

Chapter 1

“**L**ook out,” Alpha hissed. He was so excited his voice cracked beyond whisper. Motioning rudely for Mira and Aldebaran to follow him, he ducked around the gray smooth surface of the dormitory building. Peeking around the corner he saw the two gawking girls still standing. He waved his arm wildly for them to follow.

Mira seemed to understand and ran to a position just behind him. Aldebaran trailed, falling in line. Mira squeezed past Alpha to see around the corner. “Gees, the robots are coming this way already,” she whined.

Alpha snorted and stood with his small hands on his hips. “I told ya,” he said. “I knew they’d see us.”

“What’ll we do?” Aldebaran asked, her plump face displaying her oft seen pout.

Alpha leaned just far enough to pan the area in a frightened frenzy. He caught movement across the maintenance path. Something darted into the forest. “There,” he whispered, jabbing his smudged finger. “I think I saw Sirius and the others.”

Mira squinted to see under his arm. “Where? I don’t see em.”

Alpha pushed her back. “They’re not there now. I saw em run into the forest.”

“The forest?” Mira’s eye’s widened. “But it’ll be dark soon.”

“So?” Alpha wrinkled his nose. “They’d never find us in there. Are ya afraid?”

A small teardrop appeared at the corner of Mira’s eye. “I’m not,” she protested. “I’m brave as you.”

Alpha shook his head, dearly wishing he and the girls hadn’t gotten separated from Sirius and the others. Like Aldebaran and Mira, they too were only eight years old, but at least their group had some boys. How come he got stuck with two sappy girls?

“C’mon,” he said. “We’ve got to get out of here. I’m the oldest, you gotta do what I say.” He didn’t wait for the girls to argue, but backed away from the building and ran to a clump of thick vegetation next to the maintenance path. The girls hesitated briefly, then scampered after him.

Alpha found a small clearing within bushes a few meters from the path. Mira and Aldebaran crawled on hands and knees to sit next to him. He dropped to his elbows and knees and wriggled to a point where he could see the dormitory building they’d just departed. A service robot rolled on its three wheels to the corner of the building. It turned the corner, rotated its visual sensor in a wide sweep, then returned the direction from which it had come.

Alpha jeered quietly. “Ha, you missed us.”

He twitched at a sharp kick in his side.

“Look,” Mira said, punching him with her foot again.

“Ow. What is it?” He moved so he could see where she was pointing. A pair of service robots were silently rolling along, sweeping their visual sensors side to side.

“Shh,” he said, lying low. “Don’t even breathe.” The robots rolled smoothly past. Alpha was congratulating their luck when the nearest robot’s sensor pointed his way. He didn’t know whether to freeze or drop to the ground. Before he could decide, the robot rolled on in its relentless, yet disturbingly calm search.

After the robots were safely beyond, Alpha motioned for the girls to follow him again. He spurted across the path into another clump of bushes that grew at the entrance to the vast forest. The girls waited for what seemed an eternity, but eventually followed.

Alpha squeezed through scratchy limbs of closely packed junipers to get a hurried view of the compound. The number of robots roving among the buildings was increasing. A few were the more humanistic models, the mums. They strode much more smoothly on two legs than actual humans. Though distant, he could hear one of the human models calling his name. It was saying something in addition, but he couldn’t recognize the other words.

“They’re calling you,” Mira whispered.

“I know,” he said through gritted teeth. “C’mon, this way. Mira ... this way, into the forest.”

He tugged on Mira’s hand. She resisted, seemingly mesmerized by the distant melodic voice.

“C’mon,” he demanded with a jerk.

Aldebaran grabbed Mira’s other hand and tugged with Alpha. Mira finally turned away from the beckoning sounds and stumbled along after them.

Alpha threaded his way between the brush and spindlings, heading steadily for the larger trees of the deeper forest. We’ll be safe in here, he told himself. Sirius said the robots won’t go into the forest. They’re afraid.

Suddenly Alpha stopped. Is there something we should be afraid of too? he wondered.

“What’s wrong?” Aldebaran asked. She stood wide-eyed, listening with anxious twitches of her head, tossing her blonde hair to and fro.

Alpha avoided her direct gaze. He couldn’t let the girls see him, the leader, show fear. He had been leader for as long as he could remember. They all saw him that way, even Sirius and Auriga. He was older, two years more than all the others, and had to be brave.

“What are you waiting for?” Aldebaran punched him in the arm.

“Nothing,” he said quietly. “Just deciding where to go.”

Mira’s eyes teared again. “Mum will be mad.”

“Mum’s don’t get mad,” said Alpha. “They never show any emotion, you know that”.

She wiped at her wet eyes. “Maybe, but Mum will bawl me out. Won’t let me play anymore.”

Alpha snorted. “How’s she gonna find ya? She won’t come in here. Sirius says robots never come in here.”

“How’s he know?”

“He’s been in the forest before. Says he ain’t never seen a robot go beyond the nature trails. They just stand at the edge.”

Mira sniffed. “We never run away before, neither.”

Alpha looked glumly down at his feet. He didn’t have all the answers. Why did they always think he had the answers? All he knew, almost for sure, was that there had to be other people somewhere. Someone else besides just him and his friends. It was up to him and the others to find those people. The forest that surrounded their compound must have the solution. Nothing else made sense.

“C’mon,” he said again. “We’re wasting time. I’m going. Are you going ... or staying?”

Mira looked back toward the compound, her finger

twirling a lock of her crimson hair. She then looked at Aldebaran. "I guess I'm going."

Alpha warily lead the way deeper into the forest. He felt uneasy, and wondered why. It's just like our nature study walks, he told himself. Yet this was different, and more than a bit scary without the mums.

Well, I'm not exactly alone, he reminded himself. And even though they were only girls, their company helped a little.

"Ow," Mira squealed.

Alpha spun around ready to flee. Mira was seated on the ground holding her left elbow. "What is it? Did something bite you?"

"No, I fell and scraped my arm," she sniffed. "This isn't any fun. I want Mum."

Aldebaran dropped next to Mira, squatting on her knees. She examined the injury. "It's just a little scratch," she said.

Alpha pulled his handkerchief from his pocket. "Here, tie this around it. It's hardly bleeding."

"Well, it hurts, and Mum would fix it." Mira wiped away tears as Aldebaran tied the handkerchief.

"Yea, and stick you in the dormitory again," he said. "We'll never find the other people that way."

Mira stood and looked at the injured arm as she flexed it. "I don't think there are any other people. Neither does Columba."

"You're wrong, and so is Columba," Alpha said.

"You gotta be. There can't be just us, just the compound. You've seen all those lessons about cities. How come our city only has us in it?"

Mira limped a couple of steps, her eyes fixed on her covered abrasion. "Columba's never wrong. She's smart. And she says there's nobody else. Besides, my arm hurts. I

want to rest.”

Alpha slapped a rolled up fist against his thigh. Something like this always happened with the girls along. He looked around, sighting a large tree in a small clearing. He pointed at it. “We can rest over there. Even the evening mist won’t bother us under that tree.”

He lead the way, wishing he’d been with Sirius and Auriga instead of the girls. Aldebaran and Mira followed, Mira holding her barely perceptible injury. The girls sat at the trunk of the tree, snuggling together. Alpha sat near them, both relieved and troubled by the darkness that was slowly enveloping them. The robots would surely never find them in the dark, but would something else?

I wish we’d have found Sirius, he thought. He’d never spent an entire night outside the dormitory before. It was already pretty dim, and he could only see the nearest trees. He wondered how dark it would get.

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Alpha shivered in the glow of morning. There was seldom any real wind in the compound area, the forest included. But the great cottonwood leaves still provided enough rustling through the night that he got little sleep. And though the large leaves had kept the nightly mist from directly falling on them, he was damp, as was the ground around him. He shivered again, and grunted at the sight of the two girls, still huddled together and sleeping soundly.

“Wake up,” he ordered. “It’s getting light. We’ve got to get moving.”

Aldebaran sat up and rubbed her bright blue eyes, her curly hair knotted and tangled from their ordeal. “I’m hungry,” she complained.

Mira’s straight hair was lying smoothly on her still sleeping shoulders.

Alpha rubbed his cold hands together. “Wake up I said.”

Aldebaran stood and patted the dew from her smudged blue dress. “I am awake,” she protested.

Alpha pointed an accusing finger. “She’s not.”

Aldebaran gently shook Mira’s shoulder. Mira finally stirred, then sat up suddenly. She squinted at her surroundings. “I’m cold. I want Mum,” she pleaded.

“Alpha ... Mira,” a melodic voice sounded.

Alpha tensed and took a few steps toward the sound. “It’s them. Sirius was wrong, they’re coming in the forest. We gotta go.”

Aldebaran helped the sniveling Mira to her feet. “But she wants Mum, and I’m hungry.”

Alpha grabbed Aldebaran by the arm. “Let’s go. I’m hungry too. Sirius says there’s lots to eat in the forest. He’s studied about it. We just gotta find him and the others.”

Aldebaran pointed a pudgy finger at the compound. “Sirius said the mums wouldn’t come in here, neither.”

Alpha flinched angrily at the comment, and tugged persistently. The girls followed with some resistance.

Mira continued to look back in the direction of the voice, stumbling often.

“What if we don’t find Sirius?” Aldebaran asked in a mocking tone.

“Then he’ll find us. That was the plan. Now c’mon.”

The grass was heavy with moisture, and shortly Alpha’s socks and pant legs were soaked. The chill he’d felt since waking was worse. He envied the girls, who with dresses at least didn’t have wet pant legs clinging to them. He spotted a small mulberry tree that was about three times his height.

“Look. I can climb that. It’ll let me see how close the robots are. And maybe I can spot Sirius.”

Mira wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“Mum says we shouldn’t climb.”

Alpha glared at her. “Mum’s not here.” He turned and ran to the tree. Jumping several times, he failed to get a hand hold on the lowest large branch. He took a few steps back and made a running leap, finally snagging the branch and hoisting himself up.

Aldebaran stood at the base of the tree and looked at him. “What d’ya see?”

“Shh. I see two robots back at the big tree where we spent the night, two mums. Don’t see any service robots. Bet their stupid wheels won’t work in the forest.”

“Do you see Sirius, or Columba?”

“Naw. Don’t see nobody else.” Alpha grabbed a few mulberries and slid down the tree trunk. “We’d better go, they’re getting pretty close. Here’s some berries we can eat.”

“I’m not hungry now, I’m thirsty,” Mira complained.

“I’m not going to eat some old berries,” Aldebaran said.

Alpha dropped the berries, leaned over, cupped his hands around the moist grass and pulled upward. He was rewarded with a pool of water in his small palms. “Just get a drink like this,” he said, pouring the cool liquid into his dry mouth.

Mira wrinkled her face. “Ugh. It isn’t clean.”

“Is too,” Alpha fired back. “You ain’t real thirsty then.”

“I am too.” Mira pointed a rolled up tongue at Alpha, then imitated his actions and obtained a drink.

“Aldebaran ... Alpha,” the voice sounded again.

Aldebaran had just scooped up a handful of water. She shook it from her hands and ran to Alpha. “They’re so close. What’ll we do?”

Alpha eyed the looming trees and the beckoning deep forest. He wanted to retreat into their majesty, but found he was too frightened to do so. "This way," he said excitedly. "We'll double back to the maintenance path. We gotta find Sirius."

After several minutes, Alpha's meandering guided the girls back to the forest's entrance. The maintenance path was in view. The compound seemed to have largely returned to normal. There was no indication of the frantic search of the day before, but the few robots that did glide along the path were scanning in all directions.

"Stay here," he said. He crawled on all fours to some low bushes next to the maintenance path. From that vantage point, he could see most of the activity. He noticed a normal number of service robots going about their regular duty, but few of the human-like mums. I bet they're in the forest looking for us, he thought.

He started to turn back when movement a few dozen meters away caught his attention. It was two of the mums herding a number of children out from the cover of the trees.

"Oh no," he said. He could see Sirius, Auriga, Vega, ... yes and Procyon and Columba. All the others, they'd all been captured. He turned to scurry back to the girls on hands and knees and found himself face to face with Mira's sparkling green eyes.

"I told you to stay put," he rasped.

"You're not my Mum," she mocked. She crawled to the path's edge, with Aldebaran on her heels.

"Look," she said. "The others. They've gone back."

"They were captured," Alpha said, correcting the assessment.

One of the mums turned to face him, giving Alpha the strange feeling that it knew where he was hiding. "Children, you must come back to the dormitory. We have a

warm breakfast prepared. Come and eat your breakfast like good children.”

Aldebaran grabbed Alpha’s sleeve. “Does she see us?”

“Naw ... I don’t think so. I bet that darn Procyon told em we came in here.”

“I’m hungry,” Mira complained. “Mum says breakfast is ready.”

“They’re just trying to trick you,” Alpha said. “If they knew where we were, they’d come get us. Besides, I can get more berries.”

“I’m not eating those,” Mira said. “They might be poison.”

“Anyways, they caught Sirius,” Aldebaran said. “He’s the one who knows how to find food. How’ll we find food now?”

Alpha felt his ears growing warm with embarrassment and anger. “I don’t know. We’ll think of something. If you won’t eat these berries, maybe later we can steal some food from the cafeteria.”

“I’m hungry,” Mira whined again. “I’m going to Mum.” She jumped up and ran for the other children.

“No.” Alpha grabbed at the tail of her dress, but missed.

Aldebaran looked at Alpha with soft blue eyes. “Me too,” she said.

Alpha reached for Aldebaran. She slapped his hand away and ran after Mira. The mum saw the two children, and strode smoothly toward them, offering mechanical words of comfort.

Alpha slid back into the bushes. He wanted to turn and retreat into the shelter of the trees. Then he remembered the darkness of night. It was scary, even with the girls. Without them it could be even scarier.

“Alpha,” the melodic voice called. “The other children want you to join them for breakfast. Come on now, like a good boy.”

I’m not your good boy, he thought. He backed up further. He was hungry, just like the rest, and was pretty sure the berries were safe. But he hadn’t ever eaten them before. Maybe, he thought, it would be better to find something else, something he knew wasn’t poison. Then he’d find other people, and they’d help him rescue the children. He turned to scamper through the grass and bumped headlong into a pair of hard robotic legs.

* * *

Alpha’s finger followed the pendulum image swinging on the computer terminal in front of him. It was supposed to illustrate the meaning of the equations displayed at the top of the screen. For him it was just a distraction as he tried to time his finger to keep pace with the image.

A beeping sound drew his attention across the room. Sirius was intently monitoring his own teaching screen, occasionally pushing a sequence of buttons that caused the terminal to beep and change the display. As always, Sirius was only a few lessons behind, despite his younger age. Alpha was jolted from his musing by the threat of Sirius’ competition. He sat up straight, studied the equations, and typed in the answer the computer sought. For a time, he kept pace with the computer’s monotonous tutorial.

After a while he was again distracted. His wandering attention brought his eyes to the west window where he had a beckoning view of the forest. He saw two mums escorting a couple of children on their daily nature tour. He rose from his seat and strode to the window, leaning his elbows on the sill.

His mind filtered out the low sound effects emanating from Sirius' terminal and the frequent pecking noises as Sirius continued to interact with the keyboard. He squinted to identify the children on the nature study. The red hair identified one undoubtedly as Mira, though the fact that she skipped hand-in-hand along side one of the mums would have made the identification anyway.

The other was either Columba or Aldebaran, but from this distance he couldn't tell. He realized that it was partially his fault that now only two children were taken on nature studies at a time, and always accompanied by two mums. Other than the extra nature study precaution, things were pretty much back to normal. With their infinite patience, the mums took no revenge and imposed no punishment. They simply adjusted their procedures, making any such future escape more difficult. The trouble, Alpha mused, is that mums never forget anything. That made it impossible to tell how long the precautions would remain in force.

He was so engrossed with watching the children vanish into the greenery that he didn't hear the classroom door open. The class mum was beside him before he realized it. He jerked around, abashed to be discovered away from his terminal.

It was difficult looking into the mum's artificial looking eyes. While the dormitory mums were all feminine in appearance, the class mums were designed to appear masculine. To Alpha, they all shared the same face, with only clothes and minor body differences providing the distinction. Staring into the simulated faces always bothered him. It was as if they somehow knew his thoughts.

"Did you find your lessons too difficult today?" the mum asked. The voice was identifiably different from the dormitory mums only in its deeper pitch.

"Naw. I was just thinking about the nature study."

How do you tell a mum you are bored? Surely it wouldn't understand. But that was his mood. He'd been much moodier than before the failed escape. There was no way to relate how he felt. The mums never had moods. Never.

The android face smiled back at him with automated friendliness. "You and Sirius have nature study after lunch. Would you like us to reschedule your nature study for an earlier time tomorrow?"

Always so darned accommodating, Alpha thought. And always referring to itself as us, or we. Besides, it wasn't the time of the nature study that bothered him. It was the whole point of studying. He didn't understand it. Everything was taken care of by the robots. The dormitory mums saw to all their needs, and the service robots took care of the compound. He understood that the class mums were to provide training for the children. But he just didn't understand why. Why?

"Alpha, do you understand the question?"

Alpha scowled at the plastic smile. "Yeah, I understand. I don't care what time nature study is. It isn't the courses that bother me exactly. It's ... everything."

The smiling face froze for an instant. Alpha knew the computerized brain was scanning memory, trying to figure out a response. His lessons had taught him a lot about computers, and he'd figured out that the robots responded just like his learning terminal, except with an artificial smiling face.

"We do not understand your inquiry," the class mum finally said.

Alpha swept his hand in a wide arc. "I don't understand this, the whole classroom. What's the point? Why do we have to come here and study? Why can't we just play?"

He noticed that Sirius stopped working at his terminal and sat wide-eyed with mouth open, seemingly shocked

at the frank complaints to the class mum.

The smiling face froze another moment, then the smile broadened. “You are older than the others,” the soothing voice said. “We expected a difficult attitude to become manifest. But we do not believe it is time.”

Alpha cocked his head, wondering what the robot meant. “Time? For what?”

“You are ten years old. We thought you would adjust to the age of the others. Perhaps not. But it is not yet time, not until you are twelve.”

Alpha looked to Sirius for support, but was greeted with indifference. He looked again at the stiff, mannequin face. He didn’t know what the robot was referring to, but there was clearly more to know. Something important was being kept from him and the rest. Something other than technical training. Something he suddenly had a burning desire to know.

* * *

Alpha drummed his fingers in boredom as Mira peered through the microscope and exclaimed what she saw. She seemed almost excited about the biology studies, and was particularly interested in skeletal formation. What used to bother Alpha was that she was so darned good at it. Even better than he was. Lately, he really didn’t care.

He felt that the last two years had treated him badly. He used to be bigger than the other children, as well as smarter. Now, only the stocky Auriga and slightly built Vega were significantly smaller than he was. Even the girls were nearly his size. Aldebaran was actually taller. And Procyon was taller yet, though quite thin. Alpha could still best him in their wrestling play, but not easily.

The class mum, standing ever nearby, was smiling as always. Alpha considered pressing it for information again,

as he had done more often lately. Yet his persistence since that revealing day two years ago had revealed nothing additional. He'd never figured out how to weasel information from the mums. He could never pull something on one that the others didn't know about, or trick them into revealing something. He couldn't cleverly get a nibble of information from one, and another tidbit from another. To a degree, a very small degree, each mum had its own personality. But they all shared the same information. Whatever one knew, they all knew.

It puzzled Alpha. He'd studied enough about electronics to understand that the robots were probably in constant contact through electronic means. Perhaps they were all tied to a massive, common database. It frustrated him that he and the other children couldn't perform any such similar feat. In fact, he never really understood what the other children were thinking. He'd discovered that what humans said didn't necessarily even reveal what they were thinking.

The endless amount of information the mums possessed was also fascinating. The lessons continued, day after day, year after year. It would seem that eventually the children would know all there was to know, but the next day there would be more. And the mums seemed to know it all.

Though the mums had the knowledge, it was generally presented to the children by the instruction terminals. On certain days, like lab days, the mums handled instruction directly. Lab days were usually more fun than regular classes, but even on this lab day, Alpha was bored.

When he was younger, he held the class mums in very high regard for their boundless knowledge. But he'd noticed things special about himself and the other children. They had something inside them besides knowledge. There were feelings, humor ... and trickery. They, especially Mira and

Vega, often liked to say one thing while meaning another. Zinging, they called it. If they got you to believe something ridiculous, they'd never let you forget it.

After being repeatedly victimized by it, Alpha finally caught on. He was much harder to fool now, and even pulled the gag on occasion. But the robots seemed to be fooled by the procedure every time. He used to think it was their general attitude of docile accommodation, but now he was sure that for some reason they simply couldn't understand when they were being teased.

That presented the puzzle that baffled Alpha. How could the mums be so supremely smart, yet so easily fooled? It all continued to build in his mind. The mum's seemingly unlimited knowledge, yet their lack of any type of deviousness or humor. And most of all, the fact that only the stupid service robots, the mums, and the small family of children seemed to exist in the compound. Didn't there have to be other people, somewhere?

"It's your turn," Mira smugly announced. Alpha rolled his eyes and took his place beside the microscope. He noticed that the class mum wasn't looking in his direction. He removed the eyepiece and slipped it into his pocket.

"I can't see anything," he complained.

"Just look carefully into the eyepiece," the class mum said. "The prepared pollen slide will be plainly visible."

Alpha pretended to play along. This zing should be a good one. He looked down the microscope shaft again. "Still can't see a thing."

Mira pushed him aside. "Just look in here, dummy." In seconds she realized what he'd done and grinned. "The eyepiece is gone," she said with mock surprise.

The class mum fluidly walked to the microscope. "It should be in place. Mira just finished using the apparatus."

Alpha backed away and slipped the eyepiece onto a

shelf behind some video modules.

“Mira,” the mum said with an unruffled smile, “Do you have the eyepiece?”

“Not me,” she said with a giggle.

The mum’s empty expression focused on Alpha. He resisted his usual impulse to avoid eye contact with the unblinking mask. “Don’t look at me,” he said, “I don’t have it either.”

The mum’s electronic brain switched into a stoic search algorithm. “Then the eyepiece must have fallen onto the table.”

Alpha pretended to help, and gave Mira a stern look as she failed to suppress a giggle. “I don’t see it,” he said.

The mum rose and looked blankly at Alpha, electronically scanning data banks for a reasonable response. “If the eyepiece is not on the table, it must have fallen on the floor and possibly rolled to another location.” The mum assumed the amusing position of crawling on hands and knees, in which it even less resembled a human. It methodically examined the floor for the eyepiece.

Alpha motioned for Mira to join the search. Poorly containing a titter, she bent over beside the mum and pretended to help. Alpha retrieved the eyepiece from its hiding place and slowly maneuvered to a position next to the microscope. He slipped the eyepiece back into its proper position.

“Are you sure it isn’t on the table?” Alpha asked.

The mum answered without looking up. “That is not possible. We thoroughly examined the table.”

Alpha chortled, forcing a snigger into submission. The mums were always so thorough. They’d never look the same place twice, the way the children would. He watched as the robot followed its probabilistic methodology and gradually searched further and further from the microscope

location.

When the mum was near the door, Alpha announced: “That’s odd, here’s the eyepiece, right where it’s supposed to be.”

The mum rose smoothly, strode to the microscope, and verified the announcement. It looked at Alpha without a hint of aggravation, hesitated in frozen thought, then replied: “Is this what you children refer to as a zing?”

Mira burst into cackling laughter. Alpha smiled, but found it hard to laugh with the mum staring directly at him. “Yeah,” he finally admitted, “I zinged ya. I hid the eyepiece.”

“Then you lied about having it in your possession?”

Alpha knew that question would come up. They’d been taught by the mums that lying was a moral failure. “Nope, I didn’t lie to you, I zinged ya. I’d put the eyepiece on the shelf by the time you asked if I had it. When you asked, I didn’t have it.”

The mum gestured without a change of expression toward the microscope. “Please examine the prepared slide so we may complete the lesson.”

“That’s it?” Alpha snapped. “Just look at the slide?”

“That is the objective of the lesson.”

Alpha shook his head, disappointed at the anti-climax of his prank. “I want to know the answer to something.”

“Would you like to pursue a different lesson at this time?” the mum politely asked.

“Yes. I want you to tell me why we children understand zings and you don’t. We can tell jokes, get our feelings hurt, get mad but you mums don’t.”

The robot hesitated. “We have been instructed in a variety of scientific disciplines, and given the capacity to impart that knowledge to you children. We have not been

instructed in the procedure of recognizing zings, or the other emotional reactions you mention.”

“Who instructed you? Other humans? Other robots?”

The mum turned and looked pleasantly at Mira, then back at Alpha. It then stood completely motionless for a few seconds. “You have been asking many such questions. We believe you have reached stage three. You will accompany us, and Mira will remain here to finish the lesson.”

“Stage three? What’s that? And why can’t Mira come?”

“Accompany us and we will explain.” The robot nodded politely to Mira and led Alpha out of the room. He felt compelled to follow, yet apprehensive of what lay ahead.

The robot walked swiftly down the wide hallway. Alpha had to take uncomfortably long strides to keep up. They passed all the normal classrooms without slowing down. The robot moved so quickly through the automatic stairway doors that they were barely open when it glided through. Alpha scurried behind. It looked like the robot was going to the fourth floor, a place always presented as only containing maintenance equipment, and of no interest to the children. Alpha nervously followed as the robot scaled one of the few stairwells in the compound.

The fourth and top floor wasn’t even a full floor, surely containing no more than a few rooms. Alpha was suddenly curious why he’d never wondered what it did contain. It occurred to him that there were a number of other places in the compound he knew nothing about. He vowed to find out what they all held.

The robot paused beside the closed door at the top of the stairs. It reached forth with delicate fingers and tapped a short sequence of numbers on a wall-mounted key pad. While the door was silently opening, the robot moved

through. Alpha approached the portal with hesitation. The mum stopped a few meters within the room and waited, smiling, for Alpha to follow.

Alpha's legs moved stiffly. Why was he afraid? Had a robot ever hurt one of the children? Not since he could remember, though a nagging memory of his early childhood provided just enough doubt. Shortly he was inside the room with the robot. The door swished shut, startling him.

He nervously examined his surroundings. The room was small, containing a single chair placed before a common looking computer terminal. The room had clearly been regularly maintained, yet never visited by other than robots. He was relieved that though the interior of the room was plain, nothing ominous was apparent.

The mum motioned toward the console. "Please be seated. The information you seek will be presented."

"Huh?"

"You asked how we came to have our instructions. This lesson will provide the requested information."

"What then? Will I be allowed to leave?"

The robot repeated the gesture toward the console. "You must be discreet with the information. When finished, you will be allowed to resume normal training."

"Discreet? You mean I can't tell the others?"

"They are not yet at stage three. We hoped you would be content until the others also reached the stage. Now, alone at your age, you must be discreet until the other children reach stage three."

Alpha edged toward the beckoning terminal.

"Please be seated," the mum said again. "We believe your questions will be answered by the lesson. We will wait in silence until you finish."

Alpha started to ask another question, but saw the mum shift to dormant mode. He would get no response until

he had completed the lesson. He anxiously chewed his lip, took a deep breath, and seated himself in front of the beckoning terminal.

Chapter 2

“**D**amn you,” Vega shrieked. She slapped Alpha hard on the face. “You could tell me, but you just won’t.”

Alpha rubbed the smarting cheek, though his feelings were hurting even worse. “I told you ... it’s what the mums said. You have to be at least twelve before I can tell ya. They didn’t want to tell me either, at least not me alone.”

“Oh, you. Always bragging about your age. It’s not our fault we’re younger. We’re as smart as you. Sirius is even smarter.”

Alpha’s ears burned at the stinging remarks. She was right ... partly. He had flaunted his age on many occasions, though mostly when younger and the difference more significant. But this time it wasn’t his doing. It was the robots. What would they do if he violated their instructions? Would it matter at all? The lesson warned of such frightening things: psychological damage, anxiety, trauma...

“Well, mister smarty pants,” Vega said, “I know something too. And I’m not going to tell you.”

“I don’t want to know,” Alpha said, holding back his anger. He wished he’d never pushed the mums so hard. Now he knew what he’d always wondered about. But much of it was just confusing and frightening. And the cost, to be hated by the other children. Vega’s comments weren’t new. Other children had made the same accusations.

He looked pleadingly at Mira who stood watching the altercation with her usual quietness. Through his blurred vision, he thought he saw the slightest sympathy in her sparkling green eyes. She used to be his best friend. Perhaps she still was.

Mira put her hand on the shorter Vega’s shaking shoulder. “I think you should tell him,” she said.

“But he won’t tell me anything.”

“He will when he can. This is different. Alpha should know.”

Alpha rubbed eyes moist of hurt and anger. “I should know what?” he sniffed.

Mira nudged Vega. “Go on.”

Vega glared back. “Oh, all right. It’s Procyon. He’s run away. Said the mums can’t tell him what to do anymore. Me and Sirius kept the class mum busy so it didn’t notice Procyon had left.”

Alpha felt envy of Procyon. Running away is exactly what he felt like doing. “Is he in the forest again? Does he still think he’ll find other people?”

Vega smiled, a sinister smirk that flaunted the fact that she knew, and Alpha did not. “Nooo,” she drawled. “He’s not in the forest. But I know where he’s going. He told me before he left.”

Mira gave Vega’s shoulder another firm shove. Vega shot an agitated glance over her shoulder, then frowned at Alpha. “He’s going to the South Wall. Says he’s gonna break into the chambers.”

Alpha blinked at the information. Only a short week ago he'd have been easily talked into accompanying Procyon on such an excursion. But now he knew what a dangerous adventure it could be. Procyon must be stopped.

"Which chambers?" he shouted. "Did he tell you?"

Vega backed away, fear showing in her eyes. "No. He just said something about a red entrance. It's not my fault."

Alpha squinted in thought. There was more than one red access door at the South Wall. There were at least three. And it figured that Procyon would choose a chamber protected by a red entrance, the most forbidden of the off limit areas.

Alpha began moving toward the dormitory for some gear. He'd need water for the long hike, and maybe a light. He turned back to the girls.

"Mira ... I can't explain exactly why, but it's very important that Procyon doesn't enter the chambers at the South Wall. Will you help me find him?"

Mira looked at the pouting Vega, then reached out her hand. "I'll go with you."

* * *

"I'm tired," Mira said. "Can't we rest?"

Alpha slowed to a fast walk, but kept moving. "Better not. Procyon is over an hour ahead of us. He could've gotten through one of the doors by now."

"Procyon won't be able to get in, they're all locked."

"Maybe. But Procyon's pretty good at figuring things out. I wouldn't bet that those doors will stay locked."

Alpha ran up a small knoll to get a view of their destination. The South Wall was only about three kilometers from the compound, but the terrain was very rough, more so than the forest near the compound. He hoped he and Mira

could reach it and find Procyon before the robots figured out they'd been fooled.

From the top of the knoll he could clearly see the deep blue of the South Wall, now less than a kilometer away. The boundary between the terrain and the South Wall curved slowly up on both sides into the sky. For the first time, as Alpha followed the graceful curves, he began to understand the enigma of the wall. Much of his special lesson involved things he only partially understood. But the shape of the South Wall and the valley they lived in was beginning to make sense.

"What'd you see?" Mira called. She was sitting in the tall grass and rubbing her feet.

"We don't have far to go. It won't take long."

"Do you see Procyon?"

Alpha squinted to make out details, but the distance was too great. "No, I can't see him. But I know where the nearest red door is, so we better hurry."

He ran down the knoll with renewed energy, grabbing Mira's hand and pulling her to her feet.

"Can't you tell me why its so important that we find him?"

Alpha wanted to tell Mira, about the chambers, about the South Wall, about everything. Would he be committing some terrible wrong if he did?

"I've gotta ask the mums," he finally answered. "I'll try to talk them into it, okay?"

"Okay." Mira held Alpha's hand as they walked nearly faster than she could go.

* * *

Alpha could see a door ajar even from their distance. "See," he said, pointing. "He's already broken in."

Alpha released Mira's hand and ran to the violated entry. He examined the latch. Procyon had used something very thin to defeat it. The door didn't look so sturdy, now that it hung open. Clearly the designers didn't anticipate anyone violating the lock.

Mira was out of breath when she caught up to Alpha. "What are you going to do?"

"I've gotta find him." Alpha opened the door slightly wider and eased into the dimly lit interior. It appeared clean, obviously maintained by service robots. A crisp smell was faintly detectable.

"Ozone," Mira blurted. "I smelled it in lab class once."

"Do you hear a noise?"

"Kinda. Sort of a ... low rumble."

"That's what I hear too. Wonder what it is?" Alpha slipped further into the entrance.

Mira waited at the door. Alpha waved for her to follow, but she stood fast.

"C'mon," he whispered.

Mira stood firm, shaking her head no.

Alpha could see the fear in her eyes, could feel it in his trembling hands. Okay, he thought, I've gotta go.

He motioned for her to stay, then moved through another doorway at the back of the small chamber. Past it a hallway spread out to the left and right as far as he could see. The hallway was roughly the width of Alpha's dormitory room. It disappeared in an upward curving arc. It was dim, but a strip on either wall above Alpha's reach provided a soft glow.

He touched one of the smooth, cool walls. It gave off a vibration, perhaps matching the rumble he more felt than heard. Looking up he could not see a ceiling, the distance simply evaporated into darkness. No features were visible on

the walls, save for the strips of soft light.

He studied each direction, and decided for no specific reason to turn to his left. After perhaps ten minutes, the doorway he'd used was out of sight on the upward curving horizon that loomed behind him. He paused for a few seconds, looking back the way he'd come. Unlike the numerous recognizable landmarks available to one wandering outside, the corridors were mundane. He was hesitant to proceed beyond the view of his only reference point.

What if I choose the wrong way, he thought, or the wrong entrance? He stood still, a pensive look on his face, as he reran the recent explanations through his mind. If he understood the information correctly, it seemed that a continued journey would end precisely where he'd started. But if everything in the chamber looked pretty much alike, how would he know if he'd passed his starting point? He thought for a few seconds, then lifted his cap off his head and dropped it on the floor.

"There," he said. The quandary solved, he renewed his search.

After proceeding for another ten minutes, he was surprised to see an entrance opening to his right, a direction that would take him deeper into the South Wall. He'd expected to come upon an exit entrance to his left, like the one he used to enter the endless hallway. Instead, he found himself before an unlocked sliding door. He approached and it dutifully slid open. Looking within he saw a small room, roughly two meters square. He stepped in and the door slid closed behind him.

Before he could try re-opening it, he felt a sensation of motion. Elevator, he thought. He'd felt the sensation before in the compound buildings. But this time it was more pronounced, like the elevator had started quickly to move up. Shortly, it seemed that it was slowing down, and he

began to feel lighter. The longer he stood, the lighter he felt. He also found himself forced to lean to his left, as if the room was tilted.

“Mira,” he said, knowing that she couldn’t possibly hear. “I’m scared.”

Alpha swallowed hard to hold his queasy stomach in check. He wanted the disturbing feelings to stop. If this was an elevator, it wasn’t like one he’d ever been on before. And it was taking a long time.

He began to feel as if the floor barely held him down. Though the room itself was small, the walls extended upward perhaps three meters. He flexed his knees and eyed the ceiling.

He hopped into the air, reaching upward. His intuition was rewarded as he reached over half way to the ceiling, and he’d barely hopped. To his surprise he didn’t come straight down, but landed against one wall of the room. He’d meant to hop straight up, but it certainly didn’t turn out that way.

Alpha scratched his head, and walked to the opposite side of the room. He jumped again, with more force. This time he would have banged his head on the ceiling had he not cushioned himself with his hands. Again, when he landed, he was across the room against the opposite wall. What was this room that he could easily jump three meters into the air?

In spite of his apprehension, he was beginning to enjoy the experience. “Mira should have come,” he said. “It’s like a magical room. She would have loved this.”

As the seconds passed, he felt even lighter. When will this stop? he wondered. Would he end up floating from the floor? Would he end up standing on the ceiling? What was the room doing to him?

After a few minutes the room stopped moving so

abruptly that it nearly tossed him into the air. He wobbled on uncertain legs, and jerked as he heard the door slide open again. Standing motionless, he gaped at the exit with indecision.

I've come this far, he thought. He cautiously stepped through the opening.

Alpha turned quickly around when he heard the door slide shut behind him. He looked apprehensively at his surroundings.

"What is this?" It couldn't be the hallway he'd just left, it was different. The floor curved upward at a much greater pitch. Was his entire world suddenly smaller?

No, the width of the hallway was the same. Yet along its length ...

"This can't be the same hallway. How is it so different?"

Alpha started along the direction from which he'd encountered the strange room. If I find Mira waiting at an entrance, I'll be totally confused.

Wait a minute, he thought. I can't afford to get lost now. He returned to the entrance of the elevator, pulled a wrapped candy from his pocket, and dropped it on the floor.

He began his journey again, feeling as light as a sparrow. So light, in fact, that walking was difficult. A loping hop worked better. Barely out of sight of the small room's entrance, he came upon a red, forbidden door on his right.

It was locked, so he continued his exploration. He soon passed two more of the sliding doors on his left. Each of them opened to a small room like the one in which he'd felt so strange. He also passed two more closed red doors on his right.

As he came to a third door on the hall's left side, he found the candy he'd dropped, lying as he had left it. A complete circuit in only a few minutes. He'd never before

proven to himself what the lesson presented. Such a hike through the forest would have taken hours. But this seemed to confirm what he'd been told. He smiled at the revelation.

Then troubling thoughts returned. Exactly where was he? How was this place so different from the compound?

Since the journey was so short, he decided to retrace his steps. This time, he yanked on each door as he came to it.

On the second try, he was surprised as the door gave way. He examined it, and found it had been tampered with.

Procyon, he thought. He smiled at the deft way the lock had been evaded. Cautiously pulling the door open, he peered in.

“Mira,” Alpha whispered to himself, “you should see this.”

The scene before him looked like something from one of the fantasy entertainment discs. Tubes, a few centimeters in diameter, sprung from the floor in a virtual forest. Their construction looked like some sort of plastic, and they were alternately colored bright red, blue, yellow, and white. At first the color distribution seemed totally random, but then he noticed a repetitive pattern. There was space for someone his size to squeeze between the colored spires, but with little extra room. The tubes extended vertically with their diameters shrinking to nearly nothing. A gray cylinder, seemingly suspended along the length of the chamber as far as he could see, appeared to be the termination point.

He moved nervously into the opening and approached the nearest of the tubes, tapping the side of a blue one. It resounded with a ping, not reminiscent of plastic it visually resembled. It was obviously more sturdy than his first impression.

He grabbed hold of the tube and found it cool to the touch. He scratched his head, and peered along the jumbled

arrangement. There appeared to be no end to them. As the chamber stretched on, it merged into a mass of the tubes.

“Procyon,” he shouted. “Procyon, are you here?”

Procyon must be terrified, he thought. Where could he be? Alpha took a few steps toward the maze. No, he decided, surely Procyon wouldn’t go far into the disorienting jumble of pipes.

Alpha re-examined the doorway and the wall it transgressed. He turned and wriggled between tubes a short way. Hopefully Procyon would be too afraid to move out of sight of the entrance wall.

“Procyon? It’s me ... Alpha. I’ve come to help you ... I think I know what this place is.”

Alpha explored further, frequently calling Procyon’s name. He kept the wall in sight, no more than two meters away. He stopped suddenly at a brief sound. What was that? Had he heard something? There it was again. A whimper. Procyon?

Alpha turned his head to determine the direction of the sound. Behind him ... no ... to his left. He peered between the looming pipes.

He took a couple of steps further into the tubular forest. A whimper, he heard it once more. Two more steps. There it was again. To the right.

He caught a glimpse of green fabric between a bundle of colored tubes. He proceeded slowly. Don’t lose him now.

He moved where he could see Procyon’s seated and slumped form, his teary face bowed and trembling.

“Procyon,” he said softly.

Procyon jerked his head upright and jumped to his feet.

“No,” Alpha pleaded. “Don’t run. I’ve come to help, to take you home. I can tell you about this mysterious place, it isn’t that frightening.”

“Alpha, I’m scared. I wanted to find more people, someone to help.”

“I know,” Alpha said, “and you didn’t find anyone.”

“No, I didn’t. B-but I got lost in here. I don’t understand this place.”

Alpha stood beside Procyon and put a comforting arm around his shaking shoulders. “This place won’t hurt you. You could say we’re inside of a great cloud.”

“Huh?” Procyon rubbed tears away from reddened eyes. “This doesn’t look like a cloud.”

“Not the clouds we’ve studied about. But it is right for our clouds.” He hugged Procyon’s shoulders tightly. The mums would simply have to deal with him for what he was going to do. Procyon had a right to know, whatever his age. They all had a right to know.

“Our clouds?” Procyon sniffed.

“Yes. Our clouds are special. I think our rain, our nightly mist, is manufactured right here. These tubes, where they enter the floor, pump the mist into our air, where it falls to the valley floor.”

“Huh?”

“We’re in a ship. A great spaceship built by other people. A ship named Destiny. Shaped like ... like this.” Alpha held up his flashlight.

* * *

Alpha watched with detached interest as a meadowlark flew by. “I wonder,” he thought aloud, “if the birds can fly high enough to feel the difference in our artificial gravity?”

Mira sat close to him on the grass, her hand holding his. “Tell me again about the ship,” she coaxed. “You went so fast with the others, I’m not sure I understand. Tell me again.”

Alpha squeezed her hand. “The compound ... the valley ... it’s all on the inside of a great space ship, named Destiny by its builders.”

“But it’s so big. How could anyone build such a ship? And ... who built it?”

“Very big ... yes. A gigantic cylinder, large enough to hold a large city and a wilderness. And it was built by people like us, long ago.”

“What people? Why did they build it?”

Alpha tried to face her, but found it difficult to brave the questioning zeal in her eyes. He turned his attention back toward the sky. “People from our home planet, Earth.”

“Where are they? Why can’t we find any more people?”

“They’re still on Earth, and its a long, long way from here. Some of the information I learned is confusing, but I’m beginning to understand. And I told the mums I would answer any questions you and the others had. I insisted you had a right to know. They never agreed with me. But they haven’t tried to stop me.”

“You mean we’re on the ship alone? Just you and me ... and the other children?”

He squeezed Mira’s hand tighter. “For now, yes ... just us ... and the robots.”

Mira pulled her hand away. “What do you mean, For now?”

Alpha took a breath and finally faced Mira’s inquisitive stare. He knew she must be feeling the fear he first felt. She would have to face that fear, as would he.

“We were sent on a long voyage, one that started nearly three centuries ago. We, along with thousands of others, were frozen as zygotes. There’s also frozen cells of many varieties of animals and plants.”

“Zygotes?”

“It was the only way we could make the long journey without aging. About twenty years ago the cells of some of the plants and animals were unfrozen and allowed to grow so it would be ready for us. That’s how the forest, animals and birds began. It makes a complete balanced ecology within the Destiny. I was activated next. You and the others followed two years later.”

“Why were you activated before the rest of us?”

Alpha shrugged. How many times have I wondered that, he thought. The instruction terminal provided no information to explain why he, and only he, was older than the others.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s part of some plan, but I can’t imagine what.”

“Why did they do it, the other humans? Why did they send us away?”

“There’s a planet ... near the star Tau Ceti. That’s where we’re headed. It’s about a dozen light years from Earth.”

“Only a dozen? That doesn’t seem so far.”

Alpha picked up a stick and scrawled a diagram on the ground. “We can’t travel at the speed of light, you should remember that from our lessons. We’re traveling a good percentage of it though. But the journey wasn’t straight from Earth to Tau Ceti.”

“We started here,” he said, pointing to one of three holes he had poked into the dirt. “First the Destiny went to Epsilon Eridani, and now is heading for Tau Ceti.”

“If they wanted us to get to Tau Ceti, why do it in such a stupid manner?” She wrinkled her face.

“Those two stars are both near Earth, astronomically speaking. I guess since the ship was expensive, they wanted to explore as much as possible.”

“Then what’s so special about Tau Ceti? Why acti-

vate us now?"

"It's the only star close to Earth that is known to have a likely planet for humans to live. There are some planets around Epsilon Eridani, but all known ones are too far from the star."

"And Tau Ceti?"

"There's a planet there; Earth sized, or nearly so. And it's close enough to Tau Ceti to be Earth-like. They named it Eden. They, the people on Earth, hope we can live on Eden."

Mira's bright green eyes sparkled. "Can we? Can we live on Eden?"

"I don't know. According to the lessons, everything measurable from Earth says so. We won't know till we get there."

Mira stood and smoothed wrinkles from her pleated skirt. The action seemed normal enough, but Alpha detected the slightest tremble in her small hands.

"It seems weird to me," she said. "Why send us. They'll never know what happened. If three hundred years have passed, the people who built this ship are all probably dead."

Alpha reached for Mira's hand. She responded by clasping his. "The ones who sent us, the ones who built this great ship, probably are dead. But others are still monitoring our progress."

"What? How?"

"There's a data link. It's been sending information to Earth all this time. And it's been receiving information from Earth as well."

"Why didn't we know? Why haven't the mums told us?"

"It's not their fault. They've done what they were programmed to do. They were supposed to raise us and

teach us the specialties we'd need to survive. That's why we've learned so much about science. We were supposed to be taught about Earth when we reached our teens. Actually, we're getting an early start."

"What's supposed to happen to us?"

"We'll reach Eden in about eight years. We'll be more knowledgeable then, well trained in several needed subjects. We're supposed to try to live on the planet. It'll be our home, our children's home. It'll be a new Earth."

Mira's trembling fingers gently touched Alpha's arm. "Can't we just turn around and go back to Earth? I'm not sure I want to live on a strange planet."

Alpha smiled. "To us, Earth is a strange planet. Besides, it's too far away. We'd all be dead, or very old before the Destiny reached Earth. I don't even know if there's enough fuel. None of us know how to pilot it. We ..."

"All right, all right. I just asked." Tears welled up in Mira's eyes. "I'm scared. I don't want to go to Eden. I want to stay here. This is our home."

She understands now, Alpha thought. And the finality frightens her, as it does me. He tried to put an arm around her. She recoiled from him.

"Maybe we can stay here in the Destiny ... if you want," he said. "The Destiny will go into orbit around Eden. Maybe we'll have our choice."

Mira sat cross-legged on the grass and smoothed her dress. She was silent for several seconds.

"You said you were activated before the rest of us. Do you know why? Do you remember what happened before we were activated?"

"No, not really. I only remember living in the dormitory with the rest of you. I remember you as toddlers, but I wasn't much older."

Mira bounced to her feet and grabbed Alpha's hand.

“I bet we can find out. Let’s try. I want to know why you’re older than the rest of us.”

* * *

“What are you doing?” Mira asked. She stood tiptoe to see over Alpha’s shoulder.

Alpha entered commands into the terminal’s keyboard. A multicolored map appeared on the screen.

“There,” he pointed. “That’s a map of the compound. We’re in that building, there. That’s our dormitory, where we’ve always lived. You can see that the compound is pretty big, spanning a circle maybe a kilometer across.”

Mira touched her finger to the screen. “We only use these buildings. What’s in all the others?”

“I don’t know,” Alpha answered. “We live and are taught in about a fourth of them. Sirius has studied this more than I have. He says the ones over there are similar to ours, but the ones on the opposite side of the compound are different. All are currently locked up.”

“Could the similar ones be another dormitory? Maybe more children are to be activated. Maybe some already have been.”

“Maybe. There may even be another compound, or several. We’ve never explored the entire ship, only the area around our compound, and the South Wall area. What we can see across our cylindrical world shows only more forest. But there’s a lot of unexplored territory between here and the North Wall.”

“That’s right. How big is the ship, anyway?”

Alpha zoomed the map larger. “The lessons said it’s ten kilometers long, and a little over three kilometers in diameter. There’s a hundred square kilometers of living space. The compound takes up only about three-quarters

of a square kilometer, less than one percent of what's available."

"You mean we could build a compound a hundred times bigger than this one? Then we could live here forever."

Alpha took his eyes from the terminal to look at Mira. "I don't think we could have a city quite that big. We'd probably have to leave much of it in forest, you know, to keep a balanced ecology. But the compound could maybe be ten to twenty times bigger."

Mira leaned over and hugged Alpha. "But we could stay here. We could build a city."

"Possibly. We need to know more about the ship and how long it can last. I want to learn how to instruct the robots to add more buildings. I was going to see if we could have them build us small homes, so we could move from the dormitory. If things on Eden don't go well, maybe that experience will help us make more structures."

"Oh, can you? That would be wonderful."

"Well, not yet. I can't get access to system levels that would allow robot control. The instructional terminals seem to allow very limited access. But I'm sure the robots could do the construction. Sirius is looking into it now. He's, well, better at computers than I am."

Alpha zoomed the map so large that only a small portion of it filled the terminal screen. He touched keys to scroll the viewing window to the portion of map displaying the buildings similar to their own.

"If another dormitory is in the compound, I think it must be in one of these three structures. They're most like our home."

"Couldn't you just ask the computer for a map of the entire ship?" Mira asked. "Then we'd know if ours was the only compound."

“I’ve tried. The only detailed map it’ll show me is of our area. I guess they figure we don’t need to know much more. The lessons indicate that other knowledge will be made available to us later. From here all I’ve ever seen is forest in all directions, even in our sky, the other side of the ship. Eventually, we’re to be given control of the entire vessel.”

“Why not now?” Mira scowled with indignation.

“We’re not children anymore.”

“No, ... but I think there’s a lot more to learn.”

Mira touched the screen again. “Let’s go see if one of these buildings is a dormitory.”

* * *

Alpha walked somberly beside Mira, his troubled mind wondering if this venture was a good idea. He studied each new structure they passed. He’d never realized how confining their childhood had been. It had seemed so natural. The mums took good care of them, and they generally obeyed the mums without question. He didn’t believe the mums were purposely trying to keep information from them, it’s just that their education was already scripted.

Now that the children had been told about the ship and the voyage, they were demanding more freedom. So far the mums had not interfered with those desires. Alpha wondered if the mums were purposely allowing the new freedom or just acting from lack of concise instruction. Either way, the children were free to go anywhere in the compound, save for the forbidden maintenance and control areas. Since Procyon’s adventure, they had been cautioned repeatedly about respecting the red entrance warnings and not venturing too far into the wilderness.

“C’mon,” Mira said impatiently. She skipped ahead as if on a lark. “Here’s one of the places you mentioned.

Let's look in here."

Alpha heard Mira, but remained preoccupied with the other structures in the vicinity. Could this area have been meant for raising other children? How many children were there supposed to be? Could the other buildings, the different ones, house all the other zygotes? Maybe one of them contained the controls to the ship. Maybe ...

"Hurry up," Mira pleaded. "This looks just like our home. I bet that's what it's for. Help me open it."

Mira's excitement interrupted his consuming thoughts. He turned his attention to the entrance. It was a two story, marble looking structure. Each floor could house perhaps a dozen rooms. The structure across the maintenance path had the look of one of their instructional buildings.

"Help me," Mira pleaded. She stomped her foot on the steps in frustration.

Alpha stopped his rumination and took notice of Mira's plight. She tugged unsuccessfully on the locked door.

"Let me see," he said, nudging her to the side.

He examined the face of the construct. It looked strangely abandoned. Yet the exterior was perfectly maintained, a tribute to the meticulous nature of the service robots. He grabbed the door and gave a yank. It held.

"It won't open," he said.

"But it isn't marked with any warnings. We were only told not to violate any posted areas. This isn't posted." She let out a laugh. "We should've brought Procyon. He'd be inside already."

"Probably," Alpha muttered. He stooped and studied the handle carefully. It was true that this structure wasn't posted for non-entrance, it was just strangely locked. Procyon used a bread knife to violate the door into the South Wall chambers. Prizing his own preparation, Alpha reached

for his hip pocket and pulled forth a bread knife.

He pushed the blade between door and jam; the door opened easily. Easing it ajar, he peeked through the opening. A musty odor emanated from inside.

Mira wrinkled her nose at the odor. “I can’t believe it. It smells like the robots haven’t been maintaining the inside of this place.”

Alpha took a breath of fresh air and slipped through the doorway. He’d never found a place that wasn’t spotless from the scrupulous attention of the service robots. But Mira was right, they hadn’t been in here for a long while. Why?

Mira squirmed to see past him. “What do you see?”

Alpha stood motionless for a few seconds. The smell here was old. He moved further into the building. It was difficult to see. Light panels should have come on when he entered.

Mira’s face peered around the half-opened door.

“Why’s it so dark?”

“I don’t know.” Alpha unclipped the lamp from his belt and played it around the room.

“Yuk. It’s dirty in here,” Mira said. She slid through the door and clutched Alpha’s arm.

“It’s just dust,” he said. “Looks like it’s been collecting for a long time. A very long time.” He pointed the lamp right, then left. “Let’s go this way.”

Mira held tightly to his arm and followed. “Why this way?”

“I don’t know, it just feels right.” He swept the lamp around the room. The imprints of their footsteps clearly recorded their path. No other marks of any kind marred the dust veneer of the floor. Surely they were the only beings, alive or mechanical, to visit the building in many years.

“I don’t like it in here,” Mira whispered. “Let’s go

back.”

“No. There’s nothing in here that can hurt us ... I don’t think.”

Mira tugged smartly on his arm, but continued to follow.

Alpha moved slowly but deliberately toward the end of the hallway. It veered to the right. He paused. This seemed familiar. Did he remember something, or was it just similar to the dormitory where he’d grown up?

“This way,” he said, turning the corner. As the light of the entrance disappeared from view, Mira’s clutching hand tightened its grip.

“There’s the door to some quarters,” Mira whispered.

“Yes, I see it.”

Alpha approached the door. It was locked. He pushed solidly against it, but it held. He pulled the knife from his pocket and slid it into the door jam. After several minutes the door still had not budged. Perspiration from his labored effort and the stifling air burned his eyes.

Mira pushed gently on his back. “What’s taking so long? It’s spooky in here.”

“I got the latch to release, but something’s blocking the door.”

“We could break the window.”

Alpha considered the suggestion. The door had a half-meter square window at eye level, so dusty that his lamp revealed nothing on the other side.

“I don’t know,” he said at length. “The mums would surely be mad if we broke something.”

“Mums don’t get mad. You’ve said so yourself. Besides, robots haven’t been in here, how would they ever know? It looks like they don’t even care about this place.”

Alpha chewed his lip. What Mira said made sense. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. No robots have been in here

lately, that's for sure."

He raised the butt of the lamp and smashed the glass. He peered through the shattered window, swinging his lamp around quickly. "What the heck?"

"What is it?"

"A service robot, parked directly in the way."

"Can't you tell it to move?"

"No, it's dormant. I'll have to force the door."

"I'll help," Mira said.

Alpha moved slightly aside to allow Mira room beside him. While she pushed, he gave the door a jolt with his shoulder. It slowly yielded, some of the remaining glass falling with a crash. He carefully stepped inside and played his lamp around the musty room.

"What do you see? What's in there?"

Alpha strained his eyes to pick out detail in the narrow lamp beam. He could tell that the room had been designed to care for infants. There were two, no, three cribs revealed by the wandering light. Each was covered with ages of dust. A motionless android stood near the unkempt cribs, itself covered with dust.

The statuesque look of the mum gave him a chill. It obviously had stood motionless for ages, yet unlike the toppled service robot it looked perfectly able to move at the blink of an eye. He swept the lamp back to the cribs and squinted to see through the dingy haze.

"What is it?" Mira asked again. She nudged Alpha aside and squeezed past him.

Alpha moved slowly forward, too shocked to accept what his lamp revealed. He approached a crib covered with cobwebs and pointed his lamp into it. The canopy of age effectively blocked the light.

Mira backed toward the partly opened door. "Let's get out of here. I want to go."

Alpha started to back away, then was drawn back to the murky vision in the crib. He brushed some cobwebs away. When he peered in he saw a doll sized figure facing away from him. He reached and touched the tiny head. The mummified skin crumbled under his fingers.

He jerked his hand away and yelled. He tore his eyes from the sight, rushed to the door, and pushed Mira from the room. "Let's get out. We've got to get out."

Mira stumbled, unable to keep her balance with Alpha shoving her. "What is it? What happened here?"

"I don't know, something terrible." He hurried Mira back into the hall.

"Were there babies in there?" she squealed. "Dead babies?"

"It happened a long time ago. Nothing we can do about it. Hurry." He pulled Mira forcibly along.

When he reached the building's entrance, he shoved Mira through the door and back into the sunlight. He burst through after her.

"What happened?" she cried. "What could have happened?"

Alpha hugged her close. "An accident, a disease, maybe a robot failure. I don't know, but it's over now. It happened long ago."

Mira buried her head in Alpha chest. "W-when? When did it happen?"

"Years ago. I don't know ... I wonder ..."

Mira backed away. "What is it Alpha. What are you thinking?"

He stared at the doorway and the hideous gloom beyond. "I think maybe I was here. Maybe I was born, activated, here. There must've been several of us, just like there are of you, I mean your age. But something went wrong. I can't remember what went wrong."

“But ... how did you get out? And why did the robots just lock this up?”

Alpha squeezed the heels of his hands to his temples. “I don’t remember. I was too young. I just can’t remember. The robots probably didn’t know what to do. They weren’t programmed for this. I think they moved me out and locked up the building.”

Mira embraced Alpha again. She shook with uncontrolled sobs. Alpha held her and moved away from the dormitory. He struggled with the terrifying thoughts that tore at his pampered being. In spite of the incredible knowledge the mums possessed, apparently things aboard the Destiny could go wrong. Tragically wrong.

Chapter 3

“**T**hat doesn’t look bad,” Alpha said, though no one was around to hear. He backed up another few meters and eyed the small, dome-shaped domicile that was to be his new home.

“Not bad at all.” He felt thrilled at having an actual place of his own, small though it be. It would be so much more *his* than the dormitory room he’d occupied for as long as he could remember. Videos of Earth, whether for entertainment or instructional purposes, often showed people living in homes, and even owning them. Though he hadn’t actually purchased this dwelling, in fact he’d never really purchased anything, he felt a vain pride of ownership unlike anything he’d ever felt before.

It had taken nearly four years of prodding before the mums allowed Alpha and his companions to have independent homes. It had to do with reaching phase four, whatever that meant. Finally the wait was over, and Alpha had already moved much of his belongings into the dwelling. Per-

haps, he thought with a blush, one day Mira and he would share the new domicile.

Getting the robots to build the bungalows had seemed an impossible undertaking for so long. Yet the task proved so easy in the end. The months of study he and Sirius had poured into the effort rested on the erroneous premise that it would require a fundamental alteration to the robots' programming. That approach proved impossible for two reasons. By design, the robot computer was a heavily encrypted system, disallowing intervention. Additionally, Sirius discovered enough to realize that the system was overwhelmingly complicated even if access was achieved.

Eventually the dogged efforts of Sirius lead to a discovery that should have been obvious from the beginning. When Sirius made the discovery, he excitedly told Alpha "We just need to express a desire and methodology to them. The challenge is that it has to be meticulously and logically presented."

Alpha remembered thinking it a simple enough formula, and he immediately began explaining to the robots his desires. Then he found that the trick in verbally reprogramming the robots required quick thinking and nearly perfect recall. One had to provide precise answers to the robots' seemingly senseless and endless questions. Each answer had to relate logically back to previous answers or the robots would get confused and drop the entire conversation.

Every time Alpha tried to verbally reprogram the robots he grew angry and ended up shouting. Robots had no appreciation of his frustration, and would either continue the questions or go dormant for several minutes.

Once he realized he could not effectively accomplish what he wanted, he found it just as difficult to select the best one of his fellow humans for the purpose. How to fairly interpret his comrades' intellect and capabilities proved to

be a daunting task, triggering some uncomfortable introspection.

The boys were easier for him to consider. He knew them particularly well, having lived and played with them as long as he could remember. He personally liked Auriga the best, the stalwart persona in his compact body, always ready to attach himself relentlessly to any project. But Auriga, for all his strengths, was more of a follower, and easily confused by the meandering conversations with the robots.

Sirius was certainly the strongest intellect, and understood the robots perhaps best of all. But he was a lone thinker, a tinkerer, not a great communicator. He required long pauses to collect his thoughts in response to the unscripted questions of the robots. The pauses themselves led the robots into cyclic logic impasses.

Of the boys that left Procyon, tall and slender, almost gaunt. He was persuasive, no question about it. But he always wanted, must have, things his own way. If Procyon started to work on the robots, Alpha and the others would have little control of the outcome. Besides, Procyon was mostly persuasive with humans. His circular arguments and occasional scary ranting would defeat his purpose with the machines.

That left Alpha the problem of picking one of the girls, whom he felt he understood considerably less. How could he evaluate them when he felt he barely understood them? He'd grown up with them as well, but until the last couple of years it had been mostly an antagonistic experience, with the possible exception of Mira.

Now he found himself more attracted to them, particularly Mira. In a way, she'd always been his best friend, even in midst of their childhood acrimony. She was an excellent negotiator, often bringing the boys and girls together through their differences. But this problem was more com-

plicated. It wasn't difference of opinion that must be overcome, but the digital inertia resident in the collective minds of the mums.

Aldebaran was certainly not meant for the job. She, like Auriga, was a good soldier dedicated to the task. But she was inflexible in her approach, and unable to quickly assimilate other views.

Columba, nearly as tall as Procyon, was possibly as intelligent as Sirius. She would soon be their physician, having learned virtually all the mums could provide about the subjects of anatomy and medicine. But communication was not her strong point, as her poorly developing bedside manner affirmed.

And finally, tiny Vega. She was as old as the others, but still looked like a child. With her jet black hair and dark eyes, her one and a half meter frame had a mischievous look. Her mind, though not as deeply reflective as Sirius', was amazingly quick. She could quickly extrapolate a solution from very little data. And she could, as Alpha had been often aggravated to find out, argue a point especially well.

It was Vega that Alpha finally chose to help him work the robots. And it was, as the existence of the bungalows testified, a very prosperous choice.

"Hi Alpha, want some company?"

Alpha was startled from his thoughts by Mira's voice. She approached from the path to the compound, displaying a big smile. He admired her figure as she strode with swinging arms, wearing a matching green blouse and skirt, perfected by a green ribbon taming her crimson ponytail.

"I can always use your company," he said.

She approached and leaned against the porch rail next to him. "What were you thinking so hard about?"

"Our situation, our future."

Mira sighed. "Glad I'm not the only one. Ever since

we've been allowed to see the information coming from the Earth-link, I've been thinking a lot myself."

Alpha leaned and gave Mira a gentle kiss on the cheek. She blushed and pushed him away.

"I'm not exactly worried," he said. "But there is so much to think about."

"Not worried? I sure am, at least a little scared. We'll be arriving at Eden in less than five years. I've looked through the observatory telescope. I can't see Eden, but Tau Ceti is really bright now."

Alpha slid from his perch and stood next to Mira, reaching an arm around her waist. This time she didn't move away.

"You know," he said, "It sounds funny, since we've never been there, but I feel like we're headed home."

"Gosh," Mira said. "I don't think of Eden as home. This seems like home to me. I admit that in some ways I envy the people we've seen on the link videos, their cities and homes, having families ... and children." She glanced up at the taller Alpha with a blush. "But so much of those videos look more like make-believe. It had just as well be a fantasy, it isn't our world. This is our reality."

"Yes, I don't feel badly about our lives either. As you said, this is our reality, and it isn't an uncomfortable one. And we'll have the adventure of exploring Eden, something many of the people of Earth would give anything to have."

He smiled at Mira. "And we'll have children too. I don't mean just you and me, but all of us. We'll have families, and we'll build our own city. On Eden if we're lucky, but aboard the Destiny if Eden is not what we hope."

Alpha noticed a teardrop meander down Mira's cheek. He knew what she felt, having seen the videos of Earth society too. Sometimes it made him feel terribly isolated. Her soft hair tickled his cheek and made him laugh.

Suddenly she pulled away. “I know,” she said. “Let’s go on a picnic, like we’ve seen the Earth people do on the videos. Just you and me, deep in the forest where no one will bother us. We need cheering up. At least I do.”

Alpha turned the idea over in his mind. It would be nice, just the two of them, far from the compound. Yes, it would be very nice.

“C’mon,” she pleaded, pulling him into the bungalow’s kitchen. “I’ll fix us a great lunch, and we’ll leave right away.”

* * *

Sirius checked over his shoulder, trying to keep track of all robots in the area. He walked hurriedly along the maintenance path, far from the dormitory. He’d been studying all he could find on the compound buildings for two years now, and these were the most mysterious. He’d ditched class a couple of times and visited here before, but only for a short time. It was hard to be sure what the robots would do if they caught him in this vicinity.

Since the last visit, he’d scoured the computerized records in search of information on this part of their city. The area was different, not like the familiar structures of the children’s training area. Until Alpha blew the top off the big secret of Destiny, this area had been unavailable, except for someone deliberately avoiding the mums.

Now the children could go anywhere. Sirius smiled at the natural thought of them being children. There were no more children on Destiny. They, the young adults of Destiny, could go anywhere. They just weren’t supposed to violate certain areas. Areas which were locked, but not guarded.

That fact, however, is precisely what made Sirius nervous. He intended to violate a posted entrance, and counted

on it not being guarded. And if his hunch was right, he'd soon be at the very heart of their world.

His learning capacity was one of the best on Destiny, and he was perhaps too aware of that fact. It seemed only reasonable to accept what it implied. For his entire life he'd studied side by side with the others. Only Vega and Columba seriously challenged his ability. Yet he didn't mind the fact that Alpha was more or less their leader. Sirius could see that in ways, Alpha had a better understanding of aspects of their survival. Social things, organizational things, considerations that Sirius knew he tended to overlook. But technically, no one but possibly Vega approached him.

And on one important detail, the time table for the human responsibility of the Destiny, he didn't agree with Alpha. The robots were taking too long to give the humans control. Sirius felt that he had the capacity, and the right, to be controlling the Destiny now.

He sighted the building he wanted less than a block away. It was unique in construction, being the only domed shaped structure he was aware of. From it, maintenance paths formed spokes in all directions. Sirius was so intent on his journey that he nearly missed the sight of a service robot strolling only twenty meters away.

He stopped his direct heading and turned onto another path. Whether the service robots gathered data for the mums was something he'd never figured out. He'd need time to violate the lock on the domed building after he got there, and he didn't want any robots of any kind around when he started.

He casually roamed along a meandering path for another fifteen minutes. He kept his wandering from taking him out of sight of his target. Now, as far as he could see, he was the only sentient mechanism in the area, biological or

otherwise. He took another careful look around, then moved quickly for the structure.

The lock was difficult. Ten minutes later Sirius slowly exhaled his pent-up breath as he closed the defeated door behind him. Whether or not it sent an alarm he didn't know. The few schematics he'd been able to find, none of which covered this structure, showed no intrusion alarms. But he knew there was no guarantee that this building was like the others.

He was not surprised when interior light panels came on as soon as he entered the doorway. Every compound building he'd ever been in worked the same way. A curving hallway spanned both ways, apparently encircling the center of the dome. The placid appearance of the interior revealed nothing of what he sought. He cursed, and decided arbitrarily on a direction.

He moved swiftly, his heart pounding rapidly. His ears were keen to any sound. After only a few dozen strides, he came upon an open archway to his left. He peered in, seeing a room in dazzling white, so bright that at first he could see no particulars.

He glanced quickly along both extremes of the hallway, then moved with haste through the open arch. Soon his eyes adjusted to the brightness. Even so, the room presented few details. Most notable were a half-dozen wall panels displaying flickering symbols that he didn't recognize. He suspected that the flickering might be a form of communication that robot sensors could decipher. Near the back of the room was a glass tube that reached from floor to ceiling. The tube appeared large enough for a robot or human to occupy.

He paused before one of the flickering screens. Identical to the others, it was slightly larger than his head, and placed comfortably at eye height. Occasionally a block dia-

gram or schematic would fill a screen, but would disappear too quickly for him to recognize or understand.

Sirius began to feel a sense of urgency. He'd already been in the structure for several minutes, and hadn't discovered anything like what he sought. Slowly approaching the glass tube, he placed a hand to the surface.

"Wha...?" He yanked his hand away. At his slight touch, the entire tube rotated until a two-meter tall opening presented itself. The glass tube stopped its turning, the hole inviting him to enter.

He felt compelled to step into the tube, but was also instinctively cautious. He stood frozen by the dichotomy. Should he enter? What would happen to him if he did? Was it a transport device? Was it meant for humans, or robots? If meant for a robot, could it inadvertently harm a human?

The tube began to slowly turn back to its original configuration. Sirius propelled himself through the narrowing opening. He was hardly through when the opening disappeared. The tube was so small he could barely move his arms. How long would he be trapped inside the tube? How long could he stand it?

A swell of panic stirred his emotions. "No one knows I'm here," he muttered.

The floor of the room began to rise. Sirius felt a sickly feeling in the pit of his stomach. He realized the bottom of the tube was sinking, and at an uncomfortably fast rate.

He closed his eyes briefly to counter the dizziness. When he opened them again he saw the floor level of another room sliding past. Had he passed only one level while his eyes were closed?

The next room coming into view had the same mundane appearance as the one he'd first entered, except that it was entirely bathed in gray, either indicative of a darker

color or dimmer illumination.

Another room slid in and out of view, bathed in yellow.

Another, light blue.

Finally, as light green walls loomed around him, the tube slowed. It came to a gentle stop at the room's floor level. Was this the fifth level, or had he missed the first floor in his swoon?

The glass tube swished and a soft breeze of fresh smelling air wafted his sweat moistened face. Shaking badly, he stepped out and breathed deeply. He was relieved to be able to move freely again, though he knew his confinement had been brief.

Breathing nervously, he slumped into a nearby floor-mounted swivel chair. He waited for his pounding heart to normalize as he took in his surroundings.

This place seemed different from the rooms he'd briefly seen during his rapid descent. It was half again in size, though still circular in shape. Two rows of flickering screens encircled it. On a counter next to the swivel chair were three adjacent keyboards, each marked with different symbols.

His eyes widened. Was this what he sought? This could be, should be, the control center of the Destiny.

* * *

"Well? How'd you like it?" Mira asked. She hummed as she dawdled at the task of re-packing the picnic gear.

Alpha sat with his back against an elm tree, wriggling to get more comfortable. He sipped on a fruit-punch concoction and wafted at a cottonwood seed floating by.

"Great. It was really great." He patted his stomach for emphasis.

"Do you suppose we'll go for picnics on Eden?"

Alpha rubbed his nose in thought. “Maybe ...some-day. I think it’ll be kinda tough for awhile.”

Mira finished re-packing and sat next to him, her head on his shoulder. “I’m not worried about it anymore,” she said. “It’s nothing you can’t handle.”

Alpha half-smiled and slowly shook his head at the remark. He wished he had as much confidence in himself as did Mira. He wasn’t really their leader anyway. Sure, some of them sought his advice, more or less from habit. But how would they react if he started issuing orders? And why should he?

Mira snuggled closer. “Ohh, it’s getting cold.” She wrapped her arms around his chest.

He relaxed in enjoyment of her closeness. Turning lazily he caught sight of a frightened rabbit scurrying through the ankle high grass. It was followed closely by a half-dozen quail.

Suddenly Alpha sat up straight, bumping Mira’s nose with his shoulder.

“Ow,” she blurted. “What’s the matter with you?”

“It’s what you said. It’s getting colder.”

“So? No reason for you to hurt me.”

Alpha stood, noticing a breeze building up from the west. “I’m sorry Mira. But the temperature is falling ... and the air is moving. That isn’t normal, not for the Destiny.”

“Oh, this is nothing.” Mira stood and brushed off her skirt. “I’ve seen videos of terrible storms on Earth. Our weather on the Destiny is serene by comparison.”

Alpha noticed that the breeze was now from the north. “Exactly. It’s supposed to be serene, precisely controlled by the ship’s climate computer. That’s why we’ve never had a hurricane, tornado, or any other type of storm. It’s why we don’t have violent rainstorms, only the nightly mist. Why we don’t have ... large variations in tempera-

ture.”

Mira rubbed her arms with her hands. “Gosh, it is getting cold. Shouldn’t we head back?”

Alpha pulled Mira to him, trying to share his warmth with her. “The temperature must’ve dropped ten degrees or more. Yes, I think we should head back. We’ve a long way to go, and it’ll take over an hour.”

He stooped to grab the picnic basket. A puff of air brushed his hair across his face. He stood and touched the top of his ear.

“What’s wrong?” Mira asked?

“I ... thought I felt a drop of water.”

“In the daytime? Couldn’t be.” Mira picked up the blanket she’d spread on the ground and headed from the clearing.

Alpha looked up into the Destiny’s sky. The solar lamps that speckled the central cylinder shined brightly, as always. “No, you’re right. It ... couldn’t be.” He hefted the basket and started after her.

* * *

Alpha leaned into the howling wind. He tugged Mira along behind him. She followed awkwardly, trying to hold the blanket about her with a single clenched fist. “What’s happening?” she yelled into the wind.

Alpha winced at the stinging rain pelting his face. He slowed to accommodate Mira. The wind shifted again, as it had been frequently doing since the storm began. Sometimes pockets of warmer air would engulf them, followed shortly by even colder air. He turned his back on the storm and faced Mira.

“I don’t know what’s happening. Something must’ve gone wrong with the climate control system. These air pock-

ets of different temperature are driving the winds, the rain adds energy to the system.”

Mira stumbled and sprawled in the mud. She struggled to her feet and wiped at the muck that covered her dress. “I can’t take much more. When will it stop?”

Alpha tried to help Mira better cloak herself in the blanket. “I don’t know. On Earth things always balance out. But this may be a computer run amok. We’ve got to find shelter.”

“Shouldn’t we go back to the compound?”

The shifting wind wailed so loudly that Alpha could barely hear her. “Yes, but I’m not sure we can make it.” he shouted. “I’m not even sure where we are. I don’t think we’ve made much progress. We’ve got to find protection and hope this dies down.”

Mira didn’t object. Alpha tried to recall what they’d passed when they hunted for a good picnic location. Had he seen anything that might be useful as a shelter?

“What are you doing?” she shouted.

“I’m trying to remember. This way. I think there’s a small cave nearby.”

“Cave?”

“Yes. Made for the animals I suppose. I saw when we came out here. It’s our best chance.”

Alpha pulled Mira in the direction he desperately hoped would provide shelter. In only a hundred meters she fell to the ground.

“Mira, cmon,” he pleaded. “You’ve got to get up, we have to move on.”

Mira covered her head with her arms. “I can’t. I can’t.” She began to sob.

Alpha wrapped her more securely in the blanket and lifted her. He adjusted her position, took quick bearings, and moved on.

Alpha's legs ached with each step. He willed them to continue. His arms were numb, yet they dutifully bore Mira's weight. He squinted to see her face through falling sleet. Her eyes were closed. They hadn't opened since she collapsed.

He looked up again, trying to correlate the terrain with what he remembered. The sleet piled on the ground, flattening bushes and knocking leaves from the trees. The havoc it created shrouded the forest with a disguise he found bewildering.

He saw a frozen quail laying pitifully in the relentless sleet. How long would it be before he and Mira suffered the same fate?

He shook his head in an effort to chase away the mounting fear, and surveyed the surroundings. The region looked familiar. He thought, hoped, that the cave was nearby.

He saw a small embankment ahead, its grass coat matted down by the building sleet. When he put his weight on a poorly anchored foot he fell, dropping Mira on the rise of the embankment.

"Sorry," he mumbled, knowing she probably didn't hear. He decided she was safer on the ground for the moment. He grabbed bushes and pulled on them as he struggled to make it up the slope.

He finally made it to the top of the rise, and blew warm air into his cupped hands. Kneeling down he grabbed the blanket wrapping Mira, using it to pull her up the slope. Struggling to keep his balance, he picked her up in his arms.

Her unconsciousness terrified him. A surge of strength warmed him as he realized that she may be freezing to death. He stumbled through the glazed grass, barely

aware of the rage continuing around him.

“What was that?” His senses triggered sluggishly to life. He heard the sharp sound again. It was a dog, or fox, or something yipping. Something close.

He turned his head to catch the sound again. The wind played games with his perceptions.

The weight of his precious burden caused him to stumble on the poor footing. He shifted Mira in his arms and trudged onward. He heard the sound again, it was even closer. Through the sleet he saw a raising plot of ground with a forlorn canine head poking from a hole in the mound.

“Easy boy,” Alpha said. “You can’t have that cave to yourself. You’ll have to move over.”

Alpha crouched and crawled into the dim interior of the small shelter, keeping himself between Mira and the wavering coyote that guarded the entrance. It took some bravery to scoot Mira past the canine sentry, but Alpha feared the coyote less than the furious storm. Now, the frequent snarls gurgling from the wary beast elevated it in importance.

“Easy boy,” he said in his most soothing manner. “No sudden moves, okay?”

The coyote responded with a teeth filled sneer, then turned its attention to the outside. Alpha checked Mira’s condition, careful to keep an eye on the canine roommate.

“Psst, Mira, wake up. Are you all right?” Alpha gently shook her shoulder.

She let out a low moan. Her eyes fluttered, then slowly opened.

“Where am I?” she asked with a slurred voice. Her chin trembled as she spoke.

Alpha felt a small sense of hope. “Shh. Not too loud. We’re safe from the storm, in a small cave.”

“Huh? You found the cave?” She raised up on one

elbow.

Alpha smiled at her, greatly relieved that she finally woke up. What if she'd never awakened? He couldn't bear the thought.

Mira looked slowly around and caught sight of the snarling coyote. Her eyes widened and she let out a shriek while turning to scramble further into the darkness.

Alpha grabbed at her, at the same time trying to keep track of the advancing coyote. The angered beast quickly closed the distance between them, now less than two meters away.

Alpha held tight to a handful of Mira's skirt with his right hand, and gestured with the other for the animal to stay back.

"Whoa, boy. I'll calm her down. You calm down too, okay?"

Alpha half turned his attention to Mira.

"Mira, don't get excited. He won't bother us if we don't bother him. You're bothering him."

Mira stopped struggling and covered her head with her hands. She trembled as she tried to smother sobs of fear. Alpha kept a soothing hand on her arm, and gave reassuring squeezes.

"Good girl, that's it. He's moving back. He's probably as afraid as we are."

"W-we're going to d-die," she whimpered.

"Naw. An hour ago I'd have agreed with you, but we'll make it now."

"B-but that wild dog."

"He's just doing what we're doing, trying to wait out the storm. He probably has some instinct about storms, but just like us he's never seen one before. Anyway the storm is winding down. The winds have subsided and the sleet has stopped. I'll bet he leaves pretty soon."

As if the coyote understood, it poked a sniffing nose through the small opening. It turned to provide one more wrathful look at the cowering humans it had dominated, then padded out of the cave.

“There, see? He didn’t like our company anymore than we liked his.”

Mira wiped tears away with a corner of the blanket. “What time is it? When can we go home?”

Alpha squinted at the dimly lit dial of his chronometer. “Should be about a half-hour into evening, but the solar lights haven’t dimmed. I guess the entire day-night cycle is messed up. Maybe the climate system is leaving the lights on to help stabilize the temperature.”

“When can we leave? I want to go home.”

Alpha crawled to the opening and surveyed the aftermath. None of the white sleet remained, but the damage to bushes, trees, and grass had been severe. He could see the morbid remains of several small animals and birds taken entirely by surprise by the Destiny’s first ever storm.

“It’ll be slow going,” he said. “It’s warm enough now, but very muddy and slick. Maybe we should wait until your strength returns.”

Mira scurried toward the opening. “No, I’m ready now. That coyote, or something worse may come back. Besides, if the solar-cycle is goofed up, we don’t know how long we’ll have light. And I won’t spend the night in here.”

Alpha started to argue, but Mira nearly bowled him over to get out of the cave. She stood in the open air, soaking up the warmth.

He crawled out as well, took Mira by the hand, and began wading through the quagmire.

“Okay,” he said. “You win. Let’s go home.”

* * *

“I think we should punish him,” Procyon shouted, springing from his chair. “He could have gotten us all killed.”

Aldebaran stood in support of Procyon. “I agree. Sirius had no business breaking into the Destiny’s control center. It was a terribly dangerous thing to do, especially alone.”

The confused grumbling that broke out echoed off the walls of the oft used classroom. Alpha nervously faced the assembly from behind the podium. The murmuring grew louder. Sirius, sitting on a chair beside the podium, began to squirm. Alpha could see that leadership by someone was badly required. A crisis like this had never happened before, and the mums weren’t programmed to deal with it.

Alpha didn’t feel up to dealing with it either. But the others seemed to expect it of him, their big brother. Up to now he’d have been willing to leave the leadership role to Sirius because of his brilliance. For the first time, Alpha recognized that intellect was not a sufficient capability for command. Sirius apparently lacked the essential qualities of mature judgment, and failed to take the welfare of his companions into account.

Did the two years he held on the others provide such a significant difference in judgment? I doubt it, he thought. But he knew someone must step forth, and no one else seemed to be doing it.

He held his hands up to silence the arguing. To his surprise, the quarreling subsided.

“We need to consider all sides of this,” he said. He took a deep breath, hoping the right words would come. “No doubt Sirius was wrong in what he did, or at the very least premature. We’ll get control of the Destiny soon, but only after we’ve been properly trained. It’s an enormously complex ship, and we are fools to presume otherwise.”

He looked sternly at Sirius. “Do you understand that, Sirius? Bright as you are, this ship is still beyond your current comprehension. And whatever you do to the delicately balanced controls affects us all. Don’t forget, the people who built this ship were also brilliant, maybe more brilliant than any of us.”

Sirius’ mouth opened in surprise. Alpha hoped he’d pointed out something that Sirius hadn’t considered before.

Alpha looked back at the others. “There’s been a lot of damage, and we’re damned lucky that the mums are controlled by a separate computer complex. Otherwise they might not have found Sirius and readjusted the climate system.”

“We can’t continue to survive on luck like that.” Procyon shot back.

Alpha held up his hands again. “You’re right. But something good came of this as well, don’t you think?”

Aldebaran’s face scrunched in disbelief. “Good? What good? Considerable ecological damage was done out there. It’ll take months for the forest to recover, maybe years.”

Several others voiced agreement. Alpha waited for calm.

“Yes, there was damage,” he said. “Serious damage, but nothing permanent. And we’ve learned some important lessons.”

“Like what?” Procyon asked. “That we can’t trust Sirius?”

Mira stood in response to the remark. “He didn’t do it on purpose.”

“We learned,” Alpha said in a voice raised loud enough to overcome the renewed arguing, “that the robot constructed bungalows weathered the storm. We’ll need such structures on Eden, and now we know they’ll handle

rough weather. And I think we've learned something much more important."

"Yeah," Auriga spoke for the first time. "We all survived."

Procyon rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

"He's right," said Alpha. "We survived. We've never been challenged before, other than intellectually. Our lives here have been under a carefully planned protective umbrella. Maybe that isn't so good. We'll be challenged severely on Eden, and now we know we can survive. We can better face whatever Eden throws at us, and that will be far more than the minimal hardships we've endured aboard the Destiny."

Mira again stood. "That's right, and Alpha and I know. We were caught in the storm. We'd just been talking about how easy we've had it on the Destiny. We needed a hard time, just to see how we'd react to it."

"Yeah," another voice said, and the din rose again, but the topic switched to the rigors of their survival. Alpha relaxed a bit as the tension died down. Maybe being a leader wouldn't be so impossible after all. He saw Sirius' troubled face looking up at him.

Alpha winked. Sirius smiled weakly.

A rap at the classroom door pulled Alpha's attention away from the ongoing debate. Sirius and Auriga followed Alpha to the door. Alpha pulled it open to see an emotionless male-mum standing stolidly beyond.

"What is it?" Alpha asked.

"We are afraid we must report bad news."

"Bad news? What?"

"We have lost the function of the Earth-link."

Auriga grabbed Alpha by the arm. "We'll have to go outside the ship to check it out," he said.

Alpha swallowed hard, dreading the thought. "Can

you mums do that?" he asked.

"We are not programmed to perform duties external to the ship," the mum said.

"Then ... how do we do that?"

"It is time we showed you the interconnects," the mum said calmly.

"Interconnects?"

"I read something about that," Sirius said. "I thought maybe it was something used to construct the ship, but information on it is scarce."

"We can allow access to that information if you wish," the mum said.

"Huh," Alpha exclaimed. "What are the interconnects?"

* * *

Alpha squirmed nervously in the small, two-seated vehicle. Auriga sat, calmly it appeared, by his side. The transport carried them and their space-walk equipment at what seemed a break-neck speed through the three-meter diameter tunnel.

Then again, Alpha thought, he'd never ridden on a transport device before. In the compound where he'd grown up, such conveyance was unnecessary. All that had ever been required were the equipment haulers the robots occasionally used, which moved at only a walking pace. Now that he knew more about the construction of the Destiny and their upcoming mission to Eden, Alpha realized that the transports would soon have been revealed to them anyway. The antenna link must have only moved up the formation release by a few months.

The information presented to them revealed that a few meters beneath the surface of their compound, accessible through the control center, was an underground tunnel and

transport system. Tunnels connected maintenance centers at various locations beneath the compound and the forest. They also extended to both the south and north ends of the great vessel.

At the south end of *Destiny* was an air lock to the vacuum of space. It was located coincident with the tubular hub running through the craft. Just outside was the main antenna and steering apparatus for the Earth-link, located near the spin axis of the ship.

At the north end of *Destiny*, to be needed when Eden was finally encountered, was a shuttle bay with a half-dozen craft and launching platform. Alpha's head spun at the magnitude of these new disclosures provided by the mums. He wondered if he'd ever know all of *Destiny's* secrets.

After several minutes of travel, the transport slowed rapidly and came to a stop in a sterile looking hanger. An elevator shaft nearly three times the size of the one in which he'd searched for Procyon years ago stood open before them. Auriga helped Alpha carry the cumbersome space-suit and tether ropes through the beckoning entry. After a sickening elevator experience, Alpha and Auriga found themselves and the apparatus floating haphazardly in the transporting room, as the exit portal opened to reveal the air-lock a dozen meters away.

"Gads, this suit is awkward," Alpha said. He breathed heavily as he struggled to squeeze into the equipment. "I wish I'd put on the damn contrivance before traveling to the central core. In this weightless state, it's unwieldy."

"Want me to help?" Auriga asked.

Alpha flexed his fingers, testing the stiff gloves. "Just put the helmet on. I think I've got the rest of it."

Auriga slipped a foot under a hand-hold on the wall in an effort to steady himself. He raised the helmet he held

at his side ... hesitating.

“Alpha, why don’t you let me go out. I can see what’s wrong with the link antenna as well as you. I’m not afraid.”

Alpha interlaced his fingers and pushed his hands together to seat the gloves. “No, I’ll do it. It’s my job.”

Alpha took a deep breath and waited anxiously for Auriga to complete the encapsulation by fastening the head gear. Now he knew the down side of being a leader. Responsibilities such as this. Maybe Auriga isn’t afraid, but I certainly am, he thought. In fact, I’m terrified. But I don’t have the right to ask another, likely just as terrified, to go in my place.

Auriga attached the helmet, effectively cutting off the sounds outside Alpha’s cocoon. Alpha heard a hiss as Auriga adjusted the oxygen flow. He turned to see a thumbs up from Auriga. Using hand-holds, he pulled himself toward the air-lock.

He held tightly to the handrail running along the bulkhead. As he entered, his magnetic boots found the surface of the unpadded air-lock enclosure. The inner door had slid silently shut, and he could feel the fabric of the suit puff out as the surrounding air pressure diminished to vacuum level. The tightening of the air pressure made the suit even stiffer. He fumbled at the task of fastening his tether to a wall-mounted loop. It was so difficult with the clumsy gloves that he wondered how he’d be able to repair any problem he might find with the Earth-link.

He keyed in a sequence on the large panel buttons that should open the outer portal. Nothing happened, and he wondered if he’d entered the wrong sequence. He jerked with a start when a large circular panel suddenly began to slide open. Small particles of debris he’d never noticed before scattered to the more perfect vacuum of outer space.

He felt a gentle nudge as the wispy remaining air rushed past him to escape to the cosmos.

His hands tightened their anxious grip on the handrail. Alpha suddenly felt very sick.

“Alpha? How are you doing?” Auriga’s voice crackled in his earphones.

“Alpha?”

“I’m ... fine,” Alpha sputtered with a wavering voice. “Just getting up the courage.”

As quickly as the rush of air began, it was over. Alpha stood in complete stillness and silence. The circular portal looked out on a dazzling display of stars, disturbingly rotating at one revolution about every 90 seconds.

Alpha stared at the turning panorama, and had to concentrate to convince himself that it was he turning and not the stars. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut and grabbed the rail with both hands. The transition he’d have to face to move through the opening was going to be more than he bargained for. It was a confusing clash of senses. When he looked into the star-filled void, his eyes told him he was moving. Every other sense told him he was not.

He turned his back on the disturbing sight, slowly opened his eyes, and checked once again the tether connection at his waist. It seemed secure, but he tugged it once again just to be sure. If his magnetic boots should lose contact with the Destiny’s skin, he was afraid that he would drift endlessly away.

He glanced up at the porthole of the inner air-lock and saw Auriga’s reassuring face. Alpha weakly waved, and gulped down his fear.

He slowly lifted each foot in turn and rotated back to face the open portal. He swallowed again, and commanded his legs to move forward, one clumsy step at a time.

When he reached the edge of the opening, he froze

in awe. Beyond was infinity, and disturbingly different than the secure and confining experience he'd had living inside a great cylinder. He instinctively reached to shade his eyes, his gloved fingers thudding against the heavy face plate.

He glanced down at his feet and almost vomited. The glittery, exceedingly flat surface of the Destiny's south end trailed a kilometer and a half into the emptiness, stark proof that he had indeed been living inside a gigantic ship, if he ever doubted it. He had the compelling feeling that if he took another step, he would fall forever. Staring at the distant edge of the cylindrical end of the ship caused another stomach retch, as the stars slid along its sharp horizon.

Alpha stepped back so that a few centimeters of air-lock extended beyond his toes.

"Don't worry Alpha," crackled Auriga's voice. "You can't fall. If you step out you'll just float next to the Destiny. Given enough time, it's mass would pull you back. Besides, you're well tethered."

Alpha swallowed over a dry tongue. "Yeah ... I know." His mind knew, but his emotions were swamping his intellect. He leaned forward slightly so he could see the end surface of the ship again. The link equipment should be located quite close to the ship's spin axis, where he so shakily stood.

"Do you see the antenna?" Auriga asked.

"No ... wait ... yes, it's above me." Alpha had to bend his knees and lean back to look nearly straight up.

"Just walk around the air-lock," Auriga said. "Go right up the walls, the shoes will stick."

Of course, Alpha thought. But the idea seemed to violate what his gut told him. He turned perpendicular to the portal, pulled loose a foot, and placed it squarely ahead on the sloping surface. When he pulled loose the rear foot and took another step, he was surprised that it worked rather

well. He was literally walking up the bulkhead.

He took several more steps and soon found himself standing upon what minutes ago had been his ceiling. Leaning unsteadily out he spotted the antenna only a couple of meters away.

“It’s just below me, ” he said. “Now what?”

“Just step out to it.”

Sounds easy, Alpha thought. He was beginning to wish he’d let Auriga do this. Auriga seemed to have a more natural grasp of this wholly unnatural environment. When Alpha tried to extend a foot out of the portal, his fear instinctively pulled it back. Try again, you coward, he told himself. One more deep breath and he reached a foot out into space. He placed his heel on the flat surface of the Destiny’s end, and let the magnetic sole pull his foot flat onto the surface.

With enormous effort, he forced himself to pull loose the foot remaining in the air-lock. He quickly plopped it next to the anchored foot, and found himself swinging to a standing position on the flat surface of Destiny’s south pole.

The motion of the stars was suddenly different. Instead of swirling in a circle in front of him, they rotated around him. He waved his arms wildly for a few seconds, trying to regain a balance his mind said he’d lost, but the laws of physics insisted he hadn’t. Finally he realized he was standing perfectly motionless, as far as Destiny was concerned. He forced his gaze solidly on the antenna, trying to ignore the moving background.

He took a cautious step toward his target. More steps followed with increasing frequency until he stood next to the structure that towered above him a full three meters.

“I’m at the base,” he said with relief.

“How does it look?”

Alpha leaned back and examined the expansive

parabola above. A large section seemed to be completely shredded. The azimuth pivot axis was also damaged, apparently pelted by meteoric debris.

“It’s taken a meteoric dust hit, pretty serious. The antenna is severely damaged, and I doubt if the azimuth tracking motor works anymore. Guess the hull was too thick to be breached.”

“Can we repair it?” Auriga asked.

Alpha studied the structure once again, and in his near panic state could see no way to effect repairs. It was too big to take into the air-lock, and none of them were trained to work extensively outside the ship. They might be able to replace the tracking apparatus, but not the parabola itself.

“Naw, I don’t think so. It’s really tore up. I’ll take a couple pictures of it for you to study, but I don’t think it’ll do any good.” He reeled in the camera tied to his utility belt, and took a few shots of the damaged structure.

“Could the robots fix it?” Auriga asked.

“I doubt it. Nothing I’ve seen about their programming references outside structures such as this. When I looked through the antenna database I saw no references about robot repair options. I’m not sure how we’d instruct a robot to do something we don’t know how to do.”

“Nuts,” Auriga said. “Guess there’s nothing we can do about it. You’d best come on in, I’ll study the photos in here.”

“Roger.” Alpha turned to move back to the air-lock. He regretted the loss of the link, but was almost glad he wouldn’t have to tolerate the terrifying experience of the outside in a prolonged repair effort. He re-examined the antenna briefly to be sure his disdain of the experience wasn’t clouding his appraisal.

“Whoa, wait a minute.”

“What is it?” Auriga asked. “More damage?”

“No. I’m not sure,” Alpha clanked back to the base of the structure.

“Alpha? What’s going on?”

Alpha raised the camera once again.

“There’s another piece of equipment here, fastened to the base. Not sure what it is.”

“What do you mean?”

Alpha leaned to examine the truncated pyramidal shape that stood out of place before him. “The antenna, it’s all white, even the base. The whole thing is smooth curves. This thing, it’s different. About a meter high, shaped like a small, narrow pyramid, with the top chopped off. It’s black, that’s why I didn’t see it at first. I didn’t notice it on the diagrams I studied before coming out here. I guess I’ll have to look at them again in more detail.”

“It’s not part of the communication system?”

“I don’t know,” Alpha said. “It has a clamp around the cable conduit. Maybe it’s an amplifier or something. I might be able to bring it in. If we can find schematics on it, maybe we can fix it. I suppose with enough amplification, our damaged antenna might still function.”

“Give it a try,” Auriga said.

Chapter 4

Sirius stepped slowly and cautiously around the monolithic structure occupying the center of the room. He moved in almost a perfect circle, keeping at a distance as if afraid the object would strike out. He held in his hand a power meter, and watched its readout with intense interest.

“How’d you get it into the air lock?” he asked without looking up.

Alpha examined tools Sirius had laid in a careful arrangement on the laboratory workbench. He picked up a small chisel and rolled it between thumb and forefinger, wondering if it would be of help.

“Not much was holding it to the antenna base,” Alpha said. “And the brace that held it had a latch release. I just needed to remove a clamp from around the cable conduit, then unlatch it. Kind of a clumsy latch, I almost didn’t have enough fingers. Are you getting anything?”

“No readings. It’s not radiating anything, whatever it is. Without some kind of a schematic, I don’t have any

idea how to test it. That chisel won't do you any good either, I've tried it. The material is much too hard. There just doesn't seem to be a way to get into it."

Sirius approached the object and tried to lift it from the floor. "It's quite heavy. How'd you manage it."

"I was weightless, remember? I just had to nudge it toward the air lock. Once inside, I had Auriga's help. Could it be just a piece of test gear used when Destiny was constructed?"

Sirius squatted, placing himself at eye level with the squared off top. He ran sensitive fingers along the flat summit. "I have no idea. I wouldn't think so, how would they overlook removing it? Fascinating though. Why this particular shape? I'm sure it isn't solid, that it has a function."

"If not an amplifier, what else?" Alpha asked.

Sirius ran searching fingers up and down the side of the object. "No vibrations. Seems completely inert. So far I haven't a clue what it is. That's what makes it fascinating. I might try putting it's clamp around a conduit I construct in here, run some signals through. Then I'll know if it has any effect on my signals, and if it transmits anything."

"Good idea." Alpha dropped to one knee on the opposite side of the monolith, looking more at Sirius than at the object. "Why do you think this was omitted from the schematics? A late modification? Some kind of afterthought?"

Sirius rubbed his chin slowly, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "I don't know. It could be some newer technology that came along while Destiny was being constructed. Destiny took years to build, so that's quite possible. You said it isn't like the other structures, totally different construction. It wasn't mounted in permanent fashion, not like an original design feature. It ..."

Alpha jolted back to his feet. "Enough with what it

isn't. Tell me what it is."

Sirius looked up with a wrinkled face. "I thought I told you, I don't know. I can only tell you what I'm sure it is not. That doesn't mean I can tell you what it is."

"I'd settle for knowing if it was a piece of test equipment, or has something to do with the function of the link. With such a temporary mounting I'm beginning to think it's a piece of test equipment the designers forgot to remove. If so, it's probably not vital to the operation of the link. If not, we may have to figure out if it's broken, and how to fix it."

Sirius ran his fingers carefully down the other side of the structure. He rapped on it hard with his knuckles. "Not completely solid, that's for sure. Hard to say what it's for."

* * *

"Hurry up, Alpha," Mira said. She bustled repeatedly between bedroom and bath. Each trip adding some subtlety to her appearance, many that Alpha was unable to discern.

"I'm ready," he said. "You're the one we're waiting on. Besides, the ceremony isn't for another half-hour. We've got plenty of time."

Mira stopped mid-trip and placed cosmetic-laden hands on her hips. "Are you saying I'm slow?"

Alpha raised his hands in a mock defense. "Not at all. I'm just saying that we have plenty of time. And there's only going to be the same people there that we grew up with, it's no big deal."

Mira gave Alpha a squinting stare, then went back for more adjustments. "Maybe not," she said from the confines of the bathroom. "But it's the biggest event we've ever had aboard the Destiny, and I want to look my best."

“Okay,” Alpha said with little enthusiasm. “But nothing will change much, not till we get to Eden.”

Mira popped her head from the bathroom doorway. “That’s only a month away. Aren’t you at least excited about that?”

He noticed that Mira was finally putting the grooming tools away, a possible hint that she was nearly done. “I’m not sure excited is exactly the right word. I’d say ... concerned.”

“You once said you thought of Eden as home.”

Alpha remembered making the comment. A part of him did feel that way. But another part, a more pragmatic part, knew that encountering Eden could be a bigger challenge than they imagined.

“It may eventually be our home,” he said. “It won’t be easy. And without the Earth-link ...”

Mira approached Alpha and kissed him gently on the cheek. “I know,” she whispered. “It hasn’t been the same. Still, there’s years of link archives that we haven’t examined yet, so it kind of seems like it’s still working. Besides, maybe we can build a new link on Eden.”

She stepped back and put on her biggest smile, a gesture Alpha could never resist. He smiled back.

“Let’s go,” she said, taking his hand. “Let’s find out what Destiny’s designer’s had in mind.”

* * *

Alpha loitered next to Sirius in the doorway of the ceremoniously decorated theater. It looked quite festive, unlike the many times they’d used the room to view group lessons. Mira had already left his arm and sought out Columba. Auriga was talking with Vega and Aldebaran, paying most attention to Vega. Procyon was discussing something with one of the two male mums that stood near

the back of the room, their somber demeanor quite out of place on this occasion.

“How’s the research going, Sirius?” Alpha asked. In spite of himself, he was getting excited about the content of the message they would soon be presented, a message recorded hundreds of years ago.

“Not bad,” Sirius said. “Exciting in fact. I’ve been observing Eden through the observatory instruments. This is a very exciting time.”

“Any startling discoveries?”

“No, nothing like that. What I’ve seen so far suggests that the old Earth scientists did their homework pretty well. Eden holds a lot of promise. I have an extensive database on Earth living conditions, and of course the Destiny’s environment is a model of that. My studies of Eden suggest nothing that greatly deviates from our environment.”

“Really?” Alpha asked. What Sirius had to say was interesting, but Alpha wondered more what Mira and Columba were talking about. Apparently something they both thought quite humorous.

“Yes,” Sirius continued. “The main difference is that Tau Ceti isn’t as big or energetic as Earth’s Sol. Fortunately Eden is only a little over half as far from Tau Ceti as Earth is from its star. So Eden receives a similar amount of stellar radiation. Of course Eden is a little smaller than Earth.”

“That so,” muttered Alpha, shifting his attention back to Procyon. He wondered why Procyon would use this eminently human occasion to spend time with robots.

“Of course,” Sirius said. “Eden has only about three-fourths the gravity of Earth. That’s no doubt why the spin rate of Destiny was chosen, to provide us with Eden’s gravity. It’ll make our adjustment minimal.”

Alpha finally refocused on what Sirius had been saying. “I’m sorry I haven’t been of much help to you recently.

So much to do as we approach Eden.”

“I know, you’re carrying quite a burden.”

“How about the object I brought in, the one that was fastened to the antenna mast. Did you ever figure it out?”

Sirius flushed slightly at the question. Alpha was fully aware that Sirius didn’t like being beaten by a problem. Before Sirius even spoke, his mannerisms provided the answer.

“No,” Sirius admitted with obvious reluctance. “I haven’t figured out anything useful. My tests were all negative. I haven’t found a way to disassemble it short of totally destroying it. If I do that, there may be no hope of determining what it is, or what it’s for. And if it’s a necessary element of the link, I certainly don’t want to destroy it. I’m sort of hoping that something will come to me.”

Alpha looked at his chronometer again. Only two minutes left.

He placed a hand on Sirius’ shoulder. “It’s about time,” he said. “I think I’ll retrieve Mira and take a seat. This should be interesting.”

The wall-sized screen flickered to life, and the murmuring died quickly. A close-up image of an elderly man with thin white hair, pallid, wrinkled skin, and pale blue eyes filled the screen. He spoke as if he shared the room with them, not at all like many of the rehearsed lesson-videos Alpha had seen.

Alpha was always moved in a way he didn’t understand when he saw an image of an elderly human. None of the Destiny’s occupants had ever met an old person face to face. They’d seen many on instruction and entertainment videos. Somehow it always impressed him as just another special effect, as when a fictional hero walked into another dimension. Yet he knew the transformational changes of aging were real, and would eventually overtake him and his

comrades.

He feared that future. Would only their appearance change? Would there be other affects? Would one know when death was near?

He'd seen death before on the Destiny. Small forest animals often died. But never the death of another human being, save for the grotesque infant corpses he and Mira viewed on that horrifying day.

He shook his head to clear away the troublesome visions. The gigantic tranquil face before him began to speak.

"Greetings, beings of Destiny," the smiling image began. Its eyes roamed around the room as if seeing each and every face.

"My name is Dr. Gerald Friedman. If things have gone as planned, I am speaking to a population of twelve inhabitants of the Earth's first manned interstellar vessel."

Alpha shivered at the comment. It confirmed what he suspected.

"By now, you've no doubt had many of the facts of your unique world presented to you by the instructional computers of the Destiny. I wish to tell you of them in my own words, the words of a fellow human being. One that feels compassion for your separation from your mother world, yet one who envies the historic mission on which you are embarked."

"By the time you view this presentation, I and my comrades will be long expired. I sincerely hope that the Earth-link we carefully designed is operating so that even though we the creators of the Destiny are no more, you can share a distant kinship with your fellow human beings."

"We of Earth can only imagine what you feel about us. We wish you to know that your survival is paramount. You are the product of the best capability the Earth had available at the time of the Destiny's launch, both techni-

cally and biologically. I can tell you there was a great and heated debate about sending humans into space to be born there with only robots to care for them. It was a time that mightily tested our morality. As you obviously know, the difficult decision was finally made in favor of the mission. We, your ancestors, decided it is man's destiny to move to the stars, and this was the only plan within our technology."

"Had it been possible, I assure you that I and my comrades would have made the trip with you, and raised and nurtured you with the love and caring you deserve. We provided the robotic mums in our absence, an option we can only hope has worked as well as we intended."

"Twenty three years before the Destiny's launch, we discovered an amazingly Earth-like planet orbiting the star Tau Ceti. After years of study, we determined that it should indeed support human life, but we have been disappointed that our efforts to detect radio signals from the planet failed."

"You cannot know, but Earth is an aging planet. Human shortsightedness has devoured much of our precious resources and polluted others. We sent the Destiny on this historic voyage to give Earth-life another chance, an insurance of continuing to exist."

"Destiny carries forth many creatures of Earth. Thousands of human zygotes accompany you, as well as zygotes of many other life forms."

"But your mission is complicated, I'm afraid. We of Earth ask you to carry out our plans, the plans of an entire world. Carry our aspirations to the planet of Tau Ceti, to Eden."

"If Eden is inhabited, be our emissaries of peace. If possible, use the bioengineering capabilities we sent with you to make the inactive zygotes harmonious with the native life forms. If the planet is uninhabited, plant the seeds of Earth,

and tame the planet in our name.”

“As you make the planet yours, we ask that you study well the lessons we’ve given you. Do not, as we have done, poison the very planet on which you live. You start with much hardship, for that we ask your understanding. You also start with much knowledge, much more than did our ancestors. For that we do not ask your thanks; we ask only that you use the knowledge well.”

The screen went blank.

Alpha held tight to Mira’s hand, wondering why he felt so moved by the message.

* * *

Alpha seated himself at a computer terminal with Mira behind him, her gentle hands on his shoulders. He looked up at Sirius, who seemed to be smiling at some inside joke.

“Ready?” Sirius asked.

“Ready,” Alpha replied. He looked suspiciously at the screen, wondering what it was that Sirius had up his sleeve. Sirius had a habit of making jokes only funny to himself. An image popped onto the screen. Alpha was taken by the splendor before him.

The planet he saw displayed in glorious color was spellbinding. He’d seen pictures of planets throughout his training, but this live vision tugged at his emotions. Through wispy clouds he got glimpses of green from the sea that seemed to cover the entire globe.

He hadn’t actually spent much time studying Eden during the recent months, he’d had so many other duties to perform in learning the operation of the Destiny, the landing craft, and the procedures involved in restoring the zygotes.

He stared, as when he was a child, for several seconds. Finally, he couldn’t help but ask: “Is there any land

on the planet?”

“Not much,” said Sirius. “But enough. I’ve assigned the Earth concepts of north and south based on Eden’s spin axis and its relationship with Tau Ceti. With that convention, there’s a large oval shaped island in the southern hemisphere, roughly three-hundred by four-hundred and fifty kilometers ... about minus thirty degrees latitude. In the northern hemisphere, nearly opposite the southern island, is an incredible ringed continent. It looks nearly circular, about six-hundred kilometers across, with the ocean occupying the interior region as well as surrounding the continent. It’s actually two half-rings, separated at two locations that lie in a roughly north-south line. At this time my best guess is that it’s a remnant of a gigantic asteroid collision.”

“Do you have any images of the continents we can see?” Mira asked.

Sirius fingered the control in his hand. Instantly another image filled the screen, revealing the intriguing ring of land in the northern hemisphere. While a bit irregular in shape, it was as Sirius described. Mostly circular, with a ring of mountains jutting above the sea.

“This is the northern continent as it appeared three days ago. What you had been looking at was a live image of the planet, as it appears now. As you can see, even in this image clouds dominate, but fortunately there was a clearing big enough to glimpse the ring.”

“Are there always so many clouds?” Alpha asked.

“Generally quite a few. It’s made studying the surface a little difficult, though we have decent maps produced by the imaging radar. We’ll get much better maps when we can put a polar orbiting satellite in place. The clouds are mostly thin, high altitude clouds, but I’ve seen some that were probably storm clouds.”

Sirius fingered the control once again, and an image

of the much smaller southern continent appeared.

“The terrain looks gentler there,” Alpha observed.

“It’s an older formation, I’d guess,” Sirius said.

“Is that all the land Eden has?” Mira asked. “It doesn’t seem like much.”

Sirius stepped closer to the image and peered intently at it. “There are a few small islands around there, probably volcanic. There’s evidence of volcanism at the southern island as well. But I haven’t seen any other large land masses.”

Alpha leaned close to the screen to inspect the small specks Sirius had pointed out. “Have you discovered any signs of life?”

“Oh, there’s clearly life. High resolution and infrared images show plant life, without a doubt.” He selected another image that showed a highly expanded section of the southern continent. The exposed terrain was covered with vegetation, with a few brown patches here and there.

“No doubt there is animal life as well,” Sirius continued, “but from this height we can’t see that. And we won’t be getting much closer either, at least not with the Destiny.”

Alpha leaned back. “Any evidence of higher orders of life?”

“If by that you mean intelligent life, I’ve seen nothing. The latest theories, at the time Destiny left Earth, was that biological activity reveals itself by the rearrangement of a planet’s appearance, the look of order. The more advanced the biology, the greater the order. I’ve seen no indication of any order on Eden unexplainable by other than basic biological activity. No roads, buildings, unusual infrared sources, no unnatural patterns, ... and no radio-wave emanations.”

“Too bad,” Mira sighed.

“Maybe not,” Sirius said. “Leaves more for us.”

The comment rubbed Alpha the wrong way. “Re-

member our directive. We're supposed to blend with this planet. There's biology here, and it's our goal to become compatible with the native life."

"But there's no intelligent life," Sirius said. "So we can tame the planet to our liking. We're on our own here, Alpha. I'm sure the people who sent us here had some great philosophical vision of what Eden was to become. But the flat fact is, we didn't ask to be in this situation. It is our lives that are at stake. If we have to balance our lives against a three-hundred year old philosophy, I say our lives take precedent."

Alpha turned his gaze back to the terminal screen. "We can discuss this later. You've made your point. I agree we need to arrive at our own philosophy. But I don't wish to trash the one that brought us here without considerable thought. We are still members of the human race. We are a product of their goals. The opportunity that we have is from their efforts. I think we should come up with a plan of exploration, and if we meet with easy success there isn't much to worry about. But if we meet with difficulty, then that's when we must re-examine our goals."

Mira kneeled in front of Alpha and took his hand in hers. "I think our plan should include the possibility of living our lives aboard the Destiny. There's nothing that prevents us from staying here. We could orbit Eden forever, and never impact it. Maybe make use of some of its resources from up here if we need to."

"Yes," Alpha replied, "that's a possibility. We might be able to stay here, if we constrain the growth of our society. Activate a few hundred zygotes perhaps. It would take some study to confirm the idea."

"There is another possibility," Sirius said. "If you're willing to live aboard the Destiny, we can just keep going."

"What do you mean, 'just keep going?'"

“It’s a fall back position, understand, if we can’t settle on Eden. We could continue our lives aboard Destiny, but as we do, go somewhere else.”

“Where?” Mira asked with an exaggerated shrug.

“Anywhere. Someplace we’ve never been, where no one has ever been. We’d have a lifetime to figure out where, but we could follow the philosophy that brought us here, and send humanity to yet another place.” Sirius’ eyes sparkled. “We’d be the Doctor Friedmans. Now that would be really interesting.”

Alpha gestured to the captivating image of Eden.

“The first thing we have to do is study that. If for nothing else, as a source of raw materials. Let’s not take the pessimistic view yet. I believe there’s every chance that we can do the mission as Dr. Friedman and the others envisioned. Obviously, as our existence testifies, not all of their plans were so bad. Perhaps they had this better figured than we yet realize.”

Alpha was comforted to see that Sirius and Mira murmured general agreement. But the childish excitement displayed by Sirius worried him.

“Send a robotic craft to the surface to bring back soil and atmosphere samples,” Alpha said. “Based on those results, we’ll decide how to proceed.”

* * *

“Alpha,” Columba nearly shouted, “what’s taking you so long? We’re all ready to go.”

“Just a second, ... a few last minute checks.” Alpha’s shaking hands sifted through his pack contents. Do I have everything I need? he asked himself. Impossible, he admitted. I can’t possibly anticipate what we’ll see down there.

His thigh pockets were packed full of items, and he had a small backpack with sufficient food for up to two days

survival, plus as many other articles as he could stuff into the small space. He looked in anticipation at his comrades Columba and Sirius, and realized they were staring at him.

“Ready?” he asked.

“We’ve been ready,” Columba answered. Alpha noticed a perceptible quiver in her usually steady voice.

“How about you, Sirius?”

“I was born ready,” he said.

Alpha took one more look through his equipment.

“Wait, do we need the respirators?”

“I’ve put a few in the shuttle stow,” Columba said.

“But I don’t think we’ll need them. The probe results are negative for any dangerous airborne agent, and the atmospheric mixture has sufficient oxygen.”

“Great. We’ll be going down to the interior portion of the southern continent, roughly twenty kilometers inland near the western shore. That area seems to have some of the smoothest terrain. The others will remain aboard the *Destiny* and monitor our progress.”

Alpha took a deep breath as the hanger elevator reached its destination, and virtual weightlessness caused some of his equipment to float from his pack. He snatched it up and secured it. Exiting the elevator, he propelled himself via the small tunnel hand-straps toward the shuttle’s air lock. In spite of his previous experience with weightlessness, he still found it an entirely disconcerting experience. He imagined that his companions, having never experienced the effect before, may feel even less comfortable than did he.

He entered the cramped interior of the shuttle with too much velocity, ricocheting in slow motion first from the ceiling, then the opposite side. He reached awkwardly for the back of the pilot’s seat, and after a couple of failed tries managed a grip that allowed him to regain control. He lowered himself into the seat, watching with embarrassment as

his comrades entered with considerably less commotion.

The hissing of the air lock finalized their entry. Alpha keyed in the separation sequence, and barely felt the subtle motion as the shuttle separated from the north end of Destiny. Alpha's attention was on the vehicle status display, his only previous flights having been accomplished using the simulation facility.

"Oh my," Columba said softly.

"What's wrong?" Alpha asked.

Columba's pallid face was staring blankly out the forward window. Alpha craned his neck to see what was capturing her attention.

Before him loomed the slowly rotating massiveness of the Destiny. Alpha found himself mesmerized. The immensity of the Destiny swirled unstoppable, its size filling the entire viewing area. It was almost impossible to imagine an entire world inside after viewing the metallic, sterile appearance of the exterior.

As the dominance of the great ship shrank into the void, Alpha was able to focus his attention on the attitude display. After checking instruments, he looked again at his companions. He was surprised to see that the sight of the Destiny was hypnotic even to the unflappable Sirius. When he again peered out the window, the Destiny had diminished enough in size to be engulfed in a sea of stark blackness. It shrank rapidly, virtually disappearing to a silvery nothingness in only minutes.

"Oh," Columba said, "it was beautiful." She slowly turned her attention to some of her biological sampling equipment. Alpha noticed that she fiddled with the equipment only with her right hand, her left clasped tightly to her chair's arm rest.

Gradually the smooth fall to Eden's surface turned mildly bumpy. Then the bumps rapidly increased in violence

with the shuttle's interior rattling in response.

"What is it?" Columba asked excitedly.

"Air friction," Sirius shouted above the rising din.

"We're entering Eden's upper atmosphere."

"It'll be over soon," Alpha said. At least it was supposed to be, he thought. He counted off the seconds, alarmed at how long this unsettling aspect of the descent was lasting.

He wanted to say something reassuring to Columba to ease her fear, but found his jaws and fists were clenched too tightly to permit such an utterance. Before he could summon the inner strength to speak, the violent shaking began to subside, replaced by a shrill whine that was at least as alarming.

He focused his attention on the navigation display. Had something gone wrong with the auto pilot? He'd never thought seriously about the possibility of a navigation computer failure. His entire life had been spent, literally dominated, by computer controlled devices. It occurred to him that he was totally unprepared to land the craft without computer aid. He vowed to learn how to pilot the shuttle manually as soon as time permitted.

Before he could react to his fear, the craft slowed its descent. The vibrations and shrill whine virtually stopped. The windshield was filled with the rapidly expanding scene of the south continent. Alpha's fear was being overwhelmed by wonder. He forced his gaze away from the looming continent to concentrate on the shuttle instruments. The display showed the targeted terrain, and an oval marking the pre-programmed landing area. He need only touch a spot on the screen to make a different selection.

Nearing the planet's surface, the shuttle began vibrating again. The navigation screen indicated that the landing jets were firing, bringing the shuttle to a landing. In seconds

the shuttle settled with a muffled thud. Startling silence followed.

Alpha slowly relaxed his grip on the seat and looked at his comrades.

Columba's face was expressionless.

Sirius' face was covered with a smile of covetous excitement. His eyes darted out the windshield at the dust still settling from their landing. His fingers rapidly tapped instructions into the environmental computer.

"Great," Sirius said loudly. "It's great. Conditions are perfect." He looked eagerly at Alpha.

Alpha knew what the look meant. Sirius wanted out. Alpha had wanted out too, when the shuttle seemed to be breaking up. Now, in its new found serenity, it seemed a secure place to remain. He made another examination of the shuttle status indicators. In spite of the seemingly rough ride, the instruments reported a vehicle in perfect condition. Seeing that his comrades were anxiously awaiting his next move, he stood and approached the escape hatch control.

Chapter 5

The hatch opened slowly, and the two meter long ramp settled simultaneously into place. Alpha stood pensively at the opening. In the vicinity of the shuttle the ground was covered with leafy, ankle high plants. They occasionally swayed in unison, apparently reacting to a faint breeze that he didn't detect.

Soil shown beneath the plants; it had a distinctly darker tint than that of the Destiny. Alpha noticed a few exoskeleton creatures, reminiscent of insects, crawling and jumping among the plants. Only occasionally did he notice flying insects, these of rather large variety. Some displayed wingspans as long as his forearm. His first thought at sight of them was whether they could bite. After watching them warily, he found that the frighteningly large insects took no interest in the human invaders.

He was startled when something much larger darted through the plants about a dozen meters away. For reasons he didn't question, a vision of a furry, rabbit like creature

filled his mind.

Then his eyes moved further away from the immediately surrounding terrain to pause at the immensity. While not as disconcerting as his space walk, the view from the shuttle held an infinity of its own.

He marveled at the limitless view. The contrast with the interior of the *Destiny* was direful. The literal disappearance of the horizon into a murky distance of unknown proportion was bewildering. The view upward sent his senses into a reeling dizziness, as the dingy blue sky separating the clouds seemed to rise forever. He quickly brought his gaze back to the ground to avoid falling squarely on his face.

Alpha forced his attention to the vegetation at his feet. Other than their own intrinsic differences from *Destiny's* plants, the near view was not so different from that of his childhood forest. But he bluntly realized that his confined existence had ill conditioned him for the vast size of the planet. Could a childhood in such a confining, protective environment ever be overcome?

Would the others be able to make the necessary emotional adjustment? he wondered.

Would he?

A shove in the back reminded him that he blocked the view of his companions. He adjusted his pack and descended the few steps to the ground below. Looking back at the hatch he could see the faces of Columba and Sirius, crowding one another to take in the view he'd just relinquished.

It gave him some comfort to see the same bewilderment on their faces that he felt. He stood by the base of the ramp and offered a steadying hand to each as they descended. Sirius declined the offer, but Columba firmly grasped the offered hand.

He held Columba's trembling hand until she was

completely on solid ground. Then he noticed Sirius already standing a few meters further into the meadow. Sirius was holding a palm sized instrument centimeters from his face as his other hand pointed a probe in all directions. If the new world experience bothered Sirius, it wasn't apparent from the glee he exuded as he gathered technical data.

Columba's expression exhibited what Alpha personally felt. She leaned against the shuttle, her left hand still clinging to the ladder. Her face wasn't as white as it had been during their descent, but her arms were still visibly trembling.

He moved toward her. "Are you all right, Columba?"

Her mouth moved slightly, but she said nothing.

Slowly she was, as her extensive training in biology dictated, captivated by some thumb-sized crawling creatures at her feet. She knelt down to examine them. At that point Alpha decided that her innate curiosity would do her more good than his clumsy encouragement.

He realized it was time for him to apply his own training and responsibility to studying their environment. He tried to push the historic uniqueness of the mission from his mind.

Taking in the surroundings, he saw that the shuttle lay in a thirty meter diameter clearing dominated by the short ground cover. Further away, a type of low spreading tree peppered the region, some hardly larger than many of the taller shrubs. The trees further away had a fern like appearance, some easily rose to a height even beyond that of he and his companions.

Alpha motioned for his comrades and pointed toward the nearest tall plants. Soon they were immersed in a virtual forest of growth, the view of the sky sparse between the leaves. He found moving through the plants an easy task. They were spaced far enough apart to allow easy pas-

sage, and few vines or other stringy vegetation grew near the ground.

A flurry of motion at his feet made him nearly collide with a large fern. A stubby creature of armadillo size scurried from his path, waddling quickly away on six legs. It appeared to be covered with a bumpy, leathery skin that had a reptilian look. Had that been what he'd seen before? He wondered why the rabbit image had seemed so strong.

"Did you see that?" he asked. The view was so quick he'd hardly be able to describe it if the other's had missed it.

"I did, yes," Columba said. "It happened too fast for me to get a picture though."

Before the crew went another half kilometer, Alpha saw eight more of the armadillo sized reptiles. One of the creatures had its narrow snout firmly clamped on a large yellow insect. It looked like a fresh catch, and the creature carried its prize with it when startled away by the humans. A number of smaller reptile type creatures were also seen, looking similar to Earth lizards or salamanders, but with six legs and short tails.

"This is a lot more like Earth than I might have imagined," Alpha said, stepping aside to avoid squashing one of the foot long creatures. He looked at Columba for her reaction, but she didn't seem to hear.

"Columba, don't you agree?"

She was intently aiming her camera at a plant that Alpha didn't find particularly captivating.

"It's not as similar as you might expect, either," she finally said.

"Really? In what way is it significantly different?"

Columba pointed at the plant that she'd just photographed. "This, for example. Tell me what you see."

"A flower of some kind I guess. It's not exactly like

Earth flowers, I suppose. But it doesn't appear to be much different either."

"Look around you," Columba said, sweeping her arm in a circular motion.

Alpha did as Columba suggested, noticing more or less the same type of plants they'd been roaming through for the last half-hour. "What do you want me to see?"

"You don't see any other flowers, do you?"

Alpha made his rotational inspection once again.

"No, I guess not."

"You don't see a lot of flying insects either. A few of the rather large kind is all. Certainly nothing resembling beetles or bees. Nothing that would likely interact with flowering plants."

"True," Alpha said, looking around. "So?"

"Have you noticed the ground critters?"

Alpha pointed at one as evidence of his observance.

"Sure, like that crawler there. I've seen a few other types. Large worms, a few beetles. A few hopping creatures."

"Only a few other varieties, that's the point. I've counted less than two dozen different examples."

"Anything wrong in that?"

"No, not wrong. You asked what's different. I'm just pointing out the dissimilarity. I believe that Eden has had a much later start than Earth in developing life. Or things haven't progressed as rapidly here. Or perhaps the planet has gone through a major extinction event not so many millions of years ago. This life is Earth-like to an interesting degree, but a very early Earth."

"The plants are a primitive variety," she continued.

"Flowering is apparently a relatively recent development. A complex symbiotic relationship between flowering plants and flying critters has not yet occurred. The insects aren't specialized, nor are the plants. Everything is very basic."

Columba pointed at one of the lizard creatures wriggling a few meters away. “The larger creatures are primitive also. Most have six or more legs, indicating lack of any elaborate balance mechanism. They look ectothermic, cold blooded. I’d guess their metabolic processes are determined by environment. This being a fairly small continent surrounded by water keeps the temperature fairly stable, so there’s not much to force the ectothermic characteristics to evolve.”

“She’s probably right,” Sirius said. “Eden has a highly circular orbit, and the axis tilt is less than five degrees. Almost the entire planet is covered with water. That likely leads to a planet with little seasonal variation. These creatures may never develop the more complex metabolic mechanisms of Earth creatures. They just don’t need it.”

Alpha shook his head. The evolutionary complexities of the planet were not his specialty. If Columba wanted him to understand some point, she’d have to be more direct.

“So,” he said, “what does it mean? Can we live here, or not?”

Columba laughed. The first time he’d seen her relax enough to do so since they’d set foot in the shuttle.

“I’m not implying there’s a problem,” she said.

“We’re here as investigators. I’m simply telling you what I’ve observed. As a matter-of-fact, it looks quite good. If this is representative, we’ll be the only highly developed creatures on the planet, we and other Earth creatures that we’ve brought with us.”

Columba dropped her camera back into her thigh pocket. “But it does mean we’ll have to use extreme caution in seeding our varieties. Rather than the lowest common denominator, evolution is driven by the highest common denominator. The most advanced, voracious creatures control the system. We could easily introduce creatures that would

drive these into oblivion.”

Alpha finally understood what Columba was saying. “Then,” he said, “we’ll be careful. The zygotes of the more advanced Earth biology will have to wait.”

Satisfied that she’d made her point, Columba returned her attention to the surrounding flora and fauna. She made observations as she moved further into the forest of small trees.

Alpha followed, his mind filled with the images of strange creatures that may come from the union of Earth and Eden, if that were even possible.

He took meteorological measurements and pictures while following the trail for at least another half-hour. Now that Columba had pointed it out, he took note that there was little variety in either animals or plants. A few more varieties of flowering plants were discovered, but all indications were that they were the exception, not the rule.

Columba seemed enthusiastic about her work of cataloging the life forms. Sirius was absorbed in the geological aspects of the planet. As for Alpha, he was concentrating mostly on weather indicators and the gross geography. He was pleased that so far there seemed to be little that would seriously threaten them. It rather appeared the opposite, that they would have to guard against being the threat.

“There’s a clearing ahead,” Sirius shouted from his advanced vantage point. “Looks like a watering hole or small pond in the center of it.”

Shortly, Alpha and Columba came within sight of the pool. Sirius was standing near it. His hands were already manipulating some type of sensing instrument.

“Oh, that looks beautiful,” Columba said.

The pool lounged squarely in the center of the clearing, surrounded by the same pulpy, small plants near the shuttle. Flowering plants were more thickly scattered here,

giving an illusion that this was someone's private garden.

Columba approached the edge of the pool and stared into it. "You can see your reflection, just like a mirror," she said.

Alpha came up beside her and as she had reported, could see himself staring up from the surface. It seemed amazingly still, almost like a polished surface. The water was quite clear, and it looked like the bottom was lined with a velvety green floor. Some of the floor covering even extended out of the water at the pool's edge.

"Did you see that?" he asked.

"What?" Columba looked at Alpha.

"I thought I saw something swimming ... guess I was wrong." He dropped to one knee to better see beneath the water's surface, and reached his left hand into the water near the spot he thought he'd seen something move.

"Funny," he said. "This feels thicker than water. Kind of slippery, too." He pulled his hand from the liquid and examined the beads of moisture that still clung to his fingers.

"There," Columba said. "On the other side, one of the lizards crawled in."

Alpha stood and located the spotted green and yellow creature as long as his foot. It was swimming fluidly with its snout above the water.

Columba reached into her thigh pocket to retrieve her camera. She raised it to her eye to focus on the creature.

"Look at that," she said. "It's changing color."

"You mean like a chameleon?" Sirius asked.

"No. Look at it. It's like ... the water's affecting it."

As Alpha watched he saw the lizard's colors fading. It seemed to be thrashing now, rather than swimming. The thrashing grew more violent, then suddenly ebbed. The creature sank motionless to the bottom.

Alpha stared at the sinking carcass. "Did it drown?"

"No," said Columba, "I don't think so. I think ..."

she looked at Alpha with a shocked expression. "Let me see your hand."

Alpha held it up. It was turning red, and he began to feel an itching, burning sensation. He'd been so engrossed in the lizard's plight that he hadn't noticed before.

"What is it?" he asked. He suddenly felt very far from the shuttle.

Columba grabbed her canteen and doused the hand with water. She turned the hand over slowly, giving it a thorough examination, then doused it again.

"Acid," she said.

"What?"

Alpha tried to pull the limb back. Columba held on. She wriggled her shoulders to slide her pack loose. She fumbled one-handed inside it and retrieved a first aid kit. Sirius knelt to help open the kit, and Columba grabbed a tube of salve from its contents. She rubbed the salve liberally on Alpha's hand. She then wrapped it loosely in a bandage.

"We'd better get you back to the shuttle," she said.

"But ... what is it? What is this pond?"

"It's not a pond," she said, slipping the pack back into place. "I think it's a living thing, like a carnivorous plant. You've received an acid burn. It was digesting you. Let's go."

Alpha ran with his bandaged hand held against his chest. It didn't burn anymore, it felt numb. His imagination painted gruesome pictures of what he'd see when the wrapping was removed. He tried to keep his attention on the surrounding terrain, to notice the variations between it and what they'd covered on their exploration. Their current route was different than their approach, a more direct path being hurriedly blazed by Sirius.

“This way,” Sirius called from ahead. “This is shorter. Just over the next hill.”

Alpha stumbled along, poorly responding to Columba’s tug on his tunic. He jerkily responded to her course change. She suddenly stopped, looking down at her feet. Alpha nearly ran her over.

“What’s wrong,” he said slowly through a fogging mind.

She reached down and picked up a handful of something. It looked much like wood shavings. She held them in one hand and stirred them around with the other. Her head jerked up at another call from Sirius. She stuffed the material into her thigh pocket and pulled Alpha into motion again.

The external events seemed heavily filtered to him. Sounds were muffled, as if his ears were filled with cotton. His mouth was dry, and it was difficult to swallow. What he saw was a blur, a distortion that suddenly rose to hit him hard in the face when his numbing legs folded under him. He felt Columba helping him up, but he could manage only a rubbery stance. She pushed him to continue. Has Sirius said something about a shuttle being near, or had he dreamed it?

* * *

“...ha? Alpha? Do you hear me?”

Alpha struggled to open heavy eyelids. A bright ceiling loomed closely overhead, and a relentlessly shining light. His left hand twitched to cover his face, something held it in check. He responded by covering his eyes with his right hand.

“Don’t move your left arm,” an unsympathetic voice commanded.

Columba? Was it Columba? It seemed like her brusque manner.

“You’ll be fully awake soon, I’ve given you a stimulant. Try to relax, and quit thrashing around.”

Alpha rolled his head to the left and peeked through parted fingers. Yes, it was Columba. She frowned at him, as if he were guilty of some infraction.

“My hand,” he mumbled.

“It’s fine,” she said tersely. “The salve I applied stopped any further tissue damage. It also contained a strong anesthetic. That not only blocked the pain in your hand, but with our running, it got quickly into your bloodstream. That, and shock, is what knocked you out. I didn’t realize it would have such a pronounced effect.”

“Where am I?” Alpha was becoming aware of a gripping thirst.

“On the Destiny,” another female voice said. It seemed ... a more compassionate voice. He rolled his head to the right and saw Mira. “You’re in the dispensary,” she said.

Mira’s friendly smile slowly came into focus. Alpha tried to sit up. Mira helped by pulling his legs over the edge of the examination table.

He looked at his left arm. It was strapped to his chest and wrapped in a fresh bandage.

“Thirsty,” he said.

Columba handed him a large cup. “Drink this. Don’t mind the taste.”

Alpha put the cup to his lips. The first gulp caused a shudder that rippled through him. It was bitter, and warm. The second swallow wasn’t as bad. Feeling better, he began to remember the ordeal, up to the time he fell.

“You’ll be able to use the hand in a couple of days,” Columba said. “I strapped it down so you wouldn’t hurt it

in your sleep. You tossed around a lot. We can unstrap it now.”

Alpha finished the last of the bitter brew, his head shaking off the insult to his sense of taste. “Had dreams,” he said. “About Eden ... bad dreams.”

Columba took the cup from his feeble grip. “I can imagine.”

He rubbed his eyes and blinked at Columba. “Did you stop once, down there? Pick up something?”

“Interesting, you remember that. Yes, I did pick up something.” She pulled a small vial from her pocket and held it in front of him. “I picked up these.” She opened the vial.

Alpha leaned forward and peered at the revealing tube. It was as he remembered, wood shavings. “What is it? Don’t tell me there are beavers down there.”

“No, I doubt that.”

“What then?”

She poured out a few of the shavings and trickled them back into the vial. “These are very fine.”

“So? What made them?”

“I doubt these are the results of chewing.”

“Huh? What then?”

“I’d say tools. Not necessarily very sophisticated tools, but certainly not teeth.”

“Something down there is smart enough to use tools?”

“Isn’t it exciting,” Mira blurted. “There’s something down there with intelligence. At least a little intelligence.”

Alpha softly rubbed his bandaged hand. “I’m not sure that’s good news. If there’s something more highly evolved down there, it may not take kindly to our presence.”

“With the simplistic nature of the rest of the planet,” Columba said, “I don’t expect anything very sophisticated.”

The rest of the planet's life is just too primitive for that possibility."

Alpha stood shakily, steadying himself by leaning against the examination table. "That could be trouble too. Primitive intelligence of that sort could be violent. We may not be able to reason with it. Next time down, we've got to be better prepared."

* * *

"Right there," Sirius said. He jabbed a finger at the enlarged projection. "That's where we should go down next."

Alpha stood only centimeters from the screen, staring at the indicated spot "You seem so adamant. Why?"

"The lines. Don't you see them? They crisscross all over that area. I want to know what they are."

Alpha studied the image carefully. It was a large blowup of a section of the southern continent, about two kilometers nearer the coast than their first landing. Though it was of high resolution, from Destiny's orbital distance the lines were barely visible.

"Are you sure these aren't some optical artifact? Human eyes tend to manufacture patterns out of nothing more than dots."

"No," Sirius said. "They're lines all right. I've looked at dozens of images taken over several orbits. This phenomenon only occurs in certain locations, but always in those same locations. By averaging images I can tell they are definitely lines."

"Could be some geological structure, fault lines, maybe. Or migration trails of some animal."

"Maybe," Sirius said. "But these particular features are damned close to where we landed, where Columba

picked up the wood chips. Coincidences always bear investigating.”

Alpha backed away from the screen to get a broader view. He’d worked closely with Sirius on too many lab projects to doubt his intuition. Correlation seemed to be Sirius’ fascination. If Sirius thought there was one, Alpha knew he shouldn’t easily discount it.

He flexed his left hand, looking at the pinker tint of the healing flesh. “We’ll land there then. Procyon and Aldebaran can study the coastal area nearest there. Prepare two shuttles, and pack the gas guns this time.”

* * *

“See, I told you,” Sirius said. “It’s a path.”

Sirius’ face displayed the pensive look Alpha had seen so often. It meant that thoughts were racing through his brain ... alternatives, possibilities. Alpha had learned not to interfere with Sirius’ reasoning ingenuity. He waited quietly for Sirius to voice some conclusion.

“Fairly recent,” Sirius said. “See, it’s only packed dirt. These plants would overtake it in only a few weeks. Certainly in just a few months.”

Alpha kicked at the packed material, sending a clump of dark-colored earth flying. The trail was very narrow, not nearly as wide as the service paths aboard the *Destiny*. It looked as if it was surely made by the repeated pounding of feet. Not something that traveled in a herd, but something that traveled more single file.

“It looks like a migration trail to me,” he said. “The armadillos maybe?”

Columba took several photographs. “I don’t think so. We’ve seen several of them, but not in groups. They seem to be solitary animals. And we saw nothing like this where we landed before.”

“Surely not something smaller,” Alpha said, thinking aloud.

“No,” Columba said. “Couldn’t be smaller. Something bigger. Something that always goes over the same paths. They might travel together, but not necessarily.”

“Could it be something more civilized?” Alpha asked. “Maybe these are trade routes. Maybe there’s a primitive society down here.”

“I don’t believe that either,” Sirius said. “Even from orbit we’d have seen signs of any societal dwellings. All we’ve seen, other than arbitrary patches of plants and barren areas, are these trails.”

“And the area with wood shavings,” Columba reminded. “I still say this is from some creature that travels habitually over the same trails. Something primitive, but creatures that may move around together, following one another and making these paths.”

“The same animals that made the wood chips?” Alpha asked.

Columba took another photograph. “Right now there’s no way to tell. I’ve seen nothing that would tie those two things together. But this is at least as interesting. Let’s follow it and see where it goes.”

Alpha placed his hand on the hilt of his gas gun. “What if we run into a bunch of them, whatever they are? It could be more than we can handle.”

Sirius knelt and examined the packed earth closely. “That shouldn’t be a problem,” he said. “See? You’re weight compresses the soil significantly deeper. That means that whatever they are, they’re smaller than we are. And as you said, there’s no sign of any real sophistication. We shouldn’t be in any significant danger.”

Alpha waited for confirmation from Columba. His still healing hand told him that over-confidence could make

complicated look awfully simple.

Columba agreed, but with little conviction. “The other life forms seem very primitive, and docile. Remember what I said about the fiercest creature setting the pace for survival? There doesn’t seem to be much of a pace here.”

“You’re assuming the worst, Alpha,” Sirius said. “All we see is a simple trail. We don’t have any reason to suspect that whatever made it is violent. It could be a plant eater, like a small cow, or deer. This could be as innocuous as ... a rabbit trail.”

Alpha could sense the mood of his comrades. This was a mystery, and they wanted to investigate it. It should be safe enough, they were armed with gas guns. But he couldn’t shake the feeling he’d had when he first glimpsed the armadillo sized reptile, and how it contrasted with the furry little creature he’d first imagined. While he pondered the wisdom of the idea, he saw Sirius proceed along the trail without waiting for his agreement.

Alpha nervously looked for any sign of danger. He noticed that Sirius, now a hundred meters ahead, had stopped moving.

“What is it?” Alpha shouted. “Something wrong?”

Sirius stood silent until Alpha and Columba approached. He pointed at a spot a few meters ahead. “The path splits up. See, it goes off in three directions.”

“Well,” Columba said, “there’s three of us. Seems easy enough to figure.”

Alpha touched Columba’s arm. “Just a minute. I think we’re safer together.”

“It’ll take us forever that way,” Sirius said. “We’re armed, I thought we already discussed that. I say we split up, and keep radio contact. Whatever we find certainly doesn’t have gas guns and radios.”

“I agree,” Columba said. “We’ll certainly find an-

swers quicker that way.”

Alpha chewed his lower lip. He wished the leadership question had been answered once and for all. Not that he particularly wanted it, but this sure seemed like the time for someone to make an important, if unpopular decision.

He waved them onward, seeing that it was their intention. “Okay, we split. Use channel one, report every fifteen minutes.” He gave each of the others a serious stare, hoping that his minimal authority would at least get them to respect his caution.

Each agreed. Alpha chose the center path, and kept walking. Arguing would do no good here. This would have to be settled later, on board the Destiny.

* * *

“Dead end,” Alpha muttered. “Just my luck.” His chronometer indicated he’d been following the rambling path for nearly twenty-five minutes just to come up empty-handed. Maybe the others were right. If they’d all followed this path, nothing would have been learned. Still, this was a mystery in its own right, a trail that seemed to just thin out to nothing.

“Columba reporting,” his radio crackled. “This path seems to be petering out. Any luck with you two?”

“This is Alpha. Dead end here too. I’m turning back. Any luck Sirius?”

Alpha waited, but the radio remained silent.

“Sirius? Please report.”

Nothing.

Alpha felt a pang of trepidation. “Columba, have you heard from Sirius?”

“Negative. I”

After the brief pause, Alpha only heard what sounded like moans and a rasping cough from his radio. Had some-

thing happened to Columba? Or, was Sirius clobbering her signal?

“Columba? Come in. Are you all right?”

He gripped the radio tightly, as if he could squeeze something other than the distressing groans from it.

“Damn,” Alpha said, staring at the device. Whoever was on the unit had their transmit key pressed. They certainly couldn’t hear, and anyone else listening would hear Alpha’s signal scrambled. He wasn’t even sure if the noise was from Columba, or Sirius.

He listened to more moans, his heart pounding. He wanted to rush to the person’s aid. But who’s aid? And where?

He hurriedly fumbled with the buttons to select the next channel.

It was clear.

“Columba? Sirius? Come in. Come in.”

“Damn,” he muttered. If anyone was to hear him, they must come to the same conclusion and switch channels. He switched briefly back to channel one, the gurgling moans continued. Back to channel two.

“...ha? Alpha? Do you copy?”

Columba’s voice.

“This is Alpha. Is that you Columba?”

“Yes. I had to switch channels. There’s distressing sounds on channel one clobbering communications. Oh Alpha, it must be Sirius.”

“Meet me back at the junction,” Alpha said. “Then we’ll follow Sirius’ trail. Hurry.”

Alpha jogged a few steps, then broke into a full run.

Chapter 6

“**L**ook out,” Procyon shouted.

Aldebaran ducked just in time to avoid the dive of a large, screeching creature. She watched as the leathery beast flew away, its wingspan easily twice as broad as her own outstretched arms.

“Did that thing dive at me?”

“I’m not sure,” said Procyon. “I just know we shouldn’t have come down here. It’s too dangerous.”

“Calm down,” Aldebaran said. “That’s the only thing we’ve seen that shows any aggressive tendencies at all. Other than that it’s been just the small reptiles and insects reported by Columba. About the most aggressive thing we’ve seen is a lizard eating a worm. Actually, the whole thing is kind of puzzling.”

“Puzzling?”

“The creature mix here. I was perplexed when I read Columba’s notes. I’m finding my own species counts even stranger than she reported.”

Procyon dropped his apprehensive gaze from the creature that was now out of sight. "Strange in what way?"

"Predators. I don't see any."

"The lizards are predators," Procyon said. "You just said you saw one eat a worm."

"But what eats the lizards? Look around. They're all over the place, in sizes ranging from your little finger to a large rabbit. But for the life of me, I haven't seen signs of anything that eats them."

"Why does anything have to eat them?"

"It just happens that way. Evolution is a matter of filling niches. If there is an ample food supply of some kind, you can bet something will evolve to eat it. I can't tell for sure, but I agree with Columba that these creatures look ectothermic. If so, the predator ratio should be over thirty percent. Even if they're endothermic, the ratio should be a few percent." She held out her arms with palms turned up. "Look around. Do you see any lizard eaters?"

"Maybe they're just lucky," Procyon said in a joking tone. "Maybe evolution hasn't caught up with them yet."

"But if nothing eats them, why don't we see signs of over population, famine, cannibalism, or a shortage of insects? They seem to be simply fat and happy. Somehow there seems to be a magical balance. They don't over populate, but nothing seems to be keeping that from happening. I don't understand it."

Procyon cocked his head in thought. Is this important? he wondered. Not nearly as important as getting out of here, he decided.

Without the security of Destiny's confines, he was in near terror. He decided that as soon as he returned to the Destiny, he was going to seek out Mira. She had often voiced the opinion of living aboard the Destiny. Maybe the two of them could convince the others. For his part, he had

no interest in a dangerous struggle to live on the planet. What would be the point? To satisfy the misguided dreams of Dr. Friedman?

He was jarred from his morose rumination by a partially heard comment from Aldebaran.

“Huh?” he asked.

“I said I want to go down to the shore. I can see the water from here, and I want to investigate the beach area. Why don’t you come along?”

Procyon shaded his eyes with his hands and stared toward the coast. He could see the water between the leaves of the nearby ferns. He shuddered at the thought. The idea of a body of water bigger than the entire world he’d grown up in was scary, not interesting. At least here, the nearness of large plants provided some sense of limited dimension. He’d learned not to look into the sky. It went on forever, something he could not fathom. He couldn’t imagine standing at the shoreline with nothing but water for as far as he could see.

“Uh, no ... thanks. I’m going to explore around here, check out the mineral distribution.”

“Suit yourself. We’ll keep in touch with radio.”

She disappeared through the ferns, following a steep downward slope to the beach.

Procyon stood perfectly motionless. He squeezed his eyes closed and tried to imagine himself back aboard the *Destiny*.

This is impossible, he thought. How am I going to survive this? His faith in a coalition with Mira slipped away. He knew Alpha wouldn’t let them stay aboard the *Destiny*. But he also feared he would lose his life or his sanity on the planet.

“We’ll all die if we keep coming down here,” he said.

Procyon opened his eyes and noticed two tall plants

growing close together. He nearly ran to sit between the two trunks, their nearness giving him some comfort. He closed his eyes and tried to breath slowly. He desperately struggled to fill his mind with scenes from the Destiny, the compound, his bungalow, anything to give him an edge against his mounting fear.

* * *

Aldebaran swaggered through the cool sand of the beach, her boots held in her hand. She stood and watched the waves lap at her feet. It's wonderful, she thought. She'd seen such Earth scenes on videos, but there was nothing like this aboard the Destiny. At best all they had were a few small ponds.

She flinched as a shadow of one of the flying creatures flitted along the sand in front of her. She looked up in time to see the creature dive close to the water, it's long snout scooping a flopping apparition from the waves.

Several of the creatures were circling nearby. It was apparent that they hunted the shallow coastal waters. Further inland she could see far fewer of them. Apparently the one that had swooped at her was out of it's normal habitat. I must have been a puzzling sight that needed a closer look, she thought.

She watched as another of the creatures swooped and captured its prey. The action was normal enough, but it still left her with the question: what fed on the land animals, which seemed to grow in abundance but not overabundance?

She walked further along the beach watching the feeding ritual, but could never clearly see any of the sea creatures. Then she noticed that some of the large ferns near the beach were broken. They looked out of place among the healthy plants spanning the rest of the beach.

She wondered if a whirlwind could have damaged them, or perhaps a large animal. The last thought enticed her to examine them in more detail. Maybe there were some predators on the planet, big enough to fell large plants.

When she got to the broken ferns and looked down at the tracks in the sand, she stood aghast.

“This can’t be,” she said.

* * *

Procyon cycled the discouraging facts through his mind again, reaching the same dire conclusion. Mira wanted to stay on the Destiny. He did too, much more than anyone would ever realize. But Mira was in love with Alpha. She’d do what Alpha wanted, in spite of any arguments Procyon proposed.

There was no one else he could convince. Sirius was like one of the mums, a pure data collection entity. He wouldn’t be denied a chance to study Eden. Alpha was philosophical, still operating on Dr. Friedman’s dream. And Auriga was a soldier, following Alpha’s orders.

His only chance for an ally was among the girls, and they didn’t particularly like him. Vega caught his eye the most, but she seemed more interested in Auriga. Besides, she was an adventurer. Eden would be her ultimate adventure. Aldebaran was fascinated with the chance to study evolution at work in a new environment. She couldn’t see the danger, and even if she did she’d only think it interesting. And Columba, she wasn’t political. She wouldn’t take sides on other than technical grounds.

It was an impossible situation. The occupants of Destiny would come willingly to Eden, come to die, and he couldn’t stop them. Was there no way they could be convinced?

“Procyon?” Aldebaran’s voice sounded from nearby.

He jumped to his feet. She must be coming back.

“Here,” he shouted, feeling a twinge of excitement at her coming. He’d been alone too long. Maybe he should try once again to convince her.

Aldebaran’s slightly haggard face thrust through the dense vegetation. She caught sight of him and smiled.

“Find anything interesting?” she said panting.

“No, nothing.”

“Well, I did. You should come and see it.”

“Uh ... can’t you tell me about it? We should be heading back, you know.”

“I’d rather show you, and I thought you’d prefer to come to the beach with someone rather than alone.” Aldebaran looked insistent. “You look pale. Are you all right?”

Procyon furled his brow and took a deep breath.

“I’m fine. I just think we should head back.”

Aldebaran glanced upward. “Looks like several more hours of daylight left. Come on, I want to show you something. I want to get your first impression without any explanation from me. Then we’ll go.”

Procyon hesitated. He took another deep breath, wriggled his shoulders in a vain effort to relax, and took a few steps toward the slopes that descended to the shore. Aldebaran followed closely.

Procyon stalled when he came to a cliff. A treacherous drop off fell to the left. He tried to move back, but was too frightened to move.

Aldebaran motioned to the right. “This way,” she said. “It’s steep, but I made it before.”

She brushed past him and took a few steps down the slope. She stopped and waited for him to follow.

“Come on,” she said. “I thought you were in a hurry.”

“I ... can’t.”

Aldebaran came back up the slope and stood beside him. "You'd feel better if you moved away from the cliff."

She put a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Don't," he shouted. He slapped her hand away. In the process he nearly lost his balance.

Aldebaran grabbed at him to push him to safety.

He shoved at her to keep from falling.

Her face distorted in shock.

She went over the edge.

She screamed.

"No," Procyon cried. He took several steps back from the precipice. Aldebaran was gone. Her scream abruptly stopped.

He stood still for minutes, afraid to move. Finally, he took slow, deliberate steps toward the cliff. When close he crept on hands and knees to view the rough terrain below.

The contorted body of Aldebaran was disturbingly visible at the rocky base. Watching intently, he could see no movement.

He held his head and sobbed. "No. This can't happen. Aldebaran. Please be okay."

Procyon stared at the motionless form, trying to will life into the body. He retched, coughing the vile remnants of despair from his body. He stayed several minutes on his hands and knees, shaking and sobbing.

"I didn't mean it," he wailed. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone."

Starkly alone with his despair, he finally accepted the fact that Aldebaran wasn't going to move. He stood on trembling legs and turned away from the repulsive sight, staggering stiff-legged toward the high ground.

What will they do to me? he wondered. He looked back at the scene of their struggle, and grimaced to hold back another sob. I only wanted to get away from the cliff.

Aldebaran shouldn't have grabbed me. She should have stayed away.

What will the others think?

He moved clumsily to place more distance between him and the dreadful scene. Blundering on, he often looked back instead of where he was going.

His feet picked up momentum. He carelessly ran, his eyes compelled to look back. His arms waved wildly as he stumbled on. He fell and scraped against the rugged bark of a small tree, hitting the ground hard and striking his face on a rock.

He sat whimpering, holding his bruised arm, blood oozing from scratches on his face.

I've got to get away, far away.

Procyon staggered to his feet, pulled his eyes from the sight of the cliff, and fled. He stumbled again, banged a knee, stood once more, ignored the injuries and ran on.

He ran until his sides hurt, until his legs were numb, until he fell in an exhausted, sobbing heap.

He lay with his arms extended, his face in the dirt, panting for breath.

He abruptly held a gasp. "What was that?" Quickly raising to his knees, he listened acutely. Was something after him? Some creature? A large animal?

Procyon struggled to his feet again, and forced the tired legs to carry him further into the thick vegetation. He stopped, breathing hard. He tried listening again.

Aldebaran? Maybe it's Aldebaran.

He turned to the direction of his retreat. "Aldebaran? Is that you? I didn't mean it Aldebaran. Do you understand? I didn't mean it."

He took a deep breath, held it, and listened.

Now he could hear nothing.

Procyon staggered forward, his emotions as senseless

as his legs. His sobbing stopped. He no longer felt anything. He simply walked.

The coarse leaves of the ferns brushed repeatedly against his scratched face. He didn't see them ... or feel them. He just kept moving.

His aimless excursion finally brought him back to the cliff's edge. No longer feeling remorse, he simply stared down at Aldebaran's shattered body.

Moments before he had struggled with the meaning of the disaster. At first he felt that it was his fault, that somehow he was to blame for Aldebaran's death. Then he reasoned that it was simply an accident. It could have happened to anyone. Maybe she even fell on her own.

Now he realized the real truth. It wasn't an accident. It wasn't his fault. It was simply a consequence. A tragic consequence of the Destiny crew coming to an alien planet. They had no right here. The planet would eventually destroy them all, as it had Aldebaran.

He didn't know who the planet would destroy next. It could be any one of them. All that mattered now was to prove to the others the dismal fate the planet held in store.

No longer driven by fear, Procyon studied the area, and clambered down the steep slope until he got to the bottom. He worked his way over numerous rocks and boulders until he stood where Aldebaran lay.

He stared at her without emotion. Her eyes were glazed over. Blood had trickled from her mouth and nose, but was now dry upon her skin. Her blank eyes stared upward.

"I told you," he said. "I told you we shouldn't have come here. I told you it was dangerous, but you wouldn't listen."

He knelt beside her and touched her outstretched hand. It was cold, the fingers stiff. He pulled away.

He started to unfasten her backpack to take as proof that something had happened to her. Sitting beside her he tried to decide: should he carry her back? Was there any point in returning a dead body to the Destiny? What good would it do? They couldn't return her life. The only thing it would do is demonstrate that she died.

They'll probably think that she just slipped and fell. They'd miss the whole point. They wouldn't understand that the same inevitable fate awaited them all.

There has to be something I can do, he thought.

Procyon studied Aldebaran's face. It was badly cut and bruised from smashing into sharp rocks on the way down. He looked around him. The area was littered with jagged rocks. An idea stirred, a way he could convince the others of Eden's malevolence.

The idea began to solidify. He stood and surveyed the area. Only a few paces away was what he needed. A dagger-length rock with a very sharp and jagged edge.

He picked it up and walked back to Aldebaran.

* * *

Procyon struggled to carry Aldebaran's stiff body. His arms ached, but he was not yet where he wished to be. He needed to get away from the cliff, away from the rocks. As much as he dreaded it, he must get closer to the ocean's shore.

He finally came to the edge of the vegetation, the sands of the beach stretching out before him. Some fear returned as he stood blankly staring at the expansive sea ahead. He gently laid Aldebaran down in the thinning vegetation.

He felt badly now. Not guilty. Not that he had anything to do with the tragedy. But he liked Aldebaran, and certainly didn't wish this disastrous end for her. The face

that had been so lovely was barely recognizable now. He wished he knew something profound to say over her remains.

Procyon had studied philosophy aboard the *Destiny*. He'd studied the history and concepts of many religions. Though many facts were presented, he'd never understood what all the mental and emotional thrashing was about.

As he looked at Aldebaran's lifeless form, he began to understand why Earth humans had struggled so hard to come to terms with a maker. His mind was devoid of anything to say on her behalf. He now wished he'd taken the lessons more seriously.

"I'm sorry ... Aldebaran," was all he could manage.

Procyon tenderly touched her face, hoping she'd understand what he must now do. He arranged her body to look a little more comfortable. Then he pulled the dagger-shaped rock from his pocket.

He sat quiet at Aldebaran's side for several minutes. Finally he took a few deep breaths, and apologized once again for what he was about to do.

"This is necessary," he said. "I didn't want you to die. But your death has to mean something. I'm doing this to save the others, do you understand? To save the others."

He used the rock to disfigure her body even more, slashing and slashing until he began to cry. He scooted back, turned away, and cut his own arm and leg.

Procyon stood on the bleeding leg and took a few staggering steps toward the shore. He kept his eyes down to avoid the vertigo the limitless scene would cause him. He stepped again and again until he could hear the waves gurgling at the shore.

He stopped and looked up quickly at the water. Trembling, he heaved the rock as far as he could into the green-tinted waves.

“Ow. That hurts,” Procyon said loudly.

“Sorry,” Vega said with little compassion.

She poured more antiseptic on his leg wound, wasting little effort to be gentle.

Mira paced the floor a few meters away. Procyon followed her with his eyes, his head tipped forward. If his plan presented him any regret, it was the devastating effect this would have on Mira, Aldebaran’s close friend.

“I can’t believe it,” Mira said with a wavering voice. “Aldebaran is ... dead?”

Procyon sighed. “I’m sure she must be,” he said. “I didn’t see her again.”

Mira’s clinched fists revealed whitened knuckles. “Tell me again, what happened?”

Procyon avoided her gaze. “Aldebaran and I landed near the western coast. We climbed part way down a slope to the shore. She was studying the animal life there, and I was cataloging the mineral distribution. I knew we should be staying closer together, but she wandered off. We were only a few hundred meters apart. I heard her scream.”

He shuddered, remembering the expression on Aldebaran’s face when he last saw her alive.

“I ran to her as fast as I could. Her scream, it was terrible. When I got there, a ... monster was chasing her, slashing at her with its large claws.”

“Monster?”

“It looked something like a ... deinonychus I guess, over two meters high, with savage claws and vicious looking teeth. It stood erect, and would lunge with its claws extended. I yelled at it, but it wouldn’t stop. I ran closer. It ... slashed at her again. It knocked her down. I shot it with my gas gun, three times. It didn’t stop.”

Mira's troubled face shook in disbelief. "The darts had no effect?"

"None," he said emphatically. "I picked up a rock and threw it. It finally noticed me and took chase. I ran. I tried to get up the slope to get away from the shore. It was terrifying. It caught up with me once and knocked me down easily with a glancing blow." He pointed at his injured arm and leg.

"Then?"

"I rolled away, got to my feet, and ran some more. I fell down the slope once and hit some rocks. It hurt, but I got up and was able to reach the top ahead of the creature. I moved into heavy cover. It had trouble keeping up in the heavier vegetation, but I couldn't see as well either. I fell a few times. I landed hard once. That knocked the wind out of me, I could barely breathe for awhile. I just stayed still ... stunned. I was sure the creature would get me, but I guess I'd lost it by then."

"And Aldebaran?"

"When I finally came back toward the attack site, the creature was gone. I looked for Aldebaran, but I couldn't find her. I was getting weak from blood loss. I flew the shuttle back to warn you. You must understand, there are vicious beasts down there. We can't safely go to the planet."

Vega finished fastening a bandage over the leg wound. "That should hold you." she said. "But I don't understand it. I studied Columba's photos and the report of her first landing. There was nothing indicating vicious creatures, quite the opposite."

Procyon's jaws tightened. "She landed further inland. Maybe the more vicious ones stay near the coast. We've barely begun to explore." He placed his hands over his ears. "I can't explain it," he nearly shouted. "I only know what I saw, and wish I'd never seen it."

“We’ve got to get back down there,” said Auriga.
“We’ve got to see if we can find her.”

Mira struggled to speak. “Yes,” she finally said.

“I’ll equip the shuttle,” Auriga said. “I’ll get the most powerful darts we have.” He left at a rapid walk, Mira jogged to keep up.

Vega seemed to show little emotion, other than perplexed glances. Procyon noticed them with some discomfort. She would be the toughest one to fool. He had hoped his battered condition and horrifying story would make the point he sought, but it looked like they must check things out for themselves. Let it be so, he thought. Poor Aldebaran’s body will surely shock them into another debate, and stop the needless death that awaited them all.

“Was there only the one creature you saw?” Vega asked.

“Yes.” Procyon avoided her direct gaze.

“Did you see any tracks, or any other signs of the creature before it showed up?”

He shook his head and covered his eyes with a hand to feign a sob.

Mira came back into the room. “Auriga nearly has the shuttle ready to go. We’ll need you, Vega.”

“Procyon, are you coming?” Vega asked.

Procyon flinched at the question. He knew it was a possibility, perhaps a likelihood that they would ask him along. But he hadn’t faced the question until now. Leaving the protective confines of Destiny was something he had no desire to do again, ever.

“I ... don’t think I can go back.” His mind raced. Why hadn’t he worked out this part of his plan? He couldn’t face the planet again. Yet they must find Aldebaran’s body or she truly will have died for nothing. They might not find it without his help. But that would mean

he'd have to face the horror again.

"We need you," Vega said.

The blunt comment jarred him from his indecisive spiral.

Vega motioned. "You have to show us exactly where the attack took place."

He wiped moisture from his brow with a nervous hand. "I don't think you'll find her ... alive. You may all get killed."

Mira looked at Procyon, her face cast in an unaccustomed veil of sorrow. "Aldebaran is my friend," she said. "I must find her, alive ... or not. I can't stay up here knowing that she may need me. Are you going to help us?"

Procyon closed his eyes, the image of Aldebaran's last expression haunted his memory. He shook his head at the relentless vision. He opened his eyes suddenly, and saw Mira's tear stained face still staring at him.

Yes, he thought to himself. He'd have to be brave. He'd have to go back, and make sure they found Aldebaran. Then they'd believe him and share his fear.

"I ... I'll go."

* * *

"This is it," Procyon said shakily. "I fell down there when I was trying to climb up here." He looked down at the steep incline to the shore.

"That's quite a slope," Auriga said. "You're lucky you didn't get killed."

Procyon swallowed hard. "I didn't fall from here, but further down when I was trying to climb."

"Where were you when you heard the screams?" Vega asked.

"Down there," He pointed toward the shoreline.

"Then I climbed up here and ran back that way."

Vega examined the area carefully. “There’s human tracks all over,” she said. “Looks like we found the right place.”

“The attack was in that direction.” Procyon pointed to an area down the slope and to the right. He looked up to locate the sinking brilliance of Tau Ceti. Twilight was coming soon and it made him glad. It would make Vega’s snooping more difficult. But he also knew it didn’t leave him much time to lead them to Aldebaran’s body.

Vega started to examine the area where Procyon had cowered. He grew nervous as the others followed. It was the wrong way.

“Wait,” he shouted. “You won’t find her there. This isn’t where we were attacked.”

“Show us where.” Auriga said. He pointed to the pending sunset. “We don’t have much time.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” Procyon argued. “You won’t find anything that way. It all happened further down. Somewhere near the beach.”

“Which way did it look like she was dragged?” Mira asked.

“Seaward,” Procyon said pointing. “I followed the marks for awhile, but my leg was bleeding, and I was feeling pretty bad. That’s when ...”

“When you decided to go back to Destiny,” Auriga said.

“Yes. But the marks were headed toward the sea.”

“I’d say we’ve less than an hour of daylight,” Auriga said. “Let’s go down to the shore and see if we can pick up tracks. We can split up down there.”

“Split up?” Procyon shivered. “Won’t that be dangerous?”

“He could be right,” said Mira.

Vega headed down the path to the sea. “We’ll split

into two groups,” she said over her shoulder. “I’ll go with Procyon, and you two can go together. No one will go alone.”

Auriga quickly followed, motioning for Mira. Procyon hesitated, then fell in behind Auriga. Soon, he thought, it will all be over.

* * *

Vega set a rapid pace. Procyon kept his eyes on the ground in front of him as he followed. He glanced up occasionally to see where Mira and Auriga were searching. Once they must have been only a few meters from Aldebaran, but they didn’t find her. He worried that some predator had dragged her away.

Procyon could see the area where he’d left Aldebaran’s body, but he felt it would be better if Auriga or Mira made the find. If they didn’t soon, he’d have to maneuver Vega near enough that she would make the gruesome discovery.

“C’mon,” Vega said. “Quit lagging behind.”

“Coming,” Procyon muttered. He looked back at the fateful spot. His heart jumped. He got a glimpse of Mira’s red hair through the ferns. Perhaps ...

Mira let out a shriek. Procyon cringed at the chilling sound. Poor Mira, it had to be Mira.

“What is it?” Vega shouted.

She ran toward Mira, Procyon on her heels.

Mira stood with her hands at her mouth. Auriga knelt beside the ravaged body of Aldebaran, barely recognizable but for her soft blonde hair.

Vega moved to comfort Mira. Procyon took small pleasure that even the smug Vega had trouble viewing the carnage. He looked, but could only see the shocked expression Aldebaran had as she toppled backward over the ledge.

“Help me get her up,” Auriga said.

“Huh?” Procyon asked.

“Help me pick her up. We’re taking her home.”

Procyon stood motionless. He couldn’t touch her again. He saw Mira in tears. Vega patted her arm, then helped Auriga pick up Aldebaran’s body. Auriga carried her tenderly, leading the way back toward the shuttle.