

Whether or not there was intelligent life out there had never been a question. With half a trillion planets in the galaxy, millions of others must have the right conditions for life. And recently, the **electromagnetic** signals had been increasing.

Something was surely coming. Alia had read all about it, and she and Zak were always listening and watching for signs—screaming engines, bright flashes of light, fireballs in the sky. But that morning, all they heard was a muffled *whump*. It sounded as if it had come from the far side of the park. They saw a hint of silver, the way you might see an insect fly past in the corner of your vision, but by the time you turn to look, it's gone, having flown off somewhere else.

Let's find out what it was! Alia **veered** from the well-traveled path and took off, knowing her older brother would follow. She struggled to be still and attentive for lessons each day, but she loved racing through the desert on the way home, kicking up sand, skittering over rugged rocks on the far side of the park. She always wanted to push further into the desert, beyond where their parents permitted them to explore.

I don't see anything. Zak scuttled along the rocks with Mip panting at his side. He reached down to scratch her furry head and frowned. *We should go back.*

Zak never liked to wander far. *Let's keep looking.* Alia hoped the *whump* sound was an asteroid fragment. She'd always wanted to hold one of those star scraps, to feel the heat of its journey, the weight of secrets from places she'd never see.

Zak led her over the uneven rocks toward a shadowy something steaming beyond the outcrop.

Suddenly, he stopped.

Alia caught up.

It was not an asteroid. It was wreckage—a craft of some kind, battered from its landing, its wings all broken up.

Two gleaming, dark, metallic pods seemed to have weathered the landing. They were long and sleek but bulged in the center to make room, Alia **presumed**, for whatever they carried inside. The smaller one was cracked open along a seam. She approached it slowly.

Be careful, Zak warned. He reached down to hold Mip, but she broke loose and rushed up to sniff at the pod.

Shiny, flimsy packages spilled from the crack. Alia picked one up. It made a crinkling sound when she moved it. Was this their food?

Put that down! Zak ordered. *We have to go. Someone must have seen this; the watchers are probably on their way. We'll get in trouble!*

Alia knew he was right. ❶ But she wasn't ready to go.

Zak backed away as if molecules from the alien world might swirl him up in a magical cloud and spirit

him away from everything he'd ever known. Alia wished that could happen to her. ❷

Alia was about to reach back into the pod when she felt Mip's damp nose nudging her. She turned—and heard it: a scrape, and then a creak, coming from the other pod. The larger one.

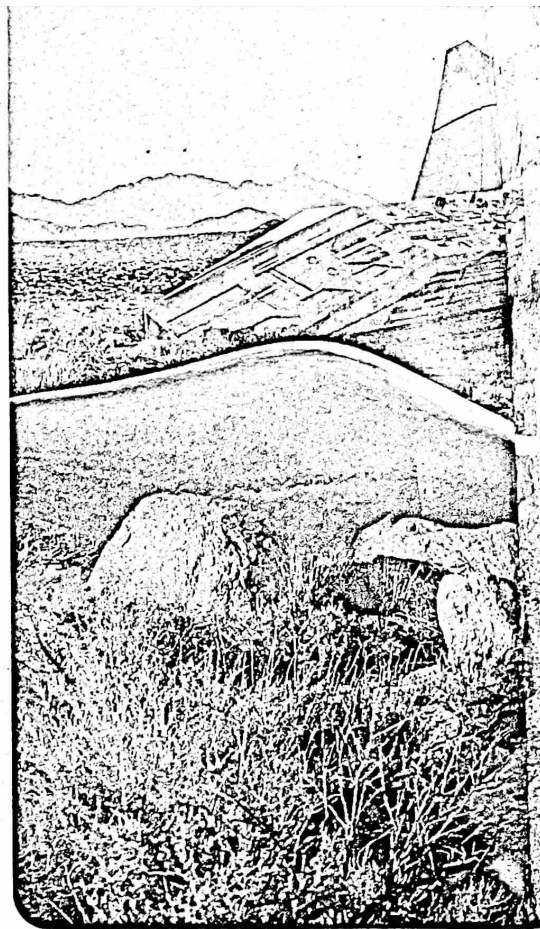
Watch out! Zak hissed.

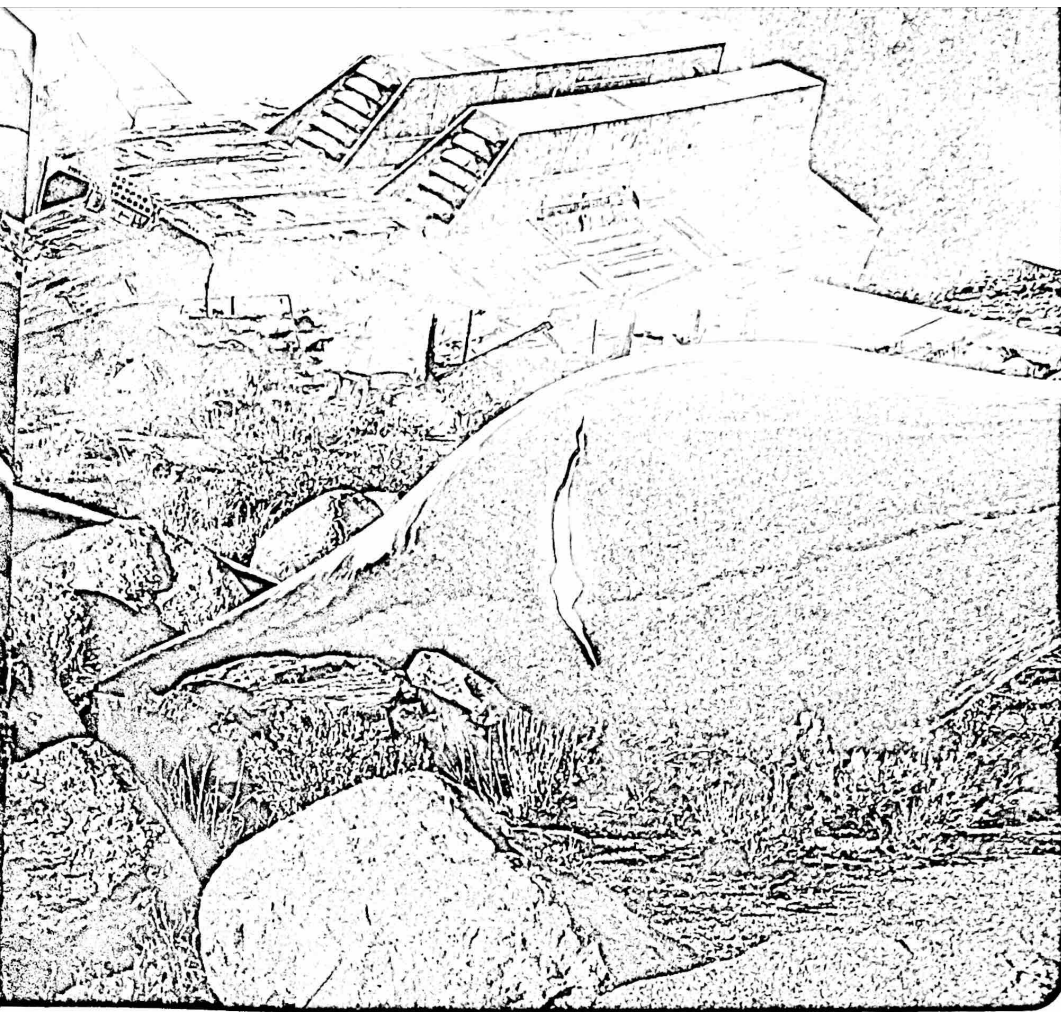
Alia froze, staring. The pod grew quiet. Then it let out a low whooshing sound.

That's probably . . . air escaping or something. ❸ Alia waited, but there were no more creaks or scrapes. In the distance, another sound rose over the rocks. Zak heard it too.

The watchers.

We need to go! Zak peered at the skyline nervously.





Not yet. Alia crouched low, pulled out the rest of the crinkly food packets, and reached deeper inside the pod.

What's in there?

Something . . . cold and hard.

Alia pulled out a long tube with some kind of trigger. *It might be some kind of weapon. It's not very big though. That's good, right?*

Zak's fear filled the air like fog. ④ *It could mean they're more advanced than us. That thing you're holding could annihilate us all!*

Maybe they don't want to annihilate us.

You're being reckless. We've lingered too long. We need to get out of here.

Not yet.

Alia turned toward the second pod, but Zak rushed forward to stand

between her and the pod. *They could carry diseases. We have no idea who they are!*

Well, I want to find out.

Alia turned back to the first pod, where something glossy was snagged on a sharp edge of metal. She tugged it from the capsule and stared.

It was a page of images.

Alia's limbs stiffened. Zak rushed to her side. Alia could sense his terror, his revulsion.

Now do you see?

She did. The creatures in the images were grotesque. Their faces were raw, their bodies soft and mushy looking.

Zak made a troubled clicking sound. *Leave that for the watchers. They'll want to study it. Now let's go.*

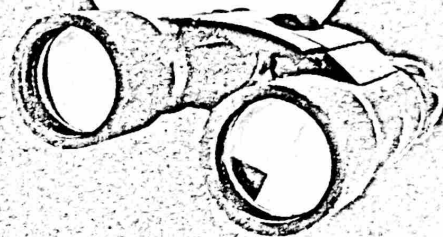
Before Alia could turn away, the larger pod creaked again.



Directions: Read the story through one time. Then read it again, answering the questions in the margins as you go.

1

Why do Zak and Alia want to avoid the watchers?



2

How are Alia and Zak different from one another?

3

Why do you think the author put the dialogue in italics instead of quotation marks?



4

How does the line "Zak's fear filled the air like fog" contribute to the mood of the story?

5

What does Alia mean by "just like us"? What does Zak mean by "just like us"?

6

Where does this story take place? What details reveal the setting?

7

Who are the creatures in the pod? How do you think they would answer Alia's questions?

Then it thumped. A quiet **keening** came from inside.

Alia, come on! Zak was already climbing over the rocks.

But Alia couldn't leave. *Something is in there. Alive.* Even with the horrible images fresh in her brain, she couldn't turn away from the wailing. So she took a step forward. What if . . .

What are you thinking? Zak rushed back and knocked Alia to the ground.

They need help, Zak! She started to get up, but Zak clutched her leg.

They're not from here, Alia! They might be dangerous.

So you want to leave them to die? Listen to them! Alia pulled away from him and scrambled toward the pod.

Do you want to risk your life trying to save them? Are they worth it, Alia? Are they worth the lives of everyone we know? Everyone we love?

But what if they're just like us? Exactly. Zak gave her a worried look. *What if those awful-looking things are just like us?* 5

Alia thought hard about that. The flight capsules being developed on their own planet would launch with strict orders to **colonize** any discovered planet, no matter who already lived there. And yet, if that were her inside the pod, she'd hope someone would choose courage over fear.

Just then, the pod thumped again, louder. It thumped again and again, desperate and powerful. Whatever was in there was strong, but Alia took a step closer.

The distant buzz of the approaching watchers was growing louder; they'd arrive soon. They'd have the equipment—the weapons and tools and research supplies—to deal with this.

Zak peered nervously into the distance. He sent out another **telepathic** thought. *If we leave now, they won't know we were ever here.*

Even Mip, tipping her antennas toward home, seemed to be waiting for Alia, but Alia scratched Mip behind her crown-horn and turned back to the pod.

Where did you come from? she wondered.

Alia folded her wings tight at her sides, bent low, and ran her antenna over the strange symbols scratched into the pod's dark surface. She traced the straight lines and curves:

E

A

R

T

H

Earth. 6

Was it the name of a faraway planet? Did the creatures inside dream of holding star scraps in their hands too? Did they dream of meeting her? 7

Zak scrambled over the rocks as the watchers drew close, but Alia stayed.

She knew what she had to do. •

DESERT ECLIPSE

The true story that inspired "They Might Be Dangerous"

BY KATE MESSNER

It is just after 4:00 a.m., but no one is sleeping. For one thing, the tents are too hot. The average summer temperature here in California's Anza-Borrego Desert is 105 degrees, and today was hotter than average. But that's not the real reason we're up.

Earlier, we'd bounced and jostled our way out here in old military jeeps. Joe, our guide, taught us how to pitch tents in the sand. We hiked around for a bit, and Joe told us about the creatures that call this alien landscape home—the scorpions and snakes and stink bugs.

But the real show would start when the sun went down and darkness fell over the rocks.

WHERE STARS ARE BORN

Tonight there will be a total lunar eclipse. So instead of sleeping, we're spending our hours of darkness sitting in camp chairs under the stars, watching a shadow creep over the moon. A lunar eclipse happens when a full moon passes through Earth's shadow. It starts slowly. In the early stages—just before 2:00 a.m. on this August night—it looks like someone has taken a tiny bite out of the moon.

Once the moon is dark, the next show begins.

"Come on up, you'll see the Orion Nebula." Our trip astronomer, Dennis Mammana, steps back from his telescope so I can take a look. "That's where stars are born."

Orion, the Andromeda galaxy, and so many other **celestial** features are in full view. Coyotes howl from a distant ridge as the moon begins to

emerge from Earth's shadow. The stars begin to fade as the full moon lights up the desert sand once again.

"Watching such a celestial event gives one a true three-dimensional sense of the **cosmos**—here's the moon drifting through the sky and entering the shadow of our own planet," Dennis says. "Seeing things like this and understanding that we can predict their occurrences gives people a recognition that the universe isn't 'out there' but that we're part of the universe."

Part of it all, we sit in our camp chairs and stare up at the sky until the dark begins to fade.

GLIMPSE OF ANOTHER WORLD

In the morning, there are eggs and sausages cooked on a camp stove, coffee and orange juice sipped from tin cups.

One of the younger boys spots a stink bug.

"Gross!" he cries. He lifts his dusty sneaker to stomp. But our guide, Joe, catches his arm.

"We don't do that out here," Joe says quietly.

"This is his home—not yours."

The kid nods. My daughter, who loves bugs of all kinds, gives a quiet nod. "Good for Joe," she says.

I agree. Joe and Dennis have given us all a gift: They've shown us another kind of country, another landscape, and a glimpse of a world beyond our own. They've reminded us how vast and full of wonder the universe is. They've reminded us that we're not looking up at that universe, we're part of it, from a tiny armored insect in the desert sand to a new star being born light-years away. ◉

Writing Contest

Consider the last line of the story: "She knew what she had to do." What does Alia have to do? What happens after the watchers arrive? Write a sequel to the story that answers these questions. Be sure to stay true to the characters. Entries must be submitted to **They Might Be Dangerous Contest** by a teacher, parent, or legal guardian. * Three winners will each get *Project F* by Jeanne DuPrau.

Entries must be written by a student in grades 4-12 and submitted by their teacher, parent, or legal guardian who will be the entrant and must be a legal resident of the U.S., age 18 or older. See page 2 for details.

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