BEACONS

 The sleek silver spaceship slipped through the icy cold, inky black, silent void of space.

 The United Space Agency’s craft, the S.S.Bradbury, had been travelling for thirteen months. Its destination was 57 light-years from Earth, some 539 trillion kilometers. The Bradbury was headed to the gas-giant planet GJ 450x, nicknamed BM for "Big Magenta", for it was unique to known astronomy in its unexplained and remarkable color. BM had also been emitting patterned energy pulses which were determined to be not random.

 The year was 2068. Ion Fusion Propulsion had been discovered twenty-two years earlier, and this breakthrough allowed further travel in less time out into the cosmos. As a result of global warming, Earth was being gradually rendered lifeless for any life forms higher than insects. The planet would eventually cleanse itself over time (as several plant species were projected to survive), but not before all humans would die. Humanity was facing a catastrophic mass extinction event. In response, the nations of the Earth united to send out colonizing probes – both manned and unmanned – to planets with suns which might support incoming human life.

 Aboard the S.S. Bradbury were three men: Captain Bennett, from Canada; Lieutenant Ngoro, from Kenya; and Ensign Suarez from Argentina. Each were in their physical and mental prime. Each was married, with families. The Agency liked to have married men in its elite ranks because it knew it made the men less reckless and more careful.

 As the Bradbury approached Big Magenta, the crew marveled at its size and color. But the men had a job to do, and it was time now to get to work.

 “Lieutenant, tell Earth we are ready to land...OK, men, let’s buckle in,” Bennett commanded.

 The retro-thrusters fired, and the silver rocket slowed and tilted and then descended through the thick magenta-colored atmosphere.

 “Contact, Captain,” Ensign Suarez called out twenty minutes later when the spaceship smoothly settled onto the planet’s surface. He gingerly powered down its engines.

 “Mission Control, this is Bennett. We are safely down. Checking atmosphere, temperature, and gravity. Radiation levels good. We will leave our video and audio coms on from here on out so you can see and hear everything we do. Once everything checks out, we will exit the Bradbury and explore. We appear to be about six kilometers from the source of the radio energy pulses. Lieutenant, open the viewing ports.”

 Looking out, the crew saw that the environment consisted of what appeared to be blemish-free white sands partly covering remnants of darker dry sea beds. Purple and blue mountains rose up on the horizon. No vegetation, no structures, no discernible life forms or water from where they could observe. The sky above was colored deep magenta as expected, and BM’s nearby single star acted as its sun. The entire scene was eerily majestic and quite beautiful.

 Ngoro broke the awed silence.

 “Captain, sensors report that gravity here is at 77.6% and that oxygen is equivalent to 5260 meters high on Earth -- just shy of Mt. Kilimanjaro back home. No harmful gases detected. Estimated temperature range is 49C daytime and -1C nighttime, based on the planet’s 29-hour cycle. No seasonal variations, so basically we dealing with something like desert Egypt in the summertime year-round.”

 “Looks like we can skip full suiting up for this one, men. But we need to go slow until our bodies adjust to the thinner air and heat. Let’s eat now and plan on going out early tomorrow after a good night’s sleep. We can hike the 6 clicks to the source area of the energy pulses after taking the usual soil and rock samples here. Tonight is also a good time to re-assure the wives that we landed safely and check in with our kids,” Bennett suggested.

 The next day, the crew made their way across the white sands heading southeast. The soil underfoot resembled crystal salt or sugar. It sparkled and shimmered in the quickly rising heat. It was unusual that there were no white rock mountains visible which could erode and produce these fine white sands. The men paused regularly to drink deeply from their canteens. Each wore a protective hat with ear and neck flaps, dark goggles to reduce glare, sturdy boots, and light blue flight suits with their United Space Agency patches and nametags. Around their necks were thin communications and recording bands. They each also carried a waist pack with emergency food rations, a few basic tools, and a laser pistol -- just in case.

 Suarez was the first to notice the cave entrance after they walked about three hours.

 “Captain, over there,” he pointed.

 “Good call, Ensign,” Bennett replied. “That can't be a natural rock outcrop. Someone or something did some work here. Be careful when we go in.” Mission Control was monitoring the action live, of course, but added no feedback. The recent technology of Photon Bending allowed virtually instantaneous signaling across the light-years of space back to Earth.

 The crew approached the large opening near the base of what looked like a reddish-orange plateau.

 Bennett, Ngoro, and Suarez entered and switched on their torches. As the darkness dissolved, they beheld what looked to be a large, flat, football-sized underground chamber. In each corner of the chamber was a three-meter tall conical orange crystal. When the men approached one, they could feel it give off some kind of odd, tingling warmth. Suarez gently touched the strange crystal with his bare hand, and all three crewmen were startled when the entire chamber was flooded with light from no detectable source.

 “What the hell was that?” Bennett asked, somewhat shaken.

 “Sorry, Captain. I just touched that orange crystal and the whole room lit up,” Suarez confessed.

 “Captain, my sensors confirm that this room is absolutely the source of the energy pulsations,” Ngoro interrupted.

 “OK, let’s check it out,” Bennett ordered.

 The men noticed from their vantage that the chamber was filled with several even rows of some kind of upright, probably one meter high, light grey stone tablets. Bennett quickly counted five rows of ten tablets in each row. Ngoro added that it looked like three tablets were missing from the neat array, seemingly at random.

 The astronauts carefully went nearer to the mysterious objects for closer examination. They saw that each stone tablet was actually an attached pair of tablets. Furthermore, they were surprised to see inscriptions on each tablet, but in some kind of strange hieroglyphics that was carved differently on each pair. Needless to say, at first glance the men could read nothing.

 They spread out and walked down each row separately, each curious yet puzzled, when suddenly Bennett cried out, “Quick, come here!” Ngoro and Suarez came fast, but in the planet’s thin air, they were both somewhat short of breath when they caught up with the Captain.

 “If I remember my language studies from school, these two tablets are inscribed in Hebrew,” he pointed. One tablet consisted of five carved lines, as did its pair.

 Using his finger, Bennett scrolled down the first tablet to the fourth line, and carefully translated, right to left.

 “Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother.”

 He quickly translated the next line, the fifth.

 “Thou Shalt Not Kill.”

 “Oh my God!” Suarez murmured, as he fell to his knees and lowered his head and devoutly made the Sign of the Cross.

 Ngoro and Bennett stared hard into each other's eyes, and each knew that the other realized what had happened, and what was still happening, and why three stone tablet pairs were missing...

 THE END

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