

Transmission Received

"This is peculiar," Commander Tava Dupree said, biting her lower lip in perplexity. She peered out the viewport and gazed upon the alien village in the distance. Thirty-five maroon-colored boxes, all approximately five feet high, dotted the rocky valley before her. "Where is everybody?"

"No one's home," Floyd Terrel declared, removing his helmet. Terrel was studying to be an astrobiologist and was the youngest member of the crew. Despite his acknowledged intelligence, he often displayed resentment to authority. He took a deep breath of air, held it in satisfaction, and then released it. "It's good to be back on IZZY again (He referred to their space ship, the ISS-3). Damn space suit's the stuffiest damn thing I ever been in. How ya supposed to breathe in these damn things?"

Tava turned her attention to Terrel and Lia Thynmu, who were removing their space suits. "You were out there for nearly four hours. Didn't you pick up ANY signs of life?"

"Intelligent life? No."

"Whatever happened here," Lia added, "we missed it."

"That's just the question I've been asking myself," Tava replied, as she headed back to the conference area on the ship. "What happened here? When you're done changing come back to the conference table. We're having a meeting."

"Her and her damn meetings," Terrel muttered after she had departed. "We've been on this planet for a day now and we've done nothing but have meetings."

"She's organized," Lia countered. "You gotta give her that."

"Damn," was all he replied.

Smil Gordon was sitting at the conference table, reviewing the latest transmission from Earth.

"Any news from home, Gordy?" Tava asked him. She stood behind him, looking over his shoulder at the computer screen.

"They're reviewing the transmissions they've been getting from this planet the last three-and-a-half years. No conclusions, yet. It seems the last transmission was received six months ago. Since then, nothing

but silence.”

“That concurs with what we’ve found here,” Tava said as she seated herself.

Lia and Terrel entered the room and promptly seated themselves at the conference table. Tava cleared her throat to signal the beginning of the meeting, but Gordon continued to stare at his computer.

“All right,” Tava began. “I think we should review all the facts concerning this mission before we proceed any further. Gordy, what’ve you found out?”

Smil Gordon was the oldest member of the crew at age fifty-two and was already completely gray. He was still in excellent shape and possessed a sharp mind. Commander Dupree felt more comfortable with him aboard. They were old acquaintances and she confided in him frequently.

The Communications Engineer cleared his throat and began. “We all know we were sent on this mission when radio telescopes on Earth picked up unusual transmissions coming from this system. The transmissions could not be deciphered at that time. I’ve been in contact with Earth all morning . . . Well, at least I’m reviewing that latest stuff they sent us, which is about three months old, thanks to the distance that separates us. But I have learned the following: The transmissions that the Earth received from this planet lasted for three-and-a-half years, and are still undecipherable. And the transmissions ceased nearly six months ago – that’s six months REAL time.”

“So while we were in hibernation making the interstellar voyage,” Terrel interrupted, “the signals coming from this planet were discontinued?”

“Exactly. We are now on a world that, for over three years, was emitting either a distress signal or a greeting signal to whoever could hear them. Considering the absence of intelligent life on this planet, we can assume that the signal was a distress signal.”

“Or a warning to stay away,” Terrel added. He ran his fingers through his curly blonde hair. His thoughts strayed for a moment and he wondered if Lia had noticed his sharp deductive mind.

“Possibly,” Tava agreed. “Either way, we’re here. All right, I know our original mission was mapping asteroids. And I know you all expected to be home after the completion of that two month mission. But in our business, we do as we’re told and we accept the assignments we receive. I didn’t want to lose seven years of Earth time any more than you did.” She gazed at Terrel before continuing. “But frankly,

I'm excited by this mission. We have a chance to encounter alien life forms and make first contact with them. If that isn't enough to stimulate your blood, then think of this as a mystery. What the hell happened here? Why did they emit those radio waves? And for what purpose?

"Anyway, our designated mission, before we were put into hibernation, was to make contact with the intelligent forms of life on this planet and assist them in any way possible. Since that life form is no longer here – or in hiding – we are now going to learn what happened to them. Terrel, you're the expert on alien cultures (God forgive me for diminishing the title 'expert', she thought to herself). Besides the tablets, what did you and Lia find out there?"

Terrel paused before answering. He recognized that the preceding pep talk was directed at him and he resented Commander Dupree's insinuation that he was someone not performing up to the cheerful standards set down by the Space Agency. He sighed before replying. "Life. Some life, anyway. The birds here are so damn incredible. I already told you of the tablets we found inside those square structures. I think those structures are their homes, but there's no way of knowing for sure. When we entered them, and by the way, their doors slide up and over, not in and out . . . Anyway, we found some artifacts inside them. A purple, round ball that sort of looks like a crystal. Several small objects that are unidentified. And those tablets."

"Which are being scanned for alien viruses or bacteria and is being decontaminated," Tava interrupted.

"Right. The tablets are square, transparent, solid, an inch thick, and have markings contained inside them. Light as hell, too."

"Inside?" Gordon asked incredulously. "If they're writings, how did they get on the inside?"

"Damn, I don't know. Anyway, they'll be ready for translation in twenty minutes."

"I'll be waiting," Gordon eagerly replied. Translating Earth documents was a simple feat for the Translating Scanner he had personally designed. But to attempt to interpret an alien language was an opportunity that even he had never anticipated.

"Anything else?" Tava asked Terrel.

"Hmmm. Oh, on the top and in the center of every one of those square houses is a pink-spinning disk, about the size of my fist. I have no

idea how the damn thing is still spinning, but my guess is that it's some type of communication device that links all the homes together. It might even connect them to other villages or cities."

"Interesting," Dupree said, her eyebrows raised in curiosity. "It may be that the entire planet is linked. Perhaps by some satellite or a large network of computers."

"That'd be my guess."

"There are some peculiarities of the planet," Lia entered the conversation. "Nearly everywhere we looked was the color red or some shade of it. The pink thorny plants, the square houses, the red dirt, the crimson sky . . . Everything. You name it and it's a shade of red or deep red. I don't know if it's significant but I think it's bizarre."

Tava replied, "We already ran tests on the dirt. A lot of rust, essentially. Probably some copper out there, too. At least it sure looks like the hills are lined with it. That's why they're red. The rest probably isn't significant. Remember, most plant life on Earth is green – here's it's red. Maybe it's no big deal. The temperature's great, about 18 degrees out there now at mid-day. Last night it hit a low of 2 degrees. Unfortunately, the air is very heavy and toxic. A ton of heavy, inert gases. We couldn't live here."

"Wait until you see the birds," Lia noted.

"Damn," Terrel snickered. "Simply bizarre."

"Anything else?"

"If you're going out . . ."

"I am."

"Then you better take a laser like we did."

"I was already planning it. Gordy, you ready?"

He had been studying the computer screen and appeared startled to hear his name. "Commander, I've got to translate those tablets. This is the chance of a lifetime."

"You can do that later."

"Later?" His voice was growing in panic. "You've got to let me do it now. Send out Terrel again or Lia. Hell, I'll go out later. Double shift if you want. But not now. Right now is too important. I've been

waiting my entire life for an opportunity like this . . .”

“All right, all right, Gordy,” Tava said with a smile, as she tried to appease him. She glanced up at Terrel, let out a sigh, and then turned to Lia. “Can you go?”

“Sure,” she replied.

“Why don’t you relax for thirty minutes. Then we’ll head out.” Tava departed.

Feeling slighted once again, Terrel stomped his foot down and exclaimed, “Damn her!” He headed for his cabin.

“When are those tablets ready?” Gordon asked Lia.

She smiled as she stood to leave. “Don’t worry, you’ll be notified.”

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Commander Tava Dupree stared out the viewport once again at the rocky, red landscape before her. What happened here? The monumental implications of a barren world on a planet once populated by a species that had achieved interstellar communication did not escape her. What she and the rest of the crew of the ISS-3 did or did not do could shape the fate of Earth.

But ironically, she suddenly found herself turning her thoughts inward and contemplating her own life. She felt the pressure growing on her as the mission continued into its second day and its first twenty-four hours. There were other African-American women who had commanded ships before in the Space Agency. She was not alone in that respect. But even she had not anticipated the mission that had been assigned to her. This was now the most-watched, most-discussed mission on Earth. It would be her chance to shine. To become a hero. To make history. Or to fail.

It was her first command – a routine asteroid mapping in a remote sector of space. And she had not even been given the best crew to serve under her. The Space Agency had assigned her castoffs that the more senior officers had rejected. It was, after all, supposed to be a simple mission. So the crew that she had been assigned was a ragtag lot at best.

Smil Gordon was ten years her senior and although he was the easiest to get along with, he seemed more interested in his computers than developing any close personal relationship with her. They had been acquaintances since her first days in the Space Agency. But they had

never become close personal friends.

Floyd Terrel was her personal thorn. He obeyed her orders, but seemed to question everything she said and did. This was only his second mission and the youngster had still not learned his place in the command structure of the Space Agency. Perhaps it was up to her to teach him.

The young Asian girl, Lia Thynmu, was entirely too silent to suit her. She could understand Gordon and Terrel, but Lia was an enigma. This was her first mission as ship's pilot. And although she seemed confident of her abilities, she seldom spoke of anything but the mission at hand.

They weren't the best group the Space Agency had ever placed together, but they were in the right sector of space at the right time and that was why they were assigned the mission. The nearest Interstellar Space Ship would not reach this destination for at least seven months. Thus, Tava's historical mission was somewhat of a fluke. And perhaps more than anything else, that frustrated her the most. She had earned the right to command this mission without having an asterisk attached beside her name in some history book. Would she be remembered as a woman who had been the beneficiary of fate? Or would any achievements she attained here, be listed as just one more accomplishment in her long resume. She could only hope and pray that it was her ability and personal achievements that would be best remembered. Let the historians judge her for that and only that.

Gordon stood at the decontamination airlock where the eight alien tablets were being scanned for microscopic life forms. He anxiously counted the seconds until the tests were complete. "No sign of infection, yet," he called to Tava.

"How much more time?" she asked.

"Two minutes."

Terrel was behind Gordon, looking over his shoulder at the tablets. Appearing still disgruntled, he turned to Tava. "Commander, there's no evidence of intelligent life out there. What do ya say, we fly on out of here and head to the next town? There might be a welcoming committee forming in some village just over the horizon."

Tava climbed into her space suit as she replied. "These were the first structures we came upon as we descended through the atmosphere. We'll stay here and gather more artifacts and search for life forms. We'll fly out of here after that's done and not before."

"When?"

"When I decide. Don't worry, you'll be informed when the time comes. But you can rest assured, Floyd Terrel, that it'll be MY decision. Is that clear? Now why don't you get to work. There's plenty to occupy your time while we're gone. A ton of tests have to be run yet. Gordy will show you what needs to be done."

Terrel fumed out of the room and stormed back to his compartment. He passed Lia on the way, who was downing a green liquid stimulant to fight off fatigue. She was already suited and ready to depart.

"Ready, Commander," she announced.

"We won't stay out too long. You were already out once and I don't want to wear you out."

"It's ready!" Gordon announced excitedly. "And no sign of alien microbes. The decontamination worked."

"Great," Tava replied. "Start the translation. But I want you to keep in contact with us at all times. So keep the waves open back at the Translator."

"Will do. Are you going armed?"

Tava grabbed two laser pistols from the weapon cabinet. "What do you think?" she said with a wink.

"Wise. Hey, see if you can find any more tablets. The Translator can use all the input possible to get a more precise interpretation of the language."

"We'll try."

"Good luck out there."

Tava nodded and the two women entered the air lock. "Can you hear me?" Commander Dupree asked Lia. They were communicating by radio through their space helmets.

"Loud and clear."

"Let's go."

They departed the spacecraft and stepped onto the rocky, red terrain. The crimson sky had remained cloudless since their landing but the light emitted from the planet's small sun was feeble. Consequently, it was no lighter than a dark, cloudy day back on Earth. Wilted, thorny

bushes dotted the landscape. Mountain ranges stretched endlessly around them from their point in the valley. There were no roads or bridges. No evidence that this was anything but a barren isolated region lying far from civilization on an alien world. No evidence, that is, but the thirty-five maroon boxes stretched out in no discernible pattern before them. And even each of them appeared isolated, as a good hundred feet or more separated them from one another.

As they approached the first box, Lia suddenly pointed to the sky. An alien bird was passing overhead at a height of about twenty feet. Tava thought to herself that the word 'bird' was an erroneous term to apply to what moved in the sky above her. It was truly the most peculiar flying creature she had ever seen.

The pink creature was shaped like a foot-long screw, with a broad posterior narrowing to a sharp point in the front, laced with grooved indentations spiraling up its body. There were no eyes or wings – no appendages at all. The bird's skin appeared to have a texture of rubber and it didn't truly fly as much as it floated. It propelled itself forward by a turn of its body, much like a screw being screwed into wood. With each spin it advanced several feet before slowing to a halt. It floated motionlessly for several seconds before another turn moved it forward yet again. Tava and Lia studied it for several minutes until the bird's painstaking slow movement pushed it beyond them.

Tava finally turned to Lia who had seen one before during her first excursion. "If that's a bird then I'm a reptile."

"Strange. Isn't it?" Lia replied.

"My guess is that it uses the heaviness of the atmosphere much as a fish uses water. Did you notice? It appeared to be floating through the air."

"Or swimming."

"And you've seen no other creatures?"

"That's it. Not even insects."

"It makes you wonder what the birds eat. Or how the plants pollinate." Tava surveyed the lone plant life within fifty feet of her. The sparsely branched, thorny, pale-red bush stood about two feet high but possessed no flowers. Perhaps pollination wasn't required on this world. But how then did plants reproduce?

The women moved ahead and came to the first box.

"We were in this one already," Lia noted. "Not much inside except some unknown artifacts."

"How about some of the others up ahead?"

"We only entered ten of them. And we marked each one we entered." Lia Thynmu pointed to the dirt ground at the base of the entrance. An 'X' was marked there.

"Good move. Let's go on."

They passed by several more boxes. Tava studied their exterior and discovered them all to be identical. The boxes were about five feet high, constructed of metal, and appeared airtight. Except for the doors, which were barely discernible to her, they possessed no windows or markings of any kind. The doorway stretched the entire length of the side and with difficulty Lia showed Tava how they flipped up and over the top. No grooves existed on the door for fingers to grip. Tava also observed the round, spinning disks on top of the boxes and was satisfied with their theory that they were probably communication devices. She estimated the size of each box to be about eight feet long and wide. It was too small of a dwelling for a human being and she immediately conjured up images of elf-like creatures as the alien inhabitants.

"It seems so strange that there's no road or sidewalks," Tava said to Lia.

"No downtown or country store, either," Lia added. "The dwelling up ahead wasn't explored before. That'll be our first stop."

It was a good two-hundred feet to the next dwelling and for the first time since leaving the ship, Tava's thoughts turned inward. The bright, orange space suit she wore was very comfortable and allowed easy movement of her arms and legs. The recycled air was cool and refreshing, and although they had traveled some distance from the ship, she was not perspiring. Fortunately, the gravity of the alien world was slightly less than that of Earth. That made her movements easier. She took a deep breath in satisfaction and moved onward.

The next dwelling appeared no different from the rest. And as they stopped at the front door, Tava ironically found herself wondering if they should knock first before entering. Lia searched for a rock to mark the doorway. But the rock she grabbed was larger than she expected and most of it was still lodged in the ground.

Suddenly, Lia stepped backwards in surprise.

"What is it?" Tava asked in apprehension. She quickly grabbed for her laser pistol and pointed it at the rock.

"There's something under there," Lia replied. There was panic in her reply. "Something green."

Tava cautiously approached the rock and then slowly lifted it out of the ground. But what she uncovered hardly appeared threatening. A small puddle of green liquid with a thick consistency was buried beneath the rock. Pistachio pudding immediately came to her mind.

"What is it?" Lia questioned her. She still maintained a comfortable distance from the rock.

"I don't know. I hope it's not what they drink around here."

"You mean their water?"

"I guess. What else could it be? You have your equipment with you. Get a sample of it. We'll analyze it back at the ship."

Lia opened her kit and was about to take a sample when Tava suddenly yelled. "Look out!"

She grabbed Lia's arm and pulled her away from the dwelling. All Lia had seen was a shadow approaching her but Tava might have saved her life.

They stood speechless about thirty-feet from the dwelling, laser pistols ready, observing the alien creature that had seemingly appeared from nowhere.

The creature had moved swiftly and now rested over the green liquid, no doubt devouring it for a meal. The women had never seen an animal without a body before. But this one appeared to consist of nothing but thousands of black, wiry flagella, which looked like long hairs, reaching out in a thousand different directions. The flagella almost appeared to be electrically charged, wildly whipping about all around it and above it. Although the absence of a trunk made it difficult to ascertain its true size, Tava estimated the creature would probably reach a good twelve feet in length if it were stretched from end to end.

Smil Gordon's voice suddenly entered the airwaves. "Commander Dupree, is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine, Gordy. We've just had our first encounter with

terrestrial life here.”

“Is there any danger?”

“I don’t believe so. We’re prepared. Stay vigilant, though. And keep this line open. Over.”

“Will do. Over.”

“Commander, what do you think it is?” Lia asked.

“By our standards? It looks something like a spider but I’d say that’s a local scavenger.”

“It doesn’t look like the dominant life form of a planet.”

“It’s probably not. I doubt if it even has a brain. But did you notice how it suddenly appeared when we exposed the green liquid?”

“Sort of like an animal smelling blood,” Lia thoughtfully remarked.

“That’s the feeling I got.”

“Then you think the green liquid may be blood?”

Tava gestured to the dwellings in their vicinity. “Something happened here. Where the hell is everyone? Think of it. If you were back on Earth and you came upon a deserted village, in a country that showed no signs of life, what would you think?”

Lia shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. It’s hard to even consider the possibility.”

“I have. I think there may have been a war here. A world war devastating enough to leave towns barren, all planetary communication destroyed, and all intelligent life seeking food and water elsewhere.”

“You mean a nuclear war?”

“I’m not sure about nuclear. The radiation level here is well below normal . . . ”

As quickly as it had appeared the creature suddenly swept back along the trail Tava and Lia had followed and disappeared into the ground. It appeared to propel itself forward by rolling or tumbling in a forward direction.

Surprised by the creature’s abrupt actions, Lia cautiously followed it and studied the area where it had disappeared. She uncovered a small

hole in the ground, no more than an inch wide. She stood over it, nervously searching for any sign of the creature. But there was no movement.

Back at the dwelling, Tava knelt over the ground where the green liquid had been. It was now bone dry. She began to gather the equipment Lia had dropped, hoping to at least get a sample of the soil.

"Commander!" Lia suddenly called out to her.

Tava sprung from the ground again. She pulled her laser pistol from its holster and surveyed the area where Lia was pointing. Ascending from the nadir of the valley was another spider creature. Fearing the worst, they quickly scanned the entire horizon. In the opposite direction, two more creatures moved swiftly over the rocky terrain toward them.

"It's feeding time," Tava commented.

"Should we head back to the ship?"

"No, let's move on. The other creature didn't bother us. They're only interested in that green liquid. But they'll be here in less than a minute, so let's move."

Tava and Lia departed the dwelling, walking as fast as their suits would allow them. When they had reached an area they deemed safe, they turned to watch the creatures. One of them arrived before the others and was instantly attacked by the original spider creature, which sprung from its hole in the ground the moment its territory had been infringed. A savage battle ensued. Together they formed a seemingly thicker creature, as the two intertwined scavengers rolled like a tumbleweed in the wind. Flagella whipped wildly about and they twirled and spun in every direction, battling for territory. The vicious battle lasted less than twenty seconds.

One of the creatures moved away from the battle-site and it approached the area where the green liquid had been. The two other creatures, noticeably smaller, suddenly backed away from the victorious spider. They circled the area cautiously but then resigned themselves to devouring the defeated creature which was sprawled out on the rocky, red ground like a dead jellyfish washed onto a sandy seashore.

"I wonder who won?" Lia wondered aloud.

"I don't know but we have a job to do. Let's check out this dwelling."

Wary of what might be inside, they cautiously entered the next structure with their laser pistols in their hands. But there was no life inside and the two women breathed easier. Tava Dupree was surprised by the emptiness of the dwelling, as it contained only two more tablets, a purple crystal ball, and five small artifacts that easily fit into her gloved hand. The artifacts consisted of flat, simple, geometric shapes, all possessing varying shades of that distinct planetary redness. The floor consisted of the dirt ground and the dwelling was void of any furniture.

"These people don't believe in comfort," Tava observed in surprise.

"Every one we've been in is the same. The same purple ball, maybe a tablet or two, and artifacts."

"Why didn't you collect any of the small artifacts?" Tava questioned Lia.

"I . . . I don't know . . ." She possessed a look of embarrassment as she now realized that it had been foolish of her and Floyd Terrel to overlook them.

Commander Dupree shook her head in disbelief. How could two members of her crew possibly overlook something that was self-evident to her? If only she had been given a more experienced crew, she thought. "All right. Let's take everything here and move onto the next dwelling. I'll fill my bag first."

She opened a heavy, metallic-fiber bag she had been carrying at her side and they began to fill it. And they performed a similar ritual at the next eight dwellings, with the contents of each dwelling being the same. Although there was room for several more stops, Tava observed the sinking sun and decided to return.

There were no more signs of the spider creatures but another bird did pass above them as they headed back to the ship. If any other life existed on the planet, or in their area, it did not make itself visible during the daylight hours. Perhaps the nightlife out here would be more active, Tava thought. It would be interesting to see what creatures would appear in the dark, although the preceding evening (their first hours on the planet) had been silent. But at that moment, she found herself yearning for the safety of her space ship, instead.

"Was getting worried," Smil Gordon greeted them with a smile. Tava and Lia entered the spaceship after ten minutes in the decontamination airlock. Their suits would spend another ten minutes in there with the artifacts. Then Gordon would have his opportunity to translate them.

"How did it go out there?"

"We got some more tablets for you. Where's Terrel?"

"I suggested he get some sleep. He took a sleeping pill and headed in for a nap."

"Why?"

"Commander, if we're going to be here for any length of time, then I suggest we start rotating shifts. We'll need someone for watch tonight."

Tava had not considered that. They had all been awake the previous night, running tests of the planet. Adrenaline had probably pushed them through yesterday evening and today but it was now clear that fatigue was setting in. And they couldn't all sleep at once. She had overlooked something basic and that troubled her. It was her first command and she wanted to prove she was capable of running everything perfectly.

"Good call, Gordy. Lia, you get some sleep next. You've been through more than anyone."

"How do you figure?"

"These state-of-the-art space suits may be more comfortable but they still wear you down. Get something to eat if you wish and then get some sleep. I'm going to work out a schedule."

"Uh, about the food . . ." Gordon began uneasily. "We may have a slight problem there."

"What?" Tava asked abruptly. She was in no mood for bad news.

"Terrel busted the synthesizing unit. He was . . ."

"He what?!"

Gordon cringed and continued in a subdued voice. "He overloaded the circuits back in the first storage room when he was running tests of the soil from the lab."

"How the hell did THAT happen?" Tava folded her arms and angrily stared down Smil Gordon. "Those circuits don't cross! Weren't you with him? Weren't you watching him?"

"I kind of got caught up in the translation. Sorry. But really," he added quickly, "it's not that big a deal. I can reroute the system in

a matter of hours and we've got food to last us all for two weeks, minimum."

Tava drew her head back, leaned up against the wall, and let out a deep sigh. Once again, she found herself shaking her head in disbelief at her crew's ineptitude. But she was a Commander now and could not afford to display her disappointment or anger. She composed herself. "You sure it can be fixed?" she questioned Gordon.

"Positive. No problem, really. And I apologize for not minding Terrel's work. But I assumed he knew what he was doing."

"Floyd Terrel has minimal background in the biological analysis features of an Interstellar Space Ship. His expertise lies in the Volmor systems, which are generally found in the Explorer class ships. If he tries to use the equipment again, I am asking you to monitor his work."

"Definitely. Sorry, I didn't know his background. You didn't mention it before you left."

That was true, Tava thought. Why Floyd Terrel was assigned to this mission was still a mystery to her. But still, as her senior crewmember, Smil Gordon should have been more aware of the crew's abilities and technical expertise. "Well, I'm mentioning it now," she replied. "Get the unit back up as soon as possible."

"Will do."

She led them back to the conference area where the Translating Scanner was hard at work. "Any luck?"

Quickly forgetting the food-synthesizing problem, his face suddenly radiated with enthusiasm. "This language is simply bizarre! It's unlike anything I've ever seen before!"

"It IS alien," she replied. "Will that thing work?"

"You kidding? It's simply a matter of time. And now we have some more input. I bet I get it within the hour."

"Can I hold you to that?"

Gordon's smile disappeared. "You serious?"

She patted him on the shoulder and forced a smile. "Give it your best, Gordy." She and Lia departed the conference area and headed for storage. It was time for dinner.

After Lia turned in, Tava joined Gordon at the conference table. The food synthesizer problem had been minor and he had completed the task in less than thirty minutes. So now, he could do little but watch his Translator continue to decipher the tablets. The sun had set and a purple twilight covered the valley. Tava reviewed the events of the day through her mind but was unable to determine the answers she sought.

"What are you thinking?" Gordon interrupted her. Restless from sitting before the translator the entire day, he stood over Tava, waiting her reply.

"I don't know. I can't make any sense of what happened here?" She stared at him, examining his eyes. They were bloodshot and he appeared exhausted. Although she was scheduled for the next shift of sleep when Terrel awakened, she would make Gordon go instead.

"We pulling out tomorrow?"

"Probably. But where will we go? All the radio transmissions have stopped. There's no sign of intelligent life, and . . ." She stopped her line of thought as something else came to her mind. "You made your transmission to Earth today, didn't you?"

"Of course. It's part of the routine."

"Have we received anything from them?"

"Not today."

"Just wondering. Maybe they could give us a clue about what's happened here."

"Maybe nothing happened here. Maybe it's like Terrel said. Maybe there's an entire civilization waiting for us right over the next hill."

"Could be. We'll find out tomorrow. Is the food-synthesizer working again?"

"Like a charm. It just required a simple rerouting."

"Good. When do you think that thing will be done translating?"

"I wish I knew. It should've finished by now. We have plenty of data. It's an alien language, so it'll take longer. I still want the last shift of sleep, though."

"No," she replied with conviction.

"Yes! Tava this is everything I've ever dreamed of. This is what my whole life has been lived for. For this one moment. The opportunity of a lifetime! This will be done before the morning. Promise! I want to be the first one to see it. Give me that."

"Gordy . . ."

"I'm not taking no for an answer," he insisted with a smile. "This is too important to me. I've never asked for a command or a promotion to officer. This is all I've ever wanted. You've got your first command assignment and I've got the first opportunity to decipher an alien language. Surely, you can see what this means to me. This is as important to me as this mission is to you under your command. Would you want someone to take that away from you?"

"All right," she replied, laughing. "You convinced me. You got the last shift."

"I knew I'd get my way. I always do with you."

"Oh, really?"

"Of course. Ever since that first mission together – on Talmen IV. Remember?"

"Oh my God!" she said with a large grin. "I've almost forgotten that. We were under . . . Was that Rimlan's command?"

"No, no, no. That was before Rimlan."

"That's right. That's right. It was . . ."

"Commander Pyne!" they exclaimed simultaneously and began to laugh together.

"It was his last mission," Gordon reminded her.

"That's right, his last one. That guy was older than the Pyramids, I swear. And his hearing!"

"Do you remember how we all answered his commands? With those bullhorns we got on Talmen IV!"

"And he NEVER realized how we were making a fool of him. There he was, so proud and serious, his final command of his 500-year old life – I swear to God he was that old! And there we were, the entire crew returning every one of his commands through bullhorns so he could hear us!"

"Oh, that was a riot! And he never caught on."

"And then Admiral Zellar made that surprise farewell visit. Remember?"

"Oh my God! I thought we would spend the rest of our lives in the stockade!"

"We almost did . . ."

* * *

"Commander." There was a knock at her cabin door. "Commander." It was Smil Gordon's voice.

"Yes, what is it?" she replied in the darkness.

"Sorry to wake you but the translation's done."

"I'm coming." She sat up in bed and turned on the dim reading light just above her. She glanced at the time. It had only been two hours since she had started her shift of sleep. It was just enough sleep to leave her groggy but not enough to alleviate her fatigue.

Tava quickly dressed and joined Floyd Terrel and Smil Gordon at the conference table. It was in the middle of the night and blackness still enveloped the entire valley. She rubbed her eyes and bluntly asked, "Well?"

"I think we better wait for Lia," Gordon recommended.

There was a tone of alarm in his voice and Tava recognized that something was wrong. "You woke up Lia for this?"

"I thought it was important."

"That would be MY decision."

"Tava," he continued in a soft voice, "we're all in danger here."

She quickly glanced out the viewport but saw only darkness. "What's wrong?"

"Don't worry, it's not out there. In fact, there's no one out there."

"What do you mean?"

"They're gone. The entire planet. The intelligent creatures that ran this planet. They're gone and they won't be back. And now we're in trouble, too."

Lia Thynmu joined them. "This better be good," she said irately. She rubbed her eyes and joined them at the table, seating herself next to Terrel who was unusually quiet. Apprehension and confusion covered the men's faces. Tava remained standing, arms folded.

"We're waiting, Gordy."

"I think you ought to know that the tablets were completely deciphered just after you retired. I've been spending the last two hours reading them, making notes, running some computations – essentially learning. Their language and the way it's stored in the tablets is nothing short of bizarre. The symbols may represent something as small as a word or something as large as an entire paragraph. And they don't read right to left, left to right, or up and down. Although it's difficult for us to detect, each symbol is layered within the tablet, linking it to the next symbol by . . ."

"Get to the point, Gordy!" Tava interrupted. "You said we're in danger. How?"

"I just thought you'd want to understand their language structure, that's all."

"I don't."

"All right," he replied angrily. "First, I have no idea what the beings here looked like. There are no pictures in the tablets. Secondly, these tablets range from personal diaries to planetary newspapers. And we were right. Those pink, spinning disks on the dwellings are linked to a worldwide communication network. In fact, this entire planet is linked to one large super computer. And that was a major factor in their sudden demise . . ."

"How?" Terrel suddenly asked. He had been awake for just over thirty minutes and was the only crewmember who displayed energy.

"Like all beings that develop global communication, they turned to the stars in search of intelligent life. They had the same major question that we did: Is there anyone out there? And – as amazing as this may seem – like us, they were intrigued by the use of radio waves to contact distant stars. A worldwide network of radio transmitters and receivers was developed, and they began recording the transmissions of space, searching for signs of extraterrestrial life."

"That must've been that beacon we were getting," Terrel noted.

"No, it wasn't," Gordon bluntly corrected him. "Anyway, these beings were committed to making contact with someone. Anyone. And they did."

Who or what their contacts were isn't clear. But it is clear is that the entire world then knew for certain that they were not alone in the universe. The radio transmitters were beamed directly at the source of their contact. Their receivers were aimed at the same source. They received a multitude of signals and they knew that their alien counterparts were attempting to communicate with them. The scientists studied the transmissions. The computers analyzed them. But it was undecipherable . . ."

"Why?" Tava asked.

"Because the aliens were not sending messages. They had other plans. Shortly after the first contact, everything on this planet collapsed."

"Collapsed? Could you expand on that?"

"All I know is that nothing – and I mean NOTHING worked any longer. Every computer, every piece of complicated machinery, all means of defense suddenly and mysteriously failed them. And within hours the invasion began."

"Invasion?"

"Yes, an invasion from their alien contacts. You see, the aliens were not sending messages to them. They were not interested in making contact with other star systems. They were much more advanced than that. What they were sending in those radio transmissions was the most sophisticated, complicated, brilliant computer virus ever designed."

"A damn computer virus?" Terrel interrupted with a scowl. "You've got to be kidding. How the hell could they send a computer virus over radio?"

"Why not? Isn't radio a means of communication? Aren't radio receivers linked to computers?"

"But how could they know the design of our . . . I mean this world's computers?" Tava questioned him. "It doesn't seem possible to create a generic virus that could take out a computer system on an alien world."

"You're right, it does seem impossible. But I think this information proves something. You see, the computers back on Earth, at their basic machine level, are nothing more than a series of ON and OFF switches. For this alien civilization to develop a virus that could infect other alien computer systems may mean that the principal of ON and OFF switches is standard throughout the universe. And if something is universal like that, then this virus could theoretically work on any

computer system anywhere. What they would have to do is develop a virus that searched at that machine level – at the level where the only options for computations are ON and OFF. From that point of view, it would be possible. Absolutely brilliant, mind you, but possible.

“And think of it. It’s the perfect vehicle for an invasion. If a world is advanced enough to send and receive radio transmissions to the stars, then obviously they have reached the stage of development where they have become dependant on those very same computers. The virus is transmitted by the alien world, downloaded into the receiver’s computers, and is spread around the worldwide network of computers that links the entire world. And this isn’t an active virus. This thing is so brilliantly conceived that it measures the level of sophistication of the receiver, learns the degree of interconnection with other computer systems in the world, and remains latent until it is spread across the entire globe, undetected by the civilization. Now this is beyond our comprehension, I admit, but somehow at some point the virus recognizes that it has traversed the world and it is then activated. At that point, panic ensues. Think of what would happen. There would be no way to transmit credits, no way of generating heat, electricity, or cold. The homes, the schools, the businesses, transportation, EVERYTHING is dependent on computers. And most significantly, the world’s defenses would be rendered useless. You can’t even get an X-Squad off the ground, let alone fight a war, without the guidance of a computer.

“And then somehow, possibly by the activation of the virus, the aliens know it is time to invade. They then arrive on a defenseless world and take what they want. In the case of this planet, one of the writers of a diary suggests, it might be for slaves. The entire population of this planet was taken. To where? For what purpose? No one knew. But they were overwhelmed by the strength of the enemy, and resistance proved futile. That’s what happened here.”

Smil Gordon ceased his report and Tava began to pace the room. What had happened was even more incredible than she had anticipated. An entire world was conquered because of a computer virus. And all because they searched the stars for extraterrestrial life. Whoever the invaders were, sooner or later they were bound to come across . . .

“Earth!” she suddenly cried out.

“Yes, what about Earth?” Lia asked Gordon.

Terrel quickly added, “And what about us? We were following those damn transmissions here. Are we infected?”

He nodded. “But we weren’t receiving the SAME transmissions that this

world did. Now I'll have to speculate, since there are obviously no records of what happened after the beings were taken from this planet. My guess is that once this planet was conquered, the invading aliens then sent out the beacon from this world in hopes of getting someone's attention. This planet may be on the fringe of some great interstellar empire. And this would be one way of expanding their empire. My guess is that an entire fleet may be standing by near Earth waiting for that virus to activate."

"Wait a minute," Tava interrupted. "That means that the invasion here took place about four years ago. This world's been silent for the last six months – after three and a half years of radio transmissions. And that's another thing. Why did the radio signals from here discontinue? How does that make any sense?"

Gordon shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. That is a mystery. At this point it's pure speculation. Maybe something happened to that empire. Maybe they felt this sector of the galaxy wasn't worth taking. All I know for sure is what I've told you. This planet was invaded and conquered because of a computer virus it received from interstellar radio transmissions."

Tava sighed as she leaned up against the wall. "And Earth is infected. That thing could activate at any time – meaning an alien invasion would commence. And that would mean war."

"A war we couldn't win with our defenses crippled," Lia despondently added. "We've got to warn them."

"Exactly!" Tava agreed. "Gordy, get on that radio and start transmitting everything we've learned. I want continuous transmission until we return to Earth. Lia, it's time we take off. I suggest we circle the planet at least once, scanning for any intelligent life forms and then hightailing it back to Earth. They'll need all the defense they can get."

Lia attempted to rise but Gordon grabbed her by the shoulder and brought her back down to her chair. "Wait a minute . . . Just hold on."

"What?"

"Remember, we're infected, too. If we touch that transmitter or start the ship moving again, that virus will spread through our entire computer system. This is a small ship. In no time, it'll complete the cycle and activate. It's a wonder it hasn't completed the cycle already. But once it does activate, everything shuts down – including life support. We'd be dead in no time."

"That's right," Terrel agreed. "We can't go anywhere. We'd be signing our own death warrant."

"Earth is in danger unless we contact them," Tava insisted.

"Yeah, and if we assist them we're as good as dead," Terrel argued. "Besides, anything we transmit will be infected. We'd only be making matters worse."

Tava turned to Gordon. "You're the communication expert. How do we contact Earth without killing them and us?"

"There's no way. We can't stay here forever and we have to contact them. But I did learn in the translation that the transmission of radio waves advances the virus throughout the host system."

"Meaning?"

"Even if we don't take off, just by signaling Earth, the virus will complete the cycle. Sooner or later we will be overtaken by this thing."

"So it's us or the Earth?" Lia asked in confusion.

"No. Either way, in both cases the virus will activate sooner or later."

"We might. But not Earth," Tava said with conviction. "We're not taking off. But we're going to make those transmissions to warn Earth . . ."

"But you'll be spreading the virus," Terrel argued in a raised voice.

"Earth already has the virus, Terrel," Gordon countered. "But if we can warn them, they may be able to take the necessary precautions to slow the advance of the virus and perhaps inoculate themselves against it."

Terrel angrily responded, "And what about us? What's going to happen to us?" The crew grew silent as they contemplated their inevitable fate. Smil Gordon ran his fingers through his hair in resignation. Lia Thynmu closed her eyes as if to pray. Commander Tava Dupree bit her lower lip in dismay. Terrel observed their reactions and continued, "Then there's no way out of this. We're going to die."

"I've already put together a recorded transmission for Earth," Gordon announced. He suddenly addressed Tava, ignoring Floyd Terrel's remarks. "It warns them about the virus, tells them what we've found here, relays the deciphered tablets, and finishes with our – I mean

YOUR – recommendations. You can go over it if you like.”

“All right. Let’s prepare for transmissions to Earth.”

“Then we’re not taking off?” Terrel asked, visibly fighting back anger.

“No, we’re not,” Tava replied. “We’re staying here and making those transmissions to Earth. Whether we live or die isn’t important. We’re astronauts. Every time we step into a space ship, we know that our lives weigh in the balance. That’s the risk each of us are willing to take. But back on Earth there are billions of people – hundreds of millions of innocent children – who never accepted such a risk. This is our job. We will make those transmissions to Earth in an attempt to save her. We are expendable.”

Terrel fought back his rage, his nostrils flaring, his teeth gritting together, his chin quivering in indignation. He abruptly turned away from them and stared out the viewport at the dark and silent valley below. Gordon and Lia watched him, hoping his rage did not manifest into physical violence. Lia was much too small to challenge his strength and Gordon was much too old to defeat him. Tava stood motionless holding her ground, chin raised, eyes never leaving him.

“All right,” he declared as he turned to them. He appeared determined but somewhat subdued. “Let’s save Earth. But in the meantime, I suggest Lia and I try and find this damn virus and destroy it. There’s no use in us sitting around here waiting to die. I’m not the type that goes down without a fight. I say, we begin by running tests on the damn radio receiving equipment. It’s sure to be in there somewhere.” Floyd Terrel’s passive response brought a silent sigh of relief from the other three. “And also, the least we could do is go on damn ‘Minimum Energy Consumption’. That’ll buy us some extra time.”

The ship’s rookie pilot and an asteroid counter had no hope of ever finding, let alone destroying, the brilliantly conceived virus. Gordon read in the tablets how the best minds of the alien world could not isolate it. Consequently, Lia and Terrel’s efforts would be futile.

“It’d be worth a shot,” he lied. “We might lick this thing yet.”

Tava nodded in agreement. “All right, you two get on it.”

Lia and Terrel headed to the back of the ship. Tava gave Gordon a long hard look before motioning with her head to the front of the ship.

“They won’t find the virus, will they?” Tava asked him as they entered the cockpit.

"There's always the possibility" He paused for a moment. But she read his eyes and saw the truth in them.

"Begin transmission to Earth," she ordered.

"Transmission begun and put on AUTO. We'll be transmitting from now until . . . until we're 'silenced.'"

She nodded in acknowledgement.

Pitch blackness covered the alien world before her. It was only their second night on the planet. But this one proved much more eventful than the first. Four years ago, this planet was conquered by an empire that was capable of producing computer programs more sophisticated than perhaps any in the entire galaxy. She gazed up at the dim starlit evening. The stars did not shine as brilliantly here as they did on Earth. But it didn't matter. Out there somewhere, perhaps on one of the stars she observed, were the invaders. She shuddered to think of what they were doing to the inhabitants of this world.

They were a ragtag crew at best. And here she was, Tava Dupree, on her first command assignment. She was aided by Lia Thynmu, a pilot on her first mission, Smil Gordon, the Communications Engineer no other commander wanted, and Floyd Terrel, the asteroid counter and future astrobiologist, that no one could command. Sent here by chance, by being at the right sector of the galaxy at the right time, they now held the fate of Earth in their hands.

Tava nervously smiled when she thought of this, her first and last command mission. It was true that it had been far less than the perfect performance demanded by the Space Agency. They had spent less than two days on this alien world and each member of the crew had committed some major mistake in that short time. But they had been sent out here to determine the nature of the mysterious radio transmissions, and that had been accomplished. Her Senior Officer, Smil Gordon, had proven to be an asset to her; his Translating Scanner had performed brilliantly. Lia had done everything asked of her and even Terrel had resigned himself to obeying her commands in the end.

Despite the inevitable consequences that awaited them, her crew was spending the final, fleeting hours of their lives admirably and assiduously fighting to save the lives of billions of people. Her apprehension for Earth was the overwhelming feeling at the moment, but she also could not help but derive some degree of personal satisfaction from the successes of the mission. And for reasons no other commander could ever understand, she felt the fate of Earth could not be in better hands.