

MAYA'S FOLD

A SHORT STORY

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PROLOGUE

She was old, older than time it self... for you see, she was one of the First. She and her sisters came out of the 'Great Nothing' together, and circled in joy amid the 'Beginning'. Their task was simple; to give life - to begin. Looking about her she felt no ties, no pull to bond with something; nothing appealed to her. She was looking for something different, something more. Her brothers and sisters searched the available universes and one by one settled in the different galaxies. But not her, no, she knew there was something more waiting for her; and she would not settle for less.

For a time, one of her sisters joined her. They traveled together through the vast void of the Beginning until they came to a new young sun. Curious, her sister insisted they stay awhile and observe as ten planets began to take shape. They watched as the planets began to spin and take their place in the elliptical trek about the strong young upstart. A rogue asteroid, the size of a small planet itself, took out the tenth planet. The tremor of its passing was felt by all. Then, not long after and quite unexpectedly, the third planet began to turn a beautiful shade of blue. An atmosphere was forming and life was ready to begin. Her sister asked if she could hear and feel what was emanating from the young world. That was when she knew that her sister was being called. She bid her joy and contentment and left that galaxy, continuing on alone. She would greatly miss Gaia.

She traveled for eons searching the vastness of space; universe after universe; and the many galaxies within them. She found many planets appealing, but none that called to her. She continued on with her search for centuries, and in time began to tire of ever finding what she yearned for. Then, just when she was about to give up, give up and let herself be absorbed by the ether, she found what she was searching for. A new world at the end of the tenth universe, far from the mainstream, was calling out to her.

Its sun was young and strong; its atmosphere forming, with rich oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide molecules. The fourth planet from this sun was a marvel, a delight, and everything that she had been searching for. She settled herself within and was at last...content.

Centuries later an ancient race landed on her. At first she was angry at the interlopers; how dare they presume to settle without her permission? But ever mindful not to judge, she studied the people carefully and soon learned that they were like her. Travelers thru space, seeking a world where they could live in peace, and have no contact with others.

She allowed them to stay and began to watch over them like a mother kitten with her brood. In time she found one of the people was still restless and wanted to leave to continue to travel in space. His brothers disagreed but he was adamant. She felt she could not stop him as he was searching the same as she had; so she let him go.

She knew in time his spirit would return.

P-329

After the Great War of 2132, Earth's population had been drastically reduced to about thirteen million – worldwide; and half of these died within the first few years from radiation poisoning. Nuclear war has no winner; everyone loses. Tracking the radiation cloud became a dark sport, a sport that led to a reprieve for many. Scientists found an area on the planet that remained free and untouched from the death traveling the globe. Those who could fled to the jungles of the Amazon where they relearned how to live together in peace. The world was at the brink of extinction, co-operation became the mandate. It took a generation for those who remained to get things up and running again; quite a feat without fossil fuel. There were many areas on the planet considered ‘hot zones’; but the entire Amazonian region was free and clear of any sign of radiation. Scientists could not explain this mystery.

After years of propaganda and manipulation, fanatics began to see that their ideology was falling on deaf ears. The young, usually their best source to gain recruits, were no longer embracing their philosophy of hate. The internet revealed the truth of what was out there and the young ignored the sermons of the radicals altogether; they were not about to give up their lives for these deluded men. The world ignored their rants and went on without them. Finding themselves suddenly impotent forced them to new heights of fanaticism. In a final act of defiance against all who did not embrace their ‘religion’, these deluded little men detonated an atomic bomb in the middle of the Ghawar Oil Fields. These fields were the largest in the world and the resulting inferno contaminated most of the other wells in the surrounding area.

Of course the Israeli’s responded as they always said they would, and many Arab nations ceased to exist in an instant. Iran disappeared as she tried to launch on Pakistan and Israel at the same time. Egypt and Kuwait were caught in the crossfire and lost everything. The traveling radiation cloud hit China first and within three months no more word came out of that part of the world. The Russians were next and fared no better. It seemed all those who had kept the world on the precipice of war for so long were the first to feel its result.

The only good that came out of the insanity was that the world finally came together as one. The survivors banded together and shared all they had with each other. There was no room for politics or games; those things were left behind by an enlightened populace. Survival of the human race became the mantra; we were all in this together.

By 2285 a very structured society had evolved. The Guild, a group of representatives from the existing countries, regulated everything. Society was divided into three categories; Citizens, Scientists, and the Military. Citizens: this group were classified into two groups; workers, and procreators. Raising the young was considered an honorable endeavor and of utmost importance; children were the future. Mainstream workers kept the whole functioning; they were farmers, construction workers, and those in electronics. Special domed cities grew up around the major industrial areas and these people kept them functioning.

These cities were kept free of radiation and the air was purified by a triple bio-filter. There was guaranteed safety living in the domed cities; everything was available in the city so there was no need to ever leave. There were 10 main cities for the population, and two bio-medical ones for medicine and medical research. One city for military use, and training for all law enforcement candidates. One city for scientific space research; which included the space bio-medical units.

The Sciences were grouped into two categories: there were those in the humanities, life and medicine; or those in off-world exploration.

Scientists working closely with the workers made life easier and more productive. Organic farming and hydro-farming was the norm in these domed cities. There were special domed areas for cattle and fisheries. Huge domed gardens in the Amazon fed most of the existing population and were guarded by special teams.

Off-world exploration searched for new reserves of power, food, and possible worlds ripe for colonization. They searched diligently for any signs of life elsewhere.

Military: A cadre of a few thousand on world, to keep order and aid in law enforcement; but the bulk was off-world in massive ships that explored the galaxy for resources. Off-world travel and exploration was conducted by the Scientific Recon Unit. They were accompanied by a force of specially trained Marine Bio Units.

There were very strict rules where exploration was concerned; only uninhabited worlds were considered for exploration. Scientists and specially trained ‘Seekers’ would land on a prospective planet and given two weeks to find any lifeforms, and/or a sentient populace. Once a prospective planet met these conditions with a negative, giant mining conglomerates would then land their machines and begin harvesting the planet's resources.

Of all the groups in off-world exploration, the 8th Marine Bios claimed the honor of being the best. This was partially because of their ‘Seeker’. Alexandra ‘Lexi’ Stone was an empath; the finest that had ever been found. She possessed an uncanny talent to locate sentient life on alien worlds, and her ability had been proven over and over again. And on one world in particular, her ability to negotiate with the natives bloomed. The Guild had oil and gas rights for the next thousand years.

This would be Lexi's twentieth trip as Seeker for Scientific Recon. She had seen many strange worlds in the six years she been in the Marine Bios and until recently had thoroughly enjoyed her chosen field. Exploring new worlds was always exciting; and the scientists valued her Intel and trusted her judgment. Not to mention the science missions had the best of everything extended to them; food, field equipment, bunks, but most of all, the best water allocated to their tanks.

Lexi was described by her handler, Science Officer Elliott Spencer, as a powerhouse of intuitive abilities. She was extremely limber and dexterous in the field; had yet to encounter difficulties on any alien terrain. Her abilities seem to get better and better with each landing.

She weighed in at 140/lbs, (all lean muscle), stood 5'7", sandy blonde hair cut short in the military style, a pleasing face, wide hazel eyes, and a full lipped mouth. Her form could be described as athletic; with curves. She was considered a beauty by the men she served with though they never approached her in that manner.

Her only male companion, (during her time on the Dantooth), was Major Rick Pasket, head of the Marine Bio Unit. They spent all their off time together; and though they shared the same bed, it was more of need than of emotional commitment. Both considered themselves close friends, nothing more.

It was the Major who had discovered her talent years ago and brought them to the attention of the Science Guild. Even the Guild had to admit that they had never seen anyone like her. They tested her skills on two off world excursions and appraised her abilities as a 10.9 on the scale. No one had ever tested to 9, let alone 10.9. Her innate talents to climb, repel, swim, and fight without breaking a sweat were a surprise; but her uncanny ability to sniff out and communicate with sentient life was her greatest talent.

The bright green planet they began to approach several days ago was totally unlike anything she had ever encountered before. All the readings indicated it was a virgin world; filled with jungle-like forests; and mineral riches beyond compare. The indigenous life forms all pointed to animal species of various forms. There were no cities or technology of any kind showing up on their scans. Should be an easy trip everyone said; but Lexi's senses told her there was something more on this world.

Lexi's first steps on the new world sent a shiver thru her body; and a strong feeling of 'coming home' enveloped her psyche. Like an old memory there was something very familiar about the planet itself. Even the scents of the flora and fauna were fanning this strange awareness. The size of the massive trees and the scent that went along with them made this inner feeling grow stronger and stronger with each passing day. She felt enveloped in sheer joy. (She reported none of this to her handlers.)

P329 was a lush green world with a plethora of natural resources and an unending supply of pure crystal clear water. For Lexi the planet was a treasure house; she had never seen such vibrant colors, such luxuriant landscapes; such beauty so untouched. Giant waterfalls, spotted across the jungle/forest, kept everything a deep green. Copious trees produced a variety of fruits with the sweetest flavor that brought her taste buds to orgasmic heights. Free standing flowers of the most vibrant colors dotted the trees throughout the forest wherever they could attach themselves. She found the soil dark and rich in nutrients, ideal for planting.

Her initial recon lasted three days and though she searched thoroughly - she found no sentient life forms... yet she knew without a doubt that something was here. She could feel a strong presence on the planet. But try as she might, she found nothing to indicate that there was any life. Yet still she knew that was wrong; she could 'feel' them watching. She had a hunch they were hiding and studying the 'interlopers'.

She reported her findings back as usual; but for the first time held back what she really thought. She told them she would require additional time before making a definite decision. She was given 2 weeks more to explore the planet; as it turned out it was 10 days more than she needed.

She tried to discuss her feelings with Rick, but he called it "mumbo-jumbo", and told her not to sweat it. She tried to get him to listen to her, but he was busy with other things and brushed her off.

Seeing her disappointment, MSgt Bridges tried to console her. Of all the men on their Bio Team, Bo was the only one who Lexi felt any strong attachment to. He was large, loud, and loving. She saw thru his macho-man exterior to the real person beneath the facade. When she was really down, she would seek him out. She explained to him her 'feelings' about the planet, and other things. Bo was always there to listen to her. His advise was to go with the feeling and see what happened. Search once more but put aside her preconceived ideas of life and just 'see'.

So she decided to heed his advice and take her time, just enjoy the planet itself and see what happened.

As the days passed, Lexi continued her exploration of the planet, stopping many times to marvel at the beauty before her. Sunrises and sunsets vibrant with purples and reds brought tears to her eyes. The planet seemed to have cast its spell over her. She explored miles further inland, and each day was an adventure in discovery. She came upon several life forms, small furry creatures which showed no fear and were very friendly; but no sentient life. She observed a pack of wolf-like creatures from the top of a tall tree; and she was glad she was high up. These creatures were fierce and aggressive and would no doubt attack if they got scent of her.

And still she couldn't get past the feeling that she was being watched. She knew that if they found no indigenous population the Guild would claim the planet for Earth and it would be mined. The beautiful landscape would change - no more green vibrant forest; no waterfalls; eventually they would leave it a dark grey lifeless rock. The thought sickened her. At the back of her mind rebellion began to take form; *No!...not this planet.*

One evening a small translucent bird landed on her finger, fluttered its delicate wings and throwing back its head, sang the most hauntingly beautiful song that she had ever heard. Her whole body vibrated to the sound of the delicate little creature. She felt herself being swept away by the beauty of it's gentle song. She was deeply moved by the incident; and her reaction was duly noted by one of the Sentinels.

She was sitting on the very top branch of the tallest tree she had ever come across the first time she spotted them. These giant beauties made Earth's Redwoods look like saplings by comparison. Deep green leaves, (the size of a full-size bed sheet), wrapped around the massive trunk and made the tree a favorite of Lexi's.

On this particular evening she was wrapped in one of these leaves leaning back enjoying the panoramic view before her. An ever so slight movement out of the corner of her peripheral vision caught her attention. She calmed herself and allowed her vision to adjust; and 'wha-la'... she spotted one. She allowed herself a brief moment of joy and then searched for more. A few minutes later she spotted all 8 of them, males and females, blending in with the local flora and fauna so well that she lost sight of them after blinking, and it took her fifteen minutes to relocate them.

They're magnificent; she thought smiling ear from ear.

Each being was a light green color, their hair a bit darker. Tall and lithe their forms were definitely humanlike in stature. They were like the magical beings from a child's old fairytale. One moved to leave and she saw faint gossamer wings attached to her back. She watched them for awhile noting their graceful movements in relation to their surroundings. In her mind they were exquisite creatures, beautiful; she smiled as she watched them.

They're observing us - studying us - learning!

A tall green man smiled with her as he watched from 10 feet away.

A day later she was recalled to the ship to report her findings. She held back several things in her report to Elliott, (her control), who listened with great interest. Privately he considered her a bit of an oddball, but he also knew she was the best at exploring; she seemed to possess a sixth sense when it came to new worlds. He had learned painfully in the past to listen carefully to her assessments and recommendations. She had saved their lives on several occasions by her ability to contact and communicate with indigenous populations. If there was an intelligent civilization here, she would find it. He handled her with great care, as he considered her his ticket to a promotion within the Guild and a return to Earth.

Elliott mulled over all she had reported and momentarily entertained the thought that he should bring her in, she was close to going native. The last time that happened it had taken 4 weeks in the sleeper to bring her back on line. He didn't want to risk another incident, but then again, they needed more information on this world. In the end he decided to wait for a few more days. He questioned her for a bit and then told her to continue with her exploring. He knew she cared for the safety of the camp and her fellow explorers, so he feigned concern and assured her that they would bring the camp on line and place scans about it. If there was anyone or anything in the vicinity they would find it.

Lexi had chuckled to herself at his offer; their instruments wouldn't work; something to do with the magnetic core of the planet. She had conveniently forgotten to tell Elliott about that little fact. She also noted this was the third time she was getting a bad vibe from Elliott. There was something else going on here, she was sure of it. Elliott didn't know it, but this would be the last time he would speak with her.

When he dismissed her she went to her quarters and carefully thought over what she had learned. She secretly hacked Elliott's computer and the information she found made her decision a lot easier.

Leaving the team, and Rick, was a big step. She had to be very sure that she was doing the right thing. But, the thought of this world being spoiled and picked clean was unbearable to her; almost an actual physical pain. She spent most of the afternoon coming to terms with what she felt she had to do. Once she made the conscious decision to follow thru, her turmoil faded and she felt much better. She packed carefully and took only what she absolutely needed.

She left the Dantooth and returned to the planet. She had come to dislike her job increasingly for almost a year now; and this world provided the perfect place and time for her to disappear. She would not allow this place to be destroyed. She continued exploring for several days more and then carefully made her plans. She faked her death by the river waterfall, and left enough clues that would even convince Rick that she was gone.

Unknown to her it was under the watchful, and approving eye of a Sentinel.

Rick took her 'death' very bad, he pushed his men to search for her body for days on end. When they were recalled he continued on by himself and had to be forcibly returned to the camp. Then the call came to pack up and return to Earth immediately.

The night before the team was to return to the Dantooth, Lexi came to Rick's tent damn near scaring him half to death. She explained what she was doing and why; it felt so right and she felt so good about it that she was sure he would understand. Of all the people she knew, outside of Bo, Rick was the only one she wanted to understand. It was Bo she knew who would have understood her reasoning.

Rick was stunned and hurt at her actions. He shouted at her that she was crazy and he forbade her. They argued fiercely, she tried to explain but he was blind-sided and refused to 'listen' to what she was saying. Eventually he eased up and agreed because he knew he couldn't stop her. He never let her know how deeply it hurt him. Rick offered to stay with her, she thanked him but said no, she would be just fine.

Two days later she watched from the top of her favorite tree as the shuttle took off and flew up into space to dock with the Dantooth. She watched till it was out of sight. Then she looked at the panoramic view about her and shouted a loud 'yao...!'. Grinning from ear to ear she bent and picked up her things and turned around and found herself face to face with a very tall green man. He appeared to be smiling at her.

She jumped at first, then composing herself she smiled back, (without bearing her teeth), placed her hands together, and bowed slightly.

The tall man tilted his head and stared at her, then he did the same. And then he threw his head back and laughed loudly as he leapt to another branch. He crooked his finger at her to follow and blended back into the forest.

Oh this is going to be fun, Lexi thought to herself as she eagerly followed him.

Four years later Lt. Col. Rick Pasket, now head of Off-World Exploration, sat in the office of the Guild Secretary. He had just received new orders when he had been requested to appear before a Guild Secretary; no reason had been given. Word was this was a pencil pusher on a quick climb to the top. As he entered the office Rick recognized Elliott and suddenly everything made sense.

“I’ve asked you here for a reason Lt. Col. Pasket; please sit down,” he indicated the chair across from him.

“Sir,” Rick nodded and sat.

“I don’t like playing games so I’ll come right to the point. I think we may need your help on P329.” He waited for Rick’s reaction and receiving none continued.

“Four years ago I believe you lost someone close on that world.”

“The best damn Seeker that ever existed,” Rick spat out angrily.

“Yes,” Elliott said in a dismissive tone as he began to walk to the back of the room, “I’d like to show you something Captain; please,” he said as he crooked his finger, “come on, follow me,”

Rick stood up and followed. They left his office by a door at the rear which led to a passageway that brought them to the communications center. They turned right and entered a room with rows of TV screens mounted above. The Secretary took out a key and unlocked the control panel.

“You may recognize these,” he said as he brought up footage of the Recon on P329. Seeing Lexi again only reminded Rick of how much he missed her.

“I’ve studied these tapes over and over, Captain, and after four months I was ready to give up,” he raised his hand and pointed, “and then I saw what she must have seen. Would you care to have a look?” He asked in a voice that knew Rick wasn’t going to answer. He switched the image to the large screen in the center of the room.

“Note here, and here,” he said pointing to two areas in the forest. “Keep watching, don’t blink.”

Rick looked up at the screen and stared at the areas; *this guy is nuts*, he thought to himself as his eyes suddenly refocused and he saw them.

“Son of a bitch; Lexi never mentioned any of this,” escaped his mouth before he thought.

“Rick, look... what we say here is between us, confidential,” Elliott said earnestly. “You can be completely candid. You knew she was still alive, didn’t you?”

“Am I under investigation, sir?” he asked without emotion.

“No, this is only a meeting of two people sharing information,” he sat back and waited.

“Shit... I never knew what she was planning, or even suspected. The night before we left for Earth she came to my tent; scared the hell out me. She told me she was staying on the planet. Said she hated her job, couldn’t bear turning P329 into a dull grey rock. She said she was sure there was a large population in the interior. Said she was staying to explore and make contact.”

“I see,” murmured Elliot.

Rick shook his head and added, “She said she had never felt as happy as when she was in the forest, high in the trees.” In a low voice he murmured... “Said it was like coming home.”

“Ah,” Elliott took it as another sign that she had gone native; he was incapable of thinking any deeper. “It wasn’t your fault Rick, she went rogue once before.”

“No, this was more than going rogue,” Rick tried to explain Lexi’s actions, “She really believed what she said; I know her and how she thinks.”

“Let me explain some things to you Rick, in the past four years our world’s policies have changed. We are on the road to complete recovery; the earth has healed itself and is in the process of coming back. We have slowed the exploration and mining of new worlds; there is no longer a need.” He watched Rick’s reactions. “But, in all that time the only world that was never truly explored was P329. I went back and looked at the video journal of the planet. It is a truly beautiful world, not only visually beautiful, but filled with life.”

Rick interrupted, “No, Lexi said she found nothing near us...”

The Guild Secretary held up his hand, “Bear with me Rick, bear with me. Unknown to the crew, a camera was left behind, a vibration sensitive camera with a five year battery in it.”

He turned and pointed to another screen that came on line. It was a picture of the camp area, overgrown with vegetation. The sun was shining thru the trees casting a shadow on the ground; a shadow of a man.

“What the hell...?” Rick exclaimed as he sat forward.

“Vibrations set off the camera,” Elliott explained, “this was transmitted three years after you left P329. Look carefully and tell me what you think.”

Rick turned his attention to the video. The area was their old campsite. Mostly overgrown and little resemblance to the site they left behind. Most of the buildings were gone, eaten up by the forest. He concentrated on the shadow as it moved and seemed to be coming forward.

A green muscular leg appeared first; then the other one. A man walked further into the clearing and they got their first close up look at the one of the inhabitants of P329. He was a fine looking fellow; if one got over the fact that he was green. At least six and a half feet tall, his whole body spoke strength; he was lean and muscular; a warrior perhaps. He was motioning to someone to join him. A pale green leg appeared and then as she joined him Rick realized it was Lexi. She had taken on the color of the inhabitants, though a paler version.

“Lexi...,” he whispered softly. *My God, she’s stunning...*

He did not see the small smile play across Elliott's face as he concentrated on Lexi's movements. She glided gracefully across the forest floor to the man's side. The man bent his head and caressed her face, nuzzling her gently. She smiled up at him and there was no doubt as to their status. She turned her attention to the camera on the ground and walked over and squatted down beside it.

“Hello Elliott, I figured you would leave one of these. I know what you're up to Elliott... you can't win this one. Don't come back here; Maya won't take kindly to you or your people trespassing here again. Do not mess around Elliott... this is the only warning you will get.”

Then she stood up and joined the man; as they walked off she turned and smiled at the camera, waving goodbye. Rick watched as they simply vanished into the forest. He was quiet for long time thinking; then all of a sudden he turned and looked at the Secretary.

“You're going back there, aren't you?”

“Yes,” he replied, “You see I felt something was there also. But my skills were not as honed as hers were. I want to go back and make contact... and I want you to lead the expedition.”

“And...there's more...?” Rick wasn't born yesterday.

“The planet contains a plant we call Lessen; its leaves produce a miracle drug. When heated, they produce enormous amounts of Prolene; its uses are unlimited. Those suffering from the effects of radiation poisoning benefit the most from this drug; their symptoms disappear after they are on the drug for three weeks; and clear up entirely after six weeks.” Elliott brought up data on the computer screen.

"It has shrunk tumors, inoperable tumors. It's also cured several types of cancer; we are still experimenting with it. That planet is the only known place where this plant grows. We tried growing it on our own and it was a disaster; it will only grow on P329."

He walked over to a chair, slumped down and sighed deeply. Then he leaned forward for effect and looked at Rick.

"Here's the kicker: to get to it we will have go thru the forest to the mountains, then descend into a valley deep in the center of the planet. I want to do this right, I don't want to go in and take the stuff by force. If we can make contact, if we can talk to Lexi..."

"You mean if I can talk to Lexi, right?"

"Yes, if you can convince her to help us no one will get hurt and all will benefit. Take time to think about it Rick; trust me, there is nothing off center in this, we just want the plant."

He sat back and waited; he hoped he was right in his assessment of Pasket, and that the bond between them was still there.

For effect, he said in a soft voice, "Either way you decide; plans are in place to leave in four weeks."

Rick looked at him, "Of course I'll go you bastard, you know I won't pass up a chance to see her again."

"Good, good," replied Elliott practically salivating.

Rick returned to his quarters; locked the door and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. He poured himself a large glass and sat down. He pulled the album out of the table drawer beside him. He flicked thru the pages and memories of Lexi rushed in; the curve of her face, the softness of her skin, her passion when they had sex. Each memory cut like a knife.

He was always gentle when touching her, loving her with great care. He wanted to give her pleasure, but he also knew if she thought he cared more for her, she would be gone in a second. So he kept himself aloof, and she remained. She never knew the depth of his love for her, he was that good. The look on Lexi's face just now told him how happy she was. He would have killed to have her look at him that way. To lose her to a strange world and an even stranger 'man'... well, it drove him to a fit of jealous rage.

In the end they had to call Master Sergeant Bridges to calm him down. The large man had to brake the door down and tackle his friend. Seeing the pictures of Lexi strewn about the room he guessed what had set Rick off. He had to deck his friend and hold him down until he came to his senses.

“Let it go Colonel, she’s gone, you can’t raise the dead,” he told a struggling Rick.

**Rick was just drunk enough to say what he swore he would never reveal.
“That’s just it Bo, she isn’t dead!” He slumped down and Bo let him go.**

Running his fingers thru his hair he sighed and explained. “She jumped ship Bo; she stayed on P329 by choice. She came to me just before we left and told me she was staying. She said there was a large sentient population on the planet; they were hiding from us and she was going to make contact. She also said she hated her job; all we did was destroy worlds... said she couldn’t be a part of that anymore.”

“Well now, that explains a lot.”

The big man sat down beside him.

“You aren’t going to believe this, but she’s been coming to me in my dreams. She’s been telling me to cover your back; now I understand why.”

“What?” Rick looked at his friend seriously.

“Rick she’s got the gift.” The big man laughed, “You never wanted to believe it before; well you better believe it now. Something else is going on here; open your eyes my friend, and figure it out.”

Four weeks later the docking bay was full of activity. Equipment was being loaded by two machine haulers. Enough food and water for 2 years; as if they would be gone that long. A top flight base-camp complete with a full kitchen; this was probably for the Secretary. There were ten crates of electronics, unknown to them they would prove to be useless. There was a mini hospital and two experienced corpsmen along with a doctor. The Guild was taking no chances.

Elliott boarded and went directly to his quarters. His heart was still racing with the news that a successful trip would most likely lead to a position on the Council Guild itself. He intended to be successful, he would return successful; if he had to kill every breathing thing on that damn planet.

Down in the cargo hold they were off loading a damn arsenal onto the ship; mines, RPG-type cannons, assault rifles, sixteen laser guns, and a liquid that was just plain scary. Rick didn't like it, but he had expected Elliott to do something like this so he had made plans of his own. A huge crate was loaded at the last minute and directed by the Master Sergeant to the bottom bay. Once it was off loaded he pried opened the crate to reveal a huge vault.

He opened its massive door with the help of two other men. Then he had his men load all the weapons into it except for the standard assault rifles. He placed two very special keys, cast only once and then the mold destroyed, on chains and gave one to Elliott and kept the other around his neck. Unbeknownst to Elliott, a third key had been cast and Rick secretly gave it to Bo. It took two keys to open the vault, and Rick wasn't placing that kind of trust in Elliott without a backup.

They finished loading and buttoned everything up and sealed the hatch. The cargo hold now held all their provisions and equipment, two small skimmers, and six gun ships. Everything was tied down and the 'all clear' was given. They took off the next morning as the sun rose over Earth Central Headquarters.

The four month trip went by too slow for Rick; he was anxious to see Lexi again. He knew she would come to him as soon as word reached her that they had landed. He kept himself busy with exercise, of both kinds. He would work off tension in the gym he had installed in the bay area. When that didn't work, a dalliance with a young Corporal, (who resembled her), took his mind off of things for a short time.

He and Elliott met every day and went over his plans. Elliott had the most detailed map of the planet. He had it digitalized and would load it in 3-D form so they could get a better idea of the layout of the jungle/forest. The satellite pictures of the mountain range they would have to climb over showed them a pathway. A sure indication that something or someone had used the path before.

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