

DESCENT INTO WONDER

By Alex Rosenzweig and Judy Waidlich

Aboard the *Wohali*, a beep from the communications panel drew T'HoD away from the coordination of the readings coming in from the various landing teams. He tapped the control to open a channel. "*Wohali*. T'HoD here."

"S'H'I here, D'HamYu. Wanted to let you and your team know that Captain Waidlich has beamed down to the surface. She's joined a landing party on Delta Continent, following up on the discovery of a megalithic construct by the personnel there." S'H'I went on to provide the landing party's coordinates.

"Interesting," T'HoD said.

"Very much so," Setak added, having joined T'HoD at the forward console in time to hear S'H'I's comment.

"So much for the idea that this planet has never had life," T'HoD said.

"Perhaps the artifact was left by beings not native to the planet," Setak theorized. He leaned back toward the comm-panel's pickup. "Mr. S'H'I, how soon will the data received by Captain Waidlich and her team be ready for redistribution?"

"I can send you the raw data right now, Setak. Processing will take some time, though."

"The raw data will be adequate, and appreciated," Setak responded.

"All right. Transmitting." One of the displays indicated the incoming data stream.

"Thank you, Commander," Setak said, as he moved aft again.

At the aft worktable, a few commands lit up a segment of the tabletop display to show the new data.

"That looks familiar," commented Graevyn, and a moment later, she was calling up an overlay of previous data.

Even before the overlay had fully formed, Coda added, "It does! It's one of those odd energy sources."

"I concur," Setak said, nodding.

"Did the XO report getting those types of readings on the surface?" Graevyn asked.

"Mr. S'H'I did not indicate one way or the other," Setak answered. "I believe we should contact Captain Waidlich directly."

Moving forward again, Setak asked T'HoD to open a channel to Waidlich. When she answered, Setak spoke, "Captain, this is Setak. Could you confirm for us if your party has been detecting electromagnetic fields or radiation sources?"

At the Delta Continent site, Waidlich paused for a moment as she heard Setak's question. She glanced inquiringly over to Lieutenant Nguyen. "No unusual radiation or EM readings here at the structure," Nguyen said, "but I am detecting elevated EM readings in the direction of the caves. I'm not sure what to make of that."

Waidlich reported Nguyen's findings back to Setak. She added, "Several of our team here are hot to go exploring those caves. I've asked for the *Horizon* to bring a team down to do the exploration of the caves." The *Horizon* was the only one of

Avenger's shuttles not yet committed to this expedition. Soon the ship's full complement of embarked craft would be out and active.

Setak again contacted the *Avenger* and asked for a detailed scan of all areas at which the anomalous EM readings had been detected. It wasn't long until Commander Ciufu had the information.

"Each of the sources of the EM readings has an artifact near it," he told Setak. "Most are no farther away than 15 or 20 kilometers. They vary in size, though it looks from here like they're all at least roughly circular. The one which Captain Waidlich's party discovered, though, is the largest we're detecting."

"It would appear that that location is somehow significant," Setak said.

"It sure looks it," Ciufu agreed.

"We'll see when the teams go in and have a look," T'HoD commented. "In the meantime, let's find out what else we can about this area."

It wasn't long until the *Horizon* touched down near the *Kismet*, which was serving as the base craft for the team near the large artifact. The *Galileo*-class shuttlecraft carried Ensigns Escaban and Miller from Sciences and Ensigns Dekker and Kimko from Security, as well as sufficient climbing gear for a team of up to ten to make the descent. All four of the young officers were rated for cave climbing.

As the shuttle's engines came to a stop, the aft gate dropped, and the four passengers, along with the pilot, Lt. Commander Rigoni, stepped out into the sunlight. They were quickly met by the other members of the party.

"So," said Rigoni, his smile and light Italian accent giving resonance to his words, "who's joining us on the short-hop to the cave's entrance?"

"Myself and Ms. Chin," Waidlich told him. "The others will continue the work here."

"All right, then, Captain. Shall we?" Rigoni gestured welcomingly toward the shuttle interior.

"We shall! Ready, Lieutenant?" Waidlich asked Chin. The young Lieutenant J.G. nodded briskly and all but dashed for the shuttle. Waidlich followed at a more measured pace.

The flight to the cave entrance took only a few minutes, and then the *Horizon* was settling back to the ground in front of the rocky crags into which the narrow opening that led down to the caves was etched. Even before he dropped the back hatch, Rigoni helped the team get into their climbing gear.

"Now, look," he said. "Be careful! Because if someone gets hurt down there, I might have to come down to help, and I'm no climber. I'm a pilot. I fly. Climb, not so much. Got it?"

"Don't worry, Lieutenant, we've got it," said Borysko Kimko. He gestured to Dekker. "Anika and I are fully-rated for cave work. We'll take care of them."

"Good, good," said Rigoni.

"And don't you worry about us," put in Ignazio Escaban. "I have completely lost count of how many caves Randy and I have gone down into." Miller grinned in confirmation of that.

"Guess that just leaves the XO and Ms. Chin here as the amateurs," Dekker said, her soft voice completely belying the steel in her personality that Waidlich knew full-well could come to the fore when the security specialist needed it.

"Guess so," Waidlich said. "And now that everyone's had a chance to crow about their qualifications for this, let's get on with it." She winked at them, and then headed down the ramp formed by the lowered gate and onward toward the dark crack in the rocks.

Reaching the narrow entrance, the team secured their cables to the rock, and tested their harnesses and emergency gear one more time. The cables, made of a light and strong superpolymer, were long enough for each person to go several hundred meters down before they'd have to latch on an auxiliary line, and light enough for a person to carry a couple of cables. And in a worst-case scenario, the harnesses also contained emergency antigrav units. Those weren't as powerful as regular shipboard units, but they'd limit risk in most situations. Still, the elaborate hardware was no substitute for good old-fashioned safety procedures, and the six officers moved slowly and carefully downward, shoulder lights active and steps cautious, finding footing a bit at a time.

At first, the journey was straightforward, walking down an inclined pathway, albeit an uneven one. About 40-50 meters down, though, the incline steepened, and then the team had to actually scale down the sides of the gap, sinking pitons into the walls at strategic points. They lashed themselves together as they reached that point, to make sure that no one might be hurt by a simple slip. Oddly, as they continued to descend, they began to notice the cave brightening.

"What the hell...?" Kimko said, gesturing downward to where the light was brightening their path.

"Are we coming out into a canyon?" asked Chin.

"Wouldn't the sensors have shown that?" Miller said.

"Nothing indicated a canyon. In fact, other than the entranceway we came in through, and maybe something a few kilometers away, there was only rock and soil up there."

"Let's just keep going," Waidlich said, "and we'll find our answer soon enough."

Finally, they emerged out into a cavern. Holding onto their cables, they turned to look out into the space they'd just entered...and gasped.

Instead of a chamber 10 or 20 meters across, as they'd expected, they found themselves staring out into an expanse kilometers across, so large that they couldn't even clearly see the rock of the far walls. The cavern was flooded with light, emanating from somewhere up in the rocks that formed the roof. The *Avenger* officers couldn't, though, see just where the light was actually coming from, or what was emitting it. What amazed them even more was what they saw when they looked down.

Built on the floor of the cavern was a city. This wasn't just a few shacks, it was an entire urban center, large enough, it seemed, to be able to house tens, or even hundreds, of thousands of people.

"Oh...my...gods..." was all Escaban could say.

Waidlich reached into a pocket and pulled out her tricorder. Turning it so the sensor array faced down toward the city, she panned it across the whole cavern. "There are inhabitants down there," she said softly. "Humanoid, not too far off the Human baseline. A couple of thousand within the range of the tricorder."

"Only a couple of thousand? In all this?" wondered Dekker, as she gazed down at a panorama of structures, some ten or twenty stories tall.

"I think I can see a few," Kimko added. "I bet that means that if they glance up in the right direction, they could see us. So do we keep going down, or go up and out of here?"

"We can't just ignore all this!" said Miller.

"I agree," Waidlich said, adjusting her stance against the rock face. "Talk about a strange new world. And in a place none of us expected. But unless we get ourselves down, we won't be able to learn much more. So, shall we?" She gestured downward.

The group slowly resumed their descent, carefully lowering themselves down along the rock face, and occasionally rappelling to cover a bit more distance. They managed to reach the cavern floor just a bit short of running out of cable, but that mainly meant they'd not have to hook on their second lines. Carefully tucking the cables as inconspicuously as possible behind some crags, they unclamped themselves. They shucked off much of their climbing gear, as well.

"By the way," asked Chin, "what about universal translators?"

"Tie in the tricorders to the communicators and run a translation algorithm," Waidlich said. "It'll be more awkward than a dedicated UT, but after all, none of us thought we'd be making a first contact down **here**."

As they walked toward the city, they studied the construction of the buildings that they approached. The structures were simple and straightforward, for the most part, displaying a blocky solidity that didn't come as unexpected for a people that lived beneath solid rock. But among the structures, plants added color and a sense of life, suggesting that whatever had led these people to make their homes beneath the surface, they had not forgotten nor abandoned the value of growing things.

"Captain, look," Dekker said, her voice shaking Waidlich out of her ruminations. The security specialist was pointing down one of the thoroughfares near which the *Avenger* crewmembers stood. Walking toward them, eyes wide with wonder, was a small group of humanoids. They looked, at first glance, mostly Human-like, though with slightly pronounced brow-ridges and deeper-set eyes. There were four men and three women in that group, and they tentatively approached the party from the *Avenger*, who activated their tricorders and communicators, in hopes of establishing communication as quickly as possible.

When the two groups met, it took a short time, and much encouragement on the part of the *Avenger* officers to keep the native humanoids talking, before the translator algorithms finally kicked in and the conversation could truly begin. The humanoids, who quickly identified themselves as being called Foroon, were quite amazed...and more than a bit intimidated, by beings who had come down from above the rocks.

"When did you move below ground?" asked Waidlich.

"Move?" The Foroon group's apparent leader, a male named Chanret, seemed puzzled. "We have been here always."

"Always in the caves?" asked Miller. "Somehow you don't look like it."

"Please forgive us," Waidlich said quickly, noting Chanret's mix of puzzlement and annoyance. "You seem very different from cave dwelling peoples where we come from."

"Perhaps 'always' might be too strong a word," Chanret said thoughtfully. "At the very least, though, we have been here for as long as anyone can remember, be it us or the generation of our fathers' fathers' fathers."

"But you," said one of the females, a woman named Alitohn, "you are not from here. I am sure we would know if you had been in this place before. And we saw you on the walls of the world. Are you...from the world above?"

"We are from another place," Chin said, choosing her words carefully.

"Have any of your people climbed the walls of...of the world?" asked Dekker.

All of the Foroon shook their heads emphatically in the negative. "Absolutely not!" said Chanret forcefully. "You must indeed be from somewhere else, to not know that the traditions speak very strongly on this matter. One does **not** climb the walls of the world!"

"We did not mean to offend," Waidlich said quickly. "Could you excuse us for a moment? We wish to talk privately, and we would not wish to inadvertently cause unhappiness by our words."

"I understand," Chanret told her. "We will await you over there." And the Foroon all took a few steps back toward the city.

The *Avenger* officers clustered together, speaking in low tones.

"They can't have evolved down here," said Chin. "They're not built at all like how they'd have to be if they were!"

"I agree," said Escaban. "Something else is going on here."

"Right," said Waidlich. "We still have many unanswered questions. Who are these people? Where did they come from? Why are they here? Are there any others? But until we're in a position to find the answers, let's tread lightly for now, and try to understand how they live and what their world of here and now is like. There'll be time to discover the rest."

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