanted the exchange to continue, but wasn't sure how to carry the momentum. Candid conversation had never been his strong point.

"It's a date, then." Jack scrapped the last spoonful of stew from the pan, plopping it onto Will's plate. "So, Will. How did you end up on this mission?"

"What do you mean?" Will was surprised that Jack was trying to continue the conversation.

"No offense, but you hardly seem the adventurous type."

"No offense taken," Will chuckled. "You're right, I'm not the adventurous type." He took another bite of stew, chewing it slowly. "I don't know," Will stalled. He wasn't completely comfortable with the topic. "Maybe I just needed a change of pace."

"From lab to alien planet? That's a hell of a change."

"Yes, I guess it is," Will admitted. "But you know, there's not a lot a Planetologist can do in a lab. Mostly computer modeling. It's not like I had a lot of rock samples to play with. Just pieces of meteorites and asteroids we collected along the way. Nothing from a complete ecosystem. I guess exploring a real living world just seemed like a natural step."

"Still a big one, though."

"True. Maybe the thought of being an explorer appealed to my romantic side. Setting foot on a new, pristine world and all that."

"I can see your point." Jack conceded. "I'll admit, the idea appealed to me as well. Jack Bell, the first human to set foot on an extrasolar world." Jack passed Will his canteen. "I wouldn't mind seeing that in the history books."

Will took a long drink of water. "So why did *you* volunteer?"

"Ray."

"Ray Wilkins? Bobby's grandfather?"

"Yup. He was my idol. Bobby, Frank, and I were inseparable growing up."

"I remember. We used to call you 'The Three Musketeers'."

"Yeah, that was us. I used to love going over to Bobby's quarters and listening to Ray talk about his adventures back on Earth. That's where I got my adventuresome spirit. I'm sure of it. Then when Bobby died, Ray sort of took me under his wing, put the command bug in me. It's all I can ever remember wanting to do with my life." Jack took a drink from his own canteen. "This mission seemed an obvious choice."

"So you never thought twice about volunteering?"

"Nope."

"I sure did. So did Abby."

"Yeah, Tanya did too. She never asked me *not* to go, but I know she wanted to. I guess she just knew I *had* to go." Jack thought for a moment, remembering their last night together. Tanya's mother had taken the children for the night, leaving them alone in their quarters for the first time in months. There had been nothing terribly romantic about that evening. They had dined in private, their meals thoughtfully delivered by a friend of Tanya's who worked in the galley. They had spent the evening talking, mostly about her work in the ag-lab. After being in training for the mission for over two years, most of their conversations had been about his work. She seemed to need to talk about her work. Or maybe she just needed him to listen. He found agricultural work mundane, but she loved it with a passion, and it gave him insights into an aspect of the mission that he otherwise would've missed.

They had once thought of her coming along with him on the mission. But they had decided it would be too difficult on their two young children, especially if the two of them perished along the way. So she had acquiesced, thus passing the assignment to Sara.

They had made love that night, refusing to speak of the dangers that might lie ahead for him. She had not asked him to make any promises to return that he could not keep.

She understood his inherent heroic nature, as much as she disliked that side of him. And he had made no such promises before departing, saying nothing more than “see you soon” as he kissed her on the cheek and floated through the docking port hatch.

“You know,” Jack realized. “In retrospect, I think she’s probably much braver than I am.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, I think it must be easier to face the unknown when you know you’ll have some amount of control over what happens to you. But to sit back and watch someone you love do so, not knowing what will happen to them, what they may be facing, well, I don’t know if I could handle that.”

“I see what you mean.” It was an unexpected observation on Jack’s part. “I didn’t know you testosterone types could be so sensitive.”

Jack glanced at Will after his remark, catching the grin on his face. “Yeah?” he laughed. “Well, we have our moments.” Jack turned his gaze toward the campfire, deciding that it needed more fuel to maintain its amber blaze.

“Well, convincing Abby wasn’t so easy,” Will confessed. “She even asked Maria to try to talk me out of it. It almost worked, too.”

“So she didn’t want you to go, I guess.”

“That is a considerable understatement. She wouldn’t speak to me for days.”

“What changed her mind?”

“I’m not sure, really. But I think it had something to do with my oldest son. He had never really been interested in my work. I think he wanted someone a little more interesting for a father. Maybe someone not quite so ‘scientific’, if you know what I mean. But after I started training, she heard him bragging about me to his friends. At that point, I think she understood my reason for going better than I did.”

Jack tossed the wood onto the flames. It was a very dry piece, and it caught fire quickly, the flames running up the log on all sides. "Yeah, boys love to brag about their fathers."

"Maybe, but he had never done so before then. I guess it had a significant effect on her. I know it did on me."

"Yeah, it does feel good."

"Yes, it does."

They sat there for a while, staring at the fire. They had both learned something important about each other, as well as themselves. It had brought them a little closer together, which they both seemed to welcome.

* * *

"Need some help?" Maria asked as she stepped off the ladder onto the flight deck, bowing her head slightly under the low ceiling.

"Huh?" Frank responded, not expecting visitors.

"Help? Assistance?"

"Oh, no thanks, Doc." Frank was puzzled by her offer. She was an excellent doctor, and a pretty fair psychologist on top of it. But he was pretty sure she didn't know anything about electronics. That's when Frank became suspicious. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason," she said innocently.

Frank realized where she was headed. "Listen, Doc. I know you mean well, but if you came up here to try to shrink my head, then you can forget about it."

"A little defensive, aren't we?"

She was good, there was no doubt about it in Frank's mind. "You'd be defensive too if you had *Commander* Lynni giving you the evil eye at every turn."

"The evil eye, huh? Why do you think she does that?"

She was baiting him, trying to drag him into a conversation that he didn't feel like having right now. "Cuz she's afraid I'm going to find Jack and she's going to have to give up her seat of power," he sneered.

Maria was a little shocked at his spiteful response. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

Frank leaned back away from the electronics rack that he had been tinkering with, slumping back into his chair. "No, of course not," he sighed. "She just doesn't understand." Frank looked directly at Maria. "I *have* to do this."

"I know you do, Frank."

"Then why can't she see it?"

"She didn't have the relationship with Jack that you did."

"Neither did you, and you seem to understand."

"I'm *trained* to understand."

She had gotten him to open up about it, and quite easily. "Yeah, they trained you pretty well, didn't they?" he remarked as he leaned forward to test another circuit with his probe.

"I'll take that as a compliment," she countered, not allowing herself to become upset by his jab.

Frank was silent for a moment. "Sorry, Doc."

"It's alright, Frank. You know, Will was one of *my* best friends."

"Really?"

"Yup. I introduced him to his wife."

Frank leaned away from his work once again, curious about this new information Maria was sharing.

"They were both so shy, I thought I was going to have to coach them through their first kiss!" She laughed to herself. "You should've seen them!"

"I had no idea," Frank admitted, chuckling.

The shared bond had been forged, just as she had intended. But it was time to get down to business. "So, you think you can fix this thing?" she asked as she leaned forward, feigning interest.

Frank knew what she was up to, but the door had already been opened, and she had stepped inside. "No, actually, I don't," he admitted. "The circuitry for the radar transponder is burnt to hell. But I might be able to rig it up to triangulate the position of any radio transmissions it might receive."

"How would you do that?" Maria had no idea what he was talking about.

"If we could put two radio repeaters on the ridgelines, I could program it to triangulate the position of the transmission source by comparing the time difference between the two repeaters."

"Really? I didn't know we even carried any, what did you call them?"

"Repeaters. We don't, actually. But they'd be easy enough to rig up."

"And you'd have to put them on top of the mountains? Can you do that?"

"I don't really know. I'm pretty sure I could. Maybe using one of the ATCs."

"They have to go up that high?"

"If we want to get any respectable range out of them, yes. But I doubt that Lynn would go for it."

"Have you tried asking her?"

"In case you haven't noticed, we're not on the best of terms right now. Besides, I'm not even sure I can make it work yet."

"You know, Frank, and this is just my opinion, mind you. But if you lightened up on her a bit, maybe showed a little more enthusiasm in your regular work, she might be more receptive to this idea."

"What's wrong with my work?"

"There's nothing wrong with it, what little there has been of it lately."

That one hurt. Frank hadn't realized that his productivity had dropped so much. He was a little embarrassed. "Really?" Her look answered his question. "Yeah, well, maybe you're right."

"About which? Easing up on Lynn, or your lack of work?" She wasn't going to let up on this one.

"Both, I guess." It hadn't been an easy pill to swallow. Luckily for Frank, Maria had delivered it in expert fashion. "They did train you well."

"Now that I *will* take as a compliment."

"Okay, Doc. I'll give it a try," he promised, seeing the doubtful look on her face. "I promise."

"Good. And you can start now by knocking off for the night and getting a full night's sleep for a change."

"Is that an order, Doctor?" he teased.

"If necessary."

Frank ceremoniously placed the probe he was using back on the desk beside him, turning it off. "You win," he conceded as he rose from his seat. "Did I at least put up a good fight?"

"Not really," she teased as she climbed down the ladder to the storm porch. At the bottom of the ladder she called up to Frank. "By the way, where did you hear the expression, 'shrink my head'?"

"From one of those old movies you and Laura are always watching."

"Really? I didn't realize you watched them."

"Occasionally," he admitted as he followed her through the compartment on their way to the habitat bay. "You know, you can be quite the clever girl, Doc."

"Occasionally."

* * *

Day 14;

Today, I learned what 'anaphylaxis' meant. The hard way, unfortunately. I had a nasty reaction to the bite of an insect that nearly stopped my breathing. Amazingly, Jack managed to administer emergency medical care that saved my life. Again, another of his abilities has surprised me. I can

only imagine how calmly he must have handled such a desperate situation.

In yet another surprising moment, Jack revealed a side of him that I never would have expected. This man of many surprises showed me a sensitivity that defies his cold, decisive nature. We shared insights and we gained knowledge of one another's souls.

The pace he has set for us has been grueling, at times near impossible. But it is by no means without forethought or consideration. My condition is good, my hope ever alive, and my optimism surprisingly high. Jack has insisted we take a day off to rest, in light of my near-death experience.

Speaking of this, I want you to know that the realization of what nearly transpired left me riddled with guilt. When I promised you that I would stay safe, and return to your side, I had no idea of the obstacles fate would place in my path. I only hope destiny allows me to honor my promise.

** * **

Several days later, Jack and Will were far up into the hills. It had only taken Will a day to recover enough to continue on, but Jack had opted to travel only as far as the base of the hills the first day, allowing Will to take it easy.

Just as they had anticipated, hiking through the mountains was far more difficult than walking across the plains. Still, after nearly two weeks of hiking across flatland, they were happy with the change of scenery. Here, it was greener, and more lush. Instead of hiking a relatively straight course across open plains, they found themselves weaving through never-ending forests. The trees here towered above them, and were adorned with various species of birds and small animals. There was plenty of water flowing through these hills as well, with a new stream crossing their path nearly every day.

As he had expected, Will found a greater variety of geological samples here than in the flatlands. Unfortunately, Jack's schedule left him little time for any real scientific study. So he collected small samples along the way whenever they stopped to rest, taking note of their location. After dinner, he would spend an hour or so studying the samples, leaving them behind the next morning when they struck camp and moved on.

It seemed as though they had gained at least a few thousand meters in altitude. The air was crisper, cooler, and undoubtedly thinner. The result was that water that had been enough for two days, was now only enough for one.

Today, they had been following a ravine up the side of a long hill since they broke camp more than four hours ago, hoping it would be the easiest way across the summit.

"It looks like we're nearing the summit," Jack panted as the trees began to thin out.

"I hope so," Will remarked weakly. "I'm almost out of energy."

"Just a little bit farther," Jack promised.

They continued up the ravine, stepping around rocks, fallen logs, and branches. Will had guessed that they were

actually following a dried-up run-off stream. He figured it had to be this planet's hot season. They had seen many dried-up streambeds along the way, and it hadn't rained since they arrived.

Just as Jack promised, the trees disappeared and the ravine began to flatten out once they reached the summit. Finally, the ravine disappeared altogether as the hillside leveled off. It was a relief to be walking on flatland again. The next leg would be downhill, which both of them preferred.

Jack picked up the pace a little after the terrain flattened out, but then suddenly slowed down.

"What's wrong?" Will asked when he noticed that Jack was lagging behind. "You need a break?" he teased.

"Do you hear that?" Jack asked as he ground to a halt.

Will stopped beside Jack and listened. "Sounds like running water."

"It sounds like a *lot* of running water," Jack corrected, remembering the sound of the first river they had taken water samples from.

"A river?"

"Yeah," Jack answered, a bit puzzled.

"That doesn't make any sense," Will insisted. "How can you have a river at the top of a summit?"

Jack began to move forward again. The ground ahead looked different somehow. He was pretty sure the start of the downhill grade was just ahead since the ground was not visible beyond ten meters. "I've got a bad feeling about this," he said nervously. That's when he realized what was so different.

They came to a stop at the edge of a cliff. They stood there in amazement, gazing upon the vista stretched out below them. There were no more hills on this side, no gradual decline to mirror the ascension they had just completed. Instead, it was a near straight drop, jagged and uneven, with rocks and strange trees jutting out of the cliff face.

“Uh-oh,” was all that Jack could say.

Below them stretched a vast, jungle-like forest so thick that he felt he could step onto the treetops like walking across a carpet. The canopy was colored in greens, tans, and browns, with occasional splotches of colorful flowers growing in the sunlit treetops that broke up the monotony. A wide river wound its way through the forest below, cutting it in half. About fifty kilometers across, the far side of the valley butted up against the base of another mountain range, the one that Jack assumed was the final obstacle between them and the coastline.

Jack looked to his left, where he heard the running water. The ridgeline they were standing on wrapped around a few hundred meters until it ended at the base of a very steep, rocky mountainside. A long series of waterfalls poured down the side of the mountain face, cascading from ledge to landing, forming a pool at each step before spilling out over the next edge. It ended in a large pool at the head of a great river.

To his right, the ridgeline had a slight downhill grade for another half kilometer before it also ran into another mountain face.

Jack looked straight down to the base. It wasn't exactly straight down, but it was close enough. “What do you think, three hundred meters maybe?”

“Does it matter?”

“Guess not,” Jack decided. “We'll have to look around and try to find the best place to climb down,” he announced as he began walking along the ridgeline to his right.

“Excuse me?” Will asked in disbelief. “Did you say, *climb down?*”

“How else do you expect to get down there? Take an elevator?” Jack joked as he walked along the ridge, stopping every few steps to peer over the edge.

“Are you nuts?” Will objected. “We can't climb down this!”

"Relax, Will. We can do this. Besides, the only other option is to go around. And by the look of those mountains, that'll take us months."

Will refused to believe what he was hearing. He was already turning pale at the thought of falling to his death. "You forgot the third option, Jack. We can go back to the escape pod and forget about the whole thing!"

"I thought you said you wanted to go all the way or not at all?"

"Well, yes, I did. But at the time, I assumed the trip would be relatively horizontal."

"It is," Jack defended, "mostly."

"Mostly. That's cute, Jack. You know, I wasn't sure at first, but now I have no doubts at all. You *are* crazy."

"Do you always babble like this?" Jack asked.

"Only when someone is suggesting that I jump off a cliff. Otherwise, I'm a very quiet man."

Jack stopped suddenly. "Look," he said, pointing at the ridgeline ahead of them. "There."

"What? What is it?"

"That's where we can get down."

Will looked; the cliff face was not quite as steep closest to the northern end of the ridge, but it still looked like suicide to him. "Please, Jack... Think about this," he begged.

Jack took off his pack, laid it against a rock, and began to unpack his rope.

"Maybe you should sleep on it," Will suggested.

After thirty minutes of rest, they were ready to begin their descent...or at least *Jack* was. It had taken Jack threatening to go on without him to convince Will to continue the journey. Using a one-hundred-meter rope, they lowered their packs down to the first ledge, letting the rope fall down on top of the packs once they had settled on the ledge below. Neither of them wanted to attempt the descent while carrying twenty-five kilograms on their backs.

There were no great obstacles for the first fifty meters. The cliff face wrapped around the base of the northern

mountains, so it was not as steep. A lot of very careful steps and a few butt-slides got them down. But the last fifty meters required more effort. Facing the mountainside, they stepped down, one rock, crack, or handhold at a time. On more than one occasion, Will's grip would fumble, sending pebbles and dirt showering down onto Jack. But they managed to get to the shelf where their packs waited without serious difficulty.

"That wasn't... so bad," Jack panted as he opened his canteen and guzzled nearly a liter of water.

"No, it wasn't," Will admitted. He plopped down on the ground next to Jack, pulling out his own canteen.

"The next leg shouldn't be much worse," Jack promised. He looked up at the sun. "We shouldn't rest too long, though. We don't have that much daylight left, and we'll still need time to find water and pitch camp before it gets too dark."

"Finally, something sensible."

Jack was too tired to laugh. Putting away his canteen, he got back up to his feet, walking over to the pile of backpacks and rope at the far end of the ledge. Tossing the rope over the edge to let it untangle, Jack pushed the packs to the side of the ledge. "Give me a hand lowering these."

Will joined him, looping the rope around his waist and leaning back against the cliff to brace himself.

"Ready?" Jack called.

"Ready."

Jack sat on the ground in front of Will, held onto the rope, and pushed the backpacks over the edge with his feet, putting tension on the rope. Slowly, they lowered the packs down the cliff face, the packs knocking bits and pieces of the mountain free as they slid down.

Will watched the free rope that hung over the edge to the left as it fed up and around him, paying out through Jack's hands back over the edge. It began swaying around more than usual. Suddenly, the end of the rope bounced up over the ledge. Will grabbed tightly, trapping the running

line against his waist. He felt a warm, almost burning sensation against his right flank as the rope found its way under his shirt and onto his bare skin. "That's it!" Will called out. "We're out of rope!"

Jack grabbed tightly onto the rope. Satisfied that the packs' descent had been halted, he called out to Will. "You got it?"

"Yeah, I got it," Will said as he braced himself to take the full weight of the dangling backpacks.

Jack let go of the rope slowly. Will leaned back harder as the line became considerably heavier. Jack moved to the edge to look over at the packs.

"Christ! We're probably less than five meters short!" he exclaimed. He turned around to face Will. "Anything breakable in there?"

"Just the data pad and video-player," Will answered.

"Yeah, but they're pretty well padded." Jack looked back over the edge. "What the hell, let it go, Will."

"Are you sure?"

"No, but I don't see much choice."

"Okay." Will slowly fed the last of the rope around his waist, until he could feel the knot at the end of the rope in his left hand. "Here it goes!" he announced as he let go of the rope.

Jack watched as the packs suddenly dropped the last five meters, bouncing off the ledge and over the side, heading toward the base of the cliff. "Uh-oh," Jack muttered as he watched the packs fall, the rope trailing behind in several graceful loops. Suddenly, one of the loops of rope caught onto a tree trunk protruding from the side of the mountain. There was a whizzing sound as the rope wrapped around the tree, its slack scraping at the tree bark. Then, much to Jack's surprise, the rope managed to wrap itself tightly around the tree. The rope went taut, the falling backpacks instantly reversing their course, bouncing back upward from the stretch of the line.

Jack watched as the packs bobbed up and down on the end of the line before they finally came to rest against the side of the mountain, suspended at the end of the precariously secured line. "I don't believe it," Jack groaned. "You wanna talk about luck? Take a look at this, Will."

Will walked over to the edge to take a look for himself. "How did that happen?"

"I have no idea," Jack admitted. "The falling rope just sort of wrapped around that tree, and presto."

"Unbelievable," Will agreed.

"Yeah. Let's get down there before that tree gives way."

Now with a little experience under their belts, the next leg was somewhat easier. Although most of it involved climbing down from rock to rock, the cragged mountainside provided an abundance of hand and footholds. Along the way, they were able to pull their packs back up to their original intended resting place and untangle their rope before continuing their descent. After an hour, and another brief rest, they lowered their packs down to the base. This time, the drop was straight down the entire way.

"Okay, we're going to have to do this one at a time," Jack said. "It's at least one hundred meters down to the bottom, and all we have left is a fifty-meter line, so one of us is going to have to climb about halfway down while the other one belays him from here."

"Then what does the top guy do?"

"He climbs down to the bottom guy, who belays him."

"From below? What happens if the second guy falls?"

"Well, he won't fall all the way down, only forty to fifty meters or so."

"Oh, is that all?" Will answered sarcastically. "Then you better go first," he suggested.

"You sure?"

"No. But there's no way a little guy like me is going to be able to stop someone your size from falling. You'd just take me with you."

"Good point. But that means you're going to have to make it down without any overhead support, you know."

"Don't remind me." Will scoffed.

Jack tied a few straps around his waist and legs, forming a makeshift harness. He attached the end of the short line to the harness and tugged at it a few times. "Okay, when I get down to the ledge, I'll take this off so you can haul it up and use it. Just keep a little slack on the rope unless I call for tension, or unless I fall, of course."

"Of course." Will braced himself, ready to take Jack's weight if necessary. "Ready when you are."

Jack moved to the edge of the cliff, pacing back and forth a few times as he peered over the edge, trying to determine the best spot to begin his descent.

"Okay, here I go." Jack knelt down on the ground, lowering his legs over the edge. He put his feet onto his first foothold, a large rock jutting out from the face.

Will carefully fed out the line as he watched Jack disappear over the edge, wondering if he would be able to do the same when it was his turn. Now he couldn't even see Jack, and was only able to gauge his progress by the amount of line he had fed him. Occasionally, he could hear the sound of crumbling rock, the pieces bouncing off the face on the way down, dislodging other stones.

It seemed like an eternity to Will as he slowly fed line out over the ledge. Then, to his surprise, Jack called out to him from below.

"Okay! Pull up the harness!"

Will quickly hauled it up, donned the harness, then tossed the other end of the rope back over the side to Jack. After taking a deep breath, he stepped up to the edge. He peered over it for several minutes, then finally called to Jack. "You ready?"

"Ready! Come on down!"

Jack's confidence in him was not the least bit encouraging. Unlike Jack, Will chose to lie down on his belly, parallel to the edge, and swing his legs over. Bending at the

waist, he swung his legs back and forth until he found the first rocky outcropping. Sliding out over the edge, he bent his knees and squatted down on the rock. He looked to both sides, saw nothing to his right, and a small ledge to his left. Less than two hundred centimeters wide and about one meter long, it looked more like a bookshelf than a place for a grown man to stand. But it led to yet another rocky outcropping just below it.

"Jesus, I can't believe I'm doing this," Will whispered to himself as he let his left leg dangle until he could touch the little shelf. This was the point where he needed to let go of the corner of the big, wide ledge he had started from. Only it wasn't as easy as he thought.

Forcing himself to let go, Will made it to the next ledge. Then another ledge, and a rocky outcropping. Then a small tree stub and another outcropping. It wasn't as hard as he thought, but it wasn't easy, either.

About thirty minutes later, scraped and bruised, Will made his way down to Jack's position. He stood there, panting and sweating, hugging the side of the mountain, every muscle in his body screaming with pain. Yet, he felt proud of what he'd just accomplished.

Jack, who had been at the extreme end of the ledge to avoid being showered with rocks during Will's descent, moved closer to him, gathering up the rope along the way. "Good job, Will. I didn't think you had it in you."

"Neither did I," Will admitted as he carefully took a drink from his canteen. "How much further?"

"One more climb like the last, then it's more of a slide the last thirty or forty meters to the bottom." Jack put the harness back on and headed out over the edge once more. "See you at the next stop."

Will braced himself, belaying for Jack as he climbed down the next leg. It didn't seem to take as long for Jack to get to the next stop as before, and before he knew it, he was again donning the harness and going over the edge.

Will slowly lowered himself over the edge again, carefully making his way down from hold to hold. He felt a little more confident this time around. But still, each step was cautious and considered, ever fearful of the long, deadly fall.

Only twelve meters left to go, the rock gave way, sending Will tumbling.

Jack braced himself, pulling in as much line as possible while Will fell past him on the right, hitting the ledge with a sickening thud before tumbling over the edge. Before Jack could brace himself, the sudden tension yanked him down, pulling him toward the edge. He dug his heels into the rocky ground and almost came to a stop, but the edge crumbled under the abrupt strain, and Jack went tumbling over as well.

Will struck the shallower grade on his right side with a thud, tumbling over, then continuing down the steep slope. After several tumbles, Will managed to get his feet out in front of him to control his slide.

As Will managed to slow his rate of descent, he was hit by the rocks that Jack was kicking up. He tensed as he landed on a curved rock that sent him flying through the air. He struck level ground and flipped over headfirst, landing on his left side and rolling several times before he finally came to rest at the bottom.

Will choked for a moment, sputtering dirt from his mouth, unable to breathe, the wind knocked out of his lungs. He lay there a moment, dazed, unsure if he was still alive. Then, more rocks fell around him as he heard Jack approaching. Will rolled over onto his back just in time to see Jack come toppling down beside him.

They both laid there for several minutes, coughing and sputtering, panting and groaning.

"You okay?" Jack asked.

"No."

"Neither am I. Anything broken?"

"Probably. I'm pretty sure that I'm bleeding from my left leg. Feels wet down there."

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I think I’m bleeding from my head again.”

“Did it knock any sense into you this time?”

Jack laughed, causing pain to shoot through his ribs on his left side. “Ow, don’t make me laugh.”

“What do we do now?” Will asked.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m just gonna lie here awhile.”

“*Finally*, you come up with a *good* plan.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

After an hour, Jack decided they had to find a place to set up camp for the night, as the sun was hanging low in the sky. Despite their bruised and aching bodies, they rose to their feet and made their way into the forest, dragging their packs behind them.

A sparse forest bordered the edge of the mountain. Jack remembered from his observations at the top of the cliff that the forest would soon become a more dense jungle. He only hoped they would find a suitable place to camp before they reached that point.

The trees were somehow different here. They weren't the tall, pointed towers he had seen reaching for the sky on the other side of the hills. These trees tended to spread out horizontally, their branches twisting, turning, and intermingling through those of their neighbors.

The ground here was soft, and covered with short, thick, blue grass-like vegetation that Will referred to as moss. The air was moist and heavy as well, as the fine mist from the many waterfalls along the south end of the valley wafted across the treetops, eventually finding its way to the ground below.

While they made their way toward the sound of the water, Will explained that the valley must've been cut right through the sides of the mountains by the river, over many millennia, possibly taking advantage of an area of weak, unsteady rock, allowing it to carve out such a large area.

The river itself ran along the southeast wall of the mountain, turning due west and traversing the jungle until it turned north again to run along the mountain wall on the western side of the valley. They came down the

mountainside a few kilometers north of the river's western turn. Once they reached the far side, they would have to figure out a way to cross it before they could begin their ascent of, what they hoped would be, the last obstacle between them and the western coastline.

The terrain here was uneven, with strange rocks jutting up out of the ground that were nearly big enough to be called mountains themselves. Their course soon became more convoluted, and Jack was beginning to suspect there was no water nearby, and that the sounds he thought he was hearing were auditory hallucinations.

As they rounded yet another large rock-cropping, Jack felt a warm mist fall upon his face and head. The sound he had been hearing became louder, the tree line broke, and they found themselves standing in front of a beautiful pond at the base of an elegant waterfall.

The pond was an oval shape, about forty meters long and thirty meters wide, flowing into a small stream at one end. There was a waterfall some ten meters from a plateau of rock at the far end.

"Would you look at that," Will exclaimed.

"Pretty, isn't it?"

"No, I mean those rocks," Will corrected. "That plateau, I don't think that it's really a plateau, I think that we're probably in a really big sinkhole, or something."

"What?"

"I wasn't sure before. But all those rocky crags jutting up, I think this whole area was once part of a volcanic flat."

"What's that?"

"It's an area of unstable volcanic activity, kind of like a huge, underground lava flow that connects one volcano to another."

"You mean, those twin peaks back there?" Jack asked, referring to the two mountains that bordered the cliff they had just come down.

"Probably. Occasionally, the flow gets obstructed along the way, and pressure builds up within the channel.

Eventually, it has to be let off, usually by forming underground pools. Hence the pushed up crags of rock we keep seeing."

"Do you mean, we're going to have to climb back out of here?" Jack said in disbelief.

"Maybe. I don't know. That level up there might just be the result of a shelf that was pushed up higher than the land around it when one of those underground pools formed. It's just a guess, Jack. I mean, we don't have much information about the geology of this planet." Will stepped up to the pond, squatting down and dipping his hand in the water. "It's very warm." He looked around. "Something underground must be heating the water."

"Like one of those lava pockets?"

"Possibly." Will pulled the water test kit out of his backpack and set it down next to the water. With a plastic cup, he scooped up some of the pond water and set it next to the kit. Pulling the probe out of the kit, he inserted it into the cup of water and turned the analyzer on. A few seconds later, data started scrolling down the analyzer's small display screen.

"How is it?" Jack asked.

"Not bad," Will answered as he watched the data. "A little high in minerals, which is to be expected, especially if there's a magma pressure vent under the water."

"Is it safe?"

"As it is, yes. It probably won't taste very good, but it won't hurt you."

"I don't want to taste it," Jack announced as he began to take off his clothes.

"What are you doing?" Will asked curiously.

"I'm gonna take a well-deserved bath, my friend."

"But Jack, we don't have any idea what's in there."

"I don't care." Jack declared. "I just want to get rid of this layer of filth that's been forming for days."

"Remember that thing in the river?" Will pointed out, reminding Jack of the long, snake-like organism that brushed

past his leg in the water.

"Look, I've got ten days of funk growing on me right now," Jack explained as he stripped the last of his clothing off, leaving it in a pile next to his pack. "I smell so bad that I can't even stand being in my tent with myself at night." Jack pulled a bottle of biodegradable soap out of his pack. "No offense Will, but you could use a little scrubbing down yourself," he advised as he stepped carefully into the water. "You're right, it is warm." Jack walked out further, one cautious step at a time, until he was in up to his ribs.

Will watched in fascination as Jack squatted down, submerging himself up to his neck in the warm water. "How is it?"

"It's wonderful!" Jack assured him. Jack ducked his head under the water briefly, wetting his face and hair. "Come on in, Will!"

Reluctantly, Will began to remove his clothing, being a bit tidier than Jack.

Jack poured some soap over his head and began scrubbing down his hair. Within minutes, he had worked up a good lather of greenish-brown bubbles. He stood up again, spreading the lather down over his shoulders, arms, and torso.

Finally stripped down to bare skin, Will waded cautiously into the warm water. The pond floor was hard, like rock, and felt somewhat porous under his bare feet. Will wondered if it was hardened lava flow. If so, then his theory about how the water was heated might prove correct.

Jack handed the bottle of soap to Will. "Not bad, huh?" he asked as he squatted down again, ducking his head underwater to rinse off the lather.

Will poured some soap over his head as well, working it into his hair and down over his body.

Meanwhile, Jack was wading back to shore to get his clothes. "Might as well wash these while we're here," he decided as he picked up both his and Will's clothes and brought them back out into the water.

They spent twenty minutes standing naked, waist-deep in the warm pond as they rinsed out their clothing. After that, they took the clothing back to shore and spread it out on tree branches to allow it to dry, going back into the water to finish cleaning themselves.

Satisfied that he was clean, Jack began to venture farther out into the pond, curiously searching the bottom through the crystal waters.

"Lose something, Jack?"

"Have you looked at the bottom? There's little bubbles coming out."

Will moved closer to take a look for himself. "It's probably seeping up through the porous rock. There's gotta be a lot of pressure down there to force the hot air up through the rock like that."

"Could it blow?"

"Probably not. The constant venting probably keeps the pressure from getting too high." Will observed the floor for himself. "Did you notice if the bubbles are coming out from all over the place, or are they along a specific line?"

"I don't know," Jack admitted as he continued looking.

For several minutes, they searched the bottom of the pond, trying to determine a pattern in the bubbles. Jack wasn't entirely sure why they were doing this, but it was sort of fun.

Then Jack heard a strange sound, a kind of a snort, or a grunt. He looked up, then to his left and right, but saw nothing. Then he heard it again. He spun around to look behind him. On the shore, digging through their packs, were several furry, brown creatures, each about one meter tall. "Oh, shit!" Jack began splashing through the water, heading back toward the shore as quickly as possible, yelling at the top of his lungs. "Hey, get out of there! Go on! Get lost! Beat it!"

Will chased after him, but as they approached the shore, one of the creatures turned to face them, rearing up onto its hind legs and growling ferociously at them. It appeared

quite large and threatening as it bared its considerable teeth at them.

Jack stopped suddenly. "Whoa, wait a minute!" The creature continued its deafening roar, causing Jack to retreat a few steps, shrinking back down into the water as if he were trying to hide.

Will followed suit, also not wanting to provoke the animal any further. "What are they doing?"

"They're eating our food," Jack realized.

"What do we do now?"

"What can we do? Our weapons are next to the packs. And we're standing out here, naked. All we can do is wait, and hope they get full before all our food is gone."

* * *

Dinner that night had been jovial. A good day's work had been done, and with the last of the huts being built, their base camp was completed. Even Frank had joined in with renewed interest, much to everyone's surprise. Starting tomorrow, the work of surveying the entire valley could finally begin. All the science equipment was up and functioning, thanks to Frank's enthusiastic efforts throughout the day. Even Adia seemed to overcome her difficulties in dealing with the great outdoors, although more often than not, she ended up working in a secluded corner somewhere.

As they finished their meal, Lynn went over the itinerary for the next day. Frank, Mac, Tony, and herself would begin surveying the valley with the aerial reconnaissance drone to develop a detailed map of the area. Laura and Adia would begin the task of specimen collection, setting out various traps to collect samples of insect and animal life for biologic and genetic analysis. Sara would continue working on her agricultural experiments and cultivation of their food crops, while Maria would spend her day in the med-lab comparing the latest crew work-ups with their post arrival conditions, looking for any potentially harmful anomalies. All in all,

things seemed to be going pretty well, and Lynn was beginning to feel optimistic once more.

After the briefing, the crew dispersed, each to their usual off-duty pursuits. Frank retired to the flight deck for another evening of attempting to find some way to repair the radar set. As much as it bothered Lynn to see Frank continuing his efforts, as he had pointed out, it was his time and he could do with it as he saw fit, as long as it didn't interfere with their mission. It was an unspoken agreement they had forged, and for now it would have to suffice.

After his usual evening workout, Tony went outside for a breath of fresh air. As he stood at the front of the ship staring at the evening sky, a noise from the starboard side of the ship caught his attention. Curious, he circled around the outside of the cargo pods arranged along the starboard side, half expecting to find the intruder that had visited the camp a few weeks ago during their overnight absence. Instead, he found Adia. "Oh, it's you," he said, relieved that there was no intruder. "What are you doing out here?"

"Nothing," she answered meekly.

"Nothing?"

"I'm just stargazing."

"Oh." Tony walked over and sat down on the ground next to her. "You're the last person I'd expect to be out here, sitting all alone in the darkness."

"Yes, I know. Somehow, it doesn't seem quite as intimidating at night. I'm not sure if it's the reduced visibility, or the beauty of the night sky. It just doesn't seem as vast."

"Yeah, I can see what you mean," he agreed as he leaned back against the cargo pod, his gaze drifting up to the starry sky. "It is a beautiful sky."

"The stars seem different from down here. Not like when you look at them from space."

"It's the atmosphere. It filters out a lot of the weaker, more distant stars, and distorts the others. That's what causes the twinkling." Tony rolled his eyes. "Of course, you

already know that," he said, remembering that Adia held several science degrees.

"Yes, but I wasn't speaking *scientifically*." She watched his face. He was peaceful, almost boyishly innocent as he gazed upward in awe. Here, away from Mac and the others, he was revealing his more sensitive side. It was not a surprise to her, as she had seen glimpses of it in the past.

"In space, it's more of a void, a nothingness," he explained. "You know that in millions of those star systems there could be beings just like us. Going about their day-to-day lives, living and dying, laughing and crying. But because they're so far away it doesn't seem to mean much. On the Daedalus, we were just cargo, equipment really, going about our tasks, ensuring our own survival. There were no hopes, no dreams, except for the one that everyone shared: reaching our new home." Tony let out a sigh. "We just went about our assigned duties, day in and day out. But *here*, the sky is full of hope. Here, we are surrounded by infinite possibilities. And not possibilities for our descendants, but for us. Right here, right now. That's what the sky means to me."

"That's a very nice way of looking at it, Tony."

Tony turned to look at her. He couldn't remember ever hearing her actually say his name before now. She was a beautiful young woman, her delicate face framed by her long black hair. So quiet and shy, yet filled with strength that he was sure they had yet to see. "Thank you."

She gazed into his eyes. Normally by now, she would've become embarrassed and turned away, finding some excuse to retreat. But tonight was different. There was a connection she had never felt before, even though she had hoped to feel it on several occasions in the past.

"What does the sky mean to you, Adia?" he asked softly, as he leaned a little closer to her.

"Nothing," she lied, looking down at her hands.

"I find that hard to believe."

"You'll think I'm silly."

"I doubt that."

"Well," she stalled, trying to muster up the courage. "To me, it means that everything my ancestors gave up, everything they sacrificed along the way, was worth it."

"That's a beautiful sentiment," Tony assured her kindly.

She looked him in the eyes again. They were even closer to her than before.

Tony moved his head in closer, sure that the moment was right, watching to see if she would allow him to kiss her or if she would withdraw in fear.

Scared to death, her hands trembling in her lap, Adia closed her eyes and tilted her head to accept his kiss.

Now he was sure it was time, and Tony closed his eyes and moved his head closer still, until their lips touched. Just a brief brushing of lips, followed by another and another.

"Tony? This is Lynn." his comm-set squawked.

Tony sat bolt upright, feeling like his parents had just walked in and caught him in the act. Adia also withdrew, pretending as if nothing had happened.

"Uh, yes." Tony announced as he pulled the mic down to his mouth. "Go ahead, Lynn."

"Have you seen Adia?"

"Yes, we're outside, starboard side."

"Good. Come back in. It's nearly time to button up for the night."

"Copy that. We'll be right in," he promised as he scrambled to his feet. He reached out his hand, offering to help Adia to her feet.

"Thank you," she replied as she took his hand and pulled herself up.

"My pleasure."

* * *

As the sun went down, the creatures finally grew tired of the food in the packs and left. As soon as they were gone, Jack waded cautiously out of the pond, immediately going for his weapon.

Will watched from the pond, choosing to wait at a safe distance while Jack checked things out. It was odd to see Jack tiptoe around the shore in the twilight, naked, carrying his rifle, in search of any remaining animals that might pose a threat. Once Jack was satisfied that the intruders had left, Will felt comfortable exiting the water.

"I can't believe this," Jack swore as he pulled on his pants. He didn't waste time with his shirt, eager to investigate the damage.

Will went for his clothing, getting completely dressed as quickly as possible "How bad is it?" he asked as Jack rummaged through their packs.

"For crying out loud, they ate just about everything!" Jack continued to frantically search through what was left. "I've got maybe three energy bars, and that's it!"

"Well, I've got a bag of dried fruit." Will was trying to sound encouraging, but failed. "Oh, and they didn't eat this bag of dehydrated hash."

"Of course not, that stuff is nasty." Jack sat down, dejected.

"What do we do now?"

"I guess we're going to have to live off the land."

"We have no idea what is edible and what isn't. Maybe we should go back."

"Either way, we're still gonna have to live off the land. And I don't know about you, but I sure don't want to climb up that cliff we just fell off of."

Will thought about their situation for a moment, trying to be helpful. "Well, I suppose we could test whatever food sources we might find. We could at least determine their immediate toxicity. But there's really no way to determine their long term effects in the field."

"Well, we know the long term effects of starvation, that's for sure."

"Good point," Will admitted.

"Well, this sucks," Jack decided.

Will was astonished to hear Jack admit the reality of their situation. He had always been so optimistic before. But he was right, it did suck. Here they were, stranded on an alien planet of which they knew frighteningly little about, at least a week or two from the safety of the LRV, nearly a light year from their mother ship, and over eleven light years from Earth. And now they had no safe source of nourishment.

"Well, let's pitch camp here for a few days," Jack said. "We can look for food first thing in the morning. Hopefully, after one or two days of foraging, we can gather enough to move on." Jack pulled his tent out of his pack. "Looks like you're going to have to put your scientist cap on tomorrow, Will."

It would now be up to Will to determine what they could and could not eat. And the consequences of an incorrect decision could be dire. The thought of that much responsibility made Will a little nervous. But at least that decision would be resting in his hands for once, and not in the hands of others. That, in itself, was something to which he was unaccustomed.

* * *

Tony was having a difficult time sleeping in light of what had transpired only an hour ago. It was not his first kiss, but it had felt that way. So many thoughts were running through his mind, the foremost of which was if he had done the right thing. Was it just one of those situational things, like he had seen in so many of the old Earth movies that Laura and Maria liked to watch? Or was this the start of something real? The Conception council had not paired up he or Adia with anyone before departure since the mission was considered so risky.

He knew he was getting ahead of himself, but the thought was pleasing. He wanted to tell someone about their kiss, but he couldn't tell Mac, that was certain. Mac would only cause problems with his snickers and uncouth remarks. And he definitely couldn't tell Laura, she was

already trying to match them up with one another. So he continued to toss and turn in his berth, wondering what the future might hold, and what Adia was thinking now.

Across the hall, Adia was drifting off faster than usual. She had never felt so content in her life, at least not that she could remember. It was amazing to her how one kiss, so small an act, could be so eventful to her. She had grown up in a world where you took the mate that the council assigned to you. Until now, she had fully expected to acquiesce to the council's decision, just like everyone else. But suddenly, her future showed the possibility of something different, and something far more desirable.

But Tony had his reputation back on the Daedalus. He was a handsome young man, and was rumored to have had many encounters with young women. She found it hard to believe, in light of all that she had seen of him over the past few months. Such sensitivity could not be faked, she was sure of it. And despite the rumors, she felt compelled to learn more about him.

If she had still been on board the Daedalus, she probably wouldn't have given him the time of day. There were several other eligible young men on board. And most of them would make suitable partners for raising a family. But despite her parents' teachings, she had never been comfortable with the idea of leaving such a decision in the hands of others. For as long as she could remember, others had been making decisions about her life for her. Just once, she wanted to make one for herself. And maybe this time she would.

* * *

Day 18;

Today was a very difficult day, to say the least. It was a day of many firsts for me. It was the first time that I

climbed down a mountain, not to mention the first time I fell off of one. Thankfully, nothing was broken, although I am experiencing aches and pains in places that I did not know existed. It was also the first time I went into a pool of water other than the whirlpool at the gym. It was the first time I witnessed an actual volcanic process in action, and it was the first time that my life was threatened by wild animals. Unfortunately, that last one cost us nearly all of our food rations, leaving us no alternative but to live off the land, lest we face starvation.

Tomorrow will be another first. Jack will be calling upon my scientific expertise in determining what we can safely eat on this planet. I didn't have the heart to tell him that my education in biology and nutrition is probably not much better than his own. He seemed so confident that I was better qualified to make these assessments. I'll do my best, of course. I suppose I can call upon my training in scientific practices and procedures and develop a method

of analyzing the substances in question. The survival encyclopedia we found in the escape pod covers everything you can think of. In fact, we spent much of the evening studying the section on foraging for nourishment in the wild. Determining the immediate toxicity of consumables shouldn't prove too difficult, as the bio-scanner is quite adept at such a task. But the myriad of possible side effects is impossible to determine, and the slightest mistake could quite literally prove fatal.

But enough dwelling on our misfortunes. On a more positive note, as I mentioned earlier, I have discovered active volcanic activity on this planet. You may wonder why I am excited about this. True, active volcanism can be a significant threat to the colony, but its presence can also be of great value. Geothermal power alone could provide all of the energy we would possibly need without the potential dangers of anti-matter reactors. Admittedly, however, no world is without its risks. It is only a

question of the benefits outweighing those risks.

Will closed his journal, returning it to the inside of his backpack. He was thankful the animals that absconded with their food hadn't found his journal interesting enough to take.

As he climbed into his tent to sleep, he noticed how much more alive the jungle was in comparison to the hills and plains they had traveled through thus far. The 'still of the night' was not an expression one used to describe the jungle. At least not this one. From every direction, he could hear the calls of various creatures as they went about the tasks of life. Squawks and yelps, coos and cries, even the occasional unsettling grunt. It was a symphony of alien life that should have made him nervous. But it did not. Perhaps it was the fatigue of the day's strenuous events. Or perhaps it was the knowledge that none of the animals they had encountered thus far had shown any interest in them, only their food. Or perhaps, just maybe, he was finally learning to roll with the punches.

* * *

Waking later than usual, Will realized that Jack was nowhere to be found. He did find a pot of hash, kept warm by the embers of the fire. His belly rumbling, he held his breath and devoured the foul concoction, avoiding its potent aroma. It was, after all, sustenance. And it might possibly be the last Earth food they would ever eat.

After breakfast, Will took the pot down to the pond for cleaning, finding Jack sitting on a rock at the water's edge. He was holding a long, crooked stick, obviously cut from a tree branch. Attached to the end of the stick was a thin line that ran down into the water.

"Morning," Jack whispered.

"What are you doing," Will whispered back.

"Fishing."

"Fishing?"

"Fishing."

"Why are we whispering?"

"Don't want to scare away the fish."

"Oh. Of course." Will had no idea what Jack was talking about. "What, exactly, is fishing?"

"I'm trying to catch a fish," Jack explained. "I read about it in the survival guide. This is a fishing pole," he told him, holding the stick up for him to see. He was obviously quite proud of his handiwork.

"I see. It's a very nice one, I'm sure." Will moved over closer to Jack, sitting down on the shore nearby to watch. "So, how does this thing work?"

"There's a hook on the end of this line here. And on the hook, there's a bug."

"A bug? Where did you get a bug?"

"They're all over the place. Under rocks, under tree roots, anywhere dark and moist."

"Why a bug?"

"To attract the fish."

"Fish like bugs?"

"Earth fish do, at least that's what the book says. Actually, it suggests using worms, but I figured a bug would work."

"Where did you get the hook?"

"I made it out of a needle from the sewing kit. It wasn't easy, either. I broke two of them before I finally got it to work."

"So, the fish is going to try and eat the bug?"

"Yes, and when he does, that wad of plastic wrapper from the energy bar will get pulled under the water. That's my signal to yank up on the pole, so that the hook digs into its jaw. Then I just pull it up to shore."

"I see. Sounds easy enough. How long have you been at it?"

"About an hour."

"Really? How many fish have you caught?"

"Well, none yet. Nothing has even swum by."

"Maybe they don't like bugs."

"Maybe," Jack admitted. "But if this doesn't work, I'm going to try spear fishing next."

"Spear fishing?"

"Yeah. You get a long, straight stick and sharpen one end. Then you wait until a fish swims by and you stab him with the spear."

"But I thought you said nothing has swum by yet?"

"Well, not yet." Jack pondered. "But fishing requires patience." Jack sighed. "Apparently a lot of it."

"I'm gonna start looking around for some nuts or berries or something," Will decided.

"Are you sure you don't want to try? I can make you a pole if you'd like."

"No thanks. Better we diversify, I expect."

"Suit yourself."

After cleaning the pot, Will took it with him for a walk around the pond in search of edible plants. The hard thing was deciding what might be edible, and, toxicities aside, what would taste good as well as provide nourishment. They were difficult questions, ones that he never would have expected to face in his lifetime.

Will approached the problem logically. It would be easy enough to choose specimens based on their parallels with edible Terran plants. So looking for things that looked like nuts and berries seemed a good place to start.

Within an hour, Will had filled his pot with all manner of specimens. Colorful berries, large and small, brown and tan nuts, and even a few roots and flowers thrown in for variety. With any luck, they might even find something tasty in the bunch.

He returned to the campsite, only to find Jack still sitting on his rock, waiting impatiently for a fish to take the bait. "Any luck?"

"Hell no!" Jack wasn't whispering anymore.

"Maybe you picked a bad spot? Maybe you should go where the fish already *are* instead of waiting for them to come to you?"

"I tried that already. Every time I go to them, they swim away."

"Maybe you're supposed to hide, or something?"

"It didn't say anything about hiding in the manual," Jack stated.

"Well, maybe these fish are smarter than Earth fish?"

Jack hadn't thought of that. It seemed ridiculous, but he wasn't having any luck, and he was willing to give anything a try at this point. He got up and moved behind his rock, crouched down and held his pole out over the rock. "How's this?" he asked.

"Pretty good, I guess." Will picked up his pot of plant specimens to head back to camp. "I'm going to go test these samples. Let me know if you catch anything." Will turned and walked away, trying not to laugh at the sight of his commander, squatting down behind a rock, hiding from the 'smart fish'.

Jack soon tired of his crouching position, stiff from yesterday's fall. He quickly decided that his position needed to be changed, choosing to sit on the ground behind the rock, and lean against it in a semi-reclined position with the pole over his shoulder. He was about to drift off to sleep when he felt a slight tug on the pole. He awoke with a start, unsure of what had caused him to stir. Then there was another tug at the pole, and he turned his head to see the little piece of plastic wrapping he had tied to the line get pulled under the surface. "Holy crap," he exclaimed as he quickly turned around and rose to his feet, climbing clumsily over the rock to the water's edge.

Jack tugged hard at the pole, hoping to lodge the hook deeply into the fish's jaw just as the manual had instructed. "Hey, Will! I think I've got something!"

From his testing by the fire pit, Will heard Jack's cries and jumped up to run down to the pond. When he got there, Jack

had both hands on the pole, and was trying to muscle the fish up onto the shore. "Unbelievable!" Will exclaimed. "You do have one!" Will watched as the fish jumped up out of the water. It was long and grey, with a dorsal fin jutting out of its back. Its green and gold stripes on its sides glistened in the midday sun as it fell back into the pond with a splash.

"Man! Did you see that? That thing is huge!" Suddenly, his pole snapped in half, leaving Jack holding the stump as the other end fell into the water.

"And strong, too!" Will laughed.

But Jack wasn't giving up that easily, not after over two hours of waiting. He ran into the water, splashing madly as he tried to reach the broken tip of the stick still floating in the water. Just as he was about to grab it, it shot away from him, stopping a meter further out into the pond. Jack dove for the stick, fearing it would get towed farther out and he might never reach it.

"Jack!" Will cried out, fearing that Jack might have fallen into deep water.

But Jack was quickly back on his feet, standing waist-deep, the end of the pole firmly in his right hand. He grabbed the end of the line with his left hand and then his right, as he began backing toward the shore. "Hah! I've got you now!"

Jack fought to keep his balance against the pull of the fish that was putting up a valiant struggle to survive. He was amazed at how strong the creature was, as the line dug into his fingers painfully. He quickly wrapped the line around his palm a few times, making sure that it wouldn't slip through his fingers as he continued his way back to shore.

Will watched from the shore as the great fish jumped high above the water once again. It had to be at least a meter long. This time, the fish rolled over as it fell back to the water, and Will could see that it had several fins along its sides as well.

Jack was back on the shore now, pulling the fish along behind him as it continued to struggle against Jack's hook

and line. Then, as suddenly as it started, it stopped. There was silence.

“What happened?” Will asked.

“I don’t know!”

“Is it dead?”

Jack quickly pulled it onto shore, wrapping the line around his hand as he brought it in. A minute later, Jack was proudly holding the meter-long fish up high in the air. His blood was surging through his body like he had never felt before. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and he was panting with exhilaration. “Would you look at this thing!”

Will examined the fish as Jack carried it up to camp. It had three prongs to its tail fin, something that Will was reasonably certain Earth fish did not have.

Then the fish began flopping on the end of the now short line, startling the both of them. The line broke, and the mighty fish fell to the ground at Jack’s feet, thrashing madly as it tried to find a way back to the water.

Jack and Will hopped around in a panic, yelling madly as they tried to stop the fish from flopping its way back to the safety of the pond.

“Do something, Jack!”

“Like what?” he screamed as he pranced.

“Kill the damn thing!”

“How?”

“Hit it! Kick it! Stomp on it! Do something quick, before it gets away!”

They jumped around the struggling fish for a few seconds more, Jack looking about for something to strike it with. Finally, instinct took over and Jack pulled out his side arm and quickly fired three rounds at the bouncing creature, sending dirt and fish pieces flying in all directions. The fish stopped its mad dance of survival, thoroughly dead.

They stepped up to the dead fish. A greenish fluid oozed out of the end where the fish’s head had been. But now, it was only a jagged, fleshy end of the fish’s long, meaty torso.

"You blew its head off." Will stated in shock.

"Yeah, well, I don't think you're supposed to eat the head anyway," Jack said defensively as he reached down to pick up the carcass.

Will stared at the dead fish for a minute. It looked nothing like any of the fish that were raised in the tanks back on the Daedalus for consumption. It didn't even look like anything that he had seen in any of the pictures of fish back on Earth.

"Do you think it's safe to eat?" Will asked.

"After all that, it better be!" Jack exclaimed.

"So, how do you prepare that thing to eat?" Will asked.

"I still have to read that part," Jack admitted as he carried it back to camp.

* * *

That evening, after Jack had cleaned and gutted the fish and Will had analyzed the meat and deemed it safe, or at least free of any detectable toxins, Jack skewered it with a long stick and held it above the fire to cook. Surprisingly, it smelled fairly appetizing during preparation.

Will decided it would be unwise for them to eat more than one new item at a time, and that they should each eat something different. That way if one of them got sick, the other would still be well enough to take care of them, or at least be alive to tell about it.

Will had generously offered to let Jack be the first to eat the fish, since he had been the one to catch it, and opted for the berries he had collected as his evening meal.

Jack cut off a piece of the fish meat, inspecting it on the end of his fork for some time before putting it in his mouth and chewing it.

"How is it?" Will asked.

"Not bad," Jack said thoughtfully, still chewing. "A little tough." He finished his first mouthful, swallowing it down with a drink of water. "It's kind of bitter, and a little stringy. Definitely takes some getting used to." He cut another

piece, willing to eat almost anything at this point. "What about your berries?"

Will looked at his bowl of purple berries. He had washed them vigorously, paranoid about any alien bacteria that might be on their surface. He would've preferred to cook them first. But this would be something they would carry with them on their journey to eat on the trail, and cooking them wasn't part of the plan.

Will picked up one berry, holding it up between his thumb and forefinger for inspection. "Well, here goes nothing," he announced as he placed the berry ceremoniously into his mouth. He bit down slowly on the berry, squeezing it with his teeth until it burst open with a slight popping sensation, squirting sweet nectar into his mouth and onto his tongue. "Mmm." It was soft, succulent, and sweet. "These are great," he exclaimed as he picked up a few more and popped them into his mouth. "I sure hope these don't kill me, because they're delicious!"

"Great!" Jack congratulated him as he took another bite of his fish.

For several minutes, they devoured their food, shoving the next bite into their mouths before they had finished the previous one.

Five minutes later, their plates were clean and their bellies full. It had been a simple meal, but a very important one. It meant that they might actually survive this ordeal. It gave them ideas and inspiration. But more importantly, it gave them a chance. Hopefully, it wouldn't give them indigestion.

* * *

The next morning, Will ate the rest of Jack's fish, and Jack ate some of the tan nuts that Will had collected. The nuts, they had decided, probably would need to be roasted in the future, but for now, they were edible.

They spent another day by the pond, testing various specimens of plant life that Will collected. Jack caught

another fish, this time using a stronger pole. It was a smaller variety, of a different color and fin configuration. This one Jack named a 'yellow-tail two-striper', and the one from the previous night he named a 'tri-tail' for its three-finned tail.

On the third morning, they broke camp and headed deeper into the jungle, carrying as many of the 'safe' nuts and berries as they could fit in their packs. Their plan was to meet up with the river they had seen from the top of the cliff and follow it across the jungle. They could fish along the way for their dinner, all the while looking for an easy place to eventually cross the river.

Over the next few days, they covered very little ground. The jungle was much more difficult to traverse, and most of their time was spent collecting possible food sources and testing them. They had ruled out countless varieties of plants, finding far more of them toxic than safe. And of those that were not deemed toxic, less than half of them tasted good enough to eat. But Will kept a careful record of every sampling in the data pad along the way, and within a week, they had a more than adequate assortment of culinary treats. The next step would be to try combining them into different entrees. This seemed a waste of time to Jack, finding simple preparation far more practical for their situation. But Will was determined to try, finding it an interesting challenge.

* * *

Frank woke up feeling strange. He opened his eyes as the first light of day spilled through his tiny window, illuminating his narrow berth with the warm, amber light of dawn. He rubbed his eyes for a moment, noticing that a slight perspiration had accumulated on his forehead. His ventilator was on, and it was blowing cool air, not warm, just as he preferred. But still, he felt overly warm.

He sat up in his berth, bowing his head slightly to avoid striking it against the overhead. Whoever had designed the berths must've thought that everyone using them would be

less than one hundred and eighty centimeters tall, a damned inconvenience that Frank cursed almost daily. He noticed that his stomach didn't feel quite right. A little queasy, maybe. Not really enough to be called nausea, but not exactly normal. Sara had been on cooking rotation last night, and although she was a skilled agriculturalist, her culinary talents left much to be desired. Deciding it was probably Sara's cooking, he headed for the bathroom.

An hour later, he was picking at his breakfast. Laura had the breakfast duty this morning, and she was quite adept at food preparation. She had prepared several loaves of bread the day before, using the wheat Sara had cultivated over the last two weeks using a fast growing, genetic hybrid developed on the Daedalus. Unfortunately, the meal Laura had prepared this morning, while delicious, wasn't helping his stomach problems.

His work assignment today was indoors, which would leave him close to the bathroom if the need should arise. He had considered consulting Maria about the problem, but decided against it for now. Maria was over protective as it was, and he didn't want to give her another excuse to mother him any more than she had been since his near-drowning experience nearly a month earlier.

* * *

Jack and Will had depleted their supply of portable food, and thus chose to take a day off from their journey to collect more. As usual, Jack took the role of hunter, spending the day trying to catch small game. They had been eating fish nearly every night for over a week now, and he longed for something different.

Will was content in his role as gatherer. It left him free to leisurely observe the environment around him, rather than rush through it as they did while hiking. He had even taken to dictating his findings along the way into a digital data recorder. He had realized early on that their journey exposed them to a greater variety of organisms than could

be observed from one location. Someday, the information might prove valuable to future explorers of this world.

Today's gatherings provided a few new testable varieties, although Will preferred to stick to those that they already knew were safe. Jack, on the other hand, seemed to prefer variety to safety. He had pointed out that it might be worthwhile to field-test a wide selection of edibles, since there was no telling what might be available along the way. It was a valid point, but arguable nonetheless.

Will had been gathering for over an hour and needed a break. He wandered farther from camp than usual and used up most of his drinking water in the process. He decided to refill his canteen from the river not fifty meters away, since it was considerably closer than the camp. The water had proven safe thus far. Although they had been boiling it as a precaution, he knew it was probably unnecessary. And Jack had already drunk the water straight from the river on more than one occasion without any ill effects.

Will found his way to a small clearing along the river's edge. The sun felt warm on his neck, after wandering under the jungle canopy for so long. It was an experience he enjoyed, feeling the energy from the nearby star warming his body, even though he knew that it was really the feeling of radiation showering his body.

Squatting on the riverbank, he carefully dipped his canteen into the water, watching as the air escaped from the submerged container, rising to the surface in a stream of bubbles. Once the bubbles had stopped, he lifted the canteen from the water and brought it to his lips, taking a long, cool drink. The chilling river water was far more refreshing than water that had been boiled sterile and left to cool overnight. They had abandoned testing the water unless suspect, realizing that their supply of testing materials was limited, and they needed to save them to test potential food sources. So far, the water on Tau Ceti Five had proven safe to drink, as long as it was not stagnant. Will pondered the thought as he dipped the canteen in again to

replace what he had drunk, before replacing the cap and returning it to the holster on his hip as he stood upright again. Never would he have imagined himself taking such risks, or 'jumping in the deep end', as Jack put it.

Suddenly, Will froze, staring across the wide river at the opposite shore. He hadn't seen it at first, the color of its fur nearly identical to the blue-tinted bushes behind it. But there it was, staring back at him with a strangely intelligent gaze. It was at least two meters tall, bipedal and humanoid in form, with long arms and legs that, although slender in overall appearance, looked to be quite muscular. Its blue fur glistened in the sunlight, its head resting atop a short, meaty neck, and was covered with long hair of similar coloring.

They both stood there for nearly half a minute, each studying the other in amazement. Each trying to decide what the other one was, if they posed a threat to one another, and how they should react. Then, as if it had made its decision, the creature squatted low, assuming what looked to be an aggressive posture to Will, who chose to back away slowly to avoid provoking it. Even though it was on the other side of the river, Will hardly felt protected by the vast, rushing body of water running between them.

He continued his careful retreat, not turning his back to the creature until he was well within the tree line, at which point he turned and broke into a dead run. Will quickly wove his way through the jungle, jumping over obstacles and ducking under low-hanging branches with a grace and skill he hadn't realized he possessed. His breathing became rapid and shallow, both out of fear and exertion, as he made his way back to camp. It wasn't until he was nearly within visual range of their campsite that he remembered the weapon he carried on his hip.

"Jack!" he yelled as he approached the camp. "Jack!" There was no answer. A few moments later, he arrived at the campsite, but Jack was nowhere to be found. "Jack!" he

repeated at the top of his lungs, spinning around to holler in all directions.

* * *

By lunchtime, Frank felt a little better. The uncomfortable sensation was still with him, but he had gotten used to ignoring it. He attributed his subsequent headache to the hours he had spent studying aerial recon images of the valley and terrain scans Tony photographed using the remotely-operated drone. A small, remotely-operated quadcopter less than half a meter long, outfitted with a digital camera and several sensors that gave them the ability to accurately chart the area without having to survey it from the ground. The task at hand was to develop enough of an understanding about the area to choose the best colonization site. And although a computer algorithm recommended potential sites, the final decision was left to human reasoning and thus required detailed analysis of all the images.

After lunch, Frank decided to see Maria about his ailment. As expected, she collected blood and urine samples for analysis and conducted a full physical examination just to be safe, promising to get back to him. In the meantime, she gave him something to ease his symptoms.

* * *

Will heard something in the distance... Something moving. "Jack?" Will called out as he heard something approach. This time, he drew his weapon, unsure of who, or *what* was coming. "Is that you?"

"Of course it is!" Jack answered as he arrived at camp to find Will, pale and out of breath. Even more surprising was the fact that Will had his pistol drawn. "Were you expecting someone else?"

"You're not going to believe what I just saw!" he exclaimed as he re-holstered his weapon. "It was at least two meters tall, Jack! It was covered with blue hair, with long

arms, and it was looking right at me, like it was trying to figure out what I was!"

"What are you talking about? What did you see?" Jack couldn't understand why Will was so panicked. It was not the first creature they had seen during their journey, although by Will's description, it might very well be the largest.

"You don't understand," Will insisted as he sat down to rest. "It was bipedal, Jack! It was humanoid!"

Now Jack was confused as well. "Was it intelligent?"

"I don't know! It's not like I had a conversation with it!" Will thought about it for a second. "But now that you mention it, I'm not sure. Maybe there *was* something..."

"Something?" Jack interrupted. "Like what?"

"Something in its eyes. Not like an animal's eyes. At least not like any of the animals in pictures and movies. I don't know."

"And it saw you?"

"Oh yes."

"And it didn't do anything?"

"No... Well, it *was* on the other side of the river. It just looked at me, like it was trying to figure me out. Then, after a few moments, it looked like it was angry or something. That's when I decided to leave."

"Can you show me where you saw it?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess so." The last thing on Will's mind was going back to see it again.

"Let's go."

Will jumped up from his seat, still full of adrenaline from his encounter, and headed quickly back into the jungle.

"Whoa! Slow down!" Jack advised. Let's not run right into its arms, Will!"

"Sorry," Will apologized, slowing his stride. He noticed that Jack had drawn his weapon, and decided to draw his again. For once, he was actually glad that Jack had required him to carry the damned thing.

His hurried trek back to camp after the encounter was far more direct than the wandering course he had taken during his gathering expedition. In a short time, they found themselves at the same tree line near the riverbank, staring anxiously across the wide river, scanning the area for any sign of the creature.

"I don't see anything, Will."

"It was right there, by those rocks."

Jack used his visual scanner to get a better look, carefully examining everything in the area. "Well, whatever it was, it's not there now."

"It was there, Jack, I swear!"

"I believe you, Will. Look, there's a broken branch and water marks on the shore from where it probably exited the river. And there are tracks higher up on the bank, like footprints." Jack put the scanner down, using his naked eyes to scan the overall area again. "It looks like it went up the bank to the left and into the trees." Jack surmised, handing the scanner over to Will.

Will scanned the area. He never would have thought to look for such indications, despite his scientific training and education. "So, what do we do now?" Will asked as he handed the scanner back to Jack.

"There's not much we can do." Jack rose from their hidden observation point in the bushes to return to camp. "I'll tell you one thing, though, I'm certainly going to build a bigger fire from now on."

* * *

The medication Maria gave Frank had helped, reducing the sensation to only an occasional discomfort. She found no abnormalities in his blood or urine, and his physical examination had proven unremarkable. Still, Maria was concerned, and ordered him to return for repeat labs every day until the situation was resolved, just to be safe.

That night, Frank slept fitfully, thrashing enough to awaken Maria in the berth across from him. Startled by the

noise, she climbed out of her bed and rushed to Frank.

“Frank?” she whispered at the curtain to his berth, not wanting to wake the others. “Are you alright?” She could hear him tossing and turning, moaning incoherently, and eased his curtain open, peeking in as she slid it aside.

She watched for a moment as Frank’s head thrashed back and forth, his hands occasionally flailing from side to side while his legs and torso shifted under the covers. Suddenly, Frank sat bolt upright, startling her and causing a short, muffled scream to leave her lips before she could cover them with her hands.

“Jesus, Frank, you scared me!” she said in surprise.

Frank was so dazed and confused, he didn’t notice Maria standing at the foot of his bed.

Maria’s hands dropped from her mouth. “Frank?” She noticed that he was covered with sweat. His face was pale, and his eyes were full of a fear that she had never seen before. He was panting and his eyes darted about frantically as if he was trying to understand where he was and what was happening to him. “Frank, you’re soaked,” she whispered. Maria looked around to see if anyone else was awake to help her. But everyone was still asleep, exhausted from a hard day of work.

Frank continued to look around nervously, trying to get his bearings. His pulse was racing, his mind spinning. He could hear someone speaking, but he couldn’t understand what was being said. His mind struggled to focus on the sound of the voice, to try to determine where it was coming from. He was seeing, but the images didn’t make any sense to him. Finally, he managed to focus his attention on the voice. It was coming from right in front of him. There was someone there, someone standing at his feet, someone with dark hair, someone with a soothing voice. It was a woman, Frank realized, someone he knew. Then the image began to solidify. Grey-green eyes, tan skin...

Maria reached out her hand, seeing a spark of coherence in Frank’s eyes. “It’s okay, Frank. You’re all right.”

The woman was calling to him, telling him something, but he still couldn't make out what she was saying. He could hear the words, they just didn't make any sense...but he felt like he could trust her, and put his trembling hand into hers where it hovered in front of him. He could feel her gentle grip, tugging at him with encouragement, urging him to follow her.

"That's it, Frank. Come on out, you can do it." Maria noticed that Frank's feet were trying to walk, even though they were under the covers and not on the floor. She pulled the covers off of him to make it easier. He was still wearing his work clothes. She continued to tug at his hand, urging him to climb out of his berth, wanting to get him to the med-lab where she could take care of him properly. But his incoherent condition made it difficult. She continued to speak gentle, encouraging words to him, hoping to bring his mind back from wherever it had been before this moment.

Slowly, Frank seemed to regain some semblance of control over his body, managing to climb to his feet, and stumble toward her. She caught him before he fell, nearly losing her footing in the process.

Frank collapsed, draped across Maria's right shoulder, his arms dangling down behind her back as he tried to stiffen up his legs to support his own weight.

"Come on, Frank, stand up," she begged him. He was a big guy, not stocky and muscular like Mac, but much larger than her nonetheless. "That's it," she coerced as his knees locked and his torso tried to straighten. "There you go."

Frank turned to his right at Maria's urging, his left arm now hanging around her neck, dangling over her left shoulder, his hand bouncing against her as they stumbled forward toward the med-lab.

He was beginning to understand where he was again. He tried to speak, but could only mumble incoherently. "Jack?" he asked.

"Jack's not here, Frank. It's me, Maria."

"Jack? Where's Jack?"

"You're on board the LRV, Frank. Do you understand?"

Frank looked around as they made their way forward. He recognized the habitat as they passed through it.

"What's going on?" Lynn asked as she pulled the curtain of her berth back from the inside and peeked out. "Frank!" she exclaimed, noticing the awkward way he was hanging onto Maria for support.

"Help us!" Maria told her.

"Mac! Tony!" Lynn called as she climbed out of her berth. Within moments, both of them were out of their berths and full of questions as they flanked their friend and helped him to the med-lab.

Once in the lab, they eased Frank up onto the exam table. His breathing was still shallow and his skin was cold and clammy. "Tony, put him on high-flow," she ordered as she began attaching various sensors to Frank's body, flipping on the bio-monitor and adjusting the settings. His blood pressure was up, and his pulse rate was sky-high.

As Tony placed the oxygen mask on Frank's face, she quickly drew another blood sample while Frank was still delirious. Maria wondered if he had experienced some sort of seizure, even though she suspected it was nothing more than a bad dream, probably coupled with a low blood glucose level, since he hadn't eaten very well the previous day.

Frank's eyes closed once he was supine again. But now they were beginning to open, fluttering at first. The light was low, but he could see Maria working in the corner of the lab.

"Oh, so you're awake?" Maria commented, after turning around.

"How did I get here?" Frank whispered from behind the oxygen mask.

"We brought you here," she explained as she stepped up to his bedside. "You were thrashing around so much, you woke us up. When I checked on you, you were incoherent, pale and sweaty... You scared me half to death."

Frank closed his eyes again. "I guess I was having a bad dream."

"I'll say. Care to talk about it?" she asked, gesturing to the others to leave the compartment.

"It was about Jack," he began, opening his eyes again and staring at the ceiling. "He was struggling to survive... Out in the wilderness...trying to find his way back to us. It was cold and windy, and he was weak...and hungry. He was calling out to me, begging me to help him." Frank looked at her again. "It was *so real*."

She could see the pain in his eyes. He was battling the guilt within himself. "You know, Frank, there was nothing that you could've done when the Icarus went down. You know that."

"Do I?"

"Jack chose his fate, Frank. He knew the risk he was taking, and he knew he had to do it. That's the kind of guy he was."

"I shouldn't have let him go down there, Maria."

"You couldn't have stopped him. None of us could have. The sooner you realize that, the sooner you can get over the guilt and get on with your life."

"And how am I supposed to do that?"

"I'm not sure. It's different for everyone. I do know that first you have to *want* to get over it."

"You think I don't?"

"You tell me."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been watching you mope around, feeling sorry for yourself, like you're the only one who's suffered a loss. We all suffered a loss, Frank."

"You don't pull any punches, do you?"

"Only when I have to," Maria smiled.

"Anything else?"

"You have to forgive yourself."

"Maybe you're right," Frank sighed.

"And until you do, you're probably going to continue getting ill."

"So you think my symptoms are psychosomatic?"

"Maybe."

"I see." Frank was a little surprised at her diagnosis. He had never thought himself the type that could become physically ill because of stress. But then, it seemed he was learning a lot about himself during this mission. "I'll give it my best, Doc. Now, when can I get out of here?" he asked as he pulled the oxygen mask off his face.

"Well, your vitals all appear to be back to normal, and your blood glucose isn't dangerously low, although I do suggest that you eat something before you go back to sleep. We don't want to go through this again."

"Quite right," he agreed as he sat up.

Maria lowered the rail on his bed so that he could hang his feet over the side. "How do you feel sitting up?"

"Fine. A little weak, maybe."

"No dizziness?"

"Nope."

"Okay, then."

Frank looked at her for a moment. "Thanks, Doc."

"It was my pleasure," she smiled.

Frank slowly scooted to the edge of the bed and stood up, pausing to make sure he was steady before heading for the door.

* * *

Jack had noticed that the hair on his arms had become lighter in color, taking on a pale, almost blonde tint over the past few weeks. In fact, after Jack brought the subject up, Will commented that Jack's own overall hair color had grown a tad paler. After consulting the survival encyclopedia, they decided it was probably due to prolonged exposure to sunlight, something that none of them had ever experienced.

But Jack had noticed something else. He had become leaner and more muscular. He had been in pretty good shape most of his adult life, working out regularly in whatever gym was available to him at the time. But it wasn't the sort of transformation that one would expect from vigorous exercise. Instead, it was more of a change in definition, leaving his muscles leaner, yet more defined. And he had noticed a similar change in Will as well. He decided that all the physical exercise they had been getting was causing the transformation in both of them.

But there was another change, one that could not be so easily explained. It was mental, and brought him a strange pleasure. He felt more alive, more conscious of his place in the vast world that now surrounded them. Perhaps it was the result of prolonged living in the outdoors, or maybe the fact that he was in better physical shape. Maybe his recently forced change in diet even had something to do with it. Whatever it was, he was enjoying it, as their journey through the jungle was beginning to feel easier.

Jack sat by the fire, watching its amber light dancing amongst the underside of the trees. After their adventure at the river, Jack returned to find that he had successfully snared a small animal he referred to as a rabbit, due to its similarities with the Earth versions that were raised on the Daedalus for consumption. Slaying it had been relatively easy. His mere presence had nearly scared it to death. Will, on the other hand, had expressed considerable remorse at the killing of the defenseless creature. But Jack, in his desire to eat meat once again, had no such compunctions. It had even been rather tasty. Even Will, who had also grown tired of fish and berries, enjoyed his portion of Cetian rabbit meat, and now he too sat by the fire, satisfied by the evening meal they had just finished.

"What are you doing?" Jack asked as he noticed Will carving away at a fat stick.

"I'm whittling."

"I know you're whittling, but what are you trying to make?"

"A recorder."

"A what?"

"It's a musical instrument. Kind of like a flute."

"I never heard of it before. Where did you learn about that?"

"I used to read a lot when I was young. Anything I could get my hands on."

Jack was intrigued. No one had thought to bring any sort of musical instruments on board during their ancestor's hasty departure so many decades ago. And since there had been far too little resources on board to create them, most of their music was either recorded versions brought from Earth, or digital music created by the computer programmers with too much time on their hands. The idea of creating music manually, using a handheld instrument of some sort, seemed terribly foreign to Jack, even though he knew that music had been one of the few things common amongst all Earth's cultures throughout human history.

"I didn't know you could play an instrument." As far as Jack knew, no one on board the Daedalus knew how to play a musical instrument.

"I can't," Will admitted. "But I thought I might give it a try."

"Oh really? That's gonna take some time, isn't it?"

"*Time*, is the *one* thing I seem to have plenty of these days."

That, Jack decided, was certainly true enough. "So, how does it work?"

"Well, if I remember correctly, it should be a hollow tube with a fipple at one end to create the sound when you blow. And it needs to have several holes spaced at proper intervals to make up a musical scale."

"How do you know where to put the holes?"

"I've seen pictures of them before, and the holes looked like they were fairly evenly spaced. I figure after I make the

first two holes, I can measure the change in pitch using the resonance scanner on the data pad, and then calculate the rest of the holes from there.”

“I never would have thought of that,” Jack admitted.

“I imagine hollowing it out is going to be the hard part.”

Jack rose, going over to his backpack. He pulled out the tool roll and produced a long, slender screwdriver and handed it to Will. “Maybe if you can find a way to sharpen up the tip of this, it might work for you.”

Will examined the implement for a moment, weighing its possibilities. “Thanks, Jack. This just might do the trick.”

Jack excused himself and went to his tent to turn in for the night. Will continued to whittle for several hours, turning the fat stick into a near perfect column before retiring to bed.

As he lay in his tent, waiting to fall asleep, he realized that for the first time, he had failed to make an entry into his journal. But he was tired now, and his hands ached from the hours spent carving.

CHAPTER NINE

"Do you have any idea what that stuff is?" Frank asked. He and Tony had spent most of the morning analyzing the last group of scans of the valley, which revealed something of interest along the base of the southern mountains.

"Not a clue," Tony admitted, scratching the back of his neck. "It looks like rock, maybe with a thin layer of topsoil over it."

"Maybe, but look here, and here," Frank noted, pointing at several places on the displayed images. "It looks too porous to be rock, don't you think?"

"Hmm." Tony was baffled. Although he had some training in geology in order to deal with excavation requirements during construction of the starter colony, this was beyond his education. "Will would know what it was," he admitted.

"Probably," Frank agreed solemnly. He didn't need anyone to remind him that Jack and Will were still missing.

"Can the computer tell us anything?"

"No, it just keeps spitting out the same response, 'Insufficient data to speculate'. So much for artificial intelligence," he quipped.

"Well, do we really need to know at this point? I mean, there's no way we're going to build the colony there anyway, not that close to the edge."

"You're probably right," Frank admitted. "But we still need to know before we can build anywhere. It might not be anything to worry about, but then again?"

Tony nodded, knowing that Frank was right. "Guess we're gonna have to go out and take a look to be sure."

"Probably, but there's no hurry right now." Frank looked at the images again, focusing his attention on the base of

the mountains at the far left edge of the monitor. Though most of the mountains were steep, there was one area near the bottom left of the screen that looked like it might provide a navigable path up the ridge. "Do you have any more images over this way?" Frank asked, pointing to the image of the mountain base.

"No, this is the last leg of the search pattern. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," Frank lied. "How high were you flying that thing?"

"About five hundred meters."

"Is that as high as it can go?"

"Not by a long shot. That baby can climb to at least two thousand." Tony boasted. "I just didn't want to risk losing signal integrity and control of the aircraft."

Frank considered their options for a moment. "It has auto-flight capabilities, right?"

"Sure. That's how we got it to fly a standard search pattern. I doubt that I could have flown it accurately enough to gather these images without it."

"So, you could load it with pretty much any instructions you wanted, even ones that would take it beyond control range?"

"I guess so, but why?"

"Look here, at this incline. It almost looks like a path up the ridge, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, kind of."

"I'd like to get a better view of that area, all the way up to the summit, if possible."

"Why?"

Frank smiled. "Just humor me, okay?"

"Sure."

"How long will it take you to write up the flight instructions?"

"An hour maybe?"

"Okay, we'll work on it tonight. We can put it back up in the air tomorrow morning."

"I'm gonna have to clear it with Lynn, first."

"Yeah, I know. Leave that to me."

* * *

"Okay, people, settle down so we can get this over with." Lynn had become accustomed to raising her voice to get their attention. The evening meal seemed to be the time when everyone was most raucous. But after a month in command, she no longer needed Frank's assistance to get them under control, and within seconds of her request, the group was quiet and attentive. "Let's have a status report. Medical?"

"I've completed the fourth weekly review," Maria reported. "Other than a few of us who have not been working hard enough to get back up to their physical peak after four months of zero gravity, there is nothing significant to report. No biochemical changes have been detected as a result of prolonged exposure to an alien environment."

"Well, that's good news," Lynn agreed.

"So I feel comfortable in reducing the frequency of the physical exams and lab draws," Maria added.

The room erupted in celebration, drowning her out completely.

"However!" Maria yelled over the cheering. "However! I remind you that we will still be doing them at least weekly until further notice!"

"Is that necessary?" Lynn asked.

"I'm afraid so. We've only been here for a month, Lynn. There may be things out there with much longer incubation periods. And there may also be things we simply haven't been exposed to yet. It's only once a week, people," Maria said, casting stern glares at the rest of the group. "Contrary to popular opinion, I am *not* a vampire," she joked.

"Very well," Lynn agreed. "Post an exam schedule, and we'll continue doing the exams in the morning."

"I'll have a schedule for you by lunch," Maria promised.

"Biology?"

Adia cleared her throat. "I've finished processing the first batch of samples. I've looked at over three hundred different organisms so far. Everything from insects to rodents, and all from within the safe perimeter. Nothing poses a threat to us so far."

"Excellent," Lynn nodded. "What's next?"

"I'm going to concentrate on larger animals and birds."

"When will you be expanding your sample collecting to outside the perimeter?" She wasn't pressuring her, she was just curious.

"After I finish with the next group of organisms, maybe two weeks? I don't expect to find much outside the perimeter that I haven't already found around here, with the exception of the beach areas."

"Maybe you can focus your first work outside the perimeter along the coast?" Tony chimed in. "It would be important for us to know the differences between the two environments before we select a building site."

"Yes, of course," Adia promised.

"Okay." Lynn turned her attention to Laura. "Genetics?"

"Well, I've taken a wide variety of samples, a few from each category," Laura reported. "Bugs, sea life, freshwater life, land animals and birds, along with several plants from each area. As best I can tell, they all use double-helix DNA strands just like on Earth," she announced proudly. "That discovery alone ought to get my name into the history books."

"Nothing troublesome?" Lynn asked.

"No, but, I haven't really looked at their genetic interactions with Earth-based DNA yet. I've just been looking for anything at the strand level that might be different than what we already know about DNA," Laura explained. "It will take years to analyze just the samples I've collected so far. Maybe decades to analyze every living organism within this valley." Laura could tell that this fact troubled Lynn. "However, according to protocol, if any of the other departments find something of concern, I will concentrate

my efforts on *that* issue instead of trying to get through as many organisms as possible.”

“Very well.” Lynn didn’t really know the protocols that governed the actions of the scientific members of her team. They were long, complicated algorithms that made her eyes cross. “Ag?” Lynn asked, turning to Sara.

“I should be harvesting the first group of Earth-in-Earth-soil crops within a few days,” Sara announced.

Again, the room erupted with cheers. Other than the fresh bread Laura had baked recently, they had been eating freeze-dried, dehydrated food for months, and they were looking forward to a fresh harvest.

“Thank you,” Sara preened, enjoying their praise. “After that, I should be harvesting something every ten days or so. The Earth-in-Ceti crops seem to be doing fine, although the color of some of the plants doesn’t seem quite right. I may need to add some soil constituents to the next batch.”

“Will they be safe to eat?” Lynn wondered.

“No,” Sara said emphatically, surprised that Lynn would even suggest such a thing. “At least not until Biology, Medical and Genetics have all given their approval.”

“Of course,” Lynn agreed, embarrassed by her error.

“I am going to need to gather more soil samples from all over the valley, if I’m going to complete my soil analysis in time for Tony to recommend a building site.” Sara took every available opportunity to remind everyone that she was more than just a farmer.

“Very well, Sara. We’ll get you out to collect within the next few days.”

“We’re almost finished with our aerial recon,” Tony interjected. “I’m gonna need her soil report soon,” he pointed out.

“Alright, you can take her out tomorrow morning, Tony.”

Sara beamed, satisfied that she had made her point.

“Uh, that’s not going to work,” Frank warned her. “Tony and I have to run one last pass at the southern base line.”

“I thought you finished that yesterday?”

"Well, we found an area near the base where we can't make out the topography. There's something strange we can't identify."

"Alright, Mac can take her out to gather the samples."

Sara opened her mouth to object, but Mac beat her to the punch.

"I've got my own work to do," Mac complained. "I don't have time to babysit dirt-girl."

"I don't need anyone to *babysit* me," Sara protested, fuming.

"Mission protocols, no one leaves the safe perimeter alone. You know that." Lynn turned to Mac. "What is it that you have to do tomorrow?"

"I've gotta move the water intake and clean out the filters. They keep gettin' clogged up by all that green crap in the river."

"It's called algae, moron," Sara jabbed.

"I don't care what it's called. I just don't wanna drink it."

"That's enough. How full are the storage tanks?"

"We're at about three-quarters capacity," Mac replied.

"Then I think we can last another day without the water plant. Just shut it down until you get back."

Mac wasn't happy, and neither was Sara. She had enjoyed the peace and quiet since Mac had become buried with maintenance work.

"Anything else to add from your department, Tony?"

"Nope." Tony looked at Frank, wondering why he hadn't told Lynn everything.

"Mac?"

"Nope," Mac answered, still pouting.

"How about you, Frank? Everything okay in engineering?"

"Yup. Everything that *can* be repaired *has* been repaired. Everything that can't, hasn't."

It was a rather short response, blunt and direct. And uncharacteristic for Frank. "Alright," Lynn responded, not

wanting to provoke him. "I guess that does it." Lynn stood up and left the table, heading for the shower.

Frank also rose, heading forward. Tony followed, catching up to him in the forward passageway.

"What the hell was that all about?" Tony demanded.

"What was what about?" Frank responded innocently.

"Why did you lie to Lynn back there?"

"I didn't lie to her."

"I thought that you wanted to take a look at the ridgeline?"

"Ridgeline, base line, same thing."

"Not from two thousand meters, it isn't." Tony protested. "Look, Frank. I don't mind helping you with whatever you're up to, but I would like to know what I'm getting into."

"You're not getting into anything," Frank defended.

"Bullshit."

"Look," Frank said impatiently as he spun around to face Tony. "Are you gonna fly the damned thing or not?"

"Yes, I'm gonna fly it!" Tony exclaimed. If he didn't fly it, he knew that Frank would. And Frank might crash in the effort.

"Good! Thank you." Frank turned back around. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

Tony stood there as Frank walked down the boarding ramp and stepped through the exterior hatch. He knew that Frank was up to something, he just didn't know what it was yet.

* * *

Will had been successful in sharpening the long screwdriver by rubbing its tip against an unusually hard rock. With its new, sharper tip, it served quite well to hollow out the middle of his piece of wood.

"You're looking somber this evening, Jack," Will commented, noticing how quiet Jack had been. "Something on your mind?"

"No, not really." Jack picked up another piece of wood and tossed it into the fire. "I was just thinking about my family," he confessed.

"Oh, yes. I know what you mean."

Jack poked at the fire with a long stick, stirring up its embers. "What do you miss the most?"

Will set down his work for a moment, thinking about the question. "Well, I would have to say that I miss the day-to-day routine the most."

Will resumed carving out the middle of his recorder. "I know, some people hate the routine of day-to-day life, but I enjoy it. It's comforting to me, knowing what to expect from one moment to the next." Will stared at the fire, remembering. "Up in the morning, a cup of tea, a shower, kiss Abby and Kayla goodbye, walk Michael to class, then off to work. Then lunch with Abby at the mid-deck buffet, more work, then meet the family at the cafeteria for dinner. Then it's home for some family time before the kids go to bed, and then the rest of the evening is for us." Will stopped whittling again. "That was my life. Boring, yes. But it's what I miss."

"I know what you mean."

"I'm sure your days were not as mundane," Will said.

"Mundane? No. I've been in training for this mission since just after my son's birth. So my day-to-day routine was never the same. I do miss our Sundays, though. I got a half-day off here and there, but I never trained on Sundays. That was my day to spend with my family."

"I see."

"We used to spend the morning playing on the garden deck. Matt and I would play catch. We'd eat lunch under the simulated blue sky. Tanya wanted to get them used to the idea of a sky. She used to make Matthew take the long route to class, forcing him to go through the garden deck, as if he were walking to school on the new world. She even made them watch old documentaries from Earth, thinking that it would help prepare them for their life here."

"Not a bad idea, really."

"No, it's not." Jack sat silently, watching the fire dance across the glowing woodpile. "She was always thinking about things like that. Always planning ahead."

"How did you and Tanya get together?" Will asked. He already knew the answer. The population of the Daedalus averaged around two hundred men, women and children, and everyone pretty much knew each other to some extent. But it was a good way to pass the time.

"We used to play together when we were growing up. You remember. Tanya, Frank, Bobby, and me. We all grew up in the same section. We all had a crush on her when we were kids. But she seemed more interested in Bobby than anyone else. I guess when he was killed, she decided to settle for me. But I didn't care. And any way that I could have her was fine by me," he admitted. "I remember the day we were joined. Everyone gathered in the garden deck, their uniforms all cleaned and pressed. She was so beautiful, so graceful as she strolled down the aisle. It was like I was watching an angel."

"I remember that day," Will recalled. He and his wife had left their son with Will's mother for the day to attend the joining. Everyone knew that it was a real union, something that didn't happen very often, and they all wanted to be there to witness the event.

"You were there?"

"Of course."

"I didn't know," Jack admitted, slightly embarrassed.

"I'm not surprised, as starry-eyed as you were."

"Yeah, I was, wasn't I?" Jack laughed. "Hell, I remember my heart was beating so fast, I could barely recite my vows."

"It was a happy day for everyone."

"Not everyone," Jack said. "Frank was furious with me. He had a thing for her as well. It was months before we spoke again."

"I didn't know that."

"It's all in the past. How's that thing coming?" Jack asked, wanting to change the subject.

"Not too bad. A few more days, and I should be ready to start drilling the holes." Will handed his work to Jack for inspection.

"Hey, this is pretty good work, Will." Jack looked the would-be recorder over, rotating it around and peering inside it. It was long and smooth, nearly perfectly straight and round, with a pale rose color to the wood. "Where'd you learn how to whittle?"

"Self-taught," Will boasted. He was actually surprised at how well it was going thus far.

"Really?" Jack asked in surprise as he handed the piece of wood back to Will. "Not bad."

"Thanks."

Jack stretched his weary joints. The day's travels had been unusually difficult. The jungle here was thick and overgrown, and it slowed them down. "Mind taking the first watch?" he asked.

"Not at all," Will assured him. "I wanted to work on this a while longer anyway."

"Thanks, I'm beat."

"Get some sleep. I'll wake you in a few hours."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Jack."

Will watched as Jack crawled into his tent and closed the flap. He looked up at the night sky. The moonlight was unusual here, with two moons casting shadows of different colors from different directions. The closest moon, Luna Proxima, moved quickly across the sky from east to west and cast an eerie, amber light across the planet. The farther moon, Luna Dista, prodded slowly around the planet in the same direction. Brighter than its closer, smaller sister, Dista cast a bright, light-blue shadow. Dista took about a month to complete its orbit, while they had seen Proxima complete nearly three orbits since their arrival. Dista seemed to travel the same line on its orbit around the planet, but it appeared

that Proxima was climbing higher with each orbit, and now it was coming quite close to the orbit of Dista.

Will pondered the possible effects of two moons in such close proximity to one another. Would their respective gravities have an effect on their overall shape? Would it cause their cores to remain molten longer than usual, the pull of gravity churning up the molten metal deep inside their centers? And what effect would it have on this planet's core, or its tides? The Daedalus had been forced to depart without an advance probe capable of determining such things, and what little they knew about the worlds of the Tau Ceti system had been gathered on the Icarus's approach to the system via simple, direct observation. Determining the finer details of the planet's geology, as well as the orbital mechanics and effects of her two satellites, were Will's responsibility during the mission. He would have to remember to discuss it with Jack later. For now, he would just enjoy the beauty of the multi-colored shadows on the ground around him.

* * *

"What do you think?" Jack asked as he looked out across the river, holding his hand up to shade his eyes from the morning sun.

"It looks shallow enough, I guess."

"Maybe, but it looks a little swift."

"I don't remember seeing any place that looked much better."

"Yeah." Jack took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Well, let's get started."

Jack took off his pack and removed the twenty-meter rope, tying one end around his waist, and the other end around Will's. After pulling his pack back on, he marched toward the river.

Jack was the first to go in, stepping carefully on the rocky riverbed. The river was only knee-deep, but the water was

moving swiftly past him, and he had to move carefully to keep from being knocked down by the rushing current.

About halfway across, he ran out of rope, forcing Will to follow him into the water. The river became a little deeper further out, rising to the middle of Jack's thighs. And now he was forced to lean upstream in order to remain upright while he traversed the mighty river.

"I don't know about this!" Will called out from his side of the river. "It's looking pretty deep where you're at!"

"It's only mid-thigh!" Jack answered. "Don't worry!" He assured Will. "I'll belay you from the far side."

"Of course," Will muttered to himself. "Assuming you make it that far."

By this time, Jack was in up to his crotch, and he was leaning with his back into the current, side-stepping his way across. Suddenly, he stopped. "Shit!"

"What's wrong?"

"My foot is caught on something!" Jack reached down into the water, struggling to get his foot free.

"What is it?"

"I don't know! A plant or something!" Jack reached down deeper, feeling around his foot. It did feel like a plant. The upper portions had leaves, long and narrow, attached to a long, thick trunk that was wrapped around his right foot. Jack reached down to try to untangle himself, but failed. Sliding his hand down further, he grabbed the trunk tightly and pulled hard, trying to rip the plant from the riverbed. It resisted for several seconds, but finally gave way, sending Jack falling to his left into the river.

When he fell, Jack tumbled over onto his stomach. His pack seemed to be floating on the surface, but he was dangling underneath it, facedown in the water. He opened his eyes and saw the river bottom passing beneath him as he was swept downstream.

After a few moments of struggling, Jack managed to right himself and get his face out of the water to breathe again. Sputtering and coughing, he reached for the bottom with his

feet but found nothing but water. The only thing keeping him afloat was his backpack. As heavy as it was, its airtight compartments were giving it considerable buoyancy.

In only that few seconds of panic, the slack on Jack's line ran out, yanking Will off his feet and dragging him downstream as well. Will was still in relatively shallow water, and he bounced off one rock after another as he struggled to get control. The tension on the line was dragging him farther toward the center of the river, and soon, Will was also in over his head.

Just like Jack, Will quickly realized that his backpack was buoyant, and rolled over onto his back. Now that he was floating freely in the water, the tension on the line eased up. Will splashed wildly, spinning himself around to face downstream. He could see Jack bobbing in the current, about fifteen meters ahead of him. Even worse, he could see the white water in the distance.

Jack was the first to enter the rushing water, sliding down a gentle waterfall into a trough of water before bobbing back up the far side. He repeated the process several times, white water splashing up over his head with each successive undulation. He quickly managed to time his breaths during the peaks when he wasn't submerged. But ahead of him he could see many more rocks sticking up out of the water. As if that weren't enough, there were also large branches protruding from the water like sharp thorns, waiting to rip him apart.

Jack had to think fast. If he could manage to steer himself, he might be able to keep from being smashed up against any obstacles. *But for how long? And could Will do the same?* Jack looked over his left shoulder to try to catch a glimpse of Will, but he wasn't there. He looked over his right shoulder. There he was, splashing frantically. The current had somehow carried him a little further across than Jack. He looked downstream again. There was a large rock, maybe ten meters across, sticking up at least a meter above the water. The river was pounding against the rock's

upstream face, sending a wake of white water violently splashing up over it. There was a clear channel of smooth green water running past either side of the rock, offering safe passage on both the right and left. That was exactly what he needed.

He turned to look at Will again. "Will!" he hollered at the top of his lungs. "Swim that way!" he yelled, waving his right arm toward the far shore, nearly rolling back over onto his stomach in the process.

The command wasn't necessary, as the far shore was the closest point of land to Will, and he was already trying desperately to get to that side.

Jack watched as Will flailed, trying to paddle his way across the current, keeping a shaky balance on his back, his backpack keeping his head above water. Jack turned his attention forward again, kicking hard and paddling with his arms to make sure he passed to the left of the rock. Within seconds, he closed on the rock and slid by to its left, riding down the falling wave. He could feel the rope as it dragged across the face of the rock, but all he could do was pray that Will passed the rock on the opposite side.

Will also closed quickly on the rock. He was trying with all his might to get to the far shore, but what had worked before was not working now. It was like something was pulling him back toward the center of the river. He could feel something holding him back, but he had no idea what it was. For a few seconds, Will was sure he was going to slam into the rock. But by some miracle, the current carried him to the right, barely missing a direct impact as he too rode the white wave down into the smooth green water on the opposite side.

Jack suddenly stopped dead in the water, a huge wake forming around his back that threatened to pull him under. The rope dug painfully into his waist, making it hard to breathe. But his plan had worked: he stopped.

The rope dug into Will's waist as well, as he swung in toward the center of the river in a graceful arc. He ended up

in the calmer water just downstream of the rock, where he felt a wonderful sensation... *Sand*. There was sand under his feet.

Will planted his feet to steady himself, leaning back into the current, his feet sinking deep into the soft sand. He looked on both sides. The water was rapid on either side of him, but it was relatively calm in the middle where he was. Then he realized that the water was not as deep here. He positioned his feet directly under him and carefully stood up. The water was only waist-deep here, swirling about him harmlessly. He couldn't believe his luck. He was standing on a sandbar, probably formed by the currents passing on either side of the rock.

Then he heard Jack's cries for help. He spun around to look downstream. Twelve meters away was Jack, buried in a white wake of water, dangling at the end of the rope. Jack was hanging just past the point where the water flow from either side of the rock converged, and had not been carried into shallow water in the same way.

Will quickly grabbed the rope behind him. Pulling up the slack as he went, he took a few steps upstream toward the rock. Afraid to untie the rope from around his waist, he reached over and grabbed Jack's line on the other side of the rock and pulled with all his might.

Jack felt incredibly heavy with so much water rushing over him. Will pulled with strength fueled by adrenaline, slowly hauling Jack upstream and out of the mighty current. Finally, after several minutes of struggling, Jack was in the calmer middle waters. "Put your feet down!" Will called out to him. "There's a sandbar beneath you!"

Jack had no idea what Will was talking about. He hadn't even noticed that he was moving upstream. He just thought the current had suddenly become stronger. But he followed Will's suggestion, and soon found himself standing in calm, thigh-deep water.

Jack stood for a moment, panting in disbelief. Finally, he turned around to face upstream and saw Will leaning

against the rock, exhausted. He started walking upstream along the sandbar toward Will, closing the gap between them with relative ease. "Are you alright?" he asked as he approached.

"You're welcome!" Will sputtered in between breaths.

Jack joined him against the rock to rest for a moment. He looked to his left, gazing at the water passing by him in a torrential current of white and green madness.

"Now what... do we do?" Will asked.

"Let's get these packs off... and get up on this rock... where it's safe." Jack suggested.

Will didn't need to be asked twice to get out of the river. He slung his pack off his shoulders and pushed it up onto the rock, water draining off of it, running down the face of the rock. Jack gave him a boost up, and Will flopped down onto the top of the rock, rolling over onto his back. Jack tossed his pack up as well and joined him.

They both laid there for several minutes, resting as the water raged around them, saying nothing.

"Thanks, Will," Jack finally said, reaching out and patting his friend on the chest.

"My pleasure."

* * *

By lunchtime, Mac and Sara had collected soil samples from more than a dozen different locations. Traveling a course southwest of the camp, they planned on circling around the valley until they had covered one quarter of its perimeter, before returning to camp. It would take another three or four days to fully sample the valley, but this first batch would go a long way toward preparing her report.

The ride in the ATUV was rough, and was not helped by Mac's aggressive driving style.

"Could you please take it easy, Mac?" Sara pleaded.

"Not if you wanna get back in time for dinner!"

Mac pulled his foot off the accelerator pedal as the vehicle crested a small rise. He already learned from

previous experience not to go over such rises too quickly, lest the vehicle become airborne. As they came over the top, the ground suddenly flattened out for a few meters before dipping down again.

Mac pulled the ATUV to a stop at the edge of the decline. Stretched out before them was a long flat plain, a depression that sat about four or five meters lower than the surrounding area. This plain was different than the rest of the valley, with a strange variety of plants scattered across its expanse. Most of the ground was the customary tan color found throughout the valley, but there were patches of grays and rusty reds scattered everywhere. There were also dozens of small ponds of dirty, stagnant water littered throughout the depression.

"Wow," Sara exclaimed as she stood up in her seat to gaze at the depression below.

"What the hell?" Mac had never seen anything like it, not even in his environmental classes in school.

"Look at this," Sara called to him excitedly. "I've never seen anything like this. It looks like a dried up swamp."

"Where did the water come from?"

"I don't know. Maybe from rain?"

"It hasn't rained for weeks, Sara."

"Yeah, but maybe we landed just after this area's rainy season? A lot of the water would've evaporated by now. That would explain all the ponds."

"Maybe so."

"Let's get down there. I can't wait to take some samples of this."

They drove down the hill and out onto the floor of the depression. The ground felt different under the ATUV's wheels. It seemed harder, more compact. All Sara cared about was that the ride was much smoother, a fact for which her bladder was quite thankful.

They drove across the depression, winding their way between the clumps of plants and ponds. Although it had a

unique beauty, Sara couldn't help but feel there was something wrong. "I don't get it," Sara said.

"Don't get what?" Mac wondered.

"These are all saltwater swamp plants."

"How do you know?"

"They're just like the ones in that little marsh at the north end of the beach where we pulled out the last cargo pod."

"There was a marsh there?"

"Duh."

"So, what's the big deal?"

"If the water came from the rains, these should be freshwater plants, like the ones along the rivers and streams." She looked at Mac, who wasn't following her line of reasoning.

"So the water here is salty? Big deal."

"Well, where did the salt come from?"

"Duh," Mac said. "The ocean, maybe?"

"What, did you flunk meteorology or something? Rainwater doesn't have salt in it."

"Yeah, but lots of rocks do. Maybe the subterranean rock here is full of salt?"

"Maybe," she conceded. Maybe he wasn't as dumb as he acted. "And maybe we should take a deeper sampling here?"

"You're the boss," Mac said as he stopped the vehicle. "Why don't you go ahead and start collecting some topsoil samples while I break out the drilling gear?"

"Okay," Sara agreed as she climbed out of the vehicle. She grabbed her sampling bag out of the backseat and strode off toward the nearest batch of plants. They were tall, nearly chest-high, with large, cream-white flowers which hung like bells from the plants' yellow-green stalks. Vibrant red stems protruded from the center of the flowers, three or four in each, ending in little spirals with a bluish ball of pollen at the ends. They were surrounded with swamp grass

that stood about knee-high, its dark-green blades in sharp contrast to the yellow stalks of the neighboring plants.

The plants seemed to be clustered on large mounds of tan-colored soil. The gray and rust-colored ground she was walking on crunched beneath her feet as she walked toward the flowering mound, and she doubted that anything would grow in it.

Sara knelt down on the edge of the pile and opened up her bag, pulling out a long, tubular sample spike. Made of metal, the spike resembled an unusually large hypodermic needle, pointed and blade-like at the tip, hollow through its length. She affixed a handle onto its blunt end, parted the grass to expose the topsoil, and plunged the spike into the soil all the way up to the handle joint. With a slight twist, she carefully withdrew the sample spike from the ground, leaving a five-centimeter-diameter hole in the ground. Being careful not to contaminate the sample by touching it with her fingers, she cautiously placed the soil-filled spike back into its container, disconnected the handle and closed its lid tightly. She meticulously labeled the sample, including the time, date, location, and conditions from where it was taken, before storing the sample in her bag. When she got back to the lab, she would mechanically remove the long pellet of soil to be analyzed using the lab's many scanning devices.

When she returned to the ATUV, she found Mac had assembled the drilling apparatus and was ready to begin.

"Where would you like to start?" he asked.

"Right here should be fine."

Mac pointed the long drill tip to the ground, holding it upright. The tip was similar to that of the sample spike, but its cutting edge was spiraled around the hollow core. Mac gripped the drill motor handle tightly, expecting considerable resistance from the rocky surface. But when he started the motor, he was easily able to pass through. The crunchy rock yielded to the drill bit without much back torque, and the drill slid quickly down into the ground. When

the motor got down to the ground, Mac stopped, reversed the motor, and powered it back out.

"That looked easy enough," Sara commented.

"Yeah, too easy." Mac detached the motor from the tube and placed it on the ground. Then he detached the drill bit from the tube. Sara laid the sample tube on the ground next to Mac, who laid the tube down next to it. After releasing the retaining rings at each end of the drill tube, he swung the tube open, revealing the meter-long pellet of sample he had just removed from the ground.

"Wow," Sara commented. "I didn't expect that." She examined the sample. Just like the open ground, it had sporadic patches of gray and rust-red colors. It was also considerably porous.

"I'm no geologist," Mac admitted. "But that doesn't look like dirt to me."

"You're right," Sara agreed as she violated protocol and removed a small piece of the sample from one end. It broke apart between her fingers as she squeezed, crunching in the same manner as it did beneath her feet. "I would swear this is lava rock."

"Like from a volcano?"

"Exactly."

"Hopefully, not from a recent one," Mac added.

"Not likely," Sara answered. She had studied the initial scans of the planet that were made by the fly-by probe two years ago. They had shown very little volcanic activity, none of which were anywhere near this area.

She stood up, brushing the lava dust from her hands as she looked around. "This whole depression must've been one big lava flow," she theorized. "That tall peak to the southeast must've been a volcano a few million years ago." Sara pulled out her canteen and took the lid off. "The question is, how did all these dirt mounds get here?"

"Beats the hell out of me," Mac shrugged.

"Well, that's not for us to figure out. At least not now." Sara took a drink from her canteen. "Let's head to the far

side and get some more samples before we head west along the mountain base.”

“Sounds good,” Mac agreed as he picked up the drilling gear.

A few minutes later, they were back in the ATUV, heading across the depression to the far side along the southern base of the mountains.

“You know,” Sara yelled over the sound of the lava rock crunching beneath the weight of the ATUV’s oversized wheels, “it’s really quite perplexing how *anything* could grow out here.”

“Why do you say that?” Mac shouted back.

“I’ve seen video footage of lava flows back on Earth. They plow over everything. Trees, plants, buildings, even some rocks. It destroys everything in its path. Those plants shouldn’t be able to grow here.”

“Yeah, I saw those videos as well. But there were plants growing on the hardened lava flows as soon as a few years later, if I remember correctly.”

“Yeah, but not saltwater swamp plants,” she reminded him.

About two-thirds of the way across the depression, Sara asked him to stop for another, deeper soil sample. Again, she collected from a nearby mound while Mac drilled into the lava rock.

“You know,” Sara said as she returned, “We should probably take a water sample from one of the ponds while we’re out here. It might help to solve the riddle as to how all this came about.”

“Good idea,” he agreed as he put the drilling equipment back into the ATUV.

“I think there’s a pond about half a click west of us.”

“Half a click, huh?” Mac smiled at her use of the lingo he taught her on their first outing together weeks ago. “Lead on, chief,” he teased.

As she led the way, Sara realized that her day with Mac hadn’t been as bad as she anticipated. She had no idea

why, but he was far less abusive than usual. Could it be that Mac was maturing? She felt that was unlikely. Maybe he was beginning to understand what she had been preaching to the others? Whatever the reason, she was just thankful he wasn't being as much of a jerk.

It took them about fifteen minutes to reach the pond. It was of moderate size, maybe ten meters across. The water was dark and muddy, swirling with small bits of lava dust from the ground underneath. There were many varieties of aquatic plant life of different sizes, shapes, and colors, growing in and around the pond, but none of them resembled anything she had seen before on this world.

"This is kind of eerie," Mac observed.

"What do you mean?"

"I know we're on an alien planet and all, but this seems *really* alien to me. You know?"

"Yeah, it is different." Sara bent down at the water's edge, picking up the stalk of a dead plant to stir the water with it. The particles in the water swirled together, grays and blacks hardly visible in the murky fluid. "It looks almost like a thick soup, doesn't it?"

Mac handed her the water test kit. "Not like any soup I ever had."

"You know," Sara joked while filling the sample container with pond water. "It looks an awful lot like that vile protein crap you're always swilling down."

"Why does everyone rag on my cream dream?" Mac said defensively. "You know, I had it analyzed back on the Daedalus, and they said it was actually quite healthy."

"Sure, especially if you have no sense of smell." She enjoyed teasing Mac for a change. She couldn't remember the last time she was able to joke without one of his half-witted comebacks.

She held the plastic tube up to the sunlight for inspection. That's when she noticed the moons. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed. "Look at the moons!"

Mac looked up to the sky. Luna Proxima was moving in front of Luna Dista at a noticeably faster rate. "Whoa, look at that."

They stood there for a moment, watching as Proxima passed slowly in front of Dista. "I wonder if the others know about this." She moved her comm-set mic down closer to her mouth to call the camp, but something stopped her. A wet sensation at her feet. She looked down and saw the pond water creeping up out of its basin, covering her boots. "What the hell?" she said as she stepped back.

"Whoa!" Mac shouted, noticing the moving pool of water himself. Then something caught his attention. A rumbling sound, coming from the nearby mountain base. "What's that noise?"

Suddenly, the rumbling turned to the sound of water crashing down onto rocks. From a cave at the base of the mountain only a few hundred meters away, water began spewing forth, spilling out into the depression below. "Uh oh," was all Mac could say.

The water rushed across the depression, and it was moving directly toward them. "I don't think these ponds were formed by rainwater," Sara realized, her eyes wide at the sight of the oncoming water.

"Let's get out of here!" Mac yelled, grabbing her hand and pulling her behind him.

He almost knocked her over as he pulled her toward the ATUV. He was surprisingly fast for a man of his size, and it took her several steps before she managed to get in sync with his longer strides. "Wait!" she exclaimed, pulling at Mac's arm to try and stop him. "The test kit!"

"Forget the test kit!" Mac yelled, forcing her to follow him.

Sara looked over her shoulder. The water was already reaching the test kit, washing it aside as the flood continued toward them. "We're not going to make it!"

"Keep moving!" he ordered. "Don't look back!"

They continued to run as fast as they could, Mac almost dragging Sara behind him. He lowered his own comm-set mic and began yelling into it, as his left hand keyed the mic button on his belt pack. "Hey somebody! Anybody! Help!"

"Mac! What's wrong?" It was Frank's voice on the comm-set.

"We're on the run! Sector twelve! In the depression! There's a flood coming in fast!"

"What? From where?"

"From a cave in the base of the mountain!" Mac panted as they ran the last few meters to the ATUV. The water was less than a meter behind them, lapping at their heels as they ran.

"What the... Get to high ground, Mac! Get to high ground!"

"No shit!"

By the time they reached the ATUV, the water was already ankle-deep and rising fast. Mac scooped Sara up and tossed her into the vehicle with ease as if she were a child, then jumped into the driver's seat beside her. He stomped on the accelerator pedal, and the vehicle lurched forward with a jerk, throwing Sara back into her seat as she fumbled to fasten her seatbelt. Water and loose lava rock spewed from the back tires as the vehicle plowed forward through the rising water.

Mac spun the vehicle hard to the right, heading in the same direction as the water in an attempt to get ahead of the flow.

"Where the hell are you going?" she yelled. "The nearest high ground is to the south!"

"We'll never make it across! It's coming in too fast! We've gotta try to get some distance between us and the water first, and *then* cut across!"

Sara looked behind them; they were starting to outrun the water and were on dry land again, but the flood was gaining on them as they lost time weaving between the

mounds of soil and marsh plants. Sara reached across Mac's lap, feeling across his left thigh for his seatbelt.

"Now's not the time, Sara!" Mac teased, despite their desperate situation.

"Your seatbelt, you jerk! I'm trying to find your seatbelt!"

Mac reached down to his left and pulled the belt across his lap, handing the end to Sara who buckled it into its receptacle.

"Go over them!" she yelled as Mac swerved back and forth between the mounds.

"What?"

"The mounds! Go over them!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Mac brought the wheel back to center and drove straight into the next mound. The ATUV plowed up the side of the mound through the plants, sending white flowers flying in all directions as the vehicle went down the other side. The jolt nearly launched Sara out of her seat, causing her to tighten down her belt. She grabbed onto the dashboard with her left hand, and the roll bar with her right, as they hit the next mound. This one was much larger than the last, and it sent them flying up into the air, landing hard on the flat lava rock on the far side.

"YEE HAW!" Mac screamed as the ATUV bounced up from the impact. Mac adjusted their course to take the next mound head-on, sending them flying at least two meters off the deck, landing hard again.

Despite her seatbelt, Sara flailed wildly as they landed. She wondered why she had ever suggested driving over the mounds. She glanced back over her shoulder. The water was still coming, but they were increasing their distance from the leading edge of the flood.

They continued on for several minutes, jumping mound after mound, nearly tipping over a few times when they failed to hit the little hills at just the right angle. Sara kept checking the water behind them. They were still keeping ahead of the surge, but they were a long way from the western end of the depression. "We're running out of time!"

she exclaimed. "We've gotta veer south now or we'll end up trapped against the western wall!"

Mac didn't dare look over his shoulder to check Sara's assessment of the situation. Trusting her instincts, he veered to the left to head southwest instead of due west.

Within minutes, the water was licking at their wheels again, ankle-deep in only a few moments. But the surface was still lava rock, and it provided decent traction even when wet.

They plowed through the water toward the edge of the depression. It was only fifty meters away.

"Hurry, Mac! Hurry!"

The rushing water quickly grew deeper, slowing their progress. Muddy water spat from their tires, and from the nose of the ATUV, as they plowed through the deepening water. Soon, Mac found he had to add continually more left turn to stay on course. With quick glances to his left, he could see that the water was rising too fast. "We're not going to make it!" he cried out. "Hang on!" He changed course again, turning more to the left to run parallel to the water's course in a last-ditch attempt to reach the ridge before the water washed them away.

Sara screamed in terror as the water quickly rose up and spilled onto the floor of their vehicle. Their speed dropped sharply and the motor began to die as the water from their wake spilled out over the top of the nose of the vehicle, pouring into the engine compartment through the hood's ventilation ducts. Panic swept through Sara like a cold wind, the memory of Frank's near drowning suddenly fresh in her mind.

Mac swerved to the right to get the water away from the ducts, but it was too late. The engine died completely, still fifteen meters from the ridge, as water quickly began to cover the floor of the ATUV.

"Get out! Get out!" Mac ordered as he grabbed his survival pack out of the backseat and began climbing toward Sara.

She thought he was crazy, but followed his instructions and jumped into the water. Mac was right behind her and grabbed her around the waist with his right arm, shielding her against the current with his body as he slung the survival pack onto his left shoulder. "Go! Go! Go!" he barked, dragging her through the rushing water.

As they past the front edge of the vehicle and stepped into the direct flow of the water, the current nearly knocked them off their feet. The water was already waist-deep, the current driving into Mac's backside, its wake climbing halfway up his back before spilling around him.

He shielded Sara from the brunt of the deluge, carefully side-stepping toward the edge of the depression ten meters away. He continued leaning backwards into the current as they slowly made their way, step-by-step, toward the edge of the water climbing up his back.

Sara clung to Mac, hiding from the water swirling around them. His bulk was to her advantage, as it blocked the water and formed a low-lying trough in front of him and around her. Each step was more difficult than the last, and Mac kept losing his footing as he fought to keep from being swept away.

The water was cold, and Mac could barely feel his legs as he struggled along. The water continued to deepen, and the wake now spilled over his shoulders and poured down on top of Sara in front of him as she clung to his torso, holding on for dear life. The force of the water shoved the survival pack up against the back of Mac's neck, pushing his head forward, making it difficult to breathe as they inched closer to the edge of the freezing water. Then, just as the water was about to overcome them, the ground under their feet started to slope upward.

Mac planted his left foot higher up the slope and pushed himself upwards, dragging Sara along with him. He repeated the process twice more until he was only waist-deep again, before shoving Sara up the slope and onto dry land.

Sara crawled up the slope, sputtering and coughing, drenched in dirty gray floodwater. Cresting the top of the slope, she fell to her stomach and rolled over onto her back, cold and exhausted.

Mac tossed the pack up onto the top of the grade and stumbled up the incline, collapsing to his knees next to Sara. "Are you alright?" he panted.

Sara couldn't answer. She was still too scared and still breathing too hard to speak. All she could manage was a thumbs-up gesture with her left hand as it lay across her muddy abdomen.

Mac turned his head to look at the water; it was still rising. "Come on, we can't stop now, the water is still rising."

"I can't," Sara whined.

"Yes, you can," Mac barked. "Let's go!" He reached over and grabbed her by the arm, forcing her up off the wet ground as he grabbed his pack with his right hand. "Don't make me carry you!"

Sara stumbled to her feet as Mac dragged her up. There was no way she was going to let him carry her. The water was no longer lapping at their feet, but Mac's pace was still just as rushed.

They made their way across the short stretch of flatland and down the other side, stumbling through a shallow tributary of floodwater that made its way more leisurely down the narrow slough.

As they climbed up the hill on the other side, Mac could see that the mountains seemed to turn away from them on either side. He remembered the images he had studied with Tony the night before, the ones from the ARD flights over this area. It was a small canyon, but of an elevation even higher than the rest of the valley. The water would spill into the valley long before it climbed up into this canyon.

"Mac, please," Sara pleaded. Her legs hurt and her feet were still numb from the cold water.

"Just a little further," he urged, "I promise."

Another twenty meters and they came to the top of the hill. The canyon lay before them, maybe fifty meters across at the mouth, and about eighty meters deep with vertical cliffs towering above them on either side.

"Okay, that's far enough for now." Mac told her.

Sara collapsed to the ground, sobbing.

"Frank," Mac panted over the comm-set, "this is Mac."

"Mac! What's your status?"

"We made it... to high ground," he panted. "But just barely. I think we're safe for now."

"Copy that! Standby one!"

Mac looked down at Sara. She was still crying. He knelt down beside her, putting his arms around her for comfort. "It's okay, Sara," he whispered softly as he took off his coat and put it around her. "We're safe."

* * *

Jack and Will laid there on the rock, resting after their white-water ordeal.

"What do we do now?" Will asked, still slightly out of breath.

Jack sat up and looked around. The rock they were on was mostly flat across the top, about four meters long and six meters wide, sitting a mere half meter above the green water rushing past them on either side. He stood up and examined the water, looking about from side-to-side, shore to shore. "Look," Jack spoke up, noticing the area just beyond the far side of the rock. "The water over there is moving more slowly." He looked farther downstream. "You see that down there?" he pointed. "Where the water is rippled?"

Will blocked the sun from his eyes with his right hand, looking where Jack was pointing.

"It's shallow there."

"How do you know that?"

"That's the same way the water looked where we first entered. The water becomes rippled as it flows over the

rocky bottom. It's probably not more than a meter deep all across there."

Will scanned the area. The rapid green water next to them curved around the downstream end of the rock to rejoin the main force of the river. Between the main flow and the far shore was a large, slower moving part of the river, but still well over their heads in depth. But about thirty meters downstream, the ripples started which, according to Jack, signified shallower waters. Even further, the river formed a nearly still pond along the far shore.

"If we can get across this fast water here, we can float downstream and then just stand up and wade the rest of the way across."

"Jack, it's at least twenty meters to the slower water there," Will pointed out. "And then another ten across that. How are we going to get across?"

"Like I said, we may not have to. The current looks like it will carry us right into the shallow water on the far side down there."

"*Looks like?* No offense, Jack, but your guesses have been less than perfect lately."

"Oh, come on."

"How do you expect to get through that?" Will asked, pointing at the water rushing alongside the rock they were standing on. "Neither one of us can swim, remember?"

"We don't have to," Jack reminded him, picking up his backpack. "We can float on these."

"Okay, but how do you propose we get past *this* water?"

Jack looked around the rock, pacing across its width. "We get a running start, and jump across," he theorized.

Will's mouth fell agape. "You're kidding, right?" It was a pointless question; Will already knew the answer.

"It should be easy."

"You're crazy!" Will sputtered. "I had my doubts about you when you suggested we hike across this planet, and again when you wanted to climb down that cliff. But now I'm certain, you're insane!"

"Well what do you suggest we do, Will? Wait, I know!" Jack raved. "We can set up camp here and wait for the rest of the colonists to come and rescue us! Yeah, that's it! We can fish for dinner, use the fire paste to cook it up. It might be a little cold at night, but what the hell, it's safer than trying to move on, right?"

"Real funny, Jack."

Jack turned away from Will, looking out over the water toward the far shore. Beyond the shore lay a vast mountain range, the last obstacle between them and their best chance of survival. He wanted so badly to get there, to resume command of the mission. His mission. He felt sorry for Will. He hadn't signed up for anything like this. Yet he had stuck it out, following Jack through every scrape along the way. "I'm sorry, Will. That was uncalled for."

"Don't worry about it," Will assured him. "After all this time following you across the country, I've grown a tougher skin than that."

"Yeah, you're right. You have." Jack admitted.

"Don't get me wrong, I still think you're crazy." Will stood up and straightened his jumpsuit. "But you *are* right, we can't stay here."

"Great." Jack picked up his pack and began to put it on, backwards. "And since I'm the crazy one here, I'll go first."

Will stepped up to help Jack with his pack. "Damn right, you will."

Jack slipped his arms through the straps, leaving the pack hanging from his shoulders, in front of his torso. After securing the strap behind Jack's waist, Will tied the rope around him once more, checking the knot to ensure it was secure. "Okay, Jack. You're all set."

Jack walked back to the far side of the rock clumsily, the weight of the pack in front of him forcing him to lean back at an unnatural angle. He looked at the rock in front of him. It wasn't entirely flat at all; rather, it had crags and valleys, making it a fairly uneven surface on which to run. He prayed

he wouldn't slip along the way and go tumbling into the river headfirst.

"Hey, Will?" Jack asked as he mentally prepared himself for the leap.

"Yes?" Will responded, rising to his feet and picking up his pack to move out of the way.

"Who's crazier? The maniac with the crazy ideas, or the nut who follows him?"

Will looked over at Jack, only to see him grinning from ear to ear.

"Interesting question," Will answered as a smile spread across his own face. "We'll have to ask Maria."

Jack looked around. The sky was clear. The jungle on either side of the river was dense and green, and the water sparkled in the Cetian sunlight. It was a breathtaking sight. Hopefully, it would not be the last thing he ever saw.

Jack looked again at Will. He winked, and then took a deep breath. "Okay, here goes nothing." Another deep breath and he was off, sprinting across the top of the rock at full speed, his arms wrapped around the bouncing pack in front of him. With a mighty leap, he launched himself off the edge of the rock, the rope tied around his waist flapping out behind him. He sailed at least five meters out before his feet dipped into the water. But it was just enough, and his torso landed just beyond the edge of the faster moving water, his backpack plunging down deep under the surface.

His chest struck the sinking backpack hard, nearly knocking the wind out of him. He began to roll to his left, and flapped his arms madly as he tried to right himself. After a few seconds of splashing, he managed to stabilize himself as the water carried him downstream. He began kicking his feet in earnest, trying to traverse the current before it carried him so far down the river that he might miss the shallows and end up in the deadly white water beyond.

Will watched as Jack kicked and paddled with all his strength. He glanced down at the rope connecting him to Jack, as it was pulled off the rock and into the water. Will

began to brace himself for the tension of the rope, certain that Jack wasn't going to make it across in time. But after a few moments, Jack's downstream progress seemed to slow, and he began to make headway across the calmer waters. *That crazy son-of-a-bitch just might make it after all!* he thought. "Swim, you crazy bastard! Swim!"

Jack clutched his pack under his chest, moving closer to shore with each kick. As he approached land, he began to paddle with his arms as well, rocking from side to side as his weight shifted with each successive stroke. Less than a minute after he had leapt into the water, Jack stopped kicking, slid his arms out of the straps of his pack, and stood up in the waist-deep water. "Yes!" he cried out as he held his right hand up in triumph. "Yes!"

"Way to go, Jack! Way to go!"

Jack stumbled through the shallow water, dragging his pack behind him. The water grew shallower as he got closer to shore, until he was finally standing on dry ground. Jack dropped his waterlogged pack onto the shore, untied the rope from his waist, and retied it around the nearest tree. "Okay, Will!" he called from shore. "It's your turn!"

Will had been so excited by Jack's success that he had completely forgotten that he would have to do the same. And his recent experience with the water had not been very encouraging, to say the least. But, Will told himself repeatedly, there was no other choice.

Will put his pack on backwards, just as he had watched Jack do only minutes before. Walking to the opposite side of the rock, Will kept telling himself that he could do this. Unfortunately, the rest of his body didn't seem to be listening.

He stood there, frozen with fear, staring out across the surface of the rock at the flowing green water beyond. From his perspective, the distance across that first bit of fast moving water seemed immense.

"Are you ready?" Jack called from shore. There was no answer. "Will! Are you ready?" he asked again.

Will could hear Jack calling to him from shore, but he was unable to answer.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes," Will managed to answer meekly.

"Then let's do it!"

"I don't know, Jack."

"What?"

"I don't know about this!"

"What's the problem?"

"I don't know!"

"Come on, Will. I did it!"

"In case you haven't noticed, Jack, I'm not quite as adventurous as you!"

"Sure you are!" Jack assured him. "Besides, it'll be easier for you!"

"How do you figure?"

"All you have to do is jump in! I can pull you in from here!"

"But can you do it before I reach the rocks downstream?"

"No problem!" Jack promised. "Trust me!"

"Stop saying that!" Will protested.

"What?"

"Every time you say 'trust me', something goes horribly wrong!"

"Okay, don't trust me! Trust yourself!" Will still didn't move. "Come on, Will! You wanna stay on that rock forever?" That still didn't move him. "What would your son think?"

That was all it took. Will took a deep breath, and broke into a clumsy dash across the uneven surface of the rock, letting out a half-hearted battle cry as he leapt from the rock and sailed across the water below.

Much to Jack's surprise, Will flew even farther than he did, landing well past the rushing water. But unlike Jack, Will dove in headfirst, the force nearly yanking the pack out from under him. He came up with the pack under his waist, as he floundered to keep his face out of the water to

breathe. Within seconds, Will realized his predicament and shifted the pack back under his torso, stabilizing his position as the current carried him downstream.

On the far shore, Jack quickly pulled in the slack left over from Will's amazing leap. He dug his heels deep into the soft shoreline as the drag of the current tightened the rope.

Will began kicking like a madman, his arms flailing at his sides in a comical attempt to swim. It had little effect on his course, but the extra propulsion was unnecessary, as Jack was pulling vigorously from the shore, hauling Will in little by little. A minute later, Will was splashing into the shallow water.

"Stand up!" Jack shouted from shore. "Stand up!"

Will stopped kicking when Jack's words sunk in. He looked about at the water around him. Finally realizing where he was, Will relaxed a moment, swinging his legs out to the side and letting them settle in the water directly beneath him, floating on his backpack. His feet bounced across the rocky bottom as he continued his lazy arc toward shore. Finally, he dismounted his pack, planted his feet firmly, and stood up, his arms slipping out of his pack as he rose.

Will couldn't believe he had made it to shallow water. His pack, now out of his grip, bumped against his legs and circled around them, dangling from the rope between him and the shore.

"You did it!" Jack congratulated him.

"Will stepped forward, grabbing his pack along the way, dragging it behind him as he carefully made his way to where Jack stood.

Jack grabbed him with both arms in a powerful bear-hug as Will stepped up out of the water. "Jesus, Will! You should've seen yourself! Man, you flew further than I did!"

"I did?" Will coughed in surprise.

"Hell yes! You launched like a rocket, my friend! Christ, and you dove right in! I mean headfirst!" Jack laughed. "It was beautiful!"

“Really?” Will was still dazed, refusing to believe he was standing on solid ground, safe from the raging waters that had nearly taken both their lives. He turned around to face the river as Jack released him from his congratulatory embrace. He watched as the green and white water flowed behind them, unchanged by their recent intrusion.

“Come on, buddy.” Jack interrupted. “Let’s pitch camp before it gets too dark.”

“Yeah, good idea.”

“We need to build a fire and get dry before it starts getting cold,” Jack added.

Jack opened his backpack to begin setting up their camp for the night. Slowly, Will turned back from the river and joined him.

“Hey, Jack?” Will asked.

“Yeah?”

“Let’s make that our last water adventure, shall we?”

“You’ve got a deal, my friend.”

CHAPTER TEN

"Mac!" Frank's voice crackled over the comm-set. *"Look to the west!"*

Mac pulled away from Sara, looking over his right shoulder. The sun was in his eyes, but he could hear a buzzing sound, a mechanical noise, coming from the direction of the bright, afternoon sun. He held up his hand to shade his eyes. There was a small dot to the right of the sun, like a bird high up in the air. The dot grew larger, with more features becoming discernible as it drew near.

"You see him, yet?"

"No," Tony answered as he manipulated the aircraft's flight controls. "Wait, there they are."

Frank looked at the monitor in the center of the remote control unit. There, standing along the edge of the plateau, was Mac, looking right at the drone's camera, with Sara kneeling next to him. "Can you see it?" Frank asked Mac asked over the comm-set.

"Yeah! Hey, Tony! I don't suppose that thing has a hundred and twenty kilogram lift capacity?"

"Sorry, pal," Tony answered.

"Where's the ATUV?" Frank asked.

"Sorry, it's a submarine now. So, how the hell do we get out of here?"

"Standby, Mac," Frank promised. "We'll find the shortest way around the flood for you. Just give us a few minutes."

"Take your time," Mac answered sarcastically. *"No hurry, we'll just rest here a bit,"* he added.

“Head east along the southern edge of the flood,” Frank instructed Tony. “I want to see where all that water came from.”

Mac watched the ARD turn slightly left, losing a little altitude as it headed northeast toward the edge of the flooded depression. “Don’t worry, Sara. They’ll find us a way out.”

Sara held her ribs with her left hand, wincing in pain with each breath. “Jeez, Mac. I think you broke one of my ribs, you big ape.”

“Sorry,” Mac apologized sincerely. “I was trying to save your ass back there.”

“Yeah? Well who asked you?” she complained.

“Well excuse the hell out of me.” he defended. “What was I supposed to do? Leave you behind to drown?”

“Who says I would’ve drowned?”

“Oh, come on, Sara!”

“Did it ever occur to that pea-brain of yours, that I might be able to take care of myself?”

“For crying out loud! The water nearly swept us both away! I was doing you a favor!”

“Some favor!” Sara winced.

Mac noticed her pain for the first time. “Are you okay?” he asked as he bent down to help her.

“Get away from me!” she ordered, pushing him away. “You’ve done enough damage already.”

“No problem, lady,” he snapped as he picked up his pack and began to walk away, heading deeper into the canyon. “No problem at all!”

Sara sat back down, paying no attention to Mac as he stormed off. She carefully pulled her soaking wet jacket off her shoulders, her ribs stabbing her with only the slightest movement. She lifted the side of her shirt to visually inspect her left side. There was a large reddened area staining her skin. “Shit,” she whispered to herself as she let her shirt

down and laid back, rolling carefully onto her right side to rest.

“Can you get inside that thing?” Frank asked.

“No way,” Tony objected. “I’ll lose the signal for sure.”

“Won’t the default instructions kick in?”

“Those were written for open sky, Frank. Not the inside of a cave.”

Frank stared at the monitor. “I don’t think that’s a cave, Tony.”

“What?”

“Look, the water is flowing out of it, not in. That’s no cave, that’s a tunnel.”

“What? Then where the hell is the water coming from?”

“You see the rock along the inside of the tunnel? That looks like lava rock. I’ll bet you that’s a lava tube. The mountain was probably a volcano at one time. That tunnel probably goes clear through to the ocean side of the mountain.”

“But how did the water get in there? The tide doesn’t come that far up. Even the depression is higher than that.”

“I don’t know. Can you fly over to the shore side?”

“No way. We’ll lose the signal as soon as it dips down below the ridgeline.”

“Ah, yes, the ridgeline. Follow the base to the north until you reach the forest, Tony,” Frank instructed. “Then turn toward the beach. I want to check the tide level there, at least.”

Mac wandered into the canyon that cut into the southern mountain range. It was lush, with tall blue-green grass carpeting its floor. Tall trees lined either side, giving way to the sharp incline of the granite cliffs at the canyon’s edges. It was a small canyon by geographical perspectives, maybe fifty meters across and eighty meters deep, coming to a

point at the far end. Short of climbing up its face, Mac couldn't see any way out without braving the floodwaters that had nearly swept them away only minutes earlier.

It was, however, a picturesque little canyon, a separate little world onto its own. Mac wandered through it, committing the canyon's details and resources to memory as he explored. If Frank and Tony couldn't find a way out for them, they could very well be stuck there awhile.

"Mac?" Frank's voice crackled.

"Yeah."

"I've got some bad news, pal."

"Give it to me."

"There is no way out of that canyon, unless you want to swim."

"No thanks. I've had enough of the water for awhile."

"Yeah, I hear ya." The comm-set was silent for a moment. *"You know, we probably won't be able to get you out right away. Probably not until tomorrow, at the earliest."*

"Yeah, I figured as much."

"Have you got a plan for the night?"

"I'm checking out the valley as we speak."

"Have you got your pack with you?"

"You bet your ass I do."

"Good boy."

"Don't worry about us, Frank." Mac assured him as he continued to explore. "We'll be alright. You just figure out a way to get us out of here."

"Will do." The comm-set went quiet again. *"Just one thing we can't figure out, Mac."*

"What's that?"

"The water."

"It's seawater, Frank. It had to come from the ocean."

"Yeah, we figured that much out. That cave at the eastern end of the depression must be a tunnel that comes out on the ocean side of the mountain. I just can't figure out how the tide got that high, and so quickly."

"Did you try looking up?"

"What?"

"At the moons. Look at the moons. See anything different about them?"

"Negative. There still hanging there in the sky, side by side."

"Proxima is on the wrong side. It was to the east of Dista an hour ago."

There was a long pause.

"You're right," Frank finally replied. *"That would do it, I bet."*

"Freaky, ain't it?"

"Mac, I had Tony fly the drone to the beach," Frank told Mac over the comm-set. *"The tide has climbed all the way up the beach, nearly to the edge of Sherwood Forest! Ten more meters and the whole valley will be underwater!"*

"We need Will here to figure out how often that's going to happen," Mac commented. A sour expression came over his face as he realized what he had just said. The last thing Frank needed was to be reminded of Jack's loss. "Sorry, Frank."

"That's okay. Listen, stay safe out there. I'll get back to you once we figure out how to get you out of there."

"We'll be here." Mac pushed his mic aside and sighed, as he resigned himself to the situation. He would have to find shelter for the night, perhaps even build one. The sun was still forty-five degrees above the horizon. Looking at his watch, he realized they had only a few hours of daylight left. It was time to get busy. His first instinct was to fetch Sara, but she had made it clear she wanted him to stay away. And if that was the way she wanted it, so be it. Besides, if she needed his help, she could find him. It was a small enough canyon. Still, he would find shelter roomy enough for two, just in case.

* * *

"How long until the water recedes?" Lynn asked from her seat at the wardroom table.

"No way of knowing," Frank admitted. "On our last pass, it was still coming in, though it has slowed a bit."

"Christ, Frank. Is that the best you can tell me?"

"Sorry, this just isn't my area. Hell, it isn't any of our areas."

"I know a little about geology," Tony interjected. "If that's lava rock, and we're pretty sure that it is, then it's not going to hold all that water for long. It's going to seep down through to the old topsoil trapped underneath."

"How long will that take?" Maria asked.

"It depends on a lot of things," Tony admitted as he leaned back in his chair at the far end of the wardroom table. "That rock must've been there for a while. The old topsoil is sure to have become somewhat compact over time. So it's not going to soak up as much water, assuming that it is the usual topsoil underneath."

"Care to offer a guess?" Lynn asked.

"If it is normal topsoil?" Tony looked to Lynn, who nodded. "Then maybe a few days before it goes down enough for them to at least wade across. Maybe longer, but I doubt any sooner than that."

"Frank, is there any way to get supplies to them? Something to help them out until then?"

"None that I can think of, sorry."

"Maria. Can they live off the land if necessary?"

"Yes, I suppose. But I wouldn't advise it. We just don't know enough about this place yet."

"Jesus," Lynn complained. "We've been here over a month now. Don't we know anything yet?"

"Lynn, be realistic," Laura warned. "We're talking about an alien ecosystem, here. As much as it *looks* like what we know Earth to have been, it *isn't* Earth. We haven't even begun to discover how each organism here interacts with the others, let alone how they affect the entire ecosystem. Eating something indigenous at this point would be like taking off your helmet to see if there was breathable oxygen."

Lynn let that one sink in for a moment. "Any suggestions?" she asked, throwing her hands up in frustration.

"Build a boat?" Tony suggested, half joking. Lynn gave him a disapproving stare, causing Tony to shrink back down in his seat. "Just a thought."

"We *could* make a raft," Frank chimed in. "Maybe use the chutes from the cargo pods. They're waterproof. We could glue them into long tubes and inflate them, maybe."

"They wouldn't hold the pressure," Tony disagreed. "Better to use the float rings from the pods. They won't be easy to remove, but they're perfect for the job. Hell, that's what they were made for."

"I like it," Lynn agreed. "Get on it," she ordered. "Everyone helps. We'll stay up all night if we have to. Just tell us what you want us to do."

"Tony and I will get started removing the float ring from the first pod. The rest of you start removing the carbon-fiber deck plates from one of the other pods. We can use them as the floor of the raft."

"Won't it let water into the raft?" Maria asked.

"Doesn't matter," Frank explained as he rose from his seat to get started. "We'll be floating on the pontoons we make out of the float rings. It doesn't matter if we get wet, as long as we get safely across."

"How *are* we going to get across, once you get the raft ready?"

"I can use the water pump from the potable water system inlet down by the river. Mac shut it down until he can clean it anyway. It puts out a pretty high pressure. If I can rig up a jet, we can ride across using the jet as propulsion."

"How were you planning to steer it?" Lynn asked.

"We can work all of this out as we're building it, Lynn."

"Then, let's get started," Lynn ordered.

Frank exited the wardroom, heading for the forward hatch with Tony following right behind him. "Mac, this is

Frank," he called as he pulled his mic closer to his mouth.

"Go ahead, Frank."

"We're gonna build a raft to come get you."

"No shit? How long is that gonna take?"

"Probably take most of the night, if we're lucky. We've got to take a few float rings off of the cargo pods."

"Yeow, tough job. Glad I don't have to do it."

"Hunker down, help is coming."

* * *

It had been over an hour since Mac stormed off in a huff. More importantly, Sara hadn't heard a peep over the comm-set in nearly as long. She reached down to press the call button on her comm-set control pack, but it wasn't there. Stunned, she looked down at her waist, but it was gone. She looked around her immediate area, and found nothing. "Damn it," she cursed, realizing she must have lost it while escaping the flood. Suddenly, she felt very alone.

"Mac?" she called out as she looked around. Receiving no answer, she climbed to her feet, her body resisting the effort as her injured ribs shot pain through her left side. "Mac!" She called out again. "Mac!" Her voice echoed off the canyon walls, adding to her sense of loneliness. "Great," she muttered. Bracing her sore ribs with her left arm held close against her body, she headed off into the canyon in the same direction Mac had gone earlier.

"Mac!" she repeated every few minutes as she strolled along, each step sending pain shooting through her ribcage. After thirty minutes of searching, she began to wonder if he had found a way around the flood without her. She wouldn't be surprised, not after the way she had snapped at him. It wasn't easy for her to admit it to herself, but she knew she had been unfair to him. But surely he wouldn't leave her behind. If his efforts at rescuing her had indeed been instinctive, then how could he possibly abandon her?

"MAAAC!" she hollered, ignoring the pain it elicited.

"What?" his voice came from the distance. She turned to her right, looking in the direction of his voice. "MAC!" she yelled again.

"Jeez, woman! Would you stop yelling?"

There he was, not thirty meters away, dragging several large branches from the forest into the open grassland.

"Have you ever heard of a comm-set?"

"My control pack is gone. I must have lost it in the flood," she admitted.

"Figures," he grumbled as he dropped the branches and turned to head back into the forest.

"I've been looking for you for nearly half an hour!" she complained. "Didn't you hear me calling you?" she asked as she approached him.

"I was cutting down those branches. Probably couldn't hear you over the chopping," he lied with a smile.

"What are you doing?" she asked as she passed the pile of long, straight branches.

"Building a shelter," he responded calmly.

"Shelter? What for?"

"Didn't you hear?" he asked. "Ah, yes. You lost your comm-set pack, didn't you?"

She had been around Mac long enough to know his particular brand of sarcasm quite well. "Hear what?" she asked hesitantly.

"We're stranded here, at least until tomorrow."

"You're kidding," she responded, crestfallen. She thought for a moment before her expression changed to one of curiosity. "I don't suppose you're making a shelter big enough for two, are you?"

"Nope," he lied again. He could tell by her tone of voice that she needed his help after all, and she knew it. And he couldn't resist the opportunity. "But don't worry, there's enough branches in the forest for you too."

"Mac," she pleaded. "Come on."

"What?" He was going to play it for all it was worth.

"You're going to make me ask, aren't you?"

"Ask what?" he responded with mock innocence as he carried on the charade.

"You know what," she accused, trying not to be drawn into his little game.

"Sara, I have no idea *what* you are talking about," he protested as he found his next branch, pulled out his knife, and began to chop away.

"Okay, fine. I'll build my own shelter." Sara looked around, trying to figure out what to do next. "Can I borrow your knife?"

"Of course," he responded politely. "Just as soon as I'm finished with it."

"And when will that be?" Sara fumed.

"Let's see," Mac calculated as he continued to hack at the branch. "I still have to chop down a few more branches, haul them back to the pile, and build my shelter. Then I have to cut some firewood. Oh, and I'll have to cut some cord to fasten the rain cover. After all, it is getting kind of cloudy out, and I wouldn't want to get wet. So, say two hours, maybe three."

"But it'll be dark by then."

"That's true," he admitted. "That *will* make it more difficult for you, won't it?"

"Why do you have to be such an asshole?" she protested.

"How am I being an asshole, Sara? You asked to borrow my knife, and I offered to let you use it as soon as I'm finished with it."

"You know damned well that I won't be able to build a shelter in the dark. How am I supposed to survive the night?"

"Why are you asking me? I thought you said you didn't need help from a *man*. No, wait. I believe you called me *an ape*, right? So if you don't need help from a man, then *surely* you don't need help from an ape? That would be laughable."

"Oh, I get it," Sara conceded. "Fine, if that's what you want. I apologize."

"Apologize for what?" Mac teased.

"I apologize for calling you an ape. Alright?"

"I believe you called me a 'big ape'," he corrected.

"I'm sorry I called you a big ape," she said. "Please forgive me."

"Why, thank you, Sara. I accept your apology." Mac scooped up the last of his freshly cut branches and began dragging them back to his pile in the open grass.

"Then I can use your knife now?"

"Nope, not until I'm finished with it."

"What?"

"Hey, you said you didn't need my help. So go to it, girl." Mac glanced up at the sky as if to check the time by looking at the sun. "But you'd better get busy, daylight's fading fast."

"Ugh!" Sara groaned as Mac dragged his branches away. She watched as he walked away, dragging his long branches behind him. Looking up, she could see the clouds forming overhead. They seemed to be following the two moons, as if they were being dragged along by their abnormally strong gravitational influence. She couldn't believe what was happening to her. And at the hands of her archenemy, a man who embodied everything she hated about Daedalian men. But without him, her chances of surviving the night were slim to none, and she knew it.

It was the pain from her injury that forced her hand. A pain that even now jabbed her in the side with every breath she drew. Even if she had all day, she still couldn't build anything with her sore ribs. She was out of options.

"Mac?" she pleaded, her voice suddenly losing all its defiance. "Wait up, will you?"

Mac showed no signs of stopping, forcing Sara to follow him all the way back to his building site. He dumped his last load of branches onto the pile, wiping off his sweaty brow as he pulled out his canteen for a drink.

Sara approached from behind him, determined to say whatever he needed to hear in order to get him to help her survive the night. She could always make him pay for it another day. "Mac, please. You know I can't make it out here without you. Please help me, please?"

Mac looked her in her eyes. He knew she was only acting. But he also knew she was right, she couldn't make it through the night without his assistance. She was just refusing to admit it to herself. "So, you admit that you need my help?"

"Yes, I admit it," she responded humbly.

"The help of a man? An ape? A Cro-Magnon?"

"Yes, Mac. I admit it. I need your help. *Your* help, Mac."

She was really giving it the hard sell, and Mac was impressed by the effort. But he wasn't going to give in that easily. "I don't know, Sara. I hate to see you go back on your principles so easily."

"Oh, come on!" Pain shot through her side again as she yelled.

"Alright, Sara. If you insist. I'd be happy to help you."

"You will?"

"Hell, Sara," he admitted. "I was planning on building this thing for the both of us from the start."

"Really?" Her fear was beginning to turn into anger.

"Of course,"

"You really are an ass," she sniffled, "you know that?"

"Yeah, well, a guy's gotta play to his strengths, right? Besides, you kind of had it coming."

"Perhaps." She watched him for a moment as he began to assemble their shelter. He appeared to know exactly what he was doing, carefully selecting his construction site, and laying out his frame for assembly. She knew that she could not survive without this irritating, brash, arrogant man. She had accepted that fact several minutes ago, as bitter a pill it had been to swallow. By all rights, she should hate this man with every fiber of her being. But right here, right now, she was just thankful he was there with her.

* * *

Will held up his whittling handiwork proudly for inspection. Now that it was hollowed out and he had fashioned a mouthpiece at one end, he was ready to test it out.

Wetting his lips first, Will wrapped them around the tip of the mouthpiece and blew. A shrill tone emitted from the open slit in the wood just past the mouthpiece, varying in pitch as Will blew unevenly through the long tube.

"What the hell was that?" Jack asked as he poked his head out of his tent.

"Sorry about that, Jack. I didn't realize it would be so loud," Will apologized with embarrassment.

"Hey, it works!" Jack noticed excitedly. Will had been working on it for over a week, and Jack was awaiting its outcome with great anticipation. "How many notes can you produce?"

"I don't know," Will admitted, raising the instrument to his lips to try again. He blew more evenly this time, producing a long, steady note, warmer and softer than his first attempt. Pleased with the results, a broad smile crossed Will's face. He tried a few more times, attempting to produce different results by varying his technique. The instrument would only play one note since there were no holes yet drilled into its long, slender body. But he was able to create a surprising number of variations in tonality, ranging from a shrill, piercing note to a soft, mellow one. He even managed to trill his tongue, producing a rapid series of staccato notes.

"Man, I can't believe it," Jack exclaimed in amazement. "The damn thing really works!"

"You can't believe it! I can't believe it! I never dreamed it would actually work this well!"

"Get busy and drill some holes in it!"

Will set the instrument down beside him. "I think I'll wait until tomorrow night. I want to triple check my calculations." Will carefully wrapped the recorder up in a small scrap of

cloth to protect it from damage. "I'd hate to make a mistake this far into the project."

"Good thinking," Jack agreed. "But I'll be expecting some tunes from you before long." Jack smiled at him as he ducked back inside his tent to sleep.

Will was pleased with himself. He had worked long and hard at creating his little toy, and soon he would be finished, and the process of teaching himself to play would begin. He placed his bundled instrument deep into his pack, where it would be safe from all the bumps during the next day's hike. Tomorrow, he would review his calculations before marking his drilling points.

Will opened up the side pouch on his pack, removing his journal and pen. After reviewing his last entry, he put pen to paper and began to write.

Day 35;

Another day has passed, and another challenge has been faced and conquered, Jack once again finding a solution. The things that I find myself agreeing to do on a daily basis would have undoubtedly gotten me tagged for a psychiatric evaluation back on the Daedalus. But with each passing day, the severity of the extremes lessens.

This evening, I produced my first note with my little recorder. It was surprisingly gratifying. Recorder: it seems so technical a word, not nearly poetic enough to adequately describe the beauty of what it will eventually be

capable of producing. I think, "flute" would better suit the instrument. A "Cetian Flute," that's what I will call it when it is completed. The first indigenous instrument for our new world. Perhaps it will earn me further mention in our history files. I think I would like that association. It's much more romantic than any of the geological references my adventures here might generate.

Despite the many challenges we have been forced to contend with, soon we will face perhaps our most formidable one to date. Within a few days at the least, we will begin our journey across the vast mountain range that Jack suspects to be the last geographical barrier between us and the coast. I only pray, that after all we have been through in our attempt to reach it, the rest of our crew are alive and well, waiting for us with open arms. To find otherwise, I fear, would prove emotionally catastrophic for Jack.

** * **

By sundown, Mac and Sara had finished constructing their shelter. An odd looking structure made of tree

branches, grass and packed mud, Mac had decided to cover it with the rain cover he carried in his survival pack. The last thing they wanted was for rain to wash away all of the insulating mud Sara had so diligently packed against the outside of the structure, despite her pain.

The triangular-shaped hut was only three meters long from front to apex, with an opening that formed a symmetrical triangle a meter and a half in length on all three sides. At Sara's request, Mac lined the floor of the hut with long, soft blades of grass after she cleared it of rocks and debris to make it more comfortable. It had been an effort that Mac felt was a waste of time, but one he chose to perform out of guilt for making her beg for his assistance earlier.

Mac had taken great pains to ensure the hut was sturdy enough to withstand the elements, double lashing the main members and anchoring the entire structure to the ground with two long stakes at each anchoring point, driven into the ground at opposing angles to prevent them from being pulled up by strong winds.

"That should do it," Mac announced as he walked around the hut, tugging at it to test its integrity.

Sara stood back, admiring their handiwork. Her ribs were not bothering her as much as before, thanks to the pain killers from Mac's survival pack. She looked toward the back of the hut, stepping to one side to take in the full splendor of the setting Cetian sun.

"Wow, would you look at that," she said.

Mac turned from his inspection to witness the sunset. The canyon floor was a good twenty-five meters higher than the main valley, a spectacular vista that stretched out before them. The sky above the valley was littered with dark, brooding storm clouds, backlit by the lavender glow of the setting sun, with amber and blue highlights provided by the planet's twin moons hanging high in the evening sky behind them.

"Beautiful," Mac agreed, returning to his work.

"You know, we should've built this thing with the opening facing the valley. That's where the view is."

"It's also where the wind comes from," he pointed out.

Sara turned around to look at their little shack. Suddenly, she understood why Mac had chosen the triangular shape. "I get it."

"Get what?"

"Why you chose this shape. It's aerodynamic, right?"

"Bingo. Any wind that the valley sends our way will tend to push down on the structure rather than try to lift it up or knock it over."

"And that's why you covered the windward end of the tarp with all those rocks and dirt, huh?"

"Right again. Who knows, I may make a builder out of you yet."

"No thanks," she immediately rejected the idea, brushing the dirt from her hands. "It's definitely not my strong suit."

"I don't know," Mac said thoughtfully. "You were pretty good at packing that mud on the roof."

"You forget, dirt is my specialty," she reminded him.

"Ah yes. Speaking of dirt, why don't you dig a shallow hole, say one meter in diameter, in front of the hut," he instructed as he picked up his knife and replaced it into its sheath on his hip.

"What for?"

"Fire pit," he answered as he turned and began walking toward the woods. "And don't dig it too close. We don't want to burn the house down. Say, two meters?"

"Where are you going?"

"To get some firewood," he announced as he strolled off.

"Sure, why not?" Sara answered.

"And while you're at it, see if you can find some rocks to line the edge of the pit with!" he added as he walked away.

"Of course," she mumbled to herself as she shivered in the light evening breeze. It was getting cold, and the last thing she wanted to do with her sore ribs was lug around a bunch of rocks.

* * *

The sun had long set, leaving the LRV camp bathed in only the light of the twin moons. At Lynn's request, Laura and Maria had set up several floodlights to provide extra illumination for their work. But even with the extra lighting, the work was progressing slowly as they broke open the first float bay.

"Finally," Frank breathed a sigh of relief as he tossed the access plate aside. Reaching down inside the cramped compartment, he felt around until he found the line that filled the float with air. He carefully disconnected the fitting and tucked it down into the bay. The last thing he needed was for it to suddenly inflate.

When inflated, each float would wrap around one quarter of the capsule's circumference just above the heat-shield level. Frank estimated that in order to carry Mac and Sara, an operator, and a makeshift propulsion system, they would need at least two of the floats, but decided to use all four, just to be sure.

"How's it going, guys?" Lynn asked as she approached.

"Painfully slow" Frank admitted.

"Getting to these things is not easy," Tony added. "They weren't designed to be taken apart."

"How long do you think it will take before you have all the floats you need?"

"Let's see," Frank began sarcastically. "It took us about two hours just to get this one out. So maybe, six more hours."

"Well, maybe not that long," Tony corrected optimistically. "Now that we know how to get to them, it shouldn't take quite as long to get the other ones out."

"Don't forget, after we remove them, we still have to build the raft," Frank reminded them.

"And the propulsion system," Tony added.

"Maybe, we'd all better knock off for the night, huh? Get a fresh start in the morning?" Lynn suggested.

"Lynn," Frank informed her patiently. "If we don't get these floats out tonight, there's no way we're going to be able to affect a rescue before sundown tomorrow."

"Then maybe we'd better plan on this being a two-day project instead of an overnight one. I don't want something to go wrong while we're out there on the water."

"They don't have any food, Lynn," Frank reminded her. "And they have very little drinkable water as well."

"Lynn's right, Frank. Let's call it a night."

"Mac's still stranded out there, Tony. Of all people, I would think that you would want to rescue him more than any of us."

Lynn said nothing, taking note of Frank's frustration.

"Mac would agree with her!" Tony insisted. "Besides, he's stranded out there with Sara, remember?"

Frank looked curiously at Tony for a moment.

"If I know Mac, he's probably snuggling up to her right now, telling her they have to keep warm or something." Tony flashed a broad, toothy grin at Frank.

Fatigue washed over Frank as he realized Tony was right. "Yeah, he probably is at that." Frank dropped the collar to the ground in defeat. "What the hell," he resigned.

"Don't worry about Mac," Tony assured him as they walked back to the boarding ramp. "He'll do just fine."

Lynn stood silently, watching Frank get up and head inside. After he was gone, she turned to Tony. "Thanks."

"No problem."

* * *

Mac pushed the ignition strip into the fire paste, setting into motion a chemical reaction that caused the paste to burst into flames spreading quickly across the wood. Mac tossed another piece of wood on top of the now burning starter piece, and within minutes, they had their fire.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Mac boasted.

Sara was huddled up just inside the open end of the hut to stay out of the cool evening breeze that had kicked up

just prior to Mac's return. Her jacket was never able to dry completely, and the cold, damp cloth was chilling her to the bone.

"C...can you m...make it b...bigger?" she stuttered, shivering.

"What's the matter, you cold?"

"I'm f...freezing. My j...acket is st...still wet. All m...my clothes are st...still w...wet."

"Then why don't you take them off," Mac suggested casually as he tossed another piece of wood on the fire.

"You'd l...like th...that, w...wouldn't y...you?"

"Gimme a break, Sara," he said as he walked over to her. "You're never gonna get warm if you keep that cold, wet thing on, and you know it." He reached down to feel her face. Normally, she would have knocked his hand away from her, but she was too cold to care.

"Jeez, Sara. You're cold as ice!" Mac knelt down beside her. "You're taking that thing off, right now! Whether you like it or not!" he commanded as he began to unzip the front of her jacket.

Sara looked up at him, her teeth chattering, her body shaking. She had not been this cold only minutes ago. She knew that her core temperature had to be falling fast. She wondered if she should have listened to the other women on the Daedalus. They warned her not to allow herself to get too thin. *Women need a little more fat on their bodies than men do.* She could hear them as if they were standing next to her, judging her slender form. She had always strived to keep her body-fat percentage as low as possible, spending hours every night on the exer-cycle in her war against her body's natural tendency to carry the extra layer of insulation around with her. But now, in retrospect, it may have been a mistake.

She could feel Mac's warm breath against her cheek as he removed her jacket. It was so warm and she was so cold. But she was confused. This man normally repulsed her. But

now, all she could think about was huddling against his warm body. All she could think about was getting warm.

Mac pulled off Sara's shirt. "Lie back," he instructed.

Sara rolled backwards without hesitation as Mac slid her jumpsuit down her legs and off her feet. She felt alarmingly cold as the sudden breeze hit her bare skin. "Oh God."

Mac pulled off her boots, followed by her pants. "Come here," Mac instructed, reaching out to put his arm around her shoulder. He pulled her into his chest, wrapping both of his massive arms around her.

"J...jeez, M...Mac," she stammered, recoiling from him. "You're w...wet t...too."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry," he apologized. Mac quickly shed his clothing, stripping down to his underwear as well, and pulled her in close again.

His chest was warm against her cheek. She snuggled in closer, burying her face in his skin, wrapping her arms around his waist. He was solid as a rock, and she could feel the heat from his muscles radiating through his thin, fat-free skin. "S...so c...cold," she whispered.

"I know," he whispered back. "I know." Mac reached over to his survival pack with his left hand, digging through it until he felt the smooth, metallic fabric of his thin, insulated sleep sack. He pulled it out of his pack, flapping it around to unfold it, and wrapped it loosely around the two of them.

It felt like nothing to Sara, it was a flimsy little sheet that didn't seem like it could help at all. Mac tucked it around them, trying his best to protect her back and legs from the cold. He held her, gently rocking her back and forth.

His back felt like ice, the cold night air blowing against it as he tried to shield her from the breeze. She was sitting in his lap now, her legs tucked up underneath her, nestled snugly between his thighs. He rubbed her back slowly with his right hand, trying to generate a little friction to warm her cold skin.

Her back felt smooth and silky, as were her thighs that were pressed against his. He could feel her ice-cold toes

tucked under his right calf. Her hair was long and golden brown, and held the pungent aroma of salty floodwater. He could feel her breasts pressing up against his abdomen. Then he noticed something had changed, something was different. He looked down at her. She was still, unmoving. He could still feel her warm breath against his chest, constant and regular. Then he realized, she was no longer shivering.

He noticed something different about himself as well. Here he was, holding a beautiful, sexy, half-naked young woman in his arms. Yet he was not aroused at all. Only a few hours ago, he had smiled at the thought of the two of them thrown together, stranded in this tiny canyon, separated from the others for who knew how long. What a perfect opportunity it would be for him. Only a few days ago, he wanted her more than he had wanted any woman in his young life. Yet now that he held her in his arms, the only thoughts running through his mind were ones of concern for her well-being.

Jesus! He thought. *What a time to develop a conscience! Tony's never going to believe this,* he mused, as he continued to rock her gently back and forth.

* * *

Sara woke slowly, still groggy after her hypothermic slumber. She felt toasty, cozy, and safe in her husband's arms. The way they used to sleep together had always been so comforting to her, interwoven with one another. But they had not slept together in this way for longer than she could remember. And she had missed the feeling of his massive chest, heaving slowly up and down as he breathed slowly in and out.

Her eyes suddenly popped open. Her husband did not have a massive chest, and they rarely even slept in the same bed any longer. She tried to shift her eyes up slightly to peek at the man she was huddled against, but couldn't get a clear view of his face. All she could see were the

striations of chest muscles stretching across his ribcage and under her cheek. Then it came back to her. The sample collecting, the flood, the cold. It was *Mac* that she was lying against. Her first reaction was one of disgust. Or was the disgust only what she thought she should feel? Then it changed to panic. *What happened last night? How did I end up in his arms?* She thought long and hard, trying to remember the previous night's events, the memories floating back to her in bits and pieces, disjointed and indiscernible. She remembered the bitter cold, and the shivering. She remembered him taking off her clothing. She remembered his warm body pressed tightly against hers.

Her eyes darted around, getting her bearings. The hut, the sleep sack, the grassy floor. She could smell something peculiar, something burning. Then she remembered the fire, and she remembered falling asleep, warm in Mac's big, strong arms, and cuddled up with her face buried in his chest, rocking her gently, protecting her from the cold, harsh world outside. And the contentment, she remembered that most of all. Feeling so protected, so safe when she was near him.

Again, panic swept through her, washing away all traces of her previous contentment. This was *Mac*, after all. The most arrogant man she had ever known! Yet, she had never felt so content before, so peaceful. Even now, in the face of this sudden, horrifying reality, the contentment seemed to settle back in, pushing the panic aside.

Mac began to stir, and she quickly closed her eyes, pretending to be asleep. She could hear him yawning, and felt his body stretching and flexing as he woke. It was sort of cute, actually, this big muscle-bound ape stretching like a little schoolboy waking from his afternoon nap. She could hear him smack his lips as he opened his eyes.

His head turned toward hers, his chin brushing against her hair. "Sara?" he whispered.

She remained still, pretending to be asleep, as Mac carefully extricated himself from her embrace and out of the

sleep sack. Perhaps, if she just laid there, pretending to wake up a little later, she would have time to figure this all out.

Mac stoked the nearly-dead fire, hoping to take the chill off the morning air. After taking inventory of his survival pack, he decided that rationing of their limited consumables would be required, especially after his morning conversation with Tony via the comm-set indicated that a rescue attempt might not take place until late in the day, if not the following one.

They requested that he recon the status of the floodwater, hoping it had receded significantly overnight. But Mac decided to postpone the inspection until after Sara was awake and felt up to the task.

Dividing the energy bars and dried fruit into six portions, Mac didn't wait for Sara to awaken before eating. Although he was considerably larger than Sara and required more calories per day, he opted to limit his consumption. He had gained a few pounds as of late, thanks to Laura's various experiments in bread baking, and had allowed his body fat-percentage to climb to a whopping eight percent. That was the highest it had been in two years, and the thought of letting himself slip that way disgusted him to no end.

Trying to be as quiet as possible so as not to disturb Sara's slumber, Mac sat quietly, chewing on dried fruit and washing it down with sips of water from his canteen. They would have to find a new source of water today. But Mac had spied more than one waterfall cascading down the canyon walls during his initial recon of their little valley. It should require no more than a short hike and some simple purification procedures to produce enough potable water to get them through the day.

About an hour later, Sara finally developed the nerve to present herself, clinging to her guise of extended slumber to avoid potential embarrassment. She had laid there an entire

hour, as she contemplated her confusing feelings toward Mac, why she was experiencing them, and what they really meant. In the end, she convinced herself it had merely been a matter of survival, and that Mac was just doing his job, protecting a member of his team.

If only it hadn't been Mac.

There was no denying however, that she probably would not have survived the flood, or her bout with hypothermia, without Mac. His brute strength was the sole deciding factor that had saved the both of them from drowning in the first place. Although anyone with the proper training and tools could build a shelter, the flood currents had been ferocious, and probably would have overpowered any other man on their team.

Women on the Daedalus served in all manner of roles. Doctors, scientists, technicians and the like. There were really only two areas in which they differed. Men generally took the more dangerous and more physically demanding responsibilities, while the women gravitated toward the more cerebral or nurturing roles. The thing that bothered her the most was that it was the women's responsibility to bear children and care for the family. There was no denying that only the women could bear children. But the fact that such duty was *expected* of her was still difficult for her to accept. Her mother, and her mother before her, knew that they would live their entire lives aboard the Daedalus, and thus had accepted their roles. But once they were living on a planet instead of a spaceship, there might be other alternatives.

There was yet another factor for Sara to consider, one that she had been denying to herself for some time now. She *wanted* children. She *wanted* a family. Deep down inside, she knew it. And the feeling of security she had felt in Mac's arms only served to reawaken that instinct within her.

"Good morning," she greeted him as she stepped out of the hut.

“Good morning,” Mac returned, obviously happy to see her awake, alive and well.

There was something different in his tone, a sincerity that was usually missing. Mac knew how to be polite, on occasion. But those occasions were rare, and usually forced.

“How are you feeling?” Mac inquired.

“Not bad, considering,” she replied, not wanting to complain. In fact, she was feeling abnormally weak.

“Are you hungry?”

“A little.” She was actually famished.

Mac handed her one of the food portions he prepared.

Sara looked at the meager rations with disappointment. “Is this it?”

“Sorry,” Mac apologized. “I figured we better ration what little we have. No idea how long we might be stuck out here.”

“Really?” Sara asked, surprised by the news. “Have you heard anything?”

“They’re trying to build a raft to rescue us. They’re taking the floats off the pods. It’s not an easy task. I’d be surprised if they get to us today. Tomorrow, more likely.”

Sara looked down at her skimpy breakfast. “I see,” she replied as she selected a piece of dried fruit and popped it into her mouth. The last thing she needed right now was another day alone with Mac. She was confused enough already. “Did you already eat?” she asked, trying to make polite conversation.

“Yup. Same thing.”

“Is that going to be enough for you?”

Mac chuckled. “I’ll be alright. I’ve been getting a little chubby around the middle lately anyway. A little starvation will do me some good.”

“Yeah, right.” Sara remembered how firm his torso had felt last night. She’d be hard-pressed to find an abnormal amount of fat anywhere on his body.

Sara ate the dried fruit rather quickly, having developed an affinity for it over the years. Dried fruit was more

common than fresh fruit on board the ship. It was the only way to keep it from spoiling between harvests.

The energy bar was a different story. She had never cared for them, they were awfully chewy and always left an unusual taste in her mouth. She ate it nevertheless, knowing that she needed the more complex carbohydrates if she was going to get through the day.

"It's warming up rather quickly," Mac commented, looking up at the sky. "Clouds are gone as well."

Sara looked up. The two moons had drifted farther apart, and the sky was back to its usual brilliant topaz. "So, what's the plan for the day?" she asked as she forced down another bite of the energy bar.

"Well, first, we have to find a fresh water source. I saw a couple of waterfalls when I was looking around the area yesterday. So we shouldn't have any problem there. And Frank wants us to check on the flood levels to see if they have gone down at all since last night. After his little skirmish in the ocean, he's probably hoping the water will go down enough for us to walk back across," Mac laughed. "Probably lost his taste for saltwater, eh?"

"Probably," she agreed. Until yesterday, she couldn't imagine what it must've been like for Frank.

"We should probably collect some more firewood, just in case we have to spend another night here."

"Do we have enough food for another day?"

"Nope. We barely have enough for today. If we have to spend a significant portion of tomorrow out here, we may have to live off the land."

Sara didn't like that idea. As a botanist, she had a pretty fair understanding of the risks involved in eating the indigenous plant life without thorough testing. And she had no desire to become a human guinea pig. But neither did she have the desire to go on a crash diet.

The idea of going back into the water and trying to swim across was looking more appealing now.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Fearing they would find food less available once they reached higher elevations, Jack and Will decided to set up camp just after lunch. They would spend the day hunting wild game in the hopes of finding and killing a significant source of protein. Jack had devised a method to dry meat in the Cetian sun. It would enable them to carry and consume the meat for at least a week at a time, making their journey across the mountains less problematic.

Jack moved quietly through the forest, attempting to move closer to his target. About forty meters away down a long narrow valley was a long, fat, reddish colored animal that resembled images of wild boars back on Earth. Based on strategies Jack had found in the survival guide, Will circled around the hill to the far end of the valley and had taken up a position just out of the creature's line of sight.

Jack froze as the boar suddenly looked up, its concern peaked by the sound of Jack's footsteps. Jack decided the animal did not have good distance vision, since it looked directly toward him, yet didn't appear to see him.

Will, on the other hand, was certain the animal had spotted Jack, and he jumped out from his hiding place, whooping and hollering as he ran toward the animal. The boar-like creature, shocked by the sight of this unusual, and apparently psychotic, creature dancing in the distance, turned and ran in the opposite direction, directly toward Jack.

The creature lumbered along at a remarkable speed for an animal with such short, stubby legs. Jack raised his pistol as the boar approached him at an all-out run. Taking careful aim, he waited for the animal to get closer before firing.

When the time was right, Jack gently depressed the trigger of his pistol, firing a single shot directly at the forehead of the charging beast. To his disbelief, the round bounced off the animal's surprisingly hard skull, leaving nothing more than a small patch of torn, bleeding fur where it struck. The bullet failed to even knock it off its stride. Jack suddenly realized there was nothing wrong with the animal's distance vision... The creature simply wasn't afraid of him.

Jack fired again, this time without such careful aim. The round kicked up dirt as it struck the ground to the left of the onrushing boar, missing the animal completely. With no time left, Jack scurried up a nearby rock to escape the angry animal as it circled the rock, looking for a way to climb its sides and seek retribution for the unwarranted attack.

The boar-like creature snorted and growled as it paced angrily about the base of the rock, rearing up on its hind legs more than once to reveal its long, sharp fangs in a ferocious display. It worked, at first, and Jack realized he wanted nothing to do with this creature. But without an escape route, he was left with little choice. He fired round after round, some bouncing off the creature's tough hide, others entering its body through areas of less resistance. Still, the creature refused to die.

The beast, now full of rage, reared up again, putting its front hooves on the rock as if trying to jump up in a single bound. Jack aimed for the animal's open mouth, firing three rounds in rapid succession, all of which struck the boar directly into its snarling, red maw. Blood and tissue flew out of the creature's mouth as its eyes filled with blood. The animal let out a painful squeal, then fell over onto its side, dark reddish-brown blood oozing from its wounds. Seconds later, its breathing stopped, and it lay motionless next to the rock.

After watching it for more than a minute, Jack decided the creature was dead, and jumped down from his perch. He gave it a tap with his boot, the boar's lifeless body quivering from the blow. It was an ugly thing, with ragged fur and

beady black eyes. It smelled horrible as well, and Jack wondered if it would even taste good.

Will walked up to him a minute later, stopping next to the creature and looking down. "Too bad we had to kill it," he commented as he stared at the dead animal.

Jack raised his eyes to Will, dumbfounded. "That was the plan, remember?"

"Are you sure it's even edible?" Will wondered, noticing the creature's pungent aroma.

"After all that, it better be."

* * *

"That should do it," Tony announced as he finished securing the last deck plate to the raft.

Frank walked around the makeshift raft, pushing and pulling at various points to test its sturdiness. "I think we should put some sort of a skirt around the nose and under the first deck plate, just to help the water flow around the nose and under the deck."

"That shouldn't be too hard. It might reduce the drag on the nose a bit too," Tony replied. "How long do you think it will take to install the propulsion system?"

"I don't know. A few hours, maybe?"

Frank looked up at the sun. It was already sitting fairly low in the sky. "I don't know. There are only four hours of daylight left, and we still have to rig up a way to tow it to the water."

"How were you planning on doing that?" Tony wondered.

Frank lifted one end of the raft. "It's not too heavy. I thought I would lash a couple of canopy poles together and make a long triangle with a couple wheels on the back end, then lash it to the back of the ATC."

"Like a trailer. That should work," Tony agreed.

"We'll get started on the trailer while you and Adia work on the propulsion system."

* * *

"Mac?" Frank's voice squawked over the comms.

"Go ahead, Frank."

"How are you holding up?"

"Oh, pretty fair, I'd say."

"Think you can last until morning?"

"No problem," Mac assured him. "What's the hold-up?"

"Well, the raft is finished, but Tony still needs to install the propulsion, and I have to make a trailer to tow it to the water."

"I was thinking about that earlier," Mac replied. "You could use the wheels from the cargo pod tow kit, and some of those long poles from one of the portable canopies."

"That's what I was thinking. The whole thing would have gone a lot faster if you were here to help build it. We should finish it up sometime tonight, and have it in the water in the morning."

"Copy that. Just bring some breakfast, will you? We're running low on rations here."

"You got it. Hang in there."

"We will," Mac promised as he turned his mic off.

"What's the news?" Sara asked.

"They'll be here first thing in the morning," Mac promised her.

"Great," she commented unenthusiastically. "Another night stuck out here in the middle of nowhere."

She was depressed, Mac could tell. He looked at his watch. "It'll be getting dark in a few hours. I'm gonna go for a walk, explore our little valley." He rose to his feet. "Care to join me?"

"No thanks," Sara declined. "I'm gonna stay here and rest a bit," she said as she rubbed her sore side. "My ribs are still bothering me."

"Suit yourself. I'll be back in a few hours." Mac turned and began to walk toward the woods.

"Wait a minute!" Sara called after him, suddenly panicked. "You're just going to leave me out here? What if I need your help?"

Mac was a little surprised. Not only was she admitting that she might need his help, but she seemed genuinely frightened at the thought of being left alone here. Something was different, she was no longer the same Sara he had known only a day ago.

“There’s a signal flare in my pack. Just point it toward the sky and push the button on the bottom. I can be back in minutes if I have to,” he assured her as he continued to walk away.

Sara sat there, watching him until he disappeared into the distant tree line. She scanned the area in all directions. It was quiet and peaceful here. A soft, warm breeze blew across the meadow, fluttering the tall grass in graceful waves. The topaz sky above was littered with puffy, white and gray clouds that moved slowly from east to west, casting lumbering shadows across her as they passed under the afternoon Cetian sun. She could hear the sounds of birds in the distance, one of them occasionally soaring overhead in a high, drifting flight. The grass made a subtle, brushing sound as it danced in the breeze. The whole scene was utterly surreal to her. Even though she had spent most of her life working with plants and soils, it had all been in labs and ag-bays on board the Daedalus. Large, climate-controlled compartments stacked from floor to ceiling with growing flats, sunlamps and irrigation systems. It had seemed enough of a miracle to her that something could grow from a mere seed into a fully mature plant with nothing more than a little light, water, soil, and carbon dioxide. But that had been in a carefully controlled and closely monitored environment. Here, under the open sky, it occurred naturally. There were no sunlamps, no growing flats, no irrigation systems. No computers to monitor the status of the crops. No one to till the soil or plant the seeds. No one to harvest the crops or control the growth rates through genetic manipulations.

Sara laid back on the grass next to the tent, watching the clouds pass overhead. She was in the middle of nature

in its most pristine form. She was surrounded by the miracle of life itself. She felt different somehow, changed. She felt renewed, rejuvenated. She couldn't explain it, but she was sure it had something to do with the life that surrounded her.

* * *

"Wow," Jack exclaimed as he chewed his first bite. "That's not bad."

"Thank you."

"How did you get rid of the stench?"

"I didn't," Will admitted. "I used those pungent purple leaves to season it. Basically, I replaced one smell with another."

"Well whatever you did, it worked. This stuff is great. You're going to have to write a cookbook when we get back."

"Oh, yes. William Scheller's Wilderness Recipes." It was an amusing thought.

"There's another reason for your name to go down in the history books."

Will took another bite of the boar meat. "One of these days, I'm gonna try my hand at making a salad. I haven't had a good salad since we left home."

"Good idea," Jack agreed as he shoveled down his dinner. "Why don't you get started tomorrow? I could really go for a good salad, myself. Besides, I think we could use another day of preparation before we head up into the mountains. Maybe even two or three days for that matter."

Will was a little shocked by that. Jack had always been so dead set on trudging ahead, trying to get to the landing site as quickly as possible. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, I was thinking. Winter can't be too far off. What, maybe one or two months?"

"Something like that, I would guess."

"It's bound to get colder as we move into higher altitudes. And to be honest, I have no idea how long it will

take us to cross this mountain range. If we're lucky, we'll find an easy route through to the other side." Jack finished his last bite, setting his small metal plate into the pot of hot water they used for cleaning up after dinner. "Then again, we may not be so lucky. So I was thinking, maybe we'd be better served to stay here a few days and prepare. I've been reading the survival guide," he continued. "I think we need to do some more hunting, gather some extra meat to make into jerky. We should collect more roots, nuts, and berries as well. Also, we need to be thinking about protecting ourselves from the elements. These clothes aren't going to cut it once winter sets in, especially at higher elevations."

"What do we do? How do we protect ourselves?"

"Furs," Jack smiled. "We hunt some larger animals, something with heavy fur. We skin it and make some heavy winter coats to keep us warm."

"We can do that?" Will asked.

"Why not? All the instructions are in the survival guide."

It made sense; that much Will had to admit. He just had a hard time imagining himself wearing animal fur as clothing. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Jack?" Will remembered Jack's difficulty killing the boar. "I mean, it took the whole clip to kill this thing."

"Yeah, well, next time I won't use a pistol," Jack gestured toward the rifle leaning against a nearby tree.

"Coats, huh?" Will contemplated.

"Oh yeah. We can even make boot covers, mittens, head gear, you name it. We've got a sewing kit and lots of high tensile-strength fishing line. We should be able to make anything we want."

"I didn't know you were such an accomplished seamstress," Will teased.

"I'm not, of course. But the survival guide has all the instructions. Cutting patterns, stitching patterns, skinning and tanning instructions. You name it."

"So, we're going to become real mountain men," Will chuckled, remembering the references in the history files he

had studied as a young lad.

"You got it. Oh, by the way, we'll have to stop shaving."

"Really?" Will asked. No Daedalian had ever worn facial hair. It was considered unhygienic. "Why is that?"

"Beards will help keep our faces warm during cold weather."

Will stroked his chin in contemplation. "I wonder how I'll look in a beard. Distinguished, maybe?"

"Undoubtedly," Jack laughed.

* * *

Mac returned just before sundown, triumphantly carrying the carcass of a small, dead animal.

"Where have you been?" Sara asked. "I was beginning to get worried."

"I was hunting for dinner," Mac announced, holding up his kill for display.

"You killed that thing?" she said skeptically.

"Yup," Mac grinned, holding it up proudly.

"You're not planning to eat that thing, are you?"

"You bet I am."

"Are you crazy? How do you know it won't kill you?"

"I don't. But I do plan on finding out."

"You can't just *eat* it! You have to test it first. Determine its toxicity, its effects on the human body."

"That could take hours!" Mac objected.

"Exactly!"

"But I'm hungry now, and we don't have a test kit."

"So you're just going to eat some strange alien animal?"

"Oh, come on, Sara. It's just a rabbit."

"It may *look* like a rabbit, Mac, but it's definitely *not* a rabbit. It is an alien creature. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"I'm not stupid, Sara."

"Then don't *act* stupid, Mac."

"Look," Mac explained as he dropped the dead animal by the fire pit. "The way I see it, everything else here appears

to have developed in pretty much the same way as it did on Earth, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"And Laura said the DNA structure is basically the same..."

"So far, but..."

"Soooo...it stands to reason that this little critter, who also probably developed the same way, has a better than average chance of being safe to eat."

"Mac," she urged. "Not every creature on Earth was safe to eat. Many organisms were extremely toxic to humans."

"Bugs and spiders, sure. But my great, great, grand-pappy—who lived on Earth—once said 'Every animal on God's green earth was edible. Some of them just didn't taste very good.' So the way I figure it, if it looks like a rabbit and acts like a rabbit, then it probably tastes like a rabbit as well. And guess what," he added as he pointed at the Cetian rabbit on the ground, "that thing was hopping when I shot it, so it's a rabbit."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "That's your argument?" she asked. "It was hopping?" she continued, mocking him. She reached over and picked up the dead animal, turning to march off to dispose of it for his own good.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Someone around here has got to make sense," she declared. "I'm tossing this thing into the floodwaters!"

"The hell you are!" he objected, rising to give chase.

"Oh yes I am!" she insisted as she headed toward the water.

Mac tried to grab Sara as she broke into a run. She only managed a few steps before her ribs began to hurt, causing her to stop, grasping at her injured side.

"Give me the damn rabbit, Sara!"

"It's *not* a rabbit!" she refused, holding the dead animal behind her back.

Mac tried several times to reach behind her, being careful not to bump her tender ribs.

"Don't make me get tough with you!" he threatened.

"Ha!" she laughed mockingly as she played keep-away with the carcass. "I'm so scared!"

That was enough. Mac grabbed her right shoulder, spinning her around with ease.

"Ow!" she screamed as his hand squeezed her shoulder and spun her around abruptly. "Let go of me, you jerk!" she commanded, resisting his hold on her.

"Give it to me!" Mac ordered with determination.

"Fine!" she agreed after seeing the anger in his eyes. "Go ahead and eat the damn thing!"

Mac snatched the carcass from her hand, letting go of her shoulder and heading back to the fire.

"But don't expect me to take care of you when you get sick and die!" Sara yelled after him.

"Jeez, Sara! Have you lost your mind?" he demanded as he dropped the carcass and returned to building the fire.

Sara rubbed her shoulder where Mac had grabbed her. "I'm only trying to save you from your own stupidity."

"Why is it that you women always think you know what's best for us?"

"Because you men are always pulling stupid stunts like this!" she retorted as she followed him back.

Mac stopped, turning around to face her again. "Have you found *anything* even *remotely* threatening about the plants here?"

"No, but..."

"And what about the dirt?" he interrupted. "Is it so terribly different that Earth plants won't grow in it?"

"Well, no, but..."

"Have you found *anything* that would lead you to believe the organisms here would be unsafe to eat?"

"No," she admitted reluctantly.

"Then why are you *so* sure that I'm gonna die if I eat this thing?"

"I'm not sure, Mac," she confessed. "That's my point."

"Do you think we can thrive here if we can't eat the indigenous organisms? What are we going to do, grow Earth crops in Earth soil, inside big domes or something? Keep raising Earth rabbits inside the domes as well? Does that sound like a good plan to you? That's what we've been doing all the way here... Four generations of us. And we're barely surviving, let alone thriving."

"Mac..."

"*That is my point, Sara,*" Mac continued. "You can test things for years. But sooner or later, someone's going to have to eat the stuff to be sure. It might as well be someone who's hungry. Someone who has as much to gain as he does to lose." Mac tossed another log on the burning fire. "Well that *time* is now, and that *someone* is *me*."

Sara looked at him for a moment. His logic made some sense, despite her best arguments. "But, Mac. Wouldn't it be safer to wait until more tests have been done? Or at least wait until we're back at the LRV where Maria could take care of you if you got sick?"

"Yes, but what if they can't get to us tomorrow?" Mac pointed out as he sat down by the fire, pulled out his knife, and started trimming a large stick. "What if we're stranded out here for several days...or even weeks?" He looked her straight in the eyes. "We won't have much choice then, will we?"

Suddenly, she realized what he was doing. He wasn't just hungry. He wasn't just trying to feed himself. In his own stupid way, he was trying to protect her, in case they *did* have to stay there for a few weeks.

"They're coming to get us tomorrow, Mac. You said so yourself."

"If their plan works, sure. But in case you've forgotten, none of us has had much luck in the water since we arrived here."

Sara was speechless. She watched as Mac began to cut apart a few branches. Sitting down a meter away from him,

she watched as he trimmed two large branches into small Y-shaped pieces and stuck them into the ground on either side of the fire pit. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Making a cooking spit," he answered quietly.

"Oh." She watched as he selected a straight branch long enough to reach across the fire, scraping the thin bark off of it with his large knife.

"Where did you get that knife?" she asked. "I've never seen anything like it, before."

"My father gave it to me."

"Really?" She continued to observe him cleaning the stick. The knife was nearly one hundred centimeters long, with a wide, silver blade that was polished to perfection. Its cutting edge appeared razor sharp, and its opposite edge was lined with a long row of saw teeth that looked like they could cut through just about anything. It was a formidable looking weapon that looked natural in Mac's hands. "Where did he get it?" she asked politely.

"His great, great grandfather brought it with him when he left Earth. It was the *only* thing he brought with him."

"Why a knife?"

"He was a simple man, or so I'm told. A carpenter. He liked to hunt and fish, mostly. Anything he could do to get him outside."

"Hardly seems the type to agree to be locked up inside a spaceship for the rest of his life."

"Yeah, well, I guess he fell in love with the wrong woman. A doctor, the daughter of one of the scientists who worked on the original project back on Earth. They met in Australia. She and her mother and brother were hiding out from the Syndicate with the Eden Underground, working on the Hercules drive. He was working for some developer out there, building tract homes for young Australian families. When it was time for her to go, I guess he couldn't bear the thought of losing her, so he went with her."

"Wow, that's so romantic."

"Shows you what romance gets you," Mac muttered darkly.

"How do you mean?"

"He spent the rest of his life tending to the landscape on the garden deck. Not much of a life for a *real* outdoorsman."

"So he gave that knife to his son?"

"Who gave it to his son, and so on, until it reached me."

"Are you going to give it to your son?"

"Probably, if I ever have one."

"Oh, I'm sure you will. I can't imagine you without a son to corrupt."

Mac chuckled. "Every Morrison male since then has been told the same thing when they received it."

"What's that?"

"All a man really needs to survive are his wits, and a good knife."

"Kind of a simple philosophy, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well we Morrison's come from simple stock."

She knew that wasn't really true. Mac probably was only remotely related to the man who originally owned that knife, if at all. Not with all the genetic dilution that had occurred over the decades due to the use of in vitro fertilization instead of natural conception. But he knew that. Many of the Daedalians clung to the idea of family heritage, despite their lack of genetic relation to their predecessors. It seemed to provide them with a sense of family pride that they sorely lacked. Even Sara preferred to consider herself related to her great grandmother.

"I don't know, Mac. You don't seem so simple to me."

Mac looked at her again. He knew she was only trying to be nice. She was an intelligent woman, confident, and well-educated, considerably more than him. Those serving in scientific disciplines had far more education than those whose jobs involved more manual labor. "Thanks." Mac finished peeling the bark off his roasting stick, setting it aside to begin cleaning his kill. "You know, you're a lot like she was."

"She who?" Sara wondered.

"Great, great grand-pappy Peter's wife," Mac explained, holding up the knife.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"That's how it was meant," he assured her as he cut away the dead creature's hide.

"What was her name?"

"Jennifer. Jennifer Bell."

"*Matthew Bell's* daughter?" Sara was shocked.

"That's her."

"Wow. Then it was *definitely* a compliment." Sara thought for a moment. "Then you're related to Jack?" she surmised.

"Considerably removed, yes."

"I didn't know that." Sara watched as he removed the last of the animal's hide, tossing it aside for later. "If I remember my history correctly, she was opposed to a lot of the council's ideas as well," Sara teased.

"That she was." Mac jabbed the tip of his knife into the animal's gut, slicing it open down its length, its internal organs spilling out onto the ground. "You definitely have *that* in common with her."

The sight of the creature's guts gushing out repulsed Sara, and she looked away. "So that's why you signed up for this mission, to be a builder?" she asked to take her mind off the bloody display.

"Seemed like the thing to do," Mac shrugged. "Maybe I thought that it would make old Pete happy. You know, seeing his kin following in his footsteps, building homes on an alien world." Mac stopped his disemboweling momentarily, looking up at her. "Seems sort of apropos, doesn't it?" he mused.

"Apropos?" Sara replied, almost laughing at his unexpected use of the word.

"Hey, I know a few words." Mac looked a little unsure of himself for a moment. "That was the right word, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," Sara assured him with a smile. "And yes, it does."

Mac finished removing the animal's innards, wiping away as much of the blood and undesirable tissue as possible. Grasping the head of the creature firmly in his left hand, he sliced around the circumference of its neck, severing all of the tissue surrounding its cervical spine before snapping it off cleanly with both hands.

She watched as Mac drove the long, bare stick forcibly through the length of the creature's body from head to tail, positioning it in the center of the long stick and placing it gently in the crux of the two upright "Y" shaped cradles he had pushed into the ground on either side of the pit earlier. It had been a gruesome display, watching him skin and clean the creature for consumption. But it had somehow been comforting to watch him perform the act without hesitation. If they did end up stranded here for weeks, he would undoubtedly be able to provide for her.

* * *

An hour later, the sun was down, leaving only the blue and amber light of the twin moons, the angle of their shadows becoming more oblique as Proxima moved farther ahead of Dista on its orbital plane.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Sara asked.

"Please, Sara," Mac objected as he ripped a leg from the cooked animal's carcass. "Give it a rest?"

Sara moved her pinched right thumb and forefinger across her mouth as if she were zipping it closed, indicating that he would hear no further objections from her. She watched in fear as he took his first bite, as if he would suddenly drop to an agonizing death right in front of her.

"Mmm," he hummed with satisfaction as he chewed the tender meat. "This is delicious!" He took another bite, nearly devouring the leg bone in the process. "You've gotta try this, Sara," he urged with his mouthful of Cetian rabbit meat. "It's great!"

"I don't know," she said hesitantly, still waiting for him to fall over in pain. She watched as Mac consumed both hind legs and then dug into the torso, moaning praises over the flavor between every bite. Sara looked at her energy bar and dried fruit. It didn't look very appetizing right now. And with every bite she watched him enjoy, her rations became less appealing. Eventually, the sound of Mac smacking his lips and the intriguing aroma of the meat wore her down. "Maybe, just a little taste?"

Mac smiled, pulling one of the smaller front legs from the body and handing it to Sara.

"Thank you." Sara looked over the juicy, brown leg. Tan meat hung from the small bone, threatening to fall off it at any moment. She sniffed at it for a second, testing its aroma as if she might be able to smell some unknown toxin. Mac watched with great delight as she sniffed the meat, trying to get up the courage to touch it with her tongue.

"Are you going to eat it, or just lick it?" he laughed.

"Just give me a minute, will you?" she snapped. She opened her mouth tentatively, trying to pinch off a tiny piece of meat to test. But the entire portion began to fall off the bone, and she instinctively opened her mouth wider to catch it before it fell to the ground. "Ugh!" she moaned, afraid to close her mouth around it, but not wanting to spit it out.

"Just chew it, Sara," he cackled loudly.

She closed her mouth slowly, biting down onto the warm, tender meat. It tasted unusual, not like anything she had ever tasted before. But it was not an unpleasant taste, she noticed, as she began to chew. It was actually quite delicious. Her expression slowly turned from horror to pleasure as she continued to chew the alien meat.

"It's good, huh?"

Sara nodded her head in agreement.

"Tastes like rabbit, right?"

"No," she managed to say as she continued eating.

Mac watched as she chewed the meat for an unusually long time. "Are you going to swallow it?"

Sara swallowed hard, immediately chasing the meat with a gulp of purified creek water.

"So," Mac said, waiting for her response.

"You're right," she agreed. "It is good." She took another bite, pulling the rest of the meat from the bone into her mouth and chewing.

"I told you so," Mac bragged. He pulled the other leg off and handed it to her. "Eat up."

Sara eagerly devoured the last leg, attacking part of the torso after that. The meat was delicious, better than anything she could remember eating in recent months. She didn't know if it was the animal itself, or the open fire that Mac had cooked it on. But there was no denying that it was quite enjoyable to eat. Within minutes, they had finished the entire animal, leaving nothing but the skeleton of its torso hanging from the cooking spit.

"A lot better than dried fruit and energy bars, huh?" he asked as he watched Sara uncharacteristically licking the juice from her fingertips.

"Mmm," she agreed. She licked her fingers clean, savoring every last drop of the flavorful oils. She couldn't believe it could be so satisfying. But now she wished there was more. "Is that it?" she asked as she looked at the bare skeleton, picking minuscule bits of meat and gristle from it and popping them into her mouth.

"That's all there is," Mac laughed.

"What?" she asked.

"Look at you!" he chuckled. "Ten minutes ago you were expecting me to drop dead. Now you're picking at the bare bones like a starving child!"

"Shut up," she protested playfully.

Mac laughed even harder.

"Why don't you make yourself useful and go out and kill another one?"

Mac continued laughing.

"You're such a jerk!" she said, throwing one of the bones at him. "Now, what?"

"We need dessert," he proclaimed.

"Of course," she agreed, playing along. "I'll call the galley and see if they have any pie."

"I'm serious," he insisted.

"Come on, what do we have for dessert?"

Mac reached for his daypack, opened it up, and pulled out a small resealable plastic bag full of dehydrated apricots. "Hand me that cup over there."

"Dried fruit?" she asked as she handed him the cup. "Haven't you had enough dried fruit for one day?"

"Ah, but this isn't just *any* dried fruit," he announced mysteriously. He poured some water into the cup and dumped the pieces of dried fruit into the water, pushing them down into the cup and then adding more water until it was nearly full.

"What are you doing?" Sara asked.

"Rehydrating the fruit," he explained as he carefully set the cup down out of the way.

"What for?"

"You'll see," he promised. He tossed another piece of wood onto the fire and stirred up the embers with a stick to help light the new log.

She watched him for a moment, curious what he was up to. "How long do we have to wait?" she asked as she watched him place the metal cup containing the submerged fruit onto the embers.

"I'm not sure...ten, fifteen minutes maybe," he promised. "Just be patient."

Sara rose from her place by the fire, dusting herself off as she crossed behind him. "Well, I'm going to go inside and tighten up my bandage while we're waiting."

Sara emerged twenty minutes later, no longer wearing her jacket. Her shirt underneath was a dirty, light brown, permanently stained by yesterday's encounter with the

floodwaters. There was a bulge on her left side where her bandage was hiding, and she was holding it with her hand.

"Mac, can you tie this for me?" she asked, lifting the left side of her shirt.

"Sure," he agreed, rising from his seat to assist her. He grabbed the two ends of the bandage, cinching it up tight.

"Ouch!" she squealed, flinching from the pain.

"Sorry."

"No, it's alright," she assured him. "Maria said it's got to be tight or it won't provide any support."

"You sure?"

"Yes," she promised, taking a deep breath and nodding at him to proceed.

Mac pulled on the bandages again, causing her to bite down on her lower lip. He quickly tied it off, tucking the tails of the bandage under to pad it and keep it from digging into her side. "There you go, good as new," he announced as he stood up.

"Thank you." Sara lowered her shirt cautiously, testing the stability of the bandage. "Yes, that's much better."

"Your hair," Mac exclaimed, noticing that it had been combed. "How did you...?"

"I found a comb in your pack. In the little hygiene kit. There was a toothbrush as well, along with a little tube of toothpaste that you can swallow."

"Yeah, I can smell it. Kind of minty."

"Yes." Sara sat back down by the fire. "You know you don't realize how much you miss the little things until you have to go without them."

"I suppose you're right."

"You wanna try it?" she offered. "It'll make your mouth feel minty-fresh."

"Sure, why not?" he agreed. He reached into the hut and pulled out the pack, digging through it until he found the little black hygiene packet.

After a minute of brushing, Mac swallowed. "Not bad," he agreed, licking the last of the pasty foam from his teeth and

gums.

"It beats having grimy teeth," she added. "Is our dessert ready yet?"

"Almost," Mac decided as he used a stick to push the heated metal cup off the embers. The water was almost gone, some if it boiled away while the rest was soaked up by the now swollen pieces of fruit. "Yup, nice and plump," he announced as he held up a piece for her inspection.

"Would you look at that," she commented in amazement. "I had no idea they could be rehydrated so easily. Where did you learn how to do that?"

"My mom works in the galley, remember?"

"Of course."

"You're supposed to dip them in sugar, so they might be a little tart. But that's not the best part."

"There's more?"

"The alcohol," Mac said, a mischievous grin on his face.

"Alcohol?"

"You bet," he said as he pierced a piece of fruit with the end of a stick and handed the stick to Sara with the fruit still dangling on the end of it.

"Won't that get us...?"

"Intoxicated? Yup, a little. That's what's so cool about them. Fruit that gets you drunk."

"Where did you get them?" she asked in amazement as she examined the piece of fruit.

"Old family recipe," Mac replied.

"I don't understand. Where did the alcohol come from?"

"The hunting knife wasn't the only thing great, great grand-pappy Peter brought with him," Mac admitted as he stabbed another piece of fruit. "Peter used to pilfer a few pieces of fruit each harvest. Then he would skin them, cut them up, and bottle them in alcohol. After about a year, he'd pull them out and dehydrate them so they'd keep longer."

"What did he do with the alcohol?" Sara wondered.

"What the hell do you think he did with it?" Mac snickered. "I'm told it gave the alcohol a fruity flavor, though."

"You never tried it?" Sara asked. "The alcohol, I mean."

"Nope. That was gone before I was born. But every year, we'd break some of these babies out on great, great grand-pappy Peter's birthday, just to remember him by."

Sara moved the fruit closer to her lips.

"Careful, it's hot," Mac warned. He blew gently on his fruit for a few seconds before tossing it into his mouth. "Oh yeah," he cooed as he chewed the warm alcohol-laced morsel. "Sweet, nectar of the Gods."

Sara giggled. "Your family's weird." Mimicking Mac's actions, she blew gently across the surface of the fruit for several seconds. After touching it to test its temperature, she plucked it from the end of her stick and placed it in her mouth, biting down softly. Warm, sweet juice squirted into her mouth, mixed with the subtle hint of bitter alcohol. "Oh, I see what you mean. The alcohol is really bitter," she exclaimed as her face puckered.

"It gets easier after you've had a few." Mac picked up the cup and moved over closer to her, setting the cup back down between them. "You want another?"

"Sure, why not?"

Mac handed her a piece of fruit, taking another one for himself as well. Five minutes later, Mac was refilling the cup with dried fruit and water to make another batch.

* * *

Will finished drilling the last hole in the side of his flute, and now the moment of truth was at hand.

"Jack?" he called.

Jack looked over from his work area on the far side of the fire. He had been working on a small piece of leftover boar hide, trying to fashion a small tote bag according to the instructions he found in the survival encyclopedia. "What's up?"

"It's finished," Will announced proudly.

"Really?" Jack rose quickly from his work to move over to Will's side of the fire. "Well, give it a try."

Will held the flute up, carefully positioning his fingers in the most comfortable fashion. Raising it to his lips, he wet them briefly and wrapped them around the mouthpiece and blew softly into the flute. The same sound as before emanated from the narrow slit just beyond the mouthpiece. Holding the note steady, Will lifted his finger nearest his mouth, uncovering the hole. The note changed in pitch, dropping, in what Will recognized as, a whole musical step. His eyes widened as he lifted his next finger, causing the note to change yet again. This time, the note went down a half step. He repeated the process, the note changing as he lifted each finger.

"It works, Will! The damn thing works!" Jack exclaimed, laughing.

Will took the flute down from his mouth, a broad smile spreading across his face.

"I don't believe it!" Jack praised. "It really works!"

Will tried again, raising and lowering fingers in no particular order, producing similar notes in random patterns. He varied the strength of his breath, trying to alter the tonality of the notes. He even trilled his tongue and his fingers. His soul was alive with his newfound power to create music, even if his fingers had not yet learned the ability to create anything remotely resembling a melody.

* * *

Sara laughed with abandon. "Weren't you embarrassed?"

"Hell no!" Mac laughed. "It wasn't the first time she'd seen my naked butt!"

Sara squealed with laughter, nearly falling over backward as she plopped another piece of the alcohol-laced fruit into her mouth.

"I'll tell you one thing, though! It sure as hell was the *last* time she ever saw it!" Mac chuckled.

Sara laughed even harder, an accidental snort leaping from her mouth. "Oh my!" she exclaimed, covering her mouth with embarrassment. "Gimme anudder peez a dat fruit!" she demanded, her words slurring.

"I don't know, I think you've had enough, young lady."

"What? Don't be re-lick-u-dus," she mumbled. "I'm perfectly...right," she insisted, attempting to sit up straight.

"Perfectly right?" he teased. "The hell you are! You're shitty!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're D-R-U-N-K, drunk, little lady."

"I beg your pardon?" she giggled.

"You heard me."

"I beg your pardon?" she giggled again a bit louder, falling over against him, her face landing against his chest.

"You *are* drunk!" he insisted as he lifted her face back up.

"Say it, don't spray it, mister Mac!" she teased.

"What?" Mac felt something on his head and looked up. Another drop struck his face, then another and another. "Hey, I think it's starling to rain!"

Sara burst out laughing.

"What?" he asked in confusion.

"Starling to rain?" she teased. "Now who's d-r-n-u-k, mister Mac?"

The raindrops started falling harder. "I think we'd better head inside, Sara."

"Wait!" she begged. "I wanna nudder peeza fruit!" she demanded confidently.

The rainfall increased, growing to a downpour in seconds.

"Jesus!" Mac exclaimed, grabbing Sara and dragging her to her feet.

But Sara's legs weren't working very well. Mac picked her up and carried her over to the hut a few steps away. Pushing her head through the door flap, he dropped her inside and then returned to the fire, tossing the remaining

firewood onto the sizzling flames in the hopes that he might be able to keep it going in spite of the rain.

As Mac finished gathering the remaining wood, he heard a rustling in the bushes not twenty meters from their campsite. He froze momentarily, concentrating to hear through the sound of the downpour. He heard it again, only this time it had moved to the left. Mac quickly looked around for his rifle, which he spied leaning against the tree to his right, about four meters away. He walked slowly backwards toward the rifle now behind him, trying to remain facing the direction of the strange sounds.

Unaware of what was happening, Sara came stumbling back out of the hut into the rain. "Mac! We forgot da fruit thingies! Ooo, it's really startin' ta rain," she giggled as she stuck out her tongue trying to catch raindrops.

Something moved in the bushes again, catching Sara's attention, causing her to turn to her left toward the sound. "Mac? Is that you? Are you takin' a wee-wee?"

"Sara!" Mac hissed from behind her as he picked up his rifle.

Sara took a step toward the bushes as the unknown intruder moved again. She had heard Mac's voice, but hadn't realized that it was from behind her. "Oh, don't be so shy, Mac-ee. I've seen pee-pees before."

"Sara!" Mac whispered even louder. "Behind you!"

Sara turned around, looking like she might lose her balance for a moment as she did so. "There you are," she teased playfully.

"Get back in the hut!" Mac ordered.

"What?" she asked. Then the noise came again, causing Sara to spin back around away from Mac to face the noise.

"Sara!" He wasn't whispering anymore, as he shouldered his rifle and charged forward.

Sara turned around, her eyes open wide with fear, just in time to see Mac come charging toward her, holding his rifle up high as if ready to open fire. "Mac!" she screamed.

“Get in the fuckin’ hut!” he ordered, pushing her back inside as he charged by her.

Sara fell backwards, falling into a wet heap inside the hut, screaming as she fell.

Mac ran forward, scaring whatever was in the bushes to run off. But Mac wasn’t giving up, and instead jumped over the bushes in pursuit, just in time to see a large, humanoid-shaped, furry creature with long bluish-gray hair running with amazing speed and agility. He tried chasing after it, but within moments it was too far ahead of him.

Not one to be pushed aside so easily, Sara rushed out of the hut and started looking around for Mac, ready to give him a tongue lashing for knocking her down. “Mac!” she yelled. “Where are you, you little shit?”

Not thirty meters away, Mac heard Sara yelling from camp. He rolled his eyes, looked around again to make sure the creature wasn’t coming back, and then headed back to camp.

“There you are!” Sara barked as Mac came out of the bushes. “What the hell is going on?” she demanded. “Why did you push me down? And why are you carrying a rifle?” she finally added, noticing his weapon for the first time.

“There was something out there, Sara,” Mac explained. “Something big.”

“What?” She was sure he was making it all up.

“Something big and hairy, with arms and legs.”

“What?”

“Humanoid...with arms and legs and everything,” he exclaimed.

Sara was suddenly terrified. “You think it’ll come back?”

“I think I scared it away.”

“You sure?” she asked, looking in his eyes for confirmation.

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Good, cuz I’m not sharing any of our fruit with him.”

Mac rolled his eyes, then looked up. “The rain’s really starting to come down,” he said, changing the subject.

"We're getting all wet again." Mac looked around a brief moment. "You get back inside. I'll join you in a minute."

"Okie dokie," Sara agreed with a drunken lilt. "I better get back inside. I'm getting all wet."

Mac tossed the remaining wood back on the fire, looked around once more, and then followed Sara inside. He had a feeling it was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Why the hell doesn't he answer?" Tony asked over his comm-set.

"Maybe he's still sleeping?" Lynn offered over comms from back at the LRV.

"After being stranded out there for two days, would you be sleeping late or waiting at the bank for rescue?" Frank commented, as he stood waiting on the shore from where he and Tony launched their rescue raft thirty minutes earlier.

"The fact that we're bringing food is reason enough for Mac to be standing at the shore, waving his arms frantically," Tony added, as he steered the slowly-moving raft between the tufts of taller marsh plants protruding from under the floodwaters. Their makeshift water-jet propulsion system was performing well, though it was slow. Being the smaller of the two, they had agreed Tony would go alone to save weight, thus Frank had been left on the far shore with the ATCs and trailer to await their return.

"I don't know, guys," Lynn chimed in. *"This is making me a little nervous."*

"Me too," Frank agreed.

"Would you two relax?" Tony said as he rounded the next tuft. "I'm sure they're just asleep."

"Without his headset?" Frank asked.

"I don't remember any of us wearing our headsets when we were sleeping in that cargo pod last month." Tony reminded Frank.

The chatter went silent for a moment. Then Lynn spoke up. *"Maybe you're right, Tony."*

"I'm sure I'm right," he insisted. "Let's just wait awhile before we start worrying."

A few minutes later, Tony could see the southern bank. From back at the LRV, Lynn had been trying to hail Mac and Sara, using everything from the comm-set bands to the high gain digital telemetry system. But there was still no answer.

"I'm closing on the southern bank, now," Tony reported.

"Stay alert," Lynn warned. *"Remember, you're by yourself, so don't walk into anything you're not sure about."*

"That's right," Frank agreed.

"Man, you two are *making* me nervous," Tony muttered.

"Just be careful," Lynn reiterated.

"Yes ma'am."

Tony turned off the water pump, coasting until the bow made contact with the shore. He jumped off to the right of the raft into the knee-deep water and waded up to land, pulling the raft halfway out of the water before tying it to the nearest small tree only a few meters away. "Okay, the raft is secure. I'm going to go find them now."

"Do you know where their camp is?" Lynn asked.

"I've got a pretty good idea from the fly-over images we took the other day," he assured her. "The camp was out in the open, so it shouldn't be too difficult to locate. Besides, this valley's not that big." Tony strolled up the bank, stopping at the top to scan the area before setting off to find his friends.

A few minutes later, he came across the ravine, and waded through the shallow water and up the other side. Once on the far side, he could see the small canyon stretched out before him. There, sitting to the right of the center of the open meadow, was a small, silver hut, a trickle of grey smoke wafting up from behind.

"I've got a visual on their camp. I can see the hut, about sixty meters ahead. Mac, this is Tony," he called over his comm-set. "Do you copy me?" There was still no answer. "Maybe his comm-set's busted?" Tony guessed, hoping for a simple explanation.

"Maybe," Frank reluctantly agreed.

"Something doesn't feel right," Lynn insisted. "Tony, be careful."

"I can circle around to the west," Tony suggested. "From there I can get a better look at the entrance to the hut from the cover of the trees, before I approach."

"Good idea," Lynn agreed.

After making his way around to the west side of the hut, Tony crouched behind a large, reddish-colored tree at the edge of the forest. He pulled out his visual scanner and studied the campsite at maximum magnification. The site was in disarray, with survival gear scattered everywhere as if someone had left the site in a hurry. The skeleton of a small animal was lying on the ground by the smoldering fire pit.

"Uh, I'm not sure, but it might be time to start worrying."

"What is it?" Lynn asked.

"I can see the whole camp now, and it's a mess. Gear is strewn about... I know Mac's a slob, but not *this* bad."

"Yeah, and Sara's with him, and she wouldn't put up with it," Lynn added.

"Tony, use your rifle," Frank suggested.

"What?" Lynn said in horror.

"Did you say to use my rifle?" Tony asked.

"Frank!" Lynn barked.

"His rifle scope will automatically start sending telemetry! We can see what his scope sees from any other rifle scope's monitor!"

"Skipper?" Tony asked. He knew it was her call to make.

"Go ahead, Tony," Lynn agreed.

Tony put his visual scanner back into its holster on his hip and unslung his rifle, checking that his safety was still on. His small targeting-scope display just forward of the stock flickered to life as he pressed the power button, and the image of the camp appeared in full color, complete with a target reticle in the center and targeting data scrolling in the upper corners. "Are you getting this?" he asked in a

whisper, as he aimed the rifle scope at the campsite and zoomed the magnification in to its strongest setting.

"Crystal clear," Frank reported.

"Are you getting this also, Lynn?"

"Yes, I've got it now."

"You see what I'm talking about?"

"Yeah, it sure doesn't look right," Frank agreed.

"Do you want to call out to them, see if anyone pokes their head out?" Lynn asked.

"Uh, no thanks. I'd rather not alert something to my presence, if you don't mind."

"Something?" Lynn wondered.

"You know what I mean," Tony said. "I'm going to move in closer."

Tony adjusted the rifle's strap, wrapping it around his left forearm, ensuring that it wouldn't get knocked from his hands. He rose from his hiding place, holding his rifle up and ready at shoulder height and proceeded toward the campsite, walking in a semi-crouch to offer a smaller target to any would-be threats. With one eye trained on the scope display and the other one on the periphery in front of him, he made his way out of the tree line, taking one cautious step at a time as he moved slowly and quietly across the meadow.

Adjusting the magnification on his targeting scope down one step with every few meters, he moved the rifle slowly from right to left, scanning forty-five degrees to either side of the campsite as he approached. "I'm almost there," he whispered.

Frank watched on his rifle's scope display, keeping his hands well away from the trigger to avoid discharging his weapon involuntarily. "Lynn?" he called quietly.

"Yes?"

"Is your weapon loaded?" He knew that she only had basic weapons training, and the last thing they needed was

for her weapon to go off inside the LRV.

"Negative," she responded. "The magazine is still in the weapons locker, and the chamber is empty."

"Good."

"How dumb does he think I am?" Lynn asked no one in particular.

Maria, Laura, and Adia were all gathered around her, watching the display over her shoulder.

"He's just double-checking, being cautious," Maria assured her.

They watched the view on Lynn's rifle scope as Tony entered the camp, his scope trained on the entrance to the small, shiny hut as he crossed the last few meters.

"I can't stand this," Laura commented as she watched the image on the display bounce a bit as Tony extricated his left hand from the rifle strap.

Maria's hands went up, clenched in front of her chest as she watched nervously.

"Be careful, Tony," Adia whispered.

They watched as Tony's left hand appeared from the left side of the display screen, reaching down for the flap.

Maria held her breath as Tony's fingers reached into the gap in the flap and slowly pulled it open.

Suddenly, the view on the rifle's scope monitor changed its angle as Tony dropped to one knee, and swiftly pushed his way through the flap covering the opening into the hut.

Laura let out a little squeal, startled by the abruptness with which the display seemed to magically enter the hut, and was alarmed even more by the bouncing of the rifle scope's view as Tony entered.

"What the..." Lynn instinctively moved her head closer to the display to get a better look.

All she could make out of the bouncing image was Sara, naked, scrambling to cover herself up and, in the process,

pulling the sleep sack off Mac, revealing his naked body as well.

“No way!” Laura exclaimed.

The image suddenly shifted straight up, showing only the woven ceiling overhead, after which their monitor lost its link with Tony’s weapon system, presumably because he had turned it off.

“Did I just see what I think I saw?” Adia asked.

“Looks like you’ve got my dish duty for a week,” Maria said to Laura, a satisfied smirk on her face.

The look of disbelief on Lynn’s face quickly turned to a mixture of surprise and tentative relief.

“Excuse me,” Tony apologized as he lowered his rifle. A broad grin formed on his face.

Sara pulled the flimsy sleep sack over her naked torso to hide, poking Mac in his side to wake him.

“Mac,” Sara said.

“Not again, Honey. I’m too tired,” he complained, still half-asleep.

“Honey?” Tony asked.

Sara pulled the sleep sac over her head, mortified. “Mac! Wake up you idiot!”

“Jeez, Sara,” Mac groaned, opening his eyes.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Tony teased.

Mac tilted his head up to look at him. “Hey! Tony!”

“Should I come back later?”

“Now is good,” Mac agreed, rubbing his eyes of what little slumber he had gotten. “Did you bring us some food?”

“MAC!” Sara squealed in horror from under the sleep sack.

Mac squinted, wincing in pain at Sara’s shrill tone. “Give us a minute?” he asked as he sat up, unconcerned with his own nudity.

“Take your time,” Tony agreed, still smiling. “I’m in no hurry.” Tony settled down to wait, kneeling in the doorway

with his rifle held across his chest, grinning from ear to ear. "Did you sleep well?"

"Tony! Please!" Sara pleaded from under the sleep sack.

"Should I go?" Tony asked Mac, pointing over his shoulder at the exit.

"Get out!" Sara commanded, still unwilling to come out from under the shiny fabric.

Mac nodded, his face squinting up in a mischievous smile. "I think that would be best."

Tony turned and exited the hut, laughing. He stood up, slinging his weapon over his shoulder.

"You too, jerk!" Sara screamed from inside the hut.

"What?" Mac asked.

"I can't believe you two!" she complained. *"Do you know how embarrassing that was?"*

"What did I do?" Mac asked.

Tony laughed to himself as Sara continued to chastise Mac. He reached down to his comm-set pack as he moved away from the hut, switching the mic control from 'voice-activated' to 'push-to-talk'. "They're fine," he reported with a chuckle.

"Yes, we could see that," Lynn confirmed. Tony could hear Maria and Laura laughing in the background.

"Frank?"

"Yes, Tony?" Frank replied with a humorous lilt in his voice.

"I'm going to give them a few minutes to get, uh, organized. Then we'll be heading back to the raft."

"I quite understand," he chuckled. *"I'll be waiting patiently."*

"Just get out!" Sara demanded from inside the hut.

Tony turned back around just in time to see Mac stumble through the doorway, still naked. "Can I at least have my clothes?" Mac yelled back toward the hut.

A second later, Sara's arm poked out of the flap, her hand clutching Mac's pants and shirt.

"Thank you," he responded, taking it from her hand.

"Rough night?" Tony asked.

"No, not really," Mac said casually, scratching his head and stretching.

"Uh, you want to put your clothes on, buddy? You're going to scare the wildlife," he joked.

"Oh, yeah."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Tony whispered to him.

"I heard that!" Sara called from inside.

Mac rolled his eyes at Tony as he pulled his pants on.

* * *

It took them over an hour to get back across the water, their speed sharply reduced by the extra weight of two more bodies on board.

"Hey! Frankie!" Mac waved as they approached the opposite shore where Frank was waiting for them. Mac jumped from the still moving raft into the knee-deep water, splashing all the way up to shore, giving Frank a great, big hug. "It's good to see you."

Tony grounded the raft gently, tossing the bowline onto shore before helping Sara out.

"How are those ribs, Sara?" Frank asked as he gave her a gentle welcoming hug.

"Not bad. Mac took pretty good care of me."

"So we saw," Frank teased.

"What?" Sara didn't understand.

"Uh, my gun scope was sending back telemetry the whole time," Tony admitted sheepishly.

"Oh, great." Sara was turning red all over again. "Well, as long as nobody else saw us."

"Well?" Frank tried to ease into it. "About that..."

"You're kidding?" Sara asked with a deadpan expression. "Who else?"

"Pretty much everyone, I'm afraid."

Sara's look of embarrassment quickly faded into one of rage. "Mac," she began, turning toward him. "I'm going to

kill you.”

“How is this my fault?” Mac defended.

“I told you to set the alarm on your watch.”

Frank and Tony watched the exchange in amazement, as they started securing the raft onto the trailer.

“Man, this is weird,” Frank commented to Tony.

“Tell me about it.”

* * *

A few hours later, the two ATCs pulled into camp, their little horns beeping madly in triumph. Lynn and the others came rushing out of the LRV to greet them, exchanging hugs all around. Much to Sara’s relief, no one mentioned what they had seen on Tony’s gun scope feed, although she knew it was only a matter of time until someone cracked a joke at her expense.

Frank watched the happy celebration as he secured the trailer and the raft. He was relieved to have Mac and Sara back safe and sound, and it was good to see everyone so happy to be together again.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t help thinking about Jack and Will. He watched the joyous reunion taking place only a few meters away from him, all the while imagining what it would be like if Jack and Will were the ones returning.

That’s when he made his decision.

* * *

Work at the LRV camp had gone back to normal. Laura was busy analyzing the genetic structures of various organisms, while Adia spent her days studying the various flora, fauna, and insect life in the valley. Frank and Tony were busy making preliminary surveys of the valley, trying to determine the best site on which to construct the new colony. Sara was doing quite well in her little ag-lab, as she tested the growth rates and characteristics of various primary Earth crops in Cetian soil. Mac was busy holding everything together. As soon as he would fix one thing,

something else would break down. Between his maintenance chores and Sara's demands on his time, he was lucky to get any time for his workouts.

Having found a few abnormalities in Frank, Mac, and Sara's blood, Maria spent a good deal of her time trying to understand what had caused the abnormalities. She had even gone as far as conducting unscheduled examinations of all three of them, dismissing the extra exams as safety precautions since the three of them had been exposed to the elements considerably more than the others. Since she had no idea what was causing the abnormalities, and she could not find any indication that they posed any immediate health risk, she chose not to alarm anyone.

Lynn had spent the days bouncing around from one department to another, giving a helping hand to anyone who needed it. Most of her time seemed to be spent helping Mac get ahead of the maintenance requirements. But what troubled her most was Frank's reclusiveness. It had gotten worse after Mac and Sara's return. He would say only what was required at the morning briefings, work with Tony all day long, and then disappear out to the tool shack after dinner and stay there until bedtime. She was worried about him, but since he was doing his job, she didn't feel she had the right to say anything to him.

Tony was also bothered by Frank's recent personality changes. He was pleasant and conversant during their work sessions, but strictly business. Tony wondered if it had anything to do with the fly-overs of the southern ridgeline that he had lied to Lynn about before.

* * *

Two weeks after rescuing Mac and Sara, Frank woke early, before the sunrise. Carrying his clothing and boots in his hands, he tiptoed into the airlock compartment before dressing, so as not to wake the others.

Once outside the LRV, he went to the tool shack at the tail end of the LRV to retrieve two large saddle bags, a duffle

bag, and an over-stuffed survival pack. After securing them onto the back of an ATC, he climbed on and headed off across the valley into the light of the dawn.

As he rode across the valley, he thought about what Lynn would think, what she would say, how she would feel. He had thought about writing her a note, but that would've accomplished little. What he was doing was wrong, he was breaking every rule in the book and he knew it. But he couldn't help it. He had to do it. Jack would do the same for him.

* * *

"Laura, have you seen Frank?" Lynn asked.

"No," Laura answered as she prepared the morning meal. "I don't think I've seen him all morning. Did you check his bunk? Maybe he slept in today."

"No, he's not there. I already checked."

"Maybe he's outside?"

"Yeah, maybe." Lynn left the galley and headed forward, stopping on the porch to retrieve her comm-set from the charger rack. "Frank?" she called after donning her set. His set was not on the charger rack, which meant he was probably not on the ship. "Frank? Do you copy?" There was no response. She looked down at the comm-set rack, another set was missing as well. "Anyone copy?"

"Lynn, this is Mac."

"Mac, where are you?"

"Tool shack."

"Have you seen Frank?"

"Uh, not exactly."

"What do you mean, Mac?"

"Well, I haven't seen him, but, there's some equipment missing here."

"What sort of equipment?"

"A few digital telemetry transceiver relays, some power cells, a couple of mini-dishes and some tripods. One of the ATCs is gone as well," Mac admitted reluctantly.

"Damn it, Frank!" she swore aloud as she stormed back into the habitat. "Any idea where he's headed, Mac?"

Her shouts drew the crew's attention as they were sitting down for breakfast. They had never heard that tone of voice from Lynn. "Great!"

"What's wrong?" Maria asked as she entered the wardroom.

"Frank's taken off with a bunch of radio gear on one of the ATCs," Lynn announced angrily. "And no one has any idea where the hell he's headed."

Tony sighed. "I might have an idea."

Lynn looked at him with a glare that sent a shiver down his spine. "Well?" she asked.

"I think he might be headed for the southern ridgeline."

"Why would he go there?" Laura asked.

"He can't even get to the southern ridge," Sara objected. "The flood is still in the way."

"The water has gone down some," Tony explained. "There's now an exposed path starting in the southwest corner of the valley. Frank asked me to do an extra fly-over to check it out. It leads all the way to the summit, maybe even down the far side."

"If you thought he was up to something, you should've told me," Lynn growled.

"I didn't think he was *up* to something," Tony said defensively. "Not really. You want me to go after him?"

"And do what? Take him prisoner? Shoot him?" Lynn shook her head in disbelief. "I can't believe this is happening."

"I don't understand," Laura chimed in. "What is it that he is '*up to*'?" she asked.

"I don't know, but according to Mac, he took some transceiver relays, power cells, tripods, stuff like that."

"I noticed that some of the leftover energy bars are gone from the cabinet," Laura said. "I just assumed Mac ate them."

"I think he's going to set up a repeater on the ridge," Maria announced.

Lynn looked at her in surprise. "How do you know that?"

"He was talking about an idea he had a couple of weeks ago. He thought if he put some sort of repeater on the ridge, he might be able to pick up a distress signal from Jack."

"Was I the only one here who *didn't* know?" Lynn asked in frustration.

"I don't understand," Tony asked. "If he wanted to set up a comm-repeater, why did he take transceiver relays?"

"The comm-sets can only be charged in the rack in the EVA bay. You can't charge them from the mini-solar cells in the escape pod's survival kits. Frank knows that. Assuming Jack and Will survived, their comm-sets would be dead by now. But Jack's data pad *can* be charged from the solar cells."

"But he can't communicate through it," Tony insisted.

"No, but the digital telemetry relay will put out a constant query-signal, trying to initiate a telemetry link between any data pad and the LRV's main frame."

"Like a homing signal," Tony realized.

"Like a homing signal," Lynn repeated in affirmation.

"Not a bad idea," Tony admitted.

"Except for one thing," Lynn added. "There's no one alive out there to receive the signal."

"How can you be so sure, Lynn?" Maria asked.

No one but Frank had challenged that assumption until now. And it made Lynn feel uncomfortable. It was also a question she had asked herself on more than one occasion. But she had answered that question for herself. Now, apparently, it was time to answer it for the others.

"I watched the telemetry files over and over," Lynn told them. "There was *nothing* to indicate they might have made it out alive. All I saw was the Icarus breaking apart...right up until the time we lost the telemetry signal."

"But you never actually saw the cargo bay break up?" Maria asked.

"No, but,"

"Then you have to admit, there might be a chance."

"If they managed to eject before the bay broke up, they would've hit the Icarus's plasma wake sideways. It would've burnt them to a crisp within seconds. And even if they made it through *that*, the pod would have been damaged... The odds of their making it down safely are *astronomical*."

"But there still is a chance, no matter how slight?" Maria pushed.

"Yes, Maria. Yes, there is still a chance. A very, very remote chance." Lynn admitted.

"That's *why* Frank can't let go of his hope."

"So, what? I'm supposed to just let him go and try whatever crazy stunt he wants? Just because there's a slim chance that Jack *might* still be alive? Would that be the responsible thing to do? Hell, let's all go off looking for Jack and Will. Why not? We can finish our work up later! The colonists' needs can wait!"

"That's enough, Lynn," Maria chided. "We all know what's at stake."

Lynn looked at their faces. They were all watching her, wondering what she was going to do next. "Yeah," she mumbled, her head hanging down as she looked at the table in front of her. "Yeah." Lynn started to back away from the table. She felt as if everything was falling apart around her. "Do whatever you need to do today," she announced as she turned and walked away.

* * *

Will had wandered away from camp, in search of a private place to relieve himself. About a hundred meters away, he found a group of large rocks that provided some concealment from the world around him. Jack had often teased Will about his need for privacy when 'doing his business', pointing out that there was no one around to catch him in an embarrassing moment. But Will couldn't help that he needed the privacy. It was bad enough he had

to squat over a hole in the ground and bare his posterior outside in such a degrading manner. It was even worse that he had to wipe himself with leaves. He longed for the sanitary luxuries of the toilets back on the Daedalus.

After digging the customary pit, Will reluctantly dropped his pants down to his ankles and assumed the usual position. It was cold this evening. Will was sure that winter was no more than a week or two away. He had seen frost in the morning for over a week now, and he could see his breath long after sunrise.

Will heard a rustling sound from somewhere behind him. He spun his head around, but saw nothing except rocks. He listened intently as the wind rustled through the nearby trees. He turned his head forward again. Even if the sound was nothing, he felt it best to finish his business as quickly as possible. Then he heard something else. A heavy panting, followed by a scratching sound. The panting became louder and more distinct, as if the source of the sound had moved out into the open. Will turned his head once again, more slowly than before. On the rocks behind him stood a huge creature, covered with thick, brown and gray fur. It was two meters tall while standing on all four legs, and had a long, powerful snout, complete with several fangs protruding from each side. Its eyes were black and soulless, set deeply on either side of the base of its snout. Its paws had long, sharp claws that scratched against the rock as it shuffled from side to side, examining Will. The menacing-looking creature watched as Will stood motionless, looking over his shoulder, his naked butt still dangling over the pit. Without any warning, its posture turned from observer to aggressor, as it stood up on its hind legs and let out a deafening roar that nearly stopped Will's heart.

Will's adrenal glands kicked into overdrive. Quickly pulling up his pants, he started to run, wanting to get as far away from the frightening creature as possible.

In his haste, Will tripped, falling forward onto the ground. The beast leapt from the rock, diving toward Will who

stumbled back to his feet.

From camp, Jack heard the roar of the creature, followed by what sounded like Will screaming. It took only a second for him to react, grabbing his rifle and charging off in Will's direction. As he dodged trees and rocks, Jack flipped the safety off, readying his weapon. Closing the last twenty meters, he could hear the continued roar of the creature mixed in with Will's screams of panic. Jack charged up the side of the rocks, barely noticing the creature's paw prints on the dirt at the base, and the scratch marks from his claws on the rock itself. In bounding steps, he ascended the side of the largest rock, hoping it would provide him with a vantage point from which to fire.

As he crested the top of the rock, Jack's wish was granted. There, only ten meters ahead and four meters below him, was his target, a monstrous furry animal that had trapped Will facedown on the ground, about to tear him apart. Jack quickly raised his weapon, jamming the rifle butt firmly against his right shoulder. Shifting the weapon slightly to line up the crosshairs, Jack depressed the trigger, firing a single round at the animal.

The round struck the creature square between the shoulders, breaking through its hide and drilling deep into its muscular back. The animal reared its head backwards, twisting it to one side as if to ward off whatever had struck it from behind. But its attacker was not there. Another shot cracked through the air, announcing the next bullet as it struck the creature in the left side of its face, shearing off a large section of its upper jaw and cheek, pulling its left eye out of the socket along with it. The creature's head snapped to the right from the kinetic energy of the bullet's impact, its right forward leg buckling from the sudden blow.

Jack shot twice more, once in the left side of the creature's neck, the second slamming squarely into the base of its skull. The latter severed the creature's spinal

cord, the impact causing the lower portion of the creature's head to explode outward, spraying blood and tissue to either side. The creature fell to the ground unceremoniously, landing on top of Will.

The dead creature was heavy, and Will could barely breathe under its enormous weight. He tried to scream for help, but could hardly get out more than a whisper. He could hear Jack calling to him in desperation as he approached, the sound of his footsteps becoming louder as he came down from the rock and scurried the last few meters across the ground to reach him.

"Are you alright?" Jack yelled.

"Get it off me," Will begged in a half whisper.

Jack planted his right foot firmly against the dead creature's side and gave it a good shove, rolling it off of Will to his right.

"Will! Are you alright?" Jack asked as he reached down to help him up.

Will said nothing, still speechless.

"Look at the size of this thing!" Jack added. "It's huge!"

"Yeah, and heavy!" Will finally said between pants.

"This is great!" Jack added as he stroked his hand along the dead creature's fur. "Feel how soft this fur is, Will. This will do very nicely."

"I was almost killed, and all you can think about is a new winter coat?"

"Come on," Jack ordered. "Help me skin this thing."

* * *

Laura was working late that evening, doing some organizing in the new genetics-hut. Normally, she would've been relegated to doing her work in the lab on board the LRV. But since they had the resources of three survey-equipment pods instead of the usual one, there were a few extra hut-kits available.

She was determined to finish setting up the interior of her new lab before bedtime. The lab on board the LRV, while

adequate, was too cramped for her taste. And she hated sharing it with other scientists who didn't follow her same meticulous procedures.

Laura nearly dropped a tray of sample tubes when she heard the noise. It was loud, nearby, maybe in the next hut over. It sounded like someone had knocked over something metal onto the floor. She set the tray down, her heartbeat only now beginning to fall from her throat back down to her chest where it belonged. She moved toward the door of the hut, curious as to the source of the sudden disturbance.

Then there was another noise. It was not as startling as the previous one, but more gradual, like a scratching of metal. Laura opened the door slowly and peeked outside. It was dark out, the inner compound of the camp lit only by the blue-white floodlights built into the side of the LRV. The sky was cloudy and overcast, allowing no more than an occasional hint of moonlight to reach the ground.

She looked to the left and the right of the hut, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. She headed to the right, guessing that the noise was coming from the storage-hut toward the back of the camp.

Another crash. But from behind her this time. Laura spun around. *It must be coming from the ag-hut*, she thought. Then another crash, like a wire rack bouncing off the aluminum decking that covered the floor of the ag-hut. Laura pulled down her mic. "Lynn?" she whispered. "Lynn, this is Laura. Do you copy?"

"Go ahead, Laura," Lynn's voice responded moments later.

"Is Sara inside?"

"Affirmative. Why, do you need her?"

"There are strange noises coming from the ag-hut. Like there's something in there," Laura explained in a whisper.

"Stay put!" Lynn ordered. *"We're on our way!"*

“Mac! Tony!” Lynn bellowed from the corridor entrance at the front of the wardroom. “We’ve got trouble! Move it!”

Tony froze in mid-pull on the resistance gym, looking at Mac for a brief second. Mac jumped from his stretching, running forward. Tony released the lat pull bar, letting it fall with a loud clang as he jumped up to follow Mac.

When they got down to the EVA bay, they found Lynn breaking out rifles and ammo. “Laura reports noises coming from the ag-hut,” she told them as she slapped a magazine into a rifle and handed it to Mac. “Like something’s moving around inside there.” Lynn handed another loaded rifle to Tony.

Laura hadn’t heard another clang in over a minute. The silence was making her even more curious, and she found herself inexplicably drawn toward the door of the ag-hut, despite Lynn’s orders to stay put. She listened intently as she reached for the door, pulling it open, slowly and silently. Peering inside, she saw nothing near the door itself, and slipped quietly through, her curious nature as a scientist overriding any sense of caution and self-preservation.

Laura stood still for a moment, looking around the hut. A table was knocked over. A bag of seeds was torn open and strewn across the aluminum deck, most having fallen through the deck onto the bare ground below. Several plants were torn out of their pots, their leaves ripped from their stalks and scattered on the floor.

Suddenly, she heard a strange grunting sound to her left, beyond the vertically-stacked racks of wheat plants Sara was cultivating. She listened a moment more. It sounded like an animal, eating, smacking its lips and grunting as it chewed its meal.

Lynn hit the ground running at the bottom of the ramp, her weapon held high, with Mac and Tony hot on her heels.

They circled around to the left of the LRV's nose, expecting to see Laura standing out in the open near the ship's tail, across from the ag-hut. But she wasn't there.

Mac was also quick to notice that Laura was gone. He reached forward and grabbed Lynn's jacket, pulling her back and to the side to take cover with him. She obviously had no tactical training, and was going to walk right up to whatever was making all the noise.

"What are you doing?" Lynn sputtered, nearly falling over.

"What were you planning to do, Lynn? Walk up to it and ask it some questions?" Mac looked across to Tony. He was tucked against the LRV directly across from them. He motioned for Tony to move forward. Mac pulled Lynn around behind him and trained his weapon on the ag-hut entrance to provide cover for Tony.

Tony ran forward a few meters to his next hiding place, staying low along the way. Once he was hidden again, he trained his own weapon on the ag-hut and motioned for Mac to come forward.

Mac raised the barrel of his rifle, pointing it skyward as he ran a few meters past Tony, ducking into another hiding place.

Laura moved to her left, stepping carefully so as not to alert the intruder of her presence. She could feel her heartbeat climbing up into her throat, her respirations quickening as adrenaline surged into her bloodstream. She rounded the first stack of wheat racks and found nothing. She rounded the next stack, only to find a rack on its side a few meters down the row. She was about to move past the next and last row when she noticed something just beyond the fallen stack a few meters in front of her. Something blue and shiny. Blue, shiny, and moving. *It has hair!* Long, blue, shiny, hair, on the head of some animal, moving back and forth, bobbing up and down as it grunted and chewed and

slurped. She took a careful step forward, crossing over a knee-high barrel lying on its side in her path.

Laura tried to control her breathing, allowing only the slightest and slowest breaths in and out, trying to remain silent. She could see the creature's head and shoulders, at least the back of them. It had a shape similar to a humanoid. Skull, neck, shoulder girdle, even ears. It was covered with the same, shiny blue hair, long and luxurious on its head, shorter on its body. It looked small, much smaller than a human, as it hunched over an open bag of seeds, consuming them by the handful. *The hands!* She thought. *Four fingers and a thumb!*

"*Laura?*" Lynn's voice whispered over the comm-set. But it was enough. The creature spun its head around, spying Laura as she stood there, her mouth hanging open in amazement. It looked at her for a moment, its head cocked oddly to one side as it examined her, trying to decide if she was a threat.

"*Laura?*" Lynn's voice repeated more urgently. Something about the squawking of the comm-set made the creature nervous. Its mouth opened, revealing long, fang-like teeth as its mouth tightened up into a snarl. A low growl began to emanate from deep in the creature's throat and its eyes narrowed, becoming more sinister as it sized up its opponent.

Laura began to back away as the creature stood up. It was not nearly as small as she had first imagined, standing well over two meters when it rose to its fully erect position, its large chest expanding as it spread its arms into an aggressive stance.

Laura backed away quickly. Forgetting about the barrel behind her, she fell backwards, landing on her back with a scream, her lower legs still draped over the barrel.

Suddenly, the door to the hut flew open, and Mac's large, muscular form sprang through with astonishing speed and agility. Tony came in behind him, fading to the right, opposite from Mac.

The sudden intrusion startled the creature, causing it to dive at Laura instinctively. She screamed as the creature landed on top of her, its strong hands pinning her shoulders to the deck in its claw-like grasp. She shrieked as several razor-sharp claws penetrated her skin and dug deep into her upper chest and shoulder.

Mac heard Laura's screams and leapt into action, swinging around the far end of the racks, searching for her. Two rows over, he spotted them, locked in a life-and-death struggle as she tried to hold the creature at bay. Mac sprinted a few steps down the passage, leaping over the fallen rack and diving through the air in a flying tackle, knocking the creature off of her.

Laura screamed out in pain as one of the creature's long claws ripped open her shoulder as it was knocked off her.

Mac rolled around on the deck with the creature, holding its snapping jaws away from his face as he struggled to reach his knife.

Tony came around the corner next, jumping over Laura to get to Mac and the animal, who now held the superior position, sitting on top of Mac, pinning him to the deck. He reached around the creature's neck with his right arm, putting it in a chokehold as he tried to pull it off of Mac.

That was all the help Mac needed. In that brief instant while the creature's attention switched away from him, Mac pulled his knife from its sheath at his hip, and shoved the long blade deep into the creature's abdomen.

The beast let out an ear-splitting howl as Mac twisted the knife around in its gut, then drew it upwards, slicing it wide open. It lurched, its body in spasm as its guts spilled out all over Mac's torso. Finally, the creature went limp in Tony's chokehold; a long, grumbling sigh coming from its open mouth as it took its last breath.

Lynn entered the room and was hovering over Laura, shielding her from the battle as it ended. "Medical emergency in the ag-hut!" Lynn bellowed over her comm-

set as she laid Laura down carefully on the deck, blood spurting from her gaping shoulder wound.

Tony dropped the creature's dead carcass to the side, reaching out to help Mac to his feet. "You okay?"

"Yeah, thanks." Mac rose and looked at the dark, brownish-red blood and alien tissue splattered all over his torso. "Oh, yuck! This shit stinks!"

Lynn quickly pulled her coat off, wadding it up and pressing it over Laura's wound in an attempt to slow down her bleeding. "Give me a hand! She's hurt!" Lynn called to them.

Tony turned and stepped over to help, straightening Laura's legs out and using his own jacket to keep her warm. Mac watched in horror. Laura looked pale, almost white. There was a huge pool of blood spilling out of her shoulder, flowing down through the deck and onto the ground below.

Maria arrived a minute later, having run all the way, with her med-kit in hand. Sara and Adia were right behind her, hauling whatever medical gear Maria had instructed them to carry. Maria immediately went to work, placing an oxygen mask on Laura's face and starting an intravenous line through which to replace her missing fluid volume. "We've got to get her back to the med-lab!" she ordered. "Her subclavian vein is severed! If I don't close it up quickly, she'll bleed out!"

"Mac! Tony!" Lynn snapped. "Get her to the med-lab!"

Maria looked up, seeing the strange, dark blood covering Mac's legs. "Whoa!" she barked, noticing the dead creature in the corner. "Is that stuff on you from that thing?" she asked.

Adia gasped, as did Sara, when they noticed the lifeless creature lying on the deck only two meters away from them.

"What is that thing?" Adia asked in horror.

"That's the same creature I saw in the woods in that valley!" Mac realized.

"Tony? You get any on you?" Maria interrupted.

Tony looked himself over, "I don't think so!"

"Okay, you carry Laura back to the med-lab!"

"Yes ma'am," Tony agreed as he stepped forward and picked her up.

"And you," Maria barked at Mac. "Don't set foot inside the ship until you've been decontaminated!" she added as she followed Tony out the door, with Lynn and Adia carrying her medical gear.

"Don't worry," Sara promised. "I'll hose him down."

* * *

Several hours later, Jack and Will returned to camp carrying the creature's furry hide and several kilograms of what looked to be the best cuts of meat it had to offer.

Using the experience he had accumulated on their journey thus far, Will cooked up some of the meat for dinner, using various herbs and roots that he hoped would help to tenderize the meat and bring out its natural flavors. Meanwhile, Jack set to work preparing the rest of the meat for preservation as jerky.

After dinner, they both went to work cleaning the inside of the creature's hide of blood and tissue, determined to craft some sort of protection against the coming winter.

Before bed, Will continued with his nightly ritual of flute practice, filling the night air with half-completed melodies. Jack wrapped the rest of the meat in a bag and strung it up from a tree branch well removed from camp where, hopefully, no animals could get to it during the night.

They had decided to stay put for another day or two, long enough to turn the meat into jerky and fashion something of use from the fur of the creature that had nearly taken Will's life.

"You know," Jack returned from securing the bag of meat, "that almost sounds like a melody."

Will stopped playing and lowered his flute to his lap. "Really?" he asked, stunned at Jack's comment.

"Yeah, the style sounds sort of familiar."

"I was trying to come up with something catchy, but not too complex, so it would be easy for me to remember the fingerings."

"Play a little bit more of it," Jack urged.

Will lifted the flute to his lips and began. A lilting, albeit slightly sloppy, song emerged from the flute as Will's fingers fumbled to find the notes. The melody was haunting, leaping from low to high pitches in slow, methodical patterns. Occasionally, Will would slur notes together—whether it was on purpose or by accident, Jack wasn't sure—giving the tune a magical effect. There was a warmth to this live performance, one that he never would've envisioned.

Will ended the tune with a slight trilling of the last note, before resting his flute in his lap once again, awaiting Jack's response.

"That was beautiful, Will," Jack praised.

"Thank you. I still need a lot of practice, though."

"It has sort of a Scottish feel to it," Jack decided.

"Not surprising," Will agreed. "Abby likes to listen to old Scottish folk music. I'm sure it influenced the composition." Will thought for a moment. "Perhaps, we can claim it of 'Cetian' origin?"

"The first 'Cetian' tune." Jack smiled. "Not a bad idea, Will."

A feeling of satisfaction swept over Will as he returned to his practice. And now, more than ever, he wanted to continue playing late into the night.

* * *

"How's Laura?" Lynn asked as Maria entered the LRV's wardroom.

"She's fine. She'll be out of commission for a while, but she's got a good chance at a full recovery. I'm just worried about infection," Maria said.

"What about antibiotics?" Lynn asked.

"She's on them," Maria assured her, "but we really don't know if they work against infectious organisms on this

world." Maria sighed. "We'll just have to wait and see. To be honest, I'm just as worried about the crew."

"The crew?" Lynn's expression changed to one of concern.

"Everyone is now carrying a gun on their hip, even Adia."

"They're just playing it safe, Maria," Lynn comforted her.

"I suppose you're right. It's just scary to see everyone carrying weapons."

"Well, you'd better get used to it. We're down to seven, and I don't intend to lose anyone else."

"Eight," Maria corrected.

"What?"

"There's still eight of us left, not seven."

"Seven," Lynn insisted.

"Frank's not *dead*, Lynn. He's just gone for awhile."

"If Frank wants to go solo on us, that's fine. But until he returns, we're down to seven... Six, until Laura recovers." Lynn rose from the table without another word and headed for her berth.

Maria said nothing else to her as she left the table. She knew Lynn felt deeply betrayed by Frank's departure, but she also knew that doing something to help Jack, if indeed he and Will were alive, was something Frank needed to do.

* * *

Day 52;

We spent most of the morning building a sort of solar oven in which to dry our meat to preserve it. The temperatures are much lower in the higher elevations, and without the makeshift oven, drying the meat would take days. It was difficult, but the first

batch came out fine. We will finish the rest tomorrow.

Following the instructions in the survival guide, we spent the rest of the day cutting the creature's hide into patterns to be assembled into coats. We will begin stitching the pieces together tomorrow morning, after getting our next batch of meat in the drying oven.

The idea of trying to survive the cold mountain winter worries me, despite Jack's assurances that the creature's fur will provide us with enough protection. Although he is unlikely to admit it, I suspect the approaching colder weather worries Jack as well. He is obsessed with the making of coats, as if it were a matter of life or death. I just hope the one hide will be enough.

* * *

Laura was up and about by lunchtime, growing bored lying in her tiny berthing compartment. She felt pretty good, all things considered, although there was a nagging nausea in the pit of her stomach that refused to subside no matter what she did.

With Adia's assistance, she examined some of the tissue samples from the autopsy of the creature that had attacked her. Work, she hoped, might take her mind off her nausea.

"It doesn't make any sense," Laura complained as she stared at the display screen. It was the fifth sample she had looked at so far, and it revealed the same puzzling phenomenon as the previous four.

"What is it?" Adia asked.

"I'm not sure. Every sample I've looked at shows signs of mutation."

"Isn't mutation of DNA common?" Adia wondered.

"Yes, but in *every* sample? The skin, the hair, the heart, the muscles... Everywhere I look, I find mutations. Some of them very small, yes, but there nonetheless."

"What do you think would cause such widespread mutations?" Adia wondered. "Radiation?"

"I don't think so. Radiation would destroy cells as well as mutate them. These mutations appear to have changed the creature."

"So, it isn't the same as its parent, assuming it had one."

"No, I mean it has been *changed*," Laura explained. "Whatever this thing *is*, it's *not* the same thing it was when it was *born*."

* * *

Day 53;

Jack finally came to the conclusion that it would take us more than a day or two to finish crafting winter apparel out of the creature's hide. So, today we packed up camp and continued on our journey, with the hides dangling from our backs. The good news is that we have plenty of what Jack calls 'monster jerky'. The bad news is, although flavorful, the stuff is tough as hell. I

believe it is more suited to serve as boot soles than a food source. Nevertheless, our packs are stuffed with enough to get us through several weeks without having to kill any more of this world's inhabitants.

We climbed higher into the mountains, following the natural trails formed by the converging slopes. We have seen evidence of migration trails as well, and in many cases, have been able to use such paths to our advantage.

Using the orbital scan images stored in his data pad, Jack is usually able to estimate our position with reasonable accuracy. He believes we are only a few kilometers from a large river into which many smaller tributaries flow. With luck, one of them will lead us up to the summit. At the very least, it will keep us near fresh water.

* * *

Laura knelt at the toilet bowl, hugging its cool, metal sides. She had spent much of the early morning in this same position, wishing she had taken it easy as Maria advised. She had been consumed with her work on the dead alien's strange DNA. 'Oscar', the name Adia had chosen for referring to the dead creature, had provided her with a

wealth of intrigue, enough to fill the careers of a dozen geneticists.

It was early, and except for Lynn, who was probably up on the flight deck going over the day's itinerary, Laura was the only one awake. She finally managed to push herself away from the toilet and pull up to her feet, clinging to the metal rail along the wall. She stood there for a moment, her head spinning, fighting back the urge to vomit yet again.

She succeeded, and strolled clumsily over to the counter to wash her face. One look in the mirror confirmed her fear that she looked as bad as she felt.

The water on her face was cool and refreshing as she splashed it up from the basin with her hands. She ran her wet hands back across her forehead and over her messy hair. She paused a moment to look at herself in the mirror again. *When did I get this gray?* she wondered. She looked closer, leaning forward as she held out a clump of hair that seemed to have a lot of gray in it. But it wasn't grey. *What the hell?* She looked again. The hair wasn't gray. It was more of a blue-gray.

After an unsuccessful attempt to get her hair in order, she finally gave up and left the bathroom. Moments later, she was standing at the foot of Maria's berth. "Maria? Are you awake?" she whispered, hoping not to wake the others.

"Huh?" Maria's voice came from the other side of the curtain, still groggy from sleep. "What is it?"

"Maria, it's me, Laura." Laura looked around to be sure that no one was listening. "I don't feel well."

Laura stepped away from the foot of Maria's berth, leaning against the resistance gym in the center of the compartment. Her head was still spinning, and her body felt weak.

Maria's curtain slid open and Maria scooted out off the foot of her bunk, pulling her pants on as she stepped out.

"Jesus, Laura!" Maria exclaimed as she got her first look at her. "You look terrible!"

"Thanks," she responded with a half-hearted smile.

"What's wrong?" Maria asked as she put her arm around her for support while leading her off toward the med-lab.

"I don't know. I've been vomiting for the last hour," she explained, gesturing back toward the bathroom at the aft end of the compartment.

"Let's get you to the med-lab, huh?"

* * *

"Where's Laura?" Tony asked later that morning as he sat down for breakfast next to Adia.

"She's in the med-lab with Maria," Lynn explained. "She's not feeling well."

"Really? What's wrong with her?"

"A little nausea, I think. Probably nothing," she said dismissively.

"What's for breakfast?" Mac inquired as he entered the room.

"I don't know," Tony responded. "Ask your girlfriend over there. She's got the breakfast duty."

"Oh, shit," Mac said under his breath. "Maybe I'll stick to bread and tea this morning."

"I heard that!" Sara yelled from the galley. "Sit down and shut up, mister. Breakfast will be ready in a moment."

Tony smiled. "You never learn, do you?"

Sara entered, carrying a large platter full of food. "Breakfast is served," she announced as she set the plate down in the center of the table.

"Wow, that smells great!" Lynn exclaimed.

"Yeah, it does," Mac admitted with astonishment. "What is it?"

"Scrambled powdered eggs with peppers and onions, fried protein strips, and bran muffins," Sara announced proudly. "Dig in."

"Bran muffins?" Tony asked, surprised. "Where'd you learn how to make bran muffins?"

"Laura gave me the recipe," she admitted.

"More like, bran rocks," Mac joked as he tapped one of the harder ones against the table. He looked up after he finished his joke, a smile spread across his face. It was met with a stern look from Sara. "But tasty!" Mac lied as he forcefully tore the muffin in half and stuffed it in his mouth. "Mmm!"

"Don't listen to him, Sara," Lynn told her. "This is great," she assured her as she took a bite of eggs.

"Oh, don't worry," Sara promised as she sat down. "I never listen to him."

"Ain't that the truth!" Mac agreed, still chewing the muffin.

Suddenly, an alarm sounded at full volume. Within a millisecond, the computer recognized the location signature of the alarm activation, and a synthetic, computerized voice announced the origin of the distress.

"Emergency...med-lab," the voice repeated over and over.

Lynn jumped from her seat and ran out of the wardroom. The others quickly followed, their tableware clanging against their plates as they dropped what they were doing to respond to the distress call.

Lynn burst into the med-lab, stopping dead in her tracks at the sight of Laura, draped unconscious across the exam table in the center of the small compartment. Maria was next to her, placing defibrillation electrode pads on Laura's bare chest. She then turned to face the cardiac monitor. "Stand clear." Maria glanced about to ensure no one was touching her patient, then pressed the shock button. Laura's body twitched when the electrical energy entered her body.

Lynn gasped. "What happened?"

Tony was next to enter, with Sara and the others right behind him.

"Stand clear!" Maria ordered as she delivered another shock. She looked over her shoulder at the others assembling in the corner of the compartment, mouths agape. "Let's go, people! She's coded!" Maria knew

everyone on board had at least basic medical training. "Tony, spike a line! Sara, drug kit! Mac, start compressions! Adia, prep me an IV site... AC, right arm!"

Everyone jumped into action, rushing to their assigned tasks, struggling to remember the procedures they had been taught back on the Daedalus.

Lynn stood against the wall by the doorway, watching in horror as her crew scrambled to help their friend.

"What happened?" Mac asked as he started chest compressions.

"I have no idea," Maria admitted as she passed an endotracheal tube down into Laura's mouth and between her vocal cords. "She woke me up about an hour ago, said she wasn't feeling good."

"Drug kit is ready, right side," Sara reported.

Maria pulled the laryngoscope out of Laura's mouth, dropping it next to her head. "I brought her in here and was working her up," she continued as she inflated the cuff at the end of the tube that sealed it against the inside of Laura's trachea. "Labs, physical, the works. Sara, ventilate her for me."

Sara stepped over next to Maria at Laura's head, picked up the ambubag, and attached the end of the tube. She gave it a firm squeeze, sending oxygen down the tube as Maria listened to Laura's lungs with a stethoscope.

"Again," Maria commanded. Sara squeezed the bag again.

"One more time." Maria listened to Laura's stomach to ensure the tube had not been accidentally placed in her esophagus. "Tube's good," she announced. "Hold it tight and keep ventilating her...every third or fourth chest compression."

"Line is ready!" Tony announced.

Maria turned her eyes to the monitor display on the wall. "Hold compressions!" The tracing was dancing up and down in a wild, irregular pattern. At the top of the monitor, it read "V-FIB". "Stand clear." Maria ordered. She glanced around

Laura's still body, checking that everyone was clear, before pressing the shock button again.

Laura's body twitched again. A sick feeling shot through Mac, settling in his belly. He looked up at the monitor. It still read "V-FIB".

"IV site is ready," Adia reported.

Maria quickly moved over to Laura's right side. As Mac continued chest compressions, and Sara continued ventilations, Maria expertly inserted the IV catheter into Laura's right antecubital vein. "Secure this IV, will you, Adia?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Tony, connect the IV line to the drug kit input port," Maria instructed as she connected the other end of the tube running from the IV catheter to the output port on the drug kit. She pressed a couple buttons on the kit, causing it to beep several times in several different pitches and patterns. She glanced at the IV bag, noting that the fluid appeared to be flowing from the bag into the drug kit. She then checked that fluid was also flowing from the drug kit to her patient. "Good access," she announced. "Administering first round of meds," she added, touching several more buttons on the drug kit.

Lynn continued watching as the others worked in unison, following Maria's every command without hesitation. She had been given minimal time to complete the basic first-aid course before departure, and she barely understood what was going on. But she could tell by the looks on their faces, and the increasing desperation in Maria's voice, that it was not going well. She looked down at Laura's pale face as Mac continued to compress her chest in a rhythmic fashion. Laura appeared so lifeless, without emotion or expression. Laura was the most animated woman she had ever met, but now her face looked as if it were carved from stone.

Lynn struggled to believe what was happening. At any moment, she expected Maria to announce that everything was going to be alright, and Laura was going to be fine. But

with every new drug that the drug kit introduced, that hope slipped further and further away. They weren't even shocking her anymore.

Lynn looked down at Laura again. There was blood oozing from her ears and nose. Her lips were mottled and gray. Her half-open eyes were cloudy, devoid of life.

She looked to her right at Adia, who was near tears. She looked at Mac, dripping with sweat as he chugged away like a locomotive, delivering constant, regular chest compressions. She could see the determination in his eyes.

Lynn looked at the monitors behind her. It was reporting "ASYSTOLE". The rest of the bio-monitor's readings showed nothing but flatlines and zeros.

"Okay, okay," Maria stammered in frustration, desperately searching for the one thing she had not done that would bring her friend back to her.

"Maria?" Tony said in a soft, compassionate voice.

Maria was silent, her hands resting on both sides of her face, staring at her lost friend.

"You did everything you could," Tony assured her.

Mac looked at Tony and then back at Maria. He wasn't sure what to do, so he just kept on pumping on Laura's chest, his arms held rigid as they drove down again and again.

The room was silent for a moment, with only the sounds of Mac's chest compressions and Sara's ventilations.

"SHIT!" Maria yelled, momentarily losing control. She closed her eyes tight for a moment, as they welled up with tears. She sniffled once, then opened her eyes and looked at the digital clock on the wall. "Time of death....." She sniffled again, barely able to control her emotions. "Time of death, zero eight forty-seven," she finally said, in a barely audible whisper. She then turned and left the med-lab without saying another word.

Mac stopped his compressions, and Sara stopped her ventilations. The room suddenly became frighteningly quiet. They stood there for a moment, each of them afraid to look

the others in the eyes. Finally, Lynn looked around for someone to tell her what had happened, what had gone wrong...and what to do.

Tony was the first one to take action, reaching up and shutting off the monitors, the oxygen, and the IV line. Finally, he pulled the sheet up over Laura's face. "Goodbye, Laura," he said softly. "We'll miss you."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

An hour later, Lynn was sitting at the wardroom table with the crew, picking at her breakfast like the rest of them. Except for Mac, of course, who was shoveling the surprisingly tasty eggs down like there was no tomorrow.

"Lynn?" Maria asked as she entered the room. It was the first anyone had seen of her since she stormed out of the med-lab.

"Maria, are you okay?" Lynn asked with as much compassion as she could muster.

"No, of course not," she snapped. "My best friend just died on my exam table!" Maria took a mental step back, taking in a deep breath to calm down. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Lynn assured her before Maria spoke again.

"Listen, we need to get Laura's body out to the utility-hut where we did the alien autopsy as soon as possible."

"Why?"

"I need to perform a post mortem."

"Jesus, Maria."

"She's not even cold yet," Tony added with disdain. Tony wasn't the only one who was shocked. She could see similar reactions in all their eyes.

"I'm sorry if the idea offends you," Maria said defensively.

"Can't this wait?" Lynn asked.

"That's just it, Lynn," Maria protested. "It can't."

"Come on, Maria," Tony insisted.

"Yes, step back for a moment, give yourself some time." Sara added.

"I don't have that luxury," Maria retorted, annoyed by their objections. "We don't have that luxury. Laura has always been easily overcome by illness. She's been that way her whole life. But whatever killed her did so at an alarming rate, and for all we know, it could be contagious."

"We should seal off the lab," Lynn realized, embarrassed that she hadn't already thought to do so.

"I've already done it, on my way in. I need Mac and Tony to suit-up with me so we can get her body out of there and move her to a utility-hut so I can isolate her."

"What are we going to do for a med-lab?" Adia asked.

"The med-lab has a built-in decontamination system," Tony explained. "In fact, its entire ventilation system is separate from the rest of the ship."

"That's right," Maria nodded. "We can get it good and sterile without too much difficulty. After that, we can use it again."

"Okay, let's make that our first priority, then," Lynn agreed.

"Mac and Tony can handle the decontamination duty," Maria insisted. "I need to get on the post mortem."

"Are you guys comfortable with that?" Lynn asked, looking at Tony.

"Sure," Tony agreed. "We know the drill." He looked at Mac, who began shoveling down his eggs even faster.

"Very well," Lynn decided. "That'll be first on the agenda."

Sara and Adia started clearing the table as Mac and Tony departed, with Maria following behind them.

"Maria," Lynn called after her. "Can I speak to you a moment?"

"Sure."

Lynn took her aside, away from the others, so as not to alarm them unnecessarily. "We were all exposed, weren't we?"

"I don't know. If it's transmitted by bodily fluids, then no. But, if it's airborne..."

"How much will decontaminating the med-lab help?"

"It's a start."

"Maybe we should decontaminate the entire ship?"

"Let me do an autopsy first," Maria insisted. "If it is airborne, it's already too late, and decontamination would likely be a waste of time and resources. Remember, we don't have an unlimited supply of the decon chemicals."

"Right." Lynn sighed as Maria turned to depart. "Maria?" she called after her.

Maria turned back to face Lynn.

"Thank you. I know this is hard for you."

"It's always hard, Lynn," Maria replied solemnly. "Always."

Lynn stood there for a moment, thinking. Everything was happening so fast. They were down to only six people now. Only sixty percent of their designed staffing level. There was no way they were going to get anything done today, maybe not even for a few days. At least, not until they could put Laura's death behind them and be reasonably certain that they were not in any immediate danger.

* * *

Day 55;

*Please forgive my poor penmanship.
The cold makes it difficult to write. It
has been three days since our last kill,
and we have nearly run out of meat.
Another day and we will be without
food.*

*Tomorrow, we will pause our journey
in order to hunt again. Although the
higher elevations seem to offer fewer
opportunities, we can usually find the*

Cetian equivalent of a mountain goat. They are ugly creatures, able to stand on seemingly vertical surfaces. Covered with thick fur and countless layers of fat, their meat is bitter and tough and requires what seems like hours of chewing. I can't imagine how long their meat takes to digest.

Every time we stop to hunt, our journey lengthens by at least two days. It takes time to process the usable parts of our kill, so that we can carry the newly acquired resources on our journey. And each time we hunt, we expend ammunition, another commodity in limited supply.

At least I will have more time to practice my flute. I cannot begin to describe to you the joy it brings me. The ability to create music on a whim, to make my tiny instrument sing. The range of emotion that one little stick of wood can invoke is truly astounding.

* * *

By late evening, Maria was finished with her autopsy. She had worked nearly twelve hours straight, taking only a few short breaks.

"Learn anything?" Lynn asked as Maria collapsed into one of the wardroom chairs.

"Plenty." Maria poured herself a glass of water and took a long drink. She was covered with perspiration, and her face was drained of energy and, by the looks of it, hope.

"Any idea why she died?"

"None." Maria looked at Lynn's confused expression. "Well, not *none*, just not much. I do know that she died from multiple-organ failure. I just don't know why all her organs decided to fail. It's like each one just decided to give up. First, her kidneys, then her liver, then her pancreas. Eventually, there were so many toxins that her own blood became poisonous to her heart and lungs, and they shut down too." Maria took another drink and wiped her forehead. "That's why we couldn't resuscitate her. Christ, her pH was down to *six point two*. Even after multiple rounds of bicarb. I'm surprised she didn't die sooner."

Maria leaned forward, placing her face in her hands and running them up over her head. Her neck and back were aching, and she was so tired that she couldn't see straight.

"Maybe you should get some rest?"

"You don't understand. If I don't figure this out, it could kill us all."

"Get some sleep," Lynn said sternly. "That's an order. You probably couldn't see the answer if it jumped out in front of you right now."

Maria sighed. "You're right."

"For once," Lynn replied, offering a sympathetic smile.

* * *

Mac stepped down from the boarding ramp onto the ground at the front of the LRV, put on his sunglasses, and looked around. The air was fresh, the ground still moist from last night's light rain.

"Ready to get to work?" Tony asked as he came down the ramp to join his friend.

"You bet. After yesterday, it'll be good to get back to my regular work." Mac reached down and pressed on his right side, wincing in pain for a brief moment.

"Are you alright?" Tony asked, noticing his discomfort.

"Yeah, just a little indigestion. Probably from Sara's attempt at making dinner last night."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Tony agreed as they started toward the utility-hut. "What the hell was that stuff she made, anyway?"

"I have no idea," Mac laughed. "I was afraid to ask, to be honest." Another wave of discomfort swept through his side, causing him to grimace again.

"Maybe you'd better have Maria check you out?"

"Naw," he protested. "I'll be fine. Let's get to work."

* * *

Day 56;

I don't know how Jack maintains his optimism from day to day. He is so certain that we will make it back to rejoin the others. Myself, I find it harder and harder to have such unwavering faith. Time and again, I find myself wanting to suggest that we return to lower elevations where food is more abundant and wait out the worst of the winter before moving on. But I fear that if I were to admit my doubts to Jack, I might crush what little faith he has left. I have seen doubt in his eyes, each time we crest what he hopes will be our last summit, and the disappointment in those same eyes when we spot another ridge beyond.

Yet, despite the hardships we continually face, I am still in awe of the natural beauty that surrounds us. This snow, this pure, white blanket that covers everything and slows our progress by considerable measure...it's almost magical. Deposited here in the frigid altitudes, it lies in wait. In the months to come, as the weather turns warmer, it will slowly begin to melt, trickling down the slopes, making its way down toward the valleys. At first, it will form tiny streams. These streams will combine to form creeks, and then rivers. These rivers, crashing down from the mountains, will actually carve through the mountains over millions of years. But as they slowly destroy these mighty layers of rock, they also provide the essential elements to the myriad of life forms that they touch on the way down. Plants that drink these waters from the soils. Animals that eat the plants and drink from these creeks and rivers. Fish that live in these bodies of water. Even the birds above find sustenance from these never-ending waters. And then, they find their way

down into and through the valleys and the flatlands below, where they again provide the building blocks of life to all living things. Finally, they find their way to the oceans where they host an entirely different ecosystem, as they lie in wait to be picked back up through evaporation and carried inland in the form of clouds, where they will be deposited once more onto the mountain tops as this beautiful, innocent, white powder.

* * *

"As of yet, I have found no evidence that whatever killed Laura is contagious," Maria reported at an impromptu meeting in the LRV's wardroom after the evening meal. "My best guess is that it had something to do with the injuries she received when she was attacked by that creature. Some kind of infection that I haven't been able to detect."

"I see." Lynn said, looking thoughtful for a moment. "And no one else was injured during the attack?"

"I had a few scratches," Mac admitted. "But they were from the shelves, not the creature."

"But he did have the creature's blood all over him," Sara added with concern. "I had to hose him down."

Maria took notice, leaning forward. "Have you had any symptoms?"

"Like what?" Mac wondered.

"Nausea, vomiting, fatigue?"

"Didn't you have some indigestion this morning?" Tony asked.

"A little, but that was from Sara's cooking," he added with a grin. "But nothing like what you're describing, Doc."

"We'll, I'd better check you out, just to be sure," Maria decided. "In fact, it wouldn't be a bad idea to give everyone another physical," she advised Lynn. "Just to be on the safe side."

"Good idea," Lynn agreed. "You can start with Mac, tonight. In the meantime, everyone get some sleep," Lynn ordered. "It's been an exhausting few days."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Sara scolded Mac as the others rose from the table.

"It was nothing," he assured her. "It was just that mystery meat you made last night."

"Don't be such a tough guy, Mac."

Mac rolled his eyes in response.

"I'm not kidding," she asserted, noticing his expression.

"Yes ma'am," he finally conceded.

* * *

"So, what's the verdict, Doc?" Mac asked in his usual, jovial manor. "Am I done for?"

"Not yet," Maria responded vaguely.

Mac noticed something different in her tone. "What's the problem?"

"Well, nothing really. It's just that your blood chemistry seems a little skewed."

"Huh?"

"RBC's are high, white count's a little low, pH is off a bit..."

"Uh...you wanna speak English?"

"Sorry. I'm sure it's nothing. Probably due to the indigestion you were talking about."

"But?"

"But, I'd like to keep an eye on you tonight, just to be sure." She was trying very hard not to let her concern show too much. The fact was, his labs were leaning in a suspiciously similar direction as Laura's labs had been when

she had first come to her. They were nowhere near as messed up, but it could just be the beginning.

"What, you want me to sleep here?"

"Yes, I think it would be best if you did."

"Hey, no offense, Doc. But don't you think you're overreacting?"

"I can make it an order, if you'd like?"

"Where am I gonna sleep?"

"Right where you're sitting. Technically, that is a bed, you know."

"Yeah, but this is where..." Mac suddenly cut himself off, not wanting to point out the morbidly obvious. Unfortunately, he couldn't think of a way out the hole he'd dug for himself, so he just stopped talking instead.

"Look, go get your sleeping gear. You can even bring your mattress, if you'd like. But you *are* sleeping *here* tonight, connected to all my bio-monitors."

"Come on, Maria," Mac begged. "Just let me sleep in my own berth tonight. I promise I'll come get you if I feel the tiniest bit off, I swear."

"Sorry, Mac. I can't monitor you well enough from your own berth. And I need to monitor your trends, not just periodic values. It's for your own good, as well as everyone else's...honest."

Mac sighed. "I guess."

"Now, go and get your stuff and report back to me in fifteen minutes. I promise, if your condition doesn't change overnight, you can sleep in your own bed tomorrow night."

She watched as he jumped down off the exam table, pulling his shirt on over his head as he exited the med-lab, still complaining under his breath. Despite her concerns for his health, she maintained her pleasant expression until he was gone.

Maria stepped across the lab and sat down at her computer terminal to update her medical log. She was deeply concerned, and she felt guilty for being more concerned about finding the reason for Laura's death than

she was for Mac's well being. After all, if Mac was developing the same illness that had taken Laura's life, then it might provide a valuable clue, one that might lead her toward a cure. And she had more than just the welfare of the crew to worry about. She was responsible for the welfare of everyone hurtling toward them on the Daedalus as well.

* * *

Day 57;

So much I have seen. So much I have done. I can't even begin to describe it all as I had originally intended. I am not the same man I was when we arrived. This experience has somehow changed me. At times, I am quite proud of the changes within me. But other times, I worry that I am no longer the man you married. I do things now that would have been unthinkable to me before. I kill live animals and eat their flesh. I casually hike past wondrous examples of geology without noticing. I witness weather patterns that, until arriving on this world, were no more than subjects of study in science classes, yet I spend no effort analyzing them. So centered on survival I have become, I seem to notice only those things that have an impact on our day-to-day existence.

Perhaps this is why our ancestors paid little attention to their impact on their own world's ecology. So important was their own survival that they either could not see, or chose not to see, the damage they were doing to the beauty that surrounded them at every turn. Before, I could not understand this. But now, even though it still seems shortsighted, the reasons are at least fathomable.

It has finally warmed up to a bearable temperature in my little tent. It's amazing to me how such flimsy material can hold in any heat at all. Of course, what I refer to as warmth is merely a few degrees above freezing, as I can still see my own breath. So I will endeavor to keep warm using thoughts of you and the children as I drift away for the night. You can't imagine how much I miss you all.

** * **

Two days later, Mac was feeling measurably worse, although not as bad as Maria had feared. Another set of labs at dawn revealed subtle changes in his body chemistry, the most troubling being a drop in his body pH. If it dropped much further, Mac would become susceptible to cardiac arrhythmia, and possibly death.

Unfortunately, Sara reported similar symptoms of nausea and vomiting, the same as Laura's, and a bit worse than Mac's. Assuming the common element was that they were all exposed to the alien creature during the attack, Maria insisted on performing a physical on Tony as well.

The results of Tony's exam were just as Maria expected, with slight, yet similar changes in body chemistry. Even though Tony did not feel any of the symptoms the others complained about yet, Maria ordered him to bed as well, hoping to slow the symptoms.

With Maria busy caring for her patients, only Lynn and Adia were left to perform the daily chores. Lynn immediately put all of the mission duties on hold, finding that the job of keeping their little camp functioning now consumed all of their time.

By dinner, they were so tired that none of them felt much like cooking. Instead, they chose to eat energy bars and dried fruit, just like they had when they first arrived on Tau Ceti Five.

Maria entered the cockpit, taking a seat at Frank's engineering station at the rear of the compartment. She looked over at Lynn, who was nibbling unenthusiastically on a piece of dried fruit.

"How are they doing?" Lynn asked.

"Tony still doesn't show any symptoms other than slight body chemistry changes," Maria began. "Sara was vomiting quite a bit, but I got that under control with anti-emetics."

"Is she getting worse?" Lynn wondered, almost afraid to ask.

"Her chems haven't changed much since this morning, but that's because I've been treating the symptoms, trying to keep her pH from falling, and keeping her hydrated." Maria leaned back in her chair and ran her fingers through her hair, pulling her bangs back out of her face. "Unfortunately, Mac's not doing so hot. His pH keeps dropping, despite all my efforts to stabilize it. He's feverish

and occasionally delusional, and it looks as though his kidney function is declining.”

“Is he...?”

“Going to die? Well, he’s not crashing as fast as Laura did. Probably because he’s normally strong and healthy.” Maria sighed, a sorrowful look on her face as she remembered her deceased friend. “But all that does is buy us a little time.”

“Are you any closer to discovering the cause?” Adia asked.

“Nope. I’ve been too busy trying to stabilize Mac. Every time I sit down to try to work on the problem, one of them needs my help.”

“Could you use some help?” Lynn asked. “I can probably handle the maintenance tasks myself, at least for a few days anyway. I can have Adia work with you.”

“That would be helpful, yes,” Maria accepted. “She knows her way around a lab. At the very least, she can run labs for me.”

“I’ll speak to her about it,” Lynn promised.

“Lynn...” Maria paused nervously, not wanting to say what was on her mind.

“What is it?” Lynn asked, seeing the trepidation on Maria’s face.

“I don’t think I’m going find a way to stop this.”

“Come on, Maria. Don’t you think you’re selling yourself short?” Lynn wondered. “It’s only been a few days.”

“Yes, and I’m still no closer to understanding why this is happening, let alone how to stop it.”

“Don’t give up so easily,” Lynn encouraged her.

“You don’t understand,” Maria insisted. “Given the right circumstances, I probably could find a cure for whatever the hell this is. But that could take months, possibly years. And in a real laboratory, with a research staff and the proper equipment. It’s only been two and a half days, and this thing has already claimed one life, and is well on its way to claiming a second.”

Lynn was surprised. "Is he that bad off?"

"Forty-eight hours, maybe. I can't see him lasting much longer than that."

Lynn looked away for a moment, her mind spinning, panicking.

"Lynn?" Maria asked.

Lynn snapped back to reality. "Are we all going to die?"

"I just don't know. If they were infected by direct contact with the creature's blood, then there's a good chance that the rest of us are safe. But I don't think I'm going to be able to stop this before..." Maria paused, not wanting to say the words.

She didn't have to say it. Lynn understood.

* * *

Jack carefully made his way through the knee-deep snow, meticulously choosing his route in an effort to remain hidden. He and Will had been tracking this particular goat-like creature for over two hours now. But each time they were about to get within range of the stout creature, it would move away.

Jack crouched low behind a large fallen tree, pulling out his view-scope to get a range on the elusive creature that vaguely resembled a mountain goat. "Just within range," he whispered.

"Are you nuts?" Will objected quietly. "He's gotta be over two hundred meters away!"

"I can hit him," Jack whispered back confidently.

"I'll be the first to admit that you're a good shot, Jack. But you're not *that* good."

"You want to spend the whole day out here following that damned thing around?"

"If you miss, he'll run off and we'll never catch him," Will pointed out.

Jack unslung his rifle and carefully laid it across the fallen log. He focused the targeting scope, setting it to maximum zoom. "What's the crosswind at? Three KPH, maybe?"

"More like four," Will corrected him.

Jack entered the crosswind data into the rifle's targeting system. The crosshairs moved to the right a few centimeters. Jack adjusted his aim, realigning the crosshairs onto the creature's head. He watched for a moment, making sure that it wasn't about to move. He didn't want to waste a round if he didn't have to.

The goat's head suddenly snapped up, its body frozen in place, ears perking up and shifting forward, as if listening for something far away.

Jack froze. "He's spotted us."

Will stared at the animal through Jack's view-scope. "No, he's not looking at us," he whispered back. "Something else has gotten his attention."

The animal suddenly made a break for the distant rocks, running as if he was trying to escape something.

"Shit!" Jack cursed under his breath. "How the hell did he know we were here? There's no way he could've seen us, and we're not upwind of him!"

"I was trying to tell you, Jack. We didn't spook him. Something else did."

Will scanned the area, panning to the right in the direction the goat-like creature had been looking and the opposite direction from where he had run. "I don't see anything." Will's head suddenly snapped back in fright. "Look!" he exclaimed in a forced whisper. He frantically reset the range on the view-scope. "That's got to be what it was running from!"

Jack trained his scope on the creature Will had spotted. It was bipedal, with long arms and legs, and was covered with thin, blue fur from head to toe. Although it could stand like a human, when it moved, it used all four of its extremities in the same fashion as an ape would back on Earth. "You think that thing is after the goat?" Jack wondered.

"Maybe."

"That would mean it's a meat eater, right?"

"That would be my guess," Will agreed.

"Well, let's not hang around to find out," Jack decided, looking around. "Which way was he headed?"

"Same as the goat, toward the rocks."

"Then let's head due west. Maybe that thing will chase the goat back toward us."

"Maybe we head south, back to camp. I don't want to go anywhere near that thing."

"Need I remind you that we're nearly out of food?"

"Yeah, but that big hairy..."

"Will," Jack interrupted. "We've got the guns, remember?" Jack rose to his feet. "Besides, that big, ugly son-of-a-bitch might be edible as well," he added as he headed out.

"Doubtful," Will muttered as he rose to follow Jack.

Jack was moving as fast as he could in the knee-deep snow. Will did his best to keep up, panting heavily with every step. "Do you have any idea where you're going?" Will asked.

"We were up there... yesterday," Jack panted as he chugged along. "There's a long gully... just beyond... those rocks up ahead. The valley... the goat's running... into... makes a left turn... at the end, with any luck... it'll jump... into the gully... to escape... and head right... to us. If we get there first... we'll have a clean shot."

Will was falling further and further behind. "Wait up, Jack!" he called out. But Jack wasn't slowing down.

"Get your rifle... ready," Jack ordered as he rounded the large outcropping of rocks on his right. "You take the goat... and I'll take..."

Jack turned the corner and stopped dead in his tracks. There, not four meters directly in front of him, was a massive bear-like creature similar to the one that had attacked Will weeks ago. Jack raised his rifle as the beast charged toward him, but it was too late. The creature leapt at him, knocking him backward into the snow. Without realizing it, Jack had his rifle in between the animal's massive jaws, wrestling with all his might to hold its head

away as it snarled angrily. The creature ripped the rifle from Jack's hands, sitting up and tossing the weapon aside, letting out a mighty roar as it raised its left paw to strike Jack.

Jack heard a shot from behind him, followed instantly by a wet *thud* as blood splattered from a superficial wound in the beast's chest. Blood sprayed across Jack's face as two more shots sounded, followed by two more thuds.

The bear-like creature fell backwards, rolling off Jack, who scrambled away from it, still on his back.

"Are you alright?" Will asked, rushing to Jack's side to help him up.

"Jesus! Did you see that thing?" Jack exclaimed.

Will looked back at the beast as he helped Jack to his feet. The massive animal looked dazed, unsure of what had happened to him. "Let's get out of here!"

"Where's my rifle?" Jack asked as he got to his feet.

The bear-like animal sat back up, checking his wounds. It was bleeding, but was not seriously injured. And its anger was building as it surveyed Jack and Will.

"Forget the rifle!" Will insisted, noticing the creature had shaken off the shock of the initial attack.

Jack also saw the beast as it rose to its feet to resume the attack.

"Shit!" was all Jack could say as he turned to run.

Will was the first to make it back around the rocks. Jack was only a few steps behind him when the creature paused just long enough to let out a bloodthirsty roar.

"Left! Left! Left!" Jack cried out to Will. "Head for the rocks! We'll never outrun him over open ground!" Jack was nearly neck and neck with Will as he gave the command, reaching out and pulling him to his left as he began to pass him.

Jack could hear the beast panting and growling as it rounded the rocks in pursuit.

The creature spotted its fleeing prey and paused to roar before continuing the chase. While its roar frightened them,

Jack realized the creature only did so when it wasn't running. That meant there would be a little more ground between them. But the noise subsided, replaced with the sounds of the beast's heavy paws plowing through the snow, and its growling pant.

Jack's head flicked to the side to catch a quick glance at their pursuer. The creature was only ten meters behind them at the most, and it was gaining quickly.

Just ahead was another outcropping of rock rising about five meters above the snow and was about twenty meters long. If Jack remembered correctly, there was an area of large rocks just beyond it.

"Give me your rifle!" Jack ordered as he came to a sudden stop. Will handed the rifle to Jack when he caught up to him, moving around behind him.

Jack quickly swung around, lowering the rifle to his waist, firing three quick shots at the onrushing creature. The first round missed, spraying up snow behind and to the right of the beast. The second round grazed his shoulder, causing the creature to stumble slightly to the left, stepping into the path of the third round, which entered its eye.

The beast rolled back onto its side, crying out in agony. Jack felt a surge of victory, but it quickly became evident that the creature was only down, not out. "Keep going!" Jack ordered, pushing Will forward. "Head for the rocks... to the right!"

Jack and Will ran around the short ridgeline, toward the rock field. They could hear the beast crying out from behind them, in a combination of pain and blind rage. There was no doubt in Jack's mind. The creature would not stop until it killed them both.

Another minute of running and they reached the rocks. Leading the way, Jack dodged between them, working his way to higher ground.

"Where are... we going?" Will panted as he followed Jack higher and higher up the mountainside.

"We've got to... get to... higher ground!" he explained between breaths. "Get a... better shot!"

They continued up the slope, Jack slinging the rifle over his shoulder to use both hands to climb. In the distance, they could hear the panting grunts of the injured beast following their scent. They had a minute at best to find a good place to take another shot.

Jack made his way between two large rocks, stopping halfway through the crevice. There was another crevice to his right, which Jack headed into. A few more steps, and the crack turned upward.

Climbing as quickly as they could, they made their way to a perch halfway up the pile of rocks. Behind them, they had a clear view of the creature's approach to their position. Above them was a larger rock, and to the other side was another way back down and around the outcropping on which they stood.

Jack quickly unslung his rifle and took up a firing position. "We'll make... our stand... here. It's got to... come up... the way we did... and it's too big... to make it up... the crevice... as fast as us. If it does... we can escape... down the other side." Jack looked at his ammo display. "Only four rounds left... We've got to... make them... count." He set the range on his scope, sighting the point where the creature would undoubtedly round the rocks after them. "Pull your... side arm."

"What good... will a handgun do?" Will argued. "The rifle... barely... knocked him down!"

"Just unload it on him... as fast as you can... when he comes around the bend. If you can piss him... off again... maybe he'll... stand up and roar... at us again."

"Don't you think... we've pissed him off... enough?" Will replied.

"When he roars... I'll put one into his mouth... and blow out the back... of his fucking head. That should slow him... down a bit!"

Will settled down into a firing position next to Jack. "I'm not very good... with this thing... you know."

"He's only gonna be... twelve meters away. Just unload... the whole clip on him." Jack whispered as he adjusted his aim. "One of them... is bound to hit."

Jack waited, peering half through his targeting scope and half over the top of the scope, down into the gully below them. He could hear the sound of the beast approaching. Its lumbering paws, its ominous grunting pant, intermixed with occasional cries of pain from numerous wounds.

Will fought back his fear as they waited. He counted in his head the number of times he had actually fired a weapon at something living. Then he counted the number of times he had actually hit what he had been aiming at. The ratio was not encouraging. Neither was the number of times his hits had actually killed something.

His fear swelled as the sounds of the approaching creature grew closer. But there was something else, another sound, like small pebbles falling down the sides of a large rock.

The beast slowly rounded the corner. It hadn't spotted them yet. Its face was bloodied from its wounded eye, its gait somewhat staggered as it tried to determine the range from various objects, using only its good eye. Its head rose slightly, sniffing the air with a large, black nose. The enemy was nearby. Another angry half-growl came from the beast's mouth as it proceeded into the gully.

"That's it," Jack whispered. "Keep coming."

Something small bounced off of Will's back, and then off of his leg. Will instinctively turned his head to see where it had come from.

The beast caught the motion with its good eye, turning toward their position.

"It spotted us!" Jack warned.

Will's eyes widened in horror as he looked up behind them. Crouched into an attack stance atop the rock behind them was the tall, muscular, humanoid that had originally

spooked their prey. Its mouth was open, exposing sharp teeth and a pair of fangs. Its eyes were squinted and focused, full of rage and intent with a rugged frame coiled tightly to launch an attack.

“Jack!” Will warned as he grabbed at Jack’s shoulder.

Jack’s head spun around, his shoulders following as the ape-like creature above them let out a bloodcurdling howl. Jack and Will both spun around to take aim at the second creature, but it was too late.

The humanoid leapt at them from its perch. Jack’s heart stopped at the sight of the creature leaping into the air.

Will had already headed to his right, down their pre-planned escape route, not waiting to become the meal of yet another alien aggressor.

Jack raised his weapon to fire as the humanoid creature sailed over his head, landing a good five meters past him in the middle of the gully, right in the path of the rampaging beast. A split second later, the two creatures were locked in combat, rolling around wildly in the gully below.

Jack watched in amazement as the battle raged. Fur flew from the four-legged beast as the humanoid slashed at its opponent’s flanks with long, muscular arms. The beast latched its massive jaws onto the humanoid’s right leg as it fell over, eliciting a cry of pain. The humanoid reached its right arm down around the beast’s neck, driving its claws into the beast’s throat. A gurgling sound nearly drowned the beast’s cry as blood shot from its neck. Again, the beast locked its jaws onto the humanoid’s leg, struggling to defend itself.

That was enough for Jack—it was time to leave. He had no idea who was going to win this battle, but he was sure he didn’t want to hang around to find out.

He looked to his right just in time to see Will disappearing around the corner of the rocks at the bottom of their escape route. Will had the right idea, and Jack followed without hesitation.

Will rounded the rocks at the bottom of the crevice and turned to the right between more rocks. Jack was no more than three meters behind him when he too reached the bottom and turned to follow.

Will broke out into the open, south of the rocks. He started to run, kicking up snow as he plowed through the thigh-deep snowdrifts. All he could think of was getting back to camp. To Will, the camp meant safety.

Jack wanted to get back to camp as well, but for different reasons. Ammunition. Whoever won that battle back in the gully might come looking for them next.

Jack emerged from the rock field. He could see Will making his way across the snowdrifts, moving faster than he had ever seen him move before. "Will!" he called as he headed out across the snow after him.

Will wasn't about to slow down, not until he got some serious distance between him and those two alien creatures battling it out in the gully behind them.

Jack struggled to catch up, following Will's path through the snow to reduce his effort. He kept his eyes on Will as he followed him, the sounds of the ferocious battle fading.

As he ran, Jack noticed a pain in his left leg. He looked down as he ran. Blood was dripping from a long gash in his thigh. He slowed for a moment, taking the opportunity to see if either of the two creatures was following them. But there was no sign of any pursuit.

Suddenly, Jack heard Will scream. He spun his head forward, but Will was nowhere to be seen. All Jack could see was the snowdrift where Will had been a moment ago. There was a terrible sound, like mountains of snow falling onto the ground all at once. "Will!"

Jack continued running forward, stopping short as the snow fell away in front of him. "Will!" Jack fell to his knees, his hands shuffling through the snow along the hard surface below, as he searched for an edge.

He found it. He looked to both sides. The snow had given way in front of him for at least twenty meters on either side

of their path. He peered over the edge. Below him was another crevice at least fifteen meters deep. It was narrow at the top, maybe a meter or two across, opening up at the bottom to probably three times that. "Will!" His voice echoed in the space below. Jack scanned the bottom of the hole. It was illuminated by an eerie bluish-white light, the source was white directly below him, and blue to either side.

Jack searched frantically for any sign of Will, but all he could see was snow, lots of snow. *He's gotta be down there somewhere*, Jack thought.

Jack continued to call out, but there was no response. No sound, and no movement. Further observation showed that the gully below was long. Jack couldn't see an end in either direction. *It must've been covered up by the snow*, he thought.

"Will! If you can hear me, I'm going to run back to camp and get a rope! I'm gonna get you out of there! I promise!"

It was the most difficult thing Jack had ever done, tearing away from the edge of that cliff. But he had no choice. It was too far to jump down. And even if he could do so safely, there was no guarantee that he could get them both back out.

He ran back to camp, backtracking just enough to reach the edge of the rock field, hoping to avoid falling into the same crevice. He didn't care who had won the battle back in the gully, beast or humanoid. The thought of the victor looking for him never even entered his mind. All he could think of was getting back to camp and returning with a rope. He had to get to Will.

* * *

Lynn leapt from her berth, dashing to the bathroom. She barely got the toilet lid up before she vomited. It was a frightening experience, since she had never vomited before. She heaved several more times before she sat back up and closed the lid. She needed water to rinse the terrible taste from her mouth. She sat there for several minutes, before

she realized that someone else was in the bathroom on the other side.

Struggling to fight back the nausea, Lynn rose to her feet and made her way out of the starboard bathroom over to the port side. She stood at the door, listening. She could barely hear the sound of someone breathing heavily from inside the stall. She carefully pushed the door open to find Adia in the same position she had been in only a moment ago.

* * *

Jack had never run so fast, making it back to camp in less than twenty minutes. Working as quickly as possible, he tossed what he thought he needed into his backpack, including the rope and another ammo clip for his rifle. A few moments later, he was on his way back to the crevice, swinging his pack up over his shoulders as he ran.

Jack noticed the sun was getting low in the sky. With only a few more hours of light left, he would have to work quickly if he wanted to rescue Will and somehow get him back to camp before dark.

Jack was careful to follow his own path through the snow on his way back. It not only made for easier going, but also ensured that he didn't fall into another snow-covered hole.

When he finally made it back to the crevice, he was exhausted and out of breath. "Will!" he shouted between pants. "I'm back! I'm coming down... to get you!" Jack peered over the edge, half hoping to find his friend sitting at the bottom, waiting patiently for rescue. But there was only a white blanket of the snow.

There was something else as well, something he had not noticed earlier. Several dark patches of snow, directly below. They were all along a two-meter line. One small one, a larger one in the middle, and another small one, slightly off to the right.

Jack slid his pack off his shoulders, dropping it in the snow to his right, as he reached inside and pulled out a

rope. Looking around, it suddenly dawned on him; *What the hell am I going to tie this rope to?* “Shit!” There was nothing nearby. No rocks, no trees. The nearest possible anchoring point was too far away.

“I’ll be right back!” Jack hollered as he pulled a hatchet from his pack and ran toward the nearest tree.

Jack leapt at the tree as he approached, grabbing onto the lowest branch and swinging himself up like a gymnast. With surprising grace, Jack ascended the tree until he reached what he thought to be a stout-enough branch and began hacking away at its base.

A few minutes later, the branch had been cut away, and Jack was dragging it across the snow, back to the crevice. He quickly draped the branch across the crevice and lashed his rope to it. After tossing his pack down into the abyss, Jack donned his climbing harness, twisted a descent ring through the line, clipped it to his harness and jumped into the gully.

The branch bowed at the sudden torque of Jack’s body weight while the rope became taut. Jack applied just enough tension to the rope to slow him to a safe speed. Still, he hit the bottom harder than he would have liked, his left ankle folding over as it plowed into the snow at the bottom of the gully and landed against an uneven, rocky surface.

Jack never noticed the pain. “Will!” Jack scrambled over to his pack, reached into a side pocket and pulled out a lantern. It was much darker down here than it had looked from above. As the lantern flickered to life, Jack saw inside the crevice clearly for the first time. It was about forty meters deep, four meters in width at the bottom, and varied between one and three meters in width at the top. Above him to the sides, he could see where the snow had frozen over to form a bridge across the crevice, hiding it from view of anyone on the surface. The late afternoon sunlight gave the frozen snow-bridges an eerie, bluish glow. The fissure looked to be endless in either direction, but there was no way to tell without investigation.

Jack looked toward the location where Will would have landed. The three dark patches of snow were dark red. He hurried toward the patches, dropping to his knees in the snow as he reached the first patch and frantically started digging into the crimson-stained snow. Within seconds he felt something. A boot. *Will's boot.*

"Will!" he cried as he frantically brushed the snow away from Will's boot and leg. "Oh God." Jack reached Will's knee. His pant leg was torn open, as was his knee, which was bloody and mangled. His kneecap was hanging off to the side, torn from its ligaments.

Jack continued brushing away snow as he worked his way up Will's body. *Thigh, pelvis.* Will was on his side. His right side. He was lying on an uneven surface, draped over jagged rocks. Something Jack had dared not think about suddenly entered his mind.

In less than a minute, Jack had cleared away the snow from most of Will's body. "Will!" he cried. Jack gently cradled Will's head and neck to protect his cervical spine. Carefully, he rolled Will onto his back.

"Oh God," Jack whispered. "Oh shit... Will," he said in agony.

There was a huge gash in Will's left side, from his mid abdomen up to just below his right armpit. Bowel, lung tissue, and pieces of broken ribs hung from the gaping wound. The snow and rock where Will had struck the ground was saturated with blood that had coagulated and begun to freeze.

Jack looked up at Will's face. His right eye was smashed back deep into its socket, the perimeter of which was crushed and bloody. There was no life in his good eye; no foggy breaths, his face already ashen and cold.

Jack laid Will's head gently down onto the snow. He knelt there for ages, staring at the face of his dead friend, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Why'd you have to go and fall in here, Will?" he cried. "Why?"

Suddenly, a small round shadow appeared over the bloody snow next to Will. A shadow from above. Jack spun around on his knees, nearly stumbling backwards over Will's lifeless body, staring at the sight above him. Peering down over the edge of the crevice above was the face of the ape-like creature.

The creature's long, bluish hair hung down in front of its face as it watched Jack. Its features were disheveled from the battle with the beast. Its face and hands stained with a mixture of its own blood and that of its dead opponent. It made no sound, no gestures. It only stared, a puzzled look on its face.

"What the hell are you looking at?" Jack cursed at the top of his lungs.

The creature gave no indication of a response.

"What do you want? A thank you?" Jack yelled as he got back to his feet. "Fine! Thank you very fucking much for coming to our rescue back there! Thank you very fucking much! But if you don't mind, I'd like to be left alone right now!"

The ape grunted, then growled softly.

"Get lost!" Jack yelled, his arms flapping wildly. Jack reached down and picked up his rifle, flipping off the safety as he swung around and raised his weapon. Four rounds left the barrel of his rifle in flashes of light and fire, crashing into the ledge above, but the ape-like creature had seen them coming and ducked away. Rock and snow came tumbling down on top of Jack. He quickly realized what a dumb idea it had been.

The ape-like creature stuck its head back over the edge, bellowing an angry discourse at Jack for his behavior.

"Fine, do what you want!" Jack resigned as he plopped down onto the snow next to his dead friend. "You want to come down here and eat me? That's fine." Jack's gaze was fixed on Will's mangled face. "You want to go home and lick your wounds? Well's that's fine too."

All life rapidly drained from Jack's soul as he sat there staring at Will. And just as suddenly as it had appeared, the ape-like creature was gone again.

* * *

"It's obvious that whatever is infecting us is airborne," Maria said at the wardroom table in the morning.

"Have you...?" Lynn looked at Maria.

"Yes," Maria responded to Lynn's inquiry. "Since this morning."

Lynn suddenly felt her spirits drop even lower. Maria was their only hope, and now she was infected as well.

Maria took Lynn's arm and pulled her around the corner, away from the others. "Lynn, we have a tough decision to make."

Lynn looked at her blankly.

"I've made almost no progress in finding a way to fight this thing, let alone curing it. Mainly, because most of my time is spent caring for the crew..."

"Adia and I are doing all we can to help," Lynn insisted.

"I know, but it's not enough. At the rate this thing is progressing, in a few days, I'm going to be too sick to do anything at all. I think we need to consider putting everyone into RMS."

"What?"

"Reduced metabolic stasis," Maria explained. "It was developed on the Daedalus about thirty years ago, during the ag crisis. They were hoping to use it to put half the ship's population into stasis to reduce the demand of ship consumables."

"Yeah, but they didn't use it. And if I remember correctly, it was because there were problems with it."

"Yes. Some of the rabbits they tested it on suffered brain damage when they were brought out of stasis."

"And you want to use *that* on us?" Lynn said in horror. "I thought they canceled the entire experiment?"

"Not exactly. They just chose not to use it. But they did continue the experiments, just in case."

"And they made it safe?"

"Well, for the most part. But there are still some risks involved."

"And you have some of this stuff on board?"

"Yes. We brought some along, just in case," Maria replied.

"And you think it's the right thing to do?"

"I think it's our only chance, Lynn. However, because of the risks, it requires agreement between the medical officer, and the mission commander. And that's you."

"What are the risks?"

"Neurological impairment, organ damage... Do you really want the list?"

"Jesus, Maria." Lynn looked at her.

"It's better than death," Maria reminded her.

"Are you sure?" Lynn sighed again. "Isn't there something else we can try?" she pleaded. "If it's not transmitted from person to person, then it's got to be in the environment, right? Maybe we can button up the ship, reduce our exposure, make some improvements to the bio-filters? There's got to be something else we can try, first."

"We're already infected," Maria reminded her. "At best, all those things might slow the progression, but sooner or later, unless we find a miracle, we will all die. RMS *is* our only hope."

"May I have some time to think about it?"

"No," Maria replied flatly. "Honestly, some of us don't have much time left."

* * *

That night, Jack dined alone for the first time in his life. He had been born and raised aboard a starship, where the only privacy you had was on the toilet. He grew up with children who lived all around him on every deck. He ate in mess halls with his fellow colonists. He trained with his

friends and crewmates. Privacy was completely foreign to him, just as it was to everyone else he had ever known. Yet here he was, stranded on this world, alone.

He kept telling himself that he wasn't really alone. After all, he was trying to make it to the landing site, back to the rest of his crew. And he had to be close by now.

Every single noise around him seemed louder and more intense than before. The crackle of the fire, the wind rustling through the trees, the occasional cry of a distant animal. Jack felt as if he could hear each snowflake as it landed, adding to the blanket of white around him.

He scanned the area around his little camp. Luna Proxima was still high up in the night sky and provided little light. The glow from his fire provided faint illumination, reaching out to a ten-meter radius around him, before fading into the night. A few tree trunks were visible, and a few rocks were peeking out above the snow, his tent, Will's tent, and their gear. It suddenly felt as if there was nothing else but this little corner of the universe. It felt as if the blackness of outer space began just outside the edge of his dancing circle of amber firelight. But even worse, he felt like he was the only one left in existence.

What if I can't find my way back to the others? Or worse yet, what if the others never made it? What if the Daedalus chose not to stop and colonize this world? What if something happened to the Daedalus?

Jack struggled to keep his mind from jumping to conclusions. Too many thoughts, too much confusion. He was tired and he had to sleep.

Tomorrow is a new day, he tried to tell himself. Rising, he tossed another piece of wood on the fire and climbed into his tent to sleep.

* * *

The next morning, Jack packed up all of Will's equipment that he could carry, including his journal and his hand-

carved flute. He would do everything possible to get them back to Will's son. It was the least he could do for his friend.

Heavily draped in both his and Will's furs, Jack conducted his usual pre-departure scan, hoping to pick up a signal from the LRV that would lead him home. Every morning he did this, and each time it was the same. Nothing.

Jack had decided that the only way to handle things was to carry on as if nothing had changed. But he knew he was fooling himself. Everything had changed. Still, he slung his pack and his rifle onto his back, and continued his trek up the mountain. *Maybe this time...maybe at the top of this next ridge I'll pick up the LRV's signal.*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Frank was surprised by how quickly he was able to cross the valley floor on his way home. He had figured two, maybe three days to reach the LRV camp. But on the evening of the second day, since he reached the bottom of the mountains, he was beginning to be able to make out details of the encampment. He spotted the communications tower first, and now he could see the LRV itself, sitting in the middle of the group of cargo pods and auxiliary-huts. There was something odd, though.

There was no movement other than the scanner array slowly turning atop the communications tower. Frank had expected to at least see Mac or Tony outside doing one of their mundane maintenance chores they were always complaining about.

Frank had run various arrival scenarios in his head several times, as he made his way across the rolling, grassy terrain. Perhaps he might run into Adia or Laura, out gathering specimens in the fields. But it was late in the day, and maybe they had finished the day's tasks early and were already inside the LRV, enjoying another one of Laura's sumptuous pasta salads or relaxing in the lounge. Frank could easily envision them inside the LRV. Maria and Laura watching old movies on the video-player. Mac and Tony grunting and groaning on the resistance gym. Sara pedaling her way through another marathon on the exer-cycle. Lynn meticulously studying the mission profile as she prepared tomorrow's itinerary. It was a comforting vision altogether. But still, there was something wrong.

By now, he was far inside the outer sensory perimeter. The sensor stakes should have detected his presence and

relayed the warning to the computers on the LRV. By now, someone should've come out to investigate the source of the motion. But no one was there. And as he drew closer, he noticed something else that worried him. As the evening light waned, he realized that none of the lights were on. Not the outdoor area floods. Not the running light atop the LRV's tail. Not even a warm glow emanating through the LRV's habitat windows. For all intents and purposes, the entire camp looked unoccupied.

Frank's trepidation intensified as he approached the encampment. Storage containers were lying about. The ATUV they recovered from the floods had not been cleaned up. Instinct caused Frank to bring his ATC to a stop. He slowly dismounted his vehicle and started walking through the outer border of the camp. Something told him to draw his side arm. His feeling of relief to be home again suddenly changed to one of fear... Fear of what might have happened to his friends. His steps became more cautious as he quietly made his way through the camp. The hair on his neck stood up as he slowly made his way to the front of the ship.

The hatchway was dark when he started up the ramp. The only light was the red status light on the hatch control panel, indicating it was locked. That was not unusual, as it was standard operating procedure to lock the outer hatch when everyone was inside the LRV. But the hatch control panel would not accept his access code. Someone had *purposefully* locked him out.

Could they be that angry at me? Frank wondered. He tried his code several times without success. He even tried his command authorization code. It also failed. That meant someone with a higher authorization code than his had locked him out. And that had to be Lynn.

Frank unslung his pack from his shoulders and pulled out a small tool kit. He knew every system in this ship, even better than he knew his own children. And it was an easy task to take apart the hatch control panel and manually

override the lock-out command. Within minutes, the hatch was unlocked.

He slowly pushed the hatch open. There were still no lights on in the airlock compartment, and they should have come on automatically when the hatch opened. That meant the ship had been powered down to minimal usage levels. Something was definitely wrong. The ship had been powered down and buttoned up for a reason, and it sure as hell wasn't because they were mad at him for leaving.

Frank made his way to the inner hatch, which was also locked. The words "Quarantine" and "Close Outer Hatch" flashed in alternating patterns across the inner hatch control panel.

This really scared Frank. "Quarantine?" he muttered to himself as he closed the outer hatch. Ventilation fans spun up in the airlock, spreading a fine decontamination mist all over the compartment. Frank closed his eyes and pulled his shirt up over his nose. The decontamination chemicals stunk, and they burned his eyes.

A few minutes later, the decontamination cycle finished and the inner hatch unlocked. Frank entered the habitat less cautiously than he had entered the airlock. Whatever was happening, he didn't feel an immediate threat. But the word "Quarantine" was still burned in the back of his mind. The question was, were they protecting themselves from something outside, or trying to keep something inside from getting out? At this point, it didn't matter. He had to find out what was going on, no matter the risk...and he had to find out *now*.

Frank made his way through the entry corridor and into the main habitat area, finding no one. He continued through the wardroom, and into the berthing section. Several of the curtains on the berths were closed. He went to the nearest berth with closed curtains. It was Tony's. "Tony?" Frank slowly pulled open the curtains, half hoping to find Tony hiding in his berth, waiting to scare him in retribution for his

untimely departure. But that would be more Mac's type of joke.

Tony was lying on his back in his berth, unmoving. Frank shone his light on Tony's face. "Tony?" He was pale, and his chest wasn't moving. Frank couldn't detect any signs of life. In fact, Tony looked dead.

A knot was developing in Frank's gut, along with a sense of panic. If this was a joke, it wasn't very funny. He went to the next berth over, which was Adia's. Pulling open the curtain, she also appeared dead. Frank noticed that she had an IV port in her left arm.

One by one, Frank checked the other berths. Lynn, Mac, Sara, were all lying still like corpses.

Frank sat on the bench of the resistance gym in the middle of the berthing section. Tears were welling up in his eyes. Could all of his friends really be dead? It didn't seem possible.

A thought pierced through his swirling emotions. Two people were missing. *Laura and Maria*. Frank rose, stumbling out of the compartment, making his way forward to the med-lab.

He found Maria, slumped over her computer terminal. She looked terrible. Pale and sickly, with sunken eyes. There was vomit in the trashcan and on the floor next to her seat. Frank reached for her neck, feeling for a pulse at her carotid artery. It was faint, but it was there.

He carefully picked her up and laid her on the exam table, but he had no idea what to do next. As chief engineer, his training had been more intense than anyone's, except for Jack's. But his medical training had been brief. He managed to hook up the bio-monitor. Her vital signs were all wrong. All of her body chemistry was in the red. He had no idea what any of it meant, let alone what to do about it.

Frank went to the computer terminal on the counter, called up Maria's log, and began reading. Her most recent entries were mostly gibberish, made up mostly of severely misspelled words. He doubted she had been very coherent

at the time. He went back further, catching mention of a disease or a virus. And something about a creature.

The monitor started making strange, irregular beeping sounds, moving Frank's attention from the log and back to Maria's bio-monitor. Her heart rhythm was becoming unstable. Frank panicked, unsure of what to do for her.

Frank forced himself to focus. He returned to the computer terminal and switched from the medical log to the protocol database, searching for the treatment protocols for cardiac arrhythmias. After reading furiously for several moments, Frank went to the medicine cabinet, only to find it locked.

"Shit!" Frank cursed. Without hesitation, Frank drew his weapon and blasted the cabinet open, sending vials flying in all directions. Rifling through the open cabinet, he found the vial he wanted, and quickly drew its contents up into a pneumo-jet syringe. After dialing up a dosage, he injected it into Maria's left deltoid muscle.

A few moments later, her heart rate increased and settled into a steady, regular rhythm. Relieved, Frank looked around at the damage he had done to the medicine cabinet. There were vials scattered all over the floor and the nearby counter. But there was also a long, red case sitting in the middle of the counter.

Frank had spent several days in this room recovering from his diving accident. He had no recollection of this case. He made his way back to the counter, curious. He looked at the cover. "Reduced Metabolic Stasis Serum." *That would explain the others*, he thought, a wave of relief washing over him. Opening the case, he found five full vials of RMS serum. But there were also five empty holes where five full vials of serum had once sat. And there were five of his friends lying in their berths with IV ports in their arms, appearing to be dead.

"Who's there?" Maria rasped.

Her words were so faint, Frank almost didn't hear them. He spun around, finding Maria struggling to open her eyes.

He rushed to her side, taking her hand. "It's me, Frank."

"Frank," she half smiled. "You're back."

"What the hell's going on around here?"

"You're not sick?"

"No, I'm not."

Maria suddenly became panicked. "You shouldn't have come in here."

"You're lucky I did. Your heart almost stopped. I gave you some atropine."

"My pH?"

Frank looked up at the bio-monitor. "Seven point two five," he told her.

"Too low for RMS," she frowned.

"What?"

"Give me some bi-carb," she told him. "Above seven point three five. Then give me the RMS serum."

"What? I can't do that, it could kill you."

"I'll die if you don't," she sobbed, tears flowing from her eyes. "Please," she begged in a whisper that seemed to require all of her remaining strength.

Reluctantly, Frank administered the sodium bicarbonate. Once her pH was above seven point three five, he also administered the RMS serum. For nearly an hour he held her hand as she slipped into stasis.

Frank suddenly felt very alone.

* * *

At first, Jack was able to maintain his pace, as he made his way higher into the mountains. The thought of reaching the summit and picking up the LRV's signal constantly occupied his mind. Every few days, he would spend some time hunting, cleaning, and cooking his kill, eating what he could and hauling the rest along with him for sustenance during his journey. Otherwise, his routine was fairly predictable.

The weather was not being cooperative. Snowfall seemed minimal, but the wind at the higher elevations

brought the nighttime air to bone-chilling temperatures. When he could find a small cave, the fire kept him warm enough to get through the night. Other nights, he was lucky to get a fire lit because of the ice-cold winds.

Yet he somehow managed to get through even the worst nights. The furs helped, as did the blue-grey hair, which seemed to be growing ever thicker on his arms and legs. At first, the unusual hair growth had not worried him. But his concerns grew with each passing day. A few of the men on board the Daedalus had possessed what seemed like abnormal amounts of body hair, something his father had told him was a genetic trait amongst some of the races contained within the Daedalus's gene-banks. Jack finally had to attribute his unusual hair growth as his own body's attempt to adapt to the colder environment. Perhaps he too had a recessive gene within him that would explain the extra hair now covering most of his arms and legs.

He had given up on shaving or trying to cut his hair. Both he and Will had become somewhat shaggy in appearance as the cold weather set in. A heavy beard and longer hair seemed to help combat heat loss from their head and face. But, by now, Jack's hair was nearly down to his shoulders, and his beard, also blue-grey in color, was thick and full, hanging down well below the base of his neck.

But it worked nicely, creating a barrier to prevent the chilly winds from seeping in around the collar of his crudely fashioned fur parka. In fact, with this much head and facial hair, he rarely found the need to wear his fur head cover, even in the poorest of weather. He had even left Will's furs behind, finding that he no longer needed them to maintain his body temperature.

* * *

Mission log; Day 67; Chief Engineer Reporting;

I returned several days ago from my expedition, only to find the entire crew, with the exception of Doctor Gonzales, in Reduced

Metabolic Stasis. Doctor Gonzales herself was ill and near death. After examining her medical log, I learned that the crew has been infected with some type of alien virus of unknown origin or transmission route. Sadly, it has already taken the life of Dr. Weingarten, and severely weakened the rest of the crew. At the request of Doctor Gonzales', I placed her into stasis.

After further examination of the medical and mission logs, I can only assume that something from either the alien creature killed in the ag-hut, or something in the local environment itself has infected them, and that they quite possibly contaminated one another. Because of this, I have sealed each of them, while in stasis, into their berths, both for their protection as well as my own. Tomorrow, I will begin a careful decontamination of the entire ship. I am the last one remaining, and although I can no longer do anything to help complete the mission, at least I can watch over them and keep them all alive, until help arrives.

* * *

Jack sat by the fire, reading Will's journal. He felt guilty even opening it, knowing that it wasn't really for his eyes. But he was lonely. He missed his friend. And he thought that reading his journal a little bit each night might make him feel like Will was still there with him.

Jack decided to start from the beginning, as if he were reading a novel.

October 24, 2112

My name is Rudolph Scheller. I was born in Austria, on the planet Earth. It may seem odd for me to put it that

way, but there is cause to do so. You see, my wife, my children and I, along with another twenty other families, are currently residing aboard the first interstellar spaceship ever built by humans, and we have just left our home system on a voyage to a new world.

It is a world that none of us will ever see. The voyage will take us more than sixty years to complete. Why go, you may ask? I'm not sure I can answer that question. Why does anyone risk all that they know to gamble on the unknown? Maybe it is the discovery, maybe it's that the Earth has passed her prime and has only a bleak future ahead. Maybe we want to be part of something historic.

Or maybe, it was my wife's idea. She was approached by the Eden Underground through a close friend at work. They desired her expertise on theoretical methods of cold fusion. So they brought our entire family down to the Australian Outback to work in secrecy and safety, away from the prying eyes of the very syndicate

sponsoring the project. It all seemed too cloak and dagger for me. But she had lost all her research funding the previous year, and without her work, my wife was a soul without life or purpose.

We raised our children in the beautiful desolation of the Australian Outback. My wife worked day and night in the labs while I cared for our young. When the children grew more independent, I resumed my career as a chef in the facility's cafeteria.

Surprisingly enough, when we were invited to join them on this voyage, our children, old enough to decide for themselves, chose to accept the invitation. So off we went for a wonderful week at the Hiroka orbital resort—supposedly as one of many recipients of an international sweepstakes. But when it came time for us all to return to Earth, we made off with the shuttle and made our way to the rendezvous point with the Daedalus, the ship that the Eden Underground had absconded with from

Luna Station only twenty-four hours earlier.

So here we are, travelers aboard a stolen starship, hurtling through the blackness of space into the unknown. It is not an easy life, especially for someone who has spent the last eight years living in the vast openness of the Outback. The interior of this ship is cramped, and living accommodations are modest at best. Many of the essential systems are still being installed as I write. But my beloved wife believes in this mission with all her heart. And she believes that here, amongst the stars, free of the corporate blockades that have always succeeded in squashing her efforts, is the only place that she will be able to complete her work.

I have landed the position of Chief cook. Well, actually, I'm the only cook. The other members of the crew take turns helping me prepare meals for us all. But to stave off the boredom, I have taken it upon myself to try to develop interesting new dishes from the rather limited resources available

to me. You would think that a few metric tons of salt would seem an extravagant amount in any kitchen. But consider that it has to last sixty-plus years! Our eldest son has taken the roll of educator, teaching the youngsters on board their lessons. Our daughter is a skilled nurse, and is working with Doctor Bell in the medical clinic. Our youngest has decided that she will follow in her mother's footsteps.

I will keep this journal of our lives for posterity. I will chronicle our daily lives as well as the events of the mission. I will pass this responsibility to my son when I die, whom I hope will carry on the process, passing it down to his son after him. I have chosen to keep this journal by pen and paper. I have always loved books, and I fear this may be the only one to exist in our new world. Who knows, maybe it will be displayed in a museum someday?

Jack closed the journal as he finished reading the first entry. It was already making him feel better. Maybe it was only a distraction, but it was a welcome one.

* * *

Mission log; Day 72; Chief Engineer reporting;

I have read everything I can about RMS. As far as I can tell, there is nothing that I need to do for them. Their reduced metabolic state should keep the disease from progressing further before help arrives, at least for most of them. However, Mac and Maria were both close to death when they were put under, so they are probably at much higher risk.

Other than occasional maintenance chores, I spend most of my time reading medical textbooks from the database in hopes of understanding Maria's theories about the disease. However, being an engineer, I find myself having to read each paragraph several times before I understand it. I seriously doubt that I will be able to make any headway in discovering a cure for what Doctor Gonzales nicknamed 'TCS', or 'Tau Ceti Syndrome.'

* * *

April 9, 2113

Today, the Earth-Mars cargo ship Mazu, which was assumed lost weeks ago, finally caught up to us. How Captain Wilkins ever managed to convince the Mazu's Captain to hijack his own ship is beyond me. However, the supplies and additional personnel the Mazu brings have given us a fighting chance once again.

Once unloaded, they plan to strip the Mazu and blend her systems in

with our own. So much of the Daedalus was either unfinished, or had been altered for her new mission to Alpha Centauri B, that she was almost unlivable.

With the agricultural equipment and resources provided by the Mazu, we will be able to complete the ag-deck. In a few months, we may even have our first harvest. I cannot describe how excited I am about having fresh produce again. I, for one, have grown tired of MREs.

Along with the arrival of the Mazu came word that the Icarus was also successfully hijacked, and should rendezvous with us before we reach the Kuiper belt. Again, I am amazed at how clever the leaders of the Eden Project are, not to mention how felonious. To steal three ships, it boggles the mind. Although these ships had originally been the property of the Eden Project, legally, the Centauri Syndicate now owns this ship, as well as the Mazu and the Icarus. I cannot help but worry that they will come after us. If the hijack of the Ozu did not go

as planned, the Syndicate could use her to come after us.

It is something that I try very hard not to think about.

* * *

Mission log; day 78; Chief Engineer reporting;

I finally figured out how to use the genetic scanners to analyze the samples that Maria left behind. But to be honest, I don't really know what I am looking for. I recognize what I see, cells, structures and the like. But I can't tell if anything is wrong with them. It's like trying to assemble a puzzle that has no picture of the pieces put together.

* * *

August 17, 2115

We exited the far side of the Oort cloud today. It turned out to be larger than anyone on Earth could have expected. We were able to use the Mazu's shuttles to collect raw materials from an asteroid we passed along the way. It was a tremendous effort, and unbelievably risky, but in the end, it was worth it. We are now rich in metals, some basic chemicals and gases, and even water, having found copious amounts of frozen water on the asteroid as well. This is of great

relief to the entire population of the ship, since our hasty departure had left us with only the barest of necessities. The fact that the Syndicate had been secretly refitting the ship for a small mining crew instead of one hundred colonists only compounded the shortage.

Now, we head out across the vastness of space, on our way to the Tau Ceti system, and our best hope of finding a safe world on which our children's children may live and prosper. Teams are rapidly working to bring the observatory online in the hopes that out here, beyond the reaches of our solar system, new discoveries can be made.

The most exciting of these contemplations is the Luyten system. Our course will take us within less than a light year of this star. We will have an observational opportunity the likes of which has never existed in the history of humankind. A relatively close-up look at another star. If even a lowly cook such as myself is this excited, I

cannot imagine how the ship's astronomer must feel.

* * *

Mission log; Day 85; Chief Engineer reporting;

I have been forced to all but abandon my attempts at researching TCS. I am finding that more and more of the equipment is breaking down. Without constant monitoring and maintenance, this place just keeps falling apart. Keeping the ship quarantined this way is a great drain on both myself and the ship's life-support systems. This habitat was designed for use on an Earth-like world. It only has the ability to run on internal life-support for a few weeks, at best.

If this maintenance schedule continues, I will no longer have enough portable air left to use the bio-suits outside. I find it hard to believe that TCS could be contracted outside. It has to be from exposure to the alien creature they killed in the ag-hut. At least, I hope so. Because soon, I won't have any other choice but to expose myself once again to the natural environment of this world.

* * *

November 13, 2120

We have been officially outside the Sol system for some time now, so we have truly become interstellar travelers.

Although the loss of the Ozu was unfortunate, at least we now know that there is no way for the Syndicate to

catch up to us and reclaim their legal property.

We have begun our final acceleration push, and within a few months, we will be at our target cruise speed. As I understand it, from that point on, we will be coasting until we reach the point at which we must begin deceleration.

The expansion of the ag-deck is nearly complete, and the green light has been given by the council for us to begin increasing the size of our population. As a compromise, the council has agreed to allow each couple to conceive one child using that couple's ovum and sperm, although they will still be required to use in vitro. However, no couple will ever know for sure, which of their children is from their DNA, which are from only one parent or the other, and which were conceived using both donor ovum and sperm. An odd ruling, to say the least, but a workable compromise nonetheless.

** * **

Mission Log; Day 97; Chief Engineer reporting;

The last few days, I have not felt myself. I don't know if it is the boredom, the loneliness, or both. My appetite has diminished, but probably because one can only eat protein bars and dehydrated fruit for so long.

It has been nearly a week since I began conducting my exterior chores without my bio-suit. So far, I haven't noticed any signs or symptoms of TCS, at least none that were listed in the medical logs.

I've grown tired of the mindless video-flicks that Laura and Maria found so entertaining. Instead, I spend what little free time I have reading some of the classic literature contained in the ship's database. I had always thought it a waste of space, but now I am happy that someone thought to bring these collections along with us.

My latest scans of the crew show no substantive changes in their conditions. At least that's something to be thankful for.

I've noticed that I find myself thinking less and less about Jack. I don't know if I have finally accepted his death, or if my own situation has grown dire enough to keep thoughts of him from my mind.

* * *

Jack awoke in the morning with renewed energy and purpose. With any luck, he might reach the summit today. The weather was milder than it had been over the last week. Snow was falling, but the winds were calm, and the going was not terribly difficult. Even Jack's load felt lighter, which hardly seemed possible as his load had not changed.

Nevertheless, his endurance seemed to increase, along with his strength and physical prowess. Jack concluded that

long-term exposure to such a harsh life had served to improve both his physical condition, as well as his prowess. It seemed only natural. When life got hard, you had to get harder yourself, or die.

Jack ran mental calculations as he made his way up the last stretch of mountainside toward the summit. The Icarus's position when they ejected, their trajectory, the position of the stars, and the speed at which they had made their way across the planet's surface on their way back to the LRV—he had already run these numbers a hundred times. This *had* to be the last summit.

* * *

Sunrise found Frank on his knees, hunched over the toilet, vomiting for nearly ten minutes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The vomiting had subsided for now, however, a glass of water was all Frank could get down. Food had little appeal to him at the moment. His mood was somber, since he knew the probable cause of his ailment. He tried to tell himself that it could be anything, bad food, some other virus like a cold or the flu. Hell, it could even be an ulcer. Considering what he had been through in the last few months, that wouldn't be a big surprise. He hoped if he took it easy, he'd feel better in a few days.

* * *

Jack could see the summit now, only a few kilometers up and to the right. It would not be an easy climb. There were plenty of rocks and the incline was steep. But a few more hours, and he would be there.

He had not let himself think about being reunited with his friends since the day they had crash-landed on this world. He wanted to stay focused on the task at hand, namely, survival. Imagining what the reunion would be like would only distract him. But now, being so near to the end of his journey, he couldn't help himself. He could see it in his mind as he climbed up the mountain at breakneck speed. The LRV, sitting in the lush, green valley. His friends running out to meet him, shocked and relieved by his survival and return. The warmth of the LRV's habitat section. A hot shower, a haircut, and a shave. Real food instead of the tough, gristly meat of dead Cetian creatures.

He only wished that his wife and children would be there to greet him as well. But they were still several months away, hurtling toward the Tau Ceti system, on board the

Daedalus. But soon, they too would arrive. And once he rejoined the others, he would be there to greet his loved ones when they landed.

* * *

Frank woke two hours later, feeling somewhat better. *Maybe it was just a bad batch of dried fruit*, he thought as he lied in his berth. He slowly got up and headed for the galley. But a few steps away from his berth, the nausea swept over him again.

* * *

The next fifty meters was up a nearly forty-five-degree slope. A step at a time, Jack made his way up the incline, grabbing whatever rock or shrub he could find to keep from slipping and falling back down. Digging his toes into the soft areas whenever possible, he gained altitude little by little.

He kept thinking about getting back to the LRV. The stories they would trade, the meals they would share. They would all grieve together over the loss of Will. And even that would be welcome, since Jack would no longer have to bear that grief alone.

Finally, the mountain began to flatten out a little more. Jack was exhausted after the climb, and found a rock to rest on. *Still a few hours of daylight left*, he thought as he drank some water and chewed on a piece of two-day-old goat meat.

* * *

Frank sat in the med-lab, connecting bio-monitor sensors to his body. The nausea had all but incapacitated him, and at times he felt almost too weak to walk. A dose of anti-emetics was the only thing keeping him going at this point.

As much as he feared the readings he was about to see on the monitors, there was no sense in putting it off any longer. He had to know for sure.

Not that I can do anything about it, he thought as he flipped on the bio-monitors.

* * *

Jack had only needed a few minutes rest before starting out again. Any other day, he probably would have rested longer. But the summit was so close now; he could practically reach out and touch it.

Jack panted as he ran the last few meters toward the summit, the air growing thinner. The sky was a brilliant topaz, brighter than he had ever seen it before. A few more kilometers up, and he felt he could touch the sky.

Thoughts raced through his mind as he approached the summit. His wife and children, his crew, Will. How he wished Will could've been here to share this triumphant moment with him. Together, they had worked so hard to get here.

The sky seemed to fall away as he reached the summit, until finally, it disappeared into an endless blue-green sea stretched out before him into the distant horizon.

Jack came to a stop, looking down at the crescent-shaped valley below him. It was beautiful and green, just as it had appeared on the probe scans. Waves of seawater gently lapped at the white sands along its edges. The crisp, ocean air filled his lungs with its unique aroma. The smell was totally foreign to him, but pleasant nonetheless. He finally made it.

* * *

A distant beeping beckoned. Frank did not respond at first, instead chose to lie still on the med-lab exam table. Three short beeps, repeating every five seconds, calling for his attention. Finally, after several minutes, Frank slowly rose to a sitting position, struggling to discern the readings on the bio-monitor through tired, unfocused eyes.

Frank squinted several times, trying to focus. He squinted as he studied the display, rereading the values several times to be sure.

* * *

Jack let his rifle and pack fall to the ground, as he reached into the side pocket of his pack and pulled out his data pad. Within seconds, the unit powered up and was ready for use. Without the slightest hesitation, Jack set the unit to scan for a signal from the LRV, just as he had done every morning, and at every summit.

He watched the display as the unit scanned for the signal. One second, then two, then three. A full five seconds went by without any results. Jack waited. *It's been so long since it's seen a signal; it has probably forgotten what it looks like.*

It hadn't forgotten. There was simply no signal to be recognized. Jack frantically began scanning for any kind of a signal. HF, VHF, UHF, Laser, Doppler pulse wave, anything at all that was man-made. But still nothing.

Jack's mouth hung open, partly in disbelief, partly in despair. *It can't be! The ocean is right there, I can see it!* "It has to be here!" he screamed. "The valley is right there! It's right down there! I can see it!" Jack double-checked the valley below. It was the right shape, and was facing the right direction.

Jack reset the scanner to geographical mode and began scanning the valley. Once the scan was finished, he compared the valley to the map of the tertiary landing site, the one where the LRV should've landed. It didn't match. It was similar, yes. But the valley below was considerably smaller, with differences in both shape and elevation.

Jack stumbled backward a step, nearly tripping over his pack in the process. For months he and Will had fought to get here. And now, the destination offered no salvation. He had reached the coast, so he must have come out either north or south of the landing site. But how far north, or how far south? Which way was he to go? And if he chose the wrong direction, how far should he travel before he gave up and reversed direction? What had begun as a day of hope and triumph had ended in despair and defeat.

* * *

Mission log; Day 101; Chief Engineer reporting;

Today I confirmed that I too have been infected with TCS. What I don't understand is why it took so long. The others were infected rather quickly after exposure, but it took me weeks, assuming that I was exposed the minute I set foot inside the LRV. I only hope that whatever kept me from developing symptoms as rapidly as the others, will also keep me from succumbing to the disease as quickly as they did.

There are still too many chores to do around here. The power plant is showing signs of needing maintenance, and the air filters that Lynn rigged need to be cleaned. I will try to remain healthy long enough to complete as much maintenance as I can before I have to go into RMS like the rest of the crew. If I can complete these tasks, we will have a much better chance of staying alive until help arrives. If it arrives.

* * *

Day 103;

My name is Jonathan Matthew Bell. I am not a member of the Scheller family, so I apologize for this intrusion. But I felt compelled to carry on my friend's tradition until such time as I might give this journal to his son. I am the Mission Commander for the Eden Project's Advance Survey Team. We were sent to the Tau Ceti system ahead

of the Daedalus to survey three potentially hospitable planets. After completion of our surveys, we were to transmit our findings and recommendations back to the Daedalus so they could decide which world to colonize before entering the Tau Ceti system.

Jack paused for a moment, starting to choke up. The campfire was burning full force during this unusually calm evening on the summit.

William Scheller was my mission Planetologist. He was also my friend. He saved my life on more than one occasion. Unfortunately, he was killed by a stupid and tragic accident while we were escaping yet another threat to our survival. As best as I can tell, he did not suffer. I know that he loved his wife and his children very much, and I know he would want this journal to be given to his son, in the hopes that he will carry on the family legacy.

Again, I apologize for my intrusion. But I have reached the lowest most desperate point in my life. And without Will, I have no one to talk to. I am

hoping that writing in his journal will give me strength to carry on.

I have reached the last summit. Beyond this lies nothing but ocean. Yet, I have received no signal from the LRV. I can only assume that I have come out either above or below their landing site. Any other conclusion would be unthinkable. Tomorrow, I will have to decide which way to go along the ridge. But in the absence of data, it's a fifty-fifty proposition at best.

I really wish Will were here to help me choose.

Frustrated, Jack tossed the journal aside. It had been a strange sensation for him, writing with pen and paper. The feeling of the pen's tip as it slid across the clean, white paper was vastly different than that of a stylus on a data pad. It seemed such a wasteful way of storing information, so resource-intensive, so bulky to store.

Yet, he had to admit, it had a sort of *magic* to it.

Jack was tired, but somehow his mind was wide awake. He knew he would have to continue on at first light, but he didn't know where he would get the drive to do so.

He reached into his pack and pulled out Will's little wooden flute. Trying to remember how Will had held his fingers, Jack carefully placed his own over the holes, held the instrument to his mouth, and blew through it. A shrill whistle leapt out, causing Jack to abruptly withdraw the instrument from his lips. *There was nothing musical about that!*

He tried again, this time blowing more softly, and evenly. It was still shrill, but better. He tried lifting different fingers as he blew through to tiny wooden tube, the tone changing with each movement of his fingers.

Jack felt something he had never felt before. A unique pleasure, something satisfying. The noises he made were still shrill, almost earsplitting. *This is gonna take awhile*, he thought as he continued to experiment.

* * *

Mission log; Day 105; Chief Engineer reporting;

I still have recurring bouts of nausea and vomiting. On the advice of the medical database, I have increased my consumption of fluids to combat the dehydrating effects of frequent vomiting. The problem is that it is difficult to keep food down. And without proper nutrition, I find my productivity has fallen.

I have completed the maintenance on the power plant. Tomorrow I will begin cleaning the air filters that Lynn rigged up. I do not know if they have made any difference overall, but it cannot hurt.

* * *

Day 113;

I have been making my way north along the ridge for nearly a week now. But still, no signal. There have been a few valleys below me along the way, but nothing even remotely resembling the tertiary landing site. With each failure, I find it more and more difficult

to carry on. It is cold up here, and the weather only seems to get worse as I go farther up north. Perhaps I should've headed south instead.

I have settled into a routine. I break camp at dawn, hiking until early afternoon. After pitching camp again, I hunt small game for my evening meal. After dinner, I practice on Will's flute before sleeping. I haven't improved much, but it is my only source of entertainment. I am determined to produce a melody.

* * *

Mission Log; Day 115; Chief Engineer reporting;

I've noticed occasional blood in my urine. I give myself intravenous feedings every other day to keep my strength up. If I can last another week before going into stasis, I'll feel better about our chances of survival.

The most difficult thing about my situation is the loneliness. I have found myself talking to the other crewmembers in stasis. I know they can't hear me, but I feel slightly less crazy than if I were talking to myself.

In the evenings, I have been working on rewiring the Doppler Pulse Radar. I think if I can wire it into the comm-system, I may be able to send a warning message. As much as we need them to rescue us, the colonists need to be warned about this virus.

* * *

Day 117;

Tomorrow, I will head back south. My calculations show that I am already too far north to still be south of the landing site. It has to be south of where I arrived at the coast.

* * *

Mission Log; Day 127; Chief Engineer reporting;

I have grown tired of my daily protein bar. All I ever do is vomit it up anyway. If I'm going to vomit my food up an hour after I eat it, I might as well enjoy it on the way down.

Tomorrow, I will go outside and try to hunt some small game. I rather like going outside now. And since I'm already infected with the TCS virus, if it is outside the ship, who cares? Besides, the fresh air seems to help. If I am going to die, I don't want to spend my last days in this high-tech, metal coffin. I may have been born and raised in a spaceship, but I'm sure not going to die in one.

* * *

Day 132;

I've reached the original point where I came across the summit. Tomorrow, I will continue south along the ridge. I figure I'll give it another ten days. If I haven't found the LRV by then, I will have already traveled

*farther south than the landing site
could possibly be.*

Jack returned the journal to his pack and picked up his flute. What had once been a shrill whistle was now developing into a warm, controlled tone that was quite pleasing to Jack's ears. "A few more months of practice, and I might even be better at this thing than you were, Will."

* * *

Frank sat quietly behind the rock, his skin clammy and his vision unsteady. Thankfully, his rifle had an excellent targeting system, and his shot landed right in the throat of the furry, burrowing creature, severing its head from its body.

It had been four days since his last kill, and Frank was looking forward to the fresh meat as he stumbled across the snow covered field. The meat was tough and somewhat bitter, but it was easier to keep down for some reason.

The snow had begun to fall a few days ago. It wasn't cold enough for it to stay frozen for long, Frank had noticed. Unless there was another snow within a few days, the stuff on the ground would melt away. But the plants seemed to like it. He had never seen them so lush and alive with color. It reminded him of the garden deck on board the Daedalus.

But the cold weather made his joints ache, making walking far more difficult. If the snowfall continued, he would no longer be able to hunt outside.

* * *

Day 142;

*Ten days of traveling to the south,
and still nothing. I am now forced to
conclude that the LRV either landed
somewhere else, or worse yet, they*

never made it down at all. They had the fuel-manufacturing equipment on board. In only a few months, they could have topped off their tanks. But I find it hard to believe they would've abandoned us that way. Of course, it is possible that they thought we were dead.

There is a small valley on the inland side of the ridge, just a few hundred meters lower at best. My scans show a large cave on the far side of the valley. I've decided to hole up there for the winter. I should be able to find enough game to survive. And the cave will give me protection from the elements, and a place to live. Perhaps, after the cold weather passes, I might move farther south, or make my way down the ocean side of the ridge and live near the ocean. If the LRV has landed elsewhere, then the Daedalus will still be arriving in a few months. Once she is in orbit, I should be able to establish contact with my data pad and signal for rescue. But if the LRV did not survive, or it left all together, then I may be alone here for quite some time.

* * *

Mission Log; Day 157;

It's too cold to go outside. I have little energy. My vision is blurry most of the time, and my hands shake. Vomiting is more frequent. I'm not producing much urine. I think my kidneys are failing. And I haven't taken a dump in nearly a week. I don't know why I am able to survive this illness so much longer than the others. Nevertheless, TCS is a lousy way to go.

I'm getting closer to completing my work on the "Doppler-comm", as I like to call it. Once that is finished, I will probably have to put myself in stasis as well.

* * *

Jack sat in his warm, cozy cave, playing his flute. He had now perfected the tune that Will had composed, the "Cetian Serenade" as he had called it.

The cave had quickly become a comfortable home for him. He had been here less than a week, he figured. It was becoming difficult to keep track of time. It was also becoming difficult to write, for some reason. He knew what he wanted to say. He even felt that he knew how to write it down. But when he did so, it no longer seemed legible.

His cave was the perfect home to ride out the cold weather. Only a few meters up along the mountain, it was high enough to stay above the snowdrifts on the floor of this small valley. There was a large rock formation in front of the entrance that served to hide it from view and kept the winds from blowing directly into the cave itself.

About fifteen by twenty meters in floor area, the cave had a high ceiling. Jack was sure that there was also another exit above him. The smoke from his fire seemed to be drawn out through the top of a pile of rocks against the back wall.

Perhaps, when the snow melted, he might climb around outside and try to find the other entrance to his little home. But for now, he was content to concentrate his efforts on foraging for food and practicing his music.

Finding game was not an easy task. There were animals living in his little valley, but they spent most of their time hiding from the cold winds and snow. His best chances of a successful kill seemed to be during lulls in the storms when the other animals came out to forage.

He had found several plants buried in the snow that had edible root systems. After digging them up and boiling them, they made a fine vegetable stew, when cooked along with the bones from his most recent kills.

But the occasions when he was successful in finding and killing something were becoming fewer and farther between. Twice now, he had been forced to climb up out of his little valley in search of fresh game, usually Cetian mountain goats. If only there was a stream here, then he could go fishing. But he had not been able to find one. If there was one here, it was buried under the snow and probably frozen over. If Will had still been alive, with his knowledge of planetary sciences, he probably would have been able to find a stream.

After the last notes of his Cetian Serenade faded away, Jack set the flute down in its customary resting place on a rock next to his bed. His bed was made of the two large furs he had taken from recent kills, laid out over a pile of grass he had collected while digging through the snow for edible roots. It was warm and even comfortable sleeping under the furs, more so than any bed he had ever slept in.

Each night, he would lie there on his bed in the cave, watching the firelight as it danced across the stone ceiling. He tried not to think of his family. He tried not to dwell on the fact that he might never see them again. But it never worked.

It had been four days since his last kill, and he was out of roots as well. Tomorrow, he had to find some fresh game. If

the weather improved, then so would the hunting. If it didn't, he would have to head for higher ground again.

* * *

Frank rubbed his hands together; his fingers had been aching for three straight days. Even now, as he struggled to solder the connections on a circuit board, his hands shook. Three times he had tried to make the connection, and three times his hands had shaken at the wrong moment, causing a sloppy weld that would surely short-circuit the board, had he applied power to it.

His judgment was becoming suspect these days as well, and he knew it. Luckily, he had charted out the steps to completing the Doppler-comm before his mind became cloudy. It was difficult to get through an average day. He knew if he didn't go into stasis soon, it might be too late.

* * *

It had taken Jack half the day to climb out of the valley and onto this rocky plateau. The howling winds and snowfall hadn't helped. But he knew that Cetian mountain goats tended to hang around such plateaus, pushing their ugly snouts through the thin layer of snow in search of the grass and weeds that grew between rocks.

It had been a difficult climb, but it paid off. Jack was crouched behind a large rock, his rifle trained on a huge male goat not ten meters away. The wind and snow had served to hide Jack's stealthy approach. Instinctively, it seemed, Jack had managed to stay downwind from the beast.

Jack watched the majestic creature on his targeting scope's display screen. Its thick, brownish-black fur would provide him warmth, and its large muscular legs and huge torso would feed him for at least a week. It would be difficult to haul back down to his cave, but it would be worth the effort.

Unfortunately, it also was the biggest damned mountain goat he had ever seen, with the biggest, longest, most threatening set of horns on its head. Jack had seen such creatures in combat, and they knew how to use their horns. He had watched one of these big bucks practically shred a much larger creature a few weeks back. If Jack was going to take this creature down safely, he had to do it with one shot.

He watched quietly as the big goat chomped away on a patch of shrub. The pattern was easy to see. The goat would search the snow, then, finding a shrub or grass, it would bite off a chunk and then lift its head to look around for any predators while it chewed. Jack would have to take his shot while the goat's head was down with its snout in the snow.

He watched patiently while the goat finished off its latest find. Jack wanted to wait until the goat began searching again. The sound of its snout rustling through the snow would help to mask any sounds that Jack might make as he prepared to take his shot.

The goat dipped its head again, only to find that the patch of grass was gone. Its head rose and looked around. Satisfied that there were no predators around, the goat took another step forward and dove its snout deep into the snow and began digging about in search of more sustenance.

Jack held his rifle steady, the crosshairs trained squarely on the goat's neck. With that head, his only hope was to blow apart the beast's neck and wait for it to bleed out. Jack knew the goat's neck veins were quite large, and it wouldn't take more than a few minutes for the beast to go into shock and die.

The goat found its next patch of grass, and began pushing the snow away from its meal, tossing it in all directions. That was it, the moment that the goat's neck would be moving the least. A slight squeeze and...

The round smashed into the right side of the goat's massive neck with a sickening wet thud. The goat stumbled to the left, tripping on the uneven surface, tumbling over onto its side.

Jack leapt from his perch, a surprising bound clean over the rock without so much as touching its surface, as if he had springs in his boots. He ran toward the animal to make the final kill, but just as quickly as the beast had tumbled over, it righted itself and was back on its feet turning to flee.

Jack could see the wound on the animal's neck. It was gushing blood, but not as much as Jack had hoped. *Damn! It must've moved at the last moment!*

The goat was now running away from Jack, but it was only able to go a few steps before it realized there was nowhere else to run. The other side of the plateau was a straight drop of nearly three hundred meters.

With no options, the massive animal turned to face Jack, its left hoof pawing at the snow covered rocks as it dipped its head to bring its horns toward the attacker.

Jack stopped dead in his tracks, recognizing the danger. He quickly raised his rifle and squeezed the trigger again, but nothing happened. Jack quickly looked down at the display as the beast began his charge. The ammo count read zero. He couldn't believe that he didn't notice he was so low on ammo before he took the critical shot. Jack looked back at the stampeding goat, steam shooting out of the sides from its snout, snow flying in all directions as it plowed toward Jack.

Instinct took over, even though Jack had no idea from where it came. Was it from his months of living in the wilderness of this world? Was it from millions of years of human evolution?

Jack's body coiled into a crouch as he drew his knife, squinting as he felt the adrenaline course through his veins. Everything seemed to disappear from his mind as it became singularly focused on one thing and one thing only; he would kill this beast.

In less than a second, Jack judged the beast's rate of approach. When the goat reached him, Jack's left hand went out, grabbing the animal's right horn. He spun to his right as the animal passed him, his left hand pushing the goat's horn

away from him as he turned. Jack twirled the knife around in his right hand to reposition his grip on the weapon, after which his right arm shot out straight, coming around in a long arc to gather momentum. At the end of its arc, the tip of his knife found the beast's left side, and it pierced its tough hide, driving deep into the goat's torso.

Jack could feel the creature's heavy ribs crack and split as the point of his weapon drove through them. He could hear the animal howl out in pain as Jack continued to spin to his right while the goat passed him by. He could feel the pressure on the blade of his knife subside, withdrawing it from the goat's deep wound.

A moment later, the goat was thundering to a halt, still crying out. Jack had finished his spin and was crouched, facing the beast once again, ready for its next charge.

He would not have to wait long. The massive goat was in pain, but had no intention of breaking off its attack. It was already at a full gallop toward Jack as he quickly spun the knife around for a change in grip. Again, Jack reached out with his left hand. But the goat knew this trick, and altered its course slightly to its left to deny Jack the same opportunity.

But Jack had no intention of repeating the same trick. This time, he side stepped to his right as the beast approached, grabbing the goat's left horn and swinging himself up onto the goat's back as the creature passed him to his left.

The goat reared its head up as it came to a stop. Jack yanked back hard on the goat's left horn, pulling the creature's head back to its left. Jack leaned forward, carefully avoiding the goat's right horn, reaching down with his right arm to bring the knife under the goat's vulnerable neck. The animal tried with all its might to resist Jack's pull and bring its head back down to fend off his attack, but it was too late. Jack drove the knife deep into the base of the animal's neck just above the torso and slightly to the left of midline. The blade entered at an angle across the front half

of the goat's massive neck, slicing across both its throat and esophagus. Blood spurted from the wound, the hot, red fluid spilling across his knife hand. An ugly gurgling sound came from the creature's mouth as it tried in vain to cry out. Jack twisted the knife to widen the wound, and drew the knife quickly upward toward the creature's head as the tip of the goat's right horn flailed around in the air near Jack's left ear, trying desperately to inflict some sort of damage on the alien attacker before it was too late.

But it *was* already too late. Blood and tissue spewed from the now gaping wound in the goat's throat. The creature stumbled once as it wheezed and gurgled, trying to draw oxygen into its lungs. But its throat had been too severely damaged, and all it could draw was liters of bubbling blood that was pouring from both of its severed neck veins.

Jack hung on tight, still drawing the knife upward until he reached the creature's mandible. The goat stumbled a second time, then a third before its front legs gave out completely.

Jack leapt from the creature's back as it fell to the ground, landing less than a meter away from where the animal collapsed. Jack stood there for a moment, his right arm covered in the animal's blood up past his elbow. The great mountain goat was looking at him as it tried to breathe, blood pouring from its neck, staining the snow an eerie, dark red.

Jack stepped up to finish the job, grabbing a horn once more to lift the creature's head up and drive the tip of his blade into the creature's open mouth, deep enough to sever its brain stem.

He dropped the goat's head back onto the red snow and stepped back. There was no movement, no gasps for breath. No sound at all except for the sound of Jack's own heavy breathing. Steam rose from the animal's bloody wounds. The once majestic creature was dead.

Something surged up inside of Jack. Something he did not recognize. Both his arms shot out to his sides, his head

falling back as a bloodcurdling victory cry erupted from his lungs. It was almost embarrassing to him. He had never made such a noise, but it felt good... Incredibly good.

At this moment, Jack felt more alive than he had ever felt before.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Frank sat at the engineering station on the flight deck, wrapped in a blanket. The weather had become considerably worse over the last week, and the outside temperatures had dropped considerably. Frank had been forced to take the antimatter reactor down to bare minimum output in order to reduce maintenance requirements and prolong its service-life. If the Daedalus chose against rescue, there was no telling how long they would be stranded on this world. And with the ship in conservation mode, there was little power available for heating its interior.

His hands shook violently as his right hand hovered over the power button on the Doppler-comm system he had labored for so long to complete. If this idea didn't work, he would have no way to get a message out to the Daedalus to warn them of the virus that was threatening to take the lives of himself and his shipmates.

It had taken him nearly three hours to compose the message that his Doppler-comm would be sending in short, burst transmissions. It would be unintelligible to normal communications equipment. But they would recognize the Doppler signature of the carrier wave, and would quickly train their own Doppler systems on the source of the signal and figure out his urgent message.

These days, he was barely able to concentrate on a single thought for more than a few seconds. He couldn't sleep, and he sure couldn't eat. Every fluid that came out of him was tinged with blood. His vision was blurry and his hands constantly shook, and even when he *could* focus on something, half the time he couldn't tell what it was. It was like his mind didn't understand what it was seeing, even

though it *looked* familiar to him. If this thing didn't work, he wouldn't live long enough to try again.

Finally, Frank got up enough nerve to push the button. The power light illuminated immediately, followed by several indicator lights on the control face. *Okay so far.* He concentrated as hard as he could on each step. He adjusted the gain on the Doppler system, selected a pulse rate, and set the system to transmit ten pulses at the top of each hour. That would save on energy, but still ensure that anyone receiving the message would have plenty of opportunity to figure it out before the message stopped transmitting.

Frank pushed the button to activate the Doppler pulse, causing it to fire its first pulse up toward the sky. The red indicator on the Doppler display changed from zero to one. Frank watched as the number changed from one to two, five seconds later. Then three, four, five. He watched it cycle through all ten pulses, before switching back into standby mode, its timer counting down from fifty-nine minutes and ten seconds until it would again transmit ten, evenly spaced pulses.

A great sense of relief swept over him. His Doppler-comm was working. Now he could put himself into stasis. If he didn't die in stasis, and if the Daedalus made it here and found them, and if they could find a cure for TCS, they might still have a chance to survive.

It was a lot of ifs.

* * *

Despite the increasingly foul weather, Jack was forced to leave his little valley. Snow had been falling non-stop for nearly a week, and his valley was covered with waist-deep snowdrifts, making navigation impossible. And to make matters worse, he doubted there was any game left to hunt nearby.

It had taken him most of the morning to make his way across his snow-covered valley and up the side of the ridge.

There was not as much snow falling along the ridgeline, but there was plenty of wind. Jack was happy that he had worn all of his furs. They were bulky and cumbersome, making it difficult to move with any speed, but they kept him warm. Coupled with the hat he had fashioned out of the head of that mountain goat, Jack was sure that he resembled some sort of bizarre alien creature. Especially with all the blue-gray hair flowing from his head and face. The thought was comical to him, and he wished he had a mirror to look at himself. He could use a good laugh about now.

Jack made his way slowly along the ridge, forced to lean to his right into the oncoming wind to the point that he was practically walking sideways. Visibility was so poor that he could scarcely see more than ten meters ahead of him. At least he was going downhill. He only hoped that a lower elevation would eventually equate to better weather.

His side ached. His stomach was past being empty; he hadn't eaten in nearly a week. It was becoming more and more difficult to keep going. And his hope was quickly fading.

Jack knew he had to find some sort of shelter from the storm where he could rest. A cave, a small group of rocks, a clump of trees, anything. If he could only find some edible plants, he might last a bit longer.

Through the blinding white haze of the snowstorm, Jack saw a couple of waist-high rocks. Falling to his knees when he reached them, he quickly dug down into the snow until he hit the ground, pushing the snow up around the top of the rocks to increase their overall height and provide better protection from the wind. Sitting on the newly exposed dirt, Jack leaned back against the boulders, huddling up as best he could to stay out of the freezing wind while he rested.

Thoughts were racing through his starved mind. He tried desperately to remember his survival training back on the Daedalus. His primary concern was of course, finding something to eat. Animals, plants, fish, bugs...*Bugs!*

Jack began digging into the dirt around the base of the rocks. But there was nothing there. He began digging to his left, even turning the smaller rocks over to look underneath. That's when he found them. A small colony of insects. Reddish-purple in color, each about twelve centimeters long. They looked like rather plump worms, but with half a dozen or so feet under their rubbery bodies. There had to be at least a few hundred of them, wiggling around there, wondering why their precious rock had suddenly disappeared and left them exposed to the blistering cold of the Cetian winter.

Jack thought he might vomit at even the thought of eating something so repulsive. *Vomit what?* By now, his stomach had probably shriveled down to the size of a peanut.

Another pain shot through his side. *Well, how bad could they be?* he thought. *Protein is protein, right?* Jack reached down with his left hand, scooping up a handful of the repulsive little bugs. Drawing it up to his face, he stared at them, all reddish-purple and crawling over each other. *Protein shouldn't wiggle and squirm,* he thought as he closed his eyes, held his breath, and tossed the handful of rubbery little worms into his mouth. He tried to swallow them whole, all at once, positive that if he had to taste them, they wouldn't stay down. But a few of them remained in his mouth, undoubtedly not wanting to be condemned to death just yet.

His face grimaced as his tongue swept the last few worms from his mouth. He nearly gagged as he forced them down his esophagus to join their friends. "Yuck!" he exclaimed as he scooped up a handful of snow and swallowed it to try washing the disgusting taste out of his mouth. *How the hell did I get into this situation?* he thought, as he tried to ignore the imaginary feeling of the worms wiggling around in his stomach. He shoved another couple of handfuls of snow into his mouth, hoping he might be able

to fill up on snow instead. But that would not last for long, and he knew it.

Having no choice, Jack reached down and scooped up another handful of worms, tossing them into his mouth and swallowing quickly, in an attempt not to taste them. A few more handfuls of snow to wash down the second handful of worms, and he reached for a third. Taking a peek at the so-called food in his hand, he noticed the ones from the bottom were fatter than the ones on top. He didn't know if that was good or bad. He also didn't know if he would be able to get another handful of them down.

And what the hell is that beeping sound?

The third handful of worms was already on its way down to his stomach by the time the source of the beeping dawned on him. *Damn it!* he thought. *I must've left the data pad on. The battery must be getting low.* He cursed himself for leaving it on, as he dug under his furs to get it out of his right breast pocket to turn it off. There wasn't much solar energy available to recharge the damned thing in this blizzard. And he didn't care to sit here eating worms while he waited for it to recharge.

He pulled the data pad out from under his furs and activated the display, expecting to see the 'Low Battery' indicator on the bottom of the screen. But the battery display showed a three-quarter charge. He had left it on, but the battery wasn't low.

Perhaps it was disbelief that kept him from figuring out the reason the scanner was beeping. But there it was, spelled out in plain English for him on the tiny screen. *A signal!* Jack stood abruptly, forgetting about the ferocious winds, nearly falling over as a result. He stared at the screen. It wasn't a comm-signal. And it wasn't a signal from the LRV's transponder, either. But it was on the same frequency that the transponders used. Jack double-checked the frequency range of the signal. It was the one, but there was no ID code in the signal.

It could be from the Daedalus in orbit. Jack dismissed the thought as he ran through the snow and wind. The direction of the signal was at nearly the exact same altitude as he was. If it was from the Daedalus, it would be coming from above. Besides, he may have lost track of time, but it still had to be months before the Daedalus would even reach the Tau Ceti system, let alone getting through weeks of braking burns.

It's gotta be from the LRV! Jack couldn't believe it. He had given up all hope of ever finding them. And now, there was a signal, straight ahead of him, and not more than a few kilometers away. Jack only wished that the signal would've come before he had eaten the worms.

Suddenly, Jack's energy was renewed, his mind sharp, his senses alive. But still, as he ran through the snow, trying not to stumble as the wind blasted him repeatedly, something was bothering him. *If it was coming from the LRV, why at this altitude? Surely, they wouldn't land on the ridge? That would be crazy, not to mention nearly impossible. Besides, there were valleys on either side of the ridge in which to land.*

Ahead of him, through the haze, Jack could see something shiny, something metallic. It was small, barely sticking out of a large snowdrift.

Jack slowed as he approached the metal object, dropping to his knees in the snow right in front of it. He carefully brushed away the snow until he could see what it was. *A transceiver!* It was obviously jerry-rigged, sitting on top of a small tripod connected to a solar cell and a battery. It was meant to be some type of signal repeater. Jack had never seen anything like it before. But he had to admit; it was a pretty clever little arrangement. The design had Frank's name all over it. And that brought a broad smile across Jack's face.

Frank's alive!

Suddenly, the repeater switched on, startling Jack and knocking him over backwards into the snow. Jack looked at

his watch. It had been one hour since he had first received the signal on his data pad. It must be set to repeat at the top of each hour, he realized.

Jack quickly looked at his data pad, spinning around in all directions. If this thing was a repeater, then it had to be repeating a signal sent from somewhere else, like the LRV. It only took a moment to find the direction. But there it was, coming from the ocean side of the ridge. It was obviously much weaker than the signal he was getting from the repeater behind him, but it was there. South by southwest, about twenty kilometers away and just over a kilometer below him.

There's gotta be a valley down there, Jack realized. He couldn't see it through all the snow blowing around him. But it had to be coming from the LRV, probably sitting a few hundred meters below.

Jack shoved his data pad into his pocket, then reached over and shut off the power on the repeater. He didn't need two signals confusing him. Somewhere down there was the tertiary landing site that he had been trying to get to for the last few months. Down there somewhere was the LRV and his friends. Down there, somewhere, was home.

* * *

Mission Log; Day 175; Chief Engineer reporting;

This is final entry. Doppler-comm is up and I think working. Have checked crew. Condition appears same. They should survive in stasis until help arrives. I am trying to get my body pH right to go into RMS to survive. Dictation is difficult to make this entry. My mind not focusing well. If I do not survive stasis, to my wife, who never wanted me to go, I must apologize. Maybe you were right. Know that I love you, my last thoughts of you. My children. Take care of your mother, grow up to be good people. Whole new world is yours. Yours to

decide. Treat it well. Respect it. Take nothing for granted. I love you all.

Frank rose from his seat at the data terminal with great difficulty and made his way across the med-lab to the far counter, where the RMS serum sat. Suddenly, he became weak and dizzy, forced to sit on the edge of the examination table. He looked at the large IV bags hanging on the pole at the head of the table, trying to determine if they were still providing his body with the chemicals it needed in order to achieve something close to normal body chemistry. The tube running from the IV bags to his arm was long enough to reach to the sides of the small lab. He tried to focus on the tubing, checking for any kinks that might impede the flow, but couldn't focus his eyes on the tiny plastic tube. *If I can just rest a bit*, he thought. *Then I should be well enough to go into stasis.*

* * *

Twenty kilometers hadn't seemed very far away at first. But Jack hadn't counted on the steep slopes leading down from the ridgeline to the valley floor below. What read as twenty kilometers turned out to be more like forty. He had only made it about halfway down the mountain before he was forced to find shelter for the night.

The next morning at first light, Jack set out again. He would reach the bottom within a few hours. And he knew that he could make it across the valley to the LRV with the remaining daylight. He could make good time across open ground, even with the wind and snow.

He was still hungry, his side aching as his stomach growled. But he couldn't stop now, not even to eat. Not when he was so close to home.

* * *

Frank's eyes opened, slowly at first. The light over his head was bright, too bright. It hurt his eyes. *Where am I? What happened?* Frank sat up slowly, his head spinning. He looked around, his eyes still squinting in the blinding light. Gradually, his eyes began to focus; his mind began to recognize his surroundings. *The med-lab*, he thought. *I'm in the med-lab*. It was slowly coming back to him. *I must've passed out*.

Frank turned his head to look at the bio-monitor at the head of the exam table. Most of his readings were just barely in the green. Not ideal, but they would have to do. He looked at the clock on the wall. Seventeen thirty hours. *How long have I been out?*

It didn't really matter at that point. Frank forced himself to stand, staggering over to the counter, where he fumbled around with the container of RMS serum. Despite his hand tremors, he managed to open it and draw his dose up into a syringe.

Suddenly, a faint beeping sound echoed down the hallway from outside the med-lab. *What is that sound?*

Frank looked around for several seconds before he realized that it was not coming from within the lab. He dropped the syringe full of RMS serum back on the counter, hobbling toward the door.

Frank still couldn't figure out what the strange sound was, or what it might mean. All he knew was that it warranted his attention. He was barely able to make his way up the few steps to the cockpit where the sound was coming from. On the display screen in front of him, the words 'Perimeter Alert' were flashing at him.

Perimeter alert?

Somehow, Frank managed to punch the right buttons, calling up the perimeter sensors display. Something had crossed the sensor line. Something alive. Something moving toward them. Something big. Frank punched a few more buttons, some of them correct, some not. But eventually, he

managed to get the results he was looking for. Whatever it was, it was close and it was getting closer.

Frank rose from his chair to look out the starboard window, finding that the storm had dissipated. He scanned the starboard side of the camp, fighting to adjust his eyes to the brightness of the afternoon sun outside. Everything was blurry, but...

There!

About one hundred meters out at the ship's three o'clock! Something moving. Something large, furry. Frank squinted, trying to force his eyes to focus. It had a long snout, and horns. Whatever it was, it was still headed right for the camp, moving very fast. *Some kind of animal?*

No, it's walking upright!

Something clicked in Frank's mind, a memory. Something about a creature, in the medical log. *A creature; it attacked Laura; the TCS virus. Maria had been convinced that the creature introduced the virus to the crew.*

Frank rose and exited the cockpit, nearly falling back down the steps to the airlock deck. The ship was still buttoned up tight, just as it had been before the last storm had hit. *Surely that would keep the creature out of the ship,* he thought. But Frank wasn't taking any chances, not now, not when they were so vulnerable.

Must... protect... ship!

He made his way down the gangway to the EVA deck below. He clumsily donned his jacket, taking a rifle out of the weapons locker, as he stumbled across the airlock deck toward the inner hatch. *Not this time, you fucker!* he thought as he activated the airlock's exit cycle and flipped off the safety on his weapon. *Not this time!*

Jack was in a dead run, flying like the wind toward the camp that he had spent so many months trying to find. *Had it really been months?* Jack wondered. He had always known the date, at least for the first part of his journey. But ever

since Will's death, he had lost all sense of time. *How long has it truly been?*

Jack struck the thought from his mind. It didn't really matter now. He was here, back where he belonged. And soon he would return to the bosom of his friends, his people, no longer alone in this vast alien wilderness.

The hatch on the LRV dropped open, and Frank stumbled down the ramp. Weak and disoriented, he managed to bring himself out from under the nose of the ship, exiting to starboard. He stumbled forward a few steps, peering out across the field at the approaching creature. *It's one of them, one of those disease-carrying bastards!* If it was the last thing he ever did, he would get his revenge.

Jack saw Frank step out from under the LRV and began waving his arms wildly over his head as he ran. "Frank!" he hollered with excitement. "Frank!"

Frank watched as the gruesome creature rapidly approached. He had never seen anything move that fast, even across open ground. The creature was now waving its arms over its head, growling some unintelligible, angry battle cry. *Is this creature seeking its revenge? Did they killed its mate, or its offspring?*

"Not this time, you ugly fucker," Frank mumbled as he adjusted his stance and raised his rifle to take aim. "Not this time."

Jack couldn't believe his eyes. *Is that a rifle?*

Frank squeezed the trigger.

Jack saw the flash and instinctively twisted his body sideways. The bullet whizzed past his torso and struck the ground behind him with a thump, throwing snow, soil, and grass up around the impact site.

Is he firing at me? Again, Jack couldn't believe what he was seeing, but the rifle flashed again. By now, the shock of what he was seeing had dulled his instincts and Jack failed to take evasive action. It was just dumb luck that the bullet struck the ground in front of him, spewing dirt and snow in his face as he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Damn it!" Frank knew his illness was making it difficult to hold the rifle steady to fire at the onrushing alien. He adjusted his stance again and steadied himself, determined not to miss again. "Hold still, you fucker."

Now there was no denying it, Frank was firing at him. *Is he mad?* Jack thought. *Doesn't he recognize me?* Jack tried again, waving his arms in the air and hollering. "Frank! Don't shoot! It's me! It's Jack!"

Frank watched as the creature stood there, again waving his arms about madly and growling at him in anger. Frank squeezed the trigger several more times.

Jack dove to his left, tucking and rolling as he hit the ground. The first round struck the ground a few meters behind him right where he had been standing, with the other two landing nearby. Jack scrambled on his hands and knees to a clump of nearby boulders for cover as he heard the repeated shots of Frank's rifle.

Frank watched through the rifle's scope as he squeezed off each successive round. He followed the creature, tracking from left to right as he fired, each round striking the dirt just behind his scrambling target.

Jack took cover behind the rocks as the last few rounds struck his cover, sending chips of rock flying. "Frank! Are you nuts?" he cried in desperation.

"Shit!" Frank swore. "You're a fast little fucker, aren't you?" Frank began to move toward the pile of boulders, slowly at first, then picking up speed as he gained confidence in his superiority over the creature. He could hear the creature howling from behind the rocks. Like a trapped animal, it was almost as if...

"Frank!" Jack cried again. "Please! Stop firing! It's me!"

...As if it were pleading for its life to be spared. It should have pleased Frank, but it did not. He *needed* to kill that thing.

Frank slowed as he approached the creature's hiding place. The creature was fast, and Frank wasn't about to be caught by surprise. He had seen plenty of documentaries as a boy in school back on the Daedalus. He knew that a trapped animal was supposed to be the most dangerous kind.

Jack remained crouched behind the rocks, fearing for his life. Thoughts raced through his head, clouding his instincts. Every fiber of his being was telling him to attack, to strike out at his attacker, to get the upper hand somehow. But this was Frank, his friend. Through his panting, he thought he could hear Frank's footsteps in the snow. *What the hell is wrong with him?*

Frank could hear the creature panting as he closed on his hiding place. He raised his rifle and took aim as he began to circle around the rocks. Only a few moments more, and he would have his revenge.

Suddenly, instinct took over. Jack spun around to look behind him to the right of his hiding place. There was Frank, rifle held high up to his shoulder and aiming right at him. Jack fell backwards, his hands held up over his face in terror. "Frank! No!"

With vengeance in his eyes, Frank tightened his grip on the rifle's trigger stock. His target cried out, making one last unintelligible plea for mercy.

"Frank! Please, no!" Jack begged.

"Say goodbye," Frank muttered calmly as he moved the rifle upward slightly, placing the targeting reticle of his rifle's scope squarely between the creature's eyes. Big gray eyes. Surreal eyes, with just a hint of blue in them. Trusting eyes, reminiscent of...something.

Jack moved his left hand in front of his face, palm outward, as if to block the projectile, and turned his face away in fear. Jack couldn't believe what was happening.

After all he had been through, his life was about to end, at the hands of his best friend.

Then something caught Frank's eye. A reflection of light, off something metallic, something on the creature's hand. Something gold, on his finger. His ring finger.

A wedding ring!

"What the..." Frank lowered his rifle, peering over the top of the scope to get a better look. *A wedding ring?*

Frank was suddenly very confused. How could this creature be wearing a wedding ring? That was a *human* ritual. Frank stepped closer, keeping the rifle pointed at the creature, ready to fire. Bravery or curiosity, Frank didn't know which it was, drew him toward the ring.

Frank reached out and grabbed the creature's left wrist firmly, clearly demonstrating who was in charge. He yanked the creature's left hand up closer to him, staring at the ring in disbelief.

Jack held his right hand higher in response, his palm also held outward, sure that this madman who once was his best friend was about to slit his throat in some delusional, schizophrenic rage.

Frank saw the creature's right hand come up, showing his palm. Frank let go of the rifle in shock, letting it drop to the snow covered ground, taking the creature's left hand with his right and grabbing the creature's right hand with his left. Frank stared at the scar across the creature's right palm. It looked exactly like the scar on Jack's hand, the very one Maria had stitched up a few days before they had crashed here! And then he realized it was *Jack's* wedding ring on the creature's left hand. It was *Jack's* eyes that he saw in this creature's blue-gray eyes.

"Jack?" Frank mumbled, barely able to comprehend what his mind was thinking. The creature groaned meekly, as if agreeing with him. Then he heard it. Not with his ears, but in his head. It was *Jack's* voice, and it was pleading with him...

Please don't kill me, Frank.

Frank stumbled back a step, dropping the creature's hand. No, not a creature. The realization hit him, and it knocked him backwards onto his ass. He heard it again...

Please! It's me! It's Jack!

"Jack?" Frank asked again, still only half believing it himself.

Yes! Oh my God, yes! Frank! It's me! It's Jack!

"What the...?" Frank asked, his confusion growing as he scrambled back to his feet, still retreating backward.

Frank, what's wrong? Jack asked as Frank continued to back away from him, dropping his rifle to the ground.

Frank's mind was spinning. He looked around him in a panic. Nothing made sense. He had to be hallucinating. *Where am I? What's going on?*

Jack slowly rose to his feet, noticing that something was terribly wrong with his friend. *Frank? Are you all right?*

"Aaah!" Frank screamed, his hands grabbing at his head, as if he were in pain. "There it is again!" Frank was sure he was hallucinating. But the creature was rising to his feet, and coming toward him. Frank realized his rifle was lying on the ground between him and the advancing creature. "No! Stay away from me!"

Frank?

Frank turned and began running back to the LRV in a blind panic, confusion filling in his head with each step until his head felt as if it were going to explode. Everything began to go dark. From the edges first, quickly shrinking in from his periphery, until all he could see was darkness.

Jack followed slowly out from behind the rocks, just in time to see his friend lying facedown in the snow, unmoving. A vision of Will's twisted, blood-stained body flashed through his mind. "Frank!" he cried as he ran toward him.

* * *

Jack carried Frank's unconscious body through the snow and back to the LRV. His friend's pulse was weak and irregular, and he knew that Frank's blood pressure had to be

dangerously low. He had to get him to the LRV where Maria could care for him.

Where is everybody? Surely they were watching from the LRV? Why haven't they shown themselves? A dozen horrifying scenarios ran through Jack's head. It was completely against mission protocols for Frank to be out alone. Especially when investigating an unexpected visitor. *And why was he shooting at me?*

Everything looked strangely quiet when Jack entered the camp around the LRV. Everything was in place, the cargo pods clustered along either side of the LRV, the various utility-huts in between them. But there was something else. The snow. Drifts of white powder lying against the doors and hatches, as if nobody had used them recently. Paths of frequent travel were covered with new fallen snow, like no one had walked them for days, perhaps weeks.

Maybe the weather has kept them inside, Jack thought as he approached the LRV. But there was no one looking out the windows. *Surely, they knew what Frank had been doing?* Jack was dumbfounded. *What kind of operation is Lynn running here?*

Jack crouched down low, struggling to keep Frank from falling off his shoulder, while he ducked under the nose of the ship to head up the boarding ramp. He looked up the ramp and found the inner hatch standing wide open. It was yet another breach of mission protocol.

Jack's boots clanked across the ramp as he ascended. It was an unusual feeling after all these months, to be walking on man-made surfaces again. Although it felt a little strange, it was a welcome feeling. Despite the confusion of the last few minutes, he couldn't help thinking, *I'm home.*

Jack stepped inside, pushing the hatch closed behind him with his foot and latching it with his free hand. "Hello!" There was no response. Jack pushed the "All-Call" button on the intercom next to the hatch. "Medical emergency on the EVA deck!" There was no answer. "Can anybody hear me?"

Christ! Is everyone sleeping or something? Jack slapped the panic button next to the intercom, knowing it would bring everyone running to see what was wrong. But nothing happened. No alarms, no red lights flashing. He slapped the button again. That's when he realized; *the ship's been powered down.*

Jack ascended the gangway to the upper level with ease, considering that he had Frank slung over his shoulder. He made his way carefully down the corridor and into the med-lab. There was still no sign of anyone. After dumping Frank onto the exam table, Jack stuck his head back out the med-lab hatch, looking aft toward the habitat section. "Hello! Can I get some help here?" Not a sound. No voices, no movement, only the gentle whirring of ventilation fans. The LRV seemed abandoned.

What is going on here? he asked himself as he returned to Frank's side, flipping on the bio-monitor at the head of the table.

Jack watched the sensor displays flicker to life. "What the hell? Everything is in the red! How the hell did you get this fucked up, Frank?" Jack immediately looked around for the drug-kit, finding it on the counter in the corner of the room. He grabbed it and got to work. If his friend was going to live, it would be up to him.

* * *

It had taken Jack nearly an hour to stabilize Frank's condition. His vital signs had been in the toilet, his body chemistry completely out of whack, and his hydration practically non-existent. Even starting an IV on him had been near impossible. But Frank was stable for now. At least stable enough for Jack to leave his side and take a look around. He had a lot of questions that needed answers.

Jack entered the wardroom. The compartment was in disarray, with one exception. All but one of the chairs at the wardroom table was pushed in tight against the table. As he made his way past the table, he looked into the galley.

There were wrappers strewn across the counter. Then he remembered his hunger.

Jack entered the galley and went to the cabinets, going straight to where the basic rations would be stored. He opened the door and found them, grabbing a protein bar and ripping off the wrapper, shoveling it into his mouth and practically swallowing it whole. He grabbed another, and then another, consuming them just as quickly. By the fourth or fifth bar, he realized something. *These things taste like shit!* He looked around for the customary dehydrated fruit, but found none. Then he noticed that there weren't a whole lot of protein bars left, either. *Strange*, he thought. *There should be a hell of a lot more food stores here, unless they have been on rations for some time now.*

Jack forced another few bars down, nearly gagging on their disgusting taste. *The worms tasted better than these things.* He poured himself a tall tumbler of water, drinking it down as he looked through the rest of the cabinets for something better to eat. *The water even tastes funny*, he thought. He knew it had to be safe to drink. The purification system on board the LRV was very efficient. But still, it had a funny taste to it-metallic and unnatural.

Jack set the half-empty tumbler down on the counter and stepped back into the wardroom, heading aft. He slowly entered the berthing section. It was dark and quiet. Each curtain, at the foot of all ten of the berths, was drawn shut. The exer-cycle and even the resistance gym apparatus were stored in their flight positions, secured neatly against the aft bulkhead in between the doors to the two bathrooms.

A terrible feeling came over him.

Jack slid open the curtain on the first berth to the right-his berth. Surprisingly, it was neatly made up, as if he had been living there all along. *At least they didn't forget about me.* He stepped over to the next berth in line, Laura's, and slid the curtain open as well. It was also empty, and tidied up. Frank's berth was next. It was empty, as expected, but

was in disarray, and the bedding was stained with sweat and blood.

Jack quickly moved to the next berth, whipping the curtain open. There was Maria, lying on her back, completely still. She was paler than the sheets she was lying on, her exotic, dark complexion pallid and washed away. And she wasn't moving, not even breathing!

Oh my God! Jack moved quickly to the other berths, nearly ripping the curtains off of each, only to find the same situation. Lynn, and then Tony, both lying there, unmoving, pale and without any signs of life.

Jack moved to the other side of the compartment, ripping open all the curtains. The rest of them were all there, except, of course, for Will, whom he had buried in the mountains weeks ago. *They're all, dead!*

Jack nearly stumbled backwards in a state of shock. *My crew! My friends!* Questions leapt in and out of his mind in a frenzy of conjecture, possible scenarios playing through his mind as if he were back in the virtual reality simulator on the Daedalus, training for this very mission.

Jack suddenly felt sick. Not physically ill, but emotionally, as if his very reason for existence had suddenly been ripped from his soul. He had to get out of the compartment.

He turned and fled back into the wardroom, looking frantically for answers, but found none. Something was wrong. Suddenly, he felt very confined, almost trapped, inside this artificial, man-made world. He had to get out, back into the open.

The outer hatch flung open, slamming hard against the bulkheads with a metallic *clang*. Jack stumbled down the ramp, tripping and falling to his knees at the bottom as he scrambled out from under the nose of the LRV and into the open snowdrifts.

A few meters later he stopped, resting on his hands and knees in the snow, pausing for a moment before he rolled over onto his back. He laid there in the snow for a few minutes, staring at the gray, cloudy sky as he tried to sort

things out in his head. *What happened? How did they die? Where was Laura? Was his own safety threatened? What should he do next? What could he do?*

Frank!

He was the only one still alive...but barely. He had to save Frank, at any cost. But he needed answers. He began running training scenarios through his mind again, finding that for some reason, he was able to think more clearly outside.

It has to be some kind of disease, he realized. It was the only explanation that fit. *But from where? The air? The water? The animals?* But he had been breathing the air for months, and was drinking the water. Hell, he had even been *eating* the animals...*and* the plants. More than one of them had nearly killed him, in fact.

But I'm not sick!

Jack regained his composure, standing back up and heading back inside the ship. He knew that if it had been an illness, some sort of virus, then there would be mention of it in the medical logs. But if he went back inside, he might be exposing *himself* to the disease as well.

It was a risk he was willing to take. His crew was dead, and his best friend was dying. He needed answers.

* * *

Jack sat staring at the data terminal in the med-lab. He knew that he would most likely find some of his answers in Maria's log entries. But he was having a difficult time reading it. He recognized the characters on the screen; the formed words seemed familiar to him. But he was having difficulty understanding them. It wasn't that they were medical terminologies, per se. Most of them were common words, words that he *should* know and understand. It was more like he was reading, or trying to read, another language, one that he had not used in years.

Jack continued to struggle with the log, slowly learning about TCS and the crew's violent contact with the ape-like

alien. When he reached the log entry with Laura's name in it, his breath caught in his throat. He struggled to remember the last time he had spoken with her, laughed with her. The image of her shooting down the transit tunnel, pretending to be a torpedo, suddenly entered his mind. It was like it had happened yesterday, and now she was gone, without hope of return.

Images of the others, their voices, their body language... The way that Mac had constantly taunted Sara. The way Adia had always kept to herself. The way Maria had mothered them all. Their loss was more than what he thought he could bear. His primary responsibility, above all else, had been to keep them safe... And he had failed, failed them all.

Jack leaned back in his chair in the med-lab, tears running down his face. "God, how did this happen?" he cried. He shook his head, cursing his friends' misfortune.

That's when he noticed the long red box on the counter. It had the letters 'RMS' on it. Another memory triggered.

Jack scanned ahead in the logs furiously, quickly learning the truth. *My friends are alive!*

The truth came just in time, as Jack realized that his mind and body resisted being at the terminal for more than an hour at a time. He felt an overwhelming sense of confinement while inside the LRV. *Funny*, he thought bitterly. *After trying for so long to get back to the safety of this ship, I can't even stand being inside it.*

As Jack sat outside watching the sunset, he realized that he would eventually have to put Frank into RMS as well. But his body chemistry was still wavering outside the safe parameters listed in Maria's medical protocols for RMS induction. *Another few hours*, Jack thought as he watched the sun dip down behind the mountains. *Maybe by tomorrow morning, Frank will be well enough to go into RMS. If the disease doesn't get to him first.*

* * *

Having forced himself to overcome his uneasiness at being inside the ship, Jack woke to the sound of movement coming from the exam table. Jack opened his eyes, finding himself nearly overcome with panic at the sight of the med-lab around him. *Christ! It wasn't a nightmare after all!* A moan came from his right. A human sound. *Frank!*

Jack jumped to his feet to stand at Frank's side. His vital signs had improved over the last few hours, and his body chemistry was nearly within RMS parameters. "Frank? Can you hear me? It's me, Jack! Wake up!" But Frank's eyes did not open. Jack looked at the monitor again, checking the readings that were still in the red. Frank's blood sugar levels were still dangerously low. And Jack had already given him the last of the intravenous glucose. Most of it had been given to the rest of the crew in preparation for their RMS induction.

Jack's mind raced. If he could only get some nutrition into Frank's system. He might be able to get his body chemistry into the green and safely induce RMS. "Hold on, Frank. I've got an idea," Jack announced as he turned to exit the lab. "I'll be right back."

Through the haze in his mind, Frank thought he heard something. A grumble, or a growl. Something unintelligible at best. He tried to open his eyes, but could not. He tried his other senses, but found them cloudy as well. All he knew was that he was lying flat. He tried to move his head, to lift it up and look around, but he only became dizzy, and darkness swept over his mind once again.

Jack found Mac's blender in the galley and quickly dumped the last of the protein bars into its tall, plastic container along with a little water. After plugging it into a power outlet, he turned it on for several seconds before stopping it to check on the contents. *Too chunky*, he thought. He turned the blender on again, this time letting it run even longer before inspecting the concoction again. *Damn it! Still too chunky!* Jack repeated the process, this time trying every setting on the machine. *This stuff will*

never work! Jack was frustrated. The protein bars would've been perfect. With their glucose levels, he could've had Frank's blood sugar well within normal ranges in no time at all. But the damn things were full of nuts grown on the Daedalus's agricultural decks, and getting them blended fine enough to go down a feeding tube was impossible using Mac's simple, worn-out little machine.

What else can I use? If there had been any dried fruit left, he could've used that after reconstituting it.

Jack left the galley, heading out of the ship, and making his way to the ag-hut. But when he got there, it was full of dead or dying plants, all suffering from weeks of obvious neglect and frigid temperatures. The hut's climate control system had been shut down when Frank put the LRV into power-down mode. *Damn it, all I need is something sweet!*

Jack remembered the little, pink, fleshy roots that Will would dig up to use when cooking the meat of some Cetian creature Jack had killed. It had been very sweet, and had worked well to combat the natural bitterness from the flesh of Cetian wildlife.

Jack went back outside and looked around. It hadn't snowed since early yesterday, and there were several barren patches of ground nearby.

Next to the rocks! Jack remembered. *Only at lower elevations, like here.*

Jack reached the first clearing within minutes, turning over every rock he could find. He found nothing, and quickly moved to the next small patch of exposed soil farther out from the camp. Still no roots.

It took Jack over half an hour to find it, in the tenth patch he searched. And it was blending nicely into a loose slurry in Mac's blender, needing only a little water as a base.

Within minutes, Jack had managed to insert a nasogastric tube through Frank's nose, through his esophagus, and down into his throat. It was a procedure he had never performed before, except in VR simulations during his training. After securing the feeding tube, he hung

the bag full of root slurry next to Frank's IV bag, connected it to the NG-tube, and opened the port to allow the pale, pink concoction to trickle down the tube into Frank's empty stomach.

Jack watched as the bag slowly emptied, wondering how long it had been since Frank had last eaten. Knowing that there was nothing more he could do besides wait, Jack returned to Maria's medical logs, in search of more information.

* * *

The LRV was a lonely place without the sounds of people going about their daily routines. Jack sat in the wardroom, eating some of the Cetian root he had collected earlier. He tried to imagine the sounds of the crew. Maria and Laura watching old movies. Mac and Tony working out on the gym with Sara tossing wise-cracks at them as she rode on the exer-cycle. And finally Frank teasing Lynn, trying to get a rise out of her. But all he could hear was the whirring of the ventilation fans.

It was fairly dark outside, and with only minimal power set throughout the ship, the inside seemed empty and mysterious. Jack had not felt so alone since Will had died. Even then, the thought that he might be just one more mountain away from his crew had given him some comfort. At least it was hope of some sort. But now, after all he had been through, he was still alone in this cold, metal box.

Jack pushed the claustrophobia to the back of his mind. It was as if some primal instinct was telling him that it was not safe to be closed up from all sides with only one exit through which to escape danger. But he knew, logically, that he was as safe here as anywhere on the planet. His only threat now was the virus.

After finishing his dinner of roots, Jack checked on Frank's condition. Other than his glucose levels being slightly higher, there had been no significant change. But his vital signs and body chemistry seemed to be holding for

now, and Jack felt confident that Frank would make it through the night. With any luck, he might even be a little better by morning.

Jack set the alarms on Frank's bio-monitors to alert him of any negative changes, before leaving the med-lab for the night. It had been a long and difficult day, and now that his friend was somewhat stable, he was looking forward to some rest.

Jack climbed into his berth for the first time since setting foot on this world. It was comfortable, yet foreign. He reached inside his breast pocket and pulled out a photograph of his family. It was worn, dirty, and crinkled from months of riding in his pocket as he had struggled to make his way across the planet. It had become a ritual for him, each night, to take it out and look at their faces before going to sleep. For weeks after Will's death, it was all he had to remind himself of why he was here, and why he was trying so hard to survive and rejoin them.

He carefully placed the edge of the picture in the crack between the overhead and side bulkheads, where it could now rest comfortably. Although he was still alone, at least he was home.

* * *

"Captain? You got a minute?"

The captain turned from his desk to see who was hailing him from the door of his ready room. "Annie?" he responded, recognizing the woman at his door, but surprised to see her there. Only flight personnel occupied these decks. And although her position as the lead radio astronomer and sensors officer on the Daedalus did give her access to the flight deck, he couldn't remember the last time he had seen her around this area. "What brings you down here?" he asked as he rose from his seat to greet her.

"Our instruments picked up something strange about an hour ago," she explained as she entered the room.

"Have a seat," he offered.

"Thank you."

"Please continue,"

"Well, we were doing a detailed scan of the system, looking for rogue bodies that might cause a problem on our way into the Tau Ceti system."

"Good idea," the captain admitted.

"The funny thing is, we were getting back more signals than we were sending out."

"I don't follow."

She handed him her data pad. "You can see it, here and here. At first, we thought maybe part of the sensor pulse was bouncing off of something not entirely solid, sending back an early return while the rest of the pulse energy continued on. But then we found something else."

"What?" he asked, becoming more intrigued.

"Something odd about the pulse return. It wasn't a return at all, but rather an original pulse."

"It can't be, it's far too weak."

"That's why we originally thought it was a return. But it's not, the signatures don't match."

"Signatures?"

"Every sensor pulse has a signature coded into it..."

"So that we can calculate for the effects of relativity," the captain remembered.

"Exactly," Annie nodded.

"But that would mean..."

"That it was coming from another sensor array," she finished for him.

The captain leaned back in his chair, thinking. "The Icarus?"

"We can't be sure, sir. We haven't heard from the Icarus in over six months. And the signal is too weak and spread out. But we're sure it came from within the Tau Ceti system."

"Can you identify the set signature in the pulse?"

"No sir. It's been replaced."

"Replaced? By what?"

"A message, sir."

"A message?"

"Yes sir, from the Icarus's crew." In the silence, she reached over and advanced the data pad's display to the next page.

The captain read the message on the display, dumfounded. "Holy cripes," he commented as his finger punched the intercom button. "XO to the ready room, ASAP!"

* * *

Frank's eyes opened slowly. He looked around, trying to see where he was. *A room?* His head hurt, he was nauseous, and he could barely lift his arms. He blinked several times to try to clear his vision. *I'm in the med-lab*, he realized. *But how?* There was a tube in his nose, and an IV in his arm. *What's going on?*

Frank sat up slowly, fighting off waves of nausea. The room was dark, except for a light on at the workstation in the corner.

Frank tugged at the tube in his nose, finding it taped in place. He removed the tape, then yanked the tube out in one swift motion, nearly vomiting as it came out. Next, he pulled the IV line out of his arm, holding his hand over the IV site while he waited for it to stop bleeding. After a few minutes, the bleeding stopped, and the dizziness was tolerable.

He slid off the edge of the exam table, clinging onto the sides until his balance grew steadier. Slowly, he moved toward the hatch, but found he had forgotten about the sensor leads attached to his chest, wrist, and temples. Grabbing hold of the bundle of wires, he yanked hard, pulling off various sensor pads from his body.

There was no doubt in his mind, he was still very sick. And disconnecting himself from the various medical devices was probably a bad idea. But he needed answers. How did he get there? Who had hooked him up and cared for him? As

far as he knew, he was the only one left. In his confusion, he failed to notice the beeping alarms of the bio-monitor as he left the med-lab.

Jack jerked awake to the cacophony of alarms from the med-lab. *Frank!* He slid out of his berth, landing on his bare feet on the cold, metal deck, turning to his left, and heading forward through the wardroom. But then, just as suddenly as he had awakened, he was stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of Frank, standing on the opposite side of the wardroom by the forward hatch to the large compartment. He was frozen still, staring at him, blood dripping from his left arm where he had yanked out his IV. “Frank!”

Frank was paralyzed with fear and uncertainty. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. There, on the opposite side of the wardroom, was one of those creatures! It was tall, lean, and muscular, covered with short, blue-gray hair. Its head was covered with the same hair, only much longer, blending in a shaggy fashion with the hair from the creature’s snout-like face. And it was wearing something, some kind of clothing that Frank didn’t recognize. It was similar to the clothing they usually wore, only old and tattered, and covered with stains. The creature was growling something at him, like it was trying to communicate in some strange, unintelligible alien language.

“What the.....” Frank began. Then he noticed the stains on the tattered clothing the creature was wearing. They were blood stains. The creature growled at him again.

“Frank!” Jack called.

Suddenly, Frank’s instincts kicked in, as he turned and headed quickly forward. *That fucker has somehow gotten into the ship and is killing the others!* he thought as he headed forward.

“Frank! Wait!” Jack called after him. But Frank wasn’t hearing him as he disappeared down the corridor.

I've got to get to the weapons locker! Frank thought as he stumbled down the corridor past the med-lab.

Frank nearly fell through the hatchway between the habitat section and the airlock deck, stumbling down the gangway to the EVA deck below. Struggling to regain his balance, Frank pulled the weapons locker open and reached inside. But it was too late.

Jack grabbed Frank's shoulder, pulling him backwards. He had no idea what was wrong with his friend or why he was trying to get to the weapons, but Jack wasn't about to relive that frightening moment over again.

Jack had Frank pinned against the lockers, holding him firm as he yelled. "Frank! What the hell's wrong with you?"

Frank's hands came up firmly against Jack's face, trying desperately to push him away.

Please, Frank, please.

Frank heard something in his head, a voice, begging him to stop. A familiar voice. Frank continued to push hard against the creature's face, his right hand sliding up against the creature's upper jaw, holding it open, afraid it was going to try to eat him as well.

Jack tried to tell him to calm down, but couldn't speak with his jaw pried open by Frank's right hand. *Snap out of it,* he thought. *It's me!*

Frank heard the familiar voice in his head again. He tried to shut the voice out, afraid he was losing his mind.

It's Jack! he thought as he raised his left hand from Frank's shoulder and pushed his face to the left.

Frank heard the voice come again, despite his best efforts to block it out. *Please, stop it,* the voice continued. *Don't you remember? It's me! It's Jack!*

There was something else, something metallic, on the creature's finger, pushing against his eyebrow. It was a ring. Suddenly, a memory flashed through Frank's mind. A ring, a scar, a pair of familiar eyes, and a voice. *Jack's voice.*

Frank knew he was going to lose the struggle. "Please don't hurt me," he begged as his strength faded.

I won't hurt you, Frank, Jack thought as he began to ease his hold on Frank, feeling Frank's body giving up the struggle.

Suddenly, the creature released him, letting him fall to the floor, rolling clumsily to the side near the gangway. Frank watched in amazement as the creature—or Jack, he hadn't decided yet—stepped back, leaning against the port bulkhead. Then he realized whose voice he had been hearing in his head. It was Jack's voice, but it was coming from... All the pieces began to fall into place. He remembered confronting the creature out in the snow. He remembered the wedding ring on the alien's finger. He remembered the scar on his right palm. And he remembered Jack's voice in his head, confused and scared as he held the rifle to its head.

Frank was confused. Nothing was making sense. *Could this thing really be Jack?*

What the hell, Jack's voice said inside Frank's head. *Go ahead and kill me, if that's what you want.*

"Jack?" Frank asked tentatively. "Is it really you? Or am I having some fucked up, disease-induced hallucination?"

"Finally," Jack answered.

All Frank heard was another unintelligible grunt coming from the Jack's mouth. "Can you speak?"

"Of course I can speak, you dumbass."

Again, Frank heard only a series of grunt and growls from Jack.

"I can't understand what you're saying, Jack. Is it really you?"

Jesus, he can't hear now, either? Jack thought.

"I can hear just fine," Frank retorted.

Jack looked at him, surprised. "I didn't say anything."

"Stop growling at me, Jack. I can't understand you when you do that."

What the hell is wrong with you? Jack thought.

"What the hell's wrong with me?" Frank answered Jack's voice in his head. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

Jack looked puzzled for a moment. *Can you hear what I'm thinking?* he thought.

Frank realized for the first time that he was hearing Jack's voice just as if Jack were speaking to him. Only Jack's mouth wasn't moving. "Yeah, I guess so. What the hell is going on? What happened to you?"

This is weird, Jack admitted in his head. *We got out in the emergency escape pod as the Icarus was breaking up. We crashed a few hundred kilometers east of here,* he explained to Frank.

"No, I mean what happened to *you*?" he inquired. "Look at yourself."

Well, I know I probably look a bit shaggy, but I have been roughing it for a few months, you know.

"Shaggy? Look at yourself, Jack. You're not even... *human!*"

Well, thanks a lot. You don't look so hot yourself, pal.

"Jack, do you even know what's happened to you?"

What? Jack thought. *What are you talking about, Frank?*

"Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

I think we'd better get you back to the med-lab...

"Jack! You've changed. I don't know how or why, but you've changed into something else. Something like, well, one of those creatures. Like the one that attacked Laura."

"What?" Jack growled aloud. He was becoming confused again. But then it started making sense. The change in his hair color, the extra hair growth on his extremities and torso, his newfound athletic abilities, and this sudden ability to communicate with Frank, *telepathically!*

Jack turned and ran aft, out of the airlock deck, and down the corridor past the med-lab.

Jack burst into the port bathroom at the aft end of the LRV's habitat section, stopping just short of the mirror above the sink. Slowly, he stepped to his right, moving in front of the mirror to see himself, somehow knowing that he wouldn't like what he saw.

It wasn't his image in the mirror staring back at him. It was someone else, *something* else. He reached up and touched his face. His nose and jaw had become longer, almost snout-like. His lips had lost their pink hue and become tough and brown in color. His face, his entire face, was covered with a fine, blue-gray hair that was short around his eyes and forehead, becoming longer around his cheeks and jowls. The hair on his head, also blue-gray, was long and shaggy. The pupils in his eyes had become elongated. He opened his mouth and looked at his teeth. His incisors were longer, like fangs. His body, also covered with the same fine, blue-gray hair, had stretched, lean and muscular, his proportions more simian than human.

Jack stood there for the longest time, unable to speak. He couldn't believe what he was seeing in the mirror, yet he felt he had subconsciously known he had been changing for some time now. Frank's reflection moved in behind his own, as Frank stepped in behind him. *Is it true?* Jack asked telepathically. *Is this really what I look like?*

"I'm afraid it is, Jack."

How did this, I mean, how could this happen?

"You're asking me? I'm just an engineer."

Jesus, Frank, Jack thought softly. *What am I gonna do?*

"Well, look at the bright side," Frank joked as he too struggled to understand what was going on. "At least now you don't have to worry about that bald spot you were getting?"

Jack didn't react at first, still overwhelmed by the realization of what he had become. Finally, a strange twist came over his alien looking mouth, which Frank could only interpret as a smile. *Very funny.*

"Hey, I'm just glad you're alive, pal."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"So it was you?" Frank realized as he sat down at the wardroom table. "*You* brought me back here and fixed me up?"

Yes, it was me. You collapsed out there in the snow. I carried you back here and brought you into the med-lab. Jack was getting better at communicating with Frank telepathically.

"Last thing I remember was taking shots at you." Frank looked embarrassed. "Sorry about that, by the way."

Don't worry about it, Jack assured him. The condition you were in, I'm surprised you were even able to carry a weapon, let alone fire it.

"If I remember correctly," Frank said, suddenly defensive. "I had you cornered."

Yeah, until you freaked out and ran off, Jack retorted.

"You would too if you saw an alien mug like yours!" Frank suddenly realized that Jack might have been offended by the remark. "Sorry." Frank leaned back in his chair at the wardroom table. "So, where's Will?" Frank wondered. "Does he look like you as well?"

Will didn't make it, Jack replied without emotion.

"What?" Frank was obviously shocked.

About a month ago, I think. I sort of lost track of time.

"What happened?"

He fell into a crevice. Landed on some rocks. Busted him up pretty good. Jack looked at Frank, noting the sorrow on his face. *I'm pretty sure he died instantly.*

"Oh, my God." Frank thought for a moment, taking in what he had just heard.

Jack sat silently, staring off at nothing. Frank noticed his friend's pain. "So, how did you fix me up, anyhow?" he asked, trying to change the subject for Jack's sake.

Just basic stuff, really, he answered, still staring off into space.

"No," Frank continued, "I mean, how did you *cure* me?"

Cure you? Jack was puzzled, but it was enough to distract him from his moment of mourning. *All I did was get your vitals and your body chemistry back to something resembling normal.*

"Well, you did more than that. I feel better than I have in days," Frank said as he rose from his seat and headed forward.

What? Jack rose to follow Frank. *What are you talking about?*

Frank led Jack into the med-lab and called up the logs for the past twelve hours on the bio-monitor. "Look," Frank explained. "My vitals and chemistry get better, that's true. But here, my kidney and liver functions improved, my white cell count is back up, VQ has improved. The disease is probably still there, but its progression has changed." Frank turned to look at his friend. "Jack, I may be in remission."

Jack was shocked. *When did you become a doctor?*

"I've had a lot of time on my hands, recently. I've been doing a lot of reading. Hell," he bragged, "I even learned how to use the genetic bio-scanner."

Really?

"Well, I'm not really sure what I'm looking at half the time, but I do know how to work it."

Did you learn anything about the disease?

"I did find some abnormalities in the DNA strands of the samples Maria collected on everyone."

Like what?

"Well, there's something attached to them. Something that wasn't in the pre-infection samples from our routine physicals."

What does that mean?

"I have no idea. But I know it's there."

Did Maria know about it?

"I don't think so. From what I read in her logs, she appeared to be too busy trying to care for the crew. I don't think she had much time to work on a cure."

Too bad it got Laura first. If it works at the genetic level, she would have been the one to figure it out.

"True," Frank admitted. "So, how *did* you cure me?"

Like I said, just routine stuff. Cardiac meds, pH buffers, dextrose, and fluids. You were considerably dehydrated.

"That can't be it," Frank argued. "That's the same stuff Maria tried on everyone else." Frank looked at the nearly-empty feeding bag hanging from the IV pole next to the exam table. "What's that?" he asked, pointing at it.

Just some pureed sweet root. I ran out of dextrose and I needed to get your blood sugar up. I whipped it up in Mac's blender.

"Sweet root? Where'd you find it?"

Those tall, green stalks that grow along the rocks. The ones with the yellow tips. Will used to use them to cook the bitterness out of the meat of whatever we could kill to eat.

"Maybe that's what did the trick. Something in the sweet root," Frank hypothesized.

Don't you think that's a reach, Frank?

Frank's mind was spinning, working wildly to put everything together. "Wait a minute. A week or so ago, I got tired of eating nothing but protein bars."

I don't blame you, Jack agreed, remembering their foul taste.

"So I went out and started hunting small game again, just for some variety."

Again? Jack wondered. Mission protocols required that they grow and consume only the Terran plants they had brought with them. Indigenous consumables were to be used only as a last resort.

"My ATC broke down while I was away on a detail. It took me some time to get back, and I ran out of food along the

way. So I hunted to survive.”

Detail, huh? Jack also knew that protocols forbid anyone from traveling away from camp alone. But that explained the repeater on the ridge, a detail he was sure Lynn wouldn’t have approved.

“After I stopped eating only protein bars and started to eat wild game instead, I started feeling a little better.”

Then why did you stop?

“It got colder. I couldn’t function outside long enough to track and kill anything,” Frank explained. “Besides, I didn’t realize that it was the meat that was making me feel better.”

But you weren’t eating sweet roots, Jack pointed out.

“No, I wasn’t. But maybe the animals I ate had eaten some of that root.”

I think you’re still a little out of it, Jack thought doubtfully.

“Maybe,” Frank answered. “But it’s worth investigating.”

Jack was a little shocked. He hadn’t really meant for Frank to hear his last thought. *This telepathy is going to take some getting used to.*

“Tell me about it,” Frank agreed. “It’s a little strange having a one-sided conversation like this. I mean, I’m doing all the speaking. And it’s weird, hearing your voice in my head instead of through my ears. Anyway, do you have any more of that sweet root lying around?”

In the galley, five or six more bulbs.

“Well, let’s chow down on the stuff and see what happens to me.”

I don’t know, Frank. It sounds like a long shot.

“Yeah, but at least it’s a shot. Unless you have a better idea.”

Jack had to admit that even though it seemed an awfully convenient coincidence, they had little to lose at this point. And while Jack had extensive medical training, it was only in emergency medicine, which involved very little pathology. What Frank was hypothesizing did make sense, even if it was a stretch. And it seemed that he had been doing quite a

lot of self-teaching as of late. In fact, Frank appeared to have developed a better understanding of disease pathology than Jack ever had. Frank had a sharp mind, which had saved his butt on more than one occasion.

Frank wasn't waiting for permission, and was already on his way out of the med-lab and heading for the galley.

* * *

Despite the possible promise it might have held, the sweet root was not very palatable when eaten raw. It was soft and easily chewed, but sickeningly sweet with a slight garlic taste to it. Nevertheless, they ate all of it, with Frank consuming the majority of the remaining roots. Jack telepathically told Frank about his and Will's journey across the plains and mountains, and Frank told him of their own adventures and how the mission had been going since they were separated.

Once the roots were gone, Frank agreed to lie down and rest while Jack went back out to gather more. At Frank's request, Jack agreed to hunt game to accompany the sweet root and make it a little easier to eat. They would again check Frank's body chemistry tomorrow, after giving the roots some time to get into his system and do whatever it was they might do for him.

Tracking game was a test in patience, but it was one in which Jack had become quite adept. It gave him time to think, as he waited for his prey to reveal itself to him. Without any distractions, he couldn't help but dwell on the obvious. *What have I become? And what will become of me? Is there a way to reverse this strange metamorphosis? Or will I change even more?*

Jack thought of his wife and children. *How would they react if they see me this way? How would the colonists react? Would the same thing happen to them if they came to live on this world?*

Jack struggled to force the thoughts from his head, though it was difficult. He had to concentrate on the task at

hand. First, as always, was survival. And he had to help Frank survive and recover until help arrived.

That was another question altogether. *Would* help arrive? Jack tried to put himself in the Eden council members' positions. The Daedalus was nearing the Tau Ceti system, and soon they would have to decide which world to colonize. Once the Daedalus was committed to orbit, there was no going back.

Jack felt confident that he could survive, for years if necessary. Now that he understood the changes that had been taking place within him, he realized he was becoming better suited to survive on this world. His senses had sharpened. Vision, smell, hearing—all had improved. But some of his cognitive functions were slipping. He had not told Frank about his increasing difficulty to read written words. Frank had enough to deal with right now.

Months ago, Jack had felt like a stranger on this alien world. But now, he was beginning to feel at home. Out here, in the open wilderness, things felt right. Back in the LRV, he only felt trapped. He had learned to control the feeling, keeping it from overpowering him so he could function within the LRV itself. But it still felt foreign to him. The question was if it would it ever feel like home again?

* * *

Ray watched impatiently as the six council members filed into the briefing room and took their seats at the conference table. Their last major decision had been to agree to the demands of the separatists to be left behind in the Luyten system with the minimum equipment to survive and build their own civilization. It had been a difficult decision to make, one that Ray had not envied, as it left the Daedalus with insufficient resources and crew. But the decision had been forced at gunpoint, leaving the council with no alternatives. This decision, however, was different. This time, the council *had* several alternatives, each of them with different, yet equal, risks.

Ray did not have any of the expertise or the extensive education of the other specialists in attendance. However, he had the most command experience, having succeeded his late wife as the Daedalus's commander. He had held the position for over twenty years before handing it over to Captain Ishkin's father. More importantly, being one of the last three surviving members of the original crew, he commanded the respect of the entire population. In nearly every situation they had faced over the last sixty years, Old Man Wilkins, now approaching one hundred and eight years of age, had been there.

"Due to the urgency of the situation, we have agreed to dispense with the usual formalities," the chief council member announced from his position at the center of the table. "I'm assuming that everyone in this room has read Captain Ishkin's report, and the report from the sensor officer?" His question was met with nods of agreement. "Very well then. The question we now face is what to do about the message."

Ray had never been one for formalities, choosing not to stand as he spoke. He was weak, and conserved his strength whenever possible. "We go and rescue them, that's what we do!" His statement was met with enthusiasm, but not from the council members.

The chief council member frowned at Ray's comment. The old man was a nuisance to him. "I agree with your sentiment, Mister Wilkins. But we have to consider the safety of the entire population."

"They went out there to ensure *our* safety," Captain Ishkin added.

"That *is* my point," the chief council member continued. "That is why they sent the message, after all. To ward us off."

"Bull!" Ray grumbled.

"Did you have something to add, Mister Wilkins?"

"They were asking for help," Ray spoke up.

"The message was quite specific, Mister Wilkins," the Chief council member reminded him. "LRV to Daedalus, danger, extreme biohazard, crew infected, approach with extreme caution."

The room was silent for a moment, as the gravity of the message sank in. Of course, it didn't stop Ray from speaking his mind.

"So you're saying we're *not* going to rescue them?"

"No, sir. We're simply suggesting that we consider the possibility that mounting an immediate rescue might not be the safest course of action."

"Safest course of action be damned!" Ray objected. "Those are *our people* out there!"

"Relax, Ray," Captain Ishkin urged. "We have to think this through, first. We can't go changing course half-cocked. You know that."

Ray did know that. But that didn't mean he had to like it.

"The first question we have to ask ourselves is *can* they be rescued. I don't mean just *from* the planet. I would like to know if we can do anything *for* them once we *rescue* them. Doctor Barilla?"

The chief medical officer cleared his throat, standing slowly to speak. He too was getting along in years, and had retired himself from hands-on patient care years ago, leaving that work to the steadier hands of the two younger physicians. "There are a lot of *ifs* involved here. *If* we can find the source of the infection, and *if* the virus reacts to any of our current medications or chemistries..."

"Can you find a cure?" the chief council member asked bluntly.

"My team has no practical experience in exobiology. We have only theories based on assumptions. If the same rules that apply to Terran biology also apply to Cetian biology, then yes, if given time, we should be able to find a cure."

"Are you sure?" the chief council member asked.

"You know very well, sir, that one can never be certain in such matters." Doctor Barilla turned to look directly at Ray,

"I'm sorry, Ray."

"Can we at least protect ourselves against infection during the rescue?" Captain Ishkin asked.

"Yes," Doctor Barilla replied more confidently. "Our bio-suits and quarantine facilities are more than adequate."

"Captain Ishkin," the chief council member inquired, "what is our flight time to Tau Ceti Five?"

"At our present speed, about three months. But we will have to continue decelerating with braking burns. As you all remember, we decided to execute our terminal aero-braking maneuver at a reduced approach speed, in light of what happened to the Icarus on approach to Tau Ceti Five."

"Doctor Barilla, can they survive that long?"

"No telling. Not without knowledge of their current medical condition. And the fact that the message was *not* sent by Doctor Gonzales leads me to believe that the situation is dire."

"What about RMS?" another council member asked.

Ray's mouth dropped open. He was not aware that the crew had been supplied with the RMS serum, and had been under the impression that the risks were never successfully mitigated.

"There was no mention of its use in the message," the chief council member reminded them.

"If the disease is terminal, and Doctor Gonzales was unable to find a cure with her limited resources, then it would be reasonable to assume they invoked the RMS protocol."

"Jesus Christ!" Ray blurted out. "I can't believe you gave them that shit!"

"Please, Mister Wilkins!"

"If they did put themselves into RMS," Doctor Barilla continued, "then they would have a much better chance at surviving long enough for us to rescue them."

"I see," the chief council member remarked. "Let us assume the best case scenario for a moment. Captain, I

assume that your people have worked out some sort of a rescue plan?"

"We have been working on it, yes."

"Please elaborate," the chief council member instructed calmly.

"Well, we thought about sending a shuttle out ahead of us. But they have a rather limited fuel capacity. Even if we were to load them down with all the fuel they could carry, they would barely have enough to get there and achieve orbit, let alone land, achieve orbit again, and then break orbit to rendezvous. We also considered slowing the Daedalus down to a crawl so that we could pass the planet slowly. That would give a rescue shuttle the time and fuel it would need to complete the mission, but with no margin of error." Captain Ishkin took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before continuing. "We also looked at placing the Daedalus into orbit around Tau Ceti, in between the orbits of Tau Ceti Five and Six, and then sending the rescue shuttle. However, that would strand us in that orbit, making colonization a slow, painstaking process, due to the increased fuel requirements and transit times between the ship and the target world. It would, however, leave us in a position to colonize either world, thereby increasing our chances of success."

"Doesn't that put the general population at greater risk?" the chief council member asked.

"Yes, sir, it does," Captain Ishkin admitted. "I'm afraid that the only *sure* way to rescue them is to put the Daedalus into orbit around Tau Ceti Five."

"Which would leave us stranded as well," one of the council members observed.

"Stranded around the very planet that carries the source of the infection," the chief council member added. "Hardly a safe place to be."

"How the hell can it reach us while in orbit?" Ray argued, finding the chief council member's last remark preposterous.

"Of course it can't, Mister Wilkins," the chief council member answered, annoyed by Ray's sarcasm. "That's not the point."

Here it comes, Ray thought.

"Our ultimate goal is to deliver the population safely to a *hospitable* planet, and to set up a colony of human existence. Not to drop them on a dangerous, disease-ridden world."

"With all due respect, sir," Doctor Barilla interrupted, "calling Tau Ceti Five a disease-ridden world is quite an exaggeration. It could be something as simple as a cold or flu."

"Or it could be a plague that might destroy us all," the chief council member pointed out. "Are you willing to take that risk?"

"Hell yes!" Ray said as he stood in defiance.

"Well, I'm not, Mister Wilkins! And you shouldn't be, either!"

Ray had nothing to counter with. He knew the chief council member was right. It was too big a risk to take with the entire population.

"We understand your passion, Mister Wilkins, and we don't disagree with it. But we have to consider the safety of everyone aboard, as well as the lives of those brave men and women stranded on Tau Ceti Five."

The room fell silent as those in attendance accepted the harsh reality of being left with no other choice but to condemn their fellow crewmates.

"The council will now recess while we consider the situation and the information that you have all brought forth. We thank you all for your participation. We will reconvene again in one hour to announce our decision."

Ray watched as the council members rose and filed out of the room to confer in private. He already knew what their answer would be.

* * *

How are you feeling? Jack asked telepathically.

"Better, actually." Frank sat down at the wardroom table.
"What's for breakfast?"

I think we should check your chemistries first.

"Aw, come on, Jack. I'm starving."

Tough, Jack responded as he headed for the med-lab.
Let's get started.

Jack led Frank into the med-lab, hooking him up to the various bio-monitors as Frank lied down on the exam table.

"Are you even going to know what you're looking at?"

Sort of. Although most of your chems were within normal ranges yesterday, many of them were still slightly out of whack. We'll load both sets of values into the medical diagnostics computer after we finish the scan. It should show us the differences.

"And that will tell us what?"

Jack thought about it for a moment. *If you're going to die.*

"That's what I thought," Frank said, reading Jack's thoughts.

Will you stop that? Jack insisted. It was quite annoying, having someone hear his every thought.

"Sorry, but you thought it."

I've got to work on this telepathy thing, Jack thought as he started the scan.

"How do you mean?"

I've got to learn the difference between thinking and sending my thoughts.

"Good luck with that."

* * *

"It is the consensus of the council that attempting a rescue of the Icarus crew at this time would present too great a risk to the Daedalus and her population. However, if in the future, information becomes available that would indicate otherwise, the council will reconsider its decision."

Although Ray had been expecting it, his spirits dropped. "We request that the astro-sciences section gather as much data as possible on the fourth and sixth planets in the Tau Ceti system, and submit a colonization recommendation based on those findings, by a deadline to be determined by Captain Ishkin after consultation with the ship's navigator. We also authorize the use of up to two inter-system probes for the collection of such data. At this time, we wish to express our concern for the safety of the Icarus crew and our hope for their survival. However, her crew knew of the risks involved before embarking on their mission. And they knew that they might be left to fend for themselves if a situation such as this arose. Unfortunately, we have no choice but to put the safety of the Daedalus and her population, and the success of the mission itself, ahead of our personal desires." The chief council member looked at the faces of the attendees, seeing the disappointment in their eyes, as well as the understanding that there was no other choice.

The look in Ray's eyes was somewhat puzzling, however. Not of rage, not of acceptance, not even of denial. The expected reaction was missing, and that worried the chief council member.

The audience rose without comment or discussion, quietly making their way out of the room to return to their respective duties. Except for Ray, who had his own agenda.

Ray caught Captain Ishkin as he came out of the compartment, pulling him aside for a private chat.

"I'm sorry, Ray," Captain Ishkin apologized. "I know how close you are to Jack."

"I have a question for you," Ray said, ignoring Captain Ishkin's sympathies for the moment. "How long until we're in two-way communications range of Tau Ceti Five?"

"Two weeks, maybe? Assuming they can receive."

"And how long until we reach the point, after which Tau Ceti Five will no longer be reachable?"

"I'm not really sure. I'd have to consult with my navigator, first."

"Ballpark?"

Captain Ishkin smiled at another one of Ray's old Terran euphemisms. "About the same, I guess."

"I assume that your communications officer has been searching for more signals from them," Ray said.

"Since the moment the Icarus broke up. In fact, they voluntarily started doubling up at the comm-station since we received the latest message."

Ray smiled. "Good man."

* * *

Frank eagerly devoured the meal Jack had prepared. "You weren't kidding, were you? That sweet root really does make the meat taste better."

Jack sat down to join him, having just returned from the med-lab with the results from the bio-scan.

"Since when did you learn how to cook?"

From Will. He was pretty good at making a meal out of whatever we could find along the way. Jack sat down and took a bite of his own portion as he began reading the reports.

"So, how am I doing?" Frank asked.

Well, your chems are definitely improving. In fact, most of them are back to normal. But there are some curious anomalies.

"Like what?"

Some unusual enzyme levels, to start with. A lot of free proteins floating around that shouldn't be, if I remember my human physiology correctly. And there are even a few chemical traces that shouldn't be in your blood at all.

"Huh?"

They're all naturally occurring chemicals in the human body. They just shouldn't be noticeable in your blood work. They should be bonded permanently to other structures within your body, not floating around in trace quantities.

"Is it something I should be concerned about?"

Not really, I think. At least not overly concerned. But it is curious.

"But I *am* getting better, *right*? I mean, I *feel* better."

Yes, you are definitely getting better. Liver function is almost back to normal, urinary output is up, fluid and electrolytes are nearly normal. Hell, even your pH is back to normal. A few days ago, I could barely keep it above seven point two.

"Then I *am* getting better," Frank concluded through a mouthful of meat.

Yes, you are, especially your appetite.

"Great! Then let's give that slurry to the rest of the crew."

Whoa, hold on, Frank. It's way too soon to be thinking about trying it out on the others.

"Why?"

You only took it less than twenty-four hours ago! Don't you think it would be prudent to wait awhile, to be sure there are no side effects?

"It worked on me. Why wouldn't it work on them?"

Well, for one thing, you weren't already in stasis.

"So we wake them up first. What's the big deal?"

There's a reason RMS serum is considered a last option, Frank. It's not like waking them up from a nap. It's a risky procedure, at best. And we're not doctors. It would be safer to leave them in stasis until the Daedalus arrives three months from now.

"Uh," Frank spoke up, setting his fork down. "There might be a problem there."

Jack looked at Frank, one furry, blue-gray eyebrow raised.

"I sent them a warning message," Frank confessed.

You did what? When was this?

"A day or two before you showed up."

What did you tell them?

"Something like, biohazard, crew infected, approach with extreme caution. That sort of thing."

I thought the comm-system was down?

"Well, I sort of found a way around that little problem."

Why am I not surprised, Jack sighed in his mind.

"Come on, Jack. What did you want me to do, let the whole population drop down into the middle of an alien plague?"

Jack leaned back in his chair and let out an audible sigh. *No, of course not, Frank.* Jack thought for a moment. *But this changes everything.*

"We'll just send a new message, tell them everything is alright, come on down and join the party!"

It's not that simple, Frank. Did you sign the message?

"Sign it? Why would I sign it?"

You sent a critical message, and one of a medical nature. If the mission's medical officer doesn't sign the all-clear message, they will ignore it.

"Can't you just sign it for her?"

It doesn't work that way, Frank, and you know it.

Now, it was Frank's turn to do the thinking. "Okay, so we wait a few months, see how I do. Then we wake up Maria and let her send the message."

We don't have a few months.

"Jack, the Daedalus isn't due for at least three months."

Stop thinking like an engineer, Jack urged him, *and start thinking like a ship's captain. The Daedalus is massive. She can't just change course whenever she wants.*

"I forgot," Frank realized. "The decision point."

The entire reason we're here, Jack added. *So the council could choose their final destination before reaching the final course-change point. Think. You just received a mayday from your scout ship. Critical failure of her aero-braking ballots, breaking up, crew abandoning ship in the LRV. You even have some telemetry that you can analyze to see what went wrong. What's the first thing you do?*

"Come in slower and avoid the same problem."

Exactly. And if I know Hal, he was already scheduling extra braking burns with the flight dynamics officer long before they even received your warning. Jack rose and made his way toward the data terminal in the corner of the wardroom. Look at this, Jack instructed as he sat down and called up the navigation charts. This was his original course, Jack pointed at the course chart that painted itself across the monitor screen. Pretty much the same as ours, with an intercept order of Five, Four, Six, right?

Frank nodded silently as he examined the all too familiar course.

Assume he decided to take the ship's planned arrival speed down by ten percent. That would put him well under the safety margin. That would also delay their arrival by roughly three months, by which time the planets have moved. Jack struck a key, causing the navigation program to recalculate the positions of the three target planets, displaying them on the screen in their new positions. Now, he could no longer maintain the same intercept order, and still have enough fuel to achieve a safe parking orbit. That would force him to accept an intercept order of Six and then Four. And he could still execute a sling shot maneuver around the star to pick up Five on the far side. But that would take an extra year.

"Well, I don't want to be stuck with you as my only dance partner any longer than I have to, my friend. But wouldn't that give us even more time to be sure the cure works?"

Okay, now start thinking like a doctor. RMS only slows down the patient's metabolism, it doesn't stop it completely. Mac and Sara were already circling the drain when they were put under. They could still die before help arrives.

"But that still gives us an extra three months, right?"

No. Now put your captain's hat back on. You're already burning extra fuel with those additional braking burns. That means you can't afford to make any radical, last minute course changes. It means, that if you wanted to change course to re-commit yourself to Tau Ceti Five again, you'd

have to do it early enough to make a shallow, gentle turn, to save fuel. Jack carefully struck a few more keys. And that would be about here, at the latest.

"I'm no expert on interplanetary transfer orbits, Jack," Frank argued. "But I *am* pretty good with the Daedalus's fuel consumption rates. Couldn't you make a turn as late as here, and still have enough fuel to make orbit around Five?"

You could, if you came in trailing behind Five playing catch-up. But if you turned that late, you'd be taking her head on, doubling your closure rate. You'd have to burn twice the fuel just to get barely under the safe-approach speed, let alone get well under it.

"So how much time does that give us?"

Well, normally I would guess their decision point to be about here, which is only a week from now. But, I served under Captain Ishkin for four years after my command training. I'd bet a month's rations that regardless of what the council orders, he'll milk it until the last possible moment, giving us as much time as possible to remedy the situation down here before he has to make his final course change toward another world. Maybe two weeks.

"Well, that still gives us two weeks, right?" Frank was always the optimist. "We can do it."

Oh, yes. A mutant commander and an engineer, Jack mused. We'd need more like two years!

"Then we have no choice, do we," Frank pointed out. "We have to try to revive Maria and give her the slurry."

Jack stared at Frank for a long moment. What he was proposing was incredibly risky, and could very well kill their only hope.

"I know, Jack, but we don't have any other choice. Even if we *could* figure out how to cure this on our own..."

The council would never bet the lives of the population on it, Jack finished, not without Maria's signature on the message. Frank was right, and Jack knew it. Start studying up on the RMS revival protocols, Frank. I'll start collecting more sweet root.

* * *

The stars shimmered above as Jack sat quietly at the foot of the LRV's boarding ramp. The moons hung large in the sky, casting eerie double shadows of different hues on the landscape. The night sky on Tau Ceti Five had never seemed unusual to him. But he often wondered how it would seem to someone who had grown up under a Terran sky.

It had taken over an hour to prep Maria for the six-hour process of RMS reversal, and it would take even longer for her to wake up. Only then would they know if she was going to survive the revival process. After that, they would begin administering their concoction.

They had agreed to take turns monitoring Maria's progress, each taking two-hour shifts, promising to alert the other if something changed. So far, everything seemed to be going according to the manual. But the thought of one little failure starting a catastrophic chain of events continued to worry him.

His fate also nagged at him. The rapid changing of day-to-day events as of late had left Jack with little time to contemplate his own future. But in quiet moments such as these, he could not keep his thoughts away from the most obvious question, *What is to become of me?*

"I'm sure Maria will find a way to reverse whatever it is that has changed you, Jack." Frank's approach caught him by surprise. "Sorry, Jack. But you're the one projecting the thoughts, not me."

Then just pretend you didn't hear them, for my sake. It still freaks me out a little.

"I'll try."

How's she doing? Jack asked, welcoming the distraction.

"By the numbers, so far." Frank sat down on the ramp next to Jack. "Seriously though, Jack. There's got to be a way to reverse what's happened to you."

And if there isn't a way? What do I do then? How do I raise my children? How do I make love to my wife? How will I fit in at all, in this utopia we're supposed to be building?

"Maybe we could just shave your whole body?" Frank joked.

Jack wasn't laughing.

"Sorry. Bad timing, huh?"

Extremely.

"Just try not to dwell on it for now. We have enough to worry about right now."

Jack smiled as best he could. His friend was right, even if he was tactless. There was plenty to worry about.

Am I up?

"You think I came out here to look at your ugly mug?"

Jack stood up slowly, stretching his long, simian frame. Despite his new physique, he still seemed to be carrying the aches and pains of all his years. *Why don't you hit the sack for a few hours? Get some sleep. You are still recuperating, you know.*

"Good idea. I am pretty tired. What time do you want me to relieve you?"

About zero four hundred, I guess.

"That's six hours from now, Jack. When were you planning to sleep?"

One of the advantages of my new form. I don't seem to need as much rest as you humans, he joked as he started up the ramp.

Frank didn't care much for the way Jack had already mentally separated himself from the human species. It couldn't be a healthy attitude.

Frank also glanced up at the night sky. Somehow, even though they might still pass him by, it was comforting to know that his family was probably entering the Tau Ceti system about now. They were closer to him than they had been in the last nine months. And at least now there was a possibility that he might see them again. But what would become of Jack? Jack's own thought had been supplanted into Frank's mind, haunting him as well.

* * *

Jack woke suddenly, sitting bolt upright at the sound of the intercom beeping from the outer bulkhead at the head of his berth. "Yes!" he growled unintelligibly. Intercoms didn't work well with telepathic communication.

"Jack! Get in here!"

Jack leapt from his berth, nearly ripping the curtains from their tracks in the process. Was something wrong with Maria?

What is it? he asked as he entered the med-lab.

"She's starting to come around."

Jack looked around the room in surprise. Most of the tubes and wires that had supported Maria's very existence were gone, and only an IV, an oxygen mask, and the standard bio-sensors remained.

You took her off life-support? Jack asked.

"Around eight thirty."

Why didn't you call me?

"You needed your beauty sleep." Frank looked Jack up and down. "I guess you still need a few more hours, huh?"

Sarcasm was Frank's way to deal with uncomfortable situations. It always had been. But right now, Jack was too concerned about Maria to take offense at Frank's tactless remarks. *Smart-ass*, was all Jack could muster.

"Who are we kidding, Jack. She's going to be waking up soon. No offense, buddy, but your hairy mug might be a bit much for her right now."

Jack couldn't tell if Frank was still joking or not.

"Why don't you go clean up a bit," Frank suggested. "Maybe shave a little and trim back some of that wild mane of yours. It might help her accept what's happened to you a little easier than I did if you at *least* look presentable."

Jack was a little shocked by Frank's suggestion, but he was making sense, despite his tactless presentation of the facts.

"And why don't you take a shower while you're at it? You smell like the waste processing compartment."

For some reason, Jack didn't feel offended by Frank's remarks. Frank was treating him the same way he had always treated him, despite his outward appearance.

"Go," Frank insisted. "She won't be lucid for at least another hour."

Jack stepped back, hesitant to leave.

"I'll call you as soon as she wakes, I promise."

Jack looked at Maria. Her skin was back to her usual olive color. Her chest rose and fell rhythmically even without the aid of a respirator. A quick glance confirmed what he was seeing. She was alive. And more importantly, her bio-sensor readings were awfully good. *It worked!*

"You're damn right it did!" Frank said, again hearing Jack's every thought in his head. "Now get your ass in the shower before I toss you in there myself."

A wonderful feeling swept over Jack as he left the med-lab and headed aft for the bathrooms. One that he had not felt for a long time. He had felt it when he first woke to find himself still alive after crash landing on this planet. He had felt it when he first picked up Frank's repeater signal, and again when he saw the LRV. It was a feeling of hope. And it felt good.

* * *

Jack opened his hygiene kit. Everything was in its place, packed nine months ago before they had left the Daedalus. Jack paused to look at himself in the mirror. *How the hell do I clean this up?* He stroked his beard for a moment. It was long, bluish-gray, and it felt greasy. His hair was the same, wild and unkempt, blending in with his beard as it cascaded down the sides of his neck. For a moment, he thought about cutting it all off, but was afraid of what he might find underneath.

He decided to start by trimming his beard. Perhaps, if he could just neaten things up a little, that would be enough. Jack pulled out the electric hair trimmer from the general hygiene locker and turned it on. Besides being long and

unruly, his beard was quite tough, more like fine steel wool than human hair. It took several passes to get it trimmed down. He finally had to settle for a beard about three centimeters in length, after struggling to get it even throughout.

He shaved close, down to the skin on his upper cheeks, trying to frame the beard in the way he remembered seeing in old historic photographs. No one on board the Daedalus had ever worn a beard. Shockingly, he found that his skin had also changed. It was tougher, and darker than before. It resembled soft leather. It wasn't terrible, but it wasn't human.

Brushing his teeth was also a new experience. When he opened his mouth to look at his teeth, not only were they dirty and yellow, his incisors had become long and fang-like, dulled at their ends. With his snout-like jaw and mouth, they made him look like a cross between an ape and a wolf. It was frightening to look at, even to him.

The odd thing was... He *recognized* himself in the mirror.

After deciding that he had done all he could, Jack chose to attempt a shower. But after removing his clothing, he realized that it might be more difficult than he thought. Having not removed his clothing completely in several months, he didn't realize how much his body hair had grown. His entire body was covered with a fine, blue-gray hair, giving the appearance of a thin layer of fur. It was thicker in some areas, such as those where he had previously had human body hair, like his legs, arms and chest.

Jack wondered if there would be enough water available to thoroughly wash his furry body. The showers were rationed, with each crewmember being given a weekly allotment for showering that they could only access using their personal four-digit code.

Jack stepped into the shower stall and carefully punched his personal code into the control unit. The display showing how much water was left in his allotment brought a chuckle.

It seemed that no one had thought to reallocate his portion of the ship's water supply. The control showed he had water available in his allotment for about one hundred showers. *I guess I'll need it*, he thought, trying to remember the last time he had bathed.

* * *

Maria's eyes opened slowly, immediately narrowing into a squint against the bright light of the med-lab. Her head felt like it was going to explode, throbbing with waves of pain that made her grimace. She tried to lift her hands, but found they seemed to weigh a ton. She felt cold, naked, and vulnerable. And for the moment, she had no idea where she was, or what had happened to her.

Her vision was blurry. She tried to keep her eyes open, but found she could not do so without extreme pain. What little she could see was too bright. Sterile white walls, shiny metal counters and trays...

She realized she was lying on something firm. Another wave of pain pulsed through her head, causing her to groan. Then she heard a voice.

"Maria?"

It was a man's voice.

"Maria? Can you hear me?"

Maria tried to answer, but found her throat too dry to speak. She tried to swallow, but it was too painful. Her medical training began to kick in, as she tried to analyze her own condition. *Dry mouth, headache, weakness, photophobia, blurred vision. What's wrong with me?* One by one, her senses seemed to be checking in. She could tell she was wearing an oxygen mask. She could also tell there was a tube in her nose, which added to the confusion. Next, she noticed there were sensors stuck to her skin in various places, and a discomfort in her right groin, at the top of her inner thigh. Something else down there as well.

"Maria, it's me, Frank." the voice repeated.

Memories began flooding back. The mission, the illness, the RMS.

"Frank?" she managed to whisper.

"Yes, it's me, it's Frank."

"Frank? Where am I?"

"You're in the med-lab."

"What happened?" Her voice was becoming stronger.

"You've just come out of stasis. How do you feel?"

"Terrible." It was all coming back to her now. "Are they here?" she asked.

"Is who here?"

She's talking about the Daedalus, Jack thought to Frank.

"No, Maria. They're not here yet."

Maria was confused. "Then why?" She had to stop and swallow. "Why did you revive me?"

"We think we found a cure, Maria. But we need your help," Frank explained.

"A cure?" she asked, still confused. "We?" As best she could remember, Frank had been the only one left.

Frank chuckled. "I've got a surprise for you, Maria."

"What?"

"Feel like a visitor?"

Maria squinted again, this time more from confusion. She struggled to focus as the blurry image of Frank faded away, only to be replaced by another image. A person, a man.

Jack stepped to Maria's side. *Can she see me?* he asked Frank when he noticed her squinting.

"Barely," Maria answered. "Everything's blurry."

She can hear me! he thought with surprise.

"Of course I can hear you," Maria answered. "Who are you?" His voice was familiar as well, although she couldn't quite place it.

"It's Jack, Maria," Frank told her.

"Jack?" she gasped in disbelief. "Is it really you?"

Yes, Maria. It's really me.

Maria fought to bring her vision into focus. She could see him, blurry as he was, standing next to her, gazing down at

her. "You're alive?"

Yup, I'm alive.

Maria wasn't sure if she was dreaming. "I can't believe it. How did you....."

It's a long story, he told her.

"Where's Will?" she asked.

Jack didn't know what to say. He knew how close they had been.

"Will didn't make it, Maria," Frank interrupted, taking the burden away from Jack.

Maria was silent for a moment. But she had dealt with both their deaths long ago. And she *was* happy to see Jack again. At least, almost see him.

I'm sorry, Maria, was all that Jack could come up with at the moment.

Maria continued trying to focus on Jack. He seemed so tall, looming over her. His face was covered with hair, his features distorted. Long blue-gray hair hung from his head. She managed to get her left hand to rise up from her side, reaching out to touch his face.

Jack recoiled from her touch. It was pleasant, though. Warm and gentle, moving him somehow. It had been so long since anyone had touched him in such a compassionate way.

"You need a shave, Jack," she said as she touched his beard. That's when her eyes began to focus. The image of Jack's face had been more in her mind's eye than through her retinas. And suddenly, without warning, that image had transformed into something else. It was still Jack's eyes she noticed. The same old pale blue that always seemed to surprise you. But his face had changed, become distorted somehow. His jaw seemed longer, his skin leathery and cold to the touch. His brow was also more pronounced, and bushier than she remembered. Although this person resembled Jack, she was quickly realizing that it wasn't Jack. Not the Jack she remembered.

Jack could see the realization in Maria's eyes, and it scared him.

Maria could sense the fear in him. "What is it, Jack? What's wrong? What's happened to you?" Then her vision came completely into focus, and her hand withdrew from Jack's face in fear. "Oh my God!"

Jack could sense it, she knew. She saw him. *Maybe I should go*, he thought. Frank motioned for him to stay, noticing that Maria's vital signs, though slightly elevated, were still within safe ranges.

Maria heard Jack in her head, or at least she thought she did. "Jack?" Her voice wasn't fearful now. Kindness was creeping into it. "Oh, Jack. Is it really you?"

Yes, Maria. I'm afraid it is, such as I am.

I am hearing him in my head, she thought. "I must be dreaming," Maria decided out loud. "I swear I heard your voice, but your lips didn't move. Like it was in my head."

You're not dreaming, Maria.

"That's the way I hear him too," Frank reassured her. "There's been a few changes around here while you were in stasis, Maria."

She heard him, but her attention was focused on this strange creature that apparently *was* Jack, somehow transformed into something not quite human. She reached out for him again, taking his hand and grasping it tightly. "Oh, Jack."

* * *

"So, what's your recommendation?" Hal asked.

The gruff old scientist leaned back in his chair, looking at Captain Ishkin across the desk, knowing that his decision would seal the fate of the team on Tau Ceti Five. "I'm afraid that, given a choice between the fourth and sixth planets, I'd have to choose the fourth one."

Hal stared at the tired old scientist. He knew the poor guy had been working around the clock for the last two days. He also knew he had dreaded making that decision for

the same amount of time. "Yes," Hal agreed reluctantly, "that's what I figured."

"And if you had to choose between all three?" Ray wondered.

The old scientist looked curiously at Ray as he pondered his question. "Well, it would definitely be a toss-up between Four and Five, then. They both have their advantages and disadvantages," he began.

"If you had to choose between Four or Five, which one would it be?" Ray demanded to know.

"Ray..." Hal warned.

"Assuming, of course, there was no disease on Tau Ceti Five, that is."

"Ray, come on," Hal objected.

"It's a fair question," Old Man Wilkins argued.

"Thank you, Doctor Williams," Hal said. "That'll be all."

Doctor Williams looked at Hal, confused. Then he looked at Ray. Something was going on, he just didn't know what. His team had been asked to gather as much information on the new worlds as possible using only long-range scans, and it was woefully inadequate. "Five," he announced.

"Why?" Ray wondered, intrigued by the scientist's response.

"Simply because we have a team on the ground already. Both worlds seeming equal from afar, it only seems logical to go where you will eventually have the greatest amount of data about the world on which you are about to colonize."

"Thank you, Doctor," Ray said. "That *will* be all."

"Very well, Captain." Doctor Williams stood and straightened his shirt. "Mister Wilkins," he said politely to Ray as he exited.

Ray waited until the hatch was closed before he spoke. "You see? Even he thinks we should go to Tau Ceti Five."

"He just said that to please you," Hal said as he pressed the intercom button. "Mister De Tullio to the captain's ready room."

"We can't let them stick us on Four, Hal. The gravity is too weak."

"It's not that weak, Ray."

"Bullshit! In ten generations, we'll all be twelve feet tall if we colonize that jungle!"

"It's not like we have a whole lot of options, Ray." A knock came from the hatch. "Enter!"

The ship's navigator, Marco De Tullio, stepped through the hatch. "You wanted to see me, Captain?"

"Yes, Marco," he said as he motioned for him to come in.

Marco sat down in the chair that Doctor Williams had occupied only a moment ago.

"I need you to plot a course for a Four, Six intercept."

"I can't do that, sir."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's impossible, sir. At our present speed, we'll pass Six before we pass Four. I can give you a Six, Four intercept, if you like?"

Hal cast a glance at Ray, sure that they were having the same thought. In their fervor to find a way to rescue the advance team, neither of them had thought much about the position of the planets at their new arrival time. "Where will Five be when we arrive?"

"May I, sir?" Marco asked as he reached for the terminal on the captain's desk. "As you can see here," he explained as he called up the navigational display, "the fourth and sixth planets will have already crossed our projected course on their way around the other side of the star. But the fifth planet will still be half a lap behind them. As you remember, we had originally intended to come in behind the fifth planet while she was where the sixth planet is going to be now. I can take us wide of Six, if you like, right down Five's orbital path in between them."

Ray furrowed his brow as he studied the monitor. "What if we came in right down the middle, inside of the fourth planet's orbit, with the star on our port quarter?"

Marco looked at Ray with a puzzled look on his face. "Why would we want to?"

"Answer the man," Hal instructed his navigator. He had an idea what the old-timer was getting at.

"Well, I suppose we could. It's not the most efficient course, but it wouldn't cost us any more fuel. In fact, it might even save us a drop or two, since we wouldn't have to make much of a course correction. We'll take a little heat from the star, but nothing more than we can handle. But, I still don't understand why."

Ray picked up a stylus and drew a line on the screen to indicate his proposed course. Then he drew a dotted line that angled away from that course to the port, beginning just past the outer edge of the system and continued into the system until it intercepted Tau Ceti Five, as it would be coming around the far side of the star.

Marco's eyes widened as he caught on, looking over to his captain who was holding one finger up to his lips.

"I'll need you to calculate both those courses, Mister De Tullio. I prefer to have options available at all times, just in case," the captain added with a wry smile.

"Yes, sir."

"And I'll need you to calculate a decision point as well."

"Understood, sir. I'll get on it right away, sir."

"Thank you, Mister De Tullio. That'll be all."

"Yes, sir." Marco rose and left the room, still puzzled by their conversation.

Again, Ray waited until the hatch was closed before speaking. "The council will fry your ass if they catch on."

"That they will," Hal agreed. "No matter, since once we arrive I'm going to be out of a job anyway."

Ray laughed as he rose to leave. "You're a lot like your great grand-pappy, my boy." Ray patted him on the shoulder as he left. "A lot like him."

Hal watched Ray leave as he thought, *Yup, we're both willing to go along with your crazy schemes.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Maria had taken longer than Frank to recover. Being in RMS for nearly a month had left her muscles rather weak, and it took all her effort just to get up and go to the bathroom without assistance.

Nevertheless, it was several days before she was able to move slowly about the room. Proving to be capable assistants, Jack and Frank had gathered all manner of specimens during her convalescence. Everything from tissues and body fluids to samples of air, water, and even the foods that Jack and Frank had been eating. Each sample was carefully prepared according to Maria's exact instructions, and run through the bio and genetic scanners in preparation for her perusal. All so she could focus on figuring out why the Cetian roots had made them better. The second question was almost as important. What had caused Jack to change? Maria was sure the two were connected.

Still frail and almost always tired, Maria had less than two weeks to solve the riddle and send the all-clear signal to the Daedalus. Even though they tried to hide the fact from her, Maria could tell that Jack and Frank were both incredibly anxious. Besides, Jack had yet to master the art of hiding those thoughts he did not wish to convey to others.

What bothered her most of all, and what she had hidden from both Frank *and* Jack, was how uneasy she felt *around* Jack. She had known him her entire life. She had even delivered both of his children. Yet, in his new form, she felt uncomfortable around him. No matter how much she tried to control her apprehension, it was always there, lingering in the back of her mind.

Jack, of course, could easily sense this. As his newfound telepathic abilities became more refined, he discovered that he could pick up on the emotions of those around him. He couldn't actually read their thoughts, which seemed quite unfair, since they could easily read his, unless he was careful. And fear was the easiest emotion for him to detect.

Jack was also starting to feel the presence of something he mentally referred to as 'signals'. The phenomenon felt almost like a measure of energy or a pulsing heat in his head. He had explained the strange headaches in degrees of 'hot' and 'cold' to Frank, which had only earned him a confused stare. Jack knew that the signals manifested around living organisms, birds, and animals, but he could still feel them from some distance away, coming into his mind like the sound of a room full of chattering people. All in all, it was unnerving and nearly impossible to ignore.

On the plus side, this overload of signals only seemed to occur when he was outdoors, so staying inside the LRV for long periods of time was becoming easier. Instead of feeling confined, he welcomed the relative quiet within his own mind.

But the chores he could perform inside were becoming fewer and fewer with each passing day. His ability to read was almost gone, even though his ability to understand the spoken word was still there. But even that was starting to fade. Whenever Frank or Maria would speak to him, he found that understanding them required far more concentration than before. Words and phrases were beginning to have little meaning. Instead, he found himself understanding the intent of the sounds they made with their voices, even if he didn't understand all the words they spoke. Surprisingly enough, they didn't seem to have any problem understanding him when he spoke to them with his mind.

Frank seemed to be adapting well to Jack's new form. Frank could even finish Jack's thoughts on occasion, before Jack even knew what he was going to think.

The day-to-day chores had taken a natural division between the three of them. Jack, being the most adept at hunting and gathering, spent most of his time outside, collecting specimens, hunting game for their meals, and gathering what few edible plants he could find on the mostly snow-covered ground. Frank, meanwhile, took care of maintenance inside and outside of the LRV, which was fully powered up once more.

Of course, Maria lived in the med-lab, with occasional trips out to Laura's genetics-lab in one of the exterior huts, to use some of the more specialized scanning equipment that enabled her to see right down to the very chemical bonds that held DNA strands together. When she was still bed-ridden, Maria had spent all of her time studying not only her own logs, but the logs of everyone else in the crew, paying particular attention to Laura's genetics research. Somewhere in those logs, there might be a clue that could point her in the right direction. She had even gotten access to Will's journal, despite Jack's objections, since he carried it with him at all times. If she wanted to find an answer to this puzzle, she would need every clue she could get her hands on.

Maria had even spent endless hours interviewing Jack and Frank, repeatedly going over every detail of their adventures away from the camp and crew. It was frustrating, tedious work that often annoyed both Jack and Frank, having to repeat the same stories again and again. The constant fluid and tissue-gathering from their own bodies had become a nuisance as well. But at least it was one they could both understand.

Maria kept at it obsessively, hardly sleeping at night. Her own bio-scans showed her to be recovering every bit as well as Frank, but she was always tired and stressed, due to the great amount of pressure she was under.

There hadn't been much open discussion about anything between the three of them over the past few days. Jack, sensing Maria's fear of him, avoided her whenever possible.

He occasionally had conversations, such as they were, with Frank. But between Frank's ability to finish Jack's thoughts and his usual overly enthusiastic optimism, Jack found their talks increasingly strained and difficult to tolerate, serving only to remind him of the disconnect that was slowly growing between himself and his friends.

Their original three sit-down meals per day had quickly dwindled down to only one, in the evening, as each of them had work to do that kept them busy during the day. But what had started out as a ritual to look forward to quickly became uncomfortable for Jack, who had little information to share with Frank and Maria. It was as if their points of view, their ways of seeing the universe, that were previously identical to his own, had changed. It was like sitting down with people from another culture, another world, in fact. Frank and Maria's perceptions seemed so mistaken to Jack. It was as if they just didn't understand the world around them. Jack found himself wondering how they could be so naive. It all seemed so clear to him.

What was worse was that this change had left Jack feeling like an outsider, a third wheel. He found himself making up excuses to finish quickly and depart, or to miss the evening meal altogether.

Frank felt Jack's estrangement, and it troubled him greatly. Although he did his best to hide this from Jack, he suspected Jack already knew.

Maria, on the other hand, seemed far more relaxed when Jack was not at the dinner table. She was also aware of Jack's separation, and she felt guilty for the way she felt when he was around. She tried to remember the old Jack, whom she admired and respected. The dedicated leader and family man who would make any sacrifice for those around him. But with each passing day, she felt that man slipping away forever. And although she would never say as much to Frank, unless she could find a way to reverse Jack's mutations, she feared that one day Jack would simply vanish

from their presence and leave them for the wilderness beyond the ship.

* * *

"Too late to get some dinner?" Jena asked as she stepped up to the serving station in the main mess hall.

"I think I can rustle something up for you," the young cook answered.

Jena was interning as Captain Ishkin's administrative assistant. At twenty-two years of age, she was the youngest person on the bridge. But to the cook, she was one of the few eligible women left on board. And besides, she was attractive, pleasant, and intelligent. Thus, the cook's intern did all he could to put together a hot meal for her, even if most of his serving line was already torn down and stored away. "Just give me a few minutes," he promised her. "I'll bring it out to you."

"Thanks," she sighed. Jena took a seat at the closest empty table. The mess hall was generally deserted this time of the evening, except for a few late diners still sitting around, drinking tea and chatting about the day's events. As it had been for several weeks, the topic of whispered conversations was about the council's decision to forsake the Icarus crew and head for a safer destination. As to be expected, some agreed, while others found the decision reprehensible. These days, Jena was thankful that her schedule usually put her dinner at such a late hour. So many of her peers thought that she, being so close to the ship's captain, might have something to add to their conversations, and the incessant inquiries irritated her.

She personally had no opinion on the fate of the Icarus. At least, that's what she told herself. Over the last two years, one of the things she had learned was that those in command had to make tough decisions, and they never made them without careful consideration. She was happy just being an administrative assistant. It was not as exciting and glamorous as many of the other necessary professions

on board, but there was no stress to it. At least, not until recently.

"How's this?" the cook asked as he set a tray down in front of her.

Jena looked the food over. It was the usual fare, a small cut of some meat grown in the genetics-lab, a side of vegetable grown on the ag-deck, and a minor serving of pasta. All perfectly balanced, nutritionally speaking, even if it was predictable. "What's this?" she asked, pointing to a small bowl of some sort of colorful salad that he had placed next to her plate.

"It's a multi-bean salad."

"Beans? Are they cooked?" she asked as she poked at it with her fork.

"Of course," he laughed. "It's a little experiment of mine. They had some extra in the last harvest, and I asked if I could try to come up with something new with them."

"Is it safe?" she joked as she scooped up a few beans.

"No one's died yet, if that's what you mean."

Jena reluctantly took a bite, pleasantly surprised by the unusual flavor of the dressing. "Mmm, that's not bad. What's that dressing? I don't recognize the flavor."

"Garlic, and onion."

"Yes, but there's something else in there."

"Cilantro," the young cook boasted.

"Cilantro? I've never heard of that."

"I found it in some old cookbooks from Earth, in the ship's database. It was real popular in a lot of the trendy little soup and salad cafés back on Earth in the late twenty-first century."

"Really? I didn't know they grew it on board."

"They don't. They should, but they don't. You know how it is, not enough space, only the usual produce and all that."

Jena could see the frustration in his face. "Makes it kind of tough to be creative, huh?"

"Just a little."

"Then where did you get it?"

"I grew it myself," he bragged. "Under the heat lamps." The cook pointed at the serving counter, to a small flat of plants sitting under the lamps at the far end.

"Where did you get the seeds?"

"I've got a buddy who works on the storage deck."

"Can't you get in trouble for that?"

"What are they gonna do? Toss me off the ship? The head chef is about to retire. And with us being so close to landing, nobody's interested in being a cook. They all want to be scientists...to do the important work."

"Yeah, tell me about it. How do you keep the lights burning all the time? I mean, that's gotta cost a lot of power credits."

"I've been spending a lot of time in the dark at home," he laughed. "So I could spend my own credits on the extra power."

"Just to grow some herbs to make some salad?"

"Hey, it beats turning out the same old slop, day in and day out. Did you know that there have only been six truly-new recipes invented on board since Chef Scheller died? *Six...* In *thirty-five years*! Besides, I've gotta get ready. Once we start growing a bigger variety of produce, I'm not going to be able to get away with churning out rabbit-meat patties and pasta for very long!"

The young cook's laughter and enthusiasm were refreshing to Jena, especially at the end of a long day. "Well, it's nice to know somebody is having fun at work."

"What's the matter?" the young man asked as he sat down across the table from her. He had been hoping to strike up a conversation with her for some time. "Rough day at the office?"

"Rough week. Ever since we changed course, everyone has been skulking around the flight deck like someone died."

"Yeah, well, a lot of people aren't happy with the council's decision."

"No, it's not that. It's something else. I don't know what. Everybody is being very hush-hush on the bridge. And the usual reports that I would have to summarize for the captain are bypassing me and being hand-delivered. Usually by the ship's navigator or the XO himself. Now I don't get them until the end of the day, so I have to stay late to update the log entries. And even then, the captain has rewritten the reports. It doesn't make any sense."

"Do officers ever make any sense?" the cook joked, trying to offer a sympathetic ear. It had taken him six weeks to grow that cilantro, and it was finally paying off.

A few rows behind her, another late diner listened intently to their conversation. He found the last bit quite interesting. And he was sure that his own preceptor would find it intriguing as well. He listened for a few more minutes, until he was sure their conversation had turned away from matters of work, taking a more personal course just as the young cook had hoped.

The eavesdropping man stepped into the hallway outside of the mess hall and headed down the corridor as he looked at his watch. *The chief council member will still be awake*, he thought as he headed up the stairs toward the housing decks.

* * *

"Frank!" Maria was obviously excited about something, as she entered the wardroom where Frank was finishing his dinner.

"What is it?"

Maria looked around. "Where's Jack?"

"Outside, I guess. Why? What's up?"

"I think I've figured it out."

"You've found a cure?"

Maria sat down. "No. But I think I've figured out how the virus affected us."

"Great! How?"

"It was at the genetic level, right down at the very base of it, at the chemical bonds."

"The what?"

Maria slowed down, remembering that Frank was an engineer. "The chemical bonds, the ones that bond the proteins together in a DNA chain. It's so simple."

"Well, if it's so simple, how come you didn't figure it out before?"

Luckily, Maria was too excited to be offended. "You have to understand research protocols. You start at the top, or rather the outside, and work your way in, level by level. Genetics is pretty far down the list."

"Okay, start from the top."

"Well, before we all went into RMS, I checked our symptomology against that of known diseases, but that was a bust. Everything it seemed like, it wasn't. Then I started looking at the individual systems, to see if there was a similar pattern in their failures, but there wasn't."

"Okay, okay, jump ahead." It was all gibberish to Frank.

"Something, some chemical—actually, it's more like an enzyme—it was causing the chemical bonds in our DNA to break down. Our DNA is our instruction set..."

"I'm not sure I'm following you, Doc," Frank interrupted. "Engineer, remember?"

Maria stopped, trying to rephrase her findings in a way Frank would understand. "Okay. Pretend you've got a busted piece of equipment that you can't repair. You have all the parts you need to build a new one. But something happened to the assembly instructions. All the words and sentences got scrambled, and you can't make sense out of them."

"Then I wouldn't be able to build a new one."

"Exactly. Not only that, but the repair manual is scrambled as well, so now you couldn't even fix the old one, even if you wanted to."

"Okay."

"You see, the DNA holds the instructions for every living cell. It tells them what to do, how to act, and how to

reproduce themselves. If their instructions are scrambled, they stop functioning, period. They can't even replace themselves."

"Well, where did this enzyme come from?"

"I don't know, the air, the water? It was probably there in such tiny amounts that we probably couldn't even detect it, let alone filter it out. It probably built up in our bodies over the months until there was enough at the genetic level to do some damage."

"Can you come up with a cure for it, though?"

"Probably. There has to be some chemical in the sweet root that either blocks or renders the enzyme inert. Hell, it's probably in the animals as well, or else they would've been affected just like us. All I have to do is figure out which chemical does the trick. And that shouldn't be too hard. I mean, there were only four substances in that sweet root that the scanner couldn't identify. All I have to do is test all four of them on a live sample."

"Great! Nice work, Maria! Then we can send the all-clear message to the Daedalus?"

"Hold on, not so fast," Maria warned. "It's way too soon to do that. We need to get some results, first. We need to be sure..."

"Need I remind you, Doc, that we're up against time, here?"

"Need I remind *you* that this thing nearly killed us all?"

"Good point," Frank conceded. "You keep working, I'll tell Jack."

"You bet!" she exclaimed as she rose from the table to return to her work.

"Hold on, Doc!" Frank stopped her. "Take this with you," he instructed, holding up a plate of food. "You need to eat, you know."

"Thanks," she agreed, taking it with her to the med-lab.

Hot damn! Frank thought as he too left the wardroom, on his way to break the good news to Jack.

* * *

"Sir, I feel a little guilty, spying on her like that."

The chief council member refilled his young intern's cup of tea as he spoke. "Of course you do, lad. But you didn't *go* there with the intention of *spying* on her, did you?"

"Of course not, sir. I was just finishing my evening meal. I didn't even know she would be there."

"And they were making no effort to *conceal* their conversation from the ears of others?"

"No sir. In fact, it was mere chance that I heard them at all. The other diners had only just left, and the mess hall was pretty quiet."

"Then you did nothing wrong, my boy."

"Then why does it *feel* wrong?"

"Growing up in a ship-bound culture such as ours, we are taught to respect what little privacy we have here. That's why you feel guilty. Not for *hearing* their conversation to begin with, but rather for telling *me* about it."

"So I shouldn't have told you?"

"No, you were right in doing so."

"Even if I am violating their privacy?"

"If someone would've overheard the right conversations, and then reported them such as you have this night, we might well have avoided the Luyten incident altogether."

The young apprentice sipped at his tea as he considered the chief council member's words. "What will you do?"

"Talk to the right people, ask the right questions. All covertly, at first. This close to our arrival, we have to be careful not to fracture what little unity we still have amongst our people. Our decision to abandon the crew of the Icarus has strained that unity enough already."

"Then you won't ask for a formal inquiry?"

"Not just yet, I suspect." The chief council member sipped at his own tea. "In matters such as these," he continued, looking directly in his intern's eyes, "timing is everything."

* * *

"Well, don't get all excited or anything," Frank quipped.

Sorry, Jack thought at him. *Good, yes. Of course.*

Jack's thoughts seemed broken somehow, disjointed. It required a bit of concentration for Frank to figure out what he was thinking.

"I know it's not a cure yet, but come on, Jack." Jack still didn't respond, and for the first time since he had returned, Frank couldn't read Jack's thoughts. "What's bothering you?"

Difficult to communicate, more and more.

"What do you mean?"

Not understand you well. Not like before. Not easy. Harder. Each day, harder.

"You mean, telepathically?"

Jack nodded.

"Shit." Frank sat down on the ground next to Jack, looking up to see what it was Jack was always looking at whenever he was out here by himself. "What are you looking at?"

Sky.

"Duh."

Lifetime. Get here, only thought. Now, want back, up there. Jack pointed toward the night sky.

"I know what you mean." Frank leaned back against the snow bank. "It's weird to think that I'll probably never be back up there. I'll probably spend the rest of my life here on this world. Hell, I'll probably die here. We'll all probably die here, eventually."

Truth.

"Listen, Jack. I know you're worried about what will become of you. I mean, who wouldn't be worried in your situation? But you can't give up hope yet. Maria will figure this thing out, sooner or later. And once we get the rest of the crew revived, there will be seven of us working the problem."

No time. Soon I, no talk, no understand.

"Maybe, but you'll still be here, with us, alive. We can take care of you, Jack."

Like pet?

"Well, now who's being a smart-ass?"

Jack laughed as best he could, which was really more of a snort.

* * *

"Captain? I think you might want to know about this."

"What is it, Marco?"

"Someone has made an inquiry into the navigational logs."

A chill went up Hal Ishkin's neck. "Who was it?"

"The council." Marco watched the captain's face for any change of expression, but saw none. "Should I respond, sir?"

"It's public information, Marco. Not responding will just make it look like we are trying to hide something."

"Uh, I'm confused, sir. I thought we *were* trying to hide something."

"How much longer until we reach the go-no-go point?"

"About thirty-six hours, sir."

"Well, I didn't really expect to be able to keep it a secret this long anyhow." Hal leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Send them the information they requested, Mister De Tullio."

* * *

"Maria? Have you seen Jack?"

Maria didn't look up from the scanner display. "No, but I've been in here all morning."

"I can't find him anywhere."

"I'm sure he'll show up sooner or later."

"I hope so," Frank muttered as he left the genetics-hut.

Maria paused to look up as he left, wondering why Frank seemed so concerned.

* * *

"Captain Ishkin, I suppose you are wondering why the council has called you here today?"

"The thought has crossed my mind."

Ray fought back a smirk. He and Hal both knew damned well why the council had called this emergency meeting, and why they asked Hal to be present.

"It has recently come to the attention of the council that you have set the ship on a course that, let's say, is not entirely in accordance with our most recent directive. Is this true?"

"What directive would that be, sir?" Hal asked innocently.

"The directive to place this ship on course for whichever destination the planetary sciences department chose. I assume you remember that directive?"

"Of course, sir. And I did just that."

"What course did the ship's navigator recommend to satisfy that directive, Captain?"

"Well, he gave me several courses to choose from, sir. And I exercised my prerogative as the captain of this vessel to choose the course that best met our current requirements."

"I see." The chief council member looked down at his reports for a moment before continuing. "According to the reports from the navigator's log, two courses were made available to you. One that would put the ship on an intercept course with the orbit of Tau Ceti Four, correct?"

"Correct, sir."

"And this course, would allow us to attain orbit around Tau Ceti Four with minimum fuel expenditure, correct?"

"Yes sir, it would."

"The other course you had available to you would take us in between Tau Ceti Four and the star, would it not?"

"Yes sir, it would."

"Didn't you find such proximity to the star to be somewhat risky?"

"No sir. The course was well within the safe operation protocols of this ship, sir."

"I see. And you weren't concerned with the extra fuel it would cost us to slow down and let Tau Ceti Four catch up to us once we intercepted her orbit?"

"No sir. The flight dynamics officer assured me that we would have enough fuel to sustain a safe parking orbit around TC Four with either course."

"Nevertheless, didn't the flight dynamics officer inform you that the first course would result in considerable fuel savings upon achieving orbit?"

"Yes sir, he did."

"Yet you chose the second course?"

Ray was getting tired of this line of questioning. The council obviously had access to all of the flight officer's logs and reports. They were just building a hanging platform for everyone in the room to see.

"Yes sir, I did."

"Would you care to enlighten us as to the reason for your decision?"

"I felt it was the best course, sir."

"And why would that be?"

"The second course provided us with the longest period of options, sir."

"Options for what?"

"To change our course, sir."

"To what end?"

"In case we changed our destination, sir."

"Again, I ask you. To what end?"

Hal thought about his answer. If he told them the truth, they would probably remove him from command and hand the ship over to the XO. If he tried to lie, they would see through it and the result would be the same. *Oh well, once I park this thing, I'll be out of a job anyway.*

"I chose the second course," Hal began confidently, "because it would give us more time in case we received new information from our people on Tau Ceti Five that might give this council reason to change their decision regarding

not only the final destination of this vessel, but also in regards to the safe return of the crew of the Icarus, sir.”

Ray watched as the expressions on several of the council members’ faces suddenly turned sour. He knew they all understood what Hal had been trying to do. And secretly, they probably all applauded his efforts. But theirs was the final say, and it had to be respected, at all costs. Hal had left them with little choice in the matter; in the way he had gone about it. Ray suddenly felt guilty. After all, it had been his idea to begin with.

As the murmuring amongst the council members died down, the chief council member spoke. “Captain Ishkin. Please remain here while the council adjourns to chambers to consider this information, and render a decision.”

“A decision on what?” Ray blurted out.

The council members ignored Ray’s remarks as they filed out of the meeting room to confer in private.

Hal stepped back from the podium to sit down and wait.

“Jesus, Hal. I’m real sorry, I got you into this.”

“Don’t worry, Ray. I knew what I was doing. Besides, what are they going to do, toss me overboard,” he remarked with a grin.

* * *

Jack sat alone atop a small hill away from the camp, writing as best he could on a data pad. Each word was a struggle to compose; each sentence like climbing a mountain.

It had been nearly two weeks since Maria sent the message. Only days ago, she had succeeded in synthesizing a vaccine. As he wrote, she was already reviving Lynn, intending to test the vaccine on her first, since she was the least ill of the crew still in RMS.

Jack had spent most of his time away from the camp. He spent his days hunting food for the others, leaving his kill at the foot of the ramp for them. His ability to communicate

continued to fade, and was now down to individual words only.

He had been working on this letter for several days now, hoping to finish it before he lost all ability to communicate with his friends, whom he now referred to in his own mind as '*humans*'.

* * *

Ray and Captain Ishkin watched as the council filed back into chambers, taking their seats behind the long, metallic, conference table.

"Here it comes," Hal whispered.

The lead council member adjusted himself in his seat as he spoke. "Captain Ishkin, would you please approach the podium?" His voice was flat, and without emotion. He paused for a moment, waiting for the captain to take his place at the podium before continuing.

Hal despised the formalities, as necessary as he knew they were. He stood proud, ready to face his judgment.

"Captain Ishkin, it is the decision of this council that while you did not actually violate the instructions of this council, you did violate the intent of those instructions. We have reviewed the pertinent information, and while you did not directly jeopardize the safety of this ship and her population, you did limit any future options we may have had by your decision to choose the second course option without any solid evidence that it was an appropriate choice. While we certainly understand that such a decision is your prerogative as the commander of this ship, you must also understand that it is our responsibility to speak for the general population, and to ensure the safety of the population as well as the completion of our mission."

Ray wanted to speak, to voice his protest. But he had done enough already.

"Unfortunately, you have left this council in a bit of a predicament as we see no way to adequately punish you for your misdeeds. Given our ETA to arrival, criminal

prosecution and punishment would not be prudent. Besides, I'm not entirely sure that criminal charges would be warranted. Furthermore, we will need every able body once we reach our destination to ensure our survival, especially someone with your training and experience. We do, however, feel compelled to pass down some sort of punishment. If for no other reason than to set an example to the others. It has therefore been decided that you will be relieved of command and restricted to quarters, pending further assignment. On adjournment of this meeting, you will proceed directly to the bridge and relinquish command to your executive officer."

Ray could not contain his anger. "This is bullshit!" he yelled.

"Mr. Wilkins! You will control yourself, or you will be removed!"

Threats had never stopped Ray. "We're only months away from the most critical maneuver of our entire mission, and you want to relieve the most experienced man for the job?"

"Mr. Wilkins!"

"Ray, please," Hal urged him.

On the bridge of the Daedalus, the communications officer listened intently to the words coming through his headset, as he reached for the intercom. "Sir?"

"Yes?" the XO's voice answered.

"Radio Astronomy reports an incoming message, sir. Over the Doppler system!"

The executive officer burst through the hatch from the ready room onto the bridge and was at the comm officer's side before he had finished his sentence. "Is it a repeat?"

"No sir, it's a new message. It's coming through now, sir," the communications officer told him, pointing to the display in front of him.

The XO watched as the message printed out across the screen, holding his enthusiasm in until the message was complete. A few seconds later, the last words printed across the screen, followed by the word he was looking for, all in capital letters. 'MSG CONFIRMED'.

"Alert the captain!" the XO exclaimed as he slapped the comm officer on the back, nearly knocking him off of his seat.

"Sir, the captain is still in the council chambers."

"I don't care if he's talking to God himself, call him! And alert engineering to warm up the engines." The XO turned to face the bridge, finding that everyone was looking at him with smiles on their faces. "Helm! Prepare to change course! Navigator, plot a course for Tau Ceti Five!"

"Are you kidding?" the ship's navigator laughed. "I've been re-plotting that course every hour for the last few days!"

"So," the lead council member concluded, "if there is no further business, we shall adjourn."

Suddenly, a soft beep came from the intercom speaker on the back bulkhead, followed by a shrill, hailing whistle.

"Captain to the bridge!" the speaker announced excitedly.

Hal looked to the lead council member for permission to answer the hail. The lead council member begrudgingly nodded his approval, if only to appear compassionate in front the others.

"Put it on speaker, please," Hal instructed the system operator sitting at the small control terminal at the end of the conference table. The speaker beeped again, indicating the comm circuit was open.

"Ishkin here, what is it?"

It was the XO's voice this time. "*Message from the Icarus, Captain! Message reads; 'All clear, situation*

resolved, vaccine developed, safe to approach. Tau Ceti Five is safe for colonization. End of message."

"Is the message confirmed?" Hal asked, being very careful to follow strict procedure in front of the council.

"Message is confirmed, sir."

"And is it signed?"

"Yes sir, it's signed. By Doctor Gonzales, sir. Her authorization code is confirmed as well, Captain!"

There was silence throughout the room. Ray was grinning from ear to ear. The lead council member was not.

"Your orders, sir?" the XO inquired.

"Mute, please," the lead council member ordered the systems operator, who immediately complied, trying to hide her own smile. The lead council member leaned to his left, conferring with the other members of the council. The mumbling went on for several seconds.

To Ray, it seemed an eternity had passed before the lead council member straightened up to speak.

"Captain," he stated, trying to hide his own disappointment. "In light of recent developments, the council has decided to reconsider its position pending further investigation. You may continue your duties as Captain...for now." He slammed the gavel down hard. "Meeting adjourned!" As he rose to exit, he turned back toward Hal for a moment. "Captain? I believe your executive officer is waiting for orders?"

Hal's stone-cold expression faded into a beaming smile as he signaled the systems operator to un-mute the intercom. "XO! How much time until we reach the optimum course-change point?"

"Twenty-eight minutes, sir!"

"Notify engineering to..."

"Already done, sir!"

"Alert the ship! Prepare for maneuvering! Course change as soon as the population is secure! I'm on my way!"

"Aye aye, sir!"

Hal turned to step away from the podium as the intercom clicked off.

"Congratulations, my boy!" Ray shouted as he struggled to rise from his seat.

Suddenly, the public address system sounded all over the ship. *"Attention! All hands! Prepare for maneuvering. General population! Set condition blue. Return to quarters and secure! We are changing course for Tau Ceti Five in twenty-seven minutes!"*

Cheers erupted in the hallway as the news was broadcast throughout the ship. They all knew what it meant. The crew of the Icarus was alive and well, and their new home was waiting for them.

"You'd better get moving, old-timer," Hal teased over the commotion. "I don't want to have to wait for you to get those tired old bones back to your cabin and get secured before I can start turning this barge."

Ray smiled, patting Hal on his cheek. "You kids have no respect for your elders."

* * *

Frank watched as Maria scurried around the med-lab. It had been nearly four hours since she started to slowly bring Lynn out of RMS. It would be several hours more before she would regain consciousness.

Jack also watched, from the hatchway, having managed to overcome the nearly overwhelming feeling of confinement to return to the LRV at least one more time.

"How's she doing?" Frank asked, only returned a few minutes ago.

"She's coming along nicely. She should be regaining consciousness in an hour or two. Then I can give her the antidote."

Jack watched Frank. He was looking better than ever, now that he had completely recovered. Even Maria, as overworked as she was, looked to be the picture of health

once more. But to Jack, they also appeared more *human* than ever before. And thus, more *alien*.

But soon it would be him who was the alien, and he knew it. He reached down for his backpack on the floor near the bulkhead just outside the med-lab, pulling out his data pad. He turned it on, hoping to scan the words, to proofread them one last time, but by now, he could no longer discern their meaning. If it hadn't been for the grammar and spelling correction software built into the data pad, he doubted his thoughts would have been understandable to Frank and Maria.

Summoning all his resolve, he forced himself to step into the even tighter confines of the med-lab one last time, before it was too late.

Frank was the first to notice Jack's entry into the compartment, as well as his sorrowful face. His first instinct was to ask Jack what was wrong, but he doubted that Jack would understand him.

Jack stepped up to Frank and handed him the data pad, gesturing as best he could in his now alien body language, for him to read it.

Maria turned, sensing Jack's presence in the room. She saw Jack hand Frank the data pad as he slung his pack onto his shoulder, as if to depart. Something was not right. She felt it, the same as Frank. "What is it, Frank?" she asked.

"It's a letter, from Jack here."

"How did he manage to write it?"

"It must've been hard."

"What does it say?" Neither of them had heard a single thought from Jack in nearly a week.

Frank scanned the letter briefly, trying not to let his emotions get in the way as they suddenly surged up from inside him. Finally, he began to read.

My friends, I must go. No surprise. Knew to come. I not belong now. No tell them about me. I died long ago. Like Will. They must never know truth. Panic. Fear.

Disagreement. This world only home now for all you. No choice. Best for all. This my last order.

"Jack," Maria begged, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"There's more." Frank warned, his eyes welling up.

No worry me. I good. I know what you never know. Nature. This world. We are one. I belong out there. In trees. In rivers. In mountains. I to miss you all. But I be happy. No cry for me. Please no cry.

Frank turned his gaze away from the data pad, handing it to Maria. "The next part is for you," he whispered.

Maria took the tablet into her trembling hands and began to read.

Maria. Care for crew. Make well. Keep human. Protect colonists. Protect my children. Love yours. No cry for me. I good.

Maria handed the data pad back to Frank as she tried to hold back the tears.

Frank read the message intended for him.

Frank. Always my friend. Always. Protect my family. Tell I love. Someday, when right, tell truth about me. In your berth is journal. Will journal. At right time, give to Will son. Tell him truth. Will die brave. Save my life many. Good man. Brave man. Honest man. My friend.

Frank looked up from the data pad at Jack. "I will Jack. I promise." He wiped the tears from his own eyes and finished reading.

No one can know of me. Not now. You have new world. Build good. Build strong. Be ready. Someday, Earth come. You know, I not stay. I not belong. I not human.

"Jack, please," Frank pleaded.

Jack grunted, pointing at the data pad, indicating for Frank to finish.

Out there, happy. In here, not happy. Out there, belong. In here, not belong. Out there, understand all. In here, understand nothing. In here, freak, pet, specimen. Out there, free. I still around. Always hiding. Always watching. You will know. I remember all. Always. Not forget me.

Love, Jack.

Silence fell on the compartment, broken only by the sound of Maria's sniffles as she stepped forward and put her arms around Jack, burying her face in his furry shoulder, ignoring the alien stench of his bluish-gray fur as she whispered something in his ear that he would probably not understand. "I won't forget you Jack. I promise."

After a long moment, she finally let go, retreating several steps back, until she was leaning once again against the exam table where Lynn still lay unconscious.

Frank was frozen, afraid to speak, afraid he would break down and cry like a baby.

Jack turned to look at him as he struggled to try to remember his own humanity, or what little was left of it. Then, instinctively, he remembered something that seemed appropriate at the moment.

Jack held out his big, leathery hand, extending it to Frank.

Frank looked into his friend's eyes. Despite his grotesquely alien appearance, his eyes had not changed. Still blue, still honest, still Jack. Frank took Jack's hand, grasping it firmly, as he stepped forward and took Jack in his free arm to hug him. Almost as quickly as it had happened, it ended, and Jack turned to exit.

Frank followed him out, if only to be with him a moment longer. He watched as Jack slung the heavily loaded pack over his broad alien shoulders with ease.

Jack took a deep breath of the cold, evening air. Winter was almost over now. He looked around the area. Most of the snow had melted away, leaving a fresh, bright, blue-green layer of plant life exposed to soak up the Cetian sun. Jack wondered for a moment if the foliage had always been the same color, or if it too had been re-sequenced from something other than what it originally had been. It was one of many questions he hoped to answer in the years to come. And his answer would be found somewhere out there, in the wilderness of his new home.

Jack turned to look at Frank one last time, face-to-face, meeting his eyes. Although he planned to check on them from time to time, this would probably be the last time they actually made eye contact.

Frank understood the significance of the look Jack was now giving him. "Be safe, Jack."

Jack heard only strange grunts and vocalizations. They all sounded familiar, but were incomprehensible nonetheless. But he understood the sentiment.

Jack reached out and slapped Frank on the shoulder one last time, just as he had when they were young, then turned and walked away.

Frank stood there as Jack walked away, watching until he disappeared from sight.

As Jack moved across the open meadows and rolling hills that would soon become the first, human, extrasolar colony, his despair seemed to fade away. Birds chirped from the distant treetops, animals grunted from distances too far away for any human to hear. Smells, many and varied, wafted through his nostrils, alerting him to the presence of all sorts of creatures large and small. A late winter breeze tossed his long blue-gray hair. Everything was right for him out here.

Jack was finally home.

EPILOGUE

The old man walked slowly down the fused dirt path that led from his home in the old colony to the newer district. As he made his way down the trail, the older, wood and stone buildings gave way to the newer, fused clay buildings. Although they were stronger, cheaper to build, and completely fireproof, they lacked the ambience of their natural predecessors.

The Cetian sun was low in the sky. This time of year, both of Eden's moons lingered near the setting sun, framing them in brilliant oranges and blues from either side. This phenomenon happened only once every sixteen months, and the old man had seen it many times.

He continued past the park, where the children played in the twilight before their parents beckoned them to return home for dinner. The old man enjoyed these evening strolls. The city they had spent so many years building was beautiful with each turn. Meandering pathways leading from little parks, surrounded by homes toward the center of the district where one could find the stores, schools, public safety, and health facilities. This was the third district to be built, and a fourth was already half-completed. Construction had also begun on an underground automated subway system that would connect all the districts together. Eventually, the original colony would be dismantled to make room for a central, downtown district. But they decided to wait until all of the surrounding buildings and homes were completed. No one had said as much, but the old man suspected that they didn't want to evict the original colonists from the homes they had built from scratch.

The old man turned and headed down the narrower path to his right. It was not his usual route, but then again, tonight, his walk had another purpose. Tonight, he would fulfill the last of his promises to his long departed friend.

He stepped up to the door and rang the bell. A young girl with long red hair answered quickly, full of smiles.

"Hello," the child greeted him.

"Why, hello there young lady. Is your father home?"

"Yes sir, won't you come in?"

"Why, thank you, yes," the old man replied as he entered the home, wiping his feet so as not to muss up the floor inside.

He sat on a comfortable chair in the living room. It was an old chair, made by hand, just like the ones in his home. A moment later, the little girl returned with her father in tow.

"Mister Keller," the girl's father greeted. "Can I help you?"

"I sure hope so," the old man exclaimed. "I hate to think I walked all this way for nothing."

The old man shook hands with Matthew and sat back down, as the man of the house took a seat in the matching chair next to him, a look of curiosity on his face.

"I haven't seen you in some time," Matthew said. "Not since Sophia was born. What brings you here this evening?"

"A promise. A promise made long ago to your father." Frank could see that Matthew was intrigued. He was only sorry that he had not been able to tell Jack's son the truth sooner. The time had not been right. Their colony had still been too fragile. But they were strong now, with a population of several thousand, and growing every day. Besides, Frank wouldn't be around forever.

"I don't understand," Matthew said.

"I made a promise to your father, to Jack, that when the time was right, I would tell his kin the truth about what happened on the mission."

"I thought I already knew the truth, Frank. Everyone does."

“You all know the truth that Jack wanted us to tell...until it was safe. And it is now safe, I hope. You see, the truth is that Jack did not die so easily. He was a hard man to kill. There is so much more to the story than what you have been told. In truth, your father may still be alive today, somewhere, out there. In fact, he may be watching us this very moment.”

Matthew wondered if Frank might be going senile. But out of respect for his service to the Eden project, and for all his efforts helping Matthew’s mother rebuild her life, he felt obligated to humor the old man.

* * *

Hours later, Frank stepped through the front door and back into the chilly night air. Winter was almost over, and only small patches of snow remained on the ground. All around him, he could see the blue-green plants, lush and radiant from the melting snows. It reminded him of a night long past. The very night he had made his promise. And now, after all these decades, he had finally kept his word.

As Frank began his walk home, he wondered if the son of his old friend even believed him. It had been so long since it had all happened, though it seemed like only yesterday. Frank had seen the doubt in Matthew’s eyes. But in the end, he had seen something else. He suspected that Matthew Bell did believe his story, or at least wanted to believe it.

No matter. He had kept the first part of his promise. It was now time to find Will’s son, and complete the second.

Thank you for reading this story.
(*A review would be greatly appreciated!*)

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