

The Unseen Visitors

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The exploration ship flashed out of the clouds, making a large s-turn as it slowed. Landing legs deployed, it settled gently on the mesa. The crew breathed a collective sigh of relief. Landing on strange worlds was never easy, and this was one of the strangest they'd come upon.

Cap sighed and unbuckled his harness. "All right people!" He said. "All seals remain in place until we've done a full check. Aerial scans can't always be trusted."

Knowon added, "It is imperative we not lose anyone, cause damage to the ship, or cause harm to anything or anyone here. Understood?"

Sigh, nods, and muttered responses indicated compliance. Noak breathed deeply and punched his harness release. The youngest of the crew, he was restless and sure the caution dictated by the leaders was wasted. He'd spend as much time as anyone aboard the large ship, high above this world's atmosphere, analyzing sensor reports and studying the findings sent back by unmanned probes.

It was a huge world when compared to their own, but surprisingly its gravity was not much more than they were used to. And according to the instruments, the air was breathable and even contained more life-giving oxygen than home.

Scyophf announced. "Cap, all scanners read normal or indicate no trouble. I believe we can open up and step outside."

"Very well! Knowon, you will take charge of the exploratory party. All will go, other than Noak, Scyophf, and myself."

"Noted, Cap!" Knowon stood and put his protective clothing on. The others did the same, except for those remaining on board. As they moved towards the exit door Scyophf toggled a switch. With a click and hiss, the door opened. He pushed another button and they heard sound of the ladder descending. "Check your gear! Let's go!" Knowon stepped outside and climbed down. The others, ten in all, followed. This was routine, an operation they'd performed dozens of times.

Noak fumed. Why did he always have to remain on board? He was qualified as any to be amongst the first onto a new world. *Just because I'm the youngest doesn't mean I can't do it. Cap probably thinks I'll walk into a trap again. Just because it happened then doesn't mean...*

"Noak! Keep an eye on your scanners!" Scyophf's terse reminder brought Noak out of his funk, and yet set him deeper into it.

"We can watch and do our duties at the big screen," suggested Cap. Noak sighed and set his instruments to standby. He joined Scyophf and Cap at the central

command screen. The screen was split into several images. One was a view from the camera on ship's nose. Cap slewed it to focus on the crew as they cautiously moved away from the ship and to the edge of the flat landing surface. Other, smaller images fed back from the sensors built into the landing team's helmets.

"Knowon's voice crackled. "No sign of trouble or danger, Cap!"

"Very well! Carry on." Cap replied. "We need a look over the side as soon as possible. The effort of landing prevented good look at adjoining areas."

"We're nearly there."

Noak fumed. He wanted to be with the others, out on the surface of this new world, heading to look over the edge of the high mesa upon which they'd landed.

Several minutes later Knowon's voice disturbed the quiet contemplation that had settled over those on board. "We're coming aboard, but check out the view via the helmet cams!"

Far below, the surface was much the same as where the ship had landed, a dull blackish gray surface, relatively uniform, except for the crevices and occasional pit between the stones. A few loose boulders sat about. In the far distance was a smaller cliff, a ledge an individual could easily hoist himself upon. And behind it was a field of knee high grass and shrubs. Most amazing, however were the giant statues, seemingly placed a random over the entire lower plain. Lifelike, they were painted in vibrant life-like colors and apparently clad in actual clothing. There were also statues or reproductions of wheeled vehicles of some kind. Most were considerably larger than the ship.

"We see it," said Cap. "What do you think?"

"Best we come aboard and discuss it in person."

Noak cursed silently. Oh, to have been out there and to have seen all that in person, rather than relying on the reports of others and the sometimes shaky scenes presented by the helmet cams.

The team came aboard few minutes later. Machitgoe headed for the galley as the others shrugged out of their outside garments. She selected several items on the auto drink dispensers and returned to the central area with hot drinks for everyone. She didn't provide the drinks because of her gender, but because long custom dictated the engineer was also the cook. She also possessed common sense and compassion and made sure to bring cups for Cap, Scyophf, and Noak.

Noak nodded thanks and moved to sit with Reddschurt. She was, next to him, the youngest person on the ship, and he sometimes hoped there was more than that between them. Even so he was jealous of her being on the initial excursion.

"It seems there was once an advanced civilization here," said Cap. "Surprised

we didn't pick this up before."

"Troubling, Cap," said Scyophf. "An active civilization would have the ability to detect and perhaps destroy us as we landed. They may have even detected the base ship in orbit."

"Lucky?" said Knowon.

"Lucky?" responded Scyophf. "No. Fortunate? Yes." He turned back to the recorded images, as well as those taken by remote devices left in various locations around the area. "I'd like to launch a drone to look at the side of the cliff. I suspect something but would like to confirm it first."

"Very well, but it can wait until the next awake cycle? We are all tired."

"Very well."

Cap stood, yawned, and stretched. "Knowon, if you will establish a Sleep Cycle watch!"

"As you wish."

Noak had been awakened during the Sleep Cycle to stand a short watch, monitoring the various instruments and consoles around the central control area. The time had passed slowly, and yet he was awake before commencement of the next Awake Cycle. Earlier observations had determined this planet rotated much slower than their normal sleeping patterns. Their schedule matched the rotation of their far distant home world.

He was in a decent mood as the remainder of the crew stirred and made ready for the new Cycle. One of his collateral duties involved launching drones, which would at long last get him outside and on the surface of this strange giant world. He was ready when Scyophf approached. "Noak, if you are ready, get into your outside gear and follow me."

"Yes, Scyophf!" Noak stood straighter and nodded in acknowledgment.

Outside he helped uncrate a small unmanned aerial vehicle. He plugged in his hand held control unit and ran a series of tests, ensuring all systems worked and that there was plenty of power, both for propulsion and the sensors. When confirmed, he unplugged the control unit and established wireless control. At Scyophf's signal he ran forward with the drone held high, thrust his arm forward and let go. The drone's wings caught the air and nosed up. Quickly, Noak boosted power to the propulsion system and activated the control surfaces, giving it controlled flight. As it climbed higher, he guided it in a lazy circle over the ship.

"Ready to hand off!" he announced.

"I have it!" said Scyophf. He sat nearby with a larger control unit in front of him. He could not only guide the craft but could see views from its cameras. He flew a few

routine patterns to establish and confirm full control and then caused it to settle over the edge of the cliff.

Noak joined him as they watched the feed from the drone's sensors. Scyophf flew the drone some distance away from the cliff and then turned it back towards the lofty crag. As the first live view of the cliff face came visible, both were amazed. The cliff, which they thought it to be, appeared to be artificial. Sensors indicated it sat at an absolute vertical, something not expected of a natural wall. There was also a uniform pattern, as if it had been built of gigantic building blocks. They were huge, larger than the escape pods aboard the ship.

Scyophf flew the drone along the edge of the cliff, just below their line of sight, and panned the onboard sensors to record images and other details. At three points they spotted unusual structures that could only in their estimation, be surveillance cameras. As with everything noticed so far, they were gigantic.

Back aboard, Scyophf began compiling data and running many complex computations. Cap and Knowon watched intently, fidgeting, anxious to know what he had discovered. It would do no good to ask for Scyophf would not answer until he could make sense of the data.

At last, he sat up. "Cap, this entire area, including the mesa upon which we've landed was created by the civilization that once existed here."

"Are you sure?"

"All indications point to that."

"They must've been giants," suggested Machitgoe from her engineering station.

"Upon further analysis, I wonder if speaking of them in the past tense is correct," said Scyophf. "Those statues on the lower plain are not carvings. They are carbon-based, covered with a variety of natural and artificial materials. What we think represent their transportation devices are made of metal alloys and other natural and artificial compounds. Most contain stores of hydrocarbon substances. Fuel perhaps?"

"You're saying?"

"These are not statues or representations, but indeed the beings of this world, along with their ground transportation devices. We did not land on a natural table land, but the roof of one of their buildings. The cliffs and mountains in the far distance are also buildings."

Noak's heart thudded. Could they finally have found signs of life? After all the interstellar journeys, the countless landings, the myriad disappointments, could the age old search be over? But what kind of welcome would they receive? More to the point, why didn't they appear to move?

At that moment Knowon the same thing. "They exist on a slower time scale.

One day/night cycle here is equivalent to a full thirty day/night cycles at home. Their daily life cycles are aligned with the rotation of this planet, and they move so slowly we don't notice it. We should check external cameras and compare what we see now with what was recorded then."

Cap worked some figures on his computation device. "If so, we are comparatively safe. Our movements are too rapid for them to detect. If we don't remain in one spot too long, we should, for all practical purposes, be invisible to them."

"My thoughts, as well," said Scyophf. "I also believe they exist on a different plane of existence or on a different frequency of existence. It might be pure coincidence we see them at all."

Reddschurt looked up from her console. "All of them are in different locations now. Several transport units have moved as well. Some are gone and new ones have arrived."

"As I thought," said Scyophf. "With a little caution, we can conduct our exploration and research without fear. We simply must not remain in one location for too long. And quite possibly, they won't be able to see us, even if we linger at times."

Many Sleep and Awake Cycles later, when the sun of this massive planet had finally set Noak and Reddschurt explored the south edge of the mesa. While they knew it to be the roof of the gigantic building they had landed on, they still saw it as a butte rising high above a plain. Below, several structures of unknown purpose littered the ground. Looking over the edge, Noak spied another suspected surveillance camera. "Here," he said. "Let's tie the line to this. I'll go down and look at it."

"You shouldn't," she said. You might fall! It's a long way, and you might be killed or something. There are any number of creatures that could find you if you're hurt and can't move."

"You worry too much. Besides, we still don't know what these things are for sure. I'll double knot it, just in case."

With that, she sighed and helped him tie the line off. She double checked and added a final hitch. She helped him tie a bo'sun's chair, two loops for his legs in the opposite ends of the line. He stepped into the loops, circled the line about his waist and knotted it. Then he climbed over the edge and rappelled down to the unit protruding from the cliff face.

At the unit, Noak activated the suction discs in the exploration suit he wore. They would help him to clamber over the unit. He moved to what looked like a lens tube. It was huge, easily as large as the main hatch aboard ship. Slightly inside, he found a smooth semi-transparent, semi-reflective surface. It curved gently outward

toward the center and in the dim light from the artificial moon across the lower plain, Noak made out his reflection. He stared, mesmerized by his image and the view of this world reflected in what he now knew to be a camera. Hopefully Cap, and the others, especially Reddschurt would be proud of him for confirming the nature of the units.

Andy the night janitor signed inwardly and locked the front doors to the private athletic facility. Members and staff were finally gone and he could get on with his duties. Tonight's first task would be cleaning the tile floor behind the counter. He started by removing the rubber mats covering portions of the floor. They trapped tremendous amounts of dirt, and to clean properly, he needed to move them. He loosely rolled up the first and carried it around the end of the deli cooler and past the monitor showing views from the outside security cameras. The screen showed four images, one for each camera. He glanced, assuring his truck sat where he always parked, and that it sat alone. The image in the lower right, below the one of his truck, caught his eye. It startled him momentarily.

It's a face! Doggone, a face! Andy thought. He saw a shock of thick black hair, intense eyes and a pointed chin. At times there was no nose, and at the other times, two, as if whatever it was moved. A person of modern sensibilities, he assumed the face to be coincidental, perhaps the effect of a dirty lens. It was something that could never be. Yet if it was a face, whose, or what was it?

When Teri arrived the next morning to open for the day, he pointed the image out to her, but she couldn't see the face. Over the next several months, he often saw the face looking into the lens. It changed from time to time, perhaps different creatures, or the same one peering into the lens from a different angle. As time went by it became harder to see and finally was not visible at all. There were some problems with the camera system, and in repairing it, the lenses were cleaned. Now, even at night Andy could see the chain link fence around the heating and air conditioning units and the cardboard and recycling dumpster at the back of the parking lot. The face, however, was gone.

After Noak reported his confirmation to Cap, several others climbed down to look into the lens. Like Noak they were drawn to the camera. Night after night, one or more of them descended and spent hours looking into the lens. They were fascinated with the camera and the huge creatures moving so slowly they appeared inanimate. Perhaps gazing into the camera would solve the mysteries of this huge slow moving world.

Late in one Awake Cycle, Reddschurt complained to Machitgoe. "They're always there, looking into that stupid lens like it's got them hypnotized or something. And now I get to pull an extra shift because my relief is over the side again. I still think it's dangerous for all of us."

"We'll talk to Scyophf, if you'd like," said the engineer.

After explaining their concerns in what they thought was a logical and persuasive fashion, they stood by while Scyophf sat at his console. He entered a great deal of data and sat quietly while the computer digested it. After a moment he looked up at them. "I've run the data again. There is no way even prolonged staring into that lens will allow them see us. The difference in our frequencies of existence is too great. Please do not worry about it.

"As to the scheduling problems, I'll speak to Cap. I'm sure he will have something to say, perhaps some extra work for those habitually not available." He turned back to his duties.

As the two walked away, Reddschurt said, "I sure hope he's right... at least about them seeing us."

But Scyophf was wrong.

Andy, possessing a rather primitive flip phone at the time, and sure the image he saw was merely the result of a dirty lens, snapped a picture of the monitor's screen one night and saved it to his desk top computer.

