



When the colony ship Pacific Unity emerges from the interstellar portal, the colonists discover they have arrived in the wrong system. While the system does have an Earth-like planet, it is already occupied and their charter forbids settlement on inhabited worlds. After negotiating with the inhabitants, the Pacificans set up a temporary colony on an uninhabited continent. They are confronted with many questions, the foremost being: Where are we and how did we end up here? Without this knowledge, they cannot plot a course to their original target. Then there is the question of what is causing the psychic changes in their children, and the cellular changes everyone soon experiences. Contact with Earth brings the news that theirs is the only colony ship that did not return to the home world, another mystery. Increasing tension between the colonists and the permanent inhabitants, the Sab'lichi, creates more pressure to find an uninhabited world where they can settle.

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*An infinite universe is at each moment opened to our view. And this universe is the sign and symbol of infinite Power, Intelligence, Purity, Bliss, and Love.*

William Ellery Channing

[ 1 ]

Ana Te Puea Rawiri Dekker had been asleep for two and a half years; it was time to wake up.

Millions of tiny molecular machines swarmed through her newly opened vascular system and into every cell, breaking down the packing material that preserved the cellular structure. As they worked, they repaired damaged cells and removed the cross-links that had tied the structures together and stabilized them. Other machines followed, restoring the body's vital fluids and electrolytes, gradually setting the metabolism in motion.

Hours passed.

The autonomic nervous system began to take over control of essential functions: breathing... slowly... slowly, heart rhythm—barely a flutter at first, then a weak pulsation, gradually swelling to a steady, regular thump, thump. Muscles twitched as nerve impulses and blood flowed into them. Awareness filtered into the brain, slowly, dreamlike. Finally, the machines shut off, leaving the fragile, complex organism to fend for itself.

A tingling, starting in her fingers and toes, traveled up her arms and legs, gradually diffusing her whole body with a feeling of nervous excitation, causing her body to twitch now and then. She lay still for a while, barely conscious, and then she stretched her legs, opened her eyes, and blinked. In spite of the dim amber lighting, she was dazzled for a moment. She became aware of a familiar shape hovering over her, a pale round face topped by a pink cap, wide mouth smiling, shadowed hollows for eyes.

“Wake up, sleepyhead.”

“Moma.” Ana felt an arm behind her shoulders, raising her head to place a pillow. A warm hand brushed hair back from her face. Ana looked into her mother's smiling blue eyes. “Are we there?”

“Almost. We'll be emerging from the Portal in a few hours.”

Ana raised her hand to touch her mother's face. The limb felt unusually heavy and bloated. “I had such a good sleep.”

“I know, love, over two years. How do you feel?”

“I feel so heavy, and yucky. I'm all itchy.”

“The heaviness will pass; your body is still waking up and getting used to itself,” her mother said. “You'll be able to get cleaned up soon.”

Ana's excitement increased; she wanted to move, but managed to control the urge to climb out of the unit. “Are Papa and Rolf awake?” she asked.

“They’re being revived as we speak.”

Margret Dekker picked up a stethoscope and held it against Ana’s abdomen, listening for bowel sounds that would indicate Ana’s digestive tract was reviving. She nodded to herself, glanced at the clock above the unit, and keyed a notation in the chart, then handed Ana a beaker of liquid with a drinking tube. “I want you to lie here for a little while and sip this, very slowly. It will give you an energy boost. I have to go and take care of some other people. Don’t try to get up yet; you’ll probably feel dizzy for a while. I won’t be far away if you need anything. Someone will come and take you to the baths in about half an hour.”

Ana watched her mother go to the next hibernation chamber and heard her murmuring to another reviving sleeper. She leaned back against the padded headrest of her unit and put the drinking tube to her lips. One finger unconsciously twined itself in a strand of her long curly hair, reminding her that it badly needed washing. She wondered if she had changed while she was in hibernation. It didn’t feel like it. They told her before she went down that all growth and physical development stopped during biostasis. That’s what biostasis meant. So how old was she? She had been twelve when they left Earth, but if her body was twelve years old, was she twelve or fourteen, going on fifteen?”

Ana was glad it had been her mother waking her. Margret Rawiri Dekker, a medical doctor, had been one of the first to be revived. Even though biostasis held few dangers, it was still considered prudent to have medical personnel on hand for the shutdown and revival processes.

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The view screens showed nothing at first but a charcoal blur, like thick black smoke, and then a few faint streaks of light appeared. Gradually the flashes of light began to increase, and then the ship shuddered slightly, its support struts groaning and clicking. A barely perceptible wave passed through the vessel and then, all at once, the screens cleared. A collective cry of awe went up on the bridge. Stars set against the pitch black of space, unfamiliar stars, an alien universe. It was hard to tell from the images sent by cameras mounted on the exterior of the vessel which stars were distant suns and which nearby planets.

Suddenly everyone was talking at once, on their feet milling around, shaking hands. Someone cheered and everyone joined in, clapping and slapping backs.

Captain Miguel Santamaria-Mendez cleared his throat. “Well, folks, this is a historic moment. We’ve emerged from the Portal into a new star system. In a few days, we will send in probes.” He paused, “I think we have cause to celebrate. Everyone assemble in the mess in two hours”— he looked at the chronometer—“at nineteen thirty.”

“Well, Miguel, we made it!” Teague shook the captain’s hand.

Gerald Teague, the son of an African mother and an Irish father, was an astronaut. Until this journey to the stars, he had been a shuttle pilot, carrying passengers and goods back and forth between Earth, the Moon,

and the various habitats in orbit around Earth. There had been little for him to do on this trip once the passengers were aboard. The *Pacific Unity* ran itself, its computers doing most of the work. His real job would begin when they reached the planet and began to download people and equipment.

“Yes. You may not believe it,” Santamaria replied in his usual calm voice, “But I’m bursting with excitement.” He smiled.

“I believe it, Captain, I feel the same way. Just have to show a cool exterior for the troops, eh?”

“Captain, I hate to interrupt, sir, but there’s something I think you should see.” The ship’s astronomer had come up silently, startling Santamaria.

“What is it, Pomaré?”

“Can you come and look, sir?”

Santamaria followed the astronomer back to her station and looked at the astrogation monitor, which displayed their current view of the universe from the ship, superimposed over the chart given them by the UN Space Agency.

“The red chart is what we should be seeing, and the green is what is actually out there,” Pomaré explained.

“Have you tested it in every direction?” Santamaria asked, knowing she wouldn’t have called him until she had, but wanting to be sure.

“Yes, sir, up and down. Nothing matches.”

“Ay,” he said in an awed voice. “*Creo que estamos perdidos.*” His pulse quickened and his throat tightened. Where in perdition are we? What if there’s no habitable planet in this system? *Santo Dios*, this could be a disaster. “Keep working on it, Pomaré; see what you can find. I’ll be back in a minute.”

He turned to the crew on the bridge. “Can I have your attention, folks?” When everyone had quieted down he continued, “I think perhaps our celebration is a little premature. It looks as if we’re lost.”

A cacophony of questions erupted in response to the captain’s announcement: “How could it happen?” “God, I don’t believe it.” “What are we going to do?” and the inevitable, “Where are we?”

“We’ll let you know as soon as we have any news. I assure you, we’re going to be working all out until we get some answers,” Santamaria said. “Meanwhile, I urge everyone to keep calm and concentrate on your work. I’m confident we’ll be able find a resolution.”

The celebratory mood was gone. Everyone looked worried; some were obviously scared. If there was no habitable planet in this system, they could all die on the ship, floating around in space with nowhere to land and not enough life support to sustain everyone aboard for more than a few months. All their plans and preparations had been based on the information given them by the UN.

Ana sat on a bunk in the family's tiny cabin which was four meters by six, including a sleeping alcove for the children and a small lavatory. Her father, Hinekino Te Ahu Rawiri—Kino to his friends—sat beside her. His legs were so long, they reached across to the opposite bunk where her mother sat with her brother, Rolf.

Freshly bathed and clothed in a pink pantsuit, she still felt a little weak, although everyone was too excited to think of sleeping yet. They'd already had plenty of sleep. After a light meal in the colonists' dining room—reintroduction of food to the awakening digestive system had to be gradual until its functions stabilized—they'd come back to the cabin to get reacquainted, although nobody seemed to have much to say after the initial bout of speculation about how far they'd come and what would happen next.

To the newly awakened colonists, it felt as if they had boarded the ship in Earth's orbit only yesterday. It was hard to adjust to the fact that they were now light years from their home world, and that two and a half years had passed. Ana felt that if there were a window to the outside, she would still see the launch site on the prairies east of Calgary.

Rawiri stood up. "I think I'll go and have a word with Miguel. I won't be long."

"Be careful, love, you've only been awake a couple of hours; you're still not too steady." Margret leaned forward and smoothed the wrinkles on the bunk Kino had just vacated.

"Don't worry, *Hoa*. It'd be difficult to come to any harm in this gravity." The artificial gravity of the *Pacific Unity* was less than fifty percent of Earth's. "You should be more worried about the damage I might do to anything I bump into."

"That too." Margret smiled. There were always jokes about Kino's size. He was a New Zealand Maori and stood close to two meters tall. He had a light tan complexion and black curly hair, which he wore long, tied at the back of his neck.

"Can we go with you?" Rolf asked.

"Better stay here with your mother, child. They'll be busy on the bridge and there's not much room. I'll be right back." He ducked his head as he went through the doorway, sliding the door shut behind him.

He returned in less than fifteen minutes with a look of mild consternation on his face. "It looks as if we're lost."

"What?" Ana and Margret chorused.

"It seems we're in the wrong star system."

"Oh, my God, What are we going to do?" Margret asked. "When did they find out?"

"Where are we then?" Rolf piped in simultaneously.

Kino came in and closed the door, then sat down on the bunk opposite his wife and son. “The astronomer discovered that the constellations out there didn’t match the ones in the computer.”

“How could that happen?” Margret wanted to know.

Rawiri shrugged. “Impossible to say. The destination was programmed into the computers before we left. I don’t know how we could have gone wrong.”

“But where are we?” Rolf repeated his question.

“We don’t know that, either, Son.”

“Are we going to have to go somewhere else?” Ana asked, craning sideways to look at her father, a worried frown on her face.

“We’re going to explore this system and see if there’s a habitable planet.” He put his hand on her shoulder and continued, “If not, I’m not sure what we’ll do; go back to Earth, I suppose. It would be too risky to jump again. We don’t know where we are now, so how would we know where we’re going? The only thing we could do is backtrack to the place we started from. Anyway, we’re hoping we’ll find something here.”

“How can you be so optimistic?” Margret asked. “You realize how few stars have planets?” As she spoke, she caught Kino’s warning look. *The children—don’t scare them.*

“Yes, but why would there be a Portal here if there were no planets?” he replied.

“But it could be some sort of refueling center or stopover for starships,” Rolf chimed in.

“If there are such things, son,” Kino said. “I’m betting there is a planet.”

He was right; there were several. It didn’t take the astronomer long to discover the fifth planet from the sun. The ship moved inwards towards the sun. As soon as they were close enough the sparkling blue sphere—as yet only visible by telescope—probes were launched to explore it while the ship continued its deceleration, moving deeper into the alien system.

The news came back from the probes: An oxygen-rich atmosphere, oceans and landmasses, vegetation. A great breath of relief passed through the crew and colonists.

“We’ll still have to do more exploring before we can land,” Santamaria cautioned. “And we’ll need to charge the solar batteries in order to have enough power to run the shuttles, so it will be a few months before we can land.”

This was met with groans from those colonists who were awake. The crew knew it was necessary to decelerate completely and reach a stable orbit around the planet before they could open up the immense and delicate solar collectors. Nevertheless, everyone was buoyed by the prospect of landing on the planet.

Ana and Rolf spent a lot of time playing in the null-gravity chamber at the center of the cylindrical ship. When they tired of that, they swam in a partially filled section of the hull. The space between the inner and outer

hull contained water that served the dual purpose of helping shield the passengers from radiation and supplying the needs of the ship.

Rawiri spent most of his time working in the ship's tiny biology lab, ensuring that their precious stocks of seeds and embryos were surviving, and monitoring the biological components of the hydroponic and recycling systems. Margret continued to run tests on the colonists who had been revived, making sure they were unaffected by the long period in biostasis. She also kept an eye on the people still sleeping in the hibernation modules.

One evening, Kino came in with news for his family. "They picked up some radio signals from the planet during an electromagnetic scan of the system. They're definitely not random noise. The communications people are sure they come from an intelligent source."

Margret gave her husband a startled look. He closed the door and sat down on the floor with his back against the opposite bunk, knees drawn up.

"You mean we can talk to them?" Ana asked. She turned off the book she'd been reading and wriggled to the edge of the bunk.

"You think they're people like us?" Rolf asked, looking up from his game pack.

"I don't know anything about them yet, but we'll soon find out, I'm sure."

"Hey, that's stupendous—the first aliens anyone's ever met." Rolf rocked back on the bunk, his feet peddling the air.

"Will they be waking everybody up now?" Ana asked.

"Not until we're ready to go down to the planet," Margret replied, picking lint only she could see from the carpet.

"Why did they wake *us* up, then?" Rolf wanted to know.

"They need some specialists to collect and analyze data about the system, especially the planet. Your father is one of the people who will be helping." Margret leaned across and brushed Ana's hair back off her face. "You two are very lucky to have this opportunity, so you'd better be on your best behavior and don't get in anyone's way. I had a hard time persuading Captain Santamaria to allow you to be revived."

Rolf turned on the video screen, which showed a camera-eye view of space outside the ship. "I wonder which one is our planet," he said, gazing at the stars that speckled the blackness.

"It's impossible to tell from this distance," Margret said. "You can't even tell which are planets and which are stars."

Ana knelt up on the bunk to get a closer look. "I bet that big one is the sun," she said, pointing to the brightest object.

Rolf sat down again. He opened his notebook and started sketching something with the stylus. "I wonder what they look like, the aliens," he said.

“All we know at the moment is that they’re advanced enough to use radio to communicate,” Kino replied. “We have no idea what they look like, Son, apparently, they don’t have television—at least they’ve found no sign of video output so far.”

“What happens now?” Margret asked.

“According to Miguel, we’ll have to make contact and see if we can come to some sort of arrangement with them. It looks as if we’re stuck here, for a while at least.”

“The first contact with an alien civilization.” Margret’s eyes glittered as she looked at Kino. “That’s the last thing I expected.”

He leaned forward and touched her knee. “I know, love. He stood up and stretched, not an easy task for such a large person in the confined space of the cabin. “This could be one of the most exciting mileposts in human history.”

“Aren’t you scared?” Rolf said. “They might be bug-eyed monsters with poisonous fangs and slimy, writhing tentacles.”

“Retarded gibbo,” Ana responded, rolling her eyes.

“I doubt they’ll be that extreme,” Margret said. “They may be a bit strange, but I don’t think they’ll be all that different. I don’t see how the type of monsters you describe could develop an advanced civilization; you’d need certain physical characteristics...”

“I’m not so sure about that, love. What does it take? Sense organs—eyes, ears and the like, a brain, and some sort of manipulative members like our hands. Those components could come in any sort of package, when you think about it. They could just as easily have tentacles.”

Rolf grinned, then sobered. “What will we do if they attack us?”

“I guess we’ll have to leave the area as fast as we can and hope they don’t have space flight.”

“Don’t we have any weapons?”

“This isn’t a warship, Rolf. We have some hand weapons for protecting ourselves against dangerous animals on the ground, but nothing that would be effective against a concerted attack, especially in space.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see.” Margret stood up and took Kino’s arm, leaning against him. “I doubt we’ll be able to sleep at all this shift, but I think it’s time for you two to go to bed.”

“Oh, Moma.” Ana stood up reluctantly. “What if...?”

“Off you go,” Kino said as gently as he could manage with his booming voice, a voice that was meant to be obeyed.

“First in the loo,” Ana cried as she elbowed past her fourteen-year-old brother into the lavatory. Their bunks were in the alcove off the main cabin, one above the other.

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As the ship drew closer to the planet, all anyone could talk about was contacting an alien civilization. Although there were some speculations about their being hostile, the majority opinion was that there was a better chance of friendly contact.

It took two and a half months to reach the planet and go into orbit. The time was not wasted, however. Attempts were made to communicate with the inhabitants as the *Unity* traveled inward. First, they sent out signals containing the values of universal constants—the speed of light, the Newton constant of gravitation, electron mass, and the atomic weights of elements—none of which received any response. They tried samples of music, voice messages in various languages, even recordings of bird and animal sounds, but to no avail. Nothing came back, or at least nothing they could interpret. Most of the planetary broadcasts consisted of strings of tones organized in groups of eight or two. Sometimes, they sounded like oceanic waves interspersed with occasional bird-like chirps and whistles.

Santamaria shrugged his shoulders after listening to one recording. “I give up,” he said. “It must be some kind of coded signal.”

Although Rawiri was a biologist and not ship’s crew, he and Miguel Santamaria, the Spanish captain of the starship, had struck up a friendship during preparations for the voyage. They were both big men. Even so, Rawiri stood several centimeters taller. Another thing they had in common was their personality—a gentleness of manner, composure in the face of conflict, but firmness in command.

The two men sometimes relaxed together over a game of chess in one of the small recreation rooms when it was not doubling as a dormitory.

“What’s the latest word on the aliens?” Rawiri asked as he pondered Santamaria’s last move.

“Nothing,” Miguel replied. “Don’t seem to be connecting at all. We’ve tried signaling on every wavelength they use, but...” He shrugged. “They probably think it’s atmospheric interference. Come on, man, make a move.”

Rawiri moved his queen’s knight and sat back grinning. “What do you think?”

Santamaria scowled at the chessboard. “Either they don’t want to have anything to do with us, or they don’t understand what we’re trying to say to them.” He moved his queen away from the threat posed by Rawiri’s knight.

“So what are we going to do?”

“I suppose we’ll have to send a shuttle down. That should wake them up.”

“Hmm.” Rawiri slid his bishop across the board. “Checkmate!” He leaned back and folded his arms. “Have you decided who to send?”

Santamaria threw up his hands in surrender, then leaned over and turned on the view screen. Both men gazed at the planet’s dark side passing slowly below, studying the coruscating clusters of light visible in

several places. The far edges of the ring of dust and rocks that surrounded the planet glittered in sunlight reflected from the dayside.

"It doesn't seem to be very heavily populated, if those lights are cities." he turned to face Rawiri and answer his question. "I'm still working on it. Obviously we'll have to send a linguistics expert..."

"You'll need a biologist, Miguel," Rawiri added with a grin. "Who knows what they will look like? They could be birds for all we know."

"I'll keep you in mind, my friend." It was Miguel's turn to grin. "For the intimidation factor if nothing else." He stood up, gathering up the chess pieces. "I guess I'd better get back to the bridge. I'll beat you next time."

### [ 3 ]

Captain Santamaria looked around the table at the five people he'd selected to make the trip to the planet. They were sitting in the briefing room next to the bridge, a room that doubled as an off-duty recreation room for the bridge crew. In addition to the table and chairs, it contained a beverage and food dispenser, some electronic games equipment and a video monitor hooked up to the *Unity's* external cameras.

"I think the best place to land would be about fifteen or twenty kilometers from this city." Santamaria moved a pointer over the tabletop screen where a map was displayed. The city was near the coast in the southern part of the main continent, a location comparable to Santiago, Chile on Earth. "It's one of the largest and seems the most likely to have some sort of government presence."

"If they have a government," Rawiri said.

"Every society has some sort of government or leadership," Cristóbal Aguilar, the colony explorer, said.

"Every *human* society," the Scots-Maori psychologist, Kahika Baird commented.

"Shall we stick to the point?" Santamaria interrupted. "The probes we sent in to test the atmosphere indicated the air was close to the Earth's, a little lower in oxygen, but breathable. Gravity is zero point nine six, so you may feel a little lighter on your feet—this should make up for the lower oxygen: less exertion required, lower oxygen use."

"Do you think we should take tanks along, just in case?" Jade Kwan Santamaria asked.

"By all means." Santamaria smiled at his wife. "The rover has been fitted with everything we could think of you might need: communications equipment, food, water, a couple of sleeping domes, portable lab so that Rawiri can do some testing, first aid, emergency life-support, and a portable convenience so you don't pollute the environment."

"What about weapons?" Gerald Teague asked. He was the crewmember chosen to pilot the shuttle. "They might be hostile."

"You can each carry a tranq shooter as long as you're discreet with it; keep it on a wrist mount inside your sleeve. Teague and Aguilar, you are in

charge of the stunners. Keep them nearby, but don't bring them out unless you're threatened. As a last resort, we've fitted both the shuttle and the rover with an atomizer—but I hope you won't have to use it."

The atomizer was a device that reduced whatever it was fired at to its constituent atoms. It was intended for use on rock and other non-living substances and had a very short range of effectiveness.

"Maybe we should take something to offer them as a gift," Baird suggested.

"You think that's a good idea?" Santamaria asked. "We didn't expect to be encountering aliens, so we haven't come prepared. Any suggestions?"

"Some sort of Earth artifact, a tool or book or something ...?"

"It depends on how advanced they are," Aguilar said. "It's no good giving them something they won't be able to understand."

"Or they might be so advanced, what we give them would be an insult," Jade answered. "Like giving them a child's toy."

"And they probably don't have the same sort of electronic equipment we have, so they wouldn't be able to view a book."

"We could give them a viewer."

"No, I don't want to hand over anything technological until we know something about them," Santamaria said.

"How about one of those holographs of the solar system?" Rawiri offered. "They're self-contained and pretty harmless. And they're not high tech."

"Perfect," Santamaria said. "Kahika, would you like to take care of that?" After receiving a nod from Baird, he continued, "Now, any questions?"

"How long shall we stay if everything goes well?" Jade asked.

"I think eight days should be long enough for a preliminary assessment. We still need to know if the environment is compatible with us. No matter how friendly and hospitable the natives are, it won't do us any good unless we can live there. We know the air is all right, but there might be other things, allergens maybe, that wouldn't be identified in a spectrographic analysis. Things that could make us very uncomfortable, even if they didn't kill us."

"We'd only know about them after repeated exposure," Rawiri said.

"Yes, but if there was something, you'd start to feel uncomfortable pretty damned fast," Santamaria replied. "In time to get out of there before it becomes critical."

"Right. We'd better be sure we have some ephedrine and cortisone along, just in case."

"There're some anaphylactic kits in with the first aid equipment. Everybody carry one in his suit pocket."

"Now, what's next...?"

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“Can I go with you?” Ana asked when she heard that her father had been chosen for the surface mission.

“Not this time, my child.” Kino stroked her hair.

She squirmed away from his hand, refusing to be distracted. “Why can’t I go?”

Ana took after her father. She had his dark curly hair and large brown eyes, as well as the broad nose and wide sculptured lips characteristic of their Polynesian ancestors. She was already as tall as her older brother who looked more like their Dutch mother. Rolf had inherited Margret’s round face and light hair, although his eyes were brown, not blue. He was slender in contrast to Margret’s comfortable plumpness.

“It might be dangerous for one thing.” Kino knew the moment the words were out that he’d said the wrong thing. “Well not really dangerous, but it might not be very pleasant.”

“I’m not scared,” Ana said.

“I know, Ana Te Puea. You’re very brave, but this time, I’m afraid you’ll have to stay with your mother and Rolf.”

“Who else will be going?” Margret asked.

“Jade—she’s probably our best linguist—Kahika Baird, Gerald Teague will be the pilot, and Cristóbal Aguilar.”

“Why Cris?”

“Extra security, I suppose. He’s a licensed explorer, so he’ll know what sort of things to watch out for.”

The next day, during the second watch, one of the smaller shuttles was launched on a planet-circling trajectory to the surface. Rawiri watched from the ports with keen interest as the shuttle swooped toward the ground, making the inevitable comparisons with Earth. There were mountains, but they were smoother, more rounded than those on Earth were. Many of the rivers were set in deep canyons. The whole world looked as if it had been worn down by time and the elements.

Their trajectory took them at an angle to the equator so that they passed over both the northern and southern hemispheres. Winter was ending in the north, but there was still plenty of snow, especially at higher altitudes. Oceans covered about four fifths of the surface. The planet had two large continents connected just below the equator by a string of islands. The larger of the two continents was in the southern hemisphere. This is where the lighted areas were, mostly along the south and west coasts. The eastern parts of both continents contained large areas of desert. There was a smaller landmass north of the equator and west of the major continents, with chains of islands to its east and west. They looked as if they might once have been mountain ranges, almost submerged when the ice caps melted. The small continent appeared to be mostly grassland with forested mountains and hills running down its spine and along the east coast. The northern part of this continent was half hidden under snow.

There were several groups of smaller islands scattered over the southern ocean.

They planned to land close to one of the cities—if that's what the light clusters were—coming in low from the east. With perfect timing, they approached the landing site with the rising sun behind them.

“Here we go,” Teague said as he let down the landing gear and gently dropped the shuttle onto the grassy plain. “All right, you can unbuckle.” He turned in his seat and gave them the thumbs up, a wide grin on his face.

“Any sign of anybody—or anything?” Kwan asked, peering through the port.

“It's pretty quiet out there. Let's get out and take a look,” Aguilar said, standing up and moving towards the airlock.

“Wait a minute, Cris; I haven't finished testing the atmosphere yet.”

“But we already did that with the probe,” Aguilar protested.

“Just making sure we didn't miss anything.”

The team began to gather equipment ready to move once Teague gave the go-ahead.

A green light blinked on the control console and a reading appeared on the monitor. Teague leaned forward to read it, with the others looking over his shoulder. “Looks all right. Nitrogen 78.5 percent, Oxygen 19.96—a bit low, CO<sub>2</sub> 0.025, the usual: argon, traces of this and that, no unusual microorganisms. We should be able to breathe okay. I guess we won't need the ventilators.”

“Nice scientific assessment.” Rawiri grinned as he lifted off his helmet.

“Hey, man, I'm an astronaut, not a scientist.”

“Keep your eyes open for company, folks,” Aguilar warned. “Don't want to be surprised by scaly lizard men.”

“Is everybody's cam working?” Teague asked.

They each had a miniature audio-video camera fastened near the shoulders if their suits, linked to the ship's com-system. The team members confirmed that they were all operational. Then the five Pacificans stepped down from the lander onto solid ground.

Rawiri took a deep breath. The air was exhilarating after being cooped up in the dry, metallic atmosphere of the ship for weeks. He felt a little light-headed. Whether it was the result of the rich air mixture, or his excitement, he wasn't sure. He patted his pocket to make sure he had his anaphylaxis kit. He noticed Jade's eyes glistening and realized that he was not too far from tears himself. Teague had his head back, his eyes closed, and a look of complete bliss on his face.

They looked around for a moment, taking in the strange landscape, searching for signs of life. There seemed to be plenty of insects, but no sign of birds or mammals or reptiles—at least not so far. The disturbance of the landing had probably frightened off any larger creatures in the vicinity.

Rawiri crouched down and ran his hand over the ground cover. From the air, it had looked like grass, but he now saw it had compact, round leaves, similar to clover, only smaller. He broke off a sprig and put it to his nose, then stood up, idly tucking the plant in the pocket of his flying suit.

Aguilar was looking towards the city through a pair of binoculars.

“See anything, Cris?” Rawiri asked.

“Looks as if everything’s made of glass,” he replied, lowering the glasses. “Everything’s shiny and sparkling, but there’s no sign of life.”

Everyone took a turn with the binoculars. Kino was entranced by the glittering orange and gold reflections of the rising sun bouncing off the buildings. The effect was magical.

“Give me a hand with the rover, some of you.” Teague was unfastening the clamps that held the ground car in place inside the freight bay of the shuttle.

Rawiri helped him slide the car out onto the ground, and then shoved the hatch cover shut.

“It’s going to be a tight squeeze, trying to fit the five of us in this thing,” Teague said. “Especially the friendly giant here.”

“I’ll walk if you like,” Rawiri said good-naturedly.

“He was just kidding,” Kwan said, flipping back her braid of waist-length black hair. “There’s plenty of room. Come on, let’s get going.”

She climbed into the back seat with Kahika Baird and Aguilar, leaving the front seat beside the pilot for Rawiri.

“What about the shuttle? Is it safe to leave it unguarded?” Rawiri asked.

Teague nodded. “It’ll be okay. There are alarms if anything gets too close. I can pick them up with the remote.” He held up a small flat box. “Anything touching the outside will get a shock, and if someone tries to seriously interfere with it—like trying to open the lock and get inside—it’ll take off back to the ship.” He put the remote control into the pocket of his flying suit and got behind the wheel of the rover.

There was no sign of a road anywhere, not even an animal track, but the vehicle was designed to travel over almost any terrain with its independently mounted wheels and massive tires. Teague turned it towards the city and started to move slowly forward.

Kahika Baird was the first to notice a flash ahead of them in the distance. “See that?” she said.

The psychologist was an exotic mix of Maori and Scot. Her luxuriant hair was dark reddish brown and her skin cream with just a dash of coffee.

They were a few kilometers closer to the city now with the sun well above the horizon behind them.

“What?”

“Where?”

“There. There it is again, a flash.” She pointed to the sky just above the city.

“What is it?”

Aguilar raised the binoculars. “The way it’s moving, I’d say it was a flyer of some sort. Hey, there are more of them. They look like a swarm of bubbles”

They slowed down to a crawl, nervously watching the air-born objects approach. They were soon able to make out details. The craft appeared to be made of glassy material with no wings or propellers. Reflection of the sun on their mirrored surfaces prevented the Pacificans from seeing the occupants or estimating their size as the floating bubbles advanced silently towards them.

Rawiri’s heart pounded. He wiped his damp hands on the leg of his flying suit and moistened his lips, wondering if the others felt as he did—apprehensive, excited, but most of all, awed. This was it, finally—the meeting of two intelligent species from completely different parts of the galaxy, maybe developing along different evolutionary tracks.

Teague brought the rover to a stop and sat gazing at the approaching flyers, his mouth hanging open, beads of sweat on his forehead.

“Be careful how you move,” Kwan murmured, “Don’t make any sudden motions that might be interpreted as hostile. And for God’s sake, don’t point anything at them they might mistake for weapons.”

“What if they start to attack us?” Teague asked.

“Remember what Miguel said. We use only minimal force—just enough to prevent them harming us,” Rawiri replied. “We can easily activate the tranqs with our hand remotes, I don’t think we need to use stunners unless...”

“We’ll soon find out,” Aguilar interrupted.

The flyers were less than fifty meters away. They could now hear a faint hum. Up close, they saw that the vehicles were egg-shaped rather than spherical.

“What do you think? Should we get out?” Teague asked.

“I think it would be a good idea,” Baird replied with a Scottish lilt. “Show we aren’t hiding anything. But slowly.”

“Why are there so many,” Rawiri asked.

“They’re probably afraid,” Baird replied. “Wouldn’t we be if aliens landed on Earth?”

Rawiri shrugged.

One flyer separated from the others and approached them. A current of air from the vehicle raised dust as it lowered towards the ground. The exploration team slowly climbed out of the rover, but stayed close to it.

“Their technology seems pretty advanced,” Teague said.

The flyer hovered about five meters above the ground, circling them slowly for an interminable minute or two, then it dropped gently to the

surface twenty meters away. The other flyers formed a circle around them and hovered at a distance of about fifty meters.

Now that it was close, they saw the flyer was quite small, not more than three meters across.

"They must be small, whatever they are," Aguilar commented.

"Why don't they come out?" Teague asked.

"Maybe they're waiting for us to make the first move," Baird said.

"Let's show them our empty hands," Kwan suggested. "Try to keep your facial expressions neutral. You never know how they might be interpreted."

Five pairs of hands lifted into the air, palms facing out. Still no movement from the flyer. "It's not working," Aguilar said, lowering his hands.

"Let's all sit down on the ground," Kwan suggested. "We'll be less threatening, especially if they're much smaller than we are."

"But we'd have a harder time defending ourselves if they decide to attack." Teague muttered.

"Shh," Kwan said. "Put yourselves in their place. If some strange, highly evolved creatures landed in your world, would you start out by trying to destroy them, or would you be curious about them and want to learn more? And how do they know we don't have powerful weapons trained on them from the ship?"

"She's right," Baird said. "I think they're curious and frightened. We may be giants to them."

They slowly lowered themselves to the ground and sat with their backs to the rover, resting their hands on their knees.

They could discern movement inside the flyer, but weren't able to see any details because the outer shell was polarized. Suddenly, an amplified chirping came from the flyer. It sounded like a mixture of birds singing and children giggling, interspersed with clicking sounds.

"Oh man, that's weird." Teague wiped his brow with his wrist. "Do you think they're trying to talk to us?"

The sound stopped.

"Probably," Kwan replied. "Well, it's a start, but we'd be able to communicate much better if we could see them."

"I think someone should answer them. How about you, Jade?" Baird said. "A man's voice might be too... formidable."

Kwan rose slowly to her full height of one and a half meters, flipped her braid back and walked forward to face the unknown beings in the flyer, holding her hands at shoulder level, palms outward.

Rawiri held his breath, keenly aware that these would be the first words ever spoken to an extra-terrestrial race. It wouldn't really matter what she said, the aliens wouldn't understand, but he hoped it would be something noble.

“Fellow beings, we come in peace and friendship. We would not intrude in your world, but we are stranded and need your assistance in order to continue our journey. We believe that both our societies would be enriched by this historic meeting of our two races.” She ended with a bow towards the vessel.

Her hands were shaking when she returned and sat down again.

“Hey, that was great,” Teague said. He looked at the silent flyer. “What do we do now?”

“I guess the next move is up to them,” Aguilar replied.

The suspense and emotion of the moment were too much for Rawiri. He had to do something or burst. He took a deep breath and began to sing in a surprisingly sweet tenor for such a large man. Baird recognized a Maori greeting song and joined in. Before long, everyone was singing, and swaying with the rhythm of the song.

They were brought to a stop by a movement from the flyer. An opening appeared in the side of the vehicle and a ramp extended. Then two figures emerged.

Rawiri drew in a sharp breath.

“My God, they’re beautiful,” Kwan gasped.

The creatures were indeed lovely. They were small and slender, about the size of a ten year-old child—surely they wouldn’t send children? They had light coffee-colored skin and large dark eyes that dominated their faces. Their heads were covered in silvery caps—it was impossible to tell from the distance if they were wearing helmets or whether it was hair. They both wore identical, form-fitting suits of shiny lavender material. The clinging suits revealed no evidence of sexual differentiation, but they were definitely humanoid.

“They look like children,” Kwan said.

“Aye, they do that,” Baird agreed. “Bonnie wee bairns.”

Slowly the five Pacificans rose to their feet. “Stay back,” Baird said softly. “Let Jade go forward first. She’s the smallest.”

“Rawiri must scare the shit out of them,” Teague muttered. He smiled at Rawiri to show he meant no insult.

“Shh.” Baird nudged him with her elbow.

\* \* \*

Jade’s heart pounded and sweat trickled down her body inside the suit as she walked to the foot of the ramp. She was keenly aware of the significance of this occasion and the importance of her role in it. She had to get it right the first time. Closer up, she saw that the aliens’ silver caps were hair, not headgear, and their eyes were deep midnight blue surrounded by silver lashes. The skin of their heart-shaped faces was flawlessly smooth with a slight greenish tinge. They had tiny noses, which to Kwan, an Asian, were in perfect proportion. Like Chinese babies, she thought. Her eyes were drawn to their hands, noting that they had only

three fingers and a thumb, but the fingers were long and gracefully tapering, tipped by perfect diminutive pink nails. The only alien thing about these beings was their ears. They were a translucent ivory color, shaped like butterfly wings, set higher on the sides of their heads than human ears and they moved slightly the way a dog's ears move to trap sounds. They didn't look grotesque, just strange.

Kwan stopped near the ramp and gestured towards the notebook clipped on her belt, and then she slowly eased it free and, with trembling hands, held it up for their inspection. She turned on the notebook and drew a circle on the screen with a stylus, then turned it toward the aliens. She pointed to the sky, then to herself and the other members of the team. "Earth," she said, pitching her voice as high as she could.

The two aliens looked at each other and frowned, then looked back at Kwan. Kwan pointed to them, hoping she wasn't violating some taboo, then at the landscape around her. They didn't seem to understand, so she added another circle to the one on the screen and joined the two with a line. She indicated her group again, repeated the name of their home planet and pointed to one of the circles. Then, with the same series of gestures, she linked the two aliens with the other circle and pointed to their surroundings.

One of them chirped something. At first, Kwan couldn't make it fit into any pattern of human sounds, but when they repeated it a few times, she came close. It sounded like Syrilial, with a pronounced sibilant. She tried to say it. The two beings looked at each other and blinked a few times. Kwan wondered if that was their way of showing amusement. She blinked her eyes at them and was relieved that they didn't take offense but repeated the gesture back at her.

So far, so good.

One of the men behind her laughed. The two aliens looked alarmed and backed partway up the ramp, their hands darting to the silvery wands hanging from their belts. Kwan looked over her shoulder and scowled, putting a finger over her lips. *For heaven's sake, be quiet. Don't spoil things now.* She looked at the two Syrilians and blinked, hoping she had interpreted the gesture correctly. She saw them relax and, with a glance at the group behind Kwan, move down the ramp again.

Once again, she pointed to herself, the sky and repeated the word "Earth."

To her delight, one of them trilled, "Ers," and pointed to Kwan.

Kwan nodded and smiled. "Yes!"

At the sight of Kwan's smile, however, the Syrilians jumped back again and touched their wands. Wrong move, she thought. Don't laugh or smile. It was going to be difficult to remember not to do something that came so naturally.

Kwan sighed. She blinked again and stood quite still with her hands away from her sides. She wondered if the others were becoming impatient behind her. Maybe she should try to initiate some action. She pointed to

herself and her companions, then the rover, and then towards the distant city. It was imperative that they contact someone in authority and they couldn't do that out here.

One of the Syrilians understood and chirped something towards the open doorway of the flyer. Another Syrilian appeared, a little taller than the first two. This one had lighter skin, reddish-gold hair, and wore a fitted suit of bright emerald. The features were more feminine than masculine although the body revealed by the close fitting garment was not female. The three Syrilians conversed briefly in their trilling speech, then turned back to Kwan and signaled to her to come aboard the flyer.

Oh, boy, now what do I do? She held up one finger, then turned and walked back to her companions.

"So?" Aguilar asked as she reached the group. "What did you find out?"

"I asked them if we could go to the city. They want me to go with them in the flyer. What do you think?"

"They seem harmless enough," Rawiri said.

"They remind me of gazelles," Baird said. "Shy and ready to flee at the least sign of danger."

"Yes, they're certainly a bit jumpy," Kwan agreed. "Not that I blame them. By the way, don't laugh or smile. It scares them. Blink your eye; that seems to be their way of smiling or laughing. Oh, and I also learned they call the planet Syrilia, or something like that.

"Should I go with them?" she asked. "You could follow in the rover."

"As long as you think it's safe, sure, go ahead," Teague replied. "I wouldn't mind a ride in one of those myself."

"All right. As soon as we're airborne, start following."

The radio communicator in the shuttle crackled and a distance voice said, "Do you think that's wise?"

"They seem very gentle. I'm sure they won't harm us, Miguel," Jade replied. "They seem more scared of us than anything."

"Be careful and stay alert."

Jade turned away and returned to the flyer. She followed the Syrilian up the ramp into the vehicle, ducking her head as she went through the opening.

The section aft of the door was blocked off by a bulkhead, behind which, Kwan assumed, was the engine compartment. The flyer was so compact, it was almost like entering a toy vehicle. The entire top from knee level was clear, giving a panoramic view. The larger Syrilian sat at the front facing an instrument panel, beside her—Kwan realized that she had fallen naturally into thinking of them as female—sat a fourth, talking into a tiny microphone while looking at a video display. One of the Syrilians gestured to Kwan to take one of the two vacant seats at the back, and then sat down in the other, the one remaining stood behind them, leaning against the bulkhead.

The little ship rose into the air without any vibration, and only a low hum to indicate it was driven by a motor of some kind. At first, they flew around in a circle, gaining altitude. Kwan saw the rest of the team was now seated in the rover, looking up at the flyer.

Instead of heading towards the city, the flyer went in the opposite direction, towards shuttle. The rover started up and began to follow and the other flyers fell in around them.

The flyer carrying Jade circled the shuttle a few times, and then set down on the ground a few meters away. The Syrilians gestured for Jade to get out, and then followed her, indicating she should go towards the shuttle. The rest of the Pacifican team arrived in the rover and sat watching as the other flyers landed. Several more, Syrilians wearing red and white costumes left their vehicles and joined them. They walked around the shuttle, examining it from every angle, chirping to one another.

When they had finished examining the exterior, the red-haired Syrilian from Jade's flyer gestured towards the closed airlock and gestured at Jade, obviously wanting it to be opened.

Jade went over to the rover. "I think they want to see inside. Maybe that's why they invited me into their flyer, so that we'd feel obliged to reciprocate."

"I don't see what harm it would do," Teague replied, climbing out of the rover. "They don't seem to be armed or hostile."

"Want me to come with you?" Rawiri asked. "Just in case."

"I think I can look after myself," Teague replied. "Just stand by."

He strolled casually over to the shuttle, keying the code into the remote control to open it as he went.

The Syrilians backed away, fingering their wands as he approached. Jade blinked reassuringly at them and went to meet Teague.

"I hope they don't want to take it apart," he said. "Just give them a quick look around. I'll wait here. Yell if there's any problem." He backed away from the entry ramp.

"What if they want to take it up?"

"Act like you don't know how."

"I don't," Jade replied. She could sense the Syrilians were getting edgy, so she turned and went up the ramp, beckoning them to follow.

There was not much for them to see, just a few passenger seats near the front and a large cargo bay at the rear, empty. They examined everything curiously, chirping comments to one another. The redheads seemed to be in charge; the silver-hairs followed their directions. They paused at the closed door to the pilot's compartment, chattering at her and pointing to it.

Don't they know how to open an ordinary door, Jade wondered. She stepped past them and pressed the latch. The door swung inwards and she stepped aside to let them enter. There was only room for three, so Jade stayed outside. She stood in the doorway and watched as they looked at

everything, and then a redhead took a small instrument from a pouch at her side and ran it over the shuttle controls. With an abrupt chirp, she turned away and indicated they were finished.

Jade led them back outside. She noticed they glared at Teague, showing a flash of teeth. He looked at her questioningly. "Maybe they don't like men," she said with a shrug.

The moment passed without incident and Jade relaxed. The Syrilians returned to their flyers, making it clear she should join them. This time, they set course for the city, Jade's flyer in the lead. The other flyers followed the ground car.

The undulating landscape was uniform green, dotted occasionally with low shrubs. They were passing a narrow river on the right, beside which a small herd of animals was drinking from the tree-lined bank. When the Syrilian pilot saw them, she swerved off course and flew directly at them. The moment they became aware of the flyer, the animals panicked and galloped away.

Kwan glanced at the Syrilian beside her and saw her lips were drawn back from her teeth. She looked at the fleeing animals, which reminded her of donkeys. Suddenly a beam of light flashed from the front of the flyer and the head of one of the animals disappeared in a spray of red mist. The headless body ran several meters before finally collapsing.

Kwan managed to suppress a cry, but felt something icy trickle down inside her. The blood drained from her face and goose bumps rose on her arms. The Syrilians were chirping excitedly to one another. The pilot turned and blinked at Jade.

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