

# SAND OF DEATH

## Prologue

It was just after noon on another scorching day in a string of long, hot weeks. From its perch high in the bright blue expanse the sun smirked down upon the weary group of travelers until sweat ran down their backs in rivulets. The land was flat, devoid of trees and brush. In the far distance outcrops of pale rock shimmered in the heat. No clouds were visible and the only protection from the sun's relentless touch was the small patch of shadow cast by the TransRover. Several makeshift canopies fluttered in the wind; the people had put them up to keep the worst of the glare away and now sprawled beneath them. Every day during midday they broke to wait out the hottest hours before trekking another couple of miles in their quest to reach New Pacifica.

Devon leaned on the DuneRail peering at a printed outline of the area. She was busy plotting their course for the next couple of days. With a disgusted motion, she folded the map and pushed it away. Then she threw up her hands in exasperation.

"These maps are useless," she complained to John Danziger. "They're either incomplete or unreliable."

Danziger pulled the map to him and stared down at the rumpled chart. The paper had been folded and unfolded so often that it was torn in several places along the creases. A sudden gust of wind threatened to blow it out of his hands. He tightened his grip on it, causing another tear. He swore beneath his breath before straightening the map on the DuneRail's front seat and squinting down at it.

Devon watched him study the lines and scribbles on the sheet. His dirty blond hair hung around his face and a tiny frown of concentration creased his brow. She realized again how important his opinion had become to her. She'd rather swallow her tongue than admit it, but his constant questioning of her decisions helped her stay focused.

In their early days on the planet Devon relied fully on the maps and didn't take kindly to suggestions from anyone except Yale. Over the past months of travel, though, as the data turned out to be unreliable, she'd come to accept and value other people's suggestions. Especially John Danziger's. He had a knack for finding the best course on the sketchy maps, the easiest paths for the vehicles to travel.

"What kind of map is this anyway?" he grumbled. Among the green patches that indicated woods, and shades of gray that meant mountains, a roughly circular area was

left blank. Or not so much blank as featureless. No rivers or streams, no hills, no forest. The area was only a few miles from the group's current position and their path would take them right through the middle of the white void on the map.

"We can't simply continue to follow this course," Devon said. "We'll hit that area in a day or so and there's no telling what we'll find."

"We could go around," John muttered and tried to gauge how far the uncharted area extended.

"We could," Devon sighed. "But the straightest course towards New Pacifica is right through there. Going around will add weeks, if not months, to our travel time. And in thirteen months the Colony ship will land. Or have you forgotten?"

"Hold your horses," Danziger rumbled. "I was just thinking out loud. I'd say we find a place to temporarily camp, then send a scout team forward to see what's up with that," and he jabbed one finger in the middle of the white nothingness.

## Chapter 1

The travelers trudged forward until dusk that day. At least the wind let off by mid afternoon so they were spared the constant assault of flying dust. Scratched and dented, the large TransRover lumbered along steadily, preceded by the smaller vehicles.

"Devon, when are we going to make camp?" Morgan complained. "It's nearly dark. We are way past our usual time to halt for the night. And I'm hungry."

He did have a point; usually they stopped with an hour or so of daylight left. They used the last light to set up camp and find enough fuel to keep several fires going through the night. Despite the heat of the days, the nights were chilly. Smoke from the fires also helped keep the bugs away. And everyone relished a cup of coffee in the morning. Coffee, however, was left in limited supply, as were most of their rations. They often added berries and roots from the local vegetation that Julia declared edible to their diet.

By nightfall they reached a small copse of scraggly trees. Devon decided this was a good place to set up their temporary camp. The gnarled trees would provide some shade to protect them from the brunt of the sun's heat and a modest spring provided fresh, albeit slightly salty water.

Quickly the tents were set up. After months of practice everyone was so well versed in their task that they could set up or break camp in twenty minutes.

"Uly, why don't you and True go find some more wood for the fire?" Devon sent her son on an errand. "But stay near the camp," she added a warning. The boy rolled his eyes in exhausted tolerance, then did run off to find Danziger's daughter.

Devon sought out Morgan. Bess had sent him to chop vegetables for the stew she was preparing. With quick flicks of the knife Morgan chopped the roots to small pieces. He was proud of his handicraft.

"Morgan, John is going to scout out the terrain ahead tomorrow," Devon said. "I'd like you to go along with him."

"Me?" Morgan exclaimed, aghast. "On a scout with, um, Danziger?"

Devon knew he was still uncomfortable in the mechanic's presence, despite the months together. Although things were better since he'd come clean, Morgan hadn't forgotten the look of pure murder he'd seen in the man's eyes when he pulled the lever that dropped the escape pod away from the plunging Roanoke.

"Yes," Devon replied, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "It's your turn."

"Can't Alonzo go?" Morgan asked. "He enjoys exploring. I don't."

"I want Alonzo to try and contact the Terrians," she answered. "Maybe they can provide information on what to expect further along the way."

"Wonderful," Morgan muttered below his breath. "Fly boy gets to sleep while I can go bounce around in the heat with that boorish Neanderthal for company." He turned back to his work and violently hacked at the roots.

Devon pretended she didn't hear him complain. Morgan was a notorious whiner but he'd proved his worth to group several times. Like everyone else, she had learned it was best to simply ignore him when he started off on another of his rants.

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When Bess' vegetable stew had satisfied their hunger the kids were sent off to bed. The grown-ups gathered around the campfire. A branch snapped, sending multiple sparks crackling into the night sky. While they gazed at the flickering flames the unmarked section of the map dominated the conversation.

"It's no surprise," Morgan stated. "We've already found out the hard way that these Council maps are totally unreliable. Mountains that aren't supposed to be there, lakes that are gone. So what's one blank spot more or less, huh? Maybe Julia knows what's there?"

"Morgan!" Bess said.

Julia shifted uncomfortably. Her eyes darted from one member to another to finally rest on Alonzo. She felt secure in the knowledge that the Advance group had forgiven her after her betrayal but she didn't like to be reminded of those days.

"What?" Morgan asked, offended. "She did work for those people."

"Morgan, if you know what's good for you, you'll listen to your wife and shut up," Alonzo said. He scowled at the bureaucrat.

"People, let's stick to the topic at hand," Devon cut in before things could get ugly. "Maybe there's something out there that the Council doesn't want us to know about. But it's just as likely it's another omission in their files." She turned to her former tutor. "Yale, do you have any information on this area that's not on the map?"

"I don't know," the tutor replied. "Let's see."

He extended his hand and drew back the sleeve to expose his robotic arm. He switched on the hologram display and a picture of the planet hovered over his hand. As the projection slowly rotated they looked at it in wonderment. No matter how many times they'd seen it, they were still awed by the grandeur of the planet, the green of its wide landmasses and the blue of its seas. The last time they'd seen Earth, when they left the stations, the planet had been shrouded in a yellowish brown haze of pollution.

"This is where we are now," Yale pointed and a small red dot started blinking in the hologram. He expanded the projection to zoom in on the area ahead. The picture quivered then steadied once more. But Yale's projection also remained blank. That is, the hologram showed green which indicated land. But no landmarks appeared. No lakes, no rivers, no mountains or hills. Nothing but a flat green.

Devon glanced at Yale. He shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Devon," he said. "This is all I have."

"What the heck does that mean?" Baines said. "Yale's projections have been wrong

before, but they never came up empty."

"It means," Danziger remarked dryly, "that we will be doing some real exploring. And he and I," he pointed towards Morgan who evaded the mechanic's gaze and stared into the fire instead, "are going to be the pioneers."

oOo

Julia Heller couldn't sleep. She turned restlessly on the bunk. Her shirt clung to her back although the night air was cool. Morgan's remarks evoked memories she thought long since forgotten. Memories of the Council, memories of Reilly. And she was concerned about the missing data on the map. When the Council realized they couldn't stop Devon Adair in her quest to save her son, they fed her misleading information about G889. When Eden Advance arrived on the planet -crashed onto it- their knowledge of their new home turned out to be incomplete at best and totally erroneous at worst.

Next to her on the bunk, Alonzo shifted and muttered incoherently. He was in a deep sleep. She sat up and studied his face. In the moonlight filtering in through the partially drawn tent flap, she could see his eyes moving rapidly beneath his eyelids. He was dreaming; Julia suspected he was having a Terrian dream. As the pilot began to toss on the cot she climbed off and left the tent; she didn't want to disturb him.

Mazatl was on watch, sitting near the fire. Luma lamps marked the camp's perimeter and stars twinkled overhead in the night sky. Julia walked over to the fire.

"Can't sleep?" he asked her as she approached him.

She shrugged. "Alonzo is having a Terrian dream," she explained. "And this uncharted area worries me."

She shivered. But whether it was from the chill in the night air or from apprehension, she couldn't tell. She hugged herself and stepped closer to the flames.

"If the Council didn't want us there, they wouldn't have left it blank on the map. They'd have drawn in an impassable swamp or forbidding mountains to keep us away."

Mazatl nodded.

"I don't know about the Council," he replied. "But I don't like this place. It's... I don't know, spooky."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he said, drawing out the words. "Something's wrong. Haven't you noticed how silent it is here? Just listen."

Julia cocked her head to listen more closely. Summer nights on G889 were filled with noise. Small rodents scrambling through the brush in search of food. Insects buzzing around the Luma lamps, or sizzling to their deaths if they came too close to the fire. The occasional cry of a night bird would sound in the distance. Tonight, though -- her eyes widened as she realized what Mazatl was talking about. The night was utterly silent. The only sounds she heard were the crackling of the fire and the lazy flapping of the tarp over the TransRover's cargo bay.

## Chapter 2

The sun wasn't up yet when John Danziger stirred awake. He turned on his cot and stretched to loosen stiff muscles. He looked over at his daughter True, sleeping peacefully on the other cot. A soft snore drifted from her and he smiled to himself when he heard the sound.

Quietly Danziger pushed aside the drapes that covered the tent's opening and crossed the camp. A soft, pink glow in the east held the promise of another bright day. He passed the fire on his way to the Martin's tent and nodded his good morning at Baines who had the last watch.

For lack of a door to knock on, he scratched the tent-cloth to wake the couple inside. When he received no reply John grazed his nails a little more loudly along the tarp.

"Time to wake up, Morgan," he called merrily, thoroughly enjoying himself.

Someone stirred inside.

"G'way," a muffled voice called back. "It's not even light yet."

"Come on, Martin, we got a long day ahead."

The flap was pulled aside and a disheveled-looking Bess faced Danziger. Behind her Morgan was a shapeless mound underneath the blankets. The mound moved lazily.

"We'll be right there," Bess promised Danziger. "Give me a few minutes."

He nodded and crossed the camp again to the vehicles that were parked neatly side by side. Though battered and scratched from the long miles across the rough terrain they remained in tiptop condition with the mechanic's deft care.

Danziger walked to the DuneRail and checked the batteries. He grunted in satisfaction; they were fully charged and should give him and Morgan quite a few hours of travel time. Enough to head deep into the uncharted territory and get an idea what Eden Advance would be up against if they decided to continue on their current course.

He began to gather supplies for their scouting trip. Extra water tanks were put on the back seat; a long drive in the hot glare of the sun required drinking a lot of water to prevent sunstroke. He packed a crate with semolina bars and other foodstuff and tied it next to the water tanks. Almost as an afterthought he threw in a spare tent. They'd be grateful for its shelter if the scout unexpectedly turned into an overnighiter.

While he worked on the preparations the camp woke up around him. One by one the colonists appeared from their tents. Devon spied Danziger working on the DuneRail and walked over to him.

"John," she called.

He turned to watch her coming up to him. Her auburn hair was brushed back and she looked fresh and rested. Except for the small frown of concern that wrinkled her brow.

"Morning, Devon," he replied.

"John, I want you to be careful today," Devon stated.

"Aren't I always?" He grinned at her.

She smiled absently at his words.

"Danziger, I'm serious," she said. "I've got a bad feeling about this place. I don't want you to go too far. Just enough to decide if the terrain's passable. I want the group to stay together as much as possible."

She was silent for a moment, gazing past him towards the desert that lay ahead of them. "And make sure you stay within Gear range," she finished her instructions.

"Yes ma'am," Danziger replied and he mock-saluted her. Then he caught sight of Morgan. Bess was dragging him towards where Danziger and Devon stood beside the

Rail.

"Looks like my travel companion isn't too happy about the arrangements," Danziger muttered beneath his breath yet loud enough for Devon to hear. She glanced over her shoulder at the approaching couple.

"Don't be too hard on him," she told Danziger. "He's trying."

They could see Morgan complaining to Bess but the woman, used to her husband's lamentations, simply ignored his protests. As soon as they came within earshot Morgan called out to Devon.

"Devon, I don't think this is a good idea. I'm not cut out for scouting parties. Let Alonzo go, or Walman, or Baines."

"Morgan," Bess admonished him, "we've been over this. It's your turn to go scouting. We all go when it's our turn."

"I need someone I know will use his head," Devon tried to mollify Morgan. Behind her Danziger snorted but she ignored him. "I know I can trust you to stay within range and keep your Gear activated at all times. I told John not to go far and if all goes well, you should be back tonight."

"See, Morgan," Bess said, "it isn't so bad." With a soft push she guided him towards the Rail. "And when you get back, I promise I'll give you a nice back rub."

Somewhat appeased by Devon's trust in him and Bess' promise Morgan reluctantly climbed in the shotgun seat of the Rail. Danziger walked around the vehicle and jumped behind the wheel. With a quick push against the transmission he gunned the vehicle forward smoothly and drove off.

"Remember to stay within range!" Devon called after them.

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"Devon, can I talk to you for a minute?" Alonzo's voice was calm but the urgency in his tone was obvious. As Devon looked at him his appearance startled her. His features were drawn tight in concern and his brown eyes were serious. It wasn't like the pilot to worry; Alonzo tended to float through life carefree and light-hearted.



"Uly, why don't you go and see if Yale needs your help." She gave the boy a gentle push in the direction of the TransRover where the tutor was busy taking inventory of their food supply.

"Mo-om," Uly began to protest, then thought better of it when he noticed the stern look on his mother's face. He shrugged and trotted off towards Yale.

Devon nodded at the pilot.

"What 's on your mind, Alonzo?" she asked.

He looked around at the bustling campsite and she followed his gaze. Despite the sweltering heat, people were occupied with repairing tents, mending clothes and collecting wood for tonight's fire. On the far side of the camp she noticed Julia coming out of the med-tent, discarding food samples she had tested for their edibility.

"Not here," Alonzo said. He strode away from her, inviting her with a quick jerk of his head to follow. Devon trudged on his heels, leaving the camp and the grove behind. When they cleared the trees and walked out of their shade, the full force of the sun struck them and Devon immediately felt beads of perspiration spring from her pores.

"Alonzo, what is it?" she asked a little impatiently.

"It's this place," he said, pointing to the swarthy desert ahead. "The Terrians contacted me last night."

"Ah," Devon understood. "Julia said she thought you had a Terrian dream. What did they have to say?"

"It was unclear," the pilot replied. "They warned me -us- to stay away from here. Devon, we should go back and around, take another course. There's a reason why the Council hasn't explored this area and I don't think we want to find out what it is."

Devon was silent for a moment while she mulled over his words. She gazed at the desert they would have to cross to reach New Pacifica. She didn't see anything untoward but she had learned about the invisible dangers that sometimes lurked beneath the surface.

"Alonzo," she finally said as she turned back to face the pilot. "We can't just detour for miles without a good reason. Why don't we wait for the scouting party before we decide? Maybe they'll tell us it's impassable. But if the way seems clear for the vehicles--" She didn't finish; she didn't have to, her meaning was obvious. If the vehicles could pass through the desert they would continue that way to New Pacifica.

"Whatever," Alonzo muttered. "Just don't say I didn't warn you." He stalked back in the direction of camp with large steps, his back rigid with tension.

oOo

"Base, come in please." A tinny voice crackled from the Gear.

Devon grabbed her set and put it on. Before she could switch it to transmit, Bess broke in on the channel. "John, this is Bess. Where are you? Is Morgan okay?"

"We're both fine. We're about three hours away from camp. The Rail broke down and it is taking longer to fix than I thought. We won't make it back tonight."

"Do you need help? Should we come get you?" Devon asked. She frowned at the news. It was nearly dark and it would be difficult to find the scouts' location at night.

"Nah," Danziger replied. "We're okay. We got food and water for another forty-eight hours if necessary. And I packed a spare tent. We're covered."

"So what's the situation there?" Devon was glad to hear no rescue was needed and John had the situation under control. "Can we travel across with the vehicles?"

"Yeah," Danziger replied. "Shouldn't be a problem. It's another desert. We got as far as forty miles before turning back. No mountains or ravines that the vehicles wouldn't be able to take. I think we're still okay for New Pacifica."

Devon sighed in relief. She worried why the Council left the map unmarked, yet she didn't relish the idea of going around. Skirting the area would add weeks to their travel time and they were behind schedule as it was.

"Adair," Danziger interrupted her thoughts. "Why don't you pack up and follow us tomorrow? That way you won't have to wait for us to get back and I'll have more time to repair the Rail."

Devon looked at the assembled group. They'd all heard Danziger's suggestion over their Gears. Slowly one by one they nodded their assent. Devon sought out Alonzo; as their eyes met he shrugged and walked away. Julia shot Devon a puzzled look and turned to follow the pilot.

"Okay, John, we'll catch up with you tomorrow. Adair out," Devon said.

### Chapter 3

Julia followed Alonzo's dark shadow through the trees and out of the camp. It was now completely dark and she could barely see him in the light of the stars. Neither of the moons was visible yet. Alonzo walked quickly, with large strides and she was hard pressed to keep up with him. At last he stopped to gaze ahead at the desert. She quickened her pace to catch up, and tripped over a boulder. Small pebbles clattered and she let out a surprised yelp.

Alarmed by the noise, Alonzo whirled around. His dark eyes, hard and unreadable, softened as he recognized her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"That's okay," he replied. "I'm just jumpy, is all." He turned away from her to glare at the dimly illuminated landscape, a troubled frown on his brow. He ran his hands through his hair.

"What's wrong?" Julia asked. His anxiety was disturbing. "Why don't you want us to follow Danziger and Morgan into the desert?"

"The Terrians told me we should stay away," Alonzo replied. "And of course Devon won't listen."

"Did the Terrians give you a reason?" Julia inquired. "Maybe if you could explain to Devon--"

Impatiently Alonzo cut her off. "I told Devon exactly what the Terrians told me; they call it the 'sand of death'. She has set her mind on getting to New Pacifica as fast as possible, no matter what."

"Alonzo, that's not true and you know it," Julia chided gently. "I don't like this place very much either. But you know we can't base our decisions on unsubstantiated charges."

With an angry gesture he silenced her. "This is a Terrian warning. They came to me in my dreams. They don't do that unless they're serious. How's that for substantial?"

She was taken aback by his violent outburst and didn't know how to reply.

"We'll be extra careful," she tried to comfort him. He shrugged and peered into the dark night ahead. The first glimmer of the lesser moon appeared on the horizon. When he remained silent, Julia sighed and quietly headed back towards the camp.

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"Morgan, the number seven anthroceptor I said."

With an exasperated sigh Danziger rummaged through his toolkit in search of the required tool. He dropped the retractor in the box, ignoring Morgan's dark glare.

"I'm a lawyer, not a mechanic," Morgan shot back. "How am I supposed to know what's an antersepter among these doohickeys?"

"An-thro-scep-tor," Danziger grumbled below his breath as he crawled back under the disabled DuneRail. He'd been working on the machine since first light and his temper was on a short fuse. Morgan's vocal complaints didn't help much.

"I don't like this," Morgan stated. "I don't like this one bit. Another scorching desert to cross. Why couldn't we've crashed in a more moderate climate?" He paused to wipe his brow with the rag that covered his head.

"Ah, the comfort of shade, the luxury of streaming rivers..." He heaved a wistful sigh.

"Martin, shut your trap," Danziger growled from beneath the vehicle. "Go see if you can spot the Rover." Any errand would be good, he thought, as long as it got Morgan out of earshot. Before he strangled him.

As Morgan walked away Danziger clucked wryly. He'd promised Devon to take it easy on the bureaucrat but he could think of a quite a few people he'd much rather be stuck with than Morgan Martin.

He turned his attention back to the Rail and whistled through his teeth as he removed the plate that covered the power conveyor. Small wonder the Rail refused to run. A layer of fine black desert dust blanketed the delicate fuse crystals. He pursed his lips and blew hard on the crystals but the dust stuck stubbornly. He sighed. He'd have to remove the whole set to clean it. Something to remember, though, before they continued through this wasteland: seal the conveyor compartments of the vehicles.

"Danziger!" Morgan called as he came stumbling back down the hill in clouds of dark

dust. "They're here, I can see the Rover."

Danziger pushed away from the Rail and got up to follow Morgan's pointing finger. Indeed, in the distance he spotted the solar collectors slowly turning atop the Rover. Adair wouldn't be pleased that the Rail wasn't ready to continue. He suspected they'd have to make camp right here, to clean the engines and make sure no more dust could interfere with the sensitive machinery.

"Dad!" True's happy voice rang across the shimmering black sands. The girl ran to her father to be scooped up in his arms and hugged him closely.

"Hey True-girl," he smiled at her. "Take it easy, it's too hot to go running around."

"I'm just glad to see you," she grinned. "What's wrong with the Rail?" Over his shoulder she spotted the half-dismantled Rail and the various parts strewn around the vehicle.

"Danziger," Devon greeted him before he could reply. She frowned when she too noticed the Rail's current state of disarray. "Haven't you repaired it yet?" she asked.

"I spent all morning trying to find what's wrong," Danziger defended himself. "And no, obviously I haven't fixed it yet. I've to take apart the engine to clean it. And I've got to do the same with the Rover and the ATV," he added. "Dust is clogging the power conveyors so I'm going to seal them. Shouldn't take more than a day though." He took a deep breath to prepare himself for the outburst he was sure would come. But Devon just stared at him for a moment. Then she turned around and addressed the rest of the group.

"Okay people, listen up. We're camping right here tonight."

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Julia busied herself handing out water rations to the thirsty crewmembers. She was very insistent that they all drank often, even more so since Cameron had nearly succumbed with heat stroke a few days ago.

"How are we doing with our water supply?" Devon asked. Julia shut the valve on the tank and glanced up at the other woman. The back of the large TransRover was filled with transparent water tanks, the clear liquid sloshing inside.

"We should be okay for a week," she replied and handed Devon a cup. "Ten days if we stretch it. Cameron filled all the water tanks this morning from the spring. There's not

enough for bathing or laundry though."

Devon screwed up her face in disgust, then nodded her understanding.

"Several small streams show near the point where we get back on the map. We should reach those within a week," Devon said. She drained the cup and gave it back to Julia.

Julia filled another tumbler and searched for Alonzo. She discovered him sitting in the ATV, a little ahead of the halted caravan of travelers. He sat very still, one leg drawn up and his arm resting on his knee. His dark, fierce eyes glared moodily over the shimmering sands. Since his outburst last night Alonzo hadn't said two words to her. Or to anyone else, for that matter. She hadn't seen him this tense since they arrived on the planet.

"Lonzo?" she called as she neared the ATV. Slowly he moved his head to look at her. He appeared to be in a trance and she wondered if she'd disturbed him talking to the Terrians. Alonzo seemed to visibly shake off the dark thoughts that creased his brow and he smiled wanly as she handed him the water.

"Thanks," he said. He drank down the liquid in a few gulps, then returned the beaker. She hesitated a moment, not sure if she should say anything about the previous evening, and began to walk back to the Rover.

"Julia," he called after her. She turned to look at him. His eyes were softer now, not so distant.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you."

She shrugged off his apology. "That's okay," she said. "We're all on edge."

"I shouldn't have taken it out on you," he answered. He jumped off the ATV and walked over to her. When he took her by the shoulders he stared deep into her eyes. She felt herself drawn in by his intense stare.

"Doc, I can't explain very well in words what the Terrians told me. I didn't really understand. All I know is we are in great danger in this desert. We need to be very careful." He was quiet for a moment, his gaze drifting away from her to stare once more across the wastelands ahead.

"Julia, if we don't make it--" he began. She quickly put a finger to his lips to stop him from continuing. Inwardly she shivered as a cold hand clamped around her heart. What exactly did the Terrians tell him?

"Don't say that," she stopped him. "We'll be alright, I promise."

## Chapter 4

Julia desperately wanted to believe her own promise but found that Alonzo's distress was contagious. It settled in her mind and refused to budge or be alleviated. She decided to have a talk with Devon about Alonzo's concerns.

When she walked back to the camp she passed Danziger working on the DuneRail. He was bent over a small object in his hands and muttered angrily below his breath. Julia realized she hadn't given him his ration yet and quickly filled a cup with water to take to him.

Gratefully he drank and thanked her. His long hair hung limply across a face wet with sweat. Dirt streaked on his cheeks.

"Any progress?" she asked in an attempt to make conversation. He grumbled something unintelligible and smoothed his thumb over the dusty surface of the conveyor in his hands. Then he rubbed his fingers together and gestured for her to come closer.

"Have you ever seen dust like this?" he asked. She peered at his digits. A black smear showed on them.

"It looks like soot," she replied. "I didn't realize the dust was that fine." A little surprised she stretched out her hand and rubbed some of the dust on her index finger. The desert sands were a dull gray, like old ashes. Could it be possible that this entire area had once burnt? She brought her finger to her nose and smelled.

"It doesn't smell like soot. It doesn't smell at all. I wonder what it is."

"I don't know," Danziger replied. "And I don't really care. Except that it's nasty stuff. It's clogged the conveyor in the Rail in no time and probably worked its way into the other vehicles as well."

"Can I have a sample of this?" she asked. "I'd like to know what it's comprised of."

He brushed off some more of the soot-like particles in her hands and she walked away to get her diaglove.

The fine dust only served to add to her worries. When she scanned it with her glove it

turned out to contain various metal components besides the plain, yet very fine sand of the desert floor. Another sample, taken arbitrarily just outside the camp showed the same results. And those minerals could be deathly to any life form when ingested in larger quantities. Julia began to understand why the Terrians named the desert sand of death.

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As they were ready to move out the next morning, Julia went through the assembled group handing every member of the Eden project a moistened rag.

"I want you all to tie this cloth over your nose and mouth while we're traveling," she addressed them.

"Great!" Uly called. His eyes sparkled with excitement as he tied the rag over his face. "We'll look like bank robbers," and he crooked his thumb and index finger pretending to 'shoot' at Yale. Julia marveled at the child's ability to see an adventure in anything. She wished she could step over her concerns as easily as the kids did.

"It'll keep your lungs clear of dust," she continued her lecture.

Below his breath Morgan Martin mumbled something about healthy station air and oxygen masks.

"We must try to stir up as little dust as we can. That means no speeding." She wiggled her fingers at Alonzo. The pilot was prone to pushing the ATV to its limits as if to make up for the loss of flying. He screwed up his eyes in mock horror but Danziger grinned widely.

"Grounded at last," the mechanic growled at him. Playfully Alonzo jabbed him in the ribs.

Julia smiled as she saw this display of good cheer. Apprehension still ran underneath the surface but everyone appeared ready for another day of travel. Alonzo was in a much lighter mood since he'd expressed his frustration that he couldn't clearly translate the Terrians' messages. Both Julia and Devon assured him they took his warnings serious. They promised him they'd be extra careful while crossing the sands. Anxiety still shone from his eyes but at least he'd stopped moping and worked as hard as ever to get them to their destination safely.



When Julia finished her lecture the large Rover slowly set in motion, Cameron at the wheel. The other vehicles followed, spread out so as not to concentrate the dust the wheels threw up, no matter how careful the drivers steered. In front of the vehicles those on foot walked slowly but steadily. As they moved forward, the landscape around them gradually changed. The last of the scarce vegetation disappeared; not even lichen crusted the ground. Here and there a small rock jutted up out of the ground, but mostly the floor was covered with the fine, dark sand. The low-rolling hills flattened out until at last they walked in a shallow depression reminiscent of a large bowl. The scale was so huge that it was imperceptible to the human eye.

While they walked most of the travelers remained silent. Rocks were few and far between but stumbling over them could result in an ugly fall. Everyone was immersed in his or her own thoughts and concentrated mainly on putting one foot in front of the other. So when Bess called her she startled Julia out of a deep reverie.

"What's on your mind, Bess?" Julia asked. The Earth woman frowned behind her mask. Her hair was held back with a ribbon and a piece of cloth covered her head.

"This place," Bess answered and motioned vaguely about her. "It reminds me of Earth. Of the holovids I saw of areas so contaminated that nothing could live there anymore." Bess was silent for a moment. Julia watched her attentively.

"Julia, you are keeping track of what's around us, aren't you?" Bess came to the point. "I mean, you'd tell us if there was something in the air or dirt that's bad for us, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," Julia tried to put her mind at ease. She waved her left arm that was covered with the diaglove. The contraption blinked silently. "I'm continuously scanning. You're right to worry. We're doing fine so far though."

As Bess fell back with her worries more or less alleviated, Julia began to pay more attention to her surroundings. Bess was right, the terrain was odd. She remembered the night in the grove when Mazatl made her aware of the lack of night sounds.

She sought out Alonzo in the group of travelers. She spotted him driving the Rail with Uly and True crammed in the passenger seat next to him. The backseat of the vehicle was loaded with boxes, tents and a couple of the collapsible water tanks. Even from the distance and despite the facemask she could see the wary look that marked his features, his eyes darting around constantly trying to scan all sides at once. She thought about calling him on Gear to ask if he'd heard from the Terrians when Devon called out their midday break.

After they'd finished their simple lunch -semolina bars flushed down with water- and started to break up again, Devon searched for Uly. Despite the heat, and Julia's warning about not disturbing the dust, he was running around with True, laughing as he tried to catch the older girl. Devon felt a surge of gratitude as she watched her son play uninhibited. Gratitude to the planet and the Terrians for healing him. They gave her the son that she'd always envisioned Uly could be. Still, Devon worried about him. He was only a young boy and they were crossing an unknown planet with dangers lurking everywhere.

While she watched him the boy tripped and fell flat on his face.

"Uly!" she cried in alarm and ran to him. He waved at her that he was okay and bent over the obscured object in the ground that had made him trip. When she came closer she saw him dig out an oval-shaped stone. He squinted close at it and wonder flushed his face.

"Mom, look what I found," he called. Devon crouched near him and stared at the object. It was a black stone, its surface gleaming dully in the bright sunshine. Then she noticed what her son had already seen and her eyes widened: etched in the stone was the image of a tiny fish skeleton, every single fish-bone printed clearly in its dusty surface. Cautiously she took the stone from Uly.

"What is it, Mom?"

"I don't know, Uly," she replied and peered closer at the fish-image in the rock. Slowly she rubbed her fingers over it, the engraved bones rough beneath her touch. "It is amazing," she muttered below her breath.

"Maybe Yale knows. Or Julia," Uly continued, bouncing up and down in excitement and eager to get the object back. She handed him the stone.

"Yes, they might," she replied. Without a further word the boy hurried off to find the tutor or doctor to ask for answers. Devon followed in a slower pace.

"That is a fossil," she heard Yale tell the children as she came to the small group clustered near the TransRover. "A fossil occurs when an organism is caught in sedimentary rock."

When the children gave him blank stares, he explained, "When this fish died a long time

ago it was covered with dirt and sand. The dirt later compressed to form a new rock, the rock Uly found. The fish's body dissolved a long time ago. Only the imprint of the skeleton remains, like it was stamped in the rock."

Alerted by the excited cries of the children most of the group came to see what was happening. They ah-ed their amazement at the tiny fish imprint. Julia activated her diaglove and scanned the stone.

"It is very old," she said. "About a million years -- Earth years."

"How did it get here?" True wanted to know. "This is a desert. There are no fish in a desert."

"Ah," Yale replied and straightened into his tutor mode. "Probably this wasn't a desert centuries ago. I think it was a lake once. Or maybe a sea."

"You mean that all this was covered with water?" Morgan asked. He looked around uncomfortably as if expecting a large body of water to surge and swallow him at any moment. "That we're walking on the bottom of some ancient ocean?"

"Exactly," Yale nodded.

"What do you think happened?" Alonzo asked. His face was filled with a curious wonder that momentarily replaced the worried frown. This planet never failed to surprise the travelers. "Why did it dry up?"

"It could have any kind of cause," Yale answered. "Maybe the climate changed. Maybe a landslide interrupted the inflow of water from the rivers."

"I remember a story from Earth," Bess said softly. "About a huge lake that dried up. It was our fault. People drained the lake to use its water and it got contaminated with pesticides. In the end the water was so poisonous that nothing could live in the lake anymore. Then it dried up."

"Ah, yes," Yale sighed. "The Aral lake in old Russia. That event set in motion the collapse of the delicate balance of nature on Earth."

"Well," Morgan said, "it couldn't have been anything like that here, could it? I mean, we're the first civilized people here, right?"

A couple of the crew nodded their assent but Alonzo muttered below his breath, "Depends on your definition of 'civilized'."

## Chapter 5

By the time Magus relieved Alonzo from his watch it was late and the camp was quiet. The heat of the day had dissipated; a welcome coolness replaced the warm air. The sky overhead was clear of clouds and thousands of stars twinkled merrily.

Alonzo rounded the Martin's tent. Soft snoring drifted through the closed flap. The next tent was the one he shared with Julia. Since it doubled as the med tent it was the largest dwelling in the camp. He was mildly intrigued when he noticed a light burning inside despite the late hour. It cast a soft glow against the canvas walls. Julia must have left the light on to make it easier for him to find his way, Alonzo assumed. He tiptoed into the tent quiet as a mouse, expecting the young doctor to be fast asleep on the small cot.

A little surprised, he discovered she was still working. She was hunched over her workbench, fiddling with several sample slides, a concentrated furrow in her brow. He stood silently admiring her for a moment. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever met, despite her torn and dusty clothing. An untidy ponytail held back her hair. Wisps of it had escaped their bond and hung forward, half covering her face. A warm wave of affection coursed through him and he knew he had it bad for her. He grinned to himself. If someone had told him a year ago he'd care so much for a woman as he did for Julia...

"Doc?" He kept his voice low so as not to alarm the night watch outside.

She jumped at the sound of his voice. The slides slipped from her fingers and scattered on the ground. She pivoted around and glowered at him. He smiled a winning grin in reply to her scowl.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you'd be asleep by now. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Next time, don't sneak in so quietly," Julia grumbled while she bent to gather up the slides. He crouched to help her.

"What are you doing up working so late anyway?" Alonzo asked her and handed her the samples. She put them back on the table and began to sort them.

"I couldn't sleep," she replied. "It was too hot. And I wanted to get these tests done." She turned towards him. "Alonzo, I'm beginning to understand why the Terrians warned us."

His smile disappeared to be replaced by a serious expression. He raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"This desert," she continued, "contains various minerals that are poisonous to us when absorbed in larger quantities. Arsenic, tellurium, mercury. A little bit won't do much damage but if collected in the body over a period of time -- I think it's the same for Terrians, even though they are so different from us. I think that's why they told you they call it the sand of death. They can't live here any more than we can. Nothing can."

He nodded slowly. It made sense.

"Have you told Devon?" he asked her.

"No," Julia replied. "I wasn't sure at first and I didn't want to worry her. She's got enough on her mind as it is."

"But you're sure now," Alonzo concluded.

She nodded. "Yes. I still think that if we're careful, keep our faces covered and cross this desert as quickly as we can we should be okay. I'm worried about the amount of particles we breathe in despite the wet rags, though. And it'd be better if we had more water, so we could wash off the dirt every night. The poison probably penetrates our systems through the skin."

Subconsciously he rubbed at his bare forearms before wiping his hands on his clothes. Julia smiled a little when she noticed the gesture. He grinned back at the realization of what he was doing. Her smile never reached her eyes, however, and that worried him more than her words.

She dug up the diaglove from her medical bag and pulled it on, then motioned for Alonzo to sit on the bunk while she switched on the glove.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to scan the mineral levels in your body," she replied and put her fingers to his neck. At the touch of her hand a tingle ran down his spine. Despite the seriousness of the doctor's words he found her gentle touch exciting. He shifted slightly.

She moved her eyes from the glowing display on the glove to his face.

"You're okay," she said. "Everything's within--"

As her blue eyes met his brown ones burning desire unexpectedly rippled through him. Her breath hitched and she halted mid-sentence as she caught the passion that he knew

showed clearly on his features. Slowly he drew her to him and kissed her gently. She answered his kiss with an urgency that surprised him. When he lay back on the cot, pulling her with him, they both forgot about trekking across the sand of death for a little while.

oOo

It became part of their daily routine. Every day, after they withdrew to their tent for the night, Julia took out her diaglove and checked Alonzo. And every time her frown deepened. On the fourth night, the glove beeped three times in quick succession. She shook her head in dismay at the results that caused the alarm.

"These levels are rising too quickly," she told him. "I'm gonna have to tell Devon. I also need to scan everyone else, especially the children. And we'll need to use the water. I just hope there's an end to this desert before we run out."

Alonzo nodded. "What about you?" he asked. "Don't you need to test yourself?"

Julia didn't reply right away. Instead, she avoided his eyes and turned towards her worktable. She fiddled with the buttons on the glove. Then she pulled it off her arm and dropped it among the clutter on the table's surface.

"No," she said. "I'm not a typical test case. I'm different." Her voice was so low he had to strain to make out the words. He was about to ask her what she meant when it hit him.

"Your enhanced genes." It wasn't a question.

She nodded in reply, still refusing to look at him. "I'll probably last longer than any of you," she said. "My DNA can break down the minerals faster and better than regular human DNA."

He moved over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "That's nothing to be embarrassed about," he said while he gently squeezed her arms.

She stiffened when he touched her but after a moment gave in to the comfort he offered. She slumped and leaned into his embrace. "I know," she whispered. "I'm not embarrassed. I'll hate to have to stand by helplessly and watch while you're--" She faltered and hid her face against his chest.

He stroked her hair, not knowing how to reply. He felt a shiver run through her

underneath his hands. Her words evoked grim images in his mind and he pushed them away with an effort. He wasn't about to give up. So far they had survived all kinds of hardships and diseases. They would make it through somehow.

"Hey, hey, we stood up against Reilly and the Council. Little bit of dust isn't going to do us in that easily."

It appeared his determination was contagious. Julia sniffled once and straightened. She suppressed her anxiety; once more she was the competent doctor. She grabbed the glove that lay on the table and turned for the exit. "I'll go talk to Devon now." Her tone made it clear that she didn't relish the conversation.

Alonzo followed her out. The night was quiet, the camp devoid of movement. Everyone was asleep except for Magus, who sat watch. Stars twinkled overhead, their cool glimmer reflecting on the windshield of the TransRover. It seemed so peaceful here, so safe. Yet danger lurked in the shadows; death sneaked up on them and came closer with every step and every whirling grain of sand.

Light-footed they crossed the camp, placing their feet on the ground gingerly as they had learned to do over the past couple of days. They came to Devon's tent, light still burning inside.

Julia called out, "Devon, are you awake?"

Inside someone moved and the tent flap was pulled aside to reveal Yale. Despite his rumpled look and clothes in disarray he managed to uphold his stately poise. "Julia," he said. Surprise washed over his face. "I was just about to get you. It's Uly. He's not feeling well."

Quickly Julia stepped past the older man and entered Devon's tent. Alonzo followed suit. Inside Devon sat on her knees next to Uly's bunk. The boy moaned and shifted. Concern showed on Devon's face as she felt his forehead. She turned at the sound of their voices.

"What's wrong?" Julia asked as she bent over Uly. She stretched out her hand; the diaglove was firmly placed on her arm and she moved it across his body.

"He complained of feeling woozy and nauseous," Devon answered.

Julia nodded slowly, keeping her eyes on the glove. It beeped a quick warning when it finished its examination. She straightened and turned off the glove.

With a last consoling pat on Uly's small hands Devon also got to her feet.

"He's suffering from mineral poisoning," Julia said. "I was about to tell you. This desert is full of metals. Arsenic, mercury, the same stuff used centuries ago to make pesticides. We're ingesting it by breathing, and probably through our skin. It slowly poisons all of us. I've been scanning Alonzo every night and the levels in his blood are rising quickly."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Devon demanded. The worry lines around her mouth deepened and her eyes brightened with consternation. She visibly struggled to keep her voice level.

"Julia didn't want to bother you until absolutely necessary," Alonzo quickly replied.

"I thought that with the precautions we've taken we'd be okay. The poisons are accumulating in our bodies faster than I'd anticipated. And Uly's levels are higher than Alonzo's," Julia added.

"How can that be?" Devon asked. "Because he's so small?"

"That's probably part of it," Julia replied. "I think it also has to do with his Terrian DNA. That absorbs the minerals faster than human DNA."

Devon's eyes narrowed and she scowled. "You're saying that what made him better is now making him sick again?"

"So what can we do?" Alonzo asked, attempting to turn the conversation to more practical matters. Devon turned her attention back to her son. When her eyes met his her features softened and she offered him a soothing smile.

"There isn't much we can do," Julia said. "More people will show the same symptoms soon. We have to get across this wasteland as fast as we can."

She started pacing back and forth in the small tent. "We should put True and Uly in the cabin of the Rover so they'll be exposed as little as possible. We'll all have to drink more water so some of the poison will be flushed out. You'll have to sponge Uly to wash off as much dust as possible. But our water supply won't last longer than two more days..." Her voice trailed off.

The people in the tent were quiet for a while. Everyone mulled over the doctor's disheartening words. Uly's soft whimpering was the only sound that broke the silence.

Yale was the first to speak. "So what you're telling us," he said, "is that if this desert doesn't come to an end soon we'll have a choice between dying of thirst or dying of



poison."

## Chapter 6

Slowly the ATV rode across the desert sands. Alonzo kept the vehicle at a slow pace so he wouldn't stir up the surface so much. If Julia's warning against speeding hadn't been enough to stop him, her drawn face that grew more worried every night, did make him pay heed.

He was on a forward scout, checking the way ahead and searching for water. Not that he expected water in this godforsaken desert. But there had to be an end to the seemingly endless plains. He squinted ahead. The sun glared down on the wastelands making the distant horizon shimmer. As far as the eye could see nothing broke the monotony of the flat sands.

Alonzo slowed the ATV to a halt and drew a large gulp from his canteen. He shook the flask and listened to the water sloshing inside. Less than a quarter left. He'd better return to the others now, he thought.

Disappointed with his unsuccessful scout he put the ATV in motion again and began to turn it around. He glanced at the scanner's screen as he did so -- and abruptly halted the vehicle. He blinked at the display; it didn't change. Could it be...? He leaned forward anxiously; he feared the image would disappear if he took a closer look. His heart began to beat a little faster as he confirmed his first impression: the scanner showed a body of water at the edge of its detection range. Alonzo decided to head out a little further, just to make sure before he called the camp with the good news.

He drove forward another mile, all the time keeping an eye on the scanner's screen. The display remained unchanged: a large body of water, a pool or even a small lake, lay only a day's travel ahead.

He again halted the ATV and brought out his Gear. The connection was bad, static interrupting the conversation. Alonzo figured the metal particles in the air interfered with the transmission. When he told them the good news, the relief in Devon's voice was loud and clear over the airwaves.

Alonzo signed off and stretched to relieve the strain in his back muscles. He was sore from sitting in the ATV's seat all day. A bit stiffly he climbed out of the vehicle. He decided to take a little break and exercise his legs a little before returning to meet the rest of the group.

"Dammit Morgan, how many times do I have to tell you to keep your face covered?" yelled a disgruntled Dr. Heller at the station bureaucrat.

With a remorseful look he shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

"And stop shuffling! You're stirring up dust."

"Gee, Julia," he muttered. "No need to make such a fuss. I'm not comfortable with that damp rag over my nose. I can't breathe and it makes me nauseous."

"You'll feel a lot more uncomfortable soon if you don't put it on," Julia warned him.

He sighed and tied the moist cloth across his face.

Her steady stare bore into him for a moment. "And now keep it on," she told him. "Or I'll tell Bess."

Morgan's eyes grew round at the threat. He shook his head. Bess would never let him hear the last of it if she found out he went against doctor's orders.

"Julia!" Devon called, sparing Morgan any further tongue-lashings. He quickly scurried away.

"Did you hear Alonzo?" Devon asked.

Julia shook her head. "No. I was telling Morgan to keep his face covered. Again." She drew her eyebrows together in displeasure at the memory. "What did Alonzo say?"

"He had good news." Devon almost burst with pleasure. "He found water. Only a day further ahead. I told him to come back now."

Julia nodded absently. She was already mentally calculating distances and quantities. Only one more day to go. She thought they would have enough time to reach the water. The symptoms caused by the slow poisoning of their bodies weren't yet serious enough to hinder travel. She worried about the children most. Their small bodies were more prone to reach their limits soon. She straightened as she made her decision.

"Devon, give Uly and True both an extra ration to drink. And make sure they stay in the

TransRover."

oOo

In a cloud of swirling sand the ATV came screeching to a halt and Alonzo jumped out. A thin layer of black soot caked both man and vehicle. Alonzo's dark eyes shone brightly in contrast to his powdered features.

Danziger yelled at him to be more careful. Julia rushed from the back of the Rover to see what the racket was about. When she noticed the dust glittering in the bright light of the sun, settling slowly, she opened her mouth to scold Alonzo for being so reckless.

"Where's Devon?" he asked before she could say a word. He broke into a coughing fit and her anger faded to be replaced by concern. She quickly went to him but he waved her away. "We've got to find shelter and find it quickly," he gasped, trying to catch his breath.

Before anyone could ask why, Morgan whispered, "Oh my God," and pointed. On the far horizon a huge black column rose. Even from this distance they could see the cloud churning in turmoil. Mouths dropped open while they all stared at the milling blackness.

"What the hell is that?" Danziger demanded from no one in particular. "It doesn't look like a thunderstorm."

"It isn't," Alonzo confirmed. "It's a dust storm. And it's coming our way."

Once his words filtered through the camp erupted in frenzied activity.

People started running around everywhere. They tried to pack as many items as they could in crates and boxes. "Cover the vehicles!" Danziger called. "If that dust gets into the engines--" He continued to relay instructions to Baines and Walman.

"Leave it!" Julia countered Danziger's orders. "We need to secure shelter for ourselves. If that storm catches us in the open, we'll--"

"We need the vehicles," Danziger reminded her.

They exchanged a worried look. Then Julia nodded. "Okay, cover the vehicles." She turned to survey the rest of the camp. "Everybody else, secure the tarp over the Rover's cargo bed. That's where we'll have to wait out this storm together and we have to make

sure it's airtight."

Quickly they pulled down the tarp across the back of the Rover. They tied it as firmly as they could but many cracks still showed.

Julia glared at the cracks. "These must be sealed," she said, pointing at the gaps in the covering. She threw a quick look over her shoulder in the direction of the storm. It was coming on fast; the entire horizon to the north was a wall of black, milling dust.

"If we set up a tent inside, wouldn't that provide an extra cover?" Bess ventured hesitantly.

"Good idea," Julia nodded and Mazatl and Cameron quickly grabbed two of the tents from the baskets at the large truck's side. The Rover's bed wasn't nearly large enough for the tents to be fully set up but with the collapsible poles strung together ingeniously they created an inner dome within the Rover's own covering.

The wind was picking up fast now, whipping around the vehicles and abandoned luggage. People began to cough as the first tendrils of dust sneaked among the Eden group, entering their airways despite the masks they wore.

oOo

Danziger finished securing the DuneRail and ATV and ran back to the Rover. One look at the engine compartment told him the large truck should be safe from the worst of the assault. Walman did a good job with it.

He threw the cabin door open. The children cowered on the seat, their eyes large. Bess had climbed in with them, trying to distract them, and he gave her a grateful look. He grabbed Devon and pushed her up inside, crowding the other occupants. She protested loudly and he told her to shut up.

"Devon, you're still recovering from your illness. And the children need you with them. You'll be okay; the cabin is sealed." Before she could reply he slammed the door and told the vehicle to lock up. With a click the voice-controlled bolts snapped shut.

Danziger glanced at the oncoming storm. The cloud of black dust was nearly on them, blotting out the sun. The sky was darkening as if an early dusk was falling. He coughed as he accidentally inhaled some of the dust swirling ahead of the storm.

"Come on, Danziger, hurry!" Julia waved urgently at him from the back of the large truck. He quickly climbed in, secured the tarp behind him and joined the group huddled in the makeshift tent beneath the Rover's covering.

The tent's canvas was flapping wildly in the force of the wind, despite the cover the outside tarp provided. Julia shouted for people to hold on to the tarp, to add their body weight to secure it to the truck. On his left Danziger recognized Morgan's plaintive voice when he called for Bess. Danziger gruffly told him Bess was safe in the cabin. Baines uttered a curse when someone stepped on his toes in the confusion and Alonzo's voice muttered an apology in reply.

The Rover rocked back and forth on its wheels as the wind tore at the vehicle and Danziger hoped that it wouldn't topple over. Then the full force of the storm hit them. It got pitch dark inside the tent and the wind howling around the truck drowned out the sound of the human voices.

## Chapter 7

The storm didn't last long. By Yale's reckoning, less than an hour passed before it became quiet outside and the canvas hung limply. Little by little the inside of the makeshift tent brightened until the people huddled beneath could see each other again. Despite their precautions, they were covered in a thin layer of gray dust. Julia swore beneath her breath when she saw what state everyone was in.

Slowly they climbed out of the Rover's bed to stare at their camp. Or rather, what was left of their camp. A thick layer of sand half-covered the tents; most of them had collapsed. Only the med-tent was still standing. The Martins' tent had disappeared altogether; what had been packed into a crate before the storm hit were the couple's only possessions left. The Rover was buried in sand dunes that reached halfway up its wheels. And everything was coated with a thick, sticky layer of dirt.

Devon lowered herself from the cabin, stupefied horror playing on her features. She motioned for the children to stay inside while Bess followed her out. She left the Earth woman in Morgan's arms as the Martins clung together for support, and went in search of Julia.

"Try to breathe superficially," the doctor warned while the grains settled around them. Coughing, hacking and spitting dust the humans wandered around, trying to take it all in, gathering their meager belongings. The looks on their faces, the blank eyes, might have been featured in newscasts about survivors of Earth's natural disasters.

Devon followed Julia to the med-tent, where she stood taking in the devastation inside. Fortunately, Julia hadn't yet had the time to unpack when the storm hit, so most of the priceless equipment was safe inside the boxes. When Devon approached Julia was digging out, almost literally, the suction tube she had once used to clear Danziger's lungs of flower pollen.

"Julia," Devon called. She was taken aback by the despondency in Julia's blue eyes when she turned to look at her. "How serious is it?" Devon asked.

"I don't know, yet," Julia said. "We're all coated in that soot. We need to wash it off, and that will deplete our water supply. We must hurry to the lake Alonzo found. We need more water than we have left." She motioned to the tube in her hands. "I also want to clear everyone's lungs as well as I can before we move out."

Devon nodded. "Okay, do what you have to do. I'll go talk to Danziger, see how soon we can leave."

oOo

Miraculously, the covers on all three vehicles had held and protected the engines from the worst of the storm. Still, it wasn't until after nightfall that they were ready to travel. Which was a blessing in disguise. They had used up their water supply sponging themselves, trying to wash as much of the deathly mineral particles off their skins. Traveling at night would at least be cooler and keep their need for fluids to a minimum.

Under normal circumstances Devon never allowed them to travel at night; the risk of damaging the vehicles was too great. Yet this time circumstances were far from normal. Their needs were too dire to worry much about the vehicles or injuries. So, just as the larger moon peeked over the horizon, they set out towards the small lake. Barring accidents, they should reach it by mid-morning.

All through the night the travelers walked in silence, everyone immersed in their own somber thoughts. They gingerly placed their feet, pushing themselves, ignoring cramped muscles. They had to reach the water while they were still able to keep going. They only stopped for brief periods of time, to rest their legs and sip at the last few drops of water to moisten their dry mouths.

To their right the sky paled, changing from dark purple to light pink to bright blue while the sun lifted itself from the horizon to begin another day of relentless torture. Sweat started to break out on Devon's brow and back and it got harder and harder to properly

lift her feet. Every once in a while someone stumbled when fatigue and dizziness made them lose their balance. Julia, who was doing better than any of them, hurried from one to the other, to encourage them, to push them, to keep them going.

Finally, Alonzo croaked a shout and pointed up ahead. In the distance the lake he had discovered the day before glistened in the sunlight. "Thank God," Devon muttered and with renewed vigor she staggered forward in the direction of the lake.

"Stop!" Julia yelled when Alonzo and Baines, who were walking ahead of the others, fell to their knees and reached to lift water in their cupped hands. They turned to stare at her, confusion and puzzlement in their eyes.

"Why?" Baines said, his voice gritty with the dust in his throat. "You told us yourself we needed water to drink and wash."

"I want to test it first," Julia said.

"She's right," Danziger agreed, and Devon also nodded.

"Remember what happened to that water bottle John dropped into a lake?"

Baines shivered involuntarily and inched back from the water's edge. He did remember seeing the remains of the bottle. They all did; Danziger had brought it back to show to everyone as a warning.

Julia knelt near the edge of the water. She stretched out her arm, gloved fingers hovering closely over the surface. The diaglove beeped. Her shoulders slumped; her whole posture was oozing the desperation she felt. She let herself fall back onto her behind.

"Now what?" Morgan whined. "I want to drink. I don't feel so good."

"If you drink this," Julia said in a flat voice, "you're as good as dead. This water is rife with the same minerals that are in the dust."

"Oh no," Devon gasped, also sinking to the ground in despair. "This was our last hope." Was this how her dream would end? With them dying here of thirst and mineral poisoning, at the edge of a lake with undrinkable water?

"I'm sorry," Alonzo murmured, as if it was his fault for finding the lake in the first place.

Everyone followed Julia and Devon's example and dropped to the ground, their limbs no longer strong enough to carry them when their last hopes melted like snow before the

glaring sun.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Danziger asked.

Julia shook her head. "I don't know how to purify this water," she murmured. "We can kill microbes by boiling it but these poisons? It needs to be filtered and that will take far too long, with the equipment I have."

"I may have an idea," Yale spoke softly. Devon looked up at her old teacher and friend. His skin had turned a ghastly gray instead of the deep brown it used to be. However, he still possessed a dignified grace when he met her eyes briefly before turning to Julia.

"Perhaps boiling this water will work also," he said. "If we can find a way to distill it. We need to condense the steam as it rises and put the resulting water into our containers. These minerals have a higher boiling point. The water vapor will be pure. At the very least it will give us water to drink."

"It might work," Julia nodded pensively and Devon allowed herself to feel a new glimmer of hope.

"If the steam is pure," Mazatl ventured, "then perhaps we can cleanse ourselves too."

Julia frowned and looked at him. "How would we do that? It would take forever to get the amount of distilled water we'd need for washing up."

Mazatl shook his head. "Not like that. Sweat huts," he said. "Like my people used to do centuries ago."

"Mazatl is right," Yale agreed. His voice was stronger now, infused with new hope. They all gathered close around him when he called up a holoimage upon his hand. The image wavered slightly, due to the fine sand that affected the robotics in his arm, but it was sharp enough to make out a tiny building. A small fire burned inside, heating up rocks and as they watched someone poured water upon the stones, causing a cloud of steam to rise and fogging the air. "The ancient Romans used the same methods in their bathing houses. I think in our case a tent would suffice."

"I don't know," Morgan murmured. "Wouldn't that mean we would all have to be... naked?"

"I'm afraid so," Yale conceded with a chuckle.

"Come on, Morgan," Bess said, patting his arm. "This is not the time to be prudish. We--"



Her voice was cut off by a coughing fit.

"Let's do it," Devon decided, putting an end to the discussion. It wasn't as if they had much of a choice. This rather unorthodox method might be their only chance. "In the interest of modesty, we'll put up two tents. To the left of the Rover the women and to the right the men." They didn't have a tent big enough to hold everyone anyway.

## Chapter 8

Hope gave them new strength and despite their exhaustion they soon had two tents put up, shielded from each other by the Rover as per Devon's instructions. They weighted down the roof in the middle with some of Danziger's heavier tools and hung containers beneath the resulting inward bulge. "Now," Yale explained, "the steam will rise to the roof and condense upon the tarp because the air outside is cooler. It will turn into water again and seek the lowest point." He pointed at the tip of the bulge. "From there it'll drip into the containers, giving us clean water to drink.

"And the fluids we sweat out will further purge our systems," Julia added.

"The fire's burning," Alonzo announced, gesturing at the men's tent. Through the tarp they could see the flickering of the flames. A large bucket of the foul water stood ready near the opening. They had found some rocks along the water's edge.

"Same here," Magus called down from the women's tent. "I'd say we're ready to do this thing."

Shielded by the Rover, the Eden group members quickly shed their clothes and crouched inside the tents. Devon ladled the first cup of water onto the hot stones and a soft cheer rose when steam did indeed curl up from the stones to drift toward the roof.

"Aren't you coming, Julia?" Bess asked from inside the tent.

"I'll be right there," the doctor called back. "I just want to make sure everyone's okay."

She walked around the Rover to the other tent. Silhouetted on the tarp, backlit by the fire, she could make out several shapes of men sitting around the fire and one smaller form that had to be Uly. Their shadows danced across the tarp as the fire inside flickered.

"Everything okay in there?" she called. The murmur of voices inside fell silent.

"Go away!" Morgan yelled, and for once Walman and Baines agreed with him.

Julia laughed. "Hey, I'm a doctor," she said. "There's nothing in there that I haven't seen before. But if you are all right, I'll leave you to it. Holler if you need me."

"Will do," Danziger's low rumble reached her and chuckling beneath her breath Julia turned. Quickly shedding her dirty clothes, she joined the women in the other tent.

oOo

Later that evening, feeling once again refreshed and cleaner than they had for days, they sat around a small campfire. The fires in the tents were kept burning, boiling kettles of water into steam which condensed against the roofs and dripped back into the containers.

"I wonder why this pool is still here, with all this desert around," Alonzo mused out loud.

"It is probably the last dribble left of what was once a huge, inland sea," Yale said.

"Remember we think this entire wasteland was once filled with water."

"That's why the concentration of minerals is so high," Julia understood. "As the water evaporates, mineral levels rise."

"It makes me wonder what happened," Devon murmured, her arms around Uly who still looked pale. His eyes, however, were gleaming with life.

"Maybe the Terrians know," he suggested. "Can I ask them?"

"Oh no, you can't," Devon clucked. "What you are going to do, young man, is get to bed and sleep. And no 'dreaming', you hear?"

"Yes Mom," Uly said. He managed to look dejected while he climbed to his feet and started for the Rover. It had been decided that he and True would sleep in the back, high above the poisonous ground.

"Well, I guess we found out why the maps have these blanks," Morgan concluded.

"There's nothing here that's worth charting. Poisonous dirt and poisonous water." He snorted disdainfully. The others laughed. It was a public secret that Morgan still held a quiet hope he would discover something that was going to make him a fortune.

"We should all get some sleep," Devon said, pushing herself to her feet. "Hopefully

tomorrow we can reach those mountains and find a pass out of these blasted lands."

Julia and the others followed Devon's example. "Don't forget to replenish the water supply over the fire, and to swap the containers," the doctor reminded Cameron, who had drawn the first watch. Despite the fact that they knew they were alone out here, that nobody could possibly live in this place, they still kept their nightly vigil. It was a habit that was hard to break.

"Will do," he promised and she followed Alonzo, retreating for the night.

oOo

The next morning, when the first rays of the sun colored the sky, they had refilled three and half containers with potable water, enough to last them for two days if they were careful. They weren't out of danger yet but Julia felt more confident than she had in days. If they could cross those mountains... Everyone was convinced that they would be safe on the other side, that they would find a normal world of green plants and vegetation, of small animals and even the annoying bugs, once they crossed the tall peaks.

Danziger and Alonzo took the Rail out to scout ahead and look for a way that the vehicles could traverse. By mid-afternoon they returned with wide grins plastered on their faces. "We found a pass," Danziger announced. "It's a few degrees east of our current course. And it's a bit further than we thought. If we can reach the foot of the mountains tonight, we can drive across tomorrow."

"Good," Julia said, with a glance at the water containers. The worried frown was back on her face; although they had survived the storm, the desert might get them yet.

"Hey Doc," Alonzo said, pulling her into his arms. "We'll be fine. I promise. This pass looks really easy."

Julia smiled at him and refrained from mentioning that nothing on the planet had been easy so far.

oOo

They camped that night at the foot of the mountains, steep cliffs looming high over the

small tents. Early the next morning True stood looking up at the sheer walls, craning her neck to see the tops which were painted orange by the rising sun. "They don't look very jagged," she mused. "Not like the other mountains. They look... a little smooth."

"Hmph," Morgan said, overhearing her. "They look like big, ugly mountains to me."

"True is right, though," Yale said while he joined them and shaded his eyes before he followed her gaze up. "These mountains must be very old, millions of years old. Their raw, sharp edges have been worn away over time, rounded and softened through erosion by water and wind."

"Okay, people, let's go," Danziger hollered, barring any further conversation. True ran over to take her spot in the Rover's cabin and the long caravan set itself in motion. Yale spared a last glance up at the mountaintops before following the others up the pass.

The pass itself was a wide trench cut through the mountains. Danziger and Alonzo had been right on the money; it was indeed easy to traverse. Its slope rose by small degrees from the valley floor and soon they left the fines behind while their route took them higher and higher above the desert.

"This looks like an old river bed," Yale said. "Probably one of the rivers that used to feed the inland sea." He thought it better not to mention that they might find it had been a rock fall which cut off the stream; why worry anyone unless necessary?

## Chapter 9

Yale's concern turned out to be justified. Just after noon, when they had climbed high enough for the temperature to be a bit more pleasant, the pass made a turn around an outcrop and the road ahead was revealed. The Rail, riding at the head of the column with Danziger at the wheel, tottered to halt and the mechanic jumped out. He swore beneath his breath as he raised a hand to shield his eyes.

"What's up, Danziger?" Devon called while making her way forward. When she rounded the bend and caught up with him, she stopped to stare in dismay at the pile of rocks and rubble that blocked the pass from wall to wall.

"We have to turn back," she said dully. "Find another way."

"We can't go back!" Julia protested. "We've almost used up our water supply. There has to be a way across."

"Julia, are you blind?" Devon lost her temper. "There is no way we can pass that wall!"

"Yes, there is," Uly piped up. He climbed from the cabin of the Rover to join his mother, Julia and Danziger. "There's a tunnel through the mountain. The Terrians showed it to me last night."

"What?" Devon exclaimed. "Uly, are you all right?" She knelt in front of him, grabbing his shoulders and he impatiently shrugged her off.

"Mo-om. The Terrians are my friends. They won't hurt me."

"What's this about a tunnel?" Danziger brought the subject back to the matter at hand. He didn't think Devon would ever feel completely comfortable about her son's link with the aliens.

"There's a tunnel through there," Uly repeated. "You can't see it from here, it's behind that rock." He pointed at a large boulder that seemed to rest upon a pedestal close to the wall.

"Uly's right," Alonzo said, sauntering closer. "I can... feel it. I also don't think this is a natural rock slide." He shrugged when Julia raised an eyebrow. "Ever since we entered the pass I've been experiencing these... I don't know what to call it. It's like... an itch. Like something's tugging at my mind. A bit like a memory that keeps getting away from you."

Danziger was shaking his head. "I don't want to know. All I care about is a way out of here. Let's see if Uly is right." The boy glared at the big man for doubting him but Danziger never noticed.

He hopped back into the Rail and waved the caravan into motion. They ambled forward in the direction of the rock. The Rail rounded the boulder first and Danziger let out a triumphant yell at the sight of a darker shadow, an entrance into the rocks. It wasn't very wide but looked high and wide enough for the TransRover to drive through. He halted the Rail again. Better to scout ahead first.

He soon realized that Alonzo was right. The tunnel was artificial, looking old and not very well maintained. Rocks had loosened from the ceiling and cluttered the path. It seemed that nobody had used it for quite some time. From what he could see, though, when he directed the luma light into the darkness, it shouldn't be too hard to drive the vehicles through. He took a step forward, intent to explore a bit more before ordering the caravan to follow him.

Sudden shouts behind him made him spin around in the opening. Alonzo lay crumpled in a heap on the ground next to the boulder. Julia crouched beside him and the others were gathered in a semi-circle around the pair. Danziger hopped from the Rail and hurried back to see what was wrong. Alonzo was holding his head in his hands, curled up into a ball and moaning in pain. Julia was feverishly running her glove across his body.

Uly crouched next to Alonzo, his eyes distant and unfocused. As Danziger pushed his way through the crowd, silently grateful that Devon's attention was on the pilot, Uly blinked and his eyes rolled back into focus.

"It won't let him go," he said, nodding vaguely in the direction of the underground passage. "He'll be better if you take him back."

They all stared at the boy for a moment until another moan from Alonzo broke the spell. Danziger frowned. Uly seemed serious and that strange calm he displayed when his Terrian side was presiding radiated from the boy. Danziger signaled to Walman for help and together they easily lifted the squirming pilot to carry him back down their tracks. As soon as they moved away from the boulder that protected the tunnel entrance, Alonzo calmed. A few hundred yards further down the pass they gently put him down on the floor. Alonzo opened his eyes and Julia was with him in an instant.

"Lonzo? How are you feeling?" she asked, once again running her hand across his body.

"Woozy," he said, shaking his head and trying to sit up. "Ow," he added with a groan when he raised himself. "My head hurts."

"Do you remember what happened?"

He frowned. "Not really. I walked around that rock, saw Danziger stop in front of the tunnel and then it was as if something blasted through my brain. I thought my head was going to explode."

"It's the bad thing in the ground," Uly said. He squirmed his way through the crowd of grown-ups.

"What do you mean, Uly?" Julia asked. "What bad thing? What is inside that passage?"

"The Terrians built the wall," Uly said. His voice was oddly mature and Danziger saw Devon shiver at the sound. "To kill the... monster. They blocked the river so it couldn't feed."

"Monster?" Baines repeated, taking an involuntary step back. "You mean, a Terrian thing like Icecube Harry back at the dome?"

"No, not a Terrian," Uly said. "This monster comes from somewhere else. It doesn't belong on the planet. The Terrians are afraid of it."

"What does that have to do with Alonzo?" Julia asked. "Are the Terrians hurting him?"

"No," Uly said. "I told you, it's the monster. The Terrians said that it will use Alonzo to get on the Dreamplane."

"Why Alonzo?" Devon asked. "Why not..." She hesitated a moment. "Why not someone else?" Why not you, Danziger suspected she had been about to say.

Uly shrugged. "Because nobody can dream like Alonzo," he said as if stating the obvious.

oOo

"You'll have to leave me here," Alonzo said. "Give me some food and water and a tent."

Julia spun around to stare at him. "Are you nuts?" she asked, her voice too calm.

"You can come for me later," he explained. "You need to find water first."

"Oh no, Flyboy," she said. "I would not dream of leaving you. None of us would. Devon?"

"Julia's right," Devon agreed without missing a beat. "You're talking nonsense. We're not leaving you. We'll find a way."

"Don't you see?" Alonzo urged. "It's not letting me go. If I get even near that tunnel I get the mother of all migraines. If you take me inside, I could die. And I'm not sure that's the worst that could happen."

"What if we put him to sleep?" Danziger suggested, ignoring the protesting pilot. "He clobbered that Terrian freak on the dream plane."

"That might work," Devon said, nodding gratefully for the out. She wasn't about to leave anyone behind ever again. She turned to look at Julia.

"I can do that," the doctor said reluctantly. "Uly?"

With a shock Devon realized that Alonzo's fate was placed in Uly's nine-year old hands. Oddly enough nobody questioned the boy's tale of a monster beneath the earth. If he said he received that information from the Terrians, they were all prepared to accept it at his say-so. Even she, his mother. Devon shook her head and concentrated on her son.

The boy lifted his shoulders. "I guess it--"

His words were cut short by a low grumble deep inside the mountain. The ground vibrated beneath their feet.

"Uh oh..." Uly muttered.

The wall that blocked the pass shook and large boulders came loose to roll with an earsplitting rattle onto the floor of the pass. Devon grabbed her son, pulled him to her and wrapped herself around his small body protectively. A few minutes later the last of the chunks stopped rolling and the ground beneath their feet was still again.

Alonzo was the first one to find his voice. "You have to go," he urged. "Now. Whatever this thing is, it's... waking up. There's not much time." He pushed Julia and she had to take a step back to keep her balance. "Please, Julia, go now." Another tremor shook the earth and more rocks slid down.

Julia looked at him, tears in her eyes. "Don't ask me to leave you behind," she pleaded. "I can't do that."

"You have to," Alonzo said. "The others need you."

"Solace," Danziger said and Alonzo turned to look at the mechanic. A fist shot out and caught the pilot square on the jaw. His eyes rolled back into his head and with a barely audible sigh he slumped to the floor. Baines was just in time to catch him before he banged his head upon the ground.

"What the--" Devon began, glaring at Danziger.

Danziger shrugged. "You can yell at me later. Alonzo was right about one thing: there's not much time." Another quake marked his words. "At least now he's out of it and can't waste our time by arguing any more."

"I don't know..." Julia said. She sat gazing down at Alonzo; a finger brushed lightly against his jaw that was already coloring blue into a bruise.



The earth shook again and Devon felt it shift beneath her feet. Small pebbles from the canyon wall rained down on them.

Julia took a deep breath. "Let's go," she said. Her voice was hollow and Devon could see the desperation in her eyes.

## Chapter 10

One by one the vehicles and people entered the tunnel. At the head of the column, Danziger had changed to the ATV, and its headlights penetrated the intense darkness. He moved slowly, carefully seeking his way among boulders and potholes. The earth shuddered again, debris from the ceiling showering down on the vehicles and people.

The Rover was right behind the ATV, with the Rail closing the line. Alonzo had been put in the back of the TransRover and Julia sat next to him, keeping an eye and a glove on his condition. Even over the clatter of rocks and the hum of the engines, his moans echoed loud in the low tunnel. Julia could only hold his head in her lap as she knelt behind him, gently stroking his face and whispering soothing words. She'd never felt so helpless in her life before.

Suddenly Alonzo screamed and flew up from her lap. The blood froze in her veins at the sound of the pilot's voice, so full of fear and anxiety.

Uly's head whipped up as the sound echoed through the cave. He jumped from the Rail and ran forward to the slow-moving Rover. "Uly, no!" Devon yelled, grabbing for her son and missing him by an inch.

"I've got to help Alonzo," Uly called over his shoulder. He pulled himself up the side of the Rover and crouched next to Julia and Alonzo. For a moment he sat contemplating the unconscious man with large, thoughtful eyes. Then he took Alonzo's hand and closed his eyes. Immediately his muscles went slack and he crumpled atop the pilot's body.

"Uly?" Devon climbed up on the bed of the Rover in search of her son. She gasped when she noticed him lying motionless next to Alonzo. Her eyes turned to Julia, accusing and questioning at the same time.

Julia gave a slight shrug, ignoring the accusation. "He has joined Alonzo on the Dreamplane, I think," she murmured. A quick scan with her glove confirmed the theory; they were both asleep.

Devon muttered something below her breath and sat down beside the doctor, joining her

in a silent vigil. All around them the ground continued to growl ominously, the sound bouncing from the tunnel walls. Suddenly the noise increased in pitch and fresh slivers of rock fell from the ceiling, pattering down on the Rover's cover. Instinctively both women leaned forward to protect the sleeping forms with their own bodies.

"C'mon, c'mon!" Danziger yelled. He had turned over the wheel of the ATV to Magus and stood pressed against the tunnel wall further up ahead, gesturing frantically for people to hurry. With his luma-lamp Danziger pointed the way for Cameron in the Rover, waving him forward with his hand while casting anxious glances up to the tunnel walls.

"How're they doing?" he asked when the Rover rolled past him.

Julia looked down at Danziger. Sharp shadows played across his face, which was covered with dust drifted down from the roof. It gave him a slightly insane look and Julia shivered involuntarily, remembering the winter at the dome. "Okay, I guess," she said. "They're both on the Dreamplane. Nothing I can do."

"Hang in there, it won't be much further," Danziger encouraged the two women. "There's light up ahead, that must be the end of this tunnel."

Another sharp crack directly overhead made them all look up at the ceiling and while they watched a dark gap appeared and widened. Danziger stepped back from the Rover, once again urging Cameron on. "Move it, move it!"

oOo

With a worried frown, Danziger watched the vehicles pick up speed, rolling along as fast as their drivers dared to go in the dark and narrow enclosure. Yale drove past in the Rail and he hopped up on the rear, precariously holding on to the bars. Deeply concerned, Danziger kept swiveling his head in all directions, to look around him, overhead, at the walls of the tunnel. Everywhere he looked, fissures appeared. The rocks that continued to tumble down in their path grew in size and the stone walls were groaning. They were running out of time.

Suddenly a big boulder dropped into the path of the Rail and Yale steered sharply to the left to avoid it. Danziger nearly lost his grip, letting out a startled shout. The Rail's headlights bounced off the left-hand wall and in their glare the two men noticed a dark square patch that was gleaming dully. Surprised, Yale halted the Rail.

"What are you doing?" Danziger demanded. "Keep going, before this whole tunnel comes down on us."

"Look at that, John." Yale hopped from the driver's seat and approached the wall.

Despite himself, and heaving a deep sigh, Danziger followed him. Close up he realized that the square resembled some sort of plaque. Small scribbles were visible upon the smooth surface. "What the heck is that?" Danziger asked.

"It looks like some kind of hieroglyphs," Yale said. "Writing."

"Can you make it out?" Danziger asked.

"No," Yale shook his head. "It's too... alien for any of my library functions."

"Well, then, let's go," Danziger said, dismissing the plaque and jumping behind the wheel of the Rail. Yale hesitated a moment longer, before he joined the mechanic in the vehicle.

o0o

The instant he opened his eyes, Alonzo knew he was on the Dreamplane. How did he get here? He had no recollection of accessing the realm. Then he remembered the iron fist coming out of nowhere, and connecting with his face. That damned Danziger! The man was making a habit out of knocking him out, and it had to stop!

He worked his jaw, not at all surprised to find it didn't hurt one bit. After all, physical injuries didn't exist on the Dreamplane. Even when he had broken his leg, Alonzo had been able to walk on two legs in the strange world of dreams.

He willed himself to wake up.

Nothing happened.

Alonzo furrowed his brow. Why was he still here? Over the months he had gained so much control, he could enter and leave the Dreamplane whenever he desired.

Could it be because he was knocked unconscious, instead of asleep?

As he looked around, Alonzo realized that something was wrong. It was the Dreamplane,

all right, the light coming from all directions at once. But the light was dimmer. Not as bright as it usually was. And the sand, it wasn't the brilliant whiteness he recalled from his first trips. It was a dusty gray, a murky color. It reminded him of--

He gasped when the memory hit him. It reminded him of the wasteland the Eden group had just crossed. The sand of death.

He reached out with the tendrils of his mind, calling for the Terrians, for any Terrian that would answer.

None came.

Again he called. "Hello?" He stretched his awareness as far as it would go. Nobody replied.

Or-- nobody?

A dozen meters ahead of him, the sand stirred and began to whirl around and up into a funnel-shaped column. Alonzo staggered back. "That's a new one," he muttered.

Wider and higher the column grew, sucking up more and more of the dusty gray sand. Alonzo squinted. A darker shape formed within the column.

Without warning, a dusty tentacle lashed out from the pillar of sand. It snatched his leg, the grains of flying sand abrading his skin. Alonzo yelled in surprise and tried to pull himself free. But the grip was relentless. He shouted again and fell back.

"Alonzo."

He looked up at the unexpected voice to see Uly standing behind him. The boy offered him a hand. "Take it."

Alonzo reached for Uly's hand. Their fingers touched but he couldn't get a firm grip. The sand-arm was pulling him in, dragging him across the desert floor, ready to suck him into its vortex. Uly's hand slipped from his fingers and Alonzo screamed as he flew across the ground and entered the vortex.

Then... blackness.

oOo

Swerving to avoid the rocks being strewn across the path, Danziger sped up the Rail until finally, amidst a shower of boulders, they raced out of the tunnel into the bright light of the sun. They were last to exit and a small cheer went up while Danziger killed the engine. Yale realized he had been holding his breath and blew out with a sigh. He turned in his seat to see the mountain shiver one last time before the passage collapsed behind them. A cloud of dust billowed up into the bright blue sky, blocking out the sun for long minutes until the wind dispersed the fines. Silence reigned, only broken by the creak of settling rocks, and small pebbles still clattering down.

"That was close," Baines muttered after several minutes, and shuddered. With a small nod, Yale agreed. It had been frighteningly close.

For the first time he looked around to see where the tunnel had brought them. The contrast with the area the group left behind was so sharp that he wanted to pinch himself to make sure he wasn't imagining things. A lush green valley stretched out before him, as far as the eye could see. Trees grew thick on the valley floor and up the slopes of the mountains. And, an even more amazing sight to Yale's weary eyes: a lake of clear, blue water that sparkled beneath the sun.

He stepped out of the Rail and walked toward the Rover, which was parked at an angle. "How's Uly? And Alonzo?" he asked while climbing up its bed. Julia was bent forward, frantically running her glove over the two limp bodies on the floor.

Devon, pale and her eyes wide and anxious, turned to face Yale. "They should have woken up now," she murmured. At a loss for words, Yale patted her hand in support.

Uly stirred and Devon drew her hand away to lean once again over her son.

"Uly?"

The boy uttered a sigh and his eyes fluttered open. "It took Alonzo," he said in a small voice. "I couldn't help him, I tried." The boy burst into tears.

## Chapter 11

Eden Project set up camp at the edge of the lake and waited. They soon discovered that Uly was incapable of telling what had taken place on the Dreamplane. Every time Devon or Yale or Julia tried to question him, he became frustrated and upset at his failure to explain and started crying, "The monster in the Earth took him!" It didn't help them much.

Without knowing what happened to Alonzo, there was little they could do. Julia hoped that, given time, he would wake from his coma. The more time passed, the bleaker his prospects became. And the paler Julia's face grew, the more sunken and dull her blue eyes.

"At least we have plenty of water," Baines remarked as he flung a pebble into the blue lake and watched the circles grow wider and wider until they faded.

"Yeah," Magus agreed. She plopped beside Baines and Morgan on the fallen tree trunk and stared out over the lake also. She chortled softly. "Remember that water fight we had? Alonzo would have loved to go another round here."

Walman laughed. "Yeah, he was always good for a practical joke and a laugh."

"You shouldn't say that," Morgan muttered as he pushed himself up. The others looked at him.

"Say what?" Walman asked.

"Would. Was. You're talking about him as if he's already dead! He's stuck on the Dreamplane, that's all. He'll be back." Morgan sincerely hoped so. Alonzo had been the first friend he had on the planet. Well, besides Bess, but she didn't count. She was his wife.

The others exchanged a startled look. Baines looked away. "You're right, Morgan. Alonzo always bounces back."

"Morgan?" Yale's voice interrupted whatever reply Morgan had been forming.

The bureaucrat turned. "Yes, Yale?"

"I need your help." He lifted his robotic arm and pushed a button. An image sprang to life, wavering a moment before it settled. Baines, Magus and Walman gathered around Yale and Morgan, eyes trained on the image.

"What is it?" Morgan asked. The image was a still life of a page full of writing.

"It's a plaque Danziger and I discovered in that tunnel." Yale nodded in the direction of the mountain they had escaped through. "I think it might hold an explanation for what happened here. And maybe it can help us help Alonzo. I need your assistance to translate it."

"My assistance?" Morgan wondered aloud. "How? I don't--" Then his eyes grew round. "The Morganite."

"Exactly."

Morgan contemplated the recording. Without thinking, he rubbed his hands together, remembering the pain of the burns he suffered when he used the glowing stones to break the geolock access code. "You'll get burned," he said. "That stuff is hot. And dangerous."

"Maybe not if it's still part of the planet," Yale said. "When I got my pre-Yale memories back, I was touching the Morganite in the cave wall. The vein was warm to the touch, but not hot."

"How do we know where to find it?" Morgan asked.

"I can help with that," Baines piped up. "We can use the Rover's scanners to run a resonance scan of the area. If we find caves, we're bound to find some of that stuff."

The three men took off for the Rover, Magus and Walman trailing behind. They were anxious to help their teammate recover. Soon half of Eden Project was cluttered around the Rover.

"There!" Baines pointed at a dark spot on the screen. "An underground cavern. It's about three kilometers away."

oOo

"I want to come," Julia said. Her face was drawn and her jaw set with stubbornness.

"Julia," Devon protested. "We need--"

"Devon." Danziger caught her eye and gave a quick shake of his head. He recognized the helplessness that was eating away at the doctor, her sense of failure. He had felt the same when Elle had her accident. It had taken him years to accept that there was nothing he could have done. He didn't want Julia to have to go through the same thing. If it didn't help, at least she would know she had tried.

Devon caved. "All right," she said. "Julia, Danziger, Morgan and Yale. That's it. Nobody else goes."

If the situation hadn't been so serious, Danziger might have laughed. This was one scout where Devon wasn't lacking for volunteers. Everyone had jumped at the chance, however minor, to try to help Alonzo.

"Let's go," Danziger said to the three people Devon had named. He wanted to get out of there before another round of discussions on what to do and who should go started.

They followed him to the Rail that stood prepared and ready, and Danziger got behind the wheel. Julia hopped in beside him, medical bag clutched in her arms and her eyes distant. He peered sideways but she kept staring straight ahead. Danziger gave a shrug and after satisfying himself that Yale and Morgan were settled in the back, he set the vehicle in motion.

It was an easy drive, across a softly rolling landscape filled with green grass and clusters of lush trees. The lake extended as far as they could see.

After a short while they approached the hill that should hold the cave system the scanner picked up. Danziger parked the Rail beneath some tall trees and killed the engine. They grabbed the packs, hoisted them onto their backs and marched out. Not much was said. Nobody really knew what to say. Julia had made it clear that this was an all or nothing expedition. If they couldn't get Alonzo off the Dreamplane and out of his coma now, she feared he would never wake up.

"There," Yale pointed.

Following his finger, Danziger found the darker shadow of a cave entrance, half hidden behind some waist-high bushes. He switched on the luma light, shoved the branches aside and entered. The others followed on his heels.

The tunnel was low and narrow. Danziger had to stoop to keep from hitting his head, and they were forced to walk in a single file. More luma lamps were turned on and the dark shadows receded before the invading light.

"I hope it's not going to come down on us," Morgan muttered as he aimed his lamp at the ceiling.

Danziger felt a cold shiver run along his spine at the memory. They had come so close to being buried alive beneath the mountain. "Shut up and walk," he grunted more sternly than he'd intended.

Morgan blinked, then started following without another word. Julia gave no sign she had



heard the exchange; it was as if she wasn't really there.

They followed the tunnel, which sloped upward for a bit, then turned sharply to the left and began to descend deep into the hill. As soon as they turned the corner, the entrance was no longer visible and the light of the luma lamps was their only illumination. Not a single pebble of Morganite was in sight and Danziger began to fear this would all come to naught.

oOo

An hour later Morgan voiced their fears. "There's nothing here," he complained. "No Morganite, no sign of Terrians."

"Maybe it's time to head back," Yale agreed. "We must have gone at least a kilometer underground."

Julia whipped around. Her eyes flashed in the lamps' light. "We keep going." This attempt, this expedition was the last hope she had left. All her medical skills, all her knowledge, it was useless against the metaphysical coma that Alonzo was in.

"Julia, perhaps--" Danziger began and she cut him off.

"Please," she pleaded. "Just a bit further." Tears burned behind her eyelids and she blinked them away. She didn't want to break down. Nobody ever was allowed to see her break down. Except Alonzo. And he wasn't around. Besides, if she started to cry now, she feared she wouldn't be able to stop.

"Lead the way," Danziger said and she offered him a grateful half-smile before turning around again and continuing through the tunnel.

Another thirty minutes and even Julia had to admit it was hopeless.

"We should go back." Her voice had lost all intonation and was flat and colorless. She couldn't bring herself to look up and meet the eyes of the others. This search for the Morganite had been her last hope.

Nobody spoke. Nobody disagreed with her.

The tunnel was narrow, and it took a few minutes before all three men had managed to follow Julia's example and turn around. Morgan, who had closed the line, now walked

point.

Suddenly Julia heard a rumble, and a yelp from Morgan. She aimed the beam of her luma light forward, beyond the tall shadows of Danziger and Yale and Morgan, where it fell upon an even taller form. A Terrian had swum up from the tunnel floor and barred their way. He completely blocked the tunnel, broad shoulders touching the walls and even though he hunched, the top of his head reached the ceiling. Thin rivulets of dust trickled down from his leathery body and glistened in the light of the lamp.

For a long moment, the four humans gaped at the lone alien. He didn't blink, didn't move, he just stood in their way.

oOo

"Now what?" Morgan asked, a tremble in his voice. "What did we do wrong this time?" He inched backward and found his way blocked by Danziger. "Maybe-- Maybe we entered some sacred cave? Or perhaps a graveyard?" He recalled the folkloric stories that Mazatl told around the campfires at night.

"Don't talk nonsense, Morgan," Danziger muttered. "You know Terrians don't bury their dead."

"Oh, right. Mooncross."

"What do you want?" Danziger asked the Terrian. Of course, he didn't receive an answer. The creature cocked his head sideways and studied the four humans.

"If we stepped onto holy ground, we're sorry," Morgan squeaked, apparently not ready to let go of his trespassing theory. The Terrians could get quite upset if someone entered their turf.

A step forward by the Terrian elicited another squeak from the bureaucrat. He tumbled another step back and landed his full weight on Danziger's toes. "Dammit, Morgan," the mechanic growled as he pulled his foot away.

"We better back up," Julia said. "That might be what he wants." As if to confirm her suspicion, the Terrian took another step forward, forcing the four to shuffle backwards. Morgan pressed into Danziger, trying to get away as far as possible from the creature.

Another step forward. And another.

"I think you're right, Julia," Yale agreed with the doctor. "He wants us to continue instead of returning to the entrance."

## Chapter 12

Again it took several moments of awkward scrambling before everyone had turned once more and Julia was in the lead.

The tunnel grew even narrower and Julia imagined she could feel the weight of thousands of tons of rock pressing down on her. Time passed, and behind them the Terrian urged them forward. Then, the tunnel took another turn to the right and--

Julia stopped dead in her tracks and sucked air through her teeth in shock. In the distance light showed. A warm, orange glow. "There's light," she told the others, knowing that it might be hard for them to see past the ones in front of them.

A relieved whimper came from behind her. Morgan, she knew without asking.

Encouraged by this new development, they walked a little faster. The glow grew brighter and brighter until it lit the walls of the tunnel around them, and the faces of the four people, smeared with dust and dirt, and full of hope that perhaps all was not lost yet.

The tunnel ended in a huge cavern. The light was so bright, after the hours spent in the darkness, that Julia had to squint to see. Thick veins of Morganite glowed and pulsed on the walls, the floor, the ceiling.

"That's why he didn't let us go back," Yale murmured.

Julia nodded in agreement. "We were so close."

Yale called up the recording of the plaque and walked past Julia toward the nearest vein of Morganite. The hologram hovered over his left hand while he reached out with his right for the red-hot, pulsing vein.

"Watch out! That stuff is--" Morgan yelled. Yale placed his fingers on the vein. "--hot."

Yale didn't flinch; smoke didn't rise from his fingers. The hologram shimmered, wavered, grew dim and brightened again while they looked. Then the hieroglyphs melted and rearranged themselves into a roman script that Julia found she could read and understand.

"In a time before time, a star appeared in the heavens and sought the Mother. It grew brighter and brighter until the stone beast buried itself in Her skin. The rivers wept deadly tears and the Slayer of Planets rejoiced. It was a time of great turmoil, sorrow and grief. Until the Mother's guardians averted the rivers that fed it and the beast slept. If a Dreamer's spirit comes near and allows the Slayer to wake, the Mother will perish slowly, and all Her children shall die with Her."

The words were stilted and strangely formal; apparently the Morganite served as a conduit between Yale's language functions and the strange hieroglyphs, attempting to translate them into English. An analytical part of Julia filed away the information while her eyes flew over the words, almost as fast as they formed within the holographic image. She searched for a clue, for the solution, for a way to cure Alonzo's comatose state. And she found none. When the inscription was finished translating and Yale shut down the holo, Julia's shoulders slumped in utter defeat.

"Nothing," she murmured.

"It explains what happened here," Yale said. "Something hit the planet. Probably a meteorite, sentient, like this planet, and made up from those metals that--"

Julia wasn't listening. "Not a clue on how to bring Alonzo back."

"That... thing wanted Alonzo, didn't it? That's what Uly said. Because he can dream with the Terrians? So maybe we didn't read it right," Morgan ventured hesitantly. "What did it say about a Dreamer's spirit? Maybe, if Yale plays it again we--"

Julia spun on her heels, eyes flashing, and she snapped: "Don't you get it, Morgan? It doesn't matter. Alonzo. Is. Gone. And there's nothing I can do about it!" Her voice cracked on the last words and she began sobbing, every drop of anguish and strain she had been bottling up finding release at once. Over her head, Yale and Danziger exchanged a look, while Morgan stared wide-eyed at the crying doctor.

Yale was the first to react. He stepped forward and drew her into his arms. She hid her face against his chest, still shaking with sobs. Danziger pounded the wall in frustration. "Dammit!" he growled.

"Hey!" Morgan turned to the Terrian that had taken position close to the entrance of the chamber. "You! Do something." With a display of courage that nobody dared imagine he possessed, he closed in on the creature and glared up at the impassive face. "It's your planet and your Dreamplane. Fix it."

The Terrian tilted his head, studying the human with passive eyes. Then he trilled and shoved past Morgan. Before anyone realized what he was doing, the alien pointed his staff at Julia. A lightning bolt crackled through the cavern, leaving a strong scent of ozone in its wake. It hit the young doctor. Without a sound, she slumped in Yale's arms.

Danziger and Morgan gaped, shocked by the unprovoked attack. "What the hell--" Danziger yelled and flicked a switch on the Mag-pro. With a soft hum it powered up.

"Wait." Yale's voice stopped him before he could fire. "She's asleep."

Glaring at the Terrian, who had returned to his position near the entrance, Danziger squatted beside Yale and Julia's limp body. "Look at her eyes," Yale pointed. The doctor's eyes were moving rapidly behind her closed eyelids.

"I think he brought her to the Dreamplane," Morgan muttered.

oOo

Julia blinked against the blinding white light that burned her retinas as soon as she inched her eyes open a fraction. Where was she?

She sat up, shading her eyes until she was accustomed to the brightness surrounding her. It seemed to come from all directions at once, and she couldn't detect any source for the light. Her surroundings were endless and monotonous; white sands, gently rolling hills, as far as the eye could see. With a start, she realized where she was. The Dreamplane. This was exactly the way Alonzo described it after the Terrians first pulled him onto it.

Why was she here?

Julia pushed herself to her feet, pivoting on the balls of her feet as she tried to make up her mind. Where to go? What to do? Any direction could be the right one, and she had three hundred and sixty degrees of options to choose from. If she picked the wrong--

Before she could finish the thought, the sand at her feet shifted. An incision appeared, the sand sinking into a thin stripe. Then an arrow formed, pointing to her right.

With a shrug, Julia set off in the direction the arrow was pointing. Someone was trying to tell her something. She'd better listen. She didn't know what else to do anyway.

She walked, the sand dragging at her feet, slowing her down, trying to pull her back. It

was hard going and she soon grew tired. She hadn't slept much, these past few weeks, ever since they entered the wasteland the Terrians called sand of death. And today, she had spent hours traipsing around dark tunnels in search for an answer.

She was about to lose hope when the landscape began to change around her. The sand lost its glaring whiteness and grew a dull gray that seemed to leech all color from the world. It looked familiar. Suddenly, she recognized it. It was a paler version of the black soot that covered the wasteland. This part of the Dreamplane was the metaphysical mirror image of the real world -- or what she considered the real world.

Encouraged, Julia picked up her pace and started paying more attention to her surroundings. She began recognizing landmarks. Over there was the mountain range where they had crossed through the tunnel, out of the desert. And that meant that she would come up on the small lake pretty soon.

She rounded another foothill. The lake should be right--

A sand dune stood where the lake was supposed to be. Small and perfectly symmetrical, like a giant's hand had grabbed a fistful of sand and let it fall slowly through clenched fingers.

Not sure what it meant, yet convinced it was important, Julia warily approached the sand hill. She walked around it, studying it, looking for a clue of what it was that she was supposed to do there. On the opposite side, she found it.

"Oh God." Her throat was suddenly as dry as the desert. A hand stuck up from the sand, a few inches of a black leather sleeve visible before the arm disappeared beneath the fine dust. "Alonzo."

For a long moment she could only gape at the fingers in horror, until instinct kicked in and she raced forward. "Alonzo!" she cried again, furiously digging at the sand with her bare hands, raising clouds of dust that made her cough. She had to get him out of here.

The practical half of her mind told her that she was being silly. Alonzo had been unconscious for days. If he had spent all that time buried beneath the dust hill on the Dreamplane, all she was going to find was his mummified corpse. Still, she couldn't let go. She had to see, to know with absolute certainty.

Finally, she uncovered his head. He looked so white, his hair and eyebrows streaked with pale dust. His eyes were closed. She cradled his torso in the crook of her arm. "Alonzo?" she whispered, new tears forming behind her eyelids and slowly dripping down her cheeks. A few of the drops fell from her face and landed on his eyes.

He blinked.

Startled out of her skin, Julia nearly dropped him.

He coughed and opened his eyes to focus on her face. "Julia?"

Julia began to laugh and cry at once. Tears of happiness were now flowing down her cheeks, leaving streaks in the dust. She didn't care.

She helped Alonzo sit up.

"What happened?" he asked. "The last thing I remember is being clogged by Danziger."

"I don't know," Julia replied in all honesty. She continued to tell him that after they cleared the tunnel, she had been unable to revive him. "Yale made a recording of some inscription and we went in search of Morganite to translate it. When it didn't provide the answers we needed, Morgan yelled at the Terrian and he fired his staff at me. I ended up here," she finished her tale.

"Morgan yelled at a Terrian?" Alonzo repeated incredulously. "I wish I had seen that." He laughed and gathered Julia up in his arms. "I'm sorry I had you worried."

She shrugged. "It's all right. You're fine now." Her brow furrowed and she looked around. "At least, I think so. We're still stuck on the Dreamplane."

Alonzo followed her gaze. "Yeah." A twinkle appeared in his eyes. "You know, we could postpone our return. Celebrate life a little."

Julia chortled and punched him in the shoulder. "I think not! The others will be worried."

Alonzo gave a mock sigh. "I suppose you're right. Do you know how to get back?"

Julia shook her head. "Not really. You're the expert here. What do I do?"

"Simple," Alonzo said. "You will yourself to wake up. It's like a regular dream, when you know you're dreaming and you can snap out of it. Here, take my hand." He reached for her arm and wrapped his fingers around her hand. "On the count of three, okay?"

"Okay." Julia took a deep breath.

"One. Two. Three."

oOo

She didn't feel different. But as soon as she opened her eyes, Julia knew she was back in the cave. The orange glow of the Morganite surrounded her and three worried faces hovered above her. "Hello there," she muttered.

Yale, Morgan and Danziger all broke in wide smiles when they noticed that she was awake. "Welcome back," Morgan said.

"Where's Alonzo?" she asked as she sat up and looked around. Then she noticed that Morgan was holding her hand between his. He caught her stare and a bit guiltily he let go. Julia's heart sank. Had it all been a dream? Not real?

"Alonzo?" Danziger asked, frowning. He exchanged a glance with Yale.

Before the tutor could say anything, his Gear beeped. "Yale? Are you there?" Devon's voice sounded thin over the airwaves.

"Yes, Devon, we're here," Yale replied as he swung the eyepiece forward. "What's going on?"

A brightly smiling Devon appeared before his eye. "Alonzo woke up. Tell Julia that he's tired and hungry but otherwise okay."

## Epilogue

*[From Julia Heller's coded Gearlog diaries]*

"We never managed to put together a satisfactory explanation of what happened near the Sand of Death. Too many pieces of the puzzle are missing to make more than educated guesses as to what it was that struck the planets millennia ago. Perhaps Yale was correct, and a sentient meteor did strike G889. It makes as much sense as any other explanation we can come up with.

I know for a fact that Alonzo has had a special connection to the Dreamplane since the day we arrived. Perhaps that's what allowed this 'Slayer of Planets' to pull him in. As to why I was the one to bring him out? I have no clue. Maybe any one of us could have done it. Perhaps my chromosomes make me special. Or perhaps, and I can only say this



out loud because nobody will ever hear this recording, perhaps it's because I love him. Frankly, I don't really care that much. We're alive, we're well, and we're back on our way to New Pacifica. That's all that matters to me."