

Context

An *Earth 2* Fan Novel by Deborah M. Walsh

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It sensed the disruption through its link with the Uly. The dreamplane shivered with the small one's – the boy's – disquiet. The Alonzo was equally disturbed. It did not understand. Death of a member of the community brought a sense of loss to the tribe, a gap which another must fill, but the dead one was returned to the Mother, and the cycle began anew. The loss of one gave birth to another. As the aliens had moved across the land, they had lost others, and those losses had been felt among the people of the Dreamplane, but none like this.

It could not touch the source of the dislocation. The lost one had not been returned to the earth, not like the others the aliens had lost. Unlike its own kind, there was nothing of those lost ones which could be reabsorbed into the cycle, merely a laying to rest of inanimate matter. Whatever made the aliens living was missing from the forms they buried under the soil. The forms decayed, and in their decay, they fed the soil, but there was no rebirth of beings like them.

But the one who seemed to be the source of the distress that vibrated through the dreamplane had not been laid to rest in the soil. Its form did not feed the growing cycle. There was no way to reach the lost one, no way to begin to understand the meaning of this loss. No way for the earth to learn. No way to heal.

* * *

<Voice of Danziger>

"Yesterday morning, we were packing to leave Bennett's ship, each of us recovering - we thought - from the disease caused by feedback from a virus in the EVE computer to the biostat chips none of us knew we had. Another gift from the Council. We were almost ready to pull out when Devon Adair collapsed. Our only doctor, Julia Heller, could not identify what was wrong with her, but it was obvious she was dying, and dying fast. By afternoon, we had remanded her to a cryo-sleep capsule on that ship. By evening, Alonzo and I had gone over every system we could think of to determine the ship's integrity. This morning, we are packing to leave again, but this time, we are less than what we were yesterday. Devon Adair, the woman who brought us all here, sleeps, and the rest of us move on."

* * *

John Danziger sat on the edge of the bunk and stared at his hands. They were big hands, strong hands, with hard-won calluses. Talented hands, hands that could coax life out of the most recalcitrant equipment. But hands that could not heal. Hands that would not hold her again. His clenched those hands, and lifted his head, grimacing. These were hands that had far too many cares to carry, now that Devon Adair was lost to him, to the group.

He'd finished packing up the contents of the tent he shared with True, and now, he supposed, Uly. The only thing left was to fold up the cot on which he sat, and break down the tent itself. Outside the tent, the sounds of the camp being struck filled the air. The pace was slower than usual, not the relaxed mode of a well-trained group, but the funereal tempo of mourning. There was very little talking out in the camp, and there was no laughter. He cocked his head to one side, listening for the sounds of his daughter, for Adair's son Uly, but the children were silent. There was nothing to drown out the keening of his heart.

"Knock it off, Danziger," he told himself angrily, wiped a hand over his stubbled face, and sniffed mightily. "This ain't gettin' us to New Pacifica. An' it sure as hell ain't bringin' Adair back." Impatiently, he pulled his curly blond hair off his forehead and shook his head. He rose suddenly, and swept the tent flap out of the way to stalk out into the camp.

* * *

Activity was progressing, but at the speed the others were moving, they wouldn't be on the road much before mid-day. "Okay, buddy," he muttered to himself, "time to be a leader." To the people around him, he shouted, "Yo, people! Let's get a move on – we gotta get on the road if we're gonna make twenty klicks today!"

"Twenty klicks?" Morgan Martin groaned. Martin had been a petty bureaucrat back at the stations, and had acclimated to life on G889 grudgingly. If anyone was going to complain, it would always be Morgan. "C'mon, Danziger – there's no way we'll do twenty klicks today."

"Damn right if we don't start gettin' our asses in gear, Martin. An' that means you. You pack up the med-tent yet?"

"Julia won't let me," Martin whined, attempting to look pitiful for a moment before he obviously remembered he was talking to John Danziger. The default leader of the Eden Advance group glared at him, and Martin shrugged. "She's still in there, working. Maybe *you* can get her to let me pack up."

"Maybe I can," Danziger agreed testily, brushing past Martin toward the med-tent. He paused at the entrance, looking at each member of the team in turn. "Get to it, folks! We've got a lot of ground to cover today!" Then he ducked into the med-tent.

"I'll cover *you* with ground," Morgan muttered under his breath, but from an arched eyebrow from his wife Bess, demanded, "What?"

"Let's just get the camp packed up, okay, Morgan? And give John a break, will you? He's under a lot of strain," Bess reminded pointedly, glaring up at her husband from an improbably elfin face surrounded by unruly curls.

"Strain? *I'm* under a lot of strain, Bess —" Morgan protested, smoothing his long hair back from his high forehead.

"Morgan. Get. To. Work."

* * *

"Not now, Danziger," Dr. Julia Heller said absently, waving him away as she continued to peer into her microscope.

"*Now*, Julia. We're packin' up to move on." He laid a hand on her shoulder to pull her away from her work, and she shrugged him off violently.

"No! I'm close, I know I am, Danziger! I just need more time!" She whirled around to face him, her mid-length blonde hair in disarray, her face haggard with exhaustion and pain. Tears sparkled in her bright blue eyes as she looked up at him imploringly. "Another day, John. Give me another day before we move out —"

"Julia —"

"No." She swiveled back to her work, took a deep breath, and explained, "I know I can find what's wrong with Devon, John. We don't have to leave her behind. I just need some more time —"

Gently, he grasped both her shoulders and squeezed. "Julia, I made a promise to Devon. We have to go. We have to get to New Pacifica and get that colony set up. We don't have the time, not now." Beneath his hands, her shoulders slumped forward, and he could feel the sobs wracking her slender body. He fought the urge to join her, instead, digging his fingers into her flesh, trying to force her to focus on him instead of her obsession. "Now, Julia. We have to go now." He didn't add that if they delayed much longer, he'd lose the heart to leave. They had to leave now, not only to keep to the schedule of reaching New Pacifica and getting the outpost set up in time for the colony ship's arrival, but so that he wouldn't lose his resolve. Leaving the ship and its precious contents behind was something he couldn't bear to think about, and so, he simply had to do it. "Please, Julia," he added, the ragged emotion that threatened to engulf him escaping in those two words.

Where orders and pleading had failed to distract her, his voice suddenly did. She turned around and looked up into his face with wonder. "John. She never knew, did she?"

Her eyes searched his, and he closed them in pain. A wry, agonized smile flitted briefly across his face. "No. She never knew." It was as much of an admission as anyone had ever forced out of John Danziger, and he ached with the reality of it.

"Oh, John," Julia breathed, and her arms went round his waist as she hugged him. "I'm so sorry."

He endured the embrace in silence a moment, then disengaged himself. "Look, forget it, Heller, okay? I made a promise to a lady I intend to keep. I know you did, too, but yours can hold a while – mine can't. Okay? So let's get this med-tent packed up and get on the road."

"All right," she agreed, brushing the back of her hand across her face. "I guess I can study the samples I took while we're travelling. If I come up with something –"

"The colony ship'll have aircraft – we'll be able to get back here quickly to test it out, okay?"

"In a year, yeah," she pointed out doubtfully.

"The cold-sleep capsule'll keep her safe, Julia. I checked those systems over myself – they're stable and secure. Alonzo helped – he's more familiar with the technology than I am. We won't have anything to worry about on that score. She's not gonna be in there long enough to suffer from cold-sleep sickness, right? Now – let's go?"

She sniffled once more and nodded. "Okay."

* * *

In the end, it was mid-day by the time the Eden Advance team pulled out of the camp they'd set up near the ancient sleep-jumper. Alonzo Solace, their youthful-looking cold-sleep pilot who had once flown such ships before the rest of them had been born, had returned to the hatch one more time to confirm for himself that the locking sequence was secure. John Danziger stood by his beloved vehicles, not looking toward the outmoded spacecraft. Not looking toward the tomb of the group's leader, Devon Adair. Finally, Alonzo rejoined the group, and they started off, slowly, mournfully.

Adair's son, Ulysses, or Uly for short, rode in the cab of their largest vehicle, the TransRover, with Danziger's daughter True, and the Yale-class cyborg tutor, Yale. The cyborg had had another name, in another life before the Council had altered and reprogrammed him and placed him in servitude as a cyborg, but he had not retaken that

name when the memories had finally returned. Unlike most of the Yale cyborgs, this man had not been a violent criminal, but instead had been a political embarrassment to the Council – a military officer who had chosen mercy over duty when faced with a group of political dissidents. Yale was who he had become, not a slave, but a member of the Adair family. And now a member of the Eden family, as well.

Yale knew that there were no real words that could bring succor to the group, although his vast library of religious philosophy and texts offered many choices. This was a new planet, with new rules, and try as he might, he could not formulate the words that would ease their souls. As the TransRover ground its way along the uneven track, he thought about the children, and how this world had changed them.

His charges sat huddled next to him in the vehicle, silent as children should never be. Uly missed his mother terribly, the mother who had sacrificed everything in order to ensure his survival. It was due to that sacrifice that they were all here on this planet, G889.

Diagnosed early in his life with the deadly Syndrome, Uly had been handed a death sentence before his young life had really begun. Few doctors even acknowledged the Syndrome back on the stations which had become humankind's home, but it was those very stations that had given birth to the fatal disease. The sanitary, sterile environment of the stations, designed by Devon's own family over the past two hundred years, had created an immune deficiency in children of Uly's generation that had no cure. The only hope for children like Uly had been a natural environment, with real air, real sunshine, real growing things. The Earth, the birthplace of mankind, had long since been polluted beyond retribution, and only those unfortunates forced to work the last leavings of mankind's depredations still remained there. The Earth's environment had deteriorated to a cesspool of acid rain, congested waterways breeding disease, and exhausted earth.

G889 had been discovered, and it was there that Devon Adair had pinned all her hopes for her son's survival. She had dedicated the previous six years of her life to launching the Eden mission, to colonize G889 with Syndrome children and their families. No Syndrome child had ever survived beyond their ninth birthday, and when the Eden Advance ship had broken free of the stations, Uly had been eight years old.

That departure had been spectacular and dangerous. The Council, the governing body of the stations, had sabotaged the mission, and the ship had been forced to depart nearly 24 hours ahead of schedule, ejecting a Council bomb before they passed through the station portal. The Council had also implanted a biochip in the brain of one of the Ops Crew, and that person had unknowingly damaged the ejectors for the main cargo pods. On coming out of a 22-year cold sleep, the Eden Advance crew had found themselves unable to safely eject the cargo pods and land, and had been forced to crash to the planet in isolated life pods. In the past six months, they had located survivors from two of the pods, but their own had landed thousands of miles east of their planned touchdown. Slowly, they were

making their way across the continent toward New Pacifica, where they would set up an outpost to welcome the colony ship that hopefully still followed them here – a ship containing supplies they had lost in the crash, and 250 Syndrome families hoping for a cure.

G889 had offered a cure, in the form of an indigenous lifeform known as the Terrians. The Terrians had taken Uly and transformed him from the sickly Syndrome child of memory, to the robust young boy sitting beside Yale. Uly had celebrated his ninth birthday that winter, an event that still made Yale shake his head in wonder. The change had come with its own costs, and even now he wondered how human the boy remained. One look at Uly's withdrawn face, the tears that threatened as he resolutely refused to look back toward the ship, told Yale he had little to worry about. The Terrians themselves were without emotion, since they had excised that from their culture centuries ago. Uly was still Devon Adair's son, her hope for the future. Perhaps the hope for all their futures, since they must learn to live in harmony with the beings of this planet if they hoped to survive.

The existence of any intelligent species on G889 had been a shock for the Eden Advance crew, since Council dossiers had insisted the planet was uninhabited. They had since learned that not only had the Council known the planet was inhabited, it had also sent penal colonists and warrior cyborgs, ZEDs, to G889.

More recently, Eden Advance had learned that the Council had also dispatched scientists to study the planet, more than a generation ago, and those scientists had deemed the planet unsuitable for human life. The scientists, led by Bennett and Elizabeth Anson, may have made it unsuitable for human habitation by launching the Council computer EVE into orbit. None of the Eden Advance group had known about EVE, or its control over the biostat chips the Council has implanted in their brain stems without their knowledge. It had been the virus implanted by Bennett in EVE's memory core that had caused them all to get sick, and Eben to die. Purging the virus had cured them all, except for Devon.

They had come here believing the planet to be free of the Council, free of disease, free of danger. They had learned the hard way that it was not. Elizabeth's ominous promise that the planet would reject humanity came too late for them. Too late for the colony ship. Like it or not, humans were coming.

Yale placed his arm around Uly's shoulder and squeezed slightly. The boy looked up at him briefly, his expression blank, then turned his gaze back toward the road ahead. So much pain this young boy had endured in his short life. The certainty of death, the terror of the crash, the months of privation, and now the loss of his mother to some unnamed and incurable – so far – disease. Yale felt a moment of pride, another in a long succession of such moments, in the strength of the boy riding beside him.

And True. Danziger's only child, born of a mother held in neuro-stasis after being

irreparably damaged in an EVA accident on one of the stations. Bright, sharp-witted, quick-tempered, and fiercely loyal, that was True. She was a good foil for Uly, never giving in to the boy's momentary lapses of self-pity, constantly challenging him, intellectually, physically and literally. Yale could not imagine how this trip might have gone had Uly not had someone near his own age with which to interact. Without someone to call friend, beyond his aged tutor.

True was the focus of all of John Danziger's being, his reason for living. Neither father nor daughter had ever intended to step upon the soil of G889. They had been part of the Advance team's Ops Crew, part of the group that would have helped the team land on the planet, and then simply make the return trip to the stations, and there take up their lives again. The crash had changed all that, forcing them to struggle to survive alongside the Advance team. There were times when their presence had spelled the difference between death and survival. True's incessant curiosity and high spirits had, on occasion, embroiled the party in situations which might have been avoided, but he could not conceive of this trek without her. Or Danziger. Together, the Danzigers kept the vehicles running, the equipment working, and Danziger played the part of devil's advocate to Devon's unflinching optimism. He had become, in effect, her other half, the balancing influence that she so desperately needed in order to lead this group.

Yale turned his attention to John Danziger, and wondered just how the gruff mechanic was coping with finding himself without his own opposite number, his own balance. He suspected, as did many of the others, that there was more to his feelings toward Devon Adair than mere antagonism. He knew, better than anyone, just how confusing Devon had found her own emotions where Danziger was involved. He shook his head. So much time wasted. The levelling factor of life on this planet had thrown them together, high-level aristocrat and station drone, and made them equals. How equal, how suited, he doubted either of them realized.

In a way, he felt as though he were seeing them all for the first time. John Danziger, uncomfortable yet stoic in the role of leader instead of challenger. Alonzo Solace, for once the technical expert on the ancient sleep capsule instead of the grounded pilot and Terrian dreamer. Julia Heller, the lost and frightened young woman instead of their unemotional, chroma-tilted doctor. Bess Morgan, so often the soul of the group, its maternal influence, herself in need of mothering. Morgan, her husband, uncomplaining for once. Baines, Walman, Magus and Cameron, each of them caught up in their own losses, their own thoughts. Eben Singh, the first of them to die in the valley behind them, had been one of them. And although they'd all felt that loss, he knew her closest friends felt it more than some.

It was a subdued and melancholy party that trudged along the rough path, and rode in the slow-moving vehicles. A party that, nine days ago, had been dying, and had left more than just an individual, albeit their leader, behind. They had all left a little piece of their souls

behind. As the ATV disappeared over the ridge, he hoped they had not left behind more than they could afford.

* * *

From her vantage point on the crest of the hill overlooking the ... ship, her old memories told her ... Mary looked out across the valley and watched the Eden Advance team move slowly away. Since she had met them, back in the cold, dark days of the winter, she had remained close, yet out of reach of the team. She doubted they knew how close, since she'd turned her back on Yale's invitation to join them. They were her own kind, she knew. Yet she still longed for the song of the planet, the music of the dreamplane, the euphoric feeling of swimming through the earth. But all of that had been denied her when she'd chosen her own kind over the Terrians' justice. And so, she remained aloof, neither human nor Terrian. Simply Mary.

It had taken her some time to come to terms with being Mary again. Mary was the name her parents had given her, a name she had all but forgotten in the years since the Outcasts had killed them at the Biodome. They had been something the Eden Advance people called "eco-terrorists," and they had been sent here as prisoners. They had died here, but she had found life. Her Terrian name was unpronounceable in the human tongue, and she missed the lovely sound of it trilled on Terrian lips. She had never really noticed the differences between herself and the Terrians once they'd adopted her. They had become her people, and she had simply accepted life among them. That she had had to forage for food they did not need, since they absorbed their nutrients from the mother earth through osmosis, had never seemed important. That she had physical needs they did not share had been beneath notice. That she had pale skin, easily damaged, where the Terrians were tall and dark and pliant, more like the plants that hugged the earth than the animals that scurried along it, never seemed to matter. All that had mattered had been the joy of the earth, the unity of the dreamplane, the oneness of the People, the Terrians.

She didn't know if she regretted her decision to help Yale. He had admitted to a crime he had not committed because he believed himself to be irredeemable. The truth had been shown to him, and he had found the will to live, not die needlessly. Something about him had reached her, in that human part of her she'd forgotten, and she'd made her choice. She hadn't believed that her people would exile her for mercy, but mercy was not part of their makeup. The verdict had been delivered, and Terrian justice was justice, right or wrong. The earth rejected her. The dreamplane eluded her. The music of the Terrians was silent for her. She lived apart, outside. Like the Outcasts had. They had found redemption. She could only hope that she would one day, too.

So, she had learned to live outside the tribe. She knew that she could join the Eden Advance group any time she wished; they would not turn her away, Yale had said so. Perhaps it was because she had that option that she elected not to exercise it. Mary

needed to learn who Mary was, in and of herself, not as part of another tribe. Perhaps, she sometimes thought, this was not so much a punishment as a test. And if it was a test, she was determined to pass it.

When the tribe had exiled her, she'd lost her lightning stick. She couldn't call lightning anymore to protect herself, nor to hunt. Everything she'd known was closed to her, even the land had become strange and unknown as she'd travelled behind the Eden Advance crew. She had followed the Edenites, studying what they chose to eat, and had mimicked their example. Sometimes she found the food they chose bitter, unpleasant. At others, she was delighted with the new tastes and sensations she discovered as a result of their experiments. She bore the days in silence, watching, learning, experiencing. There would come a time when she would join them, but that time was not yet here. She would come to them, not in need, but at peace. Until then, she followed.

She had watched them bury the dark-haired woman in the earth of the cliff overlooking the valley, her body swaddled in fabric. The woman had not swum up from the earth, and Mary assumed that this was death. Death like her mother and father. She supposed that one day she would be planted in the earth, and she would not return. She believed that day to be far off, though, and gave it little thought. There was today, and the day after. And the day after that.

Then she had followed them, out of the range of their strange devices, toward the ship. She had observed them entering the ship, and recognized it for what it was. She had realized with a start that her parents had come here, to this place, in a ship much like it. But she had been born on this planet. And so, when the others had fallen ill, she had watched in silence, but not in pain. Not like the others. She wondered briefly if it was because of her link to the Terrians, but then she saw that the boy, Uly, had also become sick. She decided that it was the planet that kept her healthy, especially when the strangers from inside the ship got sick and died. She wondered if ships carried disease, and with that fear, concluded that she would not go anywhere near the ship.

And now they were gone. But they'd left someone behind. She remembered the woman who led them, with respect and something akin to fear. She wasn't used to such strong emotion; she had known nothing of emotion for most of her life, and Devon Adair bristled with it. She was curious as to why they would have left Devon inside the ship, and wondered if she'd been wrong about ships and disease, but her curiosity wasn't enough to risk contagion in case her first guess had been correct.

She stood on the ridge, watching the last stragglers of the Eden Advance party disappear over the next ridge. She shaded her eyes against the sunlight, charting their course in her head. She could not swim the earth, but she was still one with it. She would skirt around the valley of the ship, and catch up with them in the next valley. She was not burdened with unwieldy vehicles that could not pass through tiny crevices and narrow passes. She

was one, healthy and whole, while they were many, weary and weak. Something like a smile touched her lips as she turned away from her perch and made her way to follow them. Always beyond their sight.

* * *

Baines had gone ahead in the DuneRail to scout out a possible camp for the night. Danziger knew that they wouldn't cover much ground today, but at least they'd passed beyond the valley where the ship lay. He felt a little better having it out of sight, although part of him longed to race back there and pound on its hatch until Adair awoke. As they'd filed over the crest of the ridge, he'd felt as though a long-held breath had been released. Not so much a lessening of tension among the group, but a shift in ... balance, he supposed. He had no doubt that Devon was in everyone's thoughts, but out of sight, out of mind had its uses. With the ship obscured from view, the group had stopped glancing back at it, and they'd actually begun to make better time. New Pacifica still lay months to the west, but he'd heard Yale murmur something about a journey of a thousand miles starting with a single step, and he'd approved the sentiment. Unfortunately, their journey was closer to two thousand miles, but still, they were on the move.

As he walked alongside the TransRover, he took stock of their motley company. Spirits were low, and he wasn't at all surprised. For all the arguing Devon could inspire, she inspired loyalty as well. Few people could have held this group together this long through all that they'd been through. He'd never known anyone possessed of such sheer determination. With the possible exception of his daughter. He smiled slightly at the thought – and wondered briefly just why it was that he seemed to surround himself with such strong women. Elle had certainly been no shrinking violet, and True was a reflection of her mother. And Adair? Well, hard-headed was just one of the adjectives that sprang to mind.

Morale had been a problem in the past, yet Adair had always found a way to lift it. She was a natural leader. Maybe there'd been some chroma-tilting in her background, skewing her toward leadership like Julia's had toward medicine. He, on the other hand, was a doer, not a leader. He fixed things, he didn't deal with people. After all the bizarre and unpleasant things they'd learned about the Council since Eden Project launched, he wouldn't be surprised to learn that the Council'd had a breeding program to design their society from the genes up. Yet everyone in the Eden Advance group looked to him to fill the void left by Devon's illness. He knew she'd relied heavily on Yale's advice, and he didn't count himself too proud to do the same. When they camped for the night, he'd talk to the tutor, and see what he had to say.

In the meantime, they could put some ground between them and the ship before the vehicles needed to recharge, and no one was clamoring for decisions right now, so he could allow himself the luxury to observe their party. Some of what Devon had done for

the group would have to be parcelled out to the others – he certainly couldn't shoulder it all himself. And responsibilities would probably help keep their minds off their loss, at least for a while. Yeah, he'd ask Yale for his recommendations, as well. Maybe Julia, too – after all, she was their doctor, and she'd been close to Adair. It certainly couldn't hurt.

So much to learn, so much to do. And so many miles to go before he could hope to return here for her.

* * *

The sun was still high in the sky when Danziger called a halt to recharge the vehicles. Julia took the opportunity to check everyone's vitals, moving from person to person with her diaglove. She wasn't surprised at the dejected faces that turned apathetically toward her as she worked; she shared their feelings. But she was pleased to see that everyone was still recovering nicely now that the biostat chip malfunction had been corrected. That the malfunction had been corrected by revitalizing Reilly/EVE, the orbiting Council computer, concerned her, but that was a problem for another day.

She'd saved Danziger for last, since she knew he'd want to know the results of her examinations.

"How we doin', Doc?" he asked as she pressed the diaglove to his neck.

"Everyone's tired, but we're all recovering," she answered as she studied the readouts on Danziger. "We shouldn't put in a full day on the road, though – everyone's going to need extra rest for the next few days while our bodies recuperate. Our water situation is good enough that everyone can take in extra fluids. We should see what we can do about getting some extra protein, though – that would help everyone build up."

"Good thought. Any ideas?" Danziger demanded.

Julia pulled the glove off and studied Danziger for a moment before replying. She smiled slightly as she realized that it was John Danziger, leader, asking the question, not John Danziger the man with whom she'd almost shared starvation. "Well, on Earth, some species of beans provided almost complete proteins – soya, for example. We have some in the seed supplies. I wonder if there's some way we could start some sort of mobile hydroponics."

"How much water would we need for that, Julia? And how would we transport it? And how would we be able to set up enough seeds to make it worthwhile?"

Julia frowned and shook her head. "It was just an idea," she sighed. She brushed her fly-away hair back from her face. "It'd be nice if we could find another of the cargo pods."

"That would be nice any time," Danziger agreed sourly. "Well, let's break out the semolina for now. Think we can last another couple of days without added protein? I'd like to put some more distance behind us before we break long enough for foraging parties."

Julia nodded. "Yeah. I guess so. I don't envy you, John," she added, her face sympathetic. He grimaced in reply. "Sorry."

"Yeah," he said. "I'm gonna check on the vehicles, okay?"

"Okay," she replied, and watched him move off. She shook her head sadly at the sight of Danziger, usually so full of energy and spark, dragging himself off to the TransRover.

* * *

"Hey, sport, wanna help me check out the vehicles?" Danziger asked True as he climbed up onto the TransRover. She still sat next to Yale and Uly, toying listlessly with her semolina bar.

"Do I have to?" True inquired disinterestedly, shading her eyes from the sun.

"No, you don't have to. But I could use the help. What d'you say?"

"Okay," she sighed, and started to scramble out of her seat beside Uly.

"What about you, Uly? Wanna help?"

Uly snuggled closer to Yale and shook his head. "No, Mr. Danziger. I'll stay here with Yale," he replied, reaching for the tutor's hand and twining his small hand with it.

Yale glanced at Danziger and quirked an eyebrow in his direction. Then he put his arm around Uly's shoulders and squeezed gently. "Why don't you go along, Uly? Everyone should learn about the vehicles – Mr. Danziger could use another apprentice."

"That's okay," True interjected. "My Dad doesn't need another helper while I'm here."

"I can help, too," Uly protested, rising to True's bait. True argued further, and the more she argued, the more Uly wanted to help. In the end, the two children raced each other for the ATV, each claiming greater expertise than the other. The sounds of their disagreement brought a sense of normality to the scene.

Danziger looked up at Yale and smiled. "Thanks. Just what I need – dueling helpers."

Yale smiled back in return, understanding Danziger's genuine gratitude. Uly's despair could

only communicate itself to the group, and make John's job harder. A little competition between the children couldn't hurt. "You're doing fine," Yale commented softly.

Danziger pushed back his hair and sighed. "Think so? Tell me that in a week, okay?"

"Don't worry, John – I will," the tutor told him seriously.

* * *

Morgan Martin leaned in the shade of the TransRover fiddling with a device. Bess leaned over and glanced at it, assuming it was Morgan's ever-present VR gear, and was surprised to notice it was something she'd never seen before. "What's that, Morgan?"

He started guiltily, and looked up from the device. "Receiver," he answered cryptically.

"Receiving from what?" she pressed. His edgy response set off warning bells in her mind; she loved Morgan dearly, had even entered into a lifetime marriage contract with him, something unheard of on the stations, but she knew her husband too well. He was up to something.

"The ship," he replied shortly.

"The ship? The ship where Devon –"

"Shhsh!" he warned, pressing a finger to his lips. "I don't know how Danziger'll react."

"React to what? What have you done, Morgan?" she demanded, moving around to stand in front of him, hands on hips as she glared up at him.

"Nothing," he said, a whine entering his voice. "I just ... I just did a little reprogramming on the computer is all. So that EVE can't control the ship's functions. And I set up a beacon, and this thing picks up the signal."

"Why?"

"So we can monitor the status of the ship," he answered, cringing as he expected a tempest.

Instead, Bess grinned widely at him. "Morgan, that's wonderful! You have to tell Danziger –"

"Tell Danziger what?" came a gravelly voice laden with the promise of menace from the front of the TransRover.

"Morgan's done something wonderful, John. Tell him, Morgan," she urged, stepping back so that her husband could take center stage with Danziger.

Bess was unaware of the source of the animosity between Danziger and her husband, but she was certainly sensitive to its existence. She placed her hand proudly on Morgan's upper arm and nudged him forward encouragingly. "Go on, Morgan," she said.

"Yeah, go on, Morgan," Danziger prodded with a faint sneer.

"Well, I, ah, that is ... I was concerned that leaving the ship unguarded, with EVE operational again, might, well ... ah, put Devon at risk."

Danziger's face drained as the meaning of Morgan's words hit him. It was obvious from his expression that he hadn't considered that possibility, but once Morgan mentioned it, the possibility was all too real. "And?" Danziger prompted urgently.

"So I ... did some work with the computer last night to lock EVE out. After you and Alonzo were finished. Changed the access codes." At Danziger's immobile face, Morgan shuddered, and offered, "I have the codes – they're stored in here. I also wrote them down, there's no worry they're unavailable to us, I just didn't want to leave EVE the ability —"

"Well, I'll be damned, Martin. You actually had a good idea," Danziger breathed.

"See, Morgan?" Bess praised, smiling broadly at her husband. She turned toward Danziger and beamed with pride.

"Yeah," agreed Morgan, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. Bess couldn't understand why her husband was still discomfited, and felt her spirits sink.

"And?"

"And ... I activated a ... beacon," he explained, licking his lips, "so we could monitor the status of the ship." He thrust out the device in his hand toward Danziger, and the mechanic glanced at the readouts briefly. "Everything's fine. See?"

"Yeah ... so why are you so nervous, Morgan? Sounds like a great idea to me. Unless there's a problem ..."

"Well, there is the *slight* possibility that someone else could pick up the signal," Morgan suggested uneasily.

"Someone. Like?"

"Well, anyone who has a device capable of reading the signal."

"Like penal colonists."

Morgan nodded miserably.

"Or an incoming Council ship," Danziger guessed. Morgan nodded again. Danziger looked at him for a long moment, as though enjoying drawing out Morgan's agony. Then he shrugged. "The same is true of any of our pods. EVE already knows the location of the ship. Locking out its control of the ship is a plus. Being able to monitor the status of the ship will ... well, it'll put our minds at ease, I guess, unless something happens to it. Solace checked the security on the hatch – no worries there. That hull could withstand just about anything anybody could throw at it. Power source is self-regenerating. What's the range on that thing?" he asked, nodding toward the device.

"I don't know. At least a couple thousand miles."

"So we could monitor it all the way to New Pacifica. Thanks," Danziger added, putting out his hand. Morgan stared at the hand a moment, then realized that Danziger was asking for the unit. He balked briefly, then turned it over with a sigh. "Good work, Martin. Next time, check with me first, okay?" With that, Danziger turned and stalked away.

Morgan let out a long breath and sagged against the side of the TransRover. Bess hugged him enthusiastically, murmuring, "That was a wonderful idea, Morgan!"

"Yeah," was all he could say as he closed his eyes with relief.

* * *

Baines met them on the trail an hour later and reported a suitable campsite several kilometers ahead.

"Is there a freshwater source nearby?" Julia asked after Baines had passed on his information.

Pulling off his headgear and scratching at his scalp, Baines nodded. "Freshwater, yeah – a stream. Some of those berries you said we could eat, some other stuff that looks promising. Looks like a decent place to camp, maybe even for a coupla days."

"No," Danziger replied emphatically. "One night, then we're on our way."

"Well, John, maybe if this site has edible foodstuffs, we should spend some time there replenishing our stocks." At Danziger's shaking head, Julia added, "John, we're getting low

on fresh food. It's not healthy. No one's at 100%, not after the feedback virus from EVE. I understand your reasoning for leaving the area of the ship – as a doctor, I think I have to agree with it in terms of morale. But John, these people need to rest, to recharge. This valley sounds ideal – out of sight of the ship, but the right kind of environment for us to grow stronger. As your doctor, John, I'm recommending –"

"Okay, okay, Heller. Give it a rest." Danziger turned impatiently toward the others, stepped out of the tight circle he shared with Baines and Julia, and announced that the group was moving out. "We'll stop tonight at the camp Baines found. If it checks out, we may stay there for a couple of days and restock our supplies. Now, everybody – let's go!"

Grumbling and groaning answered Danziger's announcement, but the group fell in behind him with a semblance of enthusiasm as Baines climbed back into the DuneRail and swung around to face down the trail.

* * *

It had been weeks since Alonzo had last walked the dreamplane, but he slipped into it as though he hadn't left. The bleached out light surrounded him, and he turned, trying to see where the Terrians had brought him this time. The cave was unfamiliar, its walls pocked and scarred, gnarled roots jutting out from its surface at irregular intervals. It looked no different, really, from any other Terrian cave he'd seen, except for the fact that it was empty.

Abruptly, a Terrian swarmed up through the rough dirt of the cave floor. Then another. Rank after rank of them shot up out of the ground, like stalks of wheat. Alonzo whirled, taking in the numbers of Terrians that erupted out of the floor around him. It was as though he were suddenly surrounded by an army of the tall, cadaverish aliens, their misshapen mouths working silently. He had never seen so many Terrians at once, not in all his months of dreaming with them or in personal contact. This had to either be a very large tribe, or several tribes combined. Although the Terrians did not war among themselves, such direct cooperation among different tribes was not common.

"What's going on?" Alonzo demanded, dropping into a defensive posture. Where the Terrians were tall and muscular, he was slight, not small for a human, but dwarfed by the aliens. Although he was in excellent physical shape, here on the Dreamplane, physical prowess meant nothing; one's ability to perceive and interpret the dreamscape was everything. Alonzo didn't have a sense of personal menace; the Terrians had rarely shown any sort of antagonism toward him. But he had a feeling of confusion, or discord, emanating from the numerous Terrians that encircled him.

A single Terrian stepped forward, separating out from the mass of beings. It held its lightning stick upright, and stopped right in front of Alonzo. Tilting its bullet-shaped head to

one side, it trilled a question.

Alonzo straightened slowly, tilting his own head as he absorbed the question. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

The Terrian stared at him for a moment, then pointed with its staff. The wall in front of Alonzo seemed to disappear, melting into a scene from the camp around the ship only the day before. He saw Devon observing them pack up the camp, and he was surprised to realize that she'd looked sick even then, as the rest of them had been rejoicing in their newfound health. She smiled sadly, then walked around the tent and collapsed. He saw them all hurrying to her, Julia frantically trying to revive her, the anguished faces of the Eden Advance team peering down at her, Uly pushing his way through the crowd to reach for his mother. And finally, he saw himself and Danziger placing her into the cryo-tube, surrounded by the rest of them. He watched, a tear trickling down his cheek, as Uly placed his makeshift Terrian staff against the glass of the crypt.

Alonzo turned away from the scene to look at the Terrian again. "Yes, we grieve," he said softly. "She means so much to all of us. Can you cure her?"

The Terrian raised its chin and warbled another question. Alonzo listened carefully and shook his head. "I don't understand the question," he replied, frowning. Usually, the Terrians made him understand through their dream communication, almost as if they planted the words and comprehension of them in his mind. It frustrated him that he couldn't grasp the concepts they fed him. The Terrian repeated its question, and still Alonzo looked confused. Alonzo felt the eyes of the Terrian on him, holding him, and then it turned away. It took its place with the assembled ranks of its fellows, and with a great rush of sound like atmosphere sucked out into vacuum, the Terrians dropped back into the earth.

* * *

Julia sat beside Alonzo in the TransRover, their turn to ride instead of walk. She half-dozed in the vehicle, lulled by its steady motion. After the break, Baines had turned over the Rail to Walman, and the Martins had traded off the ATV with Cameron and Magus. Yale and the children strode alongside, Uly dragging a stick in the dust, True chattering to her father. Danziger had waved off his chance to travel in one of the vehicles, claiming a need for exercise. It all looked so normal, she found herself glancing around, instinctively searching for Devon. She frowned as she recognized it for the reflex it was. Turning toward Alonzo to distract herself, she realized that her companion was asleep, his eyelids moving rapidly in REM sleep. His lips moved silently, and she made a grab for her diaglove.

Danziger must have seen her put on the diagnostic device, because he turned now toward the TransRover, and moved closer to the side of the vehicle.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Julia answered as she reviewed the readouts. "He's dreaming."

"Terrian dreams?" Danziger ventured warily.

She nodded, blowing out a breath. "The first time in weeks." Alonzo Solace was the only adult in the party to communicate directly with the Terrians on the dreamplane. Early in his career as a cold-sleep pilot, he'd lost the ability to dream normally, but the Terrians had found a way to restore that ability for their own purposes. The dreams were sometimes informative, sometimes upsetting, and Julia was always concerned about the affect of the dreams on his system. She pressed the diaglove against Alonzo's neck and nodded again, this time to herself. "His vitals are stable. But whatever he's dreaming about, it's upsetting him — his adrenaline's up."

Suddenly, Alonzo bolted up in his seat, his eyes wide open. His abrupt movement almost sent Julia toppling out the other side of the TransRover, and she had to grab for a support to steady herself. "Alonzo?"

"Wha—?" he muttered, glancing anxiously around him.

"Take it easy, buddy," Danziger told him, patting him on the shoulder. "You were catching some zzzs with the diggers."

"Yeah, I know," Alonzo agreed, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

"You wanna talk about it?" Danziger asked, his face a mixture of hope and suspicion.

Alonzo turned toward Danziger, and shook his head. "Not yet. I need to think about this one for a while — I'm not sure what they're trying to tell me. Or ask me. I'm not even sure why they contacted me —"

"Was it about Uly?" Danziger pressed.

Alonzo smiled faintly. "Now you sound like Devon."

Danziger's face closed, and his lips pressed into a grim line. "Yeah, well, she put me in charge of her kid. Guess the question comes with the territory."

"No, John, it wasn't about Uly. At least, I don't think so. I think maybe it was about Devon. But I'm not sure ..."

"Okay, buddy. Think on it. But don't go holding anything back, okay?" Danziger conceded

gruffly.

"Okay, John," Alonzo consented, and the team's replacement leader patted him on the arm and turned away, rejoining Yale and the children.

"Was it really about Devon, Alonzo?" Julia inquired softly after Danziger had moved out of earshot.

"Yeah, I think so," Alonzo answered absently. "It was weird – we just couldn't communicate. Like ..."

"Like what, 'Lonz?"

"Like I don't know, Doc. I really gotta think about this one for a while. Okay?" He turned liquid brown eyes toward her, and she felt destined to lose herself in those eyes. She found herself nodding agreement before she consciously chose to do so.

* * *

They still had a little daylight left by the time they moved into the area Baines had identified for a camp. They'd only put about ten kilometers between themselves and the ship, but Danziger felt a little better for having gotten them this far this first day. He started checking over the vehicles, unstrapping needed supplies as the others fell into their usual routines.

This was the one part of the day that never really needed orders to be shouted, or butts to be prodded. Everyone was always eager to set up camp, have a meal, and settle down for the night. Walman helped Julia pull her medical equipment off the TransRover, then went to work immediately on setting up the perimeter sensors. Alonzo started driving the portable lights into the ground, right behind Walman. Martin was helping Bess set up their tent, after which they'd start assembling the evening meal. Only True and Uly seemed to have no specific task to perform, but before he had to deal with them, Yale stepped in and suggested they help Julia.

Activity suited John just fine. Activity without somebody at his elbow asking fool questions and probing too deeply into his psyche suited him even better. Not that he would have minded the company of certain people, but the opportunity to just get the job done unhindered had its attractions. Before long, he had the TransRover unpacked, and was setting out the components of Chez Danziger. As he pounded the tent stakes into the ground, he realized he'd have to discuss Uly's situation with Yale. Not to mention True, who'd probably pitch a fit over sharing her tent – and her Dad – with Uly Adair.

Yale saved him the trouble. The children were still occupied assisting Julia in resetting the med-tent, and the tutor came over to John and cleared his throat gently.

"John, I've been thinking —"

"Me, too, Yale. About Uly —"

"I was thinking that perhaps we should simply set our tents very close together tonight. I know Devon asked you to look after him, and I respect that. But I think too many changes too quickly will not be good for the children, either of them."

Danziger straightened slowly from the tent peg, and looked into the tutor's eyes. "Yeah, I agree," Danziger replied, pushing his unruly hair out of his eyes. "Y'know, I don't mean to —"

"I know, John. I do understand. I am not a parent. I am a tutor. That doesn't mean I love Uly any less than a parent, but there are times ..." he sighed heavily, "when only the touch of a parent will do. Uly never knew his father; you're the only male role model he's ever had. He looks up to you. He knows his mother trusted you. And you have demonstrated again and again your ability as a father. Both to True and to Uly. I feel no ... disloyalty ... in Devon's request."

Danziger nodded slowly, swallowing hard. The quiet dignity of the man always took him by surprise. Nothing he'd ever heard of the Yale units matched the man he had learned to call friend. He thrust his hand out toward Yale wordlessly, and the tutor accepted the hand with a gentle smile. "Let's get your tent set up, then, neighbor."

* * *

The evening meal had been uneventful, although the tubers Bess had roasted over the fire had tasted good after the long day on the road. Conversation had been desultory at best; at times, it had fallen off into awkward silences that threatened to stretch on forever. The group had broken up early, everyone wandering off to their own tents, leaving Danziger alone by the fire to stand the first watch. He knew he'd have trouble sleeping, and he wanted to put it off as long as possible. The later he waited, the more likely he'd fall into a dreamless sleep of exhaustion.

He slung the Mag-Pro over his shoulder and started his first circuit of the evening, checking the perimeter defenses with care. Next, he looked over the condenser unit, then the generator. All was in order. As he made his way around camp, the soft murmur of private discussions filtered out of the tents, and he found himself feeling lonely in the crisp cool of the night.

Not lonely for just anyone's company; Danziger had never been comfortable with people as a rule. The people he'd called friends over the years had been selected carefully —

usually people of his own class, his own work ethic, who felt at home with grease on their hands and a toolbelt round their waists. People like Alex Wentworth and Les Fierstein. All his Ops Crew, really. He'd never expected to find that same roll-your-sleeves-up-and-get-down-to-work attitude in someone from the highest echelons of the stations. Even Morgan Martin sometimes surprised him, although not often. Walman, Baines, Magus, Cameron and Eben, God rest her soul, they were from his side of the credit chip. Yale ... well, Yale was in a class by himself. And Bess Martin? You had to be tough to survive on old Earth. He'd even liked O'Neill in the short time he'd known him, although the man's macho attitude had gotten him killed. More than once, actually.

No, Devon Adair had been one shock after another. Imperious, yes, but willing to listen, if you shouted loud and long enough. Obsessed with her kid. But that was something he could understand and even respect. And she learned. Everything this planet threw at her, she took in stride and made adjustments. As the muted conversations dwindled around him, and the silence of the night settled around his shoulders, he found himself missing her quiet confidence ... quiet, hah! The woman wore her confidence like armor. But she could be a good listener. And she had a great laugh. And sometimes she pissed him off bad enough he had to curb the urge to belt her, woman or no woman. He hadn't met anyone who could make him feel like that since Elle.

He grimaced at himself, mooning like some lovestruck schoolboy from the upper levels, and turned back toward the perimeter. That's when he saw the lone Terrian standing just outside the sensor web.

Adrenaline surged through his system at the sight of the towering figure cast in eerie shadows by G889's twin moons. Instinctively, he searched out the tent containing Uly, and moved quickly toward the tent flap.

"Yale!" he called softly. The sound of rustling answered his hail, and a moment later, Yale stuck his head out.

"What is it, John?" the tutor asked worriedly.

"Terrian. Uly okay?"

Yale followed Danziger's line of sight, and his eyes narrowed at the Terrian standing silent sentinel at the perimeter's edge. Then he glanced back into the tent and nodded. "He just dropped off. I don't know if he'll sleep well, but he's asleep right now."

"Good. Keep an eye on him. And I'll keep an eye on *him*," Danziger vowed, nodding toward the Terrian.

* * *

They'd picked a good place to camp for the night – defensible, with a source of clean water, and abundant food at hand. As the chill settled around her, she envied them their campfire and their tents, but she huddled closer into her blankets and willed the cold away. She had spent colder nights on the trail behind them, nights when her stomach had growled its hunger at her, and her bones had ached with the chill. Before, she would have simply sunk into the earth, and remained warm in its embrace. But that had been denied her, and so she learned to live like a human again.

She had chosen a spot on the slope above them, where she could see into the camp, but her presence was screened by trees. She built no fire, and she had no artificial lights, so she blended into the darkness as she had once blended into the earth. The camp was silent now, empty except for the man, John Danziger, who patrolled its perimeter like a frustrated predator. Suddenly, she felt rather than saw the Terrian rise up from the earth, taking a position just outside the device that circled the camp. She knew how pitiful a defense that device was to one who swam the earth; she had penetrated it herself on more than one occasion. That the swimmer had chosen to stand outside the line meant that it had no intention of entering the camp, merely announcing its presence. She yearned to reach out to it on the dreamplane, to divine its purpose, but try as she might, the dreamplane was closed to her.

She watched with interest as Danziger reacted to the Terrian, conferring briefly with Yale, then returned to his patrol, always keeping a wary eye on the Terrian. In her nest of blankets, she smiled. Something was going to happen, and soon. And that something might just allow her entrance back into the earth.

* * *

The Terrian had been standing immobile at the camp's edge for only a few minutes when Alonzo came out of the tent he shared with Julia. Danziger was still making his circuit of the camp, careful not to allow the Terrian to distract him from his real purpose, but he'd kept half-an-eye on the digger no matter where he was. The sight of Alonzo confronting the enormous creature brought him a moment's relief, but when Uly walked out toward the Terrian a few minutes later, John tensed and checked the charge on the Mag-Pro.

Cautiously, Danziger completed his perimeter tour, then came up quietly behind Alonzo and Uly. By now, Yale and Julia had followed them. Alonzo turned toward Danziger as though he'd been waiting for him to join them. Danziger held the Mag-Pro defensively as he walked up to Solace.

"It's all right, John. He's not here for Uly," Alonzo assured him immediately.

"Then what?" Danziger demanded suspiciously.

"I'm not sure. I still haven't made sense of my dream this afternoon. But he's the Terrian from that dream. Maybe —"

Danziger bit off, "How can you tell?" as the Terrian trilled something then, a creepy sound coming from its lips, which always looked to Danziger as though they were half-decomposed. Even creepier was the way both Alonzo and Uly snapped to attention, hanging rapt on every ... well, every whatever it was the Terrian was doing.

Alonzo listened for a moment, then turned back to Danziger. "He wants us to dream with him. He says the dreamplane is very strong in this valley. I guess there's a lot of Morganite here. They don't seem to understand us any better than I understood the dream this afternoon. And it's important that we do understand each other," Alonzo explained urgently.

Danziger took a deep breath and turned to Julia. "Doc?"

She glanced from Alonzo to Uly to Danziger. "I'll get my diaglove. Hold on, okay?"

"Make it fast, Julia," Alonzo advised, and she sprinted across the camp to their tent.

"Is it necessary for Uly to participate in this?" Yale asked suddenly, his hand held protectively on the boy's shoulder.

Uly looked up at him with eyes much older than his years. "It's important, Yale," the boy told him seriously. "I'll be okay."

Out of breath and panting, Julia trotted back to them, her diaglove securely mounted on her arm. "Okay. I'm ready," she gasped.

Alonzo smiled then, a sweet smile that made Julia blush. "Better use it on yourself, Doc — and tomorrow I'm putting you on a new exercise program."

"I get quite enough exercise with the pace Danziger'll be pushing us," she rejoined, and Danziger coughed meaningfully.

"We don't have all night, and I'm gettin' cold just standin' here," Danziger complained pointedly.

Alonzo's face grew serious again, as though the light had been switched off. He got that strange faraway look he sometimes got when talking about the Terrians. Uly looked up at him with utter trust, and as one, the two of them dropped to the ground, flattening their hands against the soil. The Terrian crouched down across the perimeter sensor from them, its own massive hands pressed against the earth. They fell into an uncanny silence as

Danziger, Julia and Yale waited.

* * *

The dreamscape was unusually vivid this time, and Alonzo turned to find Uly standing beside him. They were back in the valley with the ship, and their Terrian companion stood a few feet away. The ship remained where they'd left it, untouched, sunlight glinting off its polished surface so brightly, it hurt Alonzo's eyes. The leaves on the bushes and trees were so clear, they seemed to be cut from crystal.

The Terrian looked at them and trilled. Uly listened intently, and trilled back a response. With his connection to the Terrians, Alonzo didn't find Uly's mastery of the Terrian language as weird or unsettling as the others did, but he still marvelled at how the boy had grasped the complex language.

Uly was telling the Terrian that his mom was in the ship. The Terrian shifted its head in query, and Uly explained further than Devon was sick, and the ship was keeping her alive. Alonzo knew that while bright, Uly didn't know all of the specifics, and when the Terrian warbled another interrogative, he took over the conversation.

"The ship is keeping her frozen, so she doesn't die," Alonzo explained patiently. "She's sleeping, until we can find a cure."

This seemed to puzzle the Terrian even more. It responded in its own language that the winter hibernation was over in this part of the world, that the dreamtime was ended.

"No, not that kind of sleep. The disease she has is killing her," Alonzo asserted, casting an anxious glance toward Uly. The boy looked up at the Terrian impassively. Alonzo pressed on. "We placed her in cold sleep, like ... like freezing in the ice ... so that she wouldn't get any sicker. When we can, we'll come back for her and cure her – wake her out of her sleep."

"Can you cure my mom?" Uly asked simply, the pure confidence and trust in his voice breaking Alonzo's heart.

The Terrian glanced at the ship, then back at Uly. It looked down at the boy and trilled softly. Alonzo took a step back in shock. The Terrian had asked, "Why?"

* * *

"This isn't good," Julia said worriedly, passing the diaglove over Alonzo. "His heart rate is elevated, and his endorphins are spiking."

"What about Uly?" Yale asked urgently.

Julia moved quickly to the boy, and proceeded with diagnostics. "Not as bad. His readings are closer to normal, but they're still higher than normal. Wait – his alpha rhythms are increasing – I think they're coming out of it."

Alonzo's eyes shot open, eyes full of turmoil. Uly's opened more slowly, but there were tears trailing down his cheeks. The Terrian stood abruptly and dropped into the earth. Alonzo leaned forward on his arms, breathing raggedly. "I don't understand," he moaned. "I just don't understand!"

Uly turned his face toward Yale, and whispered, "Why won't they help my mom?"

* * *

"True, honey, I need your help."

"What is it, Dad?" True asked sleepily, rubbing her eyes with her fists.

John Danziger sat on the edge of his daughter's cot, and brushed her hair back from her eyes. "I need you to look after Uly tonight, sport. He's had a bad shock, and I think he could use the company."

"About his mom?" Danziger nodded. "Okay. I guess I can do that. What're you gonna do?"

"I'm going to look after Alonzo – he's had a bad shock, too."

"The Terrians?" Again Danziger nodded. "I'm glad I don't dream with them," True shuddered. "Too creepy."

"Yeah," Danziger agreed fervently, gently patting True's shoulder. "Look, True – don't tell Uly you're supposed to be looking after him, okay? Yale'll stay with you guys for a while, and Uly wouldn't like it –"

"If he thought I was his babysitter. Got it, Dad."

Danziger had to smile at the maturity of his daughter. Oh, she could be a royal pain in the butt, and truth was she could be wild when the spirit moved her. But at the core of her, there was a strength he admired, even envied. Y'done good, Elle, he said to himself.

Yale called out from beyond the tent flap at that moment, and Danziger invited him and Uly in. Uly was arguing softly with the tutor, and Yale simply sailed into the tent, ignoring

Uly's protests. Another trait Danziger envied – ignoring True had never been something he was good at, except at the wrong times.

"I want you guys to stick together, you understand, Uly?" Danziger directed to the boy.

"But the Terrians won't hurt us, Mr. Danziger –"

"Humor me, okay, kid? I'm gonna look after Alonzo – you get some rest. There won't be anymore Terrian dreams tonight, right?"

Uly nodded solemnly. "No, sir."

The crestfallen expression on the boy's face cut right through Danziger's soul, and he had to fight back the urge to grab the kid and hug him. True was feeling generous, but not that generous, he was sure, and he wasn't certain how Uly'd react to such an overture from him. Not for the first time, and not for the only reason, he wished Devon were here. He contented himself with a hand on Uly's shoulder. "You two look after each other, okay, champ? True?"

"Yes, Dad," True agreed, somewhat impatiently.

"Yes, Mr. Danziger," Uly echoed, staring at his feet, which he scuffed in the dirt of the tent floor.

"I'll be in the med-tent, Yale," Danziger told Yale, and with a brief clap on Yale's upper arm, he left the tent.

* * *

"Julia, I'm fine," Alonzo protested as Julia pressed him back onto the medical cot. She ran the diaglove over him, studying the readouts intently.

"Actually, you're exhausted," Julia pronounced in her official voice.

"Not so exhausted I can't make better use of this bed than just lyin' in it," Alonzo suggested with a waggle of his eyebrows.

"Cool it, flyboy," she replied shortly.

"What's 'Lonz up to now, Doc?" Danziger asked from the tent entrance.

"Nothin'. *Now*," Alonzo answered meaningfully.

"Good. Then you can tell me about your dream," the mechanic ordered him, kicking a stool over and dropping onto it.

"John, I –"

"Save it. You've had two Terrian dreams in a twenty-four hour period –"

"More like twelve –" Julia corrected.

"Okay, twelve. That's not usual. And both times, Devon figured in those dreams, am I right?"

Alonzo nodded morosely.

"So. What's the story?"

"That's what I'm not sure of, Danz. Yeah, both times Devon was in the dreams, but I just can't connect with the Terrians on this. It's like ..."

"Like what?"

"Like ... like we just don't have a common ground on whatever it is they're asking. They don't understand what's going on with her, with us – they don't understand why it's important to us. But obviously what we're feeling is ... I dunno ... sort of leaking onto the dreamplane so they're aware of it, even if they don't understand it."

"What? Devon being sick?"

Alonzo stared at his hands for a long moment, toying with his knuckles. "Yeah, I think that's part of it. I think they don't understand why she's important to us. Maybe why any of us are important."

Danziger looked at him blankly, but Julia started to speak. "It makes a weird sort of sense – the Terrians are tribal, but we've seen little evidence that they act independently. The group makes decisions and they act on those decisions, but there's been no real ... individual action."

"Two *individuals* killed Mary's parents," Danziger reminded her.

"And the tribe exiled them. We've always assumed it was because they killed those people. What if it was for acting outside the will of the tribe?"

"Are you suggesting they don't understand the concept of a leader?"

"I'm going further than that – I'm suggesting they don't understand the concept of the individual. Think about it, John – they communicate in a manner that's communal – the dreamplane. They act as a unit. We've never met any single Terrian who's in charge. And what was it you said the Elder told you, Alonzo?"

"That at one time the Terrians were more 'individuated' than they are now. And when Morgan set off that Geolock, they were disturbed by the fact that humans think with many minds, that no one human could speak for all humans. The Terrians each speak for the others in their individual tribes. D'you think that's it – they're confused by our ... focus ... on Devon as an individual?"

"But they singled Uly out when we got to this planet. They must understand the concept of the individual – why else would they have cured him?" Danziger challenged.

"Because he was the one component in our group they could reach," Julia pointed out reasonably. She glanced at the two men and smiled faintly. "They reached out to Alonzo because he was the one most capable of dreaming with them. Maybe all those years without dreams strengthened his ability to function on the dreamplane. Uly was the only one of us who was sick when we arrived – all the rest of us were in pretty normal physical shape, considering a 22-year cold sleep. He was the only one capable of undergoing the change they made in him."

"Okay, so maybe they *don't* know what an individual is," Danziger capitulated. "We've seen that the tribes don't all think alike, so they're not just mindless drones, but they don't have a single leader. So? What's the problem?"

"The problem is ... I don't know what the problem is," Alonzo admitted with a sigh. "I don't know if it's because we're disturbing them with our emotions, or if they want to help and don't know how –"

"Can they?" Danziger interrupted.

"Can they what?"

"Can they cure Devon?"

"I don't know. As far as they're concerned, she's in hibernation. They don't understand what we've done with her, or why. Or why it's important to us that she be cured at all. That's what's so frightening about this last dream – they couldn't comprehend why."

"When you think about it, rationally, I mean," Julia explained, "it's amazing that we haven't had similar incidents in the past." At the blank looks she received from Danziger and Alonzo, she elaborated, "Two very different cultures, with entirely alien cultural contexts."

Much of their ... symbology ... means nothing to us. We don't have the context. The same is true of them. That's why they elected to have one person be their spokesperson among us. Through one central ... lens, if you will, we can see into their culture. And you serve the same purpose back to them, 'Lonz.'

"What about Uly?" Alonzo asked.

"He doesn't have enough of the cultural language to serve the same function. Uly probably has a greater understanding of the Terrian culture than you do, but he doesn't have the corresponding understanding of human culture to put it in context."

"Sounds like Mary – she didn't have the human component," Alonzo suggested.

"She did, only her understanding was like Uly's – that of a child," Julia countered.

"So, what do we do?" Alonzo asked plaintively.

"I'm goin' back on watch. He in any shape to take the next watch, Doc?" Danziger inquired.

Alonzo started to say, "Yes," but Julia overruled him. "I'll take the next watch, Danziger. I want Alonzo to get some rest. Terrian dreaming isn't like normal REM sleep. It takes a lot out of him."

"I can be the judge of that, Julia –" Alonzo protested.

"She's the doctor," Danziger pointed out as he rose from the stool.

"And the doctor says get some sleep," Julia commanded. "When do you want me to relieve you, John?"

"Make it an hour. I'll see you in the morning, flyboy," Danziger replied, and exited the med-tent.

"An hour," Alonzo repeated, reaching for Julia.

"An hour in which you could be sleeping. In your own bed, alone."

"*Our* bed," Alonzo amended.

"I'm on duty. You're under doctor's orders."

"I'd rather be under the doctor ..." he grinned salaciously at her.

"Out!"

* * *

After Julia relieved him an hour later, Danziger looked in on True, Uly and Yale, and found them all sleeping peacefully. He smiled faintly to himself, then stumbled over to Yale's tent and fell face-down on the cot. He paused only long enough to yank off his shoes, and throw back the covers to crawl under them, and curled in on himself on the bed. Within moments, he was asleep.

* * *

She'd watched, enviously, as the Terrian had joined with Alonzo and the boy Uly on the dreamplane. The other humans had stood by, but they had not entered the dreamplane. She hungered for the communion of the dreamplane, and found the communication method of the humans clumsy and time-consuming. Perhaps that was one reason she travelled alone; she didn't have to resort to the unfamiliar and uncomfortable rigors of speech.

Alonzo and Uly had been ... upset, that was the word ... on exiting the dreamplane. They had not been able to comprehend the Terrian's thoughts. That was strange in itself. Terrian communication was so much clearer than words. Now the camp had settled down again, and the doctor, Julia, patrolled the perimeter with Alonzo at her side.

Squatting on the ground, her hands pressed flat against the earth, Mary felt the blurring of physical reality that was the edge of the dreamplane, tantalizingly close. Someone else was about to enter the dreamplane. Not Alonzo. The Terrians were reaching out to the others in an attempt to get across their message. She smiled to herself and relaxed her body, letting her eyes drift shut. Just a little closer, and she might yet join them ...

* * *

It didn't feel like a normal dream. The light was weird – leached of color, like in the pre-dawn. He stood outside, although he couldn't remember coming out of the tent. The camp was nowhere to be seen; he was alone. Trees rustled around him, and as he turned slowly around, he realized where he was. He stopped, not wanting to see what he knew awaited him. Finally, it seemed he had no choice; he turned around and looked at the ship.

The ship was exactly as they had left it, the hatch sealed. Nothing had changed. He cursed under his breath, and started to turn away again, trying to will himself awake. Then he heard her.

"John? John, are you there?"

The voice sounded far-off, as though muffled. Which it would be if she were really calling from inside the ship. He took a step toward the ship, then halted, shaking his head. "This is just a dream."

"John? Danziger! Answer me!"

"Always givin' orders, Adair," he complained, but a smile started to tug at the corners of his mouth. With a shrug, he faced the ship squarely, and walked toward the hatch. He looked down at it a moment, then made his decision, quickly keying in the entry sequence. The hatch opened under his hand, and he climbed down into the ship.

It was eerily quiet, the only sound the faint hum of electronics at work keeping the one remaining cryo-crypt functional. He stepped gingerly, half-expecting it all to crumble away. Finally, he came into the compartment containing the sleep capsules. Blue light spilled across the metallic floor, making everything look cold and unearthly. Well, what did he expect, standing in a dream ship on a planet 22 light years from home?

"You have to make them understand, John," he heard her say, and he wheeled around to look into her face behind the cryo-tube's glass-like wall. Her lips didn't move, not a muscle twitched. She still stood immobile, frozen in time in the tube. "It's our only hope, John. The Terrians, the earth itself, must understand."

"Devon?" he whispered. "Where are you? I can see you, but it's not you, is it?"

"I'm here, John. Here on the dreamplane. You can do it, John. You can help them understand."

"Understand what, Adair? What am I supposed to make the diggers understand?"

"Us, John. Make them understand us."

Us. Us humans? Us Eden Project? Or us Adair and Danziger? Devon and John? "What about us?"

"Who we are. Why we're here. How we fit in."

"That's a laugh, Adair. I don't even understand half of it. You want me to explain existentialism to Terrians?"

There was a brief moment of silence, and Danziger could swear he could see her fuming behind the cryo-chamber wall, despite the fact she hadn't moved. "Help them understand

what we mean to one another, John. All of us."

He walked up to the crypt then, and placed his hand on the glass, not feeling the cold he knew must be there. "How can I help them understand what you mean to me, Adair? When I'm not even sure?"

"You can do it, John," she told him gently. "Look into your heart."

"Damn you, Adair. I'm not cut out for this sort of shit. This is more your line."

"Have faith in yourself, John. I do."

A whooshing sound erupted behind him, and Danziger whirled to face the lone Terrian who rose improbably from the ship's deck ... a deck that had inexplicably become dirt and stone. Danziger swallowed his revulsion and stepped up to the Terrian. "She says I have to make you understand. So – what is it you want to know?"

The Terrian regarded Danziger silently for a moment, then cocked its head and trilled softly. Danziger frowned then answered, "Sorry, I don't understand the local lingo. I think we need a translator. Devon –" he started, turning around to face the cryo-tube again. He gasped at the sight of Devon's aging body withering before his eyes, the hair white and brittle, the face wrinkled and sunken. "No!" he cried desperately, and raced to the tube, frantically punching in the release code. He cursed himself as he realized he was using the old code, the one before Morgan's changes. He howled as he watched helplessly as Devon's body collapsed, a bundle of bones with parchment-like skin stretched tautly over it. Within moments, she'd been reduced to dust that swirled at the bottom of the tube. He dropped to his knees, his face pressed against the glass, his tears unnoticed as he repeated again and again, "No."

* * *

Mary's eyes opened abruptly, staring unseeing across the valley to the blaze of light around the tent where Danziger thrashed in his cot. She had reached the dreamplane! She had stood, awash in the eerie light of it, and watched John Danziger approach the ship where Devon Adair remained. She had heard Devon call, had followed Danziger into the ship. She'd seen his anguish, and like Yale's plea, it had touched something deep inside of her. He had not seen her, nor felt her presence – her link to the dreamplane had been tenuous, not fully formed, but it convinced her that redemption *was* possible. Reunion with the Terrians was *not* out of her reach.

She settled back on her haunches, and looked curiously out across the valley. She'd watched Danziger's pain, yet she didn't truly understand it. Loss she could understand, Eden Advance had helped her understand the loss of her parents, but the depth of

Danziger's loss was ... unfathomable. The emotions were so complex, so conflicting, she couldn't make sense of them.

Comfortably balanced low to the ground, Mary pondered what she had seen. There was something important here, she knew. Like the Terrians, like the humans, she needed to understand, too.

* * *

Julia was the first to hear Danziger's cries, but she'd barely reached the flap of the tent he shared with True when she heard the others stirring. She glanced quickly into the tent, and nearly collided with Yale's solid mass. "He must be in my tent – I fell asleep on his cot," the tutor explained quickly.

They turned to divert to the other tent when they were joined by Alonzo. "In there," he pointed, and as a body, the trio burst into the other tent.

Danziger was fighting his way out of the dream, thrashing in a tangle of bedclothes and dripping sweat.

"Alonzo, get my diaglove –"

"No, I'll get it," Yale volunteered, and quickly exited.

"A nightmare?" Julia asked as she dropped to Danziger's side, trying to take hold of him. He twisted out of her grasp, still sobbing, "No."

"He'd've come out of it by now," Alonzo suggested, shaking his head.

"A Terrian dream?" Julia demanded incredulously. Alonzo nodded solemnly. "How do you know?"

"I just know," he replied, gently removing Julia's hands from Danziger's heaving shoulders. "I think they're trying to get their answer."

"By forcing Danziger to dream with them? Wait," she interrupted herself. Danziger relaxed slightly, then surged up out of the bed with a gasp. "John, John, are you all right?"

Danziger looked around wildly, his breath coming in harsh, hungry gulps. His pupils were dilated, and Julia wasn't certain he could actually see her.

"Steady, John. We're here, it's over," Alonzo soothed.

"Julia," Yale announced, and handed her the diaglove. Then he exited to check on the children. She fitted it on and started taking readings. "His adrenaline's at a dangerously high level," she breathed. "We've got to calm him down – he could go into cardiac arrest if these levels keep up."

"Dad!" True yelled as she raced through the entrance. "Dad!" She shrugged off Julia's restraining hands and flung herself at her father. She knocked Danziger back onto the bed, but somehow contact with his daughter seemed to bring him back to his senses. As she clung to him, his hands, which had been clenching spasmodically, relaxed and curled around her. His eyes closed as he pressed his face against her hair. As his body was still wracked by shudders, he whispered soothingly to True, rocking her back and forth.

Julia stepped back, Alonzo's hands on her shoulders, and shook her head. Alonzo tried to steer her out of the tent, but she protested, reminding him of Danziger's condition.

"He's got all the medicine he needs right now, Julia. Let's give 'im some space, okay?"

She glanced back at father and daughter, still caught in a desperate embrace, and felt a moment's envy. Neither of her parents had ever held her like that, with such pure and simple love. She doubted anyone would have ever held her like that, had she not come to G889. She looked up at Alonzo and smiled, then turned toward the doorway.

Outside in the camp, everyone was waiting for news. The faces that surrounded them were pinched with exhaustion and worry. With a jolt, Julia realized they suspected that Danziger had fallen ill like Devon. Quickly she stepped forward to dispel that fear.

"Danziger had his first Terrian dream," she announced. "We don't know what it was about, but apparently it upset him greatly. We're going to have to let him get some rest, and we'll learn more later."

"Danziger dreamt with the Terrians?" Morgan repeated in a squeaky voice. "He's never dreamt with them before. What's going on?" he demanded, glared toward Alonzo, their *de facto* Terrian interpreter.

Dragging his fingers through his hair, Alonzo shrugged. "I'm not sure. All I know is that Uly and I have had no luck making sense of their questions. Maybe they're trying to learn more from Danziger."

"D'you think they'll try us all?" Magus asked worriedly.

"If they do, just open yourself to the experience. They won't harm us. They're trying to understand," Alonzo assured her.

"Open ourselves?" Morgan echoed doubtfully.

"You can't keep secrets on the dreamplane, Morgan. You don't make deals, you tell the truth. Or the truth is shown to you," Alonzo said severely.

"I can attest to that," Yale interjected. "Without the help of the Terrians, I would never have remembered the truth about my past. The stronger our ties to this planet, the greater our chances for survival here. I might be dead now without them."

Morgan shivered at that. His relationship with the Terrians historically wasn't so benevolent.

"So would I," Uly announced, coming out of the tent and placing his hand in Yale's. He looked up at Alonzo. "Did Mr. Danziger dream about my mom, too?"

Uly's question brought a sudden silence to the group. "We don't know, Uly," Alonzo answered seriously. "We'll have to wait and see."

"Why don't you all go back to sleep," Julia suggested, taking off the diaglove. "I doubt we'll be back on the road tomorrow, but if we're staying here, we'll need to start early to begin cataloging what's edible in this valley."

"Who can go back to sleep with the Terrians waiting to dream at us?" Morgan complained.

"Oh, Morgan – what secrets have you to keep hidden?" Bess inquired sweetly. "C'mon." Gently, she guided him back to their tent, while Morgan kept looking back over his shoulder at the others.

"I wouldn't want to make any bets on that," Walman said to no one in particular. That brought a smile to the others' faces, and with the mood lightened slightly, the others drifted back to their tents.

Only Alonzo, Julia, Yale and Uly remained in the center of camp. "You'd better get some rest – you don't know when they'll come back to you," Julia pointed out to Alonzo.

He shook his head. "I'm not going to sleep after that – I might as well stay up with you."

"I'll see to it that Uly gets back to sleep," Yale offered.

"Aw, Yale –" Uly began to protest.

"To sleep, young man. There's a great deal to be done tomorrow."

He nudged the boy toward the tent, ignoring Uly's protests. Finally, as they entered the tent, Uly's voice carried back, "At least tell me a story to help me sleep?"

Julia had to smile at that, and Alonzo gave her a hug. "Kinda makes you want one of your own, doesn't it?"

She coughed, choking back a laugh. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Alonzo!"

"Hey, just thinkin' about the future. After all, we got a long one ahead of us."

"What makes you think that? Terrian dreaming?" Julia challenged, chuckling.

"Human emotion," Alonzo answered, his dimpled grin giving him a distinctly mischievous look.

She hefted the Mag-Pro and gave him a sidelong look as she started to stroll the perimeter. "Thought you were hitching a ride back when the colony ship arrived."

"Thought maybe I'd stick around a while, give settling down a chance. What d'you say?"

"I say, 'dream on, flyboy'," Julia replied with a smile.

* * *

"Morgan, honey, what's wrong?" Bess whispered, rubbing Morgan's back to try to calm him down.

"Uhgn," he moaned in response, punching his pillow and pressing his face against it.

"Morgan, talk to me," Bess pressed, her voice rising slightly in volume and assertiveness. She tugged at Morgan's shoulders to turn him over to face her.

"I don't want to dream," Morgan told her, his voice trembling close to the brink of sobbing with frustration.

"Everybody dreams, Morgan. Even Alonzo, he just doesn't remember them. Dreams can't hurt you —"

"On this planet they can, Bess!" He rolled over then, pulling the sheets up to his neck and staring morosely into the darkness. "On this planet, dreams can reach right in and take your soul. I don't want to dream with the Terrians, Bess. I just don't want to."

"What are you afraid of, Morgan? The Terrians haven't hurt Alonzo, or Uly, and they've

been dreaming with them for months."

"But look what they did to Danziger. Danziger! The man's made of stone and poison, and they reduced him to quivering jelly. Look at me, Bess – I'm already quivering jelly. What'll they do to *me*?"

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close. "They won't do anything to you, Morgan. You're so sensitive – you're so in touch with your feelings. That's what's wrong with John – he bottles everything up inside, and when he has to face those feelings ... he just doesn't know how to. He'll be okay in the morning, you'll see. But," she added thoughtfully, "I wouldn't mention anything about it to him if I were you."

"Why?" Morgan asked, his interest piqued.

"He'd probably deck anyone who did. John doesn't like to show his weaknesses. Especially now, with Devon sick. He's under a lot of strain, Morgan."

"You said that before," Morgan observed, a hint of suspicion creeping into his voice. "Is there something I should know about?"

"About what?"

"About you and Danziger – you seem to know a lot about what 'strain' he's under –"

"Morgan Martin!" she chastised. "You know I chose to marry you for life! I just happen to observe our companions a little closer than you do. John's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders – keeping us together, getting us to New Pacifica, he's planning to set up that colony, Devon or no Devon. Not to mention looking after True, and now Uly. And he misses Devon, Morgan – you know there's more there than either of them would admit. Morgan, honey, we've got to do what we can to support him. Promise me you will."

"I promise, Bess," he answered doubtfully. "But what can I do?"

"Do what you do best – you'll find a way," she suggested brightly, kissing him on the tip of his nose.

"Mmm, if you say so," he murmured, turning his face to brush her lips with his.

She smiled at him, twining her arms around his neck. "Mmmm."

* * *

"What d'you think's up with Danziger?" Magus asked into the darkness.

"I dunno, but I sure as hell don't want no Terrians messing with *my* dreams," Baines replied acidly.

"May be you won't have any choice, not from what Alonzo was sayin'," Walman suggested.

"What's he know, anyway?" Baines demanded. "He's their pet, isn't he? Flyboy makes me nervous sometimes, the way he goes on about the Terrians. He was a great pilot, but now he's grounded – who knows what that's done to his head?" He blew out a breath, whistling softly. "Man, I miss Devon already."

"Not half as much as Danziger does, I'll wager," Cameron said softly.

"What d'you suppose he dreamed about? Devon?" Magus inquired.

"How do we know it was a Terrian dream, then?" Walman asked with a chuckle.

"I've never been comfortable with the Terrians, especially not since that corpse Julia dug up," Baines offered. "How come we always gotta play by *their* rules?"

"Cos they were here first," Magus answered. "It's their planet."

"We're here now," Baines countered.

"Yeah, but Uly wouldn't be if it weren't for them," Cameron interjected.

"Yeah. There *is* that," Walman agreed.

"You think they'll cure all the Syndrome kids? Shock the hell out of the Council if they do," Baines put in.

"I dunno," Magus whispered. "If we keep up our end of the bargain, maybe. Be an awful disappointment if they don't. I can't say I'm anxious to dream with them, either. I agree with Baines – I haven't been comfortable since that demon Terrian. But if they can cure Devon ... wouldn't it be worth it?"

"Depends," Walman responded.

"On what?" Magus questioned.

"On what it costs us."

"Council cost us enough. I'm willing to give the Terrians a try," Cameron remarked sadly.

* * *

Julia and Alonzo turned guard duty over to a grumpy and exhausted Walman a few hours later. The camp was quiet; no further dreams had occurred. Julia checked on Danziger before retiring, smiling at the sight of father and daughter curled in one another's arms. Leaving Walman on patrol, she joined Alonzo in their tent, surprised to find him already asleep.

* * *

Bess didn't know where she was. She heard the sound of surf beating against a shore, the call of birds as they circled overhead. The air smelled of salt and freshness, so different from the beaches of Earth. She looked out onto the horizon, and had to shade her eyes; the sun reflected off the waves was bright as a magna-flare.

She felt the wet sand give under her feet as she walked along the shoreline. Up ahead, she saw the outline of a huge communications dish. She realized with a start that this must be New Pacifica. Smiling, she started to run down the beach, searching for signs of the others. She hauled up short as a Terrian shot up through the ground in a spray of wet sand. She stared up at it, unsure of what to do next. It turned inland and pointed with its staff.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, trying to quell the uneasiness the sight of the Terrian brought her. Despite her soothing words to Morgan, she, too, found the idea of Terrian dreaming unsettling.

It didn't answer, merely continued pointing. Shrugging, she set off in the direction it had indicated.

A hundred meters in from the sea, the ground was firmer, dotted with scrubby grass and low-slung bushes. She trudged up a rise, and was just cresting the hill when she heard the first explosion. She flattened herself on the ridge, throwing her arms over her head as earth erupted around her in gouts of flame. The screams carried across the battleground to her on the wind. Wriggling gingerly over the ridge, she stared out over a field of devastation. Bodies littered the ground, small fires caught in the grasses and began moving rapidly through the growth.

Overhead, another projectile whistled through the air, the shockwave hitting her a few seconds later. She watched in horror as bodies were flung out from the center of the blast, arms and legs spinning through the smoke, in opposite directions from the bodies to which they'd been attached. She heard a moan nearby, an agonized plea for help. Crawling on her belly, she struggled toward the source of the cry.

He was a bloody mess, one side of his face seared by radiation from the blast. One hand

was missing, blood oozing around the cauterized wound. His body was littered with gashes, and a chunk of a percussion bomb stuck out of one leg, slathered in blood. Whimpering in pain, he turned his ruined face toward her and smiled suddenly.

"Bess!" he whispered through heat-damaged lips. "My angel! Have you come to take me to heaven?"

"Morgan?" she gasped, reaching out a trembling hand to touch the raw meat of his cheek.

"I knew I'd see you again, Bess," he told her weakly. He winced at the touch of her fingers, but he didn't pull away. "I knew you wouldn't let me die alone."

"Morgan, what's happening here? Who's done this to you?" she asked desperately.

"The Separatists," he hissed.

"Separatists? Who are they?"

"You know — the colonists who broke away from New Pacifica. They joined up with some of the penal colonists."

"Why? They came here for a cure —"

"They never got it. They refused the Terrians' help — Bess, you know all this. You were killed in the first battle."

"Killed? Morgan, I'm not dead —"

"No. You're my angel," he said softly. She grabbed at him, pulling him closer to her. He grunted in pain, but stirred weakly as he tried to put his arms around her. "I knew I'd find you again."

"Morgan, what happened to Danziger, to Devon —"

Morgan drew in a shuddering breath, coughed, swallowed hard. Fluid gurgled in his lungs. "Danziger went back on the colony ship, Bess — we saw him and True off the day they left." He paused, taking another shaky, bubbling breath. Bess could feel him weakening, and tears dripped from her face onto his. "When Devon died, he wouldn't stay. You helped him through the first days — I never blamed you for that, Bess, really I didn't. I know you were just being kind." A coughing fit took him then, and she held on urgently, willing her own lifeforce into his failing body. She knew this wasn't her Morgan; he was safe in bed back in the camp. But she knew deep inside that this *could* be his future. "Without them, the colony just fell apart. I knew we should have gone back to the stations, but it's too late

now."

"Quiet now, Morgan. Save your strength," she begged him.

"Doesn't matter," he murmured. "You're here now." He smiled sweetly at her, his eyes fluttering closed. "Nothing can hurt me anymore ... I have my Bess back ..."

His head lolled to one side as she felt him go limp in her arms. "No," she sobbed. "No!"

Suddenly, she was no longer on the battlefield, but standing in a cave, eerie orange light emanating from rocks embedded in the walls. Morganite. She wheeled at the sound of something surging out of the earth behind her. She faced a single Terrian, its head tilted to one side as it looked at her quizzically.

"What is that supposed to mean?" she demanded. "A possible future? *Our* future, if we don't find a way to cure Devon? Help us, damn you! This is *your* planet, you must know why it's rejecting her! You can cure her! You can save us all!"

The Terrian trilled something to her then, but she didn't understand what it said. She stood her ground, fists clenched at her sides. "Help us! Don't you understand – Devon can bring everyone together. She can make them understand what it takes to live on this planet. She's the only one they'll listen to. Uly's too young – and Alonzo's too old. *We need* Devon – and you do, too. She can help us make a future where we all get to live!"

Impassively, the Terrian regarded her in silence for a moment longer, then turned and walked away. It had only gone a few feet before it turned back to her, then dropped into the earth.

"Answer me, dammit!" Bess swore, but she was alone in the cave, the glow of the Morganite dimming slowly.

* * *

Pounding the cold, hard ground with her fist, Mary growled in frustration. Too many images, too many feelings to sort out. She didn't know how they handled it all if this is what it meant to be human. She was too distracted by all the conflicting impressions, the sense of violence and impending doom, the intense emotions to rejoice in the fact that she had entered the dreamplane twice in one night. The Terrians wouldn't be using these dreams, nor would the power and range of the dreams be great enough to pull her into them, if they weren't important.

She snarled to herself, sitting down hard on the turf. She scooted backwards until her back was against the trunk of a tree. Snatching her meager bag of possessions, she dug out a

piece of fruit and bit into it viciously. Leaning back against the solid support of the tree trunk, she closed her eyes as she chewed, trying to calm the rapid beat of her heart and make sense of all that she'd seen.

* * *

Bess shot up out of bed, sweating profusely as she wrapped her arms around herself and rocked, sobbing.

"Bess? Bess, honey?" Morgan called out softly, and she felt his arms embrace her, his face – his smooth, undamaged face – press against hers as he whispered nonsense in her ear. She turned into the embrace, holding onto him fiercely.

"What is it, Bess? What's wrong?" he asked worriedly.

"Hold me, Morgan. Just hold me!" she told him, tightening her arms around him.

* * *

Alonzo was dead to the world when Julia awoke the next morning, so she gently disentangled herself from his arms, and got up, taking care not to wake him. She waved to Baines on sentry duty as she wandered through the otherwise empty camp. When Julia arrived at the mess tent, she was surprised to see that coffee hadn't been brewed, and nothing was being done to start breakfast. Bess was usually in charge of the morning meal, since she was often the first one up, and she was one of the few members of their party who knew how to cook from natural ingredients. They were all learning, but Bess was the master, and she seemed to enjoy it. It was strange to find the mess tent empty. Shrugging, Julia set about putting on the coffee, or what they called coffee, to brew. Then she started rooting through the supplies to put together breakfast.

Magus was the first to arrive after her, entering the tent as she yawned widely. She scratched her shoulder and dropped into a seat at the table. "Need some help?" she asked blearily.

"Yeah, I guess I could. Looks like Bess is sleeping in."

"Ah, let her," Magus replied, shuffling over to join Julia at the makeshift counter. "Sounded like she had a rough night – heard her cry out a couple of times. Everybody's spooked by this dream stuff, Julia. It's okay for 'Lonz, but none of us are comfortable with the idea of sharing our dreams with the Terrians."

Julia pushed a pile of vegetables toward Magus and handed her a knife. "I suppose. But I also think we need to come to some sort of ... well, understanding with them if we're going

to survive on this planet. They've helped us in the past – I'm not sure we'd've made it this far without their help."

"Don't sell us short, Doc. Humans survived on old Earth for thousands of years without Terrian help," Magus reminded her as she started to peel some of the vegetables.

"That's just it – this isn't Earth. In many ways, it's a hostile environment. The Terrians have helped us many times in coping with that environment."

"Yeah, maybe. But we had a hand in it, too. You of all people should know not to discount the power of the human spirit."

Julia smiled at the other woman. "I never took you for a philosopher."

"Hey, I might surprise you sometimes, Doc. Hand me that brush, will you?"

Julia did as she was asked, then returned to the vegetables in front of her. The two women worked in companionable silence for a while, until all of the food was cleaned and ready to cook. "Damn, I forgot to start the fire –"

"I'll do it," volunteered a deep voice from the tent opening. Julia looked up from her work into the haggard face of John Danziger.

"Should you be up, John? You had a rough night –"

"I'm fine," he snapped, and turned on his heel to go back out into the camp.

Magus and Julia exchanged sympathetic glances, and Magus quipped, "He's a bear until he's had his caffeine. Here, let me get this stuff in the pot, you take 'im some coffee."

Julia nodded, and poured two cups of coffee, one for her and one for Danziger. She carried them carefully out into the chill morning air, where Danziger was blowing gently on the tinder to get the fire going. "Here," she said simply, extending the steaming cup toward Danziger.

He looked up and smiled tightly, accepting the cup and sipping at the coffee. He went back to work starting the fire, effectively ignoring her. She settled herself on a log by the firepit and wrapped her hands around her cup and sipped thoughtfully.

"What?" he demanded after a few moments of silence.

"You're going to have to talk about it, John," she told him. When he opened his mouth to protest, she plowed on, "You had a Terrian dream last night, John – I checked your vitals,

and your alpha rhythms were definitely those of a Terrian dream. You know how important it is that we not keep such dreams secret. They're critical to our survival here."

"Yeah," he admitted grudgingly. The fire was starting to catch now, and he sat back on a log across from her, grunting with the effort.

"So?"

"So, let a man have his breakfast before you start dissecting his brain, will you, Doc?" Danziger rumbled at her.

She had to smile. John Danziger was the strongest man she'd ever known, and yet he could be as vulnerable as a child when it came to dealing with anything emotional. Anything, that is, unless it concerned his daughter. There, he attempted to mask nothing. Sometimes, she envied True Danziger. Sighing, she agreed, "Okay. But after you've eaten, let's take a walk, okay? You can tell me about your dream then."

"You don't want a group therapy session?" he asked doubtfully.

"Maybe Alonzo, if he ever wakes up. Until we know more, there's no real reason to drag the others into it."

"I think maybe you'd better include Bess on that, Julia," came Morgan's voice from behind her.

She twisted around in her seat to look up into Morgan's shadowed face. "Bess had a Terrian dream, too?"

"I think you'd better come and see — she's a mess this morning."

* * *

Morgan led Danziger and Julia to the tent he shared with Bess. Julia paused at the med-tent to retrieve the diaglove, and poked her head in the tent she shared with Alonzo. Amazingly, he was still asleep.

Morgan was unusually solemn as he came up his tent; no protests, no whining, no agitating for better perks or more attention. He simply ushered them into his tent with great dignity, walked over to the side of the cot where Bess lay, and took her hand in silence.

Bess's face was drawn and pale; she obviously hadn't slept well. Julia joined Morgan at her side, and ran the diaglove over Bess.

"I don't see any sign of infection. You're tired, but not necessarily ill," Julia announced gently.

Bess tossed her head back impatiently. "If you'd seen what I saw last night, you wouldn't be so quick to judge!"

Julia settled onto the stool Danziger had pushed over for her. "Why don't you tell me what you saw?"

Bess bit her lip anxiously, her eyes glittering with tears, old and new. Dark smudges under those eyes gave her face a haunted look. "*You* had a dream last night, Danziger – why don't you go first?" she challenged.

Danziger's eyes shifted from person to person in the tent as he moved from foot to foot. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"No? It was that painful, huh?" she snapped. At the brief expression of deep anguish on Danziger's face, she softened her approach. "I'm sorry. It was just ..." she sighed, "awful."

Danziger scuffed his boot in the dust at the floor of the tent, staring at his hands a moment, then he started to talk. His narrative was met with utter silence. As he recounted the events of his dream, Bess's face crumpled into tears, and she wept quietly. When Danziger was through, Bess reached out to him urgently. "Oh, John – I'm so sorry. I didn't think anyone could dream something as horrible as I did – I was wrong."

"S'okay, Bess," John replied gruffly.

"Well, in my dream, we'd made it to New Pacifica. But Devon was dead – just like in your dream. I arrived at the beach, but ... there was a terrible battle going on. People were dying everywhere. And then I found Morgan."

"What was the reason for the battle?" Julia asked gently.

"In the dream, Morgan called them Separatists – people who'd broken away from the colony and joined up with the penal colonists. People who refused the Terrians' help in curing the children. You'd left the planet to return to the stations," she directed to Danziger. "And I had apparently died in the first battle. It was all for nothing," she finished quietly.

"This isn't good for Bess," Morgan told them soberly. "This sort of dream – why would the Terrians show her something so dreadful?"

"Perhaps because it could happen," Julia answered. "Alonzo thinks the Terrians don't

recognize time the way we do – not past, present, future. This may be only one possible future, the result of –"

"Devon dying," Danziger interjected. "Like in my dream."

Julia swivelled around to look up at Danziger. "You think ... cause and effect?"

"Why not? If Devon didn't make it, if she weren't there to greet the colonists and convince them that the Terrians really could cure the children, if we had no chance that she'd ever be there ... what *would* happen?"

"Every group has dominant personalities," Julia mused. "The colonists were selected because their children were ill, not because of any personality or compatibility profiling. It could be that within the group of colonists coming to G889, there are some who would refuse the help offered and splinter into separate factions. There may also be more Council operatives, assigned to disrupt or even destroy the colony."

"Which only points up our need for a strong leadership, a united front, when they arrive," Morgan suggested. "Like it or not, we need a solid political structure."

"And that's where you can make your greatest contribution, is that it, Morgan?" Danziger shot back.

Morgan frowned, glancing down at Bess, who tightened her hold on his hand. "I have experience in the field, yes. We can't be naive about this, John – to hold the colony together, we're going to have to have a system they can fit into."

"We'll have time to determine that on the way to New Pacifica. The old rules don't apply here, Morgan – there are new players in the game," Danziger reminded him forcefully.

"The Terrians," Bess whispered.

"That's right," Julia agreed. "Alonzo said the Terrians are trying to understand us. In John's dream, Devon said the same thing. I don't think we should overreact to this possibility – I think we should remain calm and see what else the Terrians tell us."

"You think there'll be more dreams?" Morgan asked worriedly, casting anxious looks at his wife.

"I think it's likely each one of us can expect to find ourselves on the dreamplane. Think about it this way," she explained, standing up from her seat and pacing around the tent. "There is a great deal at stake here – not just our continued survival, or the colonists' survival, or even Devon's survival – it's the survival of the planet."

"The penal colonists have been few in number, and really haven't presented any serious threat to the Terrians, or the ecosystem. In the years they've been here, population growth has been minimal – with deaths due to illness, weather and, well, in-fighting, it may even be negative. Whalen and Dell Curry's group were reduced to one, their son. Mary's group was also eliminated and the Terrians adopted her. We don't know how many other prisoners arrived with Gaal, but only he survived. If you think of G889 as an organic system, these individuals have been a minor irritant. But now we're planning to inject a large dosage in the form of the colony. The planet has to either assimilate us or reject us. I think the Terrians are trying to help the planet assimilate us."

"But what about what Elizabeth said – about the planet rejecting us?" Bess inquired plaintively.

"It may be she and Bennett never made real contact with the Terrians. Or never thought it was important enough to make that contact. We might never have done that if it hadn't been for what they did for Uly. I think if we're to be successful here as a species, we need to make peace with them, and find our niche in the ecosystem."

"That's a pretty big logical leap, Doc," Danziger observed.

"Even Devon has said that, John. And it does seem to fit what Alonzo said, and what Devon told you in your dream. I know these dreams are upsetting, but they're the only way we can communicate with the Terrians." Julia paused, and looked thoughtfully at Bess. "I think you should rest this morning. Obviously we're not setting out again today – I think we should plan to stay here for a few days and see how the dreams play out. We can use the time to restock our food supplies."

"If these dreams keep up, we won't be in any shape to travel," Danziger put in wearily.

"There's that, too. But Alonzo said that this area is rich in Morganite – that will help facilitate the dreaming. And the dreaming will help us communicate and reach an understanding. I hope."

"Okay," Danziger agreed, scrubbing his face with his hand. "Get some rest, Bess. But you, Morgan, can help with foraging. We can't restock if we don't know what's out there."

"Why me?" Morgan started to protest, but Bess reached up with her free hand and soothed him. "All right," he consented grudgingly.

"Don't worry, Morgan, you won't be alone. Everyone who can will be out there with you," Julia assured him.

"I'm gonna go check on the TransRover – I don't like the way it sounded yesterday,"

Danziger announced and left the tent.

"Y'gotta worry about a man who thinks so much about vehicles," Morgan muttered to himself. "When we get to New Pacifica, we're going to have to find him something else to do."

Julia and Bess turned slowly to look at Morgan, their expressions dumbstruck. Julia shook her head and looked back at Bess. "Get some rest, Bess," Julia told her, and hurried after him.

"You sure you don't need me, honey?" Morgan offered sweetly after she'd gone.

"I'm sure, Morgan – go on," Bess answered doubtfully, still eyeing her husband as though she wondered what his problem was, as well.

* * *

Alonzo scratched his stomach sleepily as he shuffled into the mess tent. Danziger looked up from where he was fiddling with the device Morgan had programmed to monitor the ship and got up. He quickly poured a cup of coffee for Alonzo and shoved it into his hands.

"You look like hell," Danziger observed.

"Feel like it," Alonzo agreed, draining the coffee. He held the cup out for a refill. "Where is everybody?"

"Foraging. Bringing samples to Julia in the med-tent. Lemme guess – you spent the night in dreamland," Danziger said, pouring the requested coffee.

Alonzo nodded slowly, carefully as he picked his way to one of the chairs set up around the table. He sat down gingerly, and sighed wearily. "How's Bess?"

Danziger glanced at Alonzo as he joined him at the table. "How'd you know?"

Solace shrugged. "I listened in on her dream."

"How come hers and not mine?"

Alonzo was silent, staring into the depths of his coffee.

"Lonz?"

"I saw your dream, too, John," Alonzo admitted quietly, not raising his head. "I'm sorry – I had no control over it. It was strange – I could see it, but I couldn't enter it. More like a vidcast than VR. Almost like the Terrians don't want me interfering."

Danziger looked at him in shock for a long moment, then turned his attention back to his own coffee. "Don't tell Morgan – he'll call it 'Morganvision' and plan to market it to the colony," Danziger muttered.

"What?"

"Dream voyeurism," John replied sourly.

"I don't think the Terrians understand the concept of privacy," Alonzo suggested.

"Well, if they show you, I guess that's okay. But if they start broadcasting to everyone ... I'm takin' the pledge."

"The pledge?"

"I'll swear off sleep until we get out of this valley."

"Could be worse. Could be *my* dreams they broadcast."

"Why's that worse?"

"Julia'd kill me," Alonzo said with a grin. He looked at the device by Danziger's hand. "What's that?"

"Morgan rigged it to monitor the ship."

"And Devon?"

"According to this, she's okay. Stable. Vitals are still registering no change."

"Good."

They fell into a companionable silence as Danziger called up the entry sequence for Devon's cryo-capsule. "'Lonz?"

"Hmmm?"

"Why me?"

"Why you, what?"

"Why'd the diggers pick me to dream with?"

"Why d'you think, John?" Alonzo asked impishly.

Danziger grimaced. "Funny, Flyboy."

"Call 'em as I see 'em, Greaseball."

Studying the sequence, Danziger committed it to memory. "I'll be ready for 'em next time."

"Next time? John, you can't show any aggression toward the Terrians —"

"Who's talkin' aggression? Look, 'Lonz, I know what's at stake here. I'm just planning ahead."

"For what?"

Danziger hefted the receiver. "Next time, I'm gettin' Adair out of that thing so she can talk to the Terrians direct. Morgan changed the codes to protect her from anyone breaking in. Now I know 'em, too."

* * *

Quickly checking over the ground to make sure she'd eradicated any sign of her occupation, Mary gathered up her few belongings and moved silently through the brush toward a cave she'd located the evening before. It didn't have the scent of a Grendler cave, and hopefully wouldn't attract attention. The members of Eden Advance were fanning out from camp, in groups of twos and threes, bags slung over their shoulders. She'd watched this before, and knew they were off in search of food.

As she stepped from the brilliant sunlight to the cool dimness of the cave, she fought down a bout of homesickness. She hadn't had the chance to investigate the cave fully the night before, but as she moved deeper into the rocky corridor, she knew Terrians had lived there sometime in the not so distant past. The characteristic riblike structure of the tunnels, the depressions in the walls ... all felt achingly familiar. Outcasts or tribe, it made no difference; she drank in the musky scent of Terrian occupation with pleasure.

At the next juncture, she heard the sound of trickling liquid, and moved forward cautiously. All too often, what looked like water was actually acid, and could kill with a few drops. Stepping into the next chamber, she found the cavern illuminated with an orange glow, and she reached out to touch the sunstones that made up so much of the Terrian

communication plane. It felt warm and welcoming beneath her questing fingers, not burning as the others had complained. She could feel the heartbeat of the planet within the pulsating stone. Closing her eyes, she tried reaching out onto the dreamplane, felt the distant tingle of it on her consciousness, but even with the sunstones, what the Eden Advance crew called "Morganite," she couldn't penetrate the dreamplane on her own.

Sighing, she drew her hand away and walked over to the wetness running down the wall. Touching it tentatively with one fingertip, she was relieved to discover it was water. She had food, she had a supply of fresh water, and she was surrounded by the comforting glow of the sunstones. For the first time in months, she felt at peace.

* * *

Morgan was growing bored. He was supposed to be helping with the search for edible plants, but so far, nearly everything had turned up edible. Julia had been downright excited at what he and the others had brought back to the camp earlier. Further search on his part seemed redundant. They'd managed to find themselves a natural grocer here, one of the few good things to happen to them since arriving on this godforsaken planet.

Bess was still resting in their tent, and by the time he'd checked on her, her color had returned to normal, and she'd been sleeping peacefully. He wasn't happy about the Terrians messing with their dreams, but until Danziger or Julia ruled it a lost cause, they'd have to endure it. But he needed a break, especially if he was going to have to face one of those dreams. Besides, thanks to the abundance of food in this valley, lunch had actually been a bit heavy, and he was feeling a little drowsy.

Rationalizing that his efforts at food gathering wouldn't make any difference one way or another, he settled comfortably on a fallen log, glanced around to make sure no one else was in sight, and pulled out his VR gear.

He hadn't used the gear since that episode with Bennett, before they'd found the ship. He'd simply slipped away from camp and settled on a hillside to enjoy his favorite VR program, and this guy in a white suit playing a saxophone had stepped right into the program with a deal he simply couldn't refuse. Release Bennett from cold sleep, and Bennett could cure the plague that was killing them all.

Eben had already died, and Bess had just fallen ill with the disease. They were all dying. Morgan hadn't seen any choice. Life without Bess, on or off this planet, was simply something he couldn't – no, wouldn't – contemplate. He hadn't imagined the box of demons he'd unleash by following those simple instructions.

He still didn't know how a man in cold sleep could have penetrated into VR, especially a man who later had no memory of it. Bennett hadn't acknowledged his role in guiding

Morgan to the cold sleep controls, nor providing Morgan with the activation sequences. The image of Danziger's face when he'd activated the sleep capsules still made him cringe, but not as much as that of Danziger's face when they'd placed Devon back in the capsule. In a funny way, it made Morgan feel a little closer to Danziger, to realize that he could feel that way about someone. That Danziger could feel about Devon the way he felt about Bess. The knowledge made Danziger seem more human somehow.

He fitted the gear on his head, adjusting the earpiece until it felt just right, and then slid the eyepiece over his eye with a sigh. The woodland grayed out around him, going from color to monochrome, like in an ancient vidcast. An elaborate drumset materialized in front of him, the sticks familiar and welcome in his hands. He closed his eyes and started to strum out a rhythm on the skins, his body rocking to the beat.

He'd been playing for several minutes, really getting into it, when he heard a female voice chastise him. "So this is what you do when you should be working, is it, Morgan? Danziger wouldn't be pleased."

He opened his eyes, his mouth already forming a protest when it fell open in frank surprise. The voice had emanated from Devon Adair, clad in a slinky white satin number that would have been the rage two centuries earlier. She was draped over a piano that had come out of nowhere, and she was shaking a finger at him slowly, as if in time with a metronome.

"Devon?" he squeaked. "How can you be here?"

She shrugged, a simple act that started off a cascade effect — first her spaghetti strap slithered off her shoulder, then the satin of her dress rippled invitingly, finally settling into body-hugging drapes. Morgan had to forcibly remind himself that he was married to Bess, life contract, and that this Devon Adair was simply a VR image.

"Are you telling me that cold sleep and VR are linked?" Morgan ventured, putting down his drumsticks. "That's a phenomenon that's never been recorded, you know. It could open up whole new business opportunities —"

"Do what you want with the idea," she replied, waving her hand dismissively. "I didn't come here to discuss the expansion of the Martin Enterprises, Morgan. I came here to ask you to reestablish the ship's link with EVE."

Morgan frowned and shook his head. "Why?"

"Because EVE is the only one capable of curing me. Without the link to EVE, I'll die, even in cold sleep."

"But you got sicker after EVE's virus was purged," Morgan pointed out reasonably. "Curing

the virus had no effect on you. Why would linking the ship back to EVE cure you?"

"Because EVE has resources even Bennett wasn't aware of," she told him, sliding gracefully down from the piano. "Or Elizabeth. In the 50 years since they went into cold sleep, EVE has been expanding her capabilities exponentially. She has the capability to cure me, Morgan. And to prevent anyone else from getting sick like me."

"What about what Elizabeth said? What about the planet rejecting us? Won't EVE's interference only help that come true? I mean, Julia and Alonzo are exploring ways to cure you through the Terrians. Yale thinks you need to be more strongly linked to the planet, not the computer —"

"Yale is wrong," Devon cut him off curtly. "Completely, fatally wrong. His mistake will cost my life and the lives of thousands of others. Yours, Uly's, Bess's. All those Syndrome families, Morgan — they're walking into a death trap. EVE and only EVE can save us all."

"How do you know this, Devon?" Morgan asked. He had a strange prickling at the back of his spine, the sort of feeling that warned him of something not quite right. This didn't sound like Devon's point of view.

"Before you severed the ship's link with EVE, I was in communication with her."

"How? We didn't have an uplink in progress, we didn't make any connections into your brain — there wasn't time, and there was no reason."

She shrugged, smiling meaningfully.

"Are you saying EVE is telepathic?" The smile grew, and Morgan felt his hands grow cold. It was a smile that frightened him. "Then what does she need a link for, Devon?"

"She can communicate with me, but she can't affect any changes without the link."

"She could do a lot more than that with the link open, Devon," Morgan reminded.

"What are you afraid of, Morgan? EVE isn't the enemy."

Morgan had been growing increasingly suspicious through the conversation, but that final statement sent off warning klaxons so loud he was sure she could hear them.

"I'll have to clear it with Danziger, Devon," he replied flatly. "After the way things turned out with Bennett, I don't want the responsibility on my own —"

"No, you don't have to clear it with Danziger, Morgan. John's just a drone — you're the one

who worked himself up to a Level 4. And I'm in command of this mission. A command decision like this can't be left in the hands of a – Morgan, what's wrong?" "Devon" asked suddenly, her eyes narrowing.

"N-nothing," he stammered, eager now to escape this nightmare. This was *not* Devon Adair. He was beginning to understand now just what was going on, and he didn't like it one bit.

"Then you'll do as I ask, Morgan?" she inquired sweetly.

"I'll have to think about it. I'm not quite sure how to reestablish the link, and you know what Danziger's temper can be like if someone makes off with one of his precious vehicles."

"I can show you how to reestablish the link, Morgan. And you don't have to worry about Danziger – I can keep him under control."

"Okay, Devon, let me think about it, plan, okay? How can I reach you again?"

"Just come back into VR, Morgan. This is the only way I can contact you – and Morgan?"

"Yes, Devon?"

"I'm counting on you."

With that, she stepped out of the program in a white nimbus, leaving Morgan to stare wide-eyed at the drumsticks in his hands. "Oh boy," he muttered to himself, dropped the sticks, and quickly pulled the eyepiece away, ending the VR program.

* * *

Morgan was halfway back to the camp when he realized that his admission that he'd been in VR when he was supposed to be foraging would get him in hot water again. The information was important, but he wasn't ready to face Danziger's displeasure on a guess. Besides, he told himself as he slowed his pace to consider this, he needed to gather more information. All he really had was a suspicion, not facts. And, he thought grimly, the suspicion was frightening enough. Remembering Bess's face after that dream, he quickened his pace again, wanting to get them out of this valley and away from the Terrians.

By the time he was within sight of the camp, he was still undecided. He saw Danziger chopping wood by the mess tent, and ducked back into the cover of trees before the mechanic could see him. He felt relief that the decision was made for him; he'd learn more

and report to Danziger and the others later, when he had more to offer. In the meantime, there was still enough daylight left that he could gather some more samples so no one would suspect he'd taken an unscheduled break.

* * *

By the time everyone returned to camp, Bess was feeling stronger and more herself. She entered the mess tent where Julia was half-heartedly trying to sort through the fruits, vegetables and nuts the others had brought back, and gently put her hands on the doctor's shoulders. "Let me, I think I can do something with all of this."

Julia smiled gratefully at Bess, allowing herself to be moved aside. "What can I do?" she offered.

Bess surveyed the offerings critically, and then smiled. "We'll save the nuts to see if we can press some oil. I think maybe this," she held up a succulent-looking zipper-skin fruit, "for dessert." She fingered the various items on display, and separated out a group of vegetables. "Stew tonight. And then I'll see about making a batter for a tempura tomorrow night."

"Tempura?"

"Lightly battered vegetables delicately fried," Bess murmured dreamily. "With a little sauce for dipping." At Julia's continued confusion, she elaborated, "Morgan took me to a restaurant once on the stations that served it. It was wonderful."

Julia smiled, suppressing a chuckle. "Sounds terrific. I'll start chopping?"

"And I'll start the broth."

* * *

By the time the twin moons were above the horizon, they'd finished the meal prepared by Bess and Julia. Gathered around the fire, they sat in near silence. Danziger stared miserably at the flames, absently rubbing True's arm and back as she snuggled protectively against him. Uly clung to Yale, his bright eyes roving around the group. Bess fidgeted nervously in Morgan's worried embrace.

Julia cleared her throat, drawing everyone's attention. "Danziger, I think you should go to bed early tonight."

"What, and ruin everybody's sleep again, Doc?" John protested sourly.

"I think if your dream is going to trigger the one that follows, the earlier the better for everyone."

Danziger closed his eyes and grimaced. No one asked why Julia assumed he would dream again, but the question was on everyone's faces: Who would dream the consequences?

"I don't think I can go through that again," Bess whispered.

"I don't think you'll have to," Alonzo answered quietly.

"You know something?" Morgan demanded.

"I know the Terrians are searching for answers. They're trying to understand us at a deeper level. Each of us. Who we are and how we fit together."

"That's what Adair said in my dream," Danziger added softly.

"So we don't know who's going to dream next. Or even if they'll go back to Danziger," Morgan complained.

"I think it's likely they'll return to Danziger," Alonzo replied.

"Lucky me," Danziger growled.

"Why Danziger?" asked Magus suddenly.

"If I were doing an experiment, I'd want a control subject," Julia suggested. "I think that's what they're doing."

"That's part of it," Alonzo answered. "I also think Devon volunteered him."

Danziger raised his head slowly, peering at Alonzo through a fall of curls. "What?"

"Don't ask me why I think that – it certainly wasn't clear in the dreams I've had. It's just a feeling I have," Alonzo protested.

"Goddamn pain in the ass," Danziger muttered, then looked down guiltily at True, who tilted her face to look at him more clearly. "Sorry, honey. Every time I think I – never mind."

"So, Danziger dreams the cause, and then someone else gets stuck with dreaming the effect. Can't wait," Walman quipped.

"It's not my fault," Danziger put in.

"Maybe we should all turn in early – we don't know which of us is going to dream tonight," Magus suggested reasonably.

"I think that's wise," Julia agreed, rising from her seat on a log. "I'm on the first watch – I'll keep an eye on Danziger."

"C'mon, True-girl – Danzigers know when they're not wanted," John grumbled, rising to his feet and extending his hand to his daughter.

Julia touched him gently on the arm. "Do you think that's wise?"

"What?"

"Having True with you when you dream?"

Stormclouds gathered rapidly across his face as he considered Julia's admonition.

"I'll be okay, Julia. Somebody's gotta look after Dad," True interjected, slipping her small body between Julia and Danziger.

Uly looked to Yale, who simply nodded. He grinned, then jumped down from Yale's lap and walked over to John and True. "Me, too." He reached for Danziger's hand and wrapped his fingers around it. "Maybe I can help."

"Can not," True argued, grabbing her father's other hand.

"Can, too – I've been on the dreamplane before, have you?"

"No, but he's my Dad –"

"And she's my Mom –"

"C'mon, you two – off to bed. Before you split me in two!" Danziger bellowed, hauling up on both arms to lift the children off their feet. They greeted this with a squeal of giggles as he waddled off, a child suspended from each crooked arm.

"I'll be right next door, John!" Yale called after them.

"Be ready to send in the Marines!" Danziger yelled over his shoulder. This elicited another fit of laughter from the children.

As they disappeared into Danziger's tent, Julia turned to Alonzo. "Will they be all right, Alonzo?"

Solace shrugged. "Uly's right – he's been on the dreamplane before, and the Terrians would never hurt him. And True can hold her own," he added with a wicked grin.

"And then some," Magus observed with a wry smile. Julia had to chuckle in response.

* * *

True allowed herself to be tucked in to her own bed, in deference to Uly; Dad couldn't sleep with them both, and the kid was definitely missing his Mom. Better not to rub it in that her parent was still around.

As she snuggled down on her cot, her father's warm hand touching her cheek, True decided it wouldn't be so bad to have Uly share their tent ... for a while. She was confident that Dad would find a way to convince the Terrians to cure Devon, and then Uly'd go back to his own tent. But for now, this was okay.

Dad kissed her on the forehead and smoothed back her hair, smiling down at her in that Dad way. It never failed to make her feel safe when he looked at her like that, and she wondered if Uly's dad had ever looked at him that way. Then Dad turned away to look after Uly. She figured she'd let him; it was a Dad kind of thing, so it was okay, since he'd said good night to her first.

She heard Uly talking to her father in a low voice, and Dad was paying close attention. She strained to hear the words, but Uly'd pitched his voice too softly for her to hear. That displeased her; sharing was one thing, but leaving her out of a conversation in her own tent was another. "Tell us a story, Dad?" she called out, and was gratified when her father looked up, smiling at her.

"Which one, True-girl?"

"Tell us a story about pirates!" Uly demanded excitedly. That made True want a story with monsters, and she said so. Uly carolled, "Yeah, monsters!" so True changed her request to hidden treasure.

Dad looked from her to Uly and back again, and shook his head. Uh-oh, he might see through her. She smiled sweetly, and begged for treasure, and he chuckled, sitting down on his cot. As he pulled off his boots, he started to weave the story, one she'd heard before but never tired of. She closed her eyes, floating on the familiar, safe sound of her father's voice, only slightly annoyed when Uly interrupted occasionally in a sleepy, questioning voice.

* * *

The soft sound of breathing in stereo filled the tent with a sense of peace. Uly could be a handful, but he was a good kid. Adair'd done all right raising him, considering. The kid could have been self-pitying and whining, but instead he was bright and curious, and he'd adapted to his cure better than any of them. And he had to admit that having him around was good for True. It was about time she learned to share, not just things but him as well. Back on the stations, she'd been the center of everyone's universe – all of Danziger's friends had doted on her, and he had to admit she was more than a little spoiled. Well, she was the only kid he'd ever planned to have, even though she hadn't really been planned, and without Elle, there hadn't been anyone else for him to love. He figured he had enough to spare for Uly, if True continued to cooperate.

He tried to relax against the bed, willing his mind to gear down to a crawl, but truth was, he didn't really want to fall asleep. Once he'd gotten up, he'd kept up a steady pace, checking over the vehicles, overhauling some of the components, chopping firewood ... his body was tired, but sleep – and dreams – wasn't something he wanted. It was something he had to do, though. He started counting lumalights, from 100 backward, and by number 59, he was drifting off to sleep.

* * *

Alonzo pressed the sedi-derm against his neck and was asleep in seconds. His head thudded against the pillow as a sigh escaped his lips. The dreamplane began to emerge.

* * *

Mary had located an airvent in the cave, and found that by building it carefully, she could have a fire going here. It felt good to settle down in warmth, instead of shivering against the cold, and she fell asleep quickly. Almost immediately, she found herself on the dreamplane again, and she nearly sang with delight.

* * *

"Hey, we're back at the ship!"

Danziger looked up sharply at the sound of his daughter's voice, frowning. "True? True, honey, what are you doing here?"

"We're on the dreamplane," Uly explained, joining Danziger on the ramp up to the ship.

True looked around her in wonder. "Light's funny."

"Always is," Uly answered with a matter-of-fact shrug. Danziger had to smile; big man on campus, at least here on the diggers' dreamscape.

"Yeah, well, I'm not so sure you two should be here," Danziger told them doubtfully.

"Terrians won't hurt us, Mr. Danziger. And maybe we can help." Uly said this with such utter trust, it nearly broke Danziger's heart.

He smiled and tousled Uly's hair. "Stick close, then. Okay, champ?"

"Me, too," True said, stomping over and grabbing her father's hand. "What do we do now?"

Danziger glanced from True to Uly. "Last time, I went into the ship."

"Then that's what we should do now," Uly pronounced, and started up the rise, tugging on Danziger's hand.

Danziger felt the urge to pull back, to insist that the children wake up and leave the dream, but Uly's confidence and True's trust overrode him. He allowed himself to be towed up the slope and down through the open hatch of the ship. Open hatch? He'd left it open in the previous dream, was that why it was open now? Or did it somehow mirror the reality — had someone or something gotten into the ship in real time? Grendlers? Convicts? When he woke up, he'd take the rail back and check.

They entered the cryo-chamber of the ship, hushed and awed by its enduring silence. He didn't know why it affected him like this — he'd done his share of cold-sleep jumps, 19 months was the longest one before the 22-year journey to G889. Maybe it was the fact that this was such old technology, still functioning after more than 100 years. Or maybe it's what it contained ... or rather, who.

Uly's hand was still clasped in his, the small fingers tightening around his hand as he pulled him and True toward the sleep capsule.

"Kinda like Sleeping Beauty," Uly whispered.

"If a stupid old kiss was enough to wake her, my Dad would've done it already," True argued in a tight whisper. "Right, Dad?" she added, tugging on his hand.

"Right," he answered absently, smiling to himself. Wouldn't that just set Adair off if his kiss could cure her? The thought had a certain appeal, but not with an underage audience present.

Uly's free hand pressed against the transparent wall of the chamber, and he murmured,

"Miss you, Mom."

Danziger frowned. He thought he'd seen movement within the capsule. But that was impossible – she was in cold-sleep, everything was slowed down to near death. No, wait – he saw her eyelid flicker! There it was again, definite movement. Suddenly, a shudder went through her entire body. Devon was awakening!

"Get back, Uly," Danziger commanded, releasing his hands from the children.

"What are you going to do – she's waking up! My Mom's waking up!"

He hurried over to the cryo-capsule controls, rapidly punching in the release sequence. With a hiss of frigid air, the door to the capsule slid up, and Danziger nearly flew across the room to stand in front of it. He reached for Devon, ignoring the cold that seeped out of the chamber in wisps of frosty vapor. Her eyes shot open as she gasped, her chest expanding with an abrupt intake of air. She collapsed forward, but he was ready for her, wrapping his arms around her as her weight carried her downward.

"Steady, Adair," he breathed, tightening his hold on her as he dropped to his knees, cradling her in his arms. She took another shaky breath, her hands groping weakly against his arms.

"Mom? Mom, are you all right?" Uly asked anxiously, hovering nearby.

"Uly?" she whispered, her voice weak and tenuous.

"I'm here, Mom. You're going to be okay –"

"Dad, is she going to be okay?" True chimed in worriedly.

"I dunno, honey. Adair, Devon – can you see me?" he inquired, turning her face toward his.

"John?" she responded, her voice thready and barely above a whisper. "Where am I –" Her eyes seemed to focus for a moment then, and she absorbed the sight of the cryo-chamber on board the ship with a shock he felt through his arms. "What happened?"

"You've been sick, Adair. Your systems were shutting down, we put you in cryo-sleep to stabilize you –"

She coughed then, a cough that rocked her entire body. He could feel how weak she was as she struggled for breath, could feel the bubble of fluid in her lungs through her trembling flesh. Her color wasn't improving, remaining pasty and lifeless. Her lips were pale, and her eyes didn't seem to be focussing properly, the pupils dilating open and closed. She clung

to him weakly for support, her fingers barely able to tighten their grip on his arms.

"Mom?" Uly asked tentatively, extending a small, shaking hand toward Devon's cheek.

"Uly?" she answered softly, her fingers sliding off Danziger's arms to reach limply toward her son. She turned her head toward the sound of Uly's voice, but her eyes shifted back and forth as though searching for him. Uly caught her hand in his and pressed it against his face, closing his eyes as he rubbed his cheek against her palm.

Danziger tightened his grasp around Devon and laid a hand on Uly's head, smoothing down the boy's curls. He heard True come up behind him, felt her small hand creep around his neck. "Dad?" she whispered. "Is she gonna be okay?"

Uly's eyes shot open, and speared him with their gaze, a mixture of hope and fear. Danziger swallowed in a suddenly dry mouth. How could the look on a small boy's face fill him with such terror?

"If I help you up, do you think you can stand, Devon?" he asked gently.

She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again, raising her head with painful slowness. The eyes she turned on Danziger were anguished. "No. John, I can't feel my legs."

There was a sudden intake of air, and a lone Terrian rose up from the floor of the cryo-chamber. As in the earlier dream, the metal deck of the chamber had somehow transformed into stone and dirt. The Terrian towered over them, its jaw grinding silently, its yellow eyes studying them. True gave out a little cry, tightening her hold around Danziger's neck enough to cause him to choke. He pulled his hand away from Uly and gently disentangled himself with his daughter, patting her arm reassuringly as he drew it away from his throat.

"My mom's still weak – are you going to help her get better?" Uly entreated in a small voice.

It was Devon who answered, in a voice like the turning of ancient pages. "No, Uly. They can't."

* * *

Mary brushed her hand against her forehead and frowned as the dream faded. She didn't understand. The Terrians could do almost anything, with the possible exception of making war. Their link with the planet was complete, symbiotic in nature. It was mother to them, the source of everything they were. They understood it completely, as it knew them so

intimately. Were humans so completely alien that the planet couldn't know them? That couldn't be true – the planet knew her, as she knew it.

She sighed, resting her head against the rock wall behind her. So many questions, so little understanding. She felt as though she was getting closer, though.

* * *

"Mom!" Uly's cry rang out across the camp. Seated in the med-tent, Julia grabbed her diaglove and sprinted through the center of camp and swept the tent flap aside. Seconds behind her, Alonzo raced into the tent, dragging on his shirt.

Julia knelt beside Uly, rapidly taking his vitals. "It's okay, Uly, you're fine –"

"My mom – they won't help her! Julia – they won't help her!"

"My dad –" True was saying, scrambling out of her cot and hurrying over to Danziger's side. Alonzo was already there, holding the big man down while he thrashed his way out of the dream.

"Take it easy, John," Alonzo soothed as Danziger's eyes opened and he shook himself.

"Is it over?" Danziger growled as he took True's hand and pulled her close.

"For you. For tonight," the pilot agreed, standing slowly. He dragged over a chair and sat down beside the bed.

Julia looked over from where she sat with Uly. "What happened in your dream, John?"

"Devon is alive. But very, very weak."

"Like Uly was," True interjected. "And she said she wasn't going to get any better."

"The Terrians wouldn't help her –" Uly complained again, his voice tremulous with the tears that slid down his face.

"No, Uly," Danziger corrected. "She said they couldn't. There's a difference."

"What?" Uly asked, rubbing his fist against his eyes to dash away the tears.

Danziger shifted on the cot, pulling himself up to a seated position. True rearranged herself to snuggle against his side, and he absently planted a kiss on her forehead. "If they won't, it means that they choose not to. If they can't, it means they don't have the ability

to."

"Do you think that's true, John? That the Terrians can't cure Devon?" Julia asked quietly.

Danziger was silent for a few moments as he considered his answer. "I don't know. In fact, I think they don't know."

"John's right. It's not over yet – they're still trying to learn," Alonzo put in.

Julia turned toward Uly and smiled, brushing his hair back from his forehead. "Get some sleep, Uly – we'll know more in the morning."

"When somebody else dreams the future?" Uly questioned as he leaned back onto the cot. Julia drew up the covers and tucked him in again.

She nodded. "Now we just have to wait to see who dreams next and what happens."

* * *

Sitting on the edge of his cot, Alonzo dragged his fingers through his hair and sighed mightily. If this tag-team dreaming went on for too long, his circadian rhythms would be completely reversed. He got next to no sleep the night before, and this night looked to be no different. He'd slept half the day away making up for it, and he frankly felt like shit.

He hadn't told Julia about his view into the dreams yet; why, he wasn't exactly sure. There hadn't been a chance, really. The day had been weird, disjointed, and she was focussed on Danziger and whoever might dream next. She hadn't returned to their tent yet; she'd stopped to talk with Magus on watch first.

Sighing again, he lowered himself onto the cot and stretched, pulled the blanket over him, and rolled over. Julia came in a few minutes later, and he could dimly hear the sounds of her changing for bed and slipping in beside him. He rolled over again and wrapped his arms around her, pressing his face against the clean smell of her hair. She kissed him on the nose and yawned. Smiling into the darkness, Alonzo whispered good night and settled down for the night. Sleep came soon enough, and with it, the next dream.

* * *

"Hello?" Julia called out. She held her hand to her eyes, shading them from the sun that beat down upon the bleached dunes that stretched down to the beach. Water lapped against the sand in a steady rhythm, and birds wheeled overhead. She turned slowly, looking for the spider cave, but this beach was curiously bereft of rock formations. "Where am I?" she asked softly. Shrugging, she climbed up over the dunes inland, calling out every

so often.

Finally, she came to a grassy area that sloped downward toward a valley. In that valley were rough buildings, forming an lopsided circle around an open area. And in that open area were many people, some of whom she recognized. She smiled, seeing Alonzo and Danziger, raised her arm to wave, and hurried toward them.

"This must be New Pacifica," she told herself excitedly as she stumbled across the uneven terrain. As she grew closer, she was able to see the people more clearly, and she recognized Dr. Vasquez among them. He seemed angry and was arguing with some of the others. The scene didn't look very happy, and that slowed Julia's pace. At last, she joined them, panting.

"Dr. Heller," Dr. Vasquez greeted coldly. "I would have thought you would have remained close to the children instead of wandering around this godforsaken place."

"Sir?" Julia asked, confused.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Julia," Danziger told her, not taking his eyes off Vasquez.

"I – ah, that is, what's going on?" she inquired, glancing around the group. "Where's Devon?" she added when she realized their leader wasn't among them.

Vasquez snorted contemptuously. "What does it matter? The woman's practically a vegetable. Her opinion is virtually worthless. My god, Heller, the woman's in worse shape than the children are!"

"Now listen here, Doc," Danziger growled, stepping forward and drumming his finger on Vasquez's chest. "That woman got us all here. She may be weak, but her mind's still as sharp as it ever was –"

"Fine, Mr. Danziger. I'm sure you have great experience of keen minds, repairing stations and moisture reclamation units. My concern is the health of the children and the colonists still in cold sleep. And after examining Ms. Adair and the rest of you, I don't hold out much hope that this ill-fated excursion will benefit anyone, least of all Ms. Adair. The only thing we can do is get back on that ship and return to the stations. G889 is not a healthy environment for humans, despite all our hopes."

"Wait, what do you mean –" Julia interrupted, and Vasquez simply glared at her. Now that she really looked at the others, she had to admit that Danziger and Alonzo didn't look well. Their color was poor, and a thin sheen of sweat had broken out on both their faces. A faint tremor worked its way through Danziger's upper body, and he looked like he was fighting chills, despite the warmth of the sun shining down on them.

"Dr. Heller, I'm sure you've done everything you could under such primitive conditions, but even you must admit that the health of the Eden Advance crew is well below normal parameters. Even Ulysses Adair is suffering, despite his rather fanciful connection to the indigenous lifeforms. Malnutrition is the least of your worries. Intestinal parasites, bone degeneration, weakened hearts, nervous system disorders ... you people are dying by inches. Your only hope is to leave this planet and return to the stations."

"But —"

"We can't leave. At least some of us can't," Danziger said roughly. "Uly'll die if we remove him from the planet."

"We don't know that, John —"

"Yes, we do, Julia. It's the planet that cured him; his link with it is what's kept the Syndrome at bay. We take him off G889, he'll die. Devon can't take care of him herself — their only hope is if some of us stay with them."

"We'll have to put it to a vote, then," Alonzo interjected suddenly. He reached for her hand, took it and held it grimly. "I'd like to stay. What about you, Julia?"

"Yes, of course I will, but —"

"You're fools," Vasquez spat. "You're condemning yourselves to death. You won't survive more than a few years, if that, on this planet. Don't you understand — this planet is inimicable to human life."

"What're you going to tell the colonists? Are you going to wake them —" Alonzo started.

"No. No point. We'll return to the stations and we'll simply declare this experiment a failure."

"What about the children?" Julia inquired anxiously.

"They'll die, Dr. Heller. Just as you will."

* * *

"Julia?" Alonzo called softly, reaching for her. He felt her shivering next to him, and pulled her close. "Shhsh. It's okay. It's okay, Julia," he murmured.

"Alonzo!" she sobbed, curling against him.

"I know," he told her, stroking her face gently. "I know. It was a dream, Julia. A possible future. We can change it. We *will* change it," he promised.

"You know?" she breathed, turning her face to look into his eyes.

He nodded. "The Terrians are letting me see their dreams. I saw it all. It's okay," he added, tracing the line of her jaw with his thumb.

"Don't you understand?" she asked urgently. "This is more important than simply curing Devon – whatever's wrong with her, we're involved, too. What Elizabeth said about the planet rejecting us – that's what was happening in the dream. We were dying because the planet hadn't accepted us, Alonzo."

"You don't know that for sure –"

"Yes, I do. We've got to find a way for the Terrians to help us, Alonzo. It's our only hope."

He kissed her forehead and hugged her tightly. "We will, Julia. I promise you – we will."

* * *

The moons were still tracing their paths across the sky, and morning was only a distant promise. Mary prowled the caverns in the dim glow of the sunstones, trailing her fingers along the walls. Dreaming with humans was a tiresome process, she decided. So much emotional noise, so many conflicts, so much clamor. Like humans themselves.

Intellectually, she knew that she had been born human. During the brief time she had stayed with the Eden Advance crew at the Biodome, she'd had glimpses – not at all tantalizing – into her own humanity. Pain, confusion, longing, loss ... these were what she understood being human to be. Nothing like the serenity, the cohesion of the Terrian mindset. The unanimity. Living as a Terrian brought with it rich rewards, order, purpose, peace, community. Living as a human brought ... what?

She paused, her hand resting lightly on a protrusion of sunstones. A faint smile touched her lips as she felt the warmth of the sunstones penetrating her fingers. She leaned against the rough surface of the wall, pressing her hand against the stone, reaching for the low pulse of its energy.

So many questions. That was something humans did not share with Terrians. Terrians didn't question, Terrians didn't explore, Terrians didn't form theories. At least, not the Terrians she knew. Some time in the distant past, before Terrians became what they were now, they might have. With a small shock, Mary realized that curiosity was something she shared with humans, not with Terrians. Curiosity. Wanting to know. The Terrians had

chosen to try to understand the humans simply because so many were coming. It was a choice made to preserve the race and the planet. The Terrians did not make war, had buried that along with emotions like curiosity in their ancient past. So simply exterminating the humans was not an option. Understanding was vital.

Yet, if no understanding was reached, the humans would eventually die. The most recent dream demonstrated that. So, if they simply backed off, the human problem would go away. But the Terrians had committed themselves to the course of communion with the humans. Just as they had not turned away from their decision to kill Yale, and thus exiled her when she saved his life, they would not turn from their decision to understand the humans.

She wondered what the others in the valley would think of this latest dream. Perhaps they would think that the Terrians would decide to simply turn their backs on them, allow them to die, and thus reclaim their world. She knew the Terrians wouldn't. She knew more dreams would come, until the two races could finally reach a common ground.

Mary's smile grew. She finally understood why the Terrians had allowed her to dream with them and the members of Eden Advance. And she knew that she would finally join her fellow humans in the days to come. And quite possibly, the Terrians as well.

* * *

A low murmur of conversation drifted across the camp as Julia and Alonzo came out of their tent the next morning. As they entered the mess tent, they were met by suddenly silent stares. Julia paused, glancing around her self-consciously. She nodded once, then moved over to the food table to get her breakfast.

"Well?" Morgan asked pointedly from his seat beside Bess.

"Well, what, Morgan?" Alonzo replied snappishly, following Julia.

"Well, we've been talking. Everybody heard Uly last night in Danziger's tent. So we know Danziger had his dream. And none of *us* had a dream afterwards. So ... what happened?"

Julia looked down at the nutritious but unappetizing gruel that had been prepared for the morning meal. Sighing, she nodded again. "I dreamed," she admitted softly. "A dream in which Devon lived, but was an invalid. A dream in which we were all dying, and the colony ship returned to the stations."

"Dying?" Bess repeated worriedly. "From what?"

"I don't know," Julia answered, seating herself wearily. "But we were definitely dying,

slowly. Immune deficiency, system failure, I don't know." She lifted her spoon and glared at the glistening glop for a moment before putting it down with another sigh. "We failed. / failed."

"You didn't fail, Julia," Alonzo told her gently, dropping onto the bench beside her. He covered her hand with his and squeezed. "It's a possible future, not destiny."

She wiped her hand across her forehead, pushing stray hairs out of her eyes. "I know, I —"

"What's it mean?" Magus inquired, her face drawn with concern.

Drawing a deep breath, Julia raised her head, sloughed off the tired, frightened woman, and became the doctor. "It means, I think, that curing Devon will allow us to understand what we need to do to survive here in the long term. We're not like the penal colonists — they didn't live their entire lives on the stations as most of us did. They've adapted to the environment here differently than we will, I think. Than we *can*." She licked her lips, pausing for a moment as all eyes focussed on her, then added, "I believe that whatever caused the Syndrome in Uly's generation may also be responsible for what's wrong with Devon. What will be wrong with all of us eventually."

"Even Bess?" Morgan demanded. "She didn't grow up on the stations — up until four years ago, she'd never left Earth. Whatever immune deficiencies the rest of us may have from living on the stations, surely she's okay —"

"Possibly, Morgan," Julia started to answer.

"Morgan, honey, I wouldn't *want* to live without you —" Bess interrupted.

Up until now, Danziger had remained silent, observing the exchange with a guarded expression. Now he rose slowly from his seat and cleared his throat meaningfully. "Nobody's gonna die, Bess," he said simply.

"Danziger, we don't know —" Julia protested.

"Yes, we do. Because we're gonna keep dreaming with the Terrians until we get this sorted out. I don't care how long it takes, we'll figure it out," he told her forcefully.

"I thought you were in a hurry to get to New Pacifica," Walman put in from where he sat with Baines, Magus and Cameron. "We've got that colony ship coming, remember? What if this dreaming stuff takes weeks? Months?"

A flash of pain crossed Danziger's face briefly, and True looked up at her father and reached for his hand. He took it and held it tightly as his face transformed into a blank

mask. On his other side, Uly looked up at him with wide eyes, and Yale moved to put his arm around the boy's shoulders. Julia half-rose from her seat, but Alonzo took her arm and pulled her back down again, shaking his head slightly.

Tension in the tent built geometrically until Yale spoke up. "I doubt very much the Terrians have so many possible futures to show us. We will make it to New Pacifica in time."

"What makes you so certain, Yale?" asked Cameron quietly.

"Faith, Cameron. Faith."

"Well, faith ain't gonna cover the next two thousand clicks," Baines reminded.

"Faith got us this far," Cameron counted. "Faith in Devon," he added, glancing around him, challenge in his gentle eyes. "She got us here, she got us this far."

"Lucky us," Walman complained theatrically.

"No, Cameron's right," Bess put in. Morgan made a face at her to stop her, but she shook her head at him and continued. "We've been through a lot to get this far, and I for one am grateful that I'm here. Life on Earth was ... difficult. Hopeless," she added, nodding to herself. "Life on the stations ... people shouldn't live their lives inside cans. Mankind wasn't meant to live that way. When Devon planned to come here, I felt like we'd all been given a second chance, a chance to do it right. I still feel that way."

"Yeah, and Devon's father's the one who designed the original stations. What's that got to do with what we're talkin' about, Bess?" Walman asked.

"It's got everything to do with it. Devon made the plans to come here. Devon arranged for everything we'd need. It was the Council that tried to stop us, it was the Council that implanted that chip in Danziger's friend and caused the crash. It was the Council that inserted those chips into us that nearly killed us. Devon's the one who forced Elizabeth to work with EVE to repair the chips. If Devon needs us to stay here and dream with the Terrians, then I vote that we do just that."

"Is that what this is? A vote?" Walman demanded.

"Why not?" Danziger interjected suddenly. "We've operated as a democracy in the past —"

"When it suited Devon —" Baines reminded them.

"We've voted on the important things," Danziger countered.

"I don't think it's necessary to force a vote at this point," Julia offered. "I think we should just see how the next few nights play out, and then make a decision. In the meantime, we're in a sheltered valley, we've got a ready food source, an opportunity to replenish our food stores, and we've got a chance to recuperate from the infection caused by the faulty biostat chips. We don't have to make any serious life decisions right now."

"I agree," Magus added. "I say we wait a couple of days, stock up, rest up, and then make a decision. A couple of days one way or another isn't going to make a whole hell of a lot of difference to New Pacifica. But it could make a big difference for us." She paused, then turned around, looking at each of the others in turn. Finally, she asked, "Well?"

"Okay," muttered Baines ungracefully, while Cameron nodded. A general murmur of assent drifted through the tent, and the tension at last dissipated.

"Good," Danziger approved. "Now, who wants to take out the rail and scout ahead? We've gotta make sure the route ahead is clear anyway ..."

* * *

Baines and Walman volunteered to take the rail out, promising to return before dark. With their gear on and satisfactorily transmitting, they left the camp shortly after breakfast had been cleared away.

Danziger and Alonzo saw them off after Danziger had checked the vehicle over one more time. Watching them depart, Danziger wiped his hands on a rag and announced, "I'm takin' the ATV back to the ship."

"You're what?"

"I'm takin' the ATV back to the ship. I wanna make sure it's secure," Danziger repeated impatiently, striding toward the all-terrain vehicle.

"Danziger, it's secure. I checked the locking sequence myself," Alonzo argued, matching Danziger's gait step for step.

Danziger halted at the ATV and wheeled on Alonzo. "So why was it open in my dream last night? You say the Terrians mirror reality in their dreams – that hatch was locked, but last night it was open. And if it really *is* open, then Devon could be in danger."

Alonzo stared at Danziger a moment, then nodded. "I'll come with you. Just let me tell Julia, okay – Danziger, promise me you'll wait for me, right?" the pilot urged forcefully, giving the mechanic a look that promised mayhem if he left without him.

"All right," Danziger acceded grudgingly. "Make it snappy. And tell Julia to keep an eye on True and Uly."

* * *

Later that day, Yale came upon Morgan, seated upon a rock in a clearing a few hundred yards from camp. Like most of the party not otherwise engaged, Yale was gathering specimens for Julia to study, and collecting larger supplies when she pronounced them safe and edible. The children were helping Julia catalogue their finds, so Yale was free to enjoy the open air and pitch in with everyone else. Pitching in looked like it was the last thing on Morgan's mind, though.

As Yale walked into the clearing, he shook his head; finding Morgan loafing off wasn't anything new. But the thoughtful look on the bureaucrat's face as he passed his VR gear from hand to hand was unusual. Normally, the VR gear would've been on Morgan's head, and he'd have been lost in a VR dream.

Yale paused, considering. Then he strode forward, not making a secret of his presence, and addressed Morgan directly. At first, the other man didn't notice the tutor, so Yale repeated his greeting. After a third try, Morgan Martin started guiltily and quickly shoved the VR gear out of sight. The frightened rabbit expression on his face relaxed as he recognized Yale, and he attempted a wan smile.

"Yale. I, ah, that is ..."

"You don't appear to be using that gear, Morgan. But it does seem to disturb you somehow," Yale observed with an underlying chuckle. "I could take a look at it if you like."

"Look at it?"

"To see if it's functioning properly," Yale suggested, extending his cybernetic hand as he closed the gap toward Morgan.

Morgan drew out the gear again and looked at it before handing it over wordlessly to Yale.

Yale was taken aback at Morgan's tractability. He hid it by adjusting his glasses and studying the gear, going so far as to plug it into the input in his arm to review the program. "Jazz, eh? I quite like that type of music, too," Yale told him conversationally. He glanced up to notice Morgan's tense scrutiny. "What is it, Morgan?"

"The program's okay? It hasn't been tampered with?"

"Tampered with? Why, no, it hasn't. What's wrong?" Yale asked, extracting the VR jack

from his arm.

Morgan stared at the gear as though it had suddenly transformed into a particularly venomous reptile. Yale took off his glasses and speared Morgan with a stern look. "Something is definitely bothering you, Morgan Martin. Something to do with this gear set. Now tell me about it."

Morgan gulped once, twice, then nodded. "Have you, um, ever heard of ... anyone in ... well, cold-sleep ... that is, you know ... ah ... entering a VR program in progress? Hmmm?" he asked, a strangely expectant expression on his wide-eyed face.

"Excuse me?" Yale replied doubtfully.

"You haven't, have you?" Morgan asked, shaking his head.

Yale shook his head in unison. "Except for your claim about Bennett, no, I'm afraid I haven't."

"So it isn't really real, then, is it? I mean, VR feels real, but it isn't, I know that, it's just that virtual helps me get through some days you know, but I do understand that someone who's in cold-sleep can't really just get up and walk into someone's VR session, and —"

"Slow down, Morgan!" Yale laughed. "Just tell me what's happened."

Morgan took a long, deep breath and nodded. "Tell you what's happened. Yes. Before we found the ship, I was in VR, and Bennett showed up and gave me the codes to activate the sleep crypts. Only it wasn't Bennett. I didn't know that at the time, but that's what I believe now. Because yesterday, Devon entered my VR and told me to reactivate the link to EVE."

"She what?" Yale demanded, all trace of humor evaporating.

"It wasn't Devon, Yale. It was EVE herself, disguised as Devon, just like she'd disguised herself as Bennett before. The Council computer can enter our VR transmissions."

Yale was silent as he absorbed this conclusion. Morgan was agitated, but not psychotic. He seemed sincere in his claims of visitations in his VR. "How does it happen?"

"How?" Morgan repeated. He shook his head. "I'm in VR, and suddenly, so is someone else. First it was Bennett, then it was Devon."

"But only since we came within range of the ship," Yale mused.

"Exactly. There must be some sort of beacon, some sort of powered relay connected to EVE in the vicinity. Something that boosts the signal enough so that it can interfere with VR. So that EVE can link with our gear signals."

"It might be wise to identify this device. It makes a weird sort of sense — before we entered the blackout zone, EVE, as Reilly, was in touch with Julia. By the time Julia cut her ties with Reilly, we'd entered the blackout zone around the Biodome. We probably hadn't travelled very far from the blackout zone when you had your first experience with an intruder in VR." Yale nodded thoughtfully.

"Why me?"

"Why you, what, Morgan?"

"Why is EVE targeting me?"

Yale ducked his head and smiled. "The reason is obvious, Morgan — you spend more time in VR than any of the rest of us. The window of opportunity is greater."

Morgan grimaced sourly. "Very funny. And in the meantime, we've got a direct link to a psycho computer in our heads, and even our VR isn't private. We have to find a way to disable that connection, Yale."

"There I must agree with you, Morgan. But Bennett's virus in EVE's operating system nearly killed us. The chips have insinuated themselves into our central nervous systems, so they cannot be removed. Destroying EVE, even if that were a possibility, would surely kill us, Morgan. I don't see that we have any options —"

Morgan reached for the VR gear still held in Yale's hand. "What about the chip's own operating system?"

"Pardon me?"

"The chip's BIOS. The machine language of the chip — the chip can't interact with an external operating system unless it has one of its own, a protocol that instructs and operates the chip. What if we disabled that program?"

Yale's natural hand moved to the back of his neck and he probed the base of his skull with his fingers, as if he could touch the chip embedded in his tissue. "How would we affect the chip's operating system?"

"Do we still have the chip Elizabeth removed from Eben?"

"I believe Julia still has it, yes."

Morgan hefted the VR gear in his hand, and smiled at Yale. "I think I have an idea, but I'll need your help."

* * *

Ten kilometers was a quick trip in the ground-devouring ATV. What had taken the Eden Advance crew nearly an entire day to cross, Danziger and Solace backtracked in less than an hour. In his haste to get to the ship, Danziger nearly rolled the ATV as he spun it to a stop in the clearing by the ship, and the vehicle was still coasting to a halt as he vaulted out of the driver's seat and raced toward the ancient sleep-jumper.

"John, wait!" Alonzo called out, hauling himself out of the ATV and following the mechanic up the slope. Danziger was nearly to the hatch when he suddenly yelled and fell back, losing his footing and skidding down the incline. Alonzo turned to reach for his friend, but halted in mid-motion as he watched a Terrian rise up from the earth.

The Terrian stood before the open hatch of the ship, its lightning stick held defensively.

"Goddammit!" Danziger swore, scrambling to regain his footing and move toward the hatch.

Alonzo dropped to a crouch beside him and held him fast. "Wait, John," he warned in a low voice. "He means us no harm."

"I'm not worried about us, Solace – I'm worried about Adair –"

Bowing its head, the Terrian extended the arm holding the staff, and sparks crackled around its rough-hewn surface. Danziger tried to fight off Alonzo's restraining hands, but the pilot held firm. "Wait," growled Alonzo. "Let me find out what's going on."

Danziger snorted angrily, but acquiesced, allowing Alonzo to close his eyes and reach into the dreamplane. A few moments later, he opened his eyes and smiled faintly at his companion. "They're standing guard over Devon so no one can harm her. They don't wish her any ill, they just don't know what to do with her yet. They're studying her in their own way. He'll step aside for us to check the systems over, but we can't stay."

"Why not?"

Alonzo shrugged. "I think our emotions get in their way. And trust me, big guy – right now your emotions are running a little high."

Danziger snarled incoherently for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. Let's take a look." He accepted Alonzo's help to stand up, and together the two men picked their way up the slope again. The Terrian bowed slightly and moved away from the hatch, allowing them to enter into the ship.

Alonzo moved quickly to the control console, rapidly scanning the readouts, while Danziger stalked into the sleep chamber. Without glancing at the lone occupied cryo-crypt, Danziger went immediately to the sleep controls, checking them over thoroughly before finally turning to face the cold light of Devon's chamber.

"Everything looks in order," Alonzo announced as he came into the sleep chamber. He halted, suddenly silent at the sight of John Danziger staring up at the frozen form of Devon Adair. If he'd ever had any doubts about Danziger's feelings for Devon, one look at the other man's face erased them. A mixture of pain and longing held John's face in thrall, gone in an eyeblink as Danziger registered Alonzo's presence.

"Here, too," Danziger said simply.

Alonzo shook himself and walked over to Danziger. "Then let's go. There's nothing more we can do here now, John. She's safe."

"Yeah," Danziger agreed, his voice rough with emotion.

"C'mon," Alonzo urged.

Danziger drew a deep, shuddering breath and nodded. "Yeah."

* * *

"So, what do you think?" Magus asked quietly as she and Cameron sorted through the plants they'd collected.

"About what?"

"About Julia's dream."

Cameron shrugged. "There's a lot we don't know about this planet. A lot the Council didn't let us know."

"Yeah, but what about going back to the stations – you came here to colonize G889. They tried to blow us up. Think there's anything left for us back there?"

"Thought you were planning to hitch a ride back when the colony ship arrived," Cameron

teased.

"Thought maybe I'd stick around for a while. Place kinda grows on you after a while."

"Yeah." He sighed. "I hope Julia's dream is wrong. I don't want to go back. I don't think I can live in a can again after this."

"No, me neither. Never thought I'd start to think of this as home. But I don't think I can go back to those little units, or the recycled air. Or paying through the nose for every little thing."

"Nothing's free. Not even here. That's what these dreams are about, I think."

"What?"

"What it'll cost for us to stay. There's a price tag, we just don't know what it is. Not yet, anyway."

"Who do you think will dream next? I mean, Bess, Julia, True and Uly have all had dreams. They're not going to bother with Alonzo, right? So, who?"

"Guess the diggers'll let us know when they're ready. Think we got enough to go back to camp yet?"

Magus surveyed what they'd collected and nodded. "For now. Let's go."

* * *

Alonzo drove the ATV back to camp, leaving Danziger to his own thoughts. The pilot was concerned about his friend; Danziger tended to keep most of his emotions bottled up, under pressure, and the strain was beginning to show. The illness caused by EVE's virus, then Devon's collapse, and now the dreams that forced him to face up to his feelings about Devon and the future of the colony – all combined to fray Danziger's iron control. Sleeplessness was the least of Danziger's problems.

Alonzo knew that there were still several more dreams awaiting Danziger and the others. What had started out to be a fairly simple expedition – move the Syndrome children to a natural environment to allow them to build up immunities wiped out by the sterile conditions on the stations – had turned into a complex problem that would probably take generations to solve.

As he maneuvered the ATV across the landscape, he wondered if the others realized that. After having lived nearly 110 years, Alonzo had a tendency to see things in the long view –

after all, he'd watched generations pass since he'd first joined the pilot training program. He'd watched the Council's modest beginnings, as a commercial entity guiding space exploration in the last days of Earth's primacy, transform over time to the monolithic, faceless control it was when they'd left the stations. What it was now, he could only guess. But he had some fairly good ideas on the subject. If word got back to the stations that G889 was a viable world for humankind, the Council's control would either grow stronger, as it dictated who could and couldn't emigrate, or it would be crushed in the stampede to leave the stations and the ultimately hopeless future they offered.

Somewhere along the line, Alonzo had become convinced that the Syndrome wasn't an anomaly, but a promise of things to come. In a generation or two, maybe more, maybe less, the stations were facing extinction. Alonzo wondered if Devon had realized that yet, and what that made her feel; after all, her father had been the prime architect of the stations, and even she had designed and built several of them before Uly was born. What had once seemed the salvation of mankind would become its ultimate tomb, if habitable planets were not identified and colonized. Another Adair might find herself becoming once again the savior of mankind.

Julia understood that. It was what had motivated her willingness to cooperate with the Council in studying G889. She might claim it was loyalty to the Council, but in the end, it was loyalty to the human race that had driven her to spy on them all and report back to Reilly. It was only when she'd realized that Reilly's blindness threatened humanity's ability to adapt to G889 that she'd listened to her heart and turned her back on the Council. But mankind's survival here was still a prime consideration for his lovely doctor.

And it was a prime consideration for them all. He had no doubt that Julia's dream was prophetic. G889 was *not* Earth; it was an alien planet, with an alien ecosystem, an ecosystem in which they had no niche. They would have to become alien themselves to survive.

The ATV rose up the slope leading into the valley where they'd camped, and Alonzo glanced over at Danziger and smiled. Such deep thoughts for an old sleep-jumper. The women he'd known over the last near-century would be surprised to see how his thoughts ran these days. Not that he'd taken the pledge on women; he'd just focussed his energies on one woman, a woman he hoped to spend the rest of his life with. But if that life were to be more than just a handful of years, they'd have to be successful in reaching an understanding with the Terrians, with the planet itself.

"You with me, buddy?" Alonzo asked Danziger as he turned the ATV down the path toward the valley.

"Hmm?"

"I said, 'are you with me?'" Alonzo repeated.

Danziger held his hand to his eyes, shading them from the glare of the sun. "Yeah, sure," he agreed wearily. "Let's just get back – I wanna take a look at the condensers."

"John, what would you do if every piece of equipment we have was working in top condition? I think you'd be bored to death," Alonzo teased as he headed the ATV toward the camp.

"Right about now, I could do with a little boredom," Danziger muttered.

Alonzo grimaced. "Yeah. I guess we all could, buddy."

* * *

"Yeah, I've got it right here," Julia told Yale and Morgan doubtfully. She'd sent the children out to play when the two men had entered the med-tent, the grim expressions on their faces setting off warning bells. "But this isn't the source of Devon's illness – the program was repaired," she pointed out, lifting out of its case the chip recovered from Eben Singh's body and frowning at it. "In fact, when we received the feedback from EVE, Devon wasn't even affected," she added, her frown turning thoughtful.

"Um, Julia, there are other people on this planet besides Devon Adair, you know," Morgan reminded as though to a small, backward child. "We have other concerns that may prove a little more immediate."

Yale gave Morgan a quelling look, and walked over to Julia, taking the chip from her fingers. "Is the operating system still intact?"

"I guess so, I didn't check. I mean, Eben was dead. Elizabeth removed it to satisfy herself that we had them, really." She turned, glancing from Yale to Morgan and back again. "What's this about, Yale?"

Yale and Morgan exchanged looks, and Morgan shrugged to Yale. The tutor briefly explained Morgan's experiences in VR, and his subsequent theory. As she listened, Julia sat down on a stool and dropped her head into her hands.

"Look, I know it sounds far-fetched, but you had to be there –" Morgan protested.

Raising her head slowly, Julia shook it negatively. "It's not that, Morgan. It makes perfect sense. So perfect, I'm amazed none of us realized it before. I can't believe *I* missed it. Of course EVE or Reilly or whatever you want to call that computer can infiltrate your VR program – that's exactly what it did when I believed it to be Reilly. The VR tube I was

given by the Council didn't contain any kind of special program – it contained a locator for EVE to target with its VR simulation. Whether there was once someone here by the name of Reilly, I don't suppose we'll ever know, but EVE took the opportunity to become Reilly in VR and try to subvert this group through me."

Morgan simply stared at her, stunned that the chromo-tilted doctor agreed with him so vehemently. "Uh, yeah," he agreed uneasily, "that's what I thought, too."

She got up suddenly, full of energy. "We could use this, you know – to track where the blackout zones are. We could map out the safe zones, away from EVE's influence. This could be invaluable –"

"And in the meantime, we remain open to attack from the computer – whether it has any weapons or not. All it has to do is introduce a power surge into the chips, and we're toast," Morgan reminded her forcefully. "Well, I for one am not anxious to test that out."

"So what *are* you proposing, Morgan?" Julia demanded, halting her movement to pin him with her gaze.

"Morgan is proposing to neutralize the chip. Using VR," Yale told her seriously.

"VR?"

"Morgan?" Yale turned the floor back to the bureaucrat.

"Well, virtual works by stimulating sections of the human brain, so that the experience includes all of the five senses," he started to explain.

"I know that, Morgan. This technology has been around for a couple of generations. So?"

"So ... by using VR to stimulate the brain, we may be able to disable the operating system of the biostat chip."

"Introduce a virus to the chip itself."

Morgan nodded solemnly.

"It could kill us."

"So could EVE."

"None of us are VR programmers, Morgan. A program like that would have to be extremely sophisticated. We simply don't have the technology –"

"Actually, we do. I've, ah, dabbled ... in writing VR programs. More of a hobby really, but I understand the language. Pretty well, really," Morgan admitted. "In fact, I once considered pursuing it as a career, but my family disapproved."

"And with this," Yale added, lifting his cybernetic arm, "we *do* have the technology to test the program."

"How?"

"By creating a simulation of the chip's operating system. We can test programs until we have a reasonable certainty of success, then test it on the real thing."

"And then?" Julia challenged. "You'll have to do human trials — your test subjects may not survive the experience."

Morgan pursed his lips as Yale turned to look at him. At last, Morgan said, "We'll have to ask for volunteers. But at least it gives us a chance to terminate the connection with EVE."

Julia was silent for a long time, her eyes shifting gradually from Yale to Morgan, and eventually back to Morgan. The bureaucrat didn't flinch under her steady gaze, and finally, she nodded. "You'll need help," Julia said simply. "Okay."

* * *

It was agreed among Yale, Morgan and Julia that they wouldn't tell any of the others about their suspicions about EVE and VR, nor their plan to combat the computer's influence.

Julia had argued half-heartedly that the others had a right to know; Yale had countered with the fact that they didn't have hard proof, and with everything going on with Devon and the dreams, it might be just the right amount of stress to send Danziger over the edge. Morgan had pointed out that Danziger wasn't really human anyway, so what difference would it make, but Julia and Yale had both favored him with icy, silent glares, and he'd chosen that moment to throw up his hands and declare he'd go with whatever the other two decided.

In the end, Julia agreed with Yale's assessment of Danziger's state of mind, and conceded on medical grounds that some secrecy in the early stages of the project would be appropriate. Among the three of them, they had all the required expertise they could hope to assemble; no one else in the group knew enough about VR programming or equipment to assist. With the possible exception of Danziger, but they'd already determined he was out of the loop on this one, at least until Devon's fate was known.

That finally settled, the trio of conspirators began to study the biostat chip in earnest,

preparatory to mapping it out in virtual for further testing.

* * *

Immediately on their return to camp, Danziger had repeated his intention to check out the moisture condensers. It was wise, really – while they had a ready source of natural water from a spring and small lake here in the valley, once they set out again, they didn't know where they'd find another freshwater source. The condensers' ability to take moisture out of the air and purify it for drinking could spell the difference between survival and death. But Alonzo knew that wasn't the reason Danziger chose to check them over now.

Constant activity prevented Danziger from dwelling too much on feeling. Focussing on equipment meant he didn't have to focus on people. Except for True, he amended to himself. And now Uly. Both children had spotted the ATV before it had come to a stop, and they'd both come running to Danziger with news of their important work with Julia. As True, leading her father by the hand to the condensers, had chattered on about what she'd learned from Julia, Alonzo chuckled to himself. He wouldn't be surprised if they were looking at the doctor for the next generation in that small, determined young lady. If there was a next generation, he reminded himself grimly.

He glanced around the camp; no one was in sight. The others must still be out foraging, or collecting supplies. He noticed that the woodpile they'd amassed the day before was looking woefully small – not nearly enough to get a decent fire going when the evening's chill settled in. Squaring his shoulders, he decided that a little activity to take his mind of their troubles wouldn't be such a bad idea, and went off in search of an ax to cut some more firewood.

* * *

By evening, everyone had drifted back to camp, exhausted from their day's endeavors. Baines and Walman had found a fairly level route at least a hundred kilometers toward the west, and that news was cheering to them all. The larder was filling up with fresh produce, and Julia had identified a couple of likely candidates for preserving. Bess had studied them critically, and announced that she planned to attempt canning over the next few days if they could concoct something approximating wax. Danziger promised to give it some thought.

As the evening meal wound down, silence blanketed the group. The day's events had already been discussed, plans for the next day laid, and finally, there was nothing more to do but wait for the next dream. Danziger casually reached toward the woodpile Alonzo had built up, grabbed a log, and tossed it on the fire. Sparks flew as the wood sizzled in the flames, smoked a bit, then caught. He stared into the flames for a long moment, then announced, "Yale, I want you to look after True and Uly tonight."

"Dad!" True protested, but Danziger turned a stern look on his daughter.

"I don't want you two sharing anymore of my dreams, sport," Danziger growled, a quirk of his lips betraying the affection in his words.

"But, Mr. Danziger —" Uly started.

Danziger raised his hand to still the complaint. "Neither of you. We don't know what the Terrians will show me next. I'd feel better if you were both with Yale."

"Aw, Dad —"

"True!"

"Okay," the young girl capitulated with bad grace.

Yale reached over and draped his arm around the girl's shoulders. "I should enjoy the company," he told her, giving her shoulders a little squeeze.

That satisfied Danziger, and he settled back in his seat, a little more relaxed. "Good. Julia —"

"Yes, John?"

"I'll want a sedi-derm, too."

"John, you really don't need —"

"Yeah, I do," he countered, his face implacable. "Might as well get it over with, huh?" He rose suddenly, still staring resolutely at their doctor. At last, she sighed, and joined him, leading him to the med-tent.

The others exchanged glances, but said nothing in deference to the children. Yale obviously picked up on the tension, and so suggested that it was time for the children to turn in, too. At their renewed protests, Yale resorted to bribery, promising them each a story of their choice.

After they had gone, conversation started up again, speculations on what Danziger would dream tonight, and who would follow. There was no pleasant anticipation in the discussion.

* * *

"You don't need this, John," Julia insisted again, holding the sedi-derm in her hand.

"Yes, I do, Julia," Danziger asserted, plucking the device out of her hand.

She looked at him critically and shook her head. "You're so tired, you're ready to drop now. This'll knock you out for at least 12 hours."

"That's good. Maybe I can have a long, dreamless sleep —"

"No, you won't. The sedi-derm won't block Terrian dreaming. In fact, it may accelerate the process. With this in your system, you may not be able to wake up out of the dream, John."

Danziger turned the sedi-derm device over in his hands thoughtfully. He looked up at Julia through the tangle of his unruly curls. "I'm so keyed up, I don't know if I *can* fall asleep without it, Doc. Humor me this once. I know the score — the sooner we get through these dreams, the sooner we'll know what's what. And if I don't wake up out of the dream, maybe I'll get some much-needed rest."

"Or maybe you won't break the dream cycle. Is that what you're trying to do — force the Terrians to complete the cycle all in one night?"

Shrugging, Danziger admitted, "Maybe. Maybe not. I just know this is one night I'm not going out like a light as soon as my head hits the pillow."

Julia grimaced, eyeing the sedi-derm doubtfully. "All right. But I'll check on you during my watch if you don't wake up after your dream. If I don't like what I see, I'll bring you out of it."

"Deal."

* * *

Danziger was beginning to hate the Venus-class spaceship that had brought Bennett, Elizabeth and their team to G889 more than 50 years ago. Local time. They must have left Earth more than 100 years ago — the trip had taken them 50 years each way, more than twice Eden Advance's 22-year trip. Ain't technology grand?

He found himself at the hatch again, no Terrian sentry in sight. The diggers were nearby, of that he had no doubt. They were pretty much calling the shots, he knew. But if it saved Devon and ensured a future for True ... hell, he'd play along as long as it took.

He lowered himself into the belly of the ship, noting absently that nothing had really

changed. The control room didn't interest him anyway; only the sleep chamber. He turned toward the next chamber and halted suddenly at the sound of a voice. A voice greeting him.

"Hello, John."

It was Devon's voice. Not the disembodied voice of the first dream, not the weak, barely audible whisper of the second. This was Devon's voice as he remembered it, as he dreamed of it in dreams not guided by the Terrians. He hesitated only a moment, then strode quickly into the sleep chamber.

She stood in front of her cryo-crypt, her hand resting lightly on the open tube door, her hair falling loosely around her shoulders, a welcoming smile on her lips. The warmth in her eyes fired an answering warmth throughout his body, and John Danziger felt himself wanting Devon Adair like he'd never wanted her before.

"Devon," was all he said, standing at the arch into the sleep chamber.

"Yes, John," she replied, a light laugh in her voice.

"You're okay."

"Yes, John."

"This is just a dream, Devon."

She closed her eyes briefly and nodded. "Yes, John."

"What happened?" he asked tightly, not trusting his voice.

Her expression grew puzzled. "I don't know. Suddenly, I woke up. The door of the chamber was open. I knew you would come, John. The Terrians told me you would come."

"Are you cured?"

She removed her hand from the door and held both hands out in front of her, turning them over as she looked intently at them. "I feel fine," she said at last. "Strong. Healthy. Like I could walk all the way to New Pacifica without stopping." She lifted her face and smiled brilliantly at him. "I think so."

That smile made his heart stop. Intellectually, he knew it was still beating, but he couldn't feel it. Or maybe he could; maybe that was what was threatening to explode inside his

chest, taking his breath away.

"John, I'm fine!" she cried, flinging her arms wide, inviting him to join her in her jubilation. Without consciously choosing to do so, he crossed the gap separating them and took her in his arms, embracing her as she enthusiastically returned the embrace.

"Are you sure?" he demanded huskily, burying his face in her hair.

"Oh, yes, John – I'm sure!" she breathed into his ear.

He tightened his hold on her. "This isn't real –"

"It will be –"

He pulled back, gazed into her face. He reached up a hand and smoothed back her hair, stroking her face with his thumb. She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against his palm, tilting her chin up and parting her lips. They drew together in a kiss as inexorable as gravity.

The kiss deepened, lengthened, followed by more. Hands roamed, garments disarrayed, passions flared. As one, they dropped to their knees, moaning softly. But as John thudded to his knees, Devon kept falling, out of his grasp. His eyes flew open, a howl of rage and frustration roaring out of him. Hands rose up from the ground, long-fingered, impossibly strong Terrian hands, pulling Devon down as she screamed and struggled against them. He made a grab for her hands, held on tightly as the earth swallowed her whole. His arms were dragged into the ground, up to the elbows, and still he hung on, ignoring the soil that boiled and thrashed around him.

Gritting his teeth so tightly, he believed they must shatter under the strain, Danziger hauled back, putting every iota of force and will into the act. The drag on Devon's body slowed, stopped, and gradually he felt her rising up through the ground, her fingers clenching his tightly. He groaned with the effort as she slowly moved back toward the surface, closing his eyes as he focused his strength. His eyes flew open again at the sound of her scream, and he joined in, for his hands gripped those of a Terrian, a Terrian who screamed. A Terrian whose hands he dropped, as he scurried backward across the sleep chamber, eyes wide with terror. A Terrian who dropped slowly back into the earth, its mouth still open, its scream still the scream of Devon Adair.

"She is one with the earth, now," came a soft, oddly-inflected feminine voice. "One with us."

Danziger whirled, and shock piled on shock as he found himself looking at Mary, her face streaked with dirt, her long hair matted and tangled. She stood a few feet away, staring

blankly at the spot where Devon had fallen from his arms.

"What – what do you mean? Mary, you've got to help us –"

"We are. The Terrians have welcomed her back to the mother. Look," she added, pointing.

Danziger turned slowly to look back at the churned up soil, saw a dark head cresting the ground as Devon – looking as human and beautiful as ever – swam up from the earth. She kept rising, dirt falling away from her in a cascade, until she stood up on the deck again, and slowly lifted her head. The eyes that turned on him then were distant, disinterested. Devon turned toward Mary and nodded. Bits of dirt and stone drifted down around her as Devon walked toward Mary, Danziger already forgotten. Danziger felt a piece of him dying, then another, and another, until there was nothing left inside.

"No!" thundered Alonzo's voice. "Mary, this isn't right – Devon's not a Terrian –" The pilot raced into the sleep chamber, panting with effort. "She doesn't belong with them, she belongs with us –"

Mary pivoted slowly, looking over her shoulder sadly at Alonzo. "She belongs to the mother, Alonzo. As I do." Mary turned away again then, and as one, she and Devon dropped into the earth, twin dust devils whirling on the floor to signal their passing.

"No!" Alonzo cried, lunging for the place where they'd stood. He landed on the ground, and pounded it with his fists.

Danziger slumped against the bulkhead, drained. "It's just a dream, Alonzo," he said in a voice that was devoid of feeling. "Just a dream."

* * *

"Alonzo! Alonzo, what is it?" Julia demanded, shaking Alonzo as he thrashed and yelled in his sleep. He erupted out of bed, gasping as he suddenly woke up. Sweat streamed down his body as his chest heaved.

Julia was already out of bed, crossing the tent in just a few strides to reclaim the diaglove. She fitted it on quickly, and was already taking readings when Alonzo shoved her away. "No. We've got to get to John."

He didn't bother to dress, and stormed out of the tent wearing nothing but his shorts. Julia paused for a moment, and glancing down at her T-shirt and shorts, shrugged and hurried after him.

* * *

Mary looked around her uneasily. She'd entered that last dream, been a part of it. Yet she'd had no control over it. She'd simply been a player upon the stage of the Terrian dreamscape. Observing at a distance was one thing, but being an unwilling and powerless participant was quite another.

The dream didn't make sense, either. She was sure that if the Terrians chose to, they could bring each of the humans into the earth and make them one with it. Just as they had with her. But that didn't create an understanding between the two races so much as simply eliminate one of them.

Unbidden, an image of Uly came into her mind. She could imagine how the boy would react to losing his mother to the Terrians. Her own memories of her mother were often indistinct, hazed by time. But every once in a while, they crystallized with a bittersweet clarity, and she remembered the touch of her mother's hands, the sweet sound of her voice. The warmth of her embrace. The Terrians lived a life of great richness in the embrace of their mother, the earth. But at the times when memory returned, Mary found herself longing for the purely human love of her natural mother. Yes, she could imagine Uly's reaction. And she doubted the Terrians would understand.

And Mary found for the first time, she understood Devon Adair's resistance to Uly joining the Moon Cross ceremony. At last, a mother's fear made sense.

* * *

"I don't like this, Alonzo," Julia said, watching the erratic spikes on the readouts from Danziger. "I'm going to have to bring him out of it."

"No. No, Julia, you can't. You've got to get him into normal sleep. He's got to dream normally, it's the only thing that can —"

"Can what, Alonzo?" Julia demanded, looking up at him worriedly.

"Can counteract the horror of the dream," he replied quietly.

"What happened in the dream, Alonzo? John's already dreamed Devon's death — what could be worse?"

"Devon became a Terrian. And she walked away."

Julia stared at Alonzo for a long time, then let out a pent-up sigh. "Right." She looked down at Danziger's sweating, contorted face. His jaw was clenched tightly, the muscles rippling along the jawline as his head rocked from side to side. "Stay with us, John," she whispered, and spoke a command to the diaglove. A soft hiss of fluid injecting itself into

his neck answered her, and a few moments later, Danziger relaxed into a more peaceful sleep. A few minutes later, Julia finally relaxed herself, brushing back her hair from her face. "He should sleep normally now."

Alonzo closed his eyes and let out a long sigh. "Good. You should get back to sleep, too, Julia —"

"No. I'll stay here. I'll keep an eye on him. You go back to sleep."

Alonzo had explained about his experiences in other people's dreams over the last couple of nights, so Julia knew that he would be joining in with the next dream. She was surprised when he admitted, "Not sure I want to."

"There's a purpose to this, right? I mean, more than just shredding away John Danziger's sanity. You're a part of that purpose," she reminded him.

Alonzo stared at her, then blushed. "You're right. Call me if you need me," he told her, and rose wearily to return to their tent.

After he'd gone, she whispered to herself, "I always need you, Alonzo."

* * *

Baines was on watch as Julia and Alonzo raced out of their tent toward John Danziger's. As he made his circuit of the camp, he clutched the MagPro tighter, as though the solid reality of it could ward off the bogeyman, in the form of a Terrian dream.

No cries rose up out of Danziger's tent, yet Julia and Alonzo had clearly been worried. Baines's tension grew as the minutes stretched, and he debated going into the tent to see if they needed help. He glanced nervously around him, hearing phantom footsteps in the brush beyond the camp, feeling imaginary eyes boring down on him out of the trees. This whole dream business gave him the creeps, and he'd rather go without sleep for a week than face the prospect of a Terrian dream. He didn't care what Alonzo had to say about it, it made him nuts.

Finally, Alonzo came out of the tent, dragging wearily across the clearing. Baines looked out into the night and assured himself that nothing was approaching the perimeter, and hurried over to join the pilot. They'd known one another a long time, a couple of trips at least. He was nowhere near as old as Alonzo, but he felt a kinship with Solace that he didn't share with anyone else.

"Yo, Alonzo!" he called, trotting up to join him. "What's happening?"

"Another dream," Alonzo answered with a sigh. "You're safe another night, Baines," he added.

"Safe? What d'you mean?"

"No Terrian dreams for you tonight. Some other lucky devil'll join in instead. The next one'll be coming soon."

"How'd you know Danziger already had his dream? I didn't hear anything."

They'd reached the med-tent, and Alonzo was bending down to hold the flap out of his way to enter. He straightened slowly, in that moment looking every minute of his 110 years. "G'night, Baines," was all he said, and disappeared into the tent, the flap fluttering shut behind him.

Baines snorted in response, but stood there a few moments longer before returning to his watch. Sometimes you never really knew a guy after all, he guessed.

* * *

After two nights of shared dreams with the diggers, everyone was somewhat reluctant to sleep, perchance to dream. But eventually, everyone succumbed. Fresh air, a grueling pace over the last few months, physical exertion, and the lingering effects of the biostat chips caught up with them all, sooner or later.

Magus had listened to Walman and Cameron drifting gradually off to sleep, their breathing finally settling into the regular pattern of slumber. Denner and Mazati had paired off a few weeks earlier, and shared a separate tent; she suspected Eben and Cameron had been about to when Eben had fallen ill. Cameron was quiet, and he held his grief in, but she could see in his eyes the pain, every so often. Truth be told, there was pain in everyone's eyes, at some time or another.

Baines was on watch, and she was sure this was one night when he wouldn't allow himself to doze off. To sleep could mean you were pulled into the dreamscape. She'd heard some movement in the camp earlier, from the direction of the med-tent. Not the sort of sounds you hear from young lovers, but two people running across the camp. To Danziger's tent. John Danziger was a hell of a guy, a good boss and a terrific mechanic. She wouldn't wish these dreams on anyone, least of all a stand-up kind of guy like him. It hurt, watching the dreams eat away at him. All the worse because he'd never admitted, even to himself, how he felt about Devon Adair. When this was over ... when the dreams had passed, and they had Devon back ... she was going to have to have a real long, in-your-face heart-to-heart with Danziger. Chances come along rare enough that you should always grab on and hold fast with both hands.

The thought of giving Danziger a stern lecture about love and opportunities made her smile, and that smile softened as she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

"Shit, I knew it!"

Magus turned and saw Walman clenching his fists and swearing at nothing in particular. She turned further, and saw Cameron a few feet away. As she continued to pivot on her heel, she realized that her efforts to stay awake had been fruitless. They'd made it onto the dreamplane. It was their turn now.

"It'd be easier if we knew what Danziger dreamed, you know," Cameron offered calmly. "We'd have some idea of what to expect, then."

"Yeah, well, we don't. And we're stuck here, so we might as well find out what the hell's going on," Walman grumbled, and trudged up the slope away from the crashing surf, toward the valley that stretched on the other side of the rise.

Cameron chuckled to himself and turned to follow. He reached the crest of the rise and turned back toward Magus. "Coming?"

She shrugged and started walking across the soft sand. "Might as well."

This dreamplane place was definitely weird. Strange lighting, like klieg lights all around but no real source. Things moved in odd ways, like old rotoscopes. Or time-delay, like seconds were missing all along the way. It felt real enough, though – the ground was firm, dotted with stones and ruts, some deep enough to catch you and turn your ankle. She wondered if an injury received on the dreamplane would translate itself into reality. Sincerely hoping it wouldn't, she started watching where she put her feet, just in case it did.

She slid down the last few feet of the slope, and joined Cameron and Walman in the valley. Ahead of them stretched a construction site, several buildings in various stages of completion. The beginning of New Pacifica. Seems like they made it in every dream so far. That was good. But in each of the dreams, something had gone wrong. She wondered what it would be this time.

The building materials were rustic at best, local timber from the look of it. Obviously they hadn't found anymore of the pods, at least none of the ones containing the pre-fab construction materials that should have made building the colony a matter of connect the dots. The sounds of old-fashioned hammers and saws drifted across to them, and Magus winced; a laser probe she could handle, but anything with a sharp edge ... anathema.

The scene looked sedate enough, everyone was working. She swore she could even see Morgan Martin, stripped to the waist, wielding a hammer like a pro. That alone made the dream worth having, she thought to herself with a smile.

"C'mon," Walman urged, and the trio moved forward toward the buildings.

As they came into the town, they could see that the buildings stretched further along the valley than they'd originally thought. The number of people was greater, too. Not the 16 members of the Eden Advance group, but hundreds of people. The colony ship had obviously landed, but Eden Advance had not been ready. She noticed a couple of completed buildings, including a large one that stretched for several hundred yards. Kind of a dormitory, she supposed. Then she noticed the ship.

The colony ship, which had never been intended to land on a planet, sat nestled on the crest of a hill to the east. It looked strange there, like some downed bird. She realized with a start that she could see through places on its hull, where plates had been removed. Cannibalizing the ship? What for?

"Look over there," Cameron pointed, and she saw it, too. A group of men were excavating an area roughly the size the building she'd identified as the dormitory, and the flat plates of shielded metal from the ship were being welded into place. The scent of ozone filled the air as they came closer; sparks flew from ten different places in the large depression in the earth.

"What the hell's going on?" Walman demanded, and one of the workmen turned toward them then.

"What d'you think? We're building the hospital. Grab a torch and pitch in, or go away. Ain't got time for chit-chat."

"The hospital? On a bed of steel? What for?" Magus asked, dropping down into the work area. Now that she was closer, she could see that the plating was being welded together to form a single flat expanse of steel. Braces had been fitted along the perimeter in places, and the beginnings of walls were being erected.

"Keep the Terrians out. This building'll be completely encased in metal – they can't swim through metal. No creature's taking *our* kids away from us. Not even Adair."

"Adair?"

The man turned a pitying gaze on her. "Don't tell me you're a digger-lover." His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I know you – you're one of the Advance team. You're the ones preachin' love thy alien. Hey!" he shouted to the others. "We got intruders!"

Magus scrambled back up the slope, helped by the reaching arms of Walman and Cameron. They hauled her up the last few feet and pulled her back from the edge. All around them, the workmen switched off their equipment, carefully placing their torches and the massive metal plates on the ground as they advanced toward the trio. The sense of menace was palpable as they retreated step by step. As the men swarmed over the edge of the pit, Magus, Walman and Cameron turned and started to run.

They'd covered a hundred meters or so when they heard the thunderclap. Curiosity overriding sense, they turned as one to see a figure rise up from the earth near the pit. It turned toward them briefly, and with a shock, Magus recognized it as Devon Adair, her hair crusted with dirt, her face smudged and filthy. In her hand was a Terrian staff, held menacingly toward them. All around the excavation, bodies shot up from the ground, lightning sticks held tightly. Electricity crackled, arcing from staff to staff, forming a light show like she'd never seen before. A howl rose up from the men then, as the crowd stood suspended between the intruders – Magus and her companions – and the Terrians ringing the foundation of the hospital. The staffs tipped in toward the base of metal, and suddenly the world went magnesium white.

A sound like a great outrushing of air followed, but it was a few minutes before the spots in their eyes faded enough for them to see. The hospital foundation glowed a sickly green, current arcing fitfully over its smoking surface. One of the men turned back to the excavation and lobbed an object toward the sizzling metal, and the object exploded in a shower of sparks. A low growl started from the mob, and as one, they turned back toward Magus and her companions.

The trio started to run again, but they could hear the mob growing closer. Suddenly, three figures erupted out of the earth, blocking their escape. Magus gasped as she looked into the blank, implacable eyes of Devon Adair. Wordlessly, Devon and her two Terrian companions stepped up to Magus, Cameron and Walman. Strong arms closed around them, and just as suddenly, they were dropping into the earth.

* * *

"Wow," Cameron breathed into the darkness.

"Wow?" Walman snapped. "Wow?"

"Yeah. Human or Terrian, nothin' gets in Devon's way," Cameron elaborated. "What a rush."

Magus choked back a laugh. Walman was launching into a tirade at Cameron, but she had to agree with Cameron. Swimming through the earth with the Terrians had been an incredible rush. But the thought of Devon Adair as a Terrian ... made her go cold inside.

* * *

No, that was all wrong. For the Terrians to take such direct action, action against another living entity ... something terrible must happen along that possible future. Something that reawakened aggression in the Terrian psyche. Granted, electrifying the metal didn't result in the death of any living creature, but the action was clearly antagonistic. The humans would surely retaliate, and that could only launch an inter-species war. That was something they had to avoid at any cost. If the Terrians were to relearn aggression and hatred ... it could change the course of the planet's future for all time.

And the colonists to come ... there had to be a way to help them understand the Terrians, and the planet, too. Because if they couldn't make them understand, that war might still come along, whether the Terrians were ready or not.

* * *

John Danziger was still sleeping by the time the others convened for breakfast. True was listless, toying with her food, her eyes straying every few moments to the tent opening search of her father. Uly had listened to Magus's description of last night's dream with wide, fearful eyes. Yale's arm around his shoulders did little to comfort him. He didn't know why his mother becoming a Terrian should frighten him so ... he'd always been excited at the prospect of developing more and more Terrian traits. But Moms shouldn't be Terrians. Terrians didn't tell stories, and Terrians didn't tuck him in at night. Terrians didn't feel much at all, and the thought of his mother not loving him anymore scared Uly Adair to death. It was worse than having her dead.

Yale was saying something to True, encouraging her to eat her breakfast. Something about her dad wanting her to keep up her strength. Uly shoved a spoonful of porridge into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. True's dad was an okay guy. Mr. Danziger never treated him like a cripple, not even when he still had to wear his immuno-suit. Uly knew that Mr. Danziger wasn't comfortable with the Terrians, that he was kind of scared of them. So dreaming with them was tough on him. But he did it anyway, for Uly's Mom.

Uly didn't understand all of it, but he knew that Mr. Danziger liked his Mom, and Mom liked him. In an adult kind of way. They fought like he and True did, but they rarely went off to play together. When Mom came back, maybe he'd suggest it to her, that she go off and play with Mr. Danziger. It always helped him and True, especially if they'd had a fight. If he was honest with himself, he had to admit he was glad True was along; if he'd been the only kid, he'd be bored all the time. Yale was great, but he could be too serious.

He ate another spoonful of porridge, and looked over at True. She was pouting, not a stupid pout, but because she was really sad. He understood that. He was sad, too. He missed his Mom. True's dad was around, just asleep, exhausted from dreaming with the

Terrians. But he was going through a rough time. Two sad kids should stick together, he guessed.

"Wanna play in VR, True? I'll let you pick —"

"No," Yale interrupted forcefully. "No VR."

"Why, Yale?" Uly asked, his spoon suspended midway to his lips. "We'll play nice —"

"I'm afraid not, Uly. We've experienced some problems with VR in this area. Because of —"

"Because of interference from the Terrian sunstones," Julia offered with a smile. "You remember that Alonzo said the area is rich in sunstones? Well, sometimes it interferes with VR transmission, and it can scramble the signal. Enough to give you a headache, or make you sick to your stomach," she added gravely.

"Well, how about a swim, then?" Bess suggested, joining them.

Julia looked up at Bess's arrival, and smiled. "That's a good idea — we tested the lake yesterday. It's safe, and there's a hot spring that feeds into it so it's not so cold. It's not too deep, either, and it's small enough you could probably swim from one end to the other without getting too tired."

"I was thinking about trying out the lake later this morning. Want to join me?"

True and Uly looked at one another for a moment, then back at Bess. "Okay."

"Great. In about an hour?" she asked brightly. They nodded. "See you then!"

Uly didn't understand the expression that passed between Julia and Yale, but he figured if he couldn't play in VR, swimming was the next best thing. In fact, swimming was a better idea.

* * *

"If we're successful, remind me to tell Bess I owe her one," Julia was saying.

Morgan looked up at that and smiled absently. Any appreciation of Bess's finer qualities — of which there were too many to enumerate — made him feel good. "Why's that, Julia?"

Julia sighed and leaned back in her chair. "The kids wanted to play in VR today. Bess suggested a swim instead."

Morgan nodded gravely. He could imagine Uly's reaction to seeing Devon in VR. The boy was already walking an emotional tightrope; he could just see what EVE as Devon would do to the boy. "They might try it later anyway, though," he said conversationally as he examined the chip through one of Julia's instruments.

"I told them that the sunstones were interfering with the VR programs. That'd it give them a headache or an upset stomach. I'll have to keep an eye on them, but that should give them a reason to avoid VR for a few days at least."

"I was grateful for Bess's intervention, too. Some physical exercise would be good for the children, and Bess is a strong swimmer. They will be fine," Yale offered. He and Julia were searching his data banks in hopes of finding information on the biostat chips. A schematic, possibly, maybe even information on how the chip insinuated itself into the central nervous system.

"Hmm." Morgan continued to examine the chip, trying to glean data on its operating system, when he realized he didn't know what Julia meant by sunstones. "Sunstones? You mean Morganite?"

"Yes, Morgan. You call it 'Morganite', the Terrians call them sunstones. Damn," Julia swore. "Another security code."

Yale sighed heavily. "All of this information literally at my fingertips, yet I do not have the security codes to access it. Morgan, perhaps your level four clearance might hold the key —"

Morgan wasn't listening. His eyes were wide as he muttered to himself. "Morganite. The rock that learns faster than a human mind. Morganite!" He turned excitedly to Julia and Yale. "We *need* Morganite."

"We're in a valley full of it, apparently," Julia agreed, not sure where Morgan was going with this. "Alonzo said the Terrians told him the concentration is very high, that's why they're able to dream with everyone."

"Yes," Morgan said, looking at Julia as though he thought her a cretin. "What else does Morganite do, Julia?"

Julia's eyes widened, and a smile spread across her face. "It learns. It communicates. You're right, Morgan — if we can access some, even one of the sunstones, it could help us break through Yale's security codes *and* map the chip's operating system!"

Yale had heard the story of Morgan and Julia using the sunstones to link Morgan's mind directly into the Geolock's control system to break its codes, so he wasn't surprised by

Julia's leap of logic. He did, however, offer a cautioning voice. "But Morgan, the sunstones are part of the Terrians' communications network. We cannot simply go out and take a piece of that away —"

"Maybe we can go to it. We don't need to keep the rock, we simply need to borrow it for a while. If you're that concerned, let's have Alonzo ask them for permission."

"And if they refuse?"

Morgan straightened slowly, his face serious. "Then we explain to them the threat these chips pose to us and everything on G889. If they're so interested in understanding us, they'll understand we're trying to eliminate that threat. And with their help, we can," he told them soberly.

* * *

"You're trying to do *what?*" Alonzo demanded when Julia delivered their request.

"We're trying to disable the biostat chip. We don't have the resources to break through Yale's security codes, and breaking down the chip's operating system is proving to be more difficult than Morgan thought. With the sunstones, we could do it, Alonzo. We could break EVE's hold on us."

Alonzo could see the gleam of excitement in Julia's eyes, and he found it contagious. This was positive, this was reaching toward their future. And if they could eliminate the chips, they wouldn't have to fear the computer in orbit above them. More than that, they'd have control, and they could release the colonists from it as well. Putting control in their hands would give them a better chance to hold off the Council and preserve both the Terrians and the planet.

"Okay. I'll ask," he agreed.

Impulsively, Julia kissed him on the cheek, then sat down next to him, waiting expectantly.

"Now?"

"Now."

He grinned, a grin that had broken a few hearts over the last near-century. A grin that had no affect whatsoever on the beautiful doctor sitting impatiently beside him. With a sigh, Alonzo admitted defeat, and closed his eyes, reaching for the dreamplane.

His response was surprisingly quick, as though the Terrians had been waiting to hear from

him. He formed the images in his mind, communicating his intent to the Terrians. They paused, considering his request. A question arose, one he quickly answered. Another. As the Terrians realized that Alonzo was asking for help to remove the threat that had already taken Terrian lives over the years, he felt something almost like enthusiasm coming from them. When he struggled to explain that EVE was a construct, not living at all, he thought he could hear a cry of exultation through the dreamplane. Not only did they grant him permission to use the sunstones, they showed him where to find them. More than that, they offered direct assistance, something the Terrians rarely did.

When Alonzo reopened his eyes, he found himself staring into Julia's wide blue eyes. "Well?" she demanded, her fingers closing around his arm.

"There's a cave on the eastern slope of the valley. That's the closest vein. Julia, I'd swear the Terrians are happy to help us with this – they know EVE, or Reilly or whatever it called itself when they last encountered it. And now that they understand it's not a living creature, they want to help us destroy it!"

* * *

Since they'd passed by the vegetation on the eastern slope on their way into the valley, no one had wasted much time checking it out. It had looked like more of what they'd seen in the previous valley, and it hadn't been very promising.

As Julia, Alonzo, Morgan and Yale trudged up the grade, they were surprised to notice fruit-bearing trees among the evergreens, berry bushes, and even a couple of trees that carried what appeared to be nuts. "I'll have to take some samples," Julia said as they passed through the grove. "These could be edible."

"We can worry about that later," Morgan insisted, and Julia had to smile. Usually, Morgan was more interested in eating than just about anything else he could do in public, but right now, he was anxious to find the sunstones and test out his theory. Julia had to admit that she kind of liked seeing this side of Morgan Martin. It was on occasions like this she could see why Bess loved him so.

"Up ahead," Alonzo announced, pointing to a rocky area that started a little higher up the slope. "Behind those trees, I think."

"You think?" Morgan challenged. "Well, let's go!"

Morgan set off at a brisk pace, and the others had to trot to catch up. Of course, Morgan could get to be annoying even when he was like this, Julia amended, grinning to herself.

"What's so funny?" whispered Alonzo in her ear.

"Morgan," was all she said. He grinned in reply.

* * *

The interior of the cavern was cool, moist, and dimly lit with outcroppings of sunstones liberally studding the walls. Morgan held up one of Bess's geological devices and studied the readouts. It was Morganite, all right. Tons of the stuff, if what they could see was any indication. With a sigh in honor of lost profits and fame, Morgan unshouldered his pack and started to pull his stuff out.

"Further in," Alonzo ordered.

"Huh?"

"We need to go further in. Look, you're planning to use gear to access the chip with the sunstones' help, right?"

Morgan nodded, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"We're not in the blackout zone anymore. EVE could access your gear and possibly throw off what you get through the sunstones. It could corrupt your data enough for a fatal error. If we go deeper into the caves, you'll be shielded by the sunstones. Surrounded."

"The sunstones prevent EVE from tapping into our VR?" Julia asked.

"In concentration, yes. Direct contact. At least, that's what the Terrians think. I think if we're successful with this, our next order of business should be locating EVE's beacon, though. Until we've disabled that, it'll still have a chance of reconnecting with the planet."

"Morgan?" Julia invited. The bureaucrat nodded and repacked his things, leading the way deeper into the caverns.

* * *

Mary heard them coming when they first entered the cave system. She recognized the voices immediately. Well, she'd planned to eventually join the crew of Eden Advance. She supposed it might as well be now. She'd "heard" Alonzo's call to the Terrians about the sunstones, and she knew why they were coming. Knew that they were coming with permission. She also knew that the Terrians knew where she was, and knew that by sending the others here, she would finally have to face them.

As she listened to them moving through the caves, she settled in on her blanket, closing her eyes and drifting into a state of contemplation. It surprised her, but she was looking

forward to seeing them again.

* * *

"Here," Alonzo decreed. "We'll be safe here."

"You're sure?" Morgan asked. Alonzo bowed his head solemnly. Morgan shrugged and dug out his things, dropping to the floor of the cavern with VR gear and the chip in hand. He reached out tentatively toward the sunstones, remembering the blistering heat that burned his hands the last time he'd joined with the telepathic rock. He flexed his fingers nervously and was just extending his hand to grasp the rock when he heard a voice.

"It won't burn you. The Terrians have invited you here."

Morgan whirled around, nearly twisting himself into a heap on the cave floor. Julia, Alonzo and Yale also turned around quickly, and each of their faces mirrored his shock. "Mary!"

She smiled, mimicking Alonzo's earlier gesture of bowing her head. "Go ahead. The sunstones will work with you."

"Mary, what are you doing here?" Yale asked gently, breaking away from the others to take her hand in his.

"I've been following you," she answered simply.

"Following us? Mary, why didn't you let us know – you could have travelled with us –" Alonzo told her excitedly.

"No. I needed to learn more about myself," she replied solemnly. "I have spent my whole life with the Terrians, never realizing I was human. Now I do. And through your dreams, I am beginning to understand what that means."

"You've been sharing the dreams," Alonzo guessed. "No wonder you showed up in the last one –"

"That was not my choice. The Terrians control the dreams. Like you, I merely watch."

"Um, we can catch up with old home week later, you know," Morgan interjected. He gestured meaningfully toward the stones, and Julia smiled.

"I'll stay with Morgan. You catch up with Mary," she offered, and dropped to her knees beside Morgan. "Okay, let's go," she added as she adjusted the diaglove.

"What's that for?"

"To monitor your life signs. I don't want you overloading yourself again, Morgan."

Morgan smiled at her then, warmed by her concern. He fitted the gear on his head, adjusting the eyepiece so it was comfortable, and held the chip in his right palm while he pressed his left against the sunstones. Almost immediately, the gear started sifting through frequencies in search of the chip's. The speed increased exponentially as the sunstones worked with the gear, numbers flashing before his eyes. He felt a surge of optimism. This could work!

* * *

Danziger awoke with the most godawful taste in his mouth. Like that time Wentworth dared him to drink something from every bottle in that bar down on Earth, in Alaska. Only this time, he didn't think he'd had such a good time getting into this state.

Feeling as though he'd personally transported each and every one of those bottles from Alaska to G889, Danziger sat up gingerly, one hand gently probing his head for bumps and abrasions, the other balancing him against the wall of the tent. No injuries, so that wasn't the cause for his discomfort. Discomfort, hell. Right about now, John Danziger would willingly die, if it meant the taste and the pain and the queasy stomach would just go away.

Amend that. The searing pain. He'd turned his head toward the tent flap, and got a good dose of brilliant sunlight straight in the face, and now his eyes were racing one another to reach the back of his skull. He wasn't sure which one won, but it sure wasn't him.

Damn! Why did he feel so rotten? No way Adair would countenance even a cc of a hooch of the order necessary to plow him under like this ... ah. Memory returned in the form of images filtered through the dreams. Now he *really* wanted to die.

Julia had been right – combining the Terrian dreams and a sedi-derm had been a *bad* idea. He felt worse now than he had yesterday, despite the fact that it had to be late morning. On any other kind of day, a sleep as long as he'd had last night would've set him up for days, but all John Danziger wanted to do was crawl back under his blanket and blank out.

But he had more immediate concerns. One was to wash out the taste in his mouth. Another was purely biological. And even more important than the others was to find out where his kid was. And Adair's.

As he dragged stiff fingers through his tangled hair, John decided that no one was going to tell him anything until he got rid of that taste in his mouth. Grabbing his sunglasses, he shoved them on and stumbled out into the unpleasant light of day.

* * *

The Mary that led Yale and Alonzo through the caverns to where her belongings lay was very different from the Mary they'd met several months ago at the Biodome. Beneath the dirt and the grime, a tan glowed. Her eyes were bright with curiosity, a curiosity that had been all but buried in her Terrian psyche. The hesitation to use words was still present, but her mastery of the language had increased dramatically. And she moved with more assurance than Yale could have hoped. A tight spot in his chest eased as he observed how well she'd done for herself in the past few months; a sense of guilt he hadn't acknowledged for a while dissipated.

They came to the small cave where Mary had stored her things. The very fact that she had things at all was a major change in her outlook on the world. Her Terrian staff was gone, of course; when she'd saved Yale from the Terrians, she'd left it behind, not thinking the Terrians would lock her out of the earth. A blanket, a canteen, a rucksack, a few implements, some machine-made, some fashioned from native wood and stone, made a small, pitiful pile in the corner of the cave. Mary displayed no pride in her accomplishment, no self-pity, no embarrassment. Mary was simply Mary, perhaps more so, perhaps less so, than before. Yale found himself watching the young woman with a renewed sense of wonder, a wonder that gave him hope for them all.

Alonzo bent to help her gather her things, and she gave him a rare smile, but said, "I can do it myself." Alonzo smoothed back her tangled hair from her face and smiled gently back at her. She turned her attention to collecting her things and stowing them in the sack.

"How long have you been following us, Mary?" Yale asked quietly.

She stood up, closing the knapsack. When that was done, she looked up at Yale and replied, "Since you left the Biodome."

"And before that?"

"I lived in a cave nearby. I found some of these things there. They don't smell so bad now. Grendlers," she added, with a disparaging shake of her head.

Alonzo had to smile. Their dealings with Grendlers hadn't been universally bad, but the smell always was. "Why didn't you join us, Mary?"

She tilted her head quizzically, regarding him with that silent, unearthly calm of hers. "I told you. I was not ready."

"And now you are?"

"Now is my time."

"Because the Terrians said so?" Alonzo inquired curiously.

"No. Because it is my time." She slung the knapsack over her shoulder and brushed past them then, not offering further explanation, and returned to the cavern where Morgan and Julia labored over the biostat chip.

* * *

"I'm in," Morgan announced suddenly, his voice breathless with excitement.

"Your heart rate is rising, Morgan – I think maybe that's enough for now," Julia responded, frowning over the readouts on the diaglove.

"Get Yale – we need to record this," Morgan ordered impatiently.

"Morgan, this can wait –"

"Get Yale!"

"Okay, Morgan, take it easy –"

"I'm here, Julia," Yale announced from the connecting passageway. Mary preceded him into the cavern, followed by Yale and Alonzo. Mary dropped to her haunches a few feet away, watching with interest, while Yale came over and sat down beside Morgan. Alonzo stood nearby, folded his arms over his chest and leaned casually against the cave wall.

Opening his cybernetic arm, Yale extracted a cable that he fitted into the VR gear Morgan wore. "Ready to start recording, Morgan," he said.

"Good," Morgan breathed, relaxing slightly.

A holographic image of the chip's geometry appeared in midair above Yale's arm. The view was breathtaking as the combined efforts of the sunstones, the gear, and Morgan's mind dropped from a panoramic view to surface level, navigating the streets, gates and junctions of the chip's architecture. Microscopic elevations on the chip's surface became elegant, towering skyscrapers in virtual reality. Depressions too small for the human eye to perceive unaided became canyons of dizzying dimensions. Light pulsed along the broad avenues and narrow sidestreets of the chip as the sunstones activated its programming.

"Ow!" Morgan complained suddenly, and Julia wrenched her eyes from the sight suspended over Yale's arm, and directed her attention to Morgan. For a moment, she

didn't realize what was bothering him, until she noticed the chip nestled in his palm, the filament wires once more following their preprogrammed imperative. The wires were growing, piercing his skin in search of his central nervous system.

"Stop!" Julia ordered anxiously. "Stop it now, Morgan — the chip's activated, it's trying to bond with your system —"

Yale calmly reached into Morgan's hand and picked up the chip with his cybernetic hand, but the wires had already worked their way into the skin of Morgan's palm. Morgan cried out as Yale tugged, but the chip wouldn't budge. Tiny beads of blood welled up around each of the fine wires. Yale started to reach out with his other hand, but Julia's shot out and halted him.

"Don't. It could try to link with your system."

"We have to get it off him, Julia —"

"Get it off!" Morgan insisted.

Julia shook her head to Yale, but turned back to Morgan's hand, poising the diaglove over the chip. She spoke a command to the unit, ordering it to activate the surgical laser to sever the shining threads driving deeper into Morgan's palm. First one, then another was cut by the thin beam of concentrated light. "It's working," Julia breathed, then gasped as the wires quickly reconnected and continued their inexorable progress. "Damn!"

The chip would not release from his hand despite their efforts to dislodge it. As they watched, it tightened its hold, puckering the skin as the wires wound deeper into the flesh.

"Turn off the program, Morgan," Julia ordered. "Tell the sunstones to stop —"

"I'm trying," Morgan answered, gritting his teeth against the pain. Suddenly, the projection hovering over Yale's arm changed, as numbers flashed by so quickly, they were simply after-images on the retina. Impossibly, the flickering numbers increased in speed until they became a subliminal strobe. Julia watched, horror-stricken.

"Look," Yale breathed. "Look at the chip."

"What?" Julia demanded, but she tore her eyes away from the hologram to stare at the chip. The filaments were receding! One had already retracted from Morgan's skin, waving feebly like antennae, and she could see others gradually withdrawing. The chip itself was becoming smaller.

It didn't seem possible, but the bio-electronics of the chip were definitely outside her field.

Bennett had said that the chip had probably been injected, which meant it must have started out as almost microscopic in size. Yet it had grown to a couple of centimeters across, the wires infiltrating the human nervous system and penetrating the brain. The sunstones were reversing the process. As the chip continued to dwindle in size, she watched in growing amazement and growing awe — Elizabeth Anson had been a brilliant scientist, more brilliant than Julia had guessed. Within minutes, only a tiny dark speck remained in Morgan's palm, amid a smear of blood. Finally, the projection dimmed and went dark.

"My God, it's gone," Julia whispered.

"What?" Morgan demanded, removing his hand from the sunstones and tearing off his gear. He glared accusingly at his palm. "We don't have a sample, then," he complained. "I went through all of that for nothing?"

"We have better than a sample, Morgan," Yale told him with a wide grin. "We have a deactivation program." He reached across his artificial arm and switched off the recorder. "The sunstones decoded the programming and did what you told them to do — they stopped the chip."

Morgan lifted his palm to his face and stared, open-mouthed, at his palm. "It's gone? You mean — we did it?" He looked up, his expression confused for a moment, then he broke into a delighted smile. "We did it!"

Julia used the diaglove to recover what was left of the chip. "We did it with a chip that isn't implanted in a human. We don't know if this program will work on a chip that has insinuated itself into a human host. Or what it will do to that host."

Yale shook his head. "Then we must find out, Julia. As soon as possible —"

"No."

They all turned around to face the source of that single, imperious word. Alonzo had moved closer, and now he stood behind them, his arms folded across his chest, not in repose, but in challenge.

"Well, why not?" Morgan demanded, a hint of a whine creeping into his voice. Julia nearly smiled; Morgan had just accomplished the impossible, and now that accomplishment was being contested.

"Because we're not ready. Not so soon after Eben's death, or Devon's illness. If this fails, if the test subject ... dies ... this group may not recover."

Silence descended as they all digested that. After a moment, Mary asked, "Why does that matter?"

* * *

"Where is everybody?"

Magus looked up from the coffee pot in the mess tent as John Danziger, looking like something a Grendler had dragged in and left behind, came into the tent. She figured he looked about like she felt, so set her own cup down and poured one for him, and thrust it into his hands.

"Thanks," he murmured, raising the cup two-handed to his lips. After a long swallow, he pulled the cup away and repeated his question.

"Well, let's see ... Bess and the kids are down by the lake having a swim. Most of the others are out foraging. I don't know where Yale, Julia or Alonzo are – probably the same. Morgan's probably off somewhere playing in VR – although Julia said something about the sunstones interfering with VR, so maybe not."

Danziger accepted this and sipped at his coffee again. "Left you behind on watch?"

Magus shrugged. "More or less. By the way, John – Cameron, Walman and I all dreamed last night."

"All three of you?" Magus nodded. "Musta been a doozy."

"It was ... interesting," she admitted. "I'm sorry, John – I'm sorry you have to go through this," she added with genuine emotion.

Danziger blushed beneath his tan, and coughed uncomfortably. "It'll be over soon. I hope."

"Me, too. Nice to know we're probably going to make it to New Pacifica. But I sure as hell don't want to see what happened in our dream come true."

Danziger visibly hesitated, and Magus thought she knew why. Looking into those dull, distant eyes had unnerved her, and she wasn't that close to Devon. Oh, they got along okay, and she respected the woman, but they weren't what you could call friends. Danziger on the other hand ... well. She could only imagine what it must feel like for him.

Swallowing hard, Danziger asked the question. What happened in the dream? Magus gestured toward the bench at the nearby table, and Danziger sat. She picked up the

coffee pot and topped off both their cups, then sat down with him and told him. The flat, angry look on his face didn't surprise her, nor the glitter in his eyes. If she didn't know better, she'd swear John Danziger was fighting back tears.

* * *

"If the death of one ensures the survival of the others, if that life is given willingly ... then what is the problem?"

Julia and Morgan stared open-mouthed at Mary, dumbfounded by her question. Yale smiled faintly, and Alonzo simply studied her as he dropped into a seated position on the dirt floor of the cave.

"What is the problem? Well, it is a complex question, Mary," Yale told her, switching into lecture mode. "It is a question for which each person must have their own answer."

"It's a waste," Alonzo put in. "Especially if we can take steps to make sure it doesn't end up in someone's death."

"And after all we've been through, to lose another one of us might be more than we can take," Julia added gently.

"Why?" Mary asked simply.

The others exchanged equally confused glances. Yale attempted to answer her, however. "The death of any member of the group affects us all. Think of us as a ... an organism, an animal if you like."

"But you are human," Mary protested.

"Yes, we are," Yale agreed with a small chuckle. "But we are also members of a group, a group in which each of us has a role to play. So, like an animal, some of us are its arms and legs, some of us its heart. Some of us its brain. Together, we can function as a unit, a single entity."

"Like the tribe," Mary suggested. "It has many parts, yet it functions as one."

"Yes," Yale approved. "We are like a tribe. The loss of one of us makes us less than we were before. Each of us brings something unique to the tribe, something the tribe needs to be itself. Without that something, the tribe no longer functions in the same way."

Mary nodded solemnly, her brow furrowed as she struggled to make sense of what they told her. She reached out and spread her palm against Yale's chest. "You are the heart of

the tribe."

Yale smiled at her, covering her hand with his. She tilted her head, looking at the hand holding hers with a curious expression. Then she looked over his shoulder and looked at Julia. "You are its brain."

Julia grinned, blushing. "I wouldn't go that far —"

"Julia," Yale prompted gently, admonishing her not to confuse Mary.

"Alonzo is the tribe's dreamer. Morgan ... what is Morgan?" Mary inquired innocently.

Strangled laughs answered her, but it was Yale who gave her a reply. "Morgan is one of the tribe's hands, one of the people who makes it work."

Morgan relaxed, smiling to himself, at Yale's description. It could have been much worse.

"And what is Devon?" Mary asked at last.

Alonzo sat up straight, conviction in his face. The tight, worried expression of the last few days melted away with sudden awareness. "Devon is the will," he said clearly.

Mary turned and looked at him for a long moment, then nodded with satisfaction.

* * *

True and Uly sat side by side on a rock by the small lake, swinging their legs in the cool water. The day had turned out perfect — bright sun, blue sky, cool breeze, interesting clouds scudding by above, and a reasonably understanding adult to supervise them. The water was perfect, too — not too deep to make the adults crazy with worry, but deep enough to make the swimming challenging enough to be fun. There was nothing worse than always being stuck playing at the baby end.

Well, yeah, there were worse things. Like having a Mom who was sleeping in a cryo-crypt in a really old spaceship, and you didn't know when — or if — she was going to wake up. And having a Dad who was forced to have scary dreams with aliens to save her, and watching it tear him apart. Uly and True didn't talk about such things, but the awareness of them was there between them. Uly's Mom was sick, really sick, and True's Dad was trying to help her, so it placed on them a solemn responsibility to remain at truce. For his Mom and her Dad.

Not that either one of them ever *planned* to cause trouble. It was just that sometimes, it was too easy to not notice trouble coming to find them. But right now, both of them were

keeping an eagle eye out – whatever that was – to avoid trouble. They both knew that there was enough trouble abroad without helping it along.

Bess was swimming laps now, cutting easily through the calm water as her arms reached up, cut down, over and over again, her legs kicking in time to the slice of her arms. True settled back against the sun-warmed rock and watched her, the steady rhythm and the heat of the sun making her drowsy. They'd been silent for a long time, just sitting there watching, and when Uly spoke, True almost fell off of her perch with surprise.

"If the Terrians turn my Mom into one of them, I don't think I want to be Terrian anymore."

"I don't think you have much choice, do you? I mean, they cured you."

"Yeah, maybe. But what good's being healthy if my Mom doesn't care about me anymore?"

The kid had a point. True couldn't imagine what it would be like if Dad suddenly didn't love her anymore. She remembered how lost and angry she'd been when they'd arrived here on G889, and Dad had seemed more interested in Uly than her. But if it was real, it'd be a thousand, no a million times worse.

"That's not going to happen, Uly," True answered him impatiently. Better not give in to his self-pity, after all. "The Terrians are showing us options," she added, mimicking the tone of voice used by one of the supervisors back at the stations. "Alonzo says they're not done yet. Maybe they'll have a better one to offer."

"Yeah, maybe," Uly said again with a frown. "Y'know, your Dad is okay. I know these dreams hurt 'im a lot. Y'think maybe I should make him a present, to say thank you?"

True grinned. "Sure! And I'll help – I know what Dad likes. C'mon – let's go."

"We'd better tell Bess ..."

True was about to say, "Forget it, she's too far away," but then she remembered they were trying to be good, to watch out for trouble. "Okay," she finally said, proud of her maturity. "Let's wait for her at the shore and tell her what we want to do."

* * *

It was late afternoon by the time Alonzo, Yale, Julia and Morgan exited the cavern system. Mary walked alongside silently, not so much withdrawn as self-contained. They'd agreed to come back to the cavern the next day to see if Morgan could use the sunstones to crack the security codes in Yale's data bank – the information it might contain on the chips would be invaluable before attempting to take the deactivation program any further.

Alonzo had already asked the Terrians if it would be acceptable to them for Eden Advance to make use of the stones again, and the Terrians had approved.

Twenty minutes later, they were straggling back to camp, where Danziger, Magus, Denner and Mazati were all outside, attending to various tasks. Magus was the first to notice them, and raised a hand in greeting, a hand that froze in mid-air as she noticed Mary. She called over to Danziger, who looked up from his work on the generator and frowned. Wiping his hands on the ever-present rag stuffed in his back pocket, Danziger straightened and walked calmly out to meet them.

With a glance toward Mary, he nodded a greeting. "Where've you been? And where did you find Mary?"

"Up on the hill," Julia explained. "There's a deposit of sunstones up there and we got permission from the Terrians to use them to —"

"Help crack the security codes on my data bank. For information about the biostat chips," Yale completed quickly.

Danziger's eyes narrowed, as though suspecting something was up, but he said nothing. Gesturing toward Mary, he asked, "Are you planning to join us?"

Mary glanced toward Alonzo, who inclined his head encouragingly. "If I am welcome," she answered.

Danziger grinned at her. "Sure," he replied, his voice warmer than it had been in days. He thrust out his hand to her and added, "Welcome aboard."

Mary stared at the hand, obviously unsure of what the gesture implied. Alonzo guided her hand to grasp Danziger's, telling her, "It's a form of greeting among humans. Of welcome."

"In ancient cultures, it meant that both parties held out open hands and bore no weapons against one another," Yale elaborated.

"Ah," Mary said, and grasped Danziger's hand firmly. "I bear no weapons. I do not have lightning anymore."

Danziger chuckled at that and grinned more broadly. "I'm glad of that. Look, we've started dinner, but it won't be ready for a while — maybe you'd like to go clean up ... ?"

Mary looked uncertainly about her, and Julia stepped in then, placing her hands on the young woman's shoulders. "Another human custom — to come to a meal with clean hands and body. There's a lake nearby — you can wash up there."

"With ... bubbles?" Mary inquired hopefully, her eyes lighting up with the memory of her previous experience with a bath.

Julia smiled. "If we can find Beth, I think that can be arranged."

"She's still down by the lake with the kids. I'll get Zero to bring the tub and heater down in a few minutes," Danziger offered.

As Julia guided Mary toward the lake, she looked back over her shoulder at Danziger, smiling gratefully.

After they'd gone, Danziger turned back to the other men, his face serious once more. "How long has she been tracking us?"

"She's been *following* us since we left the Biodome," Alonzo replied. "Living on her own. We found her up in the caves. She said she needed to be on her own for a while to find out who she is. Now she's ready to live with other humans."

Danziger turned and looked toward where Mary and Julia were disappearing into the trees, and shook his head. "You don't think there's any connection with the dreams? After all, she showed up in the one I had last night."

"She mentioned that. She said the Terrians are showing her the dreams, too, but she has no control over it. Seemed pretty sad about it, actually," Morgan spoke up.

"To be cut off from the dreamplane and unable to swim the earth ... for someone raised to do that, it's pretty tough," Alonzo offered. "But she understands the Terrians better than any of us, John – and if we can help her understand about Devon, it could help us make the Terrians understand, too."

Danziger considered that silently, then nodded crisply. "Agreed. You guys successful?"

Morgan, Alonzo and Yale exchanged a quick glance. Morgan shrugged, and Alonzo nodded. Yale said, "Somewhat. Progress, at least. We plan to go back tomorrow and see if we can get further. The Terrians are willing to help us with this – part of their attempts to understand us, perhaps."

"Good." Danziger started to turn away, then paused, looking back at them. "Next time, keep your gear on, and take one of the weapons with you. You don't know what else might be up in those caves."

"Mary's been living in the caves the last couple of days. It's okay, John," Alonzo protested.

"Even so."

* * *

Julia and Mary found Bess at the shore of the lake, toweling her hair dry as she talked earnestly with Uly and True. Uly noticed them first, and whooped a greeting as he suddenly raced toward them. He threw himself at Mary, causing her to stumble back a step or two, and he hugged her fiercely as she looked down at him, confused.

"Mary! I've missed you!"

Bess and True were coming up at a much more sedate pace, but Bess's face was alight with pleasure. True was a little more reserved, but she didn't appear to be openly hostile.

"Mary!" Bess welcomed, still drying her hair. "Where'd you come from?"

Julia glanced at Mary, who was still trying to make sense of Uly's enthusiastic greeting, and smiled. "Mary's been following us. We came across her when we went up to the caves on the eastern slope. She's been trying to find herself," Julia added meaningfully.

"And now you've found us again," Bess said warmly, reaching out with both hands to take Mary's. "I'm so glad!"

Uly hadn't let go of Mary, although he wasn't squeezing the life out of her anymore, either. With her hands caught in Bess's, Mary seemed frightened, trapped. Her eyes shifted back and forth like an animal about to bolt. Julia put her arm around the young woman's shoulders and squeezed with what she hoped was a comforting gesture. "Humans are ... demonstrative in their greetings, Mary. Uly and Bess are happy to see you. You have nothing to fear."

Mary relaxed slightly, and nodded. "I do not understand this ... touching. What does it mean?"

Uly, whose arms were still wrapped around Mary's waist, looked up at her and grinned impishly. "Hugging means you like somebody."

"And this?" she asked, raising the hands that were still held in Bess's.

"The same," Bess told her warmly. "There are many forms of greeting among human cultures. But they all basically mean that we're happy to have you among us."

Mary nodded, tightened her hold on Bess's hands, and attempted a smile. Bess returned it with extra wattage, then released Mary's hands. With visible effort, Mary then put her arms

around Uly and hugged. "I am happy to see you, too, Uly."

Uly finally released Mary and stepped back, looking expectantly at True. When True didn't move, he nudged her with his foot.

"Hi, Mary," True waved her hand at the woman. "Welcome back."

Mary looked at her intently, spread her hands, and asked, "You do not like me?"

True's eyes widened at that, then she shrugged. "Yeah, sure," she said, and walked into a brief hug with Mary.

Now that the social amenities had been observed, Julia announced, "Danziger said that dinner will be ready soon. We thought maybe Mary could have a bath before we eat. We were hoping that, well, maybe you wouldn't mind ... ?"

"Letting Mary have a bubble bath?" Bess completed with a grin. "Sure. Is he going to bring down the tub?" Julia nodded. "Then I'll go get the bubble bath and be right back. And you two," she added to Uly and True, "had better get dressed. Swimming's over for the day."

"Aw, Bess —" Uly started to protest.

"You're both going to look like prunes if you swim anymore today," she told them sternly, and steered them up the slope toward the camp.

As they marched away under Bess's iron gaze, Julia could hear True ask, "What's a prune?"

After they had gone, Julia turned to Mary and smiled encouragingly. "We really are happy to have you with us, Mary."

"Why?"

Julia blinked in surprise. "Well, because we like you. When you like someone, you enjoy spending time with them."

"But I have nothing to offer to the tribe. I have no lightning. I cannot dream, unless the Terrians let me. I cannot swim the earth."

"Perhaps not, but you do understand the Terrians better than we do. And we need that understanding, Mary. You don't come to us empty-handed."

Mary stared at her for a long time before nodding, a small smile forming on her lips. "Good."

* * *

The tattered, filthy Eden Advance uniform that Mary had worn since they'd first given it to her at the Biodome was summarily removed, and a clean, new one provided. Mary still didn't understand why, but she admitted that the clean material felt good next to her skin. Bess assured her that her old clothes could be cleaned and mended, and she'd teach Mary how to do it herself. But for now, a replacement would have to do. Mary had nodded solemnly, and followed Bess and Julia back to the camp.

By now, dusk was falling, and the woods separating the lake from the camp were dark as the three women picked their way through the trees. Mary moved forward with assurance, and Julia wondered if perhaps her night sight was superior to theirs – after all, the Terrians lived in a world of semi-darkness underground. Reaching the camp, they were greeted with the welcome smell of food, and the trio entered the mess tent.

Mary had only shared a couple of meals with them back at the Biodome, so Julia felt no qualms in showing her once more how to use the plate and implements. Mary watched intently, then started to feed herself with great concentration. At her first taste of the food, she smiled, muttering, "Good," around her food. Julia decided that she'd work on table manners later, and let the girl have a decent meal. After dinner, she planned to perform a physical on her, to see if any vitamin supplements might be in order. She smiled at herself; always the doctor, Heller.

After the meal, Julia showed Mary how to clean up her utensils, and then they joined the others around the campfire. Mary's presence seemed to lend the gathering a more festive air, and Julia approved whole-heartedly. Even Danziger seemed in better spirits. Again, she smiled; Mary had thought herself empty-handed. Instead she brought something precious to them: hope.

Julia knew that Alonzo had warned the others not to overwhelm Mary with questions. The young woman wasn't used to human conversation, and she was still skittish. Socialization would come in time, but they'd have to go slowly with her, so they didn't spook her. Julia felt no jealousy at Alonzo's special attention to Mary; she knew where she stood with him, and the knowledge warmed her. It felt good to feel confident about *something*.

They'd been sitting around the campfire, exchanging stories and opinions, for about an hour when Danziger rose from his seat. Mary looked up at him and bowed her head. "You dream."

Danziger did a doubletake. "Yes," he answered after a moment's silence.

"You have great courage," she added solemnly. "The dreams are very painful for you."

"I don't have much choice, do I?"

Mary glanced over at Yale and answered, "There is always a choice."

Danziger smiled grimly. "Well, I'd better turn in."

"No sedi-derm tonight, John?" Julia asked quietly.

"No," Danziger replied, wincing. "Not tonight."

Mary stood suddenly. "I must dream, too. Where can I ... ?"

"Ah," Yale replied. "I thought perhaps you could sleep in our tent, Mary. With True, Uly and me."

She nodded gravely, waiting.

"I'll show you," Yale offered, and got up to lead her to the tent he shared with the children. Julia knew he'd set up another cot after they'd returned to the camp, so although the tent would be a little crowded, everyone would have their own bed. "Children?" he prompted when True and Uly hadn't given up their spots by the fire.

"Do we have to, Yale?" Uly complained.

"C'mon, champ," Danziger urged. "You, too, sport. And Yale and I will each tell you a story."

"Great! Mary, too?" Uly asked, as he shot up out of his seat and trotted after the adults.

"Mary, too," Danziger agreed, putting an arm around each of the children.

After they had disappeared into the tent, conversation started up again. "It'll take some getting used to," Magus suggested.

"What?" Julia asked.

"Having her around again. She's one amazing kid, making it on her own like that."

"She is that. I'll check her over in the morning, I guess. She looks pretty healthy, considering."

"I'm glad she's joined us," Bess interjected. "I hate to think of her all by herself."

"You're always so generous, Bess," Morgan told her, hugging her gently. He got up then, and extended a hand to Bess to help her up. With his arm around his wife's shoulders, Morgan addressed Julia. "We'll go back up in the morning, to keep working on those security codes?"

Julia glanced toward Alonzo, who shrugged. "If Yale's willing." At the confused looks around the fire, Julia explained, "We're trying to use the learning ability of the sunstones to crack Yale's security codes on his data banks. To get more information about what we can expect from the Council, what other perils might be hidden on the planet."

"So coming to this valley might do us some good after all," Walman said.

"We're building up our food stocks," Cameron reminded.

"And I for one am enjoying a chance to rest in such a nice place. I kind of miss the Biodome, but I don't miss all that snow," Magus added with a shudder.

"Think I'll turn in, too," Alonzo announced, and Julia joined him. The Martins, Alonzo and Julia all disappeared into the night, leaving a faintly snickering group around the fire.

* * *

Mary listened wide-eyed to the stories Yale and Danziger told the children. She remembered the stories her mother used to tell her, before she tucked Mary in at night. It had been a long time since she'd heard a story, other than the oral history of the Terrians. She'd forgotten the pleasure of harmless shivers and vicarious excitement. She'd forgotten the pleasure of clean clothes and a warm bed, too. Even when she'd stayed at the Biodome with these people, these memories hadn't resurfaced. She was glad they did now, and she cherished these memories of her Mommy and Daddy.

Uly and True had each selected a story to be told. Danziger was getting up to go when Yale suddenly asked Mary if there was a story she'd like to hear. Danziger paused, looking curiously at her. She nodded slowly. "Tell me the story of the sleeping princess," Mary said at last, recalling a favorite from her distant childhood. Yale smiled so warmly at her, she smiled in return. The awed look on Danziger's face confused her, but it didn't frighten her. She settled into the bed, pulled the covers up to her chin, and listened dreamily to Yale spin the story.

* * *

As Danziger crawled into bed, he had to admit to himself that he was pretty impressed by Mary. And saddened, too. The Terrians had unknowingly stolen her childhood from her. The Outcasts had killed her parents, leaving her an orphan, and the tribe had taken her in

and raised her. But they'd raised her Terrian, and he couldn't imagine how frightening that must have been to a little girl, suddenly alone and surrounded by aliens.

That would never happen to True, he swore. Whatever it took, it would never happen to her. Closing his eyes, he renewed his resolve to reach an understanding with the Terrians. They'd shown something akin to compassion once with Mary, and again with Uly. Surely they could do the same for Devon?

* * *

It really was getting monotonous. The dreams always started just outside the ship, and he always had to make his way back in. The memory of the previous night's dream was still with him, making his movements slow and hesitant, but he knew he had to go in. Knew he had to see the dream through.

The ship was silent this time. No voices greeted him, no sounds except for the faint workings of the ship itself. No one stepped out of the shadows, and nothing came up from the deck. Just an old ship, and one occupant, oblivious to the anguished expression on his face as he stood before the single functioning cryo-tube. He laid his hand upon the glass, splaying his fingers so that it looked like they rested upon Devon's face, and said softly, "So, what's it gonna be this time, Adair? You gonna sprout wings and fly out of here?"

There was no answer. No hint of movement, no disembodied voice telling him to look into his heart. "I've looked into my heart, Adair. I'm not sure you'd like what I saw there. I don't know how you feel, what you think. I don't even know why I love you, but I do. I sure as hell didn't plan on travelling 22 light years to fall in love with a woman who's managed to get herself locked up in a cryo-tube. You really piss me off, you know that, Adair? What the hell's the good of arguing with you when you can't even answer me? Where's the fun in that?"

Danziger's only reply was silence. The silence of a tomb.

* * *

Baines had argued about taking the first watch, but he'd been overruled. The first and last watches were always the most popular, since it meant that whoever was on them got the best, most uninterrupted sleep – go to bed late, or get up early, but don't get up in between. It was Cameron's turn to take first watch, and he'd enjoyed watching Baines slink off sullenly to the tent. Baines didn't want to dream with the Terrians, and kept trying to avoid being asleep when the dreams came.

The camp was quiet. No sounds from Danziger's tent, even though he'd gone to bed more than an hour ago. Maybe the Terrians were giving him a break for once. He sure as hell

could use it. Cameron had never seen Danziger look so rotten, except maybe that time he and the others had been stranded without food for a few days. The time Danziger killed that Grendler, and they ended up eating some of it. Sometimes, Cameron heard Danziger cry out even now, and he knew the dead Grendler still haunted him.

Shaking his head in sympathy, Cameron hefted the Mag-Pro over his shoulder and continued his perimeter walk. The night was quiet, but he still had a job to do.

* * *

Yale had never experienced the dreamplane before. He was surprised to discover that it wasn't that different from his view into cyberspace, when he'd linked with the EVE computer to repair the damage done by Bennett's virus. A disjointed view of reality, strange lighting, images that didn't flow quite right. So, tonight it was his turn.

He stood on a beach, a beach he knew must be near New Pacifica. The surf ebbed and flowed, a soft sussuration of sound. Soothing, really. Birds circled overhead, crying out. He quickly accessed his data banks and likened them to seagulls from old Earth. So many species on this planet they had yet to identify. So very much to learn, if they had the time to do it.

From the descriptions the others had made, New Pacifica itself must be over that hill, in the valley on the other side. Not quite a seaport town, then. Sheltered from the storms that must inevitably rake the coast. Not exactly poor planning. He started up the slope with a sense of fatalism; whatever the Terrians showed him, they would show him, and one more cycle of dreams would be complete.

"Where are we?" came a confused, soft and feminine voice.

He turned and found himself looking at Mary, looking around her in awe. Of course – she would never have seen the ocean before.

"We are at New Pacifica." He held out his hand to her, and she stared at it, uncomprehending. "We will go together. Take my hand, Mary."

"What is 'New Pacifica'?" she asked, placing her hand in his and climbing the slope at his side.

"It is the town we will build for the colonists who are coming. A place for us all to start over."

"More people? Yes, they are why the Terrians want to understand."

"Oh?" he asked, sliding a few steps down the lee side of the slope.

"More come, and more after that. More than can be ignored."

Yale nodded to himself. As Julia had guessed. Too many to be ignored. Well, it was a little humbling to realize the Terrians weren't interested in them so much for themselves, as for the hundreds, possibly thousands and more who would follow. Such a tremendous responsibility, to carve out an understanding with an alien species, though!

"What's that?" Mary demanded, grabbing at his arm.

"That's New Pacifica. It's smaller than I thought it would be," he mused, patting her hand. "Come on."

They walked into the town, and found themselves in a muddy, rutted square bounded by rough-hewn buildings. The only building that looked at all modern, with antiseptic walls and carefully paved walkways, extended a few thousand yards away from the ocean. It had the look of a medical facility; of course, with 250 Syndrome children on their way, the medical facility would have been one of the first priorities.

He guided Mary gently toward the building, trying to communicate calm to her as she reacted to the strange building, so unlike anything she'd ever seen. As they entered the foyer, he was struck by how sterile, how unwelcoming the place was. What a strange environment to build for children, children whose lives held so little hope, even a little color was welcome.

A man in a white coat was conferring with some other white-coated people. Yale recognized him immediately; Dr. Vasquez, the doctor who should have been aboard the Advance ship, but had been on the colony ship when they'd been forced to leave the stations ahead of schedule. Devon had been so angry that Vasquez had left the Advance ship, but Yale wondered what their lives would have been like had Vasquez crash-landed with them instead of Julia. Julia was young enough to open her mind to new possibilities; somehow he doubted that Vasquez would be so willing to look beyond the certainties of his training.

As if in confirmation, Yale heard Vasquez now, decrying what he referred to as "local folk medicine." "Experimentation with the indigenous remedies is fine for people who don't care about their survival, but we're here to take care of 250 terminally-ill children. I've heard all of Dr. Heller's findings regarding the Terrians, and frankly, I think it's wishful thinking."

"But Dr. Vasquez, the Adair boy *is* healthy," protested one of the other doctors, a pale young man with sandy hair and a squint, whom Yale quickly identified as Dr. Gerald

Sinclair from his data files. "There's no sign of the Syndrome at all. He's in complete remission."

"A fluke, I tell you. Take a look at that boy's DNA — he's not completely human anymore. Do you think I'm going to go to 500 worried parents and tell them their children can live, but only if they stop being *human*? Really, Dr. Sinclair — surely you're not so credulous!"

"If I were a parent, I'd want to see results," muttered a dark-haired young woman with striking green eyes, whose nametag read, "Vincent, C., MD."

"Results? We've already seen promising responses to the synthetics. The Taggert boy is showing signs of remission."

"For a few minutes at a time, Dr. Vasquez," Dr. Vincent protested. "These are children, Dr. Vasquez — a few minutes of mobility isn't enough —"

"It's more than they could hope for before, Dr. Vincent. Remember that — these children were destined to die before we came here. They still might, if we don't keep those Terrian creatures away from them."

He pivoted on his heel and started to storm across the lobby when he caught sight of Yale and Mary, and halted abruptly. "Yale," he greeted with distaste. "I was wondering where you were. I want you to download everything you have on file about the Terrian physiology, especially their body chemistry."

"Of course. May I ask why?"

Vasquez looked at him as though he thought him mad. "Why? I need to know more about them before I can begin to synthesize a repellent."

"A repellent?"

"Yes, of course — it was discussed in council. We plan to seed the land around New Pacifica with a chemical repellent to keep the Terrians out. To keep them away from the children. Not to mention our crops. And what is *she* doing here?" Vasquez demanded, stabbing an angry finger toward Mary.

"I —"

"You know she's not allowed anywhere near the children while they're undergoing treatment, any more than the Adair boy is. I don't want them told fanciful stories of Terrian cures. We're dealing in facts here, Yale. And the fact is that the Terrian cure is more of a curse. Look at what it's done to her — barely civilized, her body chemistry a travesty. I

know you care about Uly Adair, but he's not completely human anymore. I won't have that happen to the rest of my children."

"I think you'd find if you asked Devon about this —"

"Ask Devon?" Vasquez demanded with a scornful snort. "What — on this dreamplane Solace goes on about? The woman's in cryo-stasis, for God's sake. No one can talk to her. Not now, possibly never. God, sometimes I can't believe I agreed to come to this hell-hole!" he swore, stalking off.

Mary and Yale watched him go, stunned. One of the other doctors came over, Dr. Vincent. She laid her hand on Mary's arm sympathetically. "He's not having much success with the synthetics. But he just won't consider the Terrian cure. He doesn't consider them sentient, and he won't admit defeat. I'm barely out of residency, and I can see that Uly Adair is a healthy ten-year-old. If his mother were around, he'd probably even be a happy ten-year-old. Mr. Danziger does his best, I'm sure, but a kid that age needs his mother. But Vasquez just won't commit any resources to looking into a cure for her, even though she did finance this expedition. It's because Uly was cured by the Terrians. If I were you, Yale, I'd wipe that data rather than download it for Vasquez."

"Why is that, Dr. Vincent?"

"Because he not only plans to repel them from the colony, he plans to exterminate them. You watch — it's become an obsession for him. If you provide him with that data, we could be looking at genocide."

"The planet will die," Mary blurted out in shock.

"And then so will we."

* * *

Mary touched her fingers to her cheeks and stared at the tears that glittered there. She looked up into Yale's compassionate eyes and shook her head. "Why?" she whispered.

Enveloping her trembling hand in both of his, Yale sighed heavily. "It's a complex question, Mary," he replied softly. "Humans ... don't always act with one mind. Humans have different ... agendas, goals," he attempted to explain.

"The Terrian way is better — one tribe, one mind."

"But not all the Terrian tribes think alike?"

Mary considered her answer for a moment, then shook her head again. "No. Not all tribes agree that curing Uly would guarantee their future. Some were against the idea. Others wanted to approach the penal colonists before this. That's how my parents were killed."

"But within the tribe, one thought reigns?" She nodded. "Then think of humans as each person is a tribe unto himself. Some humans can join together, while others choose a different path. Sometimes those paths result in conflict, in war."

"The Terrians do not war."

"But they did, sometime in their past, didn't they?" She nodded again glumly. "Humans have not yet learned to live in harmony with their environment, Mary. That is something we can learn from the Terrians. It is something we can learn together."

"But what about the man who would kill the Terrians? Can he learn?"

"We can only hope, Mary. We can only hope."

* * *

Alonzo closed his eyes tightly against the unbidden images: hundreds, thousands, maybe more ... Terrians, dead and dying. And the earth, withering away beneath their feet, the soil turning to yellow ash, crumbling into nothingness. Plantlife shrivelled and browned. Grendlers starved to death, Kobas fell into permanent hibernation, and animals simply died, slowly and painfully. Within weeks, the planet was a lifeless dustbowl, the only animation the whirling dust and the indestructible insect life. Humans had left behind their indelible mark, and once again had left a planet in ruins.

He fisted his hands, pressing them against his ears as the cries rose up in an ululation of utter grief. But the keening came from within his mind, from the Terrians mourning the passing of their race, their planet. He couldn't tell for sure if it was real, or his imagination, but that didn't matter. The result was the same: Alonzo began to tremble violently, his teeth chattering wildly as a thin sheen of sweat popped out along his entire body.

"Alonzo?" Julia whispered softly, her warm hand suddenly resting on his chest, somehow magically stilling the shudders that wracked his body. He wrapped his arms around her hand, drawing it up to his lips. His whole body seemed to curl around that hand, his anchor to reality, to the here and now. To life. Clinging to Julia's hand, Alonzo eventually fell asleep again, but sleep escaped the woman he loved. Julia remained propped up in bed, watching the tense expression on Alonzo's face with a growing tension of her own.

* * *

For the third time that night, Alonzo found himself on the dreamplane. He groaned with frustration, dropping to his knees and pounding the dusty cavern floor with his fists. "Can't you let me sleep, just one night? I wanna help, but – dammit! I'm so tired I can't think straight anymore!"

"Alonzo, m'boy – get a hold of yourself!"

Whirling awkwardly, Alonzo dumped himself onto the ground. Out of the shadows stepped the Elder, the hems of his robes swirling around his ankles, creating tiny dustdevils as he walked. Alonzo found himself shuddering at the sight, images of death and destruction bubbling up from the pit of his nightmares.

"Elder – I thought you could only dream during the winter hibernation –"

"Normally, that's true. But the Terrians have allowed me to use the dreamplane to talk with you. Here, let me help you up," the Elder offered with an indulgent smile, extending a steady hand toward the pilot.

Alonzo grasped the hand, allowing the old man to lever him to his feet. He dusted off the seat of his pants, and nodded his thanks to the Elder. "Talk with me about what?"

"About what's been happening. The Terrians can't give me a clear picture, but we've all been having dreams, dreams about Devon, terrible dreams about the future. And before that, we were dying. Five of us did, dreadful, painful deaths. None of the children born here were affected, though. Ragamuffin wants to know how his True-girl is. And I'd like to know about the rest of you – what's happening, Alonzo?"

Alonzo sagged wearily against the arched cavern wall, sliding down until he sat upon a rock jutting out from that wall. He dragged his fingers through his hair, shaking his head.

"True's fine. But we all got sick, and we lost one, too. Eben. It was a virus inserted into the Council computer orbiting G889. Inserted 50 years ago. It affected chips the Council inserted in *us*."

The Elder dropped down on his haunches to look Alonzo in the eye. "And what stopped the virus?"

"The scientists who created the computer – the computer never let them leave. One of them died from cold-sleep syndrome. We convinced the other scientist to repair the computer before she died."

"But the Council's computer is still in orbit, eh?" the Elder asked, glancing upward. He shivered. "They didn't think the ZEDs were enough? They had to put a computer in

charge?" He shook his head. "It's not like any of us can get off this planet, not in the flesh. Why d'you suppose they did that?"

"To monitor the planet. To control it. They aren't interested in us, not really, just in controlling the Terrians, and through them, the planet."

"Then they're looking to control the boy, too." The Elder whistled softly. "Times like this, I wish Shepherd were still around."

"Why's that?"

"I'm gettin' a bit too old to have so many lives in my hands, son." He sighed heavily. "Seems we aren't quite as in charge of our own destinies as much as we thought. I take it the computer's stable now?" Alonzo nodded. "Ah. Then that isn't what's wrong with Devon, is it?"

"No," Alonzo replied, scrubbing his face with his hand. "We don't know what's wrong with her. Elizabeth – the scientist who fixed the computer – said that the planet will reject us. Julia thinks maybe that's what's happening."

"But why you and not us? We've done very well here, all things considered. Our population hasn't grown dramatically, but it has grown. Our children grow more numerous every year, many of us have lived to be, well, old. Like me. I've lived here more than 20 years. Never felt fitter. So what makes us different?"

"Don't know. And I don't know if what she said is true, just that Devon collapsed after it was all over – complete system shutdown. We had to put her in cold sleep to save her life."

"And the Terrians have been dreaming with us all ever since. Why?"

"To understand us. To understand why Devon means so much to us. To understand why we can't afford to lose her."

"And do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do *you* understand?"

"Mary asked me what Devon meant to us."

"Mary?"

Briefly, Alonzo explained about Mary and her history with the Terrians. The Elder nodded thoughtfully. "I'd heard there had been children the Terrians had tried to assimilate over the years. One of them – a young convict child – disappeared a few years ago, turned up a week later raving mad. Absolutely uncontrollable. Now that I think about it, the child had undergone some sort of medical procedure. He died a few months later."

"Julia said something about Reilly experimenting on a child. She didn't seem to have many details."

"No, I don't imagine she did. So you didn't answer my question. Do you understand what Devon means to you all?"

"I told Mary that Devon was the will of the group. She's the one who got us here, the one who got us this far. I don't believe any of the rest of us could convince the colonists of what needs to be done as well as Devon could."

"And what is that, Alonzo?"

"To live in peace with the Terrians, live in harmony with the planet. For the parents to let their children be cured by the Terrians."

"You think Devon can really do all that? One person?"

"If she can't, no one can."

"No one person can carry that much responsibility, Alonzo. Not and stay sane. Perhaps that is what is ultimately wrong with the Council – they haven't remained sane. D'you think it's fair to put the responsibility – the entire responsibility – for the success or failure of mankind on this planet on Devon's shoulders?"

"I –" Alonzo faltered, looking at the Elder closely for the first time.

"D'ye see, Alonzo? Y'got it right when y'said Devon was the will of the group, but y'can't just let her do it alone. Each of you has a role to play, a place in the history of humankind on this planet. As I suspect do we all."

* * *

Alonzo awoke again, this time feeling more at ease. He was still exhausted, but his contact with the Elder somehow made him feel less alone. Less alone, and less afraid. Perhaps Elizabeth had been wrong about the planet rejecting them – if the Elder's colony had thrived here on G889, why couldn't they? He turned then toward Julia, and was surprised to see her watching him intently.

"Another dream?" she asked softly.

He nodded, smiling faintly into the darkness. "This time with the Elder. Seems the Terrians have been broadcasting our dreams to his people. They lost five to EVE, by the way. And none of the children born here were affected."

She lifted herself up onto her elbow and looked down at him with serious eyes. "Five? They've been on this planet for what – 20, 30 years? How long has the Council been using those implants?"

Alonzo sighed. "Since Elizabeth and Bennett left the stations, I guess – remember, you told me Elizabeth designed them."

"Yes," Julia agreed, unconsciously mimicking Alonzo's sigh. "How many people live on this planet, Alonzo? How many were affected?"

"I don't think there's been a census done on G889, Julia. There could be penal colonists all over the planet. There might even be other survivors from the Advance ship."

"And until we reach every last one of them, we can't even think about destroying EVE. Even if the program Morgan and Yale extracted from the sunstones works, EVE will still be there."

Alonzo reached up and touched her face gently. She didn't have to say it, but he could hear it in her voice. And with EVE, Reilly.

Julia closed her eyes and pressed her face against Alonzo's hand; he could feel the smooth silkiness of her skin, and felt a wave of wonder wash over him again. With all the hazards they faced on this planet, with all the unknowns ahead of them, he wouldn't trade any of it. Because G889 brought him her.

Her eyes opened suddenly, and she looked at him curiously. "The children were unaffected? Children. The Elder's colony has been growing, not dying, not until EVE, right?"

"Right. And I know what you're going to say next – the Elder didn't know why Elizabeth would think the planet would reject us when it obviously hasn't rejected them."

"Yes, but – could you contact him again?"

"Not tonight, Julia. I just need to get some sleep, okay? Three Terrian-type dreams in a single night is more than this old sleep-jumper can handle."

Her expression softened, and she stroked his face with her fingers. "Okay. Get some

sleep. Doctor's orders."

"I could, on the other hand, be persuaded to —"

"I thought you needed sleep, Flyboy —"

"Man does not live by sleep alone," he told her slyly, and pulled her down into a kiss.

* * *

Clouds moved in overhead during the night, and the dawn broke over a gray and misty landscape, smudged into indistinct shapes by low-lying ground fog. Fitful smoke curled up from the dying fire in the center of camp, and Morgan, on lone guard duty, huddled under a canopy, hugging the Mag-Pro to him to ward off the chill. The outer surfaces of the tents took on a greasy sheen as dew and condensation collected on the waterproof fabric.

As he sat there in the shelter of the canopy, Morgan thought about the previous day's activities. He'd experienced something he'd never expected to on G889 — a sense of discovery and accomplishment. Something he'd sought in his life on the stations, but had known he'd never find in station bureaucracy. Law had been his family's choice, not his.

He'd promised to keep their experiment a secret, and although it had been hard not to tell Bess, he'd kept his promise. That left him with only his fellow-conspirators to share the excitement, and he waited with uncharacteristic impatience for the night to end and the day to begin. For them to start on the next step of their experimental program. Morgan was gradually realizing that G889 had more to offer him than he'd ever dreamed possible, and he found his yearning to return to the comforts of the stations waning.

The camp was silent for a long time, as though the fog deadened sound. As the sky grew grudgingly brighter, a strange, diffused light stretched across the sky, and the sounds of small woodland creatures separated themselves from the overall hush. Soon, the noises of awakening humans joined in, and Morgan relaxed. Bess was the first to rise, greeting him with a warm kiss and the promise of warmer coffee. The new day had begun. And with it, new horizons.

* * *

Julia left Alonzo still sleeping in their tent, and made her way quickly across camp to what served as the group's mess tent. The morning mist had given way to a light rain, pattering softly on the tents, splashing in tiny puddles forming in the rutted ground. She paused for a moment to feel the cool wetness on her face, enjoying the sensation of drops falling on her skin. On Earth, rain poisoned by generations of toxins had been a source of fear, a guarantee of death if you were caught exposed and too far from shelter. Here, it was a

natural part of the lifecycle of the planet, a source of water to drink, to wash, and to satisfy the thirst of the plant and animal life. As she stood there, Julia could feel the rain soaking into her clothes, and realized that she was growing colder, uncomfortably so. Although spring had begun weeks earlier, a raw cold permeated the moist air, and Julia ran the last few steps toward the mess tent, shivering.

Inside the tent it was dry and warm, with inviting smells rising up to greet her. Several of the group had already settled in for breakfast. Danziger and Yale were seated together, conversing quietly over cups of coffee, while Bess tutored Mary in food preparation; Morgan had retired to the Martin's tent to nap after his guard shift. Julia had to smile at the sight of the two women; Mary looked extremely doubtful over operating the group's cooking equipment. As Julia helped herself to a cup of coffee, she asked, "What did you eat when you lived with the Terrians, Mary?"

Mary looked up quickly, gratitude in her large eyes. "I ate plants that grew near the caves, a ... I don't know what it is called – a growth that flourished in the inner caves. Fruit in the spring and summer, when the trees had them. Nuts. I have learned to eat new things since I left the Terrians. I have watched you, to know what was safe."

"Meat?" Bess inquired, scooping porridge into a bowl for Julia.

Mary shook her head violently at that. "Never. No flesh. Not until I was ... exiled. I saw you kill the small, dreamless things. I tried that, too. And only when I was very, very hungry. I am not proud of that," she added softly.

Spoon halfway to her mouth, Julia winced at the pain in the young woman's voice. While she and the others who'd searched for Pod #9 had been forced to butcher a dead Grendler to survive, causing them nightmares and severe moral trauma, they'd thought little about killing smaller animals for their meat. To Mary, all life fell in the same category: all of it was sacred, bound together by the planet.

"You did what you had to do, Mary," Bess told her gently. "You did what you had to do to survive." Mary still looked away, trapped in her own private pain, and Bess took her by the shoulders and turned her around to face her. "It's part of what makes us human, Mary – the will to survive. It's why we came here – to survive. There is no shame in that."

"It is not why I am here. I am here because my parents were here. What is my excuse?" Mary asked desolately.

"Humans require protein, Mary, to survive, in addition to vegetable matter," Julia explained patiently. "When we lived on the stations, that protein was provided to us in ... chemically-designed foodstuffs. But when humans lived on Earth, they raised animals for their meat. Humans are naturally meat-eaters, Mary."

"Why did I never need meat when I lived with the Terrians?" Mary pressed, misery still evident in her voice.

Julia chewed her porridge thoughtfully for a moment before answering. "I don't know. Maybe there was something in your diet then that took its place." Suddenly, Julia felt her heart quicken – it couldn't be that simple, could it? "This 'growth' you used to eat – is there any of it around here? In the caves where we found you?"

Mary nodded, stirring her own porridge listlessly.

"Could you take me to it? I'd like to take a look at it." Mary nodded again. "Good. Well, we'll do that later today, okay?" She touched the girl's arm sympathetically, smiled at her, then went over to join Yale and Danziger.

Yale and John looked up at her approach, and Yale shifted somewhat guiltily. She put her bowl and coffee down, then dropped onto the bench beside Danziger. "How are you feeling this morning, John?"

"Tired."

"It should be over soon, John. At least, Alonzo thinks so."

"That's good. I'll be glad to get back to normal dreaming. Or better yet, just sleeping."

They fell into silence for a few minutes while Julia ate her porridge. Some of the others drifted in, exchanged greetings, got their porridge and morning coffee and sat down to eat. Conversations started up fitfully as caffeine was consumed. When Julia was done, she pushed the bowl away and looked at Yale and Danziger expectantly. "Well?"

Yale rubbed the back of his neck worriedly. "Julia, what do you know about Dr. Vasquez?" he asked suddenly.

"Dr. Vasquez?" Julia repeated, frowning. "Yale, was Dr. Vasquez in your dream last night?"

"Yes. Very different from what I remember him being. Hostile. Obsessed."

"With what?"

"Destroying the Terrians."

Julia nodded thoughtfully. "That fits what I dreamt, too. He's a brilliant doctor, though – I find it hard to believe he's so xenophobic, he's so good with the Syndrome children. But then again, he's never encountered alien life. None of us expected to find it here."

"What are you saying, Yale? That the colony ship's head doctor could be a problem?" Danziger inquired.

"I'm not sure," Yale admitted. "I've attempted to access his profile, but I keep coming up against a security block when I get too deep. I can read the surface information, what I know of him from before we left the stations. But I'd never accessed the data on him that I'd downloaded before we left the stations until now ... there's a block that I'd never encountered through my station input. A block that appears to have a Council signature on it."

"A Council signature?" Julia shuddered. "No. The Council refused to even recognize the Syndrome. And Dr. Vasquez was the leading specialist, practically the only doctor who would attempt to work with it. There's no way Vasquez could be connected with the Council."

"It could be because he was part of Eden Advance – we saw what the Council had planned for us. There could be a tag on each of us. Have you checked any of the profiles on the rest of us? On Julia, for example?" Danziger suggested.

"John -" Julia protested.

"We know you were connected with the Council." He raised his hands to calm her. "We all know that's over, Julia. But it would be natural for your station profile to have a Council tag on it. If it doesn't, I for one would be suspicious. Yale, just how much data *do* you have on file?" Danziger pressed.

"Well, John, not quite the sum total of human knowledge, but close, I believe. I performed a data download just prior to boarding the advance ship, so my station data should be fairly up-to-date."

"Up to 22 years ago," Julia commented.

"Yes. But it should be current as of when we'd need it," Yale countered.

"So, you think the sunstones can help you break the blocks?"

Julia and Yale exchanged glances, but it was Yale who nodded. "I think there's a good chance, yes. Considering the stones helped me recover actual memory without damage, and Morgan was able to use it to decode the Geolock, I think it's the safest and most promising approach. And as the colony ship gets closer to G889, the more information we have, the better off we'll be."

Danziger considered this for a moment in thoughtful silence, then nodded once. "I agree."

You gonna go back to the caves today?"

Julia nodded. "We'll take Alonzo and Morgan with us, too. And Mary. There's something else up there I want to check out. Something I think Mary can help us with."

"Oh?"

She shrugged. "Too early, John. Just an idea. Let me play with it a little first, okay?"

"Okay. Just stay dry, okay – we can't afford for our only doctor to get sick, especially not now, all right?"

* * *

By the time both Morgan and Alonzo were up and about, the sun was at zenith and the rain had started to come down in earnest. The gentle rhythm of raindrops on the tents had turned to a steady pounding, and freshening winds buffeted the fragile domes. The weather was too unpredictable for any work to be planned outdoors, leaving nearly everyone, with the exception of Baines who was on perimeter watch, cooped up inside their tents while the storm continued.

Bess remained in the mess-tent with Magus, Cameron, Denner and Mazatl, experimenting with possible preservation techniques and new recipes. Danziger sat in his tent with Uly, True and Mary, spinning stories and answering an increasing number of questions from the young Terrian-raised woman. Walman napped before he had to relieve Baines on patrol.

Julia was in the med-tent with Alonzo and Yale when Morgan came in, shaking off the wetness with an expression of disgust. "Boy, there are days I really miss the weather-control on the stations!"

"Well, at least it forces everyone to rest," Julia responded. "That's something we all need, even without the Terrian dreams."

"Yeah, but –" Morgan paused, glancing around him. "Aren't we going up to the caves?"

"In this weather?" Alonzo scoffed.

"Why not? We've got weather gear – and it won't be raining in the caves."

"He has a point," Yale conceded with a shrug. "This is most unlike you, Morgan –"

"I know," Morgan admitted freely. "I know it is. But what we did yesterday – do you realize what we accomplished? We not only broke the hold of the Council over us, we

achieved the first technological collaboration between G889 and humans. We've created a new form of science!" he added, practically trembling with excitement.

"It's not the first time we've used the sunstones in conjunction with our own technology, Morgan. You should be the first one to realize that —" Julia reminded.

"No, it's not," Morgan agreed. "But the first time — we just broke a code. Yesterday, we created something new, something that wouldn't have existed if we hadn't worked with the sunstones."

"Morgan, if I didn't know better, I'd say you're starting to like it here," Julia commented with a small chuckle.

Shrugging, Morgan didn't reply. But the excitement in his eyes answered her nonetheless.

"There is no real reason we couldn't proceed with the sunstones, in spite of the weather. I for one would like to break the security codes in my data banks — we know that the Council kept a great deal of valuable information from us before we arrived. There may be more stored in my memory store," Yale suggested.

"Information that could help us, right?" Morgan asked. "Granted, it's not as creative as building a new program, but it's still valuable. Well?"

Julia exchanged glances with Alonzo, then Yale, and smiled. "Why not? Look, I want to take Mary with us — apparently there are some edible plants that grow in the caves. I'd like to have her identify them and then I want to bring some back for analysis."

For once, Morgan wasn't interested in food. Again he shrugged, saying, "Sure, if you want. How soon do you want to get underway?"

"We need to get some of the weather gear out of storage, and I need to collect Mary. Half an hour?" Julia suggested.

"I'll get the clothing," Yale volunteered.

"I'll help. We'll meet here in half an hour," Alonzo concluded.

* * *

Mary followed Julia reluctantly, leaving behind the comfort of the warm, dry tent and the wonder of Danziger's stories. She donned the rain poncho Julia provided, drawing the hood up over her head as Julia did, and together they raced out into the rain toward the med-tent. Julia felt a pang of regret at taking Mary away from something she so obviously

enjoyed, but she also recognized that Mary might be able to lead them to something that might make their adaptation to G889 more secure. She smiled at the younger woman as they stood just inside the med-tent flap, while Alonzo brought the Rail around. Julia, Yale, Morgan and Mary all clambered in, and Alonzo pulled out of the camp.

It had been raining heavily for several hours now, and the track was slick. But Alonzo was a good driver, and they made good time up the slope. He carefully piloted the Rail through the driving rain, miraculously avoiding ruts and rocks. Soon, they were near the cave entrance, and Alonzo threw a cover over the vehicle while the others ran inside. He joined them a few minutes later, a waterfall of rain sluicing off his poncho. Julia helped him out of it, hanging it on a small rock outcrop alongside the other ponchos.

"Okay. You three go to the sunstone chamber," Julia ordered. "Mary, will you take me to the plants you eat?"

The young woman nodded solemnly, and set off in silence through the corridors. The men drew up the rear, but after a few moments, Mary veered off down another branch, and Julia looked over her shoulder at Alonzo. He grinned reassuringly at her, then ducked under the low-slung rock to follow Yale and Morgan.

Julia continued shadowing Mary as the young woman worked her way deeper and deeper into the cave system. The glow of the sunstones fell off as the veins dwindled, and soon Julia was forced to unclip a lumalight from her belt, turning it on for illumination. Finally, Mary stopped in a dark cavern, standing in the center, waiting for Julia.

As Julia stepped into the vaulted chamber, she shined the lumalight around her. The contour of the cave seem to be misshapen and fuzzy; it took her a moment to realize that growths clung to almost every surface, the walls, the ceiling, even areas on the floor where dirt hadn't covered the rock. Clusters of cream-colored, spongy tubular objects growing out of a darker mass nearly surrounded them.

"They cannot grow in the light of the sunstones," Mary explained simply.

As Julia knelt to look at a thick cluster of the growths, she noted a slight shrinking away from the light. "They're sensitive to the lumalight, too." She touched one of the rough cylinders, approximately six inches in length, tentatively, feeling it give beneath her fingers. "What part of it do you eat?"

Mary dropped into a Terrian stance beside Julia and reached out, snapping off one of the tubular growths from the darker growth. "This. Never remove this," she added, spreading her fingers against the base of the growth, "or the plant will die. There will be no more."

"Like fruit from a tree," Julia commented, and Mary nodded. Peering more closely, Julia

noted a network of fibers reaching from the darker root into the rock wall beyond. She traced the root to the fibers to the rock, and brought her hand away, sheathed in a light layer of dust. "The roots are slowly breaking up the rock wall."

"Perhaps there are more sunstones behind the wall."

"Perhaps." Julia set about taking a few more samples, about ten in all, and stowed them in her specimen bag. "How do you eat them?"

Mary removed another of the growths and simply started to take bites out of it. "You just eat it."

"How did you find them, Mary? The Terrians don't eat these, do they?"

Mary shook her head. "The Terrians do not eat. They are sustained by the mother, the earth. They showed these to me when I was young, told me I could eat them. Sometimes they are too few, and so I ate other things. But mostly I ate these."

"Like the Terrians showed Danziger how to get moisture from the cactus," Julia said thoughtfully. "Well, we'll take back some samples and I'll test them. Then I'd like to run some tests on you, too, Mary."

"To see if I am fine?"

"Yes, and to see how these affect your body chemistry. If they do at all. Is that okay with you?"

Mary nodded, then broke off more of the growths, stowing them in her pockets. "For later."

* * *

In the sunstone chamber, Alonzo paced impatiently while Yale and Morgan worked with the sunstones. They'd linked into the sunstone vein, and had already discovered that the security blocks were keyed to Station-Level passwords. Morgan had provided the Level One through Four passwords, effectively eliminating the security blocks on data guarded by those blocks. They were working on decrypting the Level Five password right now, and every few seconds, Yale flinched as inhibitor shocks answered yet another failed attempt to break the block.

"Maybe we'd be better off copying the block into VR," Morgan suggested as Yale's breath hissed through his teeth at another shock.

"No," Yale disagreed. "We won't be able to tell if we've unlocked the entire code in VR. Keep going, Morgan – I am all right."

And so they continued for a couple of hours, both men hardly registering the return of Julia and Mary as they sought to break through the Council's security codes. Julia kept a close watch on the vitals of both men, calling a halt for a break when Yale's strength seemed to flag below acceptable parameters. By now, they'd managed to work out the first several components of the security code, and neither was willing to give up until they'd broken the entire code. While they were resting, Julia bullied them into agreeing to give up once they'd cracked the Level Five code, leaving the remainder for the days to come. As Yale massaged aching temples, he agreed readily; one code was sufficient for the day.

A couple of times, Julia went out to the edge of the cave system to report back to camp. They weren't far, but while they were inside the cave system, the gear didn't transmit beyond the entrance. After all the times they'd all jumped on Danziger for not keeping in gear contact, no one wanted to get the same treatment from the tired and disgruntled mechanic.

By the time Morgan and Yale had finally breached the Level Five security, it was full dark outside. As they made their weary way back to the Rail, Julia checked her samples; they still looked fresh. The rain had slowed a bit, which was good, since they'd be going down the slope into the valley illuminated only by the Rail's headlights.

Their trip campward was mercifully without incident, and they were all grateful to return to camp and a warm meal. Julia stowed her samples in the med-tent while Alonzo parked the Rail, and then they all rejoined the members of Eden Advance in a somewhat crowded mess tent.

* * *

"So, any luck?" Danziger asked when Julia, Alonzo and Yale joined him at the table. Morgan had taken a seat beside Bess, and was conferring in low tones with his wife. Mary sat with True and Uly, who were working on a sketch pad drawing Grendlers and Kobas.

Julia glanced at the others and nodded. "Morgan and Yale managed to break through the Level Five security block. Not enough to break through the Council code on Dr. Vasquez, but we're making progress."

"Well, I guess we'll be in this valley for a few more days at least, so you'll have time to keep chipping away at it." Danziger yawned hugely at that moment.

"You'd better turn in early tonight, John," Alonzo commented.

"Yeah, I know. Another round of dreaming with the Terrians. I'll be happy when it's over."

"Not much longer, John. Hang in there, buddy," Alonzo answered with assurance.

"You seem pretty sure of that. I hope you're right." Danziger rose wearily. "I'd wish you pleasant dreams, but I know that's not likely. At least until the Terrians are finished with us."

"I will bring the children over for their goodnight stories, John," Yale offered.

"Thanks, Yale," the mechanic answered gruffly, then took his utensils over to the washing area, and made his way out of the tent.

"I hope you're right, Alonzo," Julia said after he'd gone. "I don't think he can drag on with this much longer without lasting side-effects."

"I'm right, don't worry about that. It's what'll happen after the dreams are over that worries me now."

"Why is that, Alonzo?" Yale asked curiously.

"Because we don't know what they'll do. Which of the scenarios they'll choose to follow, if any of them."

"Well, in that case, I'd better get back to the med-tent – I want to check over those samples Mary helped me with," Julia announced, getting up and taking her plate over to the makeshift sink.

* * *

"I will stay," Mary announced firmly as Yale started to usher the children from Danziger's tent.

"Ah, Mary, I don't think that's such a good idea –" Danziger started, blushing slightly.

"I am getting stronger on the dreamplane again. I can help," she replied simply.

"Yeah, I'm sure that's true, but –"

"You have nothing to concern you, John," Yale pointed out with a small chuckle. "Her only interest is in getting onto the dreamplane and assisting you communicating with the Terrians. She could help you, John."

Danziger still appeared uncomfortable, but Yale's carefully chosen words assured him that

there wasn't anything ... well, amorous ... about Mary's decision to stay. In retrospect, he doubted she saw any of the men of Eden Advance as anything other than simply humans. Recalling all the bigotry and hatred between the sexes, among the races, and among various interest groups, he wondered if they wouldn't be better off forcing would-be politicians to spend some time with the Terrians for attitude adjustment.

"Okay," Danziger finally agreed gracelessly.

* * *

Sleep came so swiftly to Danziger, he wondered if perhaps the Terrians were anxious to get these dreams over with, too. He found himself once more on the dreamscape, Mary standing beside him. As usual, the ship was up ahead, and he made his way quickly into the interior, Mary following silently behind. They didn't get as far as the cryo-chamber, however. They found Devon sitting in the pilot's seat, avidly studying the fast-moving readouts on the computer screen.

"John, take a look at this," she told him, not looking up from the data that sped past her.

"Adair?"

"Yes, John. C'mon – the data contained in this ship's computer is incredible – Elizabeth's entire medical log, even information about the function of the bio-stat chips. Tests performed on the Terrians. John, it's amazing the Terrians would even consider contact with us at all after what they've been through at the hands of humans!" She swivelled around in the chair excitedly, pausing as she caught sight of Mary. "Mary." Devon frowned. "I don't remember ... when did you join us?"

"Mary joined us yesterday, Devon. While you were still sleeping here, in this ship. Where you are now."

Devon listened silently, the creases between her brows easing. Then she nodded slowly. "Of course. No wonder I can't remember anything after I collapsed. There hasn't been anything to remember." She sighed heavily. "So, why are you here, then?"

"You don't remember? You don't remember telling me to let the Terrians know what we all mean to each other? You don't remember the last couple of nights?"

Devon's frown deepened again. "Vague images. Frightening. Oh, John – what you've been through! What everyone's been through. Have the Terrians come to a decision yet?"

Mary answered her. "No. That is why we are here. We have not answered all of the Terrians' questions yet."

"What more do they need to know?" Devon asked.

"If they cure you, what will you do? How can you change the future?"

Devon smiled bitterly. "How can anyone know that? I know Alonzo said the Terrians don't see time the same way we do – maybe they don't understand that we can't see into our futures and predict how we'll react, what we'll do in a given circumstances. I only know that I've made promises, to them and to the children on their way here. And I'll do everything I can to keep those promises and provide for the survival of those children."

"At the cost of the Terrians?"

"Not if there's any way to avoid it. And to be honest, I don't see that there'd be any benefit to Uly or the rest of the Syndrome children for us to allow anything negative to happen to the planet or the Terrians. The challenge is going to be convincing the people on their way here."

"Can you?"

"Can I what?"

"Can you convince them?"

Devon drew a deep, slow breath, considering her answer for a moment before responding. "I think it's something that we, as a group, can do. This planet has changed us all, for the better, I think. We've learned a great deal. And I know as a parent that the promise of a cure for my child is a great inducement."

"Great inducement?"

"To make and keep a promise to the Terrians. I can't say I understand everything they do, and I'm not always thrilled about some of the things they do concerning my son ... but I never thought I'd see my son run and play, either. Trust me, Mary – the parents of the Syndrome children won't be able to turn away from so obviously a success."

Mary nodded silently. Then she turned and walked over to the exit ramp, disappearing beyond the hatch.

"Where's she going?" Devon demanded, rising out of her seat. Danziger shook his head, but grabbed her hand, and together, the two of them followed her out into the weirdly bleached sunlight of the dreamplane.

At the foot of the ramp stood a Terrian, its staff held at ease at its side. Mary halted before

it and trilled a greeting. It tilted its bullet-shaped head and replied in its own eerie tones. The conversation continued for several minutes, human and Terrian trilling the strange Terrian language. Finally, the Terrian bowed its head and dropped back into the earth, and Mary turned around to face Devon and Danziger.

"I explained that humans are isolated in themselves, and that they must communicate verbally to reach understanding. That you have the ability to reach understanding with those that come. That your ability is unlike any other because of Uly. Understanding may be reached without you, but the chance is greater with you."

"And what did the Terrian say?" Devon asked, her hand still grasping Danziger's.

"He said he will tell the tribe, and they will decide."

"Now what?" Danziger demanded.

"Now, we wait," Mary replied.

* * *

"Oh, brother," Morgan breathed, glancing warily around him. He stood in a pre-fab building entrance, artificial illumination casting the utilitarian lines of the room into sharp relief. A door opened, and Devon Adair came out. She spied him, heaved an exasperated sigh, and came over to him double-time.

"Morgan! You're late. Look, I really need your help on this one. Bryant's being a real problem."

"Uh, what can I do?" Morgan asked doubtfully.

"You can help me convince him, that's what you can do. C'mon – he's due any minute."

Morgan followed Devon back into the office, snatching curious glances around him as he walked. Devon gestured toward a table set by the wall and said, "Help yourself to some coffee. I've a feeling you'll need it."

"Thanks," he agreed, taking the opportunity to mask his confusion by pouring himself a cup. He sipped tentatively, expecting the bitter taste of the fake stuff they called coffee; instead, he was pleasantly surprised by the flavor of the real thing. "Ah," he sighed with a faint smile.

"Six months of real coffee, and none of us can get used to the luxury," Devon observed, chuckling. "I never thought I'd get rid of the taste of that trail stuff we used to drink." She

poured herself another cup and sat down at her desk. "So, what do you think?"

"About what?"

"About Bryant. From what I've observed, he's got quite a following backing him. Could be enough to jeopardize the integrity of the colony. But we can't afford for his plans to go through – the Terrians would view that as a breach of faith."

"His plans," Morgan repeated, hoping she'd elaborate.

True to form, Devon Adair couldn't help but keep talking. "I understand the attraction of a hydroelectric plant – certainly centralizing our power generation would simplify construction. And it's infinitely less of an impact than fossil fuel or even nuclear. But I can't see the Terrians agreeing to diverting the river to flood a valley full of sunstone deposits."

"Ah. No, I don't see that happening, either." Morgan relaxed; this was a subject he could warm to. "Nor do I see any long-term benefit to us in eliminating a source of sunstones. They've already proved far too useful to us in the past. And we definitely can't afford to do anything that would damage transmission of the dreamplane."

"That's what I'm looking for, Morgan." She glanced at her watch. "He'll be here any minute now. Sit down – you look so nervous!"

Morgan seated himself in a chair on the other side of Devon's desk. A moment later, there was a knock on the door, and Devon called a welcome. A tall man with well-defined muscles but the lingering pallor of a station-dweller came into the room. His face was set with an argumentative cast; the tension in his body radiated out into the room. Obviously, this man was ready to do battle.

"Bryant," greeted Devon, not rising from her chair. "Have a seat," she suggested, waving toward the other chair next to Morgan's.

Bryant sat, slouching down in the chair to demonstrate his lack of respect for Devon's authority. At least, Morgan assumed it was authority – it would make sense that the first "governor" of New Pacifica was Devon Adair.

"Well?" Bryant demanded without preamble.

"The idea is low-impact technology, nothing to upset the ecological balance," Devon opened.

"Why?" Bryant invested that single word with volumes of antagonism.

"Because that's what we agreed to. That's our pact with the Terrians."

"You have a treaty with those creatures? I haven't seen it."

"We have a verbal agreement."

"Then it's not really binding. We're not required by law to follow the agreement."

"We're required by nature. The Terrians gave us the ability to survive on this planet. The price of that survival is to respect the planet. To respect the rights of the Terrians."

"They're aliens, they don't have any rights now that we're here."

"Wrong. We're the aliens. This is their world. We live here on sufferance. We can make that a partnership, but only by following the terms of the agreement we made with the Terrians."

"You made, Adair. Before we got here. We're not bound by verbal agreements we weren't party to."

"Wrong again. You're bound by the fact that that verbal agreement allows you to survive. The Terrians, the planet itself, can reverse the biochemical change that allows you to survive. Without it, you won't last more than a few years, no matter what drugs Vasquez concocts. You're linked to the planet, and that link is what allows you to live."

"You're talking addiction —"

"I'm talking symbiosis. We give, we take. The planet gives, the planet takes. A cooperative relationship. Stick to the terms of the agreement, both you and the planet prosper. Fail to do that, one or the other of you dies. The planet itself holds all the cards. Your choice."

"You're talking murder!"

"So are you. The murder of a planet. The murder of living things. Possibly the murder of an entire intelligent species. This isn't the stations. The station rules don't apply here. This isn't old Earth. We're not going to make the same mistakes our ancestors did. We live in harmony with the planet, or we don't live at all. The colony ship's still here — take it or leave it."

Bryant turned a sour expression toward Morgan and fairly sneered. "You're awfully quiet, Morgan. You're a lawyer — is any of this legitimate?"

Morgan paused, considering precedents. "This is a first contact situation; there is no legal

precedent for agreements between species. But human history is full of verbal pacts that have been broken by one party or the other, and the results have usually been disastrous. Maybe not in the first generation, but eventually. If we fail to keep up our end of the bargain, we could be guaranteeing interspecies war in the next generation – our children's generation. Or their children's. And the fact is, in this case, maintaining our end of the agreement is to our benefit as well."

"Because of the Terrian cure?" Bryant scoffed.

"Because of the symbiotic relationship between the Terrians and the planet," Morgan replied. "Because the Terrians have done a great deal to help us survive on G889. Because we can not only learn from them, we can directly benefit from them, from their culture, their knowledge of the planet, and their communication system."

"You really believe it, don't you?" Bryant asked, his eyes wide.

Morgan nodded. "I've experienced it. I was as skeptical as you are – maybe more so. But I've seen too much that has changed my mind over the past couple of years. We can build a future on this planet, a better future than anyone could have hoped to have had on the stations. But that future must include the Terrians, and every action we take must take them into account."

Bryant seemed to be listening to Morgan's argument, and a small smile started to play around Devon's lips. She clamped down on it, and launched into the discussion. "Bryant, Danziger has completed his designs for low-cost solar generators. Personally, I'd rather see our society heavier on the construction end than the bureaucratic one. Solar would answer our power needs, provide profitable work for our colonists, and be in accordance with our agreement with the Terrians. And it wouldn't create an unnecessary bureaucracy to run a hydro-electric plant. And each of us wouldn't have to continually pay for its services."

"I don't think I'll ever get used to the Terrians. They give me the creeps," the man countered.

"You don't have to party with them, simply leave them alone and respect their rights. If we plan well enough, humans and Terrians can co-exist in peace on this planet, and we'll all benefit," Devon reminded.

Bryant exhaled loudly. "Solar for each building would mean some independence," he mused aloud. "There's still the question of water and sewer services ..."

"We're working on that. Dr. Heller is working on a biological approach to break down wastes to substances harmless to the eco-system. And there appears to be a vast artesian

well complex beneath the colony that could be used for water. A reservoir created by a hydro-electric plant wouldn't be necessary."

Bryant nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "All right. I'll back off for now, pending how the results come out. We'll go forward with the solar generators. And we'll talk more about the rest later."

"That's all I can ask," Devon acknowledged, rising from behind her desk. "Thank you, Bryant. I know we can all work together to make this planet our home."

"You haven't won yet, Adair. But I'll give you this one," Bryant replied gruffly.

* * *

"Well, that wasn't so bad," Morgan Martin breathed into the darkness. Overhead, the rain still pelted down, and in the dim light cast by the perimeter lights, he could see the droplets splash in little starbursts on the waterproof material. He snuggled down, warm and safe in his cocoon of blankets, Bess curled next to him, and counted himself a lucky man.

"What wasn't so bad?" Bess asked sleepily. He was caught in his own thoughts and didn't register her voice at first. He felt her shift position, rolling over and rising up on one elbow. Dragging her unruly hair out of her face, she prompted again, "Morgan?"

"I had a dream, Bess. I don't know why, but the Terrians didn't show me something terrible. They showed me ... well, they showed me our future. A future we could live with, Bess. A future where we have a chance."

"Better than what I dreamt."

"Much better," he agreed, turning toward her and taking her hands in his. "Bess, we really do have a chance to make it on this planet. The secret, Bess, the secret is ... well, what we've been doing to survive. Working together. Cooperating. Finding alternative methods to do things so we don't hurt the Terrians."

"In other words, behaving like adults instead of spoiled children, Morgan." Bess was completely awake now, and sat up in bed. "We couldn't survive without working together, Morgan, but it took us all a while to get to the point where we could work together. Remember the Geolock? God, Morgan, we almost destroyed ourselves and Yale because of that – and what was it, really? Greed? Revenge for Devon ordering us around? We weren't working with everyone else when we did that – we were looking out for number one. How can we expect 250 Syndrome families to learn to cooperate the minute they land if it took us months to learn it – and it took almost dying to convince us?"

Bess's painful reminder of his own venality cooled Morgan's excitement, but embers still burned deep within. "Well, we'll have to plan carefully. We'll have to have the colony set up and running by the time they get here, won't we? Work out the details of things that might be problems. Like power, land grants, mining rights, that sort of thing. We'll have to involve the Terrians from the start."

"That sounds great, Morgan. There's just one thing – we're nowhere near New Pacifica. You really think we can do all that in the next 18 months? Because that's all the time we have to define an Utopian society. Mankind's been trying to do that for thousands of years, Morgan, and no one's been successful. What makes you think we will be?"

"It doesn't have to be Utopia, Bess. We just have to learn how to encourage cooperation."

"And how to deal with it if we don't get it? Morgan, you're talking about a virtual police state – cooperate or ... what? Die? Face exile?"

"No-o. We're not talking about a police state, Bess – we're talking about a democracy. Or the closest thing that's possible with humans. Concensus. Oh, I admit – it will be difficult. Maybe even impossible. But we've got to try, Bess. It's our best chance."

* * *

In the tent Alonzo shared with Julia, Alonzo sighed and rolled over. Julia, disturbed by the movement, awoke, and touched him gently on the shoulder. "Alonzo?"

"The dreams are over, Julia. Now I can sleep."

She rested her cheek against his shoulder and smiled. "Good night, sweet prince ..."

"Mmmm ..."

* * *

"Shank, I can't believe it's still raining!" Magus declared, peering out through the mess tent flap into the deluge beyond. "I just hope we don't end up floating away!"

It was morning, although outside it appeared more like twilight under the dark sky. Many of the Eden Advance group had assembled in the mess tent for breakfast, lingering in the shelter of the tent to avoid going back out into the heavy rains. The Martins hadn't appeared yet, since it wasn't Bess's morning to prepare breakfast, and Mary and the children were sleeping in. Julia and Alonzo were also absent, and once everyone had realized that Alonzo had been sharing all the dreams, no one begrudged either one of them some extra sleep. Baines had pulled patrol duty. The remainder of the group were

scattered around the mess tent, drinking coffee, eating their breakfasts, working on small, portable tasks.

"Or the lake doesn't overflow its banks," Danziger put in, looking up irritably from Morgan's tracking device.

"Maybe we've just stumbled onto G889's rainy season," Mazatl suggested reasonably.

"Yeah, but how long does that usually last?" Walman demanded.

"On Earth, a rainy season could last for months in tropical zones," Yale provided, glancing up from notes for today's lesson plan. "But this is not a tropical climate – we may simply be experiencing a particularly widespread storm."

"Any chance the camp's in danger? I remember watching an old vidcast about mudslides taking out some city," Denner asked warily.

"Man, we're a cheery group," Danziger grumbled into his coffee. "Any other imaginary disasters we can come up with? Or don't we have enough already?"

"I imagine anything could happen, but this area appears to be relatively stable. There's enough ground vegetation and trees to anchor the soil, except perhaps in the most extraordinary circumstances. Two days of rain probably isn't enough to qualify."

"What if it keeps going on?" Magus pressed. "What if it rains for weeks?"

"Then we may have a problem," Yale agreed. "But we don't know that we do right now."

"Yeah, let's not go borrowing trouble, people," Danziger growled. "Man, I hate being cooped up. I'm gonna go take a look at the TransRover, then check on the kids." He shrugged on his still-wet rain poncho and left the tent.

After he had gone, Magus asked quietly, "Still no word, huh?"

Yale shook his head. "Perhaps we will know more when Alonzo awakes."

"Know more about what?" came Julia's voice from the entrance.

"Hurry up! I'm drowning out here!" called Alonzo from behind her. As one, Julia and Alonzo burst into the mess tent, water splashing everywhere from their rain-slicked ponchos.

"Hey! I just got dry!" Walman protested, jumping out of the way of the spray of water.

"Sorry," Julia murmured. "It's miserable out there. Is that coffee I smell?" she asked hopefully.

"Or what passes for it here," Cameron replied, stepping away from the coffee pot to let the two waterspouts closer.

Eagerly, Alonzo poured two cups of coffee while Julia peeled off her poncho, taking care not to splash any more water around the tent. "So, know more about what?"

"What the Terrians are planning. About Devon. About us," Walman answered.

Alonzo swallowed his coffee, then answered, "The dreams are over, at least."

"Who had the last dream, then? Did any of you ..." Magus gestured around the room, receiving negative answers. "What about Baines?"

"We'd've heard if he'd been dreamin' with the diggers — he'd be howling to Earth and back about it," Walman chuckled.

"That's true," Alonzo replied, grinning. "So, who's left?"

They glanced around among them, comprehension dawning slowly. "Morgan?" Walman suggested, incredulous.

"Well, it sure as hell wasn't Danziger. Yeah, our petty bureaucrat had a go on the dreamplane. And he didn't do too badly, either. I think Morgan's learning."

Walman snorted. "Learning what? How to duck out of his fair share of work?"

"Learning how important all of us are to the success of the colony. About how each of us brings something to this group to make it better, stronger."

"We were talking about Morgan, 'Lonz," Walman reminded, grinning.

"I am, too. I know Morgan's caused his share of trouble since we crashed —"

"Before we crashed, too. Remember — he and Bess hijacked an escape pod —"

"But that's in the past. I honestly believe Morgan is trying to make up for it, to make a contribution to the welfare of the group."

"Not so's I've noticed. You know something we don't, Flyboy?" Walman challenged, folding his arms across his chest.

"I —"

"Yes," Yale interjected suddenly. "Morgan has been working with the sunstones to help me crack the security blocks in my data bank, so I can access Council data. He links directly into the sunstones and my data systems through VR — it's not the most comfortable experience, I can assure you."

"Figures, doesn't it? Morgan finds a way to play in VR, no matter what," Walman sneered.

"I wouldn't call what Morgan and Yale are doing playing, Walman," Julia inserted forcefully. "We know the Council withheld a great deal of data about this planet from us. Data we could use. Data that could mean the difference between life and death for us. And both of them have been working hard to get at that data."

* * *

The others were still mulling over Yale's and Julia's revelations when Morgan and Bess entered the tent with a hearty, "Good morning!" from Morgan. He didn't notice the odd looks directed his way as he made straight for the coffee pot. Bess registered something strange, frowned slightly, but dismissed it as simple caffeine-deprivation. Julia raised an eyebrow toward Alonzo, who simply grinned.

* * *

Danziger had doublechecked the tarp covering the vehicles, tightened the lines, twitched the waterproof fabric into place in several locations, and deemed it satisfactory. Not optimal, but satisfactory. He never got quite the right environment for the well-being of the vehicles, but he made do. Thinking back to life on the stations, to the too-small unit he'd shared with True, the lifetimes' debt he'd inherited from his grandparents, and the payments necessary to keep Ellie in neuro-stasis ... this would do, he guessed.

Rain was still pummeling the ground in fierce bursts, like tiny percussion shells. It was just rain, not the acid rain of Earth, but the clean, life-giving thing that Terran rain had once been. But, damn, it was cold!

He'd only been checking over the vehicles for about half an hour, but already he was deeply chilled. A cup of hot coffee would do the trick. As he glanced over at the children's tent, he realized they hadn't ventured out into the weather. Good, True was a bear when she had the sniffles, and he didn't relish dealing with a cold where Uly was concerned. And he had no idea what Mary's immunities were. Somehow he'd gone from having one kid to three — well, two and a half, maybe. Mary was stuck somewhere in between. Anyway, while he was getting coffee, he could put a tray together for the kids — a little breakfast in bed on a dreary day like this might help their spirits, and maybe save

him from rotten tempers later on.

* * *

The mess tent was curiously quiet when Danziger got back, but he shrugged it off and went straight for the coffee pot. He quickly put together a tray of three bowls of porridge and three hot drinks. Draping the front of his poncho over the tray, he dashed back out into the rain.

"Hey, anybody in there?" he called out as he came up to the tent. True called out, racing to the tent flap and pulling it back for him. He ducked under and came into the tent interior. Chaos met him; the kids had obviously been busy this morning, despite the apparent quiet from outside. Pillows were scattered everywhere, bedclothes were churned up, and True beamed at him with a beatific smile — a sure bet she'd been up to mischief. Mary and Uly were sitting on the floor, Terrian-style. Danziger sighed heavily. Some family!

"Breakfast is served," he said, earning enthusiastic greetings from all three of them, including Mary. He put the tray down, let them pick up their bowls, then added, "And after you're finished eating, I want this place cleaned up. Looks like a Grendler cave in here."

While he was standing there trying to look stern, he felt a vibration beneath his feet. "What the —" The tremor grew stronger, causing waves to form in the drink cups, and within seconds, liquid was sloshing over the edges. "Damn! Stay here!" he commanded, turning toward the tent entrance. He pivoted back to them and added, "Stay together, stay down, and throw some of those blankets over you. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Dad!" True called anxiously. "Be careful!"

"You, too, True-girl!" he yelled back over his shoulder.

He sprinted across camp, barely keeping to his feet as the earth heaved. He nearly collided with Alonzo as he pushed through the entrance to the communications tent. "What the hell is going on?"

Morgan was frantically trying to get a reading on the seismic activity. "I don't know — but it looks like the center of it's about 10 clicks — oh, my God —"

Danziger whipped out the device Morgan had keyed to the ship and stared, disbelieving, at the display. "The ship. The ship's in danger." Danziger pivoted quickly, darting toward the vehicles.

"John! John, wait up!" Alonzo hollered after him. To Morgan, he ordered, "Get Julia. Have her get her medical kit."

"Right," Morgan agreed, pulling his gear off and following Alonzo out of the communications tent.

* * *

Danziger was tugging the cover off the ATV when Alonzo reached him, and the pilot insisted, "The Rail, John – I'm going with you, and so is Julia."

Danziger paused, the tarp bunched up in his fists, and stared at Alonzo sightlessly for a moment. Reason returned, and he nodded once. "All right." He tossed the cover back onto the ATV and stalked over to the Rail, uncovering it quickly and jumping into the driver's seat. Alonzo straightened the cover on the ATV and joined Danziger in the Rail.

They were pulling out of the vehicle area when Danziger had to put on the brakes. Mary stood in the path of the Rail, rain streaming down her face. "I go, too," she announced solemnly.

"Look, we can't take the whole camp –" Danziger snapped.

"It's all right, John. She could help. The Terrians –"

"All right, all right – get in. Where the hell is Julia?"

"Right here!" Heller called, ducking her head in the rain as she stumbled across the waterlogged ground. She tossed her kit to Alonzo and scrambled into the back of the Rail with Mary. "All set."

"Hold on tight – this isn't going to be a pleasure ride," Danziger admonished.

"Just don't go too fast, John – we can't do Devon any good if we roll the Rail."

"I'll keep it to the speed limit, Doc. You just hold on back there!"

With a roar, the Rail spewed mud in its wake as it lumbered out of camp.

* * *

Shortly after they had begun, the tremors eased, dissipating into occasional shudders. The adults of the camp met quickly in the mess tent, then broke up into parties to set the camp right. Morgan, still pale from facing another series of earth tremors, swallowed hard repeatedly, and quickly explained to Yale where Danziger had gone. The tutor immediately went off to take charge of the children. With a reassuring whisper to Morgan, Bess took over putting the mess tent back in order, while Morgan steeled himself and

returned to the communications tent to look after the equipment there.

Yale found the children in Danziger's tent, hidden under the pile of blankets and pillows, holding on to one another. As soon as they spied Yale, True immediately shoved Uly away, fought her way out of the cocoon of blankets, and declared that she was going to check on her dad. Yale patiently explained that Danziger, Julia, Alonzo and Mary had headed off in the Rail to check on the status of the ship containing Uly's mother. True took this as carte blanche to take command of the remaining vehicles, while Uly looked small and frightened. As True shrugged into her rain poncho, Yale spoke quietly to the boy, reassuring him and encouraging him to activity.

"If Julia's gone to the ship, there's no one to make sure the med-tent's all right," True shot over her shoulder. "You can help me clean up in there, Uly."

Uly started to protest, but Yale shook his head. "True is right, Uly. Julia's been doing some very important experiments, and we wouldn't want them to be ruined, would we?" The boy shook his head sullenly. "Besides, wouldn't it be nice for her to come back and find everything in order?" Uly nodded doubtfully.

"Look, I'm going to check on the ATV and TransRover – you meet me in the med-tent, okay?" True announced.

Okay, Uly?" Yale asked, earning another nod from the boy. "Put on your poncho – it's still raining."

True glowered at Uly for a moment longer, then ducked out the tent flap into the storm. Yale helped Uly pull on his poncho, and knelt in front of him, securing the snaps in front. "The earthquake is over, Uly – there's nothing to worry about."

"Not even my mom, Yale? Why did so many people go back to the ship, Yale?"

The tutor shook his head. "I'm not sure – Danziger was the first to decide to go, and Alonzo wanted to go with him. He knows how the ship works better than anyone. Julia went in case there was a medical need. And Mary? Well, Alonzo did say that Terrians have been guarding the ship. Perhaps she simply wants to go home, Uly."

Uly considered this a moment, frowning with concentration. "Okay. That makes sense. Mary's lonely for the Terrians," he answered soberly. Then a grin blossomed on his young face. "Race you to the med-tent, Yale!"

* * *

Chuckling to himself, Yale followed his young taskmistress, guiding Uly along beside him.

Activity would help to keep the children's minds off the fear the earthquake – or whatever it had been – had caused. And it would be nice for Julia to come back to a clean med-tent after whatever it was she faced at the ship. At that, it would keep Yale's mind off the contents of the ship, as well.

The med-tent was a disaster. Equipment had overturned, slides and specimens had spilled all over the tent floor. True stood in the doorway, small fists planted on her hips, and surveyed the damage with a critical eye. A moment later, she started giving orders, directing Yale and Uly this way and that while she concentrated on cleaning up Julia's various experiments in progress. While she was tidying up, she found the specimens Julia had collected at the caves the day before.

"Where'd these come from?" True asked, holding up one of the tubular growths Julia had harvested.

Yale looked up from sweeping the floor. "Julia collected those up in a cave, near the sunstones yesterday. Apparently, Mary used to eat them when she lived with the Terrians."

"I remember those," Uly put in, glancing up from where he was putting glassware back in their holders. "The Terrians gave me those to eat when they cured me."

"They eat 'em at the Elder's place, too. They're pretty good. Like fruit, only more filling," True commented offhandedly, and set the fruit aside to start a pile.

Yale stood there a moment longer, then walked over and picked up one of the cave fruits. Uly came around and tried to snatch one, but Yale swatted the boy's hand away. "Not until Julia's finished testing them, Uly."

"But, Yale – I've already had some. True, too. They taste a lot better than porridge."

"That may be, but I'd feel more comfortable if Julia says they're all right." Then Yale asked True, "You say the Elder's people eat these, True? Are you certain?"

"Sure. Like I said, they're pretty good. I didn't know where they came from, but Boy said they eat them all the time." True looked up curiously at Yale, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Why, Yale?"

"Oh, I'm not sure. Julia's got some idea about them – make sure you tell her about the Elder's people when she gets back, True. I'm sure she'll be interested."

True shrugged and went back to cleaning up. When Yale's back was turned, both she and Uly pocketed a cave fruit, grinning conspiratorily at one another.

* * *

Rain slashed down around the Rail as Danziger fought to maintain control. Visibility was poor, landmarks grayed out behind a curtain of water. The track was worse than it had been on the walk out from the ship; more than 24 hours of heavy rain had washed away parts of the slope and downed trees along the way. Danziger was forced to swerve out of his way more than once as he retraced the ten kilometers back to the ship, but after much cursing, he finally caught sight of metal glinting dully in the rain.

"There it is!" he cried out, swinging the steering wheel around to bring the Rail to a stop in a relatively level area not far from the ship. Alonzo was already vaulting out of his seat, extending a hand to Julia to help her down from the back of the vehicle. Mary dropped to the ground and ran ahead, the others bringing up the rear.

"Oh, my God," breathed Julia, halting only a few yards away from the Rail, oblivious to the rain that pounded at her slender form.

"What the hell ...?" Alonzo chimed in, coming up behind her.

Danziger was the last to reach the spot, and he swore loud and long.

Mary looked over her shoulder toward them, her head tilted curiously, but said nothing.

A jagged crack had opened earlier in the earth, the rain smoothing the edges rapidly as mud ran down the sides of the crevice. It widened as it stretched away from them, crawling up the rise toward the ship. The Venus-class spaceship itself had tumbled downward, wedging itself into the hole, and a part of the cliff wall above it had sheared off, cascading down on the half-buried ship. Little was visible of the ship containing the frozen body of Devon Adair, and the hatch hung ajar over the open space of the fissure.

* * *

"Say again, Danziger – I'm not reading you," Morgan cried anxiously into the gear.

"I said we need Zero. Now. Get Yale and have him bring Zero out to the ship in the ATV. I'll explain when they get here," Danziger answered shortly.

"Okay, okay. Uh, John –"

"Just get 'em here, Martin. Danziger out."

The gear connection went dead, leaving Morgan staring into the blank image of an closed gear channel. He pulled the gear off with an expression of disgust, muttering to himself as

he stood, picked up his rain poncho, and put it back on again with a weary sigh. "I was almost dry again," he said to himself wistfully. Flicking the hood back over his head, Morgan ran back out into the rain, heading toward the med-tent.

* * *

Mary walked around the spaceship curiously, choosing her steps with care. She had never seen the surface so churned up as it was here, the rain turning soil into muddy rivers racing down the hill into the fractured earth below. It did not surprise her that the Terrians guarding the ship had gone into the earth; had she been able, she would have joined them.

Something was strange about this area, something she hadn't noticed before, and it distracted her until she finally identified what it was. She could hear the earth below her feet. She could hear the Terrians deep beneath her. It had been months since she'd been able to hear this, the long months of her exile. She'd become so accustomed to the loss, she hadn't recognized it when the Terrian world had begun to open up to her again. Heart pounding suddenly, Mary dropped to a Terrian crouch and pressed her fingers against the muddy earth. A milky glow formed around her fingers, and they passed into the ground with an electric sensation. With a growing excitement, she opened herself up to the dreaming, oblivious to the steady rain.

* * *

Danziger had tried to open the hatch and climb down the ladder into the ship, but the ship's precarious balance had shifted, threatening to pitch him into the rift. He'd scrambled back quickly, missing a long fall into the black abyss only because Julia and Alonzo had leapt forward to haul him back. Alonzo suggested tethering Danziger to the Rail for another try, and Julia had quickly agreed. She pointed out to Danziger that they'd used the same tactic with Morgan and Bess, when the couple had dived into a fissure under the influence of a parasitic pollen a few weeks earlier. The action had proved successful, as they'd been able to pull the Martins back to the surface, saving their lives.

Danziger considered the idea, then shook his head. "It's too unstable. We'll have to wait until Zero gets here to help hold the ship steady. We might be able to rig the Rail and ATV to bring it up." He pushed back rain-sodden hair from his forehead, grimacing at the ship. "Where the hell are the Terrians who were guarding her?"

"Shank, I'd forgotten about them. They must have taken shelter from the rain," Alonzo replied.

"Considering that the Terrians' plant-like biology absorbs nutrients from the soil, it's possible that this amount of rain might be dangerous to them," Julia guessed. "Wait a minute, John – didn't you say that thing Morgan rigged was linked to Devon's cryo-chamber?"

"Yeah, what kind of readings are you getting on your gadget, John?" Alonzo asked.

Danziger pulled out the tracking device and switched over to the channel monitoring Devon's lifesigns. He shielded the device from the rain with his hand, and frowned deeply at the readout. "I'm not getting anything. It could be the link got damaged when the ship shifted —"

"No," came Mary's voice, forceful and confident.

The trio turned toward the sound of her voice, all three registering shock at the mud-covered figure that rose up out of the earth a few feet away from them.

"Mary! I thought you couldn't go into the earth —" Alonzo cried.

"The Terrians have forgiven me," she told him solemnly, a childish smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "The earth accepts me once more." The smile broke wide, and Alonzo grinned in return. "I can go home, Alonzo!"

"Mary, that's great!" Alonzo beamed back at her.

"I'm happy for you, Mary. But when you said, 'No,' what did you mean?" Julia asked, watching the mud sluice off the girl in the continuing downpour.

Mary turned toward Julia, the smile falling away. "I meant that your equipment is not damaged. She is not there."

"What?" Danziger demanded. "Where the hell is she?"

"They have taken her below. She is with the Terrians now."

* * *

The human dreamers had taught them how to touch the symbol-covered pads to open their strange obstacles through the dreams. They had learned much through the dreams, and yet there were many more questions than answers. There were as many obstacles in the dreamers' minds as there were in the ship containing the sleeping woman. The Woman Who Promised.

In the communal mind that was the Terrian dreamplane, this tribe had learned of what had gone before. The tribe had learned of the arrival of these humans, the boy who held the future in his sickness. The boy who now carried a piece of the planet, the mother, in his very genetic structure. They, more than any other tribe, knew of what had happened here, in this place, many cycles earlier. They, more than any other tribe, had suffered at the

hands of the humans who had arrived in the first ship, the ship where the woman had been preserved. They remembered, as the planet remembered. There was a certain symmetry in the fact that it was they who would determine the future of humans on this world.

The differences in humans confused them. Deep in their ancient history, Terrians had held such differences, but they had been purged long ago, locked in the ice with the Evil One. But these humans had driven the Evil One from the ice, from the earth, from the dreamplane itself. The planet was cleaner, healthier as a result. These humans had freed another of their tribes from the hand of the Gaal, he who wore a necklace of Terrian bones around his neck. He who stopped the dreaming, and who hurt their brothers for no other reason than to hurt. These humans had frozen the earth and cut off the sunstone network, the mind of the planet, yet had used the sunstones to restore it. These humans had finally stopped the unsettling images bleeding into the dreamplane from the woman, Dell Curry, silencing the pain and the fear that had troubled them for so many cycles.

And they knew, through the sunstones, that these humans sought to destroy the evil in the sky, the malevolence that had haunted them for many cycles. The Eve, that which had killed so many of their tribe in the days of the first humans. Which yearned to kill them still.

And in the dreams, they had learned that other humans would be as different from these as they were from the Eve. That although they could not think with one mind, they could act with one purpose. And the Woman Who Promised was part of the purpose.

They still did not understand fully why she was so important to the humans, or to the Uly, the boy who cried out in his dreams for his mother, a mother unlike the one they knew. But they understood through the dreaming that she was important to them all, to the future of the Terrians, the humans, and the planet, if they were to hold to their ways and do no harm to the humans who would come.

That was why they had finally entered the ship, opened the strange cylinder, and coated her in the life-giving soil of the planet. Thus protected, they had lifted her out of the ship and carried her down into the planet. Her breaths had been shallow, her hold on life fragile, but they knew this was the only way to save her. As it had been the only way to save her son.

Although it was not yet Moon Cross, they had taken her In, and now the planet, the mother, embraced her. Learned her, as it had learned no other of her kind, not even the boy. With something like shock, the Terrians had come to understand that it was the planet itself that weakened her. So now the planet studied her, identified what was lacking, and began to manufacture the missing element.

The Terrians remained crouched at the edge of the mist-shrouded pool, silent observers to the rebirth of humankind.

* * *

Danziger had stared at Mary in shock, not because of how she looked, but because of what she said. There was no challenge in her voice, no portentous thunderclap to highlight the words, merely a simple certainty. He didn't ask how she knew; if nothing else, the past months and especially the last week had taught him to open his mind to the impossible. "What are they doing with her?" he finally asked after a long moment of stunned silence.

Mary cocked her head, listening to something the rest of them could not hear. Rain continued to fall around them, washing away the mud encrusted on Mary's face. She wiped at it impatiently with her hand, then at last, she shook her head. "I do not know. It is in the hands of the mother. It studies her."

"Studies?" Julia inquired, pushing past Danziger to peer more closely at Mary. "How can the planet study her?"

Frowning, Mary shook her head again. "I don't ... I don't understand your question. The planet is mother to us, it creates and nurtures us. We return to it when it is our time. It knows us as we know it."

Julia turned toward Danziger and said, "I thought so. A symbiotic relationship between the Terrians and the planet – and the planet itself is sentient."

"C'mon, Julia – how can a planet be sentient?" Danziger scoffed.

"How can a planet cure a little boy with the Syndrome?" she challenged. "There's so much we don't understand about this planet – apparently, there's a great deal the planet doesn't understand about us, too. Devon's allowing us to open the dialogue."

"What, you're saying it's a good thing Devon got sick?"

"When she did, maybe. The planet is taking the opportunity to learn about her biology, our biology – before it's too late for us."

"Julia could be right, John," Alonzo pointed out reasonably.

Danziger's response was cut off by the sound of the approaching ATV. Yale called out as he rolled the vehicle to a stop, and moments later, he and the Zero unit joined them near the ship.

"My God," Yale breathed, looking toward the rain and mud running down the sides of the ship into the hole beneath it. "How's Devon –"

"The Terrians have her," Julia interrupted. "But we need to stabilize the ship – there's too much valuable data in its memory for us to lose it."

"Yes," Yale agreed, nodding absently. His expression grew distant a moment before he shook himself back to the scene at hand. "Yes," he added, more decisively. "What do you want us to do, John?"

* * *

It took them several hours, but eventually they were able to stabilize the position of the ship. A number of trees had been cut down to provide timber to create a platform on which the ship rested, and the ATV and Rail had both been pressed into service to haul the ship back from the brink. Once the ship was back on more stable ground, Zero set about removing some of the mud that had collected on the hull, despite Alonzo's assurances that the mess would have little impact on a ship designed to travel through space.

Soaked through, mud-spattered and incredibly weary, the group surveyed the righted ship with deadened eyes. Julia didn't even bother to try to stifle the yawn that overtook her. "What now?" she asked around the yawn.

"I think we should return to camp," Yale suggested. "If the Terrians have Devon, no doubt we'll need to communicate with them on the dreamplane. I for one could use some dry clothes and a hot meal, and a warm bed. And you," he added, gesturing to the others, "need it even more."

"What if –" Danziger started to protest, but Alonzo cut him off.

"The Terrians will contact us when they're ready, John. Yale's right – there's no reason for us to stay here. And I'm starving."

Danziger shook his head to himself, but acquiesced. They started toward the vehicles, and were climbing in when he noticed that Mary hadn't joined them.

"Mary! C'mon – we're heading back to camp," he urged toward the strange human-Terrian woman.

Mary crouched on the hillside, palms flat against the soggy earth. She looked up at Danziger's call, but shook her head. "I will stay. I will rejoin the tribe and wait with them."

"Wait?"

"For the decision." She stood up abruptly, and just as suddenly, dropped back into the earth.

"Damn! I'll never get used to that," Danziger complained. Shrugging, he turned toward the Rail, balking only momentarily at Julia's insistence that she drive. Danziger was nearly asleep on his feet, and it was only a few minutes before he was out cold as the Rail and the ATV were on their way back to camp.

* * *

"Well?" Morgan prompted as the quartet came into the mess tent.

"Where's Mary?" chimed in Bess, looking up from the pots of savory-smelling food. She'd managed to make good use of the rainy day, concocting something that actually smelled inviting to the weary travellers.

"She's gone back to the Terrians," Alonzo answered, shuffling over to the pots. "That smells great, Bess. I could eat a ton of spirulina right now, but boy ..." he grinned, spooning out bowls of stew for himself, Julia, Yale and Danziger.

"Gone back to the Terrians?" Bess repeated, her voice sounding hurt. "But I thought she'd finally decided to join us —"

"The earth took her back," Alonzo explained as he passed the fourth bowl out and took up his own. He took a bite of the stew and smiled beatifically. "Good," he declared.

Julia swallowed and took up the narrative, explaining what had happened to the ship, to Devon, and Mary's decision to remain behind with the tribe while the planet did whatever it was doing with Devon. When she took a pause to shovel food into her mouth, one of the others would take up the thread, and before long, the entire story had been told, and four bowls had been scraped clean. All of the adults were gathered around them at the tables, listening intently. When the story was done, Morgan asked, "So what do we do now?"

"We wait," Alonzo replied. "Until the Terrians contact us."

Morgan glanced around, his face indecisive. "Are we sure they will?"

"I'm sure," Alonzo answered confidently.