

DILEMMAS

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost (1875–1963) US poet. *The Road Not Taken*

Prologue

[Voice of Devon Adair]

Day 52 on the planet. Alonzo just returned with Julia, whom we left behind. And I've to decide if we take her back. The group is strongly opposed. We made our choice yesterday; we voted to leave her. Can we go back on this vote now? Can I forgive her for betraying my dream?

Yale is right; my first concern **has** to be for the group. Our survival depends on our cohesion. But Alonzo vowed he won't leave Julia. So it has come to this: forsake a few or forfeit them all. And it is my call to make...

As Alonzo waits breathlessly for my decision I play for time.

"It's not **your** word I'm concerned about," I tell him. I look around, desperately hoping for someone or something to intervene, to prevent me from making a choice. My prayers are answered when Morgan Martin opens his mouth.

"How dare you even suggest we take her back? The woman's nuts; she works for the Council. She tied me to a tree for crying out loud!"

Alonzo turns on the government liaison, frustrated anger radiating from him. And the moment has passed; the decision's been made for me...

Part 1

[Julia's narration]

Their angry voices drifted toward where I crouched on the seat of the ATV. The group stood gathered at a distance, on the edge of the camp. I didn't dare look at them directly, afraid to catch their hostile glares. It was still early in the morning; the sun had only just come up.

We arrived at the campsite only moments ago, having traveled all night. Alonzo went to talk to the group, but judging by what I heard it didn't go well. I cringed miserably at hearing their anger. As I suspected, they didn't want me to come back. I couldn't blame them; I betrayed their trust and their confidence. Experimenting with Uly's DNA. Tying Morgan Martin to a tree. And Devon... I shuddered when I remembered I'd nearly killed the woman.

Yes, they probably had the right idea when they abandoned me. I was a menace to myself and to the Eden project. I'd seen my dark side and it scared me to death. Alonzo's mercy only heightened my suffering.

Alonzo... how could any one man harness so much kindness? I treated him so badly, deceived him; I must've hurt him. Still, he came back; he held me close as the terror of being completely alone on a hostile planet subsided in his presence. No one's ever believed in me the way Alonzo did. He was a shoulder to cry on during the long night and an ear that patiently listened as I stammered through my story.

I snapped out of my reverie when Alonzo came stomping back to the ATV. A large knapsack full of rations and other materials was slung over his shoulder and his eyes seethed with anger. He flung the sack in the ATV and motioned for me to climb back on.

"Of all the people to speak..." he muttered beneath his breath.

"Alonzo, what..." I tried.

"Shut up!" he snapped as he turned the ATV, too furious to see how his harsh words affected me.

oOo

The rest of the day we didn't say much to each other. Instead we drove around aimlessly. Alonzo was still upset; I could tell by the taut set of his shoulders in front of me as he steered the vehicle. And I, I felt miserable. At first I thought it was guilt that made me feel sick but as the day progressed I felt worse and worse. At last I couldn't hide it anymore.

"Alonzo?" I called in his ear. "Please stop."

He halted the vehicle and I jumped off. Just in time too because when my feet touched the ground my stomach heaved and I threw up violently. Concerned and his earlier anger forgotten, Alonzo climbed out of the ATV and approached me.

"Julia?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

I was unable to speak and motioned him to stay away, until at last the spasms abated and I could draw air again. Wordlessly Alonzo handed me a water flask and I rinsed my mouth, spitting out the first mouthful, before drinking a few gulps.

Shakily I got to my feet. Black spots danced in front of my eyes and I swayed as the world threatened to go dark. Alonzo sprang forward to support me.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I don't think I can travel any more today."

"I can see that," he said dryly. "What's wrong with you? Do you even know?"

"Yes," I replied and leaned on the ATV. "I think I'm going through what they used to call 'cold turkey' in the 20th century."

"The Terrian DNA?" he asked, referring to my injections with Uly's spinal fluid. I nodded.

Alonzo built a small fire and I slumped next to it. My nerves screamed with the pain of withdrawal. And while the fierce shivers racked my body Alonzo held me close. But despite his nearness I never felt so lost, so utterly out of place as I did that night. The last of the alien DNA was purged from my body. And with it my sense of belonging on this planet disappeared. It was a feeling that I'd known since I first injected myself with Uly's DNA.

oOo

The next morning we discussed our options. Alonzo wanted to follow the larger group. He was certain that in time they would forgive me. I was too confused and put out to argue much. My heart still ached for that sense of belonging, found and lost. I tried to tell him he shouldn't stay with me; he should go back and rejoin the others, move on to New Pacifica and back to the stations. I was the one cast out, not him. I assured him I'd be okay somehow on my own; yet I knew full well that if he did leave me I would probably just sit there, too weary to move and waiting for death to come for me.

Alonzo flatly refused to even talk about it.

"They'll come around," he assured me.

Part 2

[Alonzo's narration]

Over the following days we continued the journey together, just the two of us, driving the ATV. I was angry with the group for casting Julia out. I was mad at myself for responding so rashly to Morgan's accusations - if I had kept my peace just a few moments longer... It was no use thinking about what might've been though. It had happened and Julia and I were alone, left to fend for ourselves.

We followed the trail of the larger group; the 'Rover left a clear track through the gently sloping hills. At night we shared the cramped space of a single tent. At first it was a little awkward; Julia didn't remember anything about the night we spent together, so naturally she was a little embarrassed. I tried to put her at ease by keeping my distance. Right now she needed a friend more than she needed a lover. And I was confident our friendship would evolve into something else when she was ready - if we lived long enough...

I was concerned about our chances for survival during the long trek. I was glad that at least the group let us keep the ATV, without it we wouldn't have stood a chance. And Julia still had her diablo, which helped finding edible vegetation so we could preserve our rations. I think Julia worried even more than I did. Yet we didn't speak much about it.

All our days passed in the same way. In the morning we struck down the tent and packed the ATV. We drove for a few hours, stopping at midday to eat lunch. Preferably berries or mushrooms we gathered during the morning, but more often than not we stilled our hunger with the tasteless semolina bars. By dusk we set up our tent and after a quick meal of more semolina we crept into our sleeping bags, too exhausted to set a night watch.

[Julia's narration]

On the tenth day of our exile, we noticed movement in the distance. When the small moving dot got bigger, we recognized the yellow DuneRail, Danziger at the wheel. Hope flared in my mind, only to be doused by the tense look on the man's face. Alonzo, noticing the same thing, clenched his teeth determinedly.

"Danziger," he acknowledged our visitor curtly.

"Alonzo, Julia," Danziger greeted us in return, "how're you holding up?"

Genuine concern rang in his voice and Alonzo relaxed a little.

"Okay, I guess, considering," he replied. "How long have you known we followed your trail?"

"Oh," Danziger said, "I suspected from the start. What else could you've done? I kept it quiet from the others though. Uhm...", he hesitated uncomfortably. "We... eh... we set up winter camp, we found a Biodome. It's deserted but still fully functional. We'll stay there until the weather changes. I would invite you to join us, but... eh... that's still somewhat unthinkable to most of the group."

My face fell upon hearing his words. Despite everything I hoped against hope that Alonzo and I would be welcomed back in the group. If not for my sake, at least for his. Winter was approaching fast, what were we going to do without proper shelter?

"I found a cave," I heard Danziger continue, "about two clicks north of the Dome. It looks like it's an abandoned Grendler cave. It's sheltered from the wind and the snows; I think you and Julia will be okay there."

A long silence followed. I cleared my throat.

"Thank you, John," I said softly. Alonzo squeezed my shoulder gently while Danziger turned the Rail and drove back.

"They will come around eventually," he tried to assure me again, and himself.

As the days got colder and the nights got longer, I doubted. We found the cave, a maze of interlocking chambers and tunnels, and Lonzo worked so hard to keep us both warm and fed. Danziger helped, smuggling food and clothes whenever he could. He even brought us some pieces of the glowing rock they called Morganite for warmth, though Alonzo wasn't very happy about using the Terrian heating stones.

[Alonzo's narration]

While Julia and I traveled, her communications device beeped constantly, its command more and more demanding. It frightened her, but no matter how often I told her we should simply throw it off a cliff somewhere, she adamantly refused.

She said the only way she'd get rid of it was by giving it to Devon; she needed it to prove the past was behind her. I suspected keeping the device was her way of doing penance. In the end I couldn't stand to see her jump every time the device beeped its demanding 'respond immediately' command.

"Julia, if you don't want to get rid of it, at least respond to it," I told her. She turned those large blue eyes on me, full of shock and disbelief.

"Maybe, if you tell him not to contact you anymore, that it's over, he'll stop calling you," I explained. She shook her head.

"I can't," she whispered, fear and confusion in her voice. "He'll have all the arguments ready, why this planet is so important. He'll call on my loyalties and remind me of my obligation. What if I ..."

She didn't finish. She didn't have to. She was scared of what she'd do when confronted with her betrayal of the goals she believed in all her life.

"I'll come with you," I promised her. That thought scared her even more.

"No, you can't!" she exclaimed. "Then they'd know about you. And they'll come after you. The Council never forgets."

"On audio only then," I amended. "He won't know I'm there, but I'll be able to break the connection for you if it gets out of hand." She thought it over a while and finally agreed to contact the Council agent, albeit reluctantly.

She readied her gear, trying to add the second eyepiece. Her hands were shaking so bad she couldn't screw it on, so I took it from her. When the set was ready I put it on her head. She looked at me, the terror clear in her eyes.

"Ready when you are," I tried to lighten the mood a little, as I put on my own gear and switched on the audio.

After a second's hesitation she took a deep breath and pulled the eyepiece forward. My heart swelled with admiration; it takes a lot of courage to confront your demons like that. I could think of a few fearless pilots that didn't have the nerve to do what she was doing.

I listened intently to the conversation she was having with this guy she called Reilly. He was furious when she told him she'd been found out. He seethed with anger and demanded she tell him her location.

I was about to butt in and put an end to it, when the conversation turned to Uly.

"You'll deliver the boy," Reilly told her, "or you will die running. Am I clear?"

Her fear was almost tangible, as she stood there with the VR gear on her head. I took this as my cue and pulled my own eyepiece forward. With a little swoosh I joined them and got my first look of Reilly.

"Heller, this is treason," he said upon seeing me. A rather incongruous remark, I thought, seeing she'd just told him Eden Project caught her spying on them.

"Who are you?" he asked me. I told him my name.

"You want me to spell that? Reilly, it's over. Face it, you lost."

And with those words I pulled Julia and myself out of VR and back onto G889.

Part 3

[Julia's narration]

As the winter continued, seemingly forever, we were running low on supplies. The food situation became very serious as we were often confined to the cave for days on end. The rumbling of our stomachs kept me awake at night. And during the day it pained me to see malnutrition melt the flesh from Alonzo's face until his eyes stood out like dark coals in his sunken features.

"Lonzo, when this storm breaks, I think you should go back to the main group," I told him one day. I was taking inventory of our meager rations and what I saw frightened me.

He sat perched on a small flat-topped rock jutting up from the ground, sharpening a knife. He added another log to the fire and looked up at me across the flames with mild amusement in his eyes.

"Julia, don't be silly," he replied.

"No, I'm serious," I said. "We don't have enough food for two but one person might..." My voice trailed off when I saw his face darken. He realized I wasn't kidding.

His features hardened and he replied, "I don't want to talk about this. It is not an option."

"But Alonzo..." I tried. He sprung up from his seat near the fire, throwing down the knife he'd been sharpening. His dark eyes sparkled with anger.

"I said I don't want to talk about it! I made my choice and will stick by it." He stormed out of the chamber.

"Even if it'll get you killed?" I yelled at his receding back. He could be so stubborn sometimes. Why couldn't he see this was the best solution? The group would welcome him back, I was sure, and the food supplies would last much longer if it was only me that needed to be fed.

A rush of cold air told me he pushed aside the blanket that we draped across the mouth of the cave. It kept the snow out and the heat in. I realized he'd gone outside where a severe blizzard was blowing. I rushed after him. Without proper clothing and in his current condition he'd be dead in no time in the subzero temperatures of the winter storm.

At first I couldn't see a thing as I walked through the makeshift curtain. The swirling whiteness blinded me. Tiny icicles stung like needles on the bare skin of my face. The cold air assaulted my senses; the wind blew right through my clothes. I squinted into the storm and finally saw Alonzo leaning into a tree, a few meters away. I trotted over to him. The snow was already stacked so high that I sunk in to my knees.

"Lonzo?" I called, when I came close. He turned and looked at me. Half-melted snowflakes clung in his hair and his eyes, bright with anger only moments ago, had taken on a dull look.

"Please, don't be mad?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "I'm not mad at you," he said. His voice sounded desolate. "I'm just scared we won't make it. You said it yourself; we're running out of food. But Julia, I could never abandon you again. So please don't ask me to." His voice quivered on the last words.

I was silent for a moment. I didn't know what to say.

"Alonzo, let's go inside. We're freezing out here." He shivered as if to confirm the truth in my words and nodded.

"I feel so powerless," he said when we entered the warmth of our little abode again.

"Alonzo, you are not responsible for me," I replied. "You've already saved my life once."

oOo

One morning, after days of raging blizzards, we woke up to silence. The storms had passed and the day was bright and sunny. I welcomed the break in the weather; we used

the quiet spells to gather food and fuel. And we desperately needed to replenish our stocks.

Alonzo wanted to go and search out a Grendler stash. Whenever we found one we pilfered it for all we could use; it kept us alive. He was tinkering with the ATV when I walked out the cave. Not having Danziger around left it up to him to make sure the vehicle remained in running condition. We'd be lost without it; we used it to carry back wood. And when the time to travel came again, we'd need the small cart to carry our equipment.

"Lonzo, I'll go find some more of those nourishing roots we discovered," I said.

He hummed his acquiescence; he was often quiet and reclusive. Although he tried to hide it, I knew he slept badly and had dreams. I believed he missed the company of the group, the easy laughter among friends, the stories we all used to tell each other in the evenings.

I followed a snow filled trail towards a clearing where I found edible roots earlier in the winter; caught up in my thoughts I didn't notice the footprints that crossed the trail at one point.

I came to the clearing -- and stood stock-still. On the other side of the small clearing, in the shadows of the large trees, two people were digging up the plants I'd come to find. They jumped as they saw me. For a moment, we all just stood transfixed, as though frozen in place, staring at one another across the open space. Then with a sharp intake of breath Morgan, as it was him, drew Bess protectively behind him. I was rooted to the ground, not knowing what to say or do.

"Go away," he yelled, shooing me off as though I was an undesirable insect. The tubers he had in his hands scattered across the clearing.

I turned and ran. I never appreciated the full extent of the fear I must have caused this man and his wife until this point. My vision blurred as tears streamed down my face.

I didn't pay attention to where I was going; I just ran. The pain and hurt I saw in their eyes and my own pain propelled me forward.

Suddenly I found I was no longer running, instead I was tumbling down a steep incline. I'd run straight off the mountain edge. My arms flailed about instinctively, trying to grab on to anything to stop my fall. Luck was with me and I managed to grab some branches that jutted up through snow.

I clung there for a moment, trying to calm my pounding heart. As I looked down, my breath caught in my throat. A few meters below my precarious perch the steep slope ended, to be replaced by a straight vertical drop.

I hesitated. It'd be so easy to let go, to finish it right here and now. My anguish would be over and Alonzo... Alonzo would be safe and free to return to the protective fold of the group.

I seemed to hang there indefinitely, indecisive. Then the branch creaked and I slid down a few inches further. This triggered my survival mechanism. Slowly, carefully, I pulled myself up. Cautiously I tried to climb the steep slope. The snow and ice created a very slippery surface and made it hard going. An hour later I finally reached the top and as I edged over I lay down in the cold snow, exhausted.

Part 4

[Alonzo's narration]

When Julia told me she'd go hunting for food I didn't really pay attention. I was occupied by my own thoughts. The Terrians kept me company in my dreams and I didn't like what they were telling me. They said to keep an eye on Uly and I didn't understand how they expected me to do that, being separate from the main group. The dream images scared me. They showed me Reilly and Julia and I realized it was a warning. I also knew Reilly would come for Julia some day.

What if something happened to me? I thought I could fall back on the group if push came to shove but I doubted that they'd want to help Julia. I worried about that. I knew Danziger wasn't so strongly opposed to accepting her back. I thought he might even learn to trust her again. And Devon, according to John, was still saddened that she hadn't kept the group together. The others however...

There had to be a way. They were supposed to give Julia a chance to redeem herself. Wasn't this whole expedition about second chances? A second chance for mankind, here, on a new and unspoiled planet? I wondered what it would take to make them see things that way. I hoped Danziger would drop by so I could talk to him about breaking the deadlock we were in.

John never showed, and my own thoughts and the reparations on the ATV kept me busy. It was clumsy work; I wasn't nearly as adept at fixing the small vehicle as Danziger was. So it was with a little pang of surprise I noticed darkness falling.

Suddenly concerned I realized Julia wasn't back yet. Going to find food wouldn't take

her all day, would it? I had visions of her lying unconscious or worse at the bottom of some ravine and an image of Reilly flashed through my mind.

Just as I prepared to go look for her, she came tumbling into the cave. Her appearance shocked me. She looked even worse than on the day I found her trembling with fear behind her tent. Tears had streaked through the dirt on her face, leaving long-dried trails. She had a large tear in her pants, her hands were scratched and she was soaking wet. She shivered uncontrollably.

I wanted to ask her what happened, but getting her out of those clothes and into some dry ones was a top priority. It wasn't until later when she sat by the fire warming herself, that she told me of the encounter with Morgan and Bess.

"Lonzo, it was horrible," she said and I tasted the pain in her words. "They must hate me so very much. And they seemed so scared when they saw me. Oh God, what have I done?"

A lone tear fell down her cheek and I gently wiped it away.

"Julia," I began but I didn't know how to continue.

"I ran from them. I wanted to tell them I'm sorry but I couldn't. When Morgan yelled at me, he sounded so afraid. All I could think about was getting away from there. And I ran. Then I fell off the cliff..."

She was silent for a moment. Then she looked up at me, her eyes bright with the horror of reliving the experience.

"It would've been so easy, you know. I was tempted to just let go... to put an end to it. But I couldn't do it, Alonzo. I'm a doctor. I can't let anyone die on purpose, not even myself."

Her words sank in and they frightened me. Cold fear dropped and lay like a stone on the bottom of my stomach. I feared for her, and for myself. What would I do without her? I grabbed her shoulders, rougher than I intended, and shook her.

"Julia, don't you ever think about that again! It's *not* the solution, never, you hear me?"

As she nodded wordlessly I held her to me, my arms wrapped around her, mumbling nonsense words in her ear till she stopped shaking.

[Julia's narration]

The next day I woke from the voices.

"...going back." I heard Alonzo say. Who was he talking to? Had John Danziger come to our hideout today? What time was it anyway?

I'd lain awake most of the long night tossing and turning, thinking about my running in to Morgan and Bess. I had trouble sleeping; the image of Morgan's frightened face was etched in my mind.

I pondered on my last encounter with the man. I'd been so out of it that I couldn't remember what happened. Alonzo told me I had tied poor Morgan to a tree in the middle of the night.

I couldn't stop thinking how easily he could've died then and that I'd have his blood on my hands; until at last Alonzo, disturbed by my restlessness, held me close in his arms, his presence easing my troubled mind and I'd finally fallen asleep.

And now Alonzo was talking to someone. I started to get up but froze when I recognized Devon's clear voice. After the disastrous experiments with her son's spinal fluid I thought Devon would hate and fear me at least as much as Morgan did.

Of course, since meeting Morgan and Bess in the woods, our nearby presence was no longer a secret. I could only guess at the commotion the discovery must've caused in the larger camp. I hoped Devon hadn't come to chase Alonzo and me away from our shelter and the vicinity of the Bio Dome. I listened more closely. Alonzo didn't sound upset or angry.

Cautiously I walked to the outer cave. As I appeared, silence ensued. Alonzo smiled at me encouragingly.

"Morning, sleepyhead," he grinned, dispersing some of the tension that hung in the air.

"Morning. Devon, John," I acknowledged our two visitors. I struggled to keep my voice calm and level.

Danziger nodded at me, not unfriendly, but Devon stared at me for a long time. I glanced at Alonzo. He noticed my unease and broke the silence before it became too oppressive.

"Devon and John are here to talk about the...eh...situation," he said.

"It was a shock for us to find out you followed us," Devon said neutrally.

"Ha," John pitched in with a snort. "Adair here wanted my hide for keeping it from her," he grinned. Then, more serious, "And some of the more hotheaded crew members wanted to come here and drive you off."

"But I think it's time we talked," Devon added. She smiled weakly.

"Yes," I acknowledged. "I think so too."

I looked over at Alonzo. A broad grin broke on his face and his eyes said "Told you so!".

o0o

That morning was a new beginning. I explained about the Council and their orders to spy on the Eden Project. I told them the same things I told Alonzo months earlier.

It wasn't easy for me to tell Devon about my betrayal of all she held dear. Alonzo sat right next to me and his silent support helped me when I faltered in my story.

Then I told Devon about Uly's part in all this, how Reilly believed Uly was the key to the colonization of the planet.

"Devon, you must be careful. Reilly's a dangerous man and he wants your son," I concluded and a heavy silence descended while my listeners pondered my words. Devon's eyes met mine, fear glimmered deep inside them.

[Alonzo's narration]

When Julia finished her story, the silence lasted for a long time. Of course I'd heard it all before, even experienced Reilly first hand, but her words still left me cold. I knew the Council, that shady governmental body, was bad news. But to think they'd resort to the kidnap of a young boy, just to get their way, that was incredible.

Julia never had a choice. From before she was born, her life belonged to the Council. Hate for those people and for her mother rippled through me. Once more I was aware what it took for her to stand up against them. And to think we left her!

I hoped Devon appreciated all this. When she finally broke the silence all she said was, "I'll have to think about all you told me."

And with those words she stood up and walked downhill to the parked Rail. Danziger raised his eyebrows at me and hesitated a moment. Then he followed her.

"Lonzo? Do you think Devon believes me?" Julia asked, doubt written clearly all over her face. Her eyes were large with uncertainty.

"Yes," I answered, smiling to ease her mind. "It's a lot to take in. I'm sure Devon'll get back to us soon."

Below us the Rail disappeared between the trees.

oOo

By the end of the day I was proven right. Shortly before sunset a softly humming vehicle approached our hideout. As the headlights swayed through the trees, Julia and I stood in front of the cave, waiting. Devon walked up to us.

"Julia," she said as she turned to her. "I believe you're telling the truth."

Julia visibly relaxed at Devon's words. She straightened as if a large weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"But I can't simply forget what happened. It's not easy to trust you again..."

"Devon, I'm not asking for your trust," Julia cut her off. "I just want the chance to make up for what I did."

Devon nodded. "I also have the group to think about. And they aren't as convinced as I am that you told the truth. I don't think you can come back," she continued. Our hopes for a swift resolve shattered.

"At least not yet," Devon added quickly as she saw the disappointment that must have been written on both our faces.

"Alonzo, you can come to the Dome for rations and clothing, if you need anything. However, it's better if Julia doesn't show herself near camp. I'm sorry," she apologized.

Devon hesitated for another moment, then turned and walked back to the Rail. Tears stood in Julia's eyes as she followed Devon's retreat.

"Devon, wait!" she called and ran back to the cave. A few moments later she came out, showing me the small object she'd gone to get. It was the comm device. She handed it to

Devon, saying, "This is how I was communicating with Reilly. I kept it all this time because I want you to have it, to prove it's really behind me."

Devon looked at me for a moment and when I nodded she slowly closed her hand around the small cube. Without another word she turned to the Rail.

[Julia's narration]

As winter wore on, Alonzo visited the main camp more and more often. He said he wanted them to get used to us being nearby; I believed he also needed those visits. He needed other people besides me to talk with once in a while. We were cooped up in the cave much of the time and we both suffered from the occasional bout of cabin fever. But I didn't complain. I was grateful he stayed with me and his visits to the Dome made our lives a little better; he always brought back food or clothing or fuel.

I know he also talked about me a lot, trying to convince the others about my trustworthiness. However, I realized words wouldn't do the trick. I needed to prove myself but couldn't do it here, stuck in the Grendler cave. I just bided my time, not willing to force anything. I knew the opportunity would present itself sooner or later. And when it did, I'd be ready.

Part 5

[Alonzo's narration]

Then one day, finally, we traveled again. After months of being stuck in our respective winter camps, Julia and I in our cave, the larger group in the Bio Dome, it felt good to actually be on the move again. Though the group had not accepted Julia in their midst yet, at least we were traveling more or less together. Julia and I kept our distance, setting up our tent a little away from the main camp. I usually ran back and forth. And once in a while someone from the larger camp came to see Julia for medical advice.

Never did Morgan come near our shelter though and I noticed Devon still kept Uly away from Julia. Danziger on the other hand didn't have any qualms about allowing True to come and visit. And True, on the brink of becoming a very beautiful young lady, showed sincere interest in the medical arts. Julia seemed happy to teach her and showed her how to read the Diaglove.

One bright and sunny day, around noon, we reached a large grove. Soft, green grass covered the ground and a small stream meandered through the trees. The group came to a halt and I went forward to see why we stopped.

"Devon, I think we should stay here for a bit," I heard Danziger say as I approached them.

"It's still early," she objected, but I could hear in her voice that she was tempted. Sunlight filtered through the foliage and Devon looked wistfully at the shade the trees provided. It was a hot day.

"The 'Rover's developed an odd squeaky rattle," Danziger said. "I'd like to investigate that before the whole thing breaks down on me. And the other vehicles could do with a minor overhaul as well."

"We're ahead of schedule, Devon," Yale pitched in. "We could all do with a few days of rest, get some repairs done. And this grove looks like the perfect campsite."

"Okay, okay," Devon laughed as she threw up her hands in resignation.

oOo

The rest of that day, and the next, were spent in quiet leisure, mending and repairing what needed fixing. Julia, as always, was busy analyzing the local flora, while True helped her adding her findings to the records.

Me, I was getting a bit bored actually, sitting on my hands as I was. So when Walman approached me to go exploring the nearby hills, I was game. As we were getting ready to walk out, Uly came bounding up to us.

"Can I come?" he asked excitedly. "Please?"

We exchanged a look.

"If it's okay with your mom," Walman answered him. Uly's face fell.

"She won't let me, she treats me as if I'm still sick," he complained. Uly hadn't had many opportunities to get into the kind of trouble a normal, healthy kid would. And if it were up to Devon, he never would. I grinned. In my opinion, every little kid was entitled to a little mischief.

"Let's go!" I said and was rewarded with a grateful look from the boy.

[Julia's narration]

I was bent over my research. I didn't pay much attention to the goings-on around me; I usually don't when I'm working. The urgent calls ringing through the camp broke my concentration.

"Uly? Uly!" I heard Devon call, shortly followed by Yale's much lower voice calling for the boy. What was going on?

I walked out of my tent and True came running to me.

"Julia, Julia, have you seen Uly?" she asked, out of breath.

"No," I answered her, "why? Has he gone missing?"

"Yeah," she replied, and in that one word I could hear her thoughts -- 'he's going to be in big trouble when they find him, for sure'.

The next moment I found myself looked upon by a suspicious Devon. I felt myself go cold. She wouldn't think...

"Have you seen Uly?" she quietly repeated True's question. I gave her the same answer I'd given the young girl. She looked at me for a long moment, her eyes boring into me, trying to gauge if I were telling the truth. I didn't realize I held my breath until at last she turned away from me and it expelled in a whoosh.

At that moment, in the falling darkness, a faraway shot rang out. For a few seconds nobody moved, then mayhem broke loose in the camp. Magus and Danziger grabbed for the Mag Pro's while Yale grabbed True. Danziger called a sound off, to find that not only was Uly missing, so were Walman and Alonzo.

Alonzo... suddenly I recalled he mentioned something about going up in the hills with Walman. They took the third gun but the shot we heard didn't sound like a Mag Pro being fired. Danziger agreed with me. He tried calling them on gear; they didn't answer. For one indecisive moment we all just stood there. Then Danziger made up his mind.

"I'm going up there, find out what's going on," he said, hefting his weapon.

"John," Devon tried to caution him, but he cut her short.

"We've got to know who was shooting. Walman and Alonzo may need help. And if Uly is with them..." He didn't need to finish.

"Then I'm coming with you," Devon decided.

"I'm coming too," I said, reluctant to put my foot in but determined nonetheless. "They may need medical attention."

Before anyone could object or agree Walman came charging into the camp, gulping for air and trying to speak at the same time.

"Uly, he took Uly," he managed between gasps. " Alonzo got shot."

Part 6

[Julia's narration]

I felt the blood draw from my face and the world seemed to fade as I groped around for something to hold on to. Oh God, not Alonzo! I couldn't lose him. I needed him. He was my anchor, my refuge from the madness that threatened every time I recalled Reilly's last words to me.

Through the sudden pounding of the blood in my ears I could hardly hear Walman's next words.

"He's alive, though bleeding badly. I tried to call on gear; all I got was static. So I left him to get help."

I quickly grabbed my equipment and Walman led us back to the hills. As I knelt next to Alonzo's unconscious body, I couldn't help but notice how pale he looked. He'd already lost a lot of blood. I struggled to remain the calm and detached professional while I treated him. The thought 'you're gonna lose him, you're gonna lose him' kept repeating itself in my head. I was relieved to see the bullet didn't hit the main artery. Now if only I could get it out...

I gasped in surprise when I discovered that the bullet was no longer anywhere near the entry wound. In the short time between Alonzo getting shot and us arriving here, it'd managed to burrow itself about fifteen centimeters higher up in his thigh.

I swallowed. It had to be a worm bullet. And that could only mean one thing. Whoever took Uly wasn't a penal colonist. Only Council soldiers used worm bullets.

I also realized I had to hurry. From what I knew about the bullets, they were intended to work their way up towards the victim's abdomen and explode, wiping out everything in the vicinity. I asked Baines to hold the light so I could use both hands on getting to the bullet.

"Can you get it out?" Devon asked me.

"Yes, I only need to get ahead of it," I muttered. "There, there it is," and I pulled out a softly whirring object.

"Oh my God," Baines whispered, "it's moving..."

I handed him the bullet.

"Throw it away, as far from here as you can. And make it quick," I told him. He waited for Devon to nod her approval, then moved out and a short while later a loud explosion echoed through the hills.

oOo

John and Devon grilled Walman remorselessly about what happened. Devon was pale but outwardly calm as she questioned the man. He couldn't tell them much. He'd been walking a little ahead of Alonzo and Uly when the shot rang out. He turned to see Alonzo go down with a shout. The next thing he knew, a huge man had appeared and grabbed the boy.

"I'm not sure he was even human. When he looked at me, my knees turned to jelly," Walman admitted. "He seemed to stare straight through me. His eyes were empty, like nobody was home."

Talk then turned to who it could have been that took Uly. Some thought it was a convict that somehow managed to get hold of a weapon. Others suspected Terrian involvement.

As opposing arguments flew back and forth, I recalled my last conversation with Reilly. I'd been scared stiff. And I remembered his parting threat still clearly. "You deliver the boy or you will die running," he told me.

"I know who took Uly," I said.

In the sudden silence, all eyes turned on me, questioning, accusing. I wished I could just sink in the ground like a Terrian but I forced out the next words.

"Reilly's got him." Devon's eyes widened in dismay as she realized I was probably right.

I continued to tell them about Reilly.

"The Council has known about this planet for years. They can't control it because of the Terrians. The planet needs them, so they can't simply eliminate them. It was all pretty hopeless until a sick little boy came along. Somehow the planet gave up a piece of itself that made the boy whole. And now Uly's the key to controlling the Terrians and controlling the planet. That's why they took him," I concluded to an appalled audience.

The silence lasted for a moment. Then a cacophony of voices rose. Everyone spoke together at the same time. Until Danziger's booming voice shouted them all down.

"At least we know whom we're up against," he said. "Tomorrow we'll go after them. Devon," and he turned towards her, "we're gonna get Uly back, I promise you." She nodded at him in acknowledgement although her gaze was desolate.

Preparations for a search-and-rescue party got underway and I returned to our tent to check on Alonzo. I knew how hopeless their efforts would be. They'd only get themselves killed. Uly was in the hands of the Council. And the Council never let go.

I also knew they wouldn't believe me if I told them that. They'd think I still worked for the Council, hampering them where I could. And Uly was in danger. There was no telling what Reilly would do to the boy. I knew there was only one way to get Uly back...

[Alonzo's narration]

Slowly I woke up, aware of a dull throbbing in my right leg. I opened my eyes to find I was in our tent. It was dark and Julia was silently moving about, packing things.

"Julia," I said but it came out as a croak. Upon hearing my voice she turned. Relief washed over her face.

"Lonzo, you're gonna be okay. You were shot, but we got the bullet out in time. With a few days' rest you'll be as good as new."

"Uly?" I asked, the last thing I remembered being a black shadow grabbing the boy before my world went dark.

Her face fell. "They took him," she said softly. I wanted to ask her who; the answer was in her eyes. The one thing she'd been most afraid of had come to happen. Reilly had come for Uly.

I saw she was packing a backpack with supplies. Some semolina bars, a water flask. I also

noticed she didn't pack her Diaglove and a cold sensation settled in my stomach.

"Going somewhere?" I tried to ask lightly but I couldn't keep my voice steady. Deep inside I already knew what she was going to say. She turned to me, her blue eyes filled with sadness and determination.

"I've got to find him," she confirmed my fears. "I'm the only one that can help him. They," and she gestured toward the camp, "don't know what they're up against. They'll only get themselves killed."

"Heller, no," I implored. She wouldn't listen.

"Lonzo, I have to," she tried to explain. "I know I can save Uly."

"He'll kill you," I tried as a last resort. She just smiled a sad smile full of resignation.

"Probably. But at least Uly will be safe. And with him the future of this planet."

I wanted to stop her and struggled to sit up, but she gently pushed me back down again. She stroked my forehead for a moment, and I, who normally have a way with words, couldn't think of single thing to say that would make her change her mind. I stared at her wordlessly.

"Alonzo, I have no choice. Don't make it harder than it already is. These last few months have shown me what it means to truly love and I thank you for that. Now I need to go and find Uly. I know you'll hurt for a while. The pain will pass, I promise you that."

With those words she kissed me gently on the lips and as I blinked away the tears that formed in my eyes, she pressed a syringe against my neck...

Part 7

[Julia's narration]

As I slipped out of the tent tears blurred my vision. I knew I was doing the right thing. I was sorry I sedated him; I worried about doing it so soon after he regained consciousness. I knew he wouldn't have let me go. He'll be okay, I told myself.

I followed the tracks through the hills. They weren't easy to see in the dark, and by the time the two moons set, I realized I was hopelessly lost. I felt desperate. I had to find Uly before the rescue party set out. Or they'd all be killed. My fate would be sealed if Reilly got his hands on me. I might be able to distract him long enough to help Uly get away.

The boy would have to make his own way back to camp, I feared, but he was a resourceful kid. And he'd probably run into the rescue party halfway.

"Advance and be killed," a voice commanded from my right and I saw tiny red spots on my chest that indicated a laser guided gun being trained on me.

"I'm an appointee of the Council," I tried. "ID Delta 04917." Maybe, just maybe, he didn't know about me.

"That's a physician's code," the soldier replied in surprise.

"Ah, Dr. Heller. So good of you to join us," Reilly's voice suddenly echoed through the dark night. My heart skipped a beat and my knees seemed to turn to water. My hopes to get out alive shattered.

"I'm glad to see you've reconsidered your allegiances." He chuckled and the sound made fear slither through my brain.

"Reilly, don't you think for one second that I'm here to help you," I declared. I tried to sound braver than I felt.

"Oh, but you are. And you will," he promised and with that the soldier struck me with a sedaderm and the world turned black.

[Alonzo's narration]

It took all night for the sedative to wear off just as Julia had intended. So it wasn't until the next morning at first light when the rescue party was getting ready to go, that I could inform the others about Julia's leaving.

"So, you're saying she's gone to get Uly," Morgan said. "How do we know she hasn't been working with this guy all along? It wouldn't be something new."

I hissed at him. I'd have hit him for sure this time if I hadn't been lying half-crippled on the cot. I just told them she left on a suicide mission -- my stomach rebelled at the thought and I swallowed hard -- and he still dared to question her motives.

Danziger silenced him with a stern look.

"What do you know about this guy, Lonz?" he asked me. "How much has she told you?"

"She calls him The Watcher," I said. "He was sent here by the Council to monitor events on this planet and to determine its viability. You know he was her contact, the one she reported back to. He is one scary fellow, I met him once."

A collective gasp resulted. I explained about Julia's last conversation with the Council operative.

"So, he knows that she's not working for him anymore," Devon concluded, her unspoken concern thick in the air.

"I wanna come," I said and sat up. The pain shot through my leg but I ignored it.

"Alonzo, don't be stupid," Danziger told me gruffly. "You know you'll only be in the way, crippled as you are. If we can we'll bring her back," he promised. And all I could do was lie there, helpless, useless, while the woman I'd give my life for was risking hers in an attempt save a small boy.

Part 8

[Julia's narration]

My mouth felt as if it was stuffed with cotton. Cautiously I opened my eyes. I was on the rough floor in a small underground hole, sunlight pouring in through cracks in the ceiling. Where it fell on the stalagmites that cluttered the cave, they glistened prettily.

I slowly moved my head. On the other side of the room I discovered Uly.

"Uly?" I called softly. To my immense relief he turned upon hearing my voice and scampered over to me.

"Julia, are you okay?" he asked. His eyes were shining bright with concern and fear.

"Yes, just thirsty," I replied. As I tried to sit up I discovered my hands were tied behind my back. Uly helped me up and then put a flask to my lips. Wonderfully cool water flowed down my throat.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"I don't know," Uly said. "What happened to Alonzo? Is he alright? And my mom?"

"Alonzo is fine, and so is your mom," I assured him. "We just have to find a way to get out of here and join them."

As I tried to think of a way to cut through my bonds, footsteps echoed through the tunnel leading to the chamber. Reilly's soldier entered and I got my first good look at him. He was so tall that he had to bend to prevent hitting his head on the ceiling. He was all dressed in black, leather it seemed, yet my trained eye told me it was probably body armor. I also noticed he had a robotic arm, not unlike Yale. And as I looked into his eyes I shivered involuntarily. Walman had been right. Those eyes were empty. What was this thing?

The soldier grunted in satisfaction when he saw I was awake. Reilly's voice resounded through the cave and bounced off the walls, creating an eerie echo.

"Ah, Citizen, you're back in the land of the living I see. Good, good," and he chuckled to himself. "I've to admit I'm disappointed with you," he continued. "You gave up on our struggle so easily. I expected more from you, Heller. Your mother will be crestfallen when she finds out about your betrayal."

"Shut up, Reilly," I said. I looked around furtively; I wondered where he was hiding. "My mother'll be long dead by the time any of your messages reaches the stations."

"Yes," he agreed. "Very unfortunate. However, you'll be pleased to know you can continue her good work for the Council."

"What d'you mean," I asked him. Uly was staring around the room, looking as confused as I felt. All we saw was the soldier, gazing at us from the far corner.

"Oh, Heller, don't play dumb. You understand how ecstatic I was when this ZED told me about your group of travelers approaching its hideaway."

"A ZED?" I asked. "That's what he is?" and I nodded towards the man in the corner. I was surprised. I'd heard about the ZEDs but thought they were obsolete. According to the rumors, the ZEDs were a failed experiment at creating super-soldiers, fighting machines with no emotions. When they started killing their supervisors, they were dismantled. Or so I'd heard.

"I'm very pleased that both you and the boy are here," Reilly continued as if I hadn't spoken. "So now you can carry through what you aborted several long months ago."

At first I didn't have a clue what he meant. I was appalled when I understood what he was talking about; he still wanted me to remove Uly's pineal gland!

I remembered when he first suggested it. Reilly believed that the essence of Uly's change

and cure was to be found in the small organ that some believed was the heart of the human soul. He wanted me to remove it from the boy. I had rebelled; I knew Uly would probably die if I tried. But he reminded me that the Council created me and therefore owned my unconditional obedience.

I flushed as I recalled how close I'd come to doing as he told me. Only the appearance of a Terrian -- or had it been Alonzo? I wasn't sure -- had stopped me. The creature explained that Uly was the link to mankind's survival on G889. He was the first in a long line of evolutionary changes. Without him, humanity's fate would be sealed. That's when I abandoned the operation and started my disastrous experiments with the boy's spinal fluid.

"Well? Are you going to do what I ask you?" Reilly's voice shook me out of my musings.

"If you mean, operate on the boy, the answer is 'no'," I told him in as steady a voice as I could muster. My hands were slick with sweat, however, and a cold fear shrunk my stomach.

"Ah. Still the mutinous little doctor, aren't we? Believe me, you will do as I tell you."

I looked around again. All during our conversation Reilly hadn't shown himself once. Where was he hiding? And why was he hiding?

"Reilly, where the hell are you?" I demanded. He answered with a mad chortle that made me shudder. I had never trusted the man but now he appeared on the brink of insanity.

"Haven't you figured it out yet, Heller?" he asked. "I thought you were supposed to be this smart skew. You can't see me," he paused for added suspension, "'cause I'm not there."

I jolted with surprise. How could this...?

"I'm speaking to you using the ZED. It is enhanced with a long-range communications system that allows me to hear everything it hears, see everything it sees. And I can make myself heard by using its voice-box."

Slowly it dawned on me. Why had I never realized if before, during our earlier conversations?

"You're not even on the planet, are you?" I asked quietly. He confirmed my suspicion.

"That's why I need you to operate on the boy. If I'd been able to do it myself, don't you

think I would have done so a long time ago? No, you're going to be my hands."

"Ha," I snorted; distantly I noted I began to sound a trifle mad myself.

Movement in the corner temporarily drew my attention away from Reilly and his crazy schemes. The ZED got up and slowly walked towards us. He towered menacingly over me. I tried not to cower while Uly dashed out of the way. His (its?) empty eyes turned on me and a long needle protruded from his mechanized arm.

"Heller, this is your last chance," I heard Reilly say.

"You can do as I tell you voluntarily. Or you can do it induced by this drug. Oh, I have to tell you about the drug, you'll love it." Another chuckle reverberated through the cave.

"It's fairly new, but gives incredible results. Once injected, the subject will do whatever they're told. It's actually based on an old fashioned benzodiazepine, a hypnotic drug they used in the 20th century. We improved the design and now it's a lot better than hypnosis," Reilly gloated. "Hypnotized subjects won't go against their own convictions. But with this... Hell, you'd run down the Station Promenade naked, singing old folk songs if I told you so." He cackled insanely and that sound scared me more than his words ever could.

"Don't worry Heller, all I want from you is that you perform the operation. So what shall it be? Your own volition? Or the drug?"

"Go to hell," I managed, torn between fear and anger. I knew the kind of drugs the Council used in the past to 'convince' people. If this stuff was as good as Reilly made it out to be, all hope for Uly was lost.

"Ah, such a shame to waste a brilliant mind like yours," he mused aloud. "I forgot to tell you, that after the drug wears off, you'll be left a blabbering idiot..."

I remained silent, thinking to myself that that would be a mercy if the drug made me operate on Uly. All I could do was take my chances and try to resist it.

When the ZED injected me and the drug hit my system, I turned my thoughts to Devon. I recalled how much she loved Uly and imagined how devastated she'd be by losing him. In my mind I pictured her, overjoyed and exalted, on that day the Terrians returned Uly, healthy and whole. I desperately sought to hold on to this image.

Through the buzz in my ears I still heard Reilly's voice commanding me, somewhere in the distance. Colored spots danced in front of my eyes and I squeezed them shut. Pain

engulfed me. God, it hurt! My enhanced genes fought to resist the pull of the drug. I was losing grip on my thoughts and as I tried to scream blessed darkness enveloped me...

Part 9

[Alonzo's narration]

Without warning I was on the Dream plane. As usual I didn't have any sense of entering; I was just there. I experienced a mental tug on my mind and as I turned Uly was standing there.

"Alonzo, please come. Julia needs you."

I knew it was pretty useless to remind myself that my real self was lying wounded on a cot in the camp. The Dream plane had its own laws of physics that I couldn't begin to grasp. So I simply asked Uly to tell me what to do.

"She hurts," he told me, frustrated because his 9-year-old mind couldn't form the words. But I understood him quite clearly, the dream images helping to boost the meaning of insufficient language. And my stomach turned as I grasped what Reilly wanted and what he was doing to Julia. I remembered the dreams the Terrians sent me during the winter. Now I understood their warning.

I was filled with an all-consuming hatred for the Council agent. I pushed it away. There was no time for that now. If I wanted to help Julia, my mind had to be clear.

Uly said that I could dream to her through him. The kid and I both had access to the Dream plane. And he was actually in her presence; while he made physical contact with her, she and I could connect mentally. It was a like dreaming to someone by touching a Terrian. Once connected, I could help her resist the drug and fight Reilly's orders.

When Uly created the link between Julia and me, our minds entwined and became like one. Her pain was my pain; her fight was my fight. I could feel the drug pulling on her will, gaining power and struggling to break her resistance. She was fighting a losing battle but fighting so bravely. Again I felt a burning hatred for Reilly, for what he was doing to this courageous woman; a woman who had the guts to stand up against the almighty Council for what she felt was right.

[Julia's narration]

Vaguely I was aware of Reilly's voice yelling at me back in reality, ordering me to

operate. Yet here I was at peace, in the deepest recesses of my mind, the nowhere between reality and dreams. The pain subsided to a vague throbbing that I was hardly aware of. Alonzo's unexpected presence, more felt than known, was immensely comforting.

"Lonzo," I sighed gratefully, unaware that I was speaking his name out loud.

"Yes, Julia, I'm here." His voice, so full of compassion, was clear in my brain. I could picture the way his eyes, warm and gentle, would look down at me if he were here.

"Lonzo, it hurts. It hurts so much," I complained. And my pain echoed in his voice when he answered me.

"I know. You've got to resist it, Julia. You can do it. I'm here to help you."

I found solace in his presence in my mind. And I found new strength in his words. I was fighting the Council but I wasn't doing it alone. He was there for me as he had been since the moment we crash-landed on the planet. As he'd been the day he came back for me, so long ago already. And as he'd been during the cold lonely winter.

Gradually I felt him receding, slowly disappearing from my mind. And as he faded, the pain increased. I tried to fight it, to go back to that place in my mind where Alonzo was, where I was safe. I couldn't find it though and with a mental thump I landed back in the cave and reality.

[Alonzo's narration]

I called the rescue party on gear. When Julia regained consciousness, wherever she was, I lost my link with her. I couldn't help her by using the Dream plane anymore. I could at least try to help her in this world by relaying the information she gave me during our brief connection.

"John, come in," I called.

"Danziger here. What's up?" and his grim looking face appeared in front of my eyes.

"John, I just heard from Julia. It's too complicated to explain, but I dreamt with her," I forestalled the inevitable questions.

"She told me a few things you need to know. Uly is with her and he's okay." In the background I heard Devon utter a grateful sob.

"She and Uly've been captured by a ZED, a kind of super soldier. It's hard to approach and harder to kill, since it has boosted senses and is covered in body armor. But it's got a weakness at the base of the skull. Any object entering there can pass on unobstructed to the brain. It's your only chance to stop it."

"What about this Council agent, Reilly?" Danziger asked.

"He isn't real. At least, he's not really there. He's up in orbit somewhere; the ZED is his hands and eyes. If you finish the ZED..."

"We'll have effectively finished Reilly," Danziger finished. "Okay, Lonz, thanks for the info. Danziger out."

Part 10

[Julia's narration]

I fully expected the ZED to hit me with another dose of the drug. I knew I wouldn't be able to resist it a second time and Uly would be lost. To my astonishment, he wasn't there. The cavern was empty except for Uly who sat hunched next to me, his hand on my knee and his eyes closed. His stance reminded me of the Terrians and I thought he might be dreaming with them. The analyst in me absently wondered if Uly had created my connection to Alonzo, the link that saved me from giving in to the drug and to Reilly.

Cautiously I moved to find a more comfortable position. My whole body hurt thoroughly and I found it difficult to control my muscles. My resistance to the drug caused me to strain them almost to snapping point.

My slight movement made Uly look up. He blinked several times, then focused on my face.

"Uly," I whispered to him. "You have to leave. The ZED isn't here. You've got to go now that we're alone."

"What about you?" Uly asked. My heart went out to him. He didn't understand the danger he was in.

"No matter about me. I'll be fine. They won't hurt me," I lied. "But you, you'll have to make a run for it. Please Uly, go. Go!"

He wavered for a moment. Then he ran off towards the exit. I heaved a sigh of relief. If only Uly was gone, Reilly would've lost his trump card. I didn't want to think about what it would mean for me if he found out that the boy had escaped his grasp once more.

But a few minutes later Uly came back.

"Julia, I can't get out. He did something to the exit. I don't see anything. I can't get out. It keeps pushing me back."

Black despair settled over me. I had put all my hopes on getting Uly out of here. And now this hope was shattered. I couldn't look him in the eye. I knew what I was going to do when the ZED returned with the drug.

oOo

Uly and I were running out of new ideas to try and override the force field when we heard shouts outside.

"Hey, you don't have to push!" a voice protested. Upon hearing it I nearly fainted with shock. That was Alonzo.

Before I could think why he would be here he came stumbling into the cave with the ZED on his heels. He was pale and his dark eyes dull with pain. The shotgun wound in his leg was bleeding again. When he caught sight of me he hurried forwards and wanted to sink down next to me. The ZED roughly dragged him away.

"Julia, are you okay?" he asked. He winced with pain when the ZED's cruel handling forced him to put his full weight on his wounded leg.

"Oh yes, she's fine," Reilly spoke suddenly. "And she'd be much better if she just followed orders like a good Council agent."

"Reilly, you sick bastard!" Alonzo struggled to free himself from the ZED's hold, but the enhanced soldier held him in an iron grip.

"Tsk, tsk, Mr. Solace," Reilly's silky voice admonished. "That's no language to use in the presence of a small child."

His eyes large with fear Uly tried to hide behind me.

[Alonzo's narration]

After Danziger signed off I lay back on the cot. I was exhausted from my mental struggle with the Council's drug. I could only image how Julia must feel. She fought the drug both mentally and physically. I hoped she was alright.

It was silent in the camp. Most of the adults were gone with the search parties to find Uly. Yale had stayed to take care of True. Once in a while he looked in on me to see how I was doing. So I didn't look up when the tent flap was pulled aside and a large shadow loomed over me. By the time I realized it wasn't Yale who entered, it was too late. A large hand covered my mouth to keep me from calling out. I felt a small sting to my neck and then the world turned fuzzy and faded out.

oOo

When the small dose of sedative the ZED had injected wore off I found myself hanging upside down on the man's shoulder. We were in the hills, silently moving through the scrubs. I wondered absently how such a large man could move so quietly. A large branch whipped against my wounded leg and I squirmed with pain. He realized I was conscious again so set me down and propelled me forward to walk on my own strength. It hurt like hell but I tried not to limp; I didn't want this guy to see how weak I was.

I asked him where he was taking me, all I got in reply were grunts and more pushing. I gave up and concentrated on getting one foot in front of the other without tripping over them. After a short -- but for me exhausting -- climb I noticed the entrance to a cave. It was nearly hidden behind a cluster of trees. He shoved me hard in the direction of the opening and I yelled at him.

" Hey, you don't have to push!" He ignored my protests and sent me headlong into an inner chamber.

That's where I discovered Julia and Uly. I tried to go over to them, but the ZED stopped me. Uly seemed okay, although he looked scared to death. Julia looked terrible and yet I never loved her more.

She sat slumped on the floor; her hands were tied behind her back. Her hair had come loose from its customary ponytail and now hung in disheveled strands over her face. I recalled how soft and silky it had felt in my hands only a day before. Large black circles showed beneath her eyes and I could see the toll the drug had taken on her. She appeared downbeat, despair obvious in her demeanor.

I went cold with fear because I suspected what Reilly was up to, why he'd sent the ZED to get me. He couldn't force Julia to do his will with the drug. And he couldn't use a

larger dose of the synthetic stimulant; Reilly feared she would succumb to its effects before having performed the operation. He needed her cooperative, but he also needed her capable.

And Reilly knew she'd fight him to death before giving in. Oh yes, he knew her quite well. He recognized that she'd try to withstand any pain he could give her. And he also knew she wouldn't be able to resist pain inflicted upon others. Especially me. He was going to give her an impossible choice: save Uly or save me.

[Julia's narrative]

I read in Alonzo's eyes that he had reached the same conclusion as I: Reilly would use him as leverage to make me do what he wanted. My last shred of hope vanished, I saw no way out; between the drug and Alonzo, Reilly held all the cards.

"Well, well," Reilly said, in the same purring voice he used earlier. "One big happy reunion. How cozy."

His voice changed to one full of hidden threats.

"Heller, lover-boy here's gonna help me persuade you. I think you'll find him most convincing. Mr. Solace, I'm sure you'll understand..."

"Go to hell, Reilly," Alonzo hissed between clenched teeth. Fear and anger were warring for precedence on his face.

His words caused Reilly to lose patience. He snapped at the ZED and the soldier moved his grip ever so slightly. Alonzo's face suddenly contorted in anguish. He cried out and bent over backwards at an impossible angle as his muscles contracted from the sudden attack on his nerves. Only the ZED kept him upright.

He screamed and writhed in the man's hands. I suddenly felt very sick and I wanted to scream with him but then I felt Uly's small hands grab my arm as he cowered with terror. I'd forgotten all about the boy!

"Run Uly, run," I yelled and pushed against him. The boy wasn't fast enough. He'd only gone a few steps when the ZED caught up with him and grabbed him. On the other side of the cave, Alonzo crumpled to the floor, sobbing with pain.

"And that," Reilly remarked coldly, "was only the beginning."

I desperately tried to regain control over my stomach. Tears of frustrated anger streamed down my face. My heart sat like a hot stone in my chest and I felt suffocated. I struggled to get to my feet.

"Okay, Reilly, you win," I said. I was completely defeated.

Part 11

[Alonzo's narration]

Through the red haze that was agony, I heard Julia speak.

"Okay, Reilly, you win."

I fought to command my body again; I tried to get up, but managed only a feeble uncontrolled muscle spasm. I'd no idea what the ZED did to me, but it hurt like hell and left me totally helpless.

"Julia, no," I croaked. "Please."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. She stared at the ground, a look of utter defeat on her face. "I'm so sorry..."

o0o

Gradually the feeling in my limbs returned; I was still a helpless invalid though, when the ZED lowered a sedated Uly on a flat rock, now a makeshift operating table. Julia was standing next to it. She glanced over at me and when I caught her eye she quickly looked away. But not before I'd seen the bottomless emptiness in her gaze.

"Well, Heller, here we are at last. You've certainly made it a complicated journey but now you can redeem yourself." Reilly was fully in control of himself again.

Julia hesitated for another second; a hard jab in the ribs from the ZED set her in motion and she put the scalpel to Uly's neck.

[Julia's narration]

I was about to start the procedure that would change our lives forever when the ground churned and exploded upwards. Two huge Terrians appeared, their staffs crackling with

electric energy. The ZED was momentarily confused by this unexpected intrusion and I was the first to move.

I reached up and planted the scalpel in his neck; I felt the blade slide through muscle and bone. Reilly's voice faded out in an enraged shriek while the towering soldier grabbed my wrist in a last desperate spasm. And as the bone gave with a painful crunch, he sprawled motionless on the ground.

A wave of nausea washed over me. I, who was sworn to aid anyone in need, had broken my oath and killed a fellow human being. That human was an emotionless cyborg and he would have stopped at nothing to make me do as his boss commanded but it still sickened me.

I didn't have time to worry about that now. The Terrians pointed their staffs at me and I ducked to avoid the blast. It barely missed me; I could feel it singe my hair when the energy passed right over my head. It hit the cave wall behind me and I was showered with debris. I yelled for Alonzo to make them stop; why were they shooting at me?

Again the Terrians charged their staffs. Alonzo lurched shakily to his feet and took a few unsteady steps towards me. I heard him scream 'no!' when the staffs discharged. As the force hit me, the cave disappeared...

[Alonzo's narration]

I reached her just as her body hit the ground. Julia lay motionless, her broken arm at an ugly angle next to her. I hovered over her still body protectively. Slowly the Terrians withdrew the energy until their staffs no longer crackled and sizzled. They trilled their confusion at my behavior but I was too upset to speak with them. Then they disappeared back into the ground.

Julia looked white as a sheet and, distressed, I felt for a heartbeat. I breathed a little easier as I felt the regular pulsation underneath my fingers. I made sure she was as comfortable as could be and then turned to Uly.

He was regaining consciousness, but remained very drowsy. At that moment I heard voices near the mouth of the cave. I tensed, then I recognized Danziger's low rumble.

"Danziger, over here," I yelled. I still felt too wrung out to attempt to walk to the entrance.

"Solace, is that you? What the heck are you doing here?" and the rescuers entered the

cave. They looked around in disbelief at the wreckage from the blasts and the crumpled bodies. When she discovered her son, Devon rushed to Uly's side, nearly smothering the still very dazed boy in her embrace.

Baines stooped over the ZED.

"He's dead," he said unnecessarily.

"I know," I said and I lowered myself next to Julia again. I heard the emotionless quality of my voice. I was feeling very tired. "Julia killed him."

"Is she okay?" Danziger asked me as he knelt at the other side of her.

"I don't know," I said. "I think he broke her arm. And the Terrians hit her with their lightning."

"Terrian lightning?" Walman and Baines asked in unison. "So that was the flash we saw! We would never have found this place if it weren't for that flash. What were the Terrians doing here?"

"Never mind," John said, after one look at my face. He lifted Julia's body in his arms, careful not to do further damage to her broken wrist. "Let's get out of here and back to camp. We'll hear what happened later."

Part 12

[Julia's narration]

When the cave disappeared from my perception an utter darkness enfolded me. Not a sparkle of light broke this blackness that was more profound than any I've ever known. A screeching noise, like thousands of fingernails scratching on a blackboard, hurt my eardrums and I slammed my palms over my ears to keep the sound out.

Invisible hands seemed to grab for me and tried to drag me even deeper into the tangible nothingness. I struggled against the groping fingers. A hot panic seared me and I wanted to scream. No sound came out of my mouth though. I was more scared than I'd ever been before. Was this death?

Suddenly bright white light shone around me, as if someone had flicked a light switch. Silence replaced the noise that was cut off abruptly. When the light assaulted my senses my eyes squeezed shut in reflex. And even through closed eyelids the glare hurt my retinas. After a little while the pain let up and cautiously I tried to open my eyes again,

little by little to get used to the brightness.

I stood on a white sandy plain. The sands went on endlessly, forming a featureless desert. As far as I could see, nothing broke the monotony of the landscape. I was amazed to find myself calm again. The panic I experienced only moments ago was replaced by a serene and peaceful sensation. I wasn't frightened anymore and I didn't feel any pain. My broken arm seemed whole and unscathed.

I wondered what happened to me; I wondered if I'd died. If I did, was this heaven? A small agnostic voice deep in my mind tried to tell me there is no such thing as heaven or hell. I didn't believe that anymore. This planet had shown us much of its metaphysics and I'd come to believe there was more between heaven and earth than modern science could demonstrate.

An unexpected thought struck me: maybe I was on the Dream plane? That answer made more sense than any other explanation I could come up with. Why was I here? The Terrians didn't normally allow me access to the Dream plane; it was one of the things Alonzo and I couldn't share. So why had the Terrians sent me here?

And how the hell was I supposed to get out of here? Alonzo always made it seem so simple but I didn't have a clue. Did I walk? Did I close my eyes and just *wish* myself back on the planet? I was at a loss.

My sense of tranquility slowly disappeared as I thought about my situation. Deep down the panic screamed again, erupting into a wild crescendo. I took a few gulping breaths to try and keep the horror at bay. I was stuck here; without outside help I wouldn't be able to get back.

The full force of my predicament hit me and adrenaline heated my veins. I broke into a headlong run, my feet throwing up little puffs of dust when they hit the ground.

Suddenly one of the aliens appeared. It exploded from the ground right in front of me. I stumbled to a halt and barely managed to avoid bumping into the creature. I spun around and set off in the other direction. Again the appearance of the Terrian stopped me in my tracks. This time I sensed I didn't have anything to fear from it.

"Who are you? Why am I here?" I asked, looking up to face the creature. It replied in their unintelligible twitter. I experienced a sudden urgent desire for Alonzo's comforting presence. He'd understand what the creature wanted; he'd help me. After some more trilling that didn't make sense to me, the creature just crouched there motionless.

I grew uncomfortable again. Its impassive stare made me apprehensive. What did it want? I found myself tempted to make a face at it, wave my hand in front of its eyes or stick out my tongue. Anything to elicit a response. With a nervous giggle I suppressed the urge.

[Alonzo's narration]

By the time darkness fell we were back in the grove. Yale, with the help of True, set Julia's arm. We weren't too worried about the broken bone. It seemed a straight break and when the bone-healing vaccine kicked in, her arm would be good as new. But she was still unconscious. And that worried us. It wasn't the first time one of us got hit by a Terrian discharge, but usually the victim recovered quickly.

I was exhausted and still recovering from the ZED's ministrations to my nervous system yet I refused to leave Julia's side. I sat near her on the cot and held her hand. Her face was pale and large circles were visible around her eyes. Still, she was devastatingly beautiful, as she lay so tranquil. My throat constricted at the thought that I might lose her. I pushed the thought away, desperately willing her to wake up instead.

By the time the first rays of the sun crept over the horizon again and there still was no indication that Julia would wake up soon, I made up my mind. I had to talk to the Terrians. They were the ones who put her in this comatose state and I needed to know why. Maybe that would enable us to help Julia. I closed my eyes and lowered my head...

And was on the Dream plane.

"Anyone?" I called out.

Two Terrians swam up from the ground. They gazed at me with their expressionless faces. White Dream plane sand poured down their bodies in small rivulets. As far as I could tell, these were the same two that had appeared in the cave. I asked them to explain why they hit Julia. They replied she was trying to hurt the boy.

The Terrians generally believed in not harming; they were unable to fight their own kind. However, they would stop at nothing to save Uly from harm. I tried to tell them the impossible position Julia'd been in, the choice that was forced on her, but they didn't listen. Or they simply didn't understand, I wasn't sure. Their expression remained devoid of emotion as I talked and talked.

I've no idea how much time I spent on the Dream plane pleading with them, since time has no meaning there. I coaxed, I begged, I shouted at them. They didn't budge and my

efforts remained without result. This species was so different from us. They knew nothing about redemption, about forgiveness, about giving someone a second chance. The concept was as alien to them as we were. And no matter what I tried, I couldn't make them understand.

All my attempts at communicating with the two Terrians were repelled by their inscrutable stares. When I at last sat down on the sandy ground in dismay, finally one of them trilled.

"The woman tried to hurt the boy," it said.

"Yes, you told me that before. And I explained to you again and again why!" I yelled in exasperation. The creature wasn't perturbed. Instead it continued.

"We cannot allow harm to come to the boy. We understand it was not willingly done, so we are reluctant to take the woman into the earth. But the boy needs to be protected. The woman was taken to the Dream plane."

And with those words I was thrown out of the Dream plane to find myself still sitting on the bunk next to an unconscious Julia. I looked at her pale features and gently stroked her face while I mulled over the message from the Terrians. Were they telling me Julia would stay this way forever, her body an empty shell, her mind imprisoned on the Dream plane?

Part 13

[Alonzo's narration]

We stayed at the grove for days, and there was no change in Julia's condition. She was breathing and her heart continued to beat steadily, but she didn't regain consciousness. At first we worried about nutrition. None of us had a clue how to intravenously feed an unconscious person; and we didn't have the necessary equipment anyway. As the days progressed we realized the state the Terrians put Julia in resembled cold sleep more than it did a human coma. All bodily functions were suspended. Yale rigged a way to measure her brain activity and we were relieved to find it was still there. She was however in a very deep sleep.

Then one day Devon entered the med-tent and announced we would move out the next morning to continue our journey toward New Pacifica.

"Devon, what about Julia? She's in no condition to travel. And I'm not leaving her!" I protested.

"No," she replied. "Nobody is gonna be left behind ever again. Not as long I've got something to say about it; it was a wrong thing to do. Alonzo, we can't stay here any longer. And there hasn't been any change at all. We don't know what's wrong with her."

She was silent for a moment, her eyes focused on a distant point; no doubt she remembered the days Uly was sick and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

"John made a stretcher we can load on top of the 'Rover. We'll take Julia with us. Maybe she'll come out of it by herself soon, or maybe we have to wait until the doctors from the colony ship arrive... Alonzo, she will be okay!" she promised me.

o0o

The more I thought about the Terrians' parting message, the more I thought I understood what was going on. The Terrians felt the need to protect Uly from anyone intent on hurting him. And Julia'd been about to perform some major surgery on the boy when the Terrians intervened. The Terrians had tried to warn me in my dreams during the long winter. I didn't understand their warnings then but now that it was too late, I did.

At first I believed they weren't interested in the circumstances that led to Julia's actions; in Terrian justice the deed itself was enough to be punished. On second thought I had the impression they also somehow understood it wasn't by choice that she tried to harm the kid. And they were reluctant to take her into the earth; they told me they so. Thus, in a weird kind of compromise they detached Julia's spirit from her body. Which left us with her suspended physical being, while her metaphysical self was somewhere on the Dream plane.

I hoped to contact her in my dreams but the Terrians wouldn't let me see her; they just said she was safe where she was. They seemed ambiguous about their decision. This was the first time in all our days on the planet that I'd seen the nearly unperturbable creatures in a state of uncertainty. I hoped it was a good sign.

[Julia's narration]

I was getting increasingly restless. I had no sense of time passing but I knew I'd been here for a long time. I thought about Alonzo a lot. I was now convinced I was on the Dream plane; the presence of the Terrian confirmed my suspicion.

I hoped Alonzo might get in touch with me here so he could help me understand the Terrian and tell me how to get back. However, Alonzo never contacted me. And I

couldn't forget the hurt look of betrayal I saw in his eyes just before I planted the scalpel to Uly's neck.

I didn't doubt that this time he wouldn't forgive me. They'd probably left me behind again. I just wished I could talk to Lonzo once more, to explain, to tell him how much it had hurt to see him suffer in my stead. I'd given in to Reilly because I still held a remote hope I might get a chance to save Uly. I told him once the boy's gland was gone, if I fumbled the operation I might fool him again. That's what I desperately desired to tell Alonzo - and Devon.

Despite trying everything I could think of I wasn't successful in getting out of the Dream plane. And nothing happened. The lone Terrian that kept me company was getting under my skin more and more. The creature just crouched there unmoving. Its steady gaze seemed expectant, as though it was waiting for something. Or waiting for me. Maybe something was expected from me. I'd no idea what it could be though.

"C'mon Heller, get it together," I told myself. "You got a cum laude degree in diagnostic analysis. You figure out what it wants."

With a start I recalled my first attempt to operate on Uly during the early weeks on the planet. With the commotion of Alonzo showing up in the cave and Reilly's crude methods of getting me to cooperate, it totally slipped my mind. And I realized how it must appear to the Terrians: that first time they had given me both a warning and an explanation why Uly should be protected; and I tried to perform the operation a second time...

I sought to explain to 'my' Terrian how Reilly forced my hand but I got no response. It never wavered in its inscrutable stare. So an explanation wasn't what they were looking for. They probably already knew what had taken place in the cavern anyway; very few of the planetary events escaped the mysterious creatures.

I recalled all the discoveries we'd made about the enigmatic alien species, I hoped that it would give me an idea what they might want from me.

We knew that the Terrians were an old race. They lived underground and could travel through the earth. The Dream plane was where they usually communicated. They were various tribes and the members from each tribe all thought with one mind. That's what really baffled them about us, the fact that all humans were separate mental entities. I'd no idea if all Terrian tribes on the planet were 'same-minded', but suspected that at minimum they were all connected.

None of my knowledge about the Terrians helped me though; I couldn't think of a single

thing that would solve my current problem.

"I could sure use some help here," I muttered under my breath.

Part 14

[Julia's narration]

I started when the Terrian suddenly moved. It raised itself and garbled something. Then it held out its hand. I got to my feet cautiously. Something was happening at last. I wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not.

"What is it? What do you want?"

In reply it motioned with its hand. Slowly I stepped forward and reached out. As soon as I touched the Terrian, it grabbed my hand and we sank in the earth...

When the earth closed over my head I struggled in its grasp. I was going to suffocate! But before my breath ran out we broke through the surface again and I found myself standing in an immense underground chamber. Thick veins of Morganite glowed dimly along the walls. It was an expansive cave, and the ceiling was so high I could hardly see it. Even more unsettling than the vastness of the place were the Terrians...

Terrians surrounded me, scores of the tall immobile creatures, a sea of expressionless leathery faces stretching as far as I could see. I heard a low noise, a warble, softly gurgling from the multitudes. And I realized they were all speaking at once.

Slowly the throng huddled closer, shuffling forward, swarming on all sides. I whirled around, afraid, looking for an escape. But they were everywhere, towering over me. I feared I'd choke from the sheer press of their bodies. Then the Terrian that brought me here trilled loudly, commanding. And they all stopped, moving back, clearing a circle around me.

Four Terrians stepped forward. They impressed me as being ancient, incredibly old; their skin appeared more wrinkled than that of the others. They stared at me impassively.

A light push in my back made me step forward to the quartet. I had the sudden urge to fall deferentially to my knees, awed by their regal stature. One of them garbled at me but as before I didn't have a clue what it was saying. I looked at it uncomprehending and again it gurgled.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I've no idea what you are saying."

A murmur went through the crowd upon hearing me speak. I wondered where all these Terrians came from. Maybe I was the first human they ever met? The Terrians usually didn't seem to have any problems making Alonzo understand what they wanted. The elder Terrian held up its hand and the crowd hushed. The four ancients muttered among themselves, and abruptly my guard sank back into the ground...

[Alonzo's narration]

It was my turn to sit with Julia. We had been traveling for days, having left the grove and the Reilly cave far behind us. Still there was no change in her condition.

We lifted her up on the TransRover every morning, tied to the stretcher to keep her from falling off. One of us was always sitting with her, to make sure she was comfortable, to keep the scorching sun off her face and to look for any changes in her condition.

We all took turns, even Morgan. I suspected part of the reason was the comfort of riding atop the 'Rover instead of having to walk. But I also noticed the tenderness they all treated Julia with. Humanity's flexibility and our ability to care for one that was cast out only months ago amazed me. Then again, forgiveness is part of human nature. After all, we all make mistakes. We may all find ourselves in need of a second chance some day. And the encounter with Reilly made Eden project understand what forces Julia had been subjected to and what a battle it must've been for her to leave it all behind.

And now she was lying here, a living shell, a shadow of the woman she once was. I adjusted the screen that kept her out of the sun and gently brushed a strand of her blond hair from her face. I closed my eyes for a moment, recalling how vibrant she'd been and wondering if that woman would ever be returned to me...

I sensed someone was with me in my thoughts and when I opened my eyes I saw I was on the Dream plane. My heart quickened as hope surged through me. This was the first time the Terrians allowed me to access the plane since they kicked me out weeks ago.

"Come," the Terrian said. "Your help is required."

The next instant I was in a huge cave filled with Terrians - more Terrians than I'd ever dreamed lived on the planet. The crowd parted, creating a path and I walked through. Their low-voiced murmurs translated themselves into words in my mind.

"It is Dream walker..."

"That's him..."

"The Guardian..."

Absently I wondered what they were talking about but the questions quickly dissipated when I came to a circle in their midst. On one side, four ancient looking Terrians stood a little apart from the rest and on the other side...

"Alonzo!" Julia cried happily while we ran towards one another. I whirled her around and covered her face with quick kisses; I was so happy to see her up and moving again that I almost forgot it wasn't real. I could feel amused curiosity emanate from the Terrians in small waves and remembered theirs was a species that didn't touch.

"Julia, are you okay? Did they hurt you?" I asked concernedly.

"No, I'm fine," she replied, smiling. Then the smile faded. "Alonzo, I didn't want to do it... but I couldn't let him hurt you again. And I hoped..." her voice faltered and I took her in my arms. I gently brushed through her hair and whispered in her ear that it was okay, that I understood. Julia took a deep breath and pushed herself away from me a little so she could look me in the eye. She motioned about her at the Terrians.

"Lonzo, I can't understand them. And I feel they want something important from me."

"She is right."

I turned at the voice and saw that the four ancients had approached us.

"The woman does not understand our words. The tribes cannot decide what to do about her, she who tried to injure the boy. We do not understand. And we are no longer of one mind."

It was a very disconcerting sensation for the Terrians. For the first time in probably centuries their minds were in disagreement. All the tribes were gathered in this cave; the four ancients were the Elders of the species.

They explained to me that some of the tribes were very resolute. Julia tried to harm Uly, therefore she had to be 'stopped' and taken into the earth. Other tribes, the tribes that dealt with humans before, weren't so sure.

They understood us a little better; or at least they understood that the world wasn't as black and white for humans as it was for them. They assembled here to discuss their options and come to an agreement. The Terrians had been at it for weeks, all this time keeping Julia waiting on the Dream plane - it was their way to keep Uly safe and suspend any further action while they made up their collective mind.

When I realized the full extent of what was going on I went cold with dread. This went beyond deciding about Julia. Whatever happened here would set the stage for human-Terrian interaction for generations to come. Most of the creatures here had never seen a human before. And the ones I considered to be on our side were a minority.

But at least the Terrians had decided to let Julia account for her actions. And that's why they needed me. Though they could understand human speech quite well -they thought in images more than words which they picked up from our subconsciousness- they'd rarely come across a human that could understand them. According to the ancients, my skills here on the Dream plane far surpassed those of any human they'd encountered.

Part 15

[Julia's narration]

I imagined myself being put on trial. And in a way I was. The Terrians wanted me to explain my motives before they could agree on a verdict. I understood from what Alonzo told me there was more at stake here than just the question of my guilt and the Terrians' judgement. It was important that the Terrians understood us humans. That they understood why we came to their planet and why we acted the way we did, if we wanted to have a chance to survive here.

Yet I wasn't afraid anymore. Alonzo was here and I didn't even have to explain to him what happened with Reilly, why I gave in. I would die happy if it came to that, in the sure knowledge that he understood.

And so I told the story once again.

I began to tell the Terrians about Earth. I explained that it used to be our home planet, 22 light years away. They garbled in horror when I told them how the earth was dying and that humans lived on the stations now. Confused I halted my narration when several of the Terrians disappeared in the ground. They swam up again a few seconds later. Alonzo said it was a reflexive action to feeling threatened.

"The stations are crowded with increasing numbers of immigrants from Earth. The Council has been looking for a solution to the overpopulation," I continued.

I explained to the aliens how alluring their planet was to the Council. And how their presence stood in the way of humanity's colonization plans. That's why the Council sent the criminals first. They were expendable. Reilly was dispatched to monitor them, to see what could be learned about the planet and how the planet could be controlled.

"When Eden Project came here I was sent with them to keep an eye on events from the surface instead of from orbit. And then you took Uly and returned him healed..."

I hesitated for a moment.

"Reilly was so excited. He understood Uly was the link between mankind and your species. He needs to understand the link. That's why he wants the boy..."

I swallowed as a threatening murmur rose from the gathered crowds. Alonzo moved a protective step closer to me.

One of the elders motioned the Terrians to silence and asked, "Your leader, she made us a promise. Why did you try to break it?"

I glanced over at Alonzo. This is where it would become complicated.

"Because I was supposed to follow Reilly's orders and the Council's demands, not Devon's promises," I replied.

They tilted their heads in an expression of not understanding. Alonzo shuffled restlessly; he was more sensitive to their feelings of confusion. And even I could sense they were perplexed by this notion of differing minds.

"We're different from you," Alonzo took over. "Humans ... eh, we think with many minds, we have many leaders. Sometimes it's hard for us to know what's the right thing to do. And sometimes we make the wrong choice."

"You came to me, to warn me, remember?" I cried. They did not understand, I could tell by the growing unrest that emanated from the collected population. "I listened to you then; I aborted the operation."

With a small nod of their heads the Elders acknowledged my words and replied in their garbled speech. A collective gasp rose from the crowd. Several creatures trilled angrily. I couldn't understand what they were saying but the threat in their tone was obvious. Alonzo moved to stand between them and me and explained what they'd said.

"You attempted to become one with us."

"I only did that because I didn't know what else to do."

I was nearly in tears now. I was getting desperate and frustrated by my inability to make them understand.

"I was torn between my concern for our group and my allegiance to the Council. All my life I had believed the Council's always right. And in the space of a few weeks those beliefs were undermined and shattered. I was trying to protect the group from Reilly. I know what I did was wrong but I meant no harm."

They were silent for a moment, mulling over my words. Alonzo's arm slipped around my shoulders in a gesture of silent comfort. We both waited breathlessly for the Terrians' next words.

The Elders trilled. "If you do not pay the price it will happen again," Alonzo translated. "Your own kind made you an outcast. We believed that was a proper and adequate penalty for your deeds. However, you tried again to harm the boy."

"Yes. No!" I cried.

I stepped out of Alonzo's embrace and started pacing. I was too agitated to stand still. I remembered the events in the cave clearly and tasted again the utter despair of the choice between Alonzo and Uly. A shiver ran through me when I recalled Reilly's glee in torturing Lonzo and seeing me suffer. The Terrians became restless; feet shuffled and a low murmur rose from the ranks.

"What else could I do? I hoped that by giving in to Reilly I'd gain some time. Maybe even fool him into believing Uly's pineal gland had changed beyond recognition, just like I told him the first time. Reilly would've had Alonzo killed if I refused."

The sound of another collective intake of breath rose from the crowd. The aliens didn't view life and death the way we did; their worst punishment was to be cast out. But killing someone -or stopping him as the Terrians called it- simply to get your way was far beyond them. They simply argued until they all agreed.

"Please," I pleaded. "You've got to believe me. I didn't mean any harm to come to the Uly, I promise you that. I didn't know what to do..."

I broke down then, all my hurt, the confusion and the guilt I felt about giving in to Reilly pouring out at once. Alonzo took me in his arms to comfort me and whispered in my ear it'd be alright. Tears streamed down my face as I sobbed out my anguish.

[Alonzo's narration]

I could almost see Julia's distress oozing from her in black waves while violent sobs racked her body. Here on the Dream plane enhanced perception forced me to experience

her emotions and suffer her dismay as though it was my own. And when horrified astonishment rippled through the crowd I realized they felt it too. Probably the sensation was much stronger for them since they were so much more adept on the Dream plane than I could ever hope to be.

While Julia cried, the Terrians were silent for a moment. Then one of Elders spoke.

"We have heard enough. We will debate among ourselves. You will wait."

And with those words they turned away from us. A chorus of garbled voices rose, so many Terrians speaking at once that I couldn't make out a single word. We could only wait. Julia's sobs subsided to an occasional snuffle.

"What's happening?" she asked me. "Do you think they believed me?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "But I won't let them hurt you, trust me."

oOo

It wasn't until much later that the voices quieted and the four ancients turned back to us. I tried to read their faces and their minds but their inscrutable features offered no indication of their decision.

"We have conferred," they said. "And we have reached a conclusion."

I held my breath. Next to me, Julia did the same. She grabbed my arm as though searching for support.

"We don't understand humans. We don't understand how it is possible to have so many different minds and still work together. But we believe no harm was intended. Therefore we have decided not to take you into the earth," - here they turned their gaze directly towards Julia- "instead we will let you go back."

With a deafening rumble all the Terrians sank in the ground and the two of us were left standing in that huge cave while the echo faded away. Julia was looking at me questioningly, waiting for me to translate, when the huge relieved grin that I knew was visible on my face said it all. A tentative smile curled around her lips.

"They're letting me go, aren't they?" she whispered. I nodded and...

With a start I was back in reality. Judging by the position of the sun that had hardly moved I'd been under only a few minutes. I was still sitting on top of the TransRover

next to Julia's stretcher.

Julia! I quickly moved over to her. Her eyes fluttered and I held my breath. Then she focused on my face.

"Alonzo?" she whispered, her voice a barely audible croak. It was the best music I had heard in my life.

I whooped for joy and yelled down to the others to stop the 'Rover. Excited shouts sounded through the group as they all came to see what was happening.

That night, for the first time in weeks, I held Julia in my arms again as we slept. And even though my dreams were often plagued by misgivings about the future, I was content...

Epilogue

[Voice of Devon Adair]

Almost a year has passed since the crash. And every day this planet teaches us something new. We learn to work together for survival. We learn about ourselves, about what it means to be human. We face difficult dilemmas; we make tough choices and learn to live with the consequences of those choices.

And in our learning, we teach. One step at the time, this planet and its inhabitants, and we, the aliens, learn to understand each other.

The Terrians have forgiven Julia for her deeds, involuntarily done. And in their forgiveness they show an understanding for mankind that is beyond anything we could hope for. I am positive about our chances to make a life here for us and for our children. Now more so than ever before.

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