

Chapter Ten

To say that the field shelter Navarr's people had set up was primitive was misleading. Yes, there were only a couple of shelf bunks, and a chemical toilet was the only sanitary facility. There was no galley, just a couple of chairs and a simple table, harsh LED lights integral to the ceiling of the domed structure. In terms of comforts, it was very basic. But the shelter itself was more solid and secure than Sidwell's dome. It'd handle anything Titan could throw at it, could even withstand light weapons fire. It could recycle air and waste almost indefinitely. The comm system was first rate. And it came complete with a fusion warhead.

Jon walked through the steps of handling the weapon with Navarr, learned how to access the fire control. You could set the timer, or set it off directly. It was simple enough, so long as you had the proper key, the right codes, and the agreement of the other person with authority to use the weapon. In the event of one of them being incapacitated, the remaining person would have to have a special clearance code sent up from Earth, meaning a delay of at least three hours. And, of course, the NSA back on Earth reserved the right to set the weapon off whenever they felt it necessary, regardless of what anyone on Titan might think of the matter.

"That's it. Any questions?"

Jon looked at Navarr, then to the pair of troopers standing guard by the airlock. "Will there always be someone on duty here?"

"Yeah, and there's a remote monitoring system that relays to my command post on Titan Prime and links back to Earth."

"Why not just have an expert here to take care of security?"

"Any computer system is vulnerable to penetration. Better to have only dedicated components and human monitors."

"Got it."

They left the security base and made their way across the compound to the dome that held the artifact, a walk of only a dozen meters. Jon was sure that the fusion weapon would leave a crater that would encompass the artifact, if it were used. Navarr could probably tell him exactly how far the blast would reach, if he wanted to know.

There was another pair of Navarr's soldiers at the entrance to the airlock. Jon nodded to them on the way in, but got no reaction in response, the faceplates of their military suits just blank mirrors. He and Navarr entered the airlock, cycled it. Opening the inner hatch to the dome, they stepped in. The air was noticeably clearer now, and the water dripping off their suits didn't freeze instantly.

"Welcome back. Thought you'd have 'nother go wit' th' angel?" Darnell Sidwell laughed, his voice crackling in the suit speaker.

"Something like that," said Jon. "This is Commander Anton Navarr. Commander, this is our host."

Navarr raised a hand in greeting. "Good to meet you, sir."

Sidwell gave him a quick nod in return, grunted. He looked to Jon. “See, Pal’s makin’ progress wit’ sealin’ this place up. Have it ready tomorrow.”

Indeed, not only was the air almost clear, but most of the upper deck floor had been sealed. Jon checked his suit’s sensors, saw that the temperature inside the dome was up 100 degrees from where it had been the evening before. Another hundred, and it’d be comfortable inside. “Looks good. Thanks.

“Dar, we’ve come down to test a couple of theories before everyone else arrives. I’d like to have some idea of whether we can shield ourselves from the artifact’s influence or not.”

“Help yerself.” Sidwell said, then went to the edge of the pit and took a seat. “I’ll watch from here.”

Navarr stepped over to the stairs, looked down. He said nothing, and even though Jon couldn’t see the man’s face, he was sure that the commander was drinking in the scene, soaking up every nuance. He turned his head to face Jon. “Amazing. I never . . . I never thought I’d see the day.”

“You can go on down, if you want,” said Jon. “I can wait and give you a moment before I try this out.”

“No, that’s all right. I’ll stay here and keep an eye on you.”

Jon nodded, descended. When he got to the bottom, he reached down and switched on the suppressor unit. As there was no datastream for his cyberware to be connected to, he didn’t notice the abrupt silence he had experienced before. But there was still a slight buzzing. Interestingly, that meshed nicely with the low, steady whisper he recognized as coming from the artifact. They wove together, sinuously, a pair of snakes writhing, becoming indistinguishable one from the other. He walked forward, looking closely at the artifact, the burl of gel floating below it, could see the flashes of blue there, now brighter, beckoning him to reach out with hand or mind and fall through the fragile reality of wakefulness . . .

. . . and into the deeper communion of dreams.

It was the cave. He turned and looked behind, could see light streaming in from the opening. The clean light of early spring, not yet filtered green by leaves. He reached out, felt the wall of the cave, finding it surprisingly dry and warm. Then motion caught his eye, back deeper in the darkness. Slowly turning his head, so as not to startle whatever it was that was there, he looked.

At first, there was nothing. Then it moved again, and he could see it. Small, on the floor, along the nearby wall. When it stopped again, it all but disappeared. But he was certain that he had a glimpse of it.

It was Palmira, Sidwell’s cat/expert.

“Pal?”

No response, but another glimpse of movement, and this time he was certain that it was Pal, or at least the image of her. She went deeper into the cave, looking back and up at

him to see if he would follow, before she disappeared again.

“Hang on, I’m coming,” he said as he carefully stepped forward. The floor of the cave was smooth, level, easy to walk on, and he found that as he got further from the entry, his eyes became adjusted to the darkness. Pal stayed a few paces in front of him, making sure that he followed. They passed no branches off the main tunnel, there was nothing to make him worry that he would lose his way, though the cave did start to bend to the left, eclipsing the now distant mouth.

In the growing darkness, he could barely see that he had come to the entrance of a large cavern. Pal had gone on into it before him, then completely disappeared. He called out her name, but there was only silence.

For a long moment he stood still, waiting. Nothing happened. Tentatively, he took a couple more steps into the room, sliding his feet on the surface of the floor, feeling ahead, in case there was some sort of crevasse or pit. “Hello? Pal, are you there?”

With the sound of his voice echoing off the walls and ceiling, there came a slight glow in the center of the room. A pale blue glow that quickly grew in intensity until it had the depth and hue of the electric blue of the tholin gel suspended below the artifact. In fact, that was exactly what it was: light from an over-large burl of gel, and above it floated the artifact, just as he had seen it in his waking state.

He walked toward it, slowly. He circled it, could see nothing except what he had seen before, while awake. Stopping an arm’s length from the artifact, he looked around the room. There was nothing there to be seen. Taking a deep breath, he gingerly touched the artifact with a hand, and from behind him heard a voice.

“Hello, Jon.”

Slowly, he turned, expecting to find the image of Sidwell. But there was no one there. He did notice, however, that there was another shadow on the wall of the cavern, beside his own. The shadow of a man.

“Darnell?” Jon glanced to where the figure should be. There was nothing.

“You’ve come a long way, to the very threshold of understanding.”

The voice seemed to be coming from the shadow itself. Jon looked back to it. “Who are you?”

“Have you puzzled out the riddle yet?”

“You mean that stuff about definition? Light and dark?”

“A very old question.” There was a pause. “No? Well, you will. Come back to me when you have the answer.”

Jon noticed the light fading, felt the dream begin to dissolve. He spoke to the shadow, “Wait . . .”

“Yes?”

“What do you want?”

“Want?” Again, there was a pause. “Why, nothing. Nothing at all.”

And the light went out.

“How long?” He struggled to open his eyes, bring the world into focus. “How long this time?”

“Just a few minutes. Barely long enough for us to get you out of there and back here,” said Navarr.

“Here, son, have some water,” said Sidwell.

Jon reached out and took the mug from the old man’s hands. He tried to concentrate on just the mug, brought it to his lips. The flat, tasteless, recycled water was nonetheless cool and refreshing. Taking a deep breath, he looked at the two men. “Is Pal around? I need her to get Seth for me.”

She materialized on the floor in front of the couch where he was sitting, then jumped up onto his lap. For a moment, he expected to feel her weight land on him. She just sat there, looking up into his eyes.

“Can you get Seth for me?”

The cat nodded slightly, and his expert appeared almost instantly. He had evidently been briefed already by Palmira, because he asked, “Do you wish to upload the medical data on your fainting spell?”

“Yeah. Get it straight to Tops, let her know what happened.”

“Anything else?”

“Not right now. But stay in touch, ok?”

“I had tried to do so, using the link through Mr. Sidwell’s compound, but you suddenly went black.”

Jon was confused. “Black?”

Navarr spoke. “The suppressor. I didn’t switch it off until we had you safely inside. Didn’t think of it at first, then had my hands full with you until just a few moments ago.”

Seth nodded. “I wasn’t sure, from this distance, what was the cause. But that does explain it.”

“Evidently,” said Navarr, “it didn’t work with the artifact, even if it was able to keep Seth out.”

Jon took another sip of water, felt his head start to clear completely. “Maybe. But maybe it did do something, after all. I noticed that the slight buzz of the field seemed to harmonize with the sound of the artifact, just before I fainted.”

“Harmonize?” asked Seth.

“Yeah, seemed to blend together with the low whisper of the artifact, each melding into the other.”

“What do you make of it?” asked Navarr, looking back and forth at Seth and Jon.

“Dunno,” said Jon. He looked at Seth, “But be sure to let Tops know. And tell her I’ll be in to see her, just as soon as we get back.”

“Confirmed,” said the expert, who then vanished.

“You feel OK?” asked Navarr.

“I think so.” He looked around, saw Sidwell sitting at his kitchen table, thumbing through a sheaf of papers. “Darnell, I think that we’ve found out what we came down to discover.”

“Eh?” The old man looked up, almost absently, like he had forgotten that he had guests. “Well, I should think so. Question is, didja learn anythin’?”

Jon smiled. “Perhaps. But we’re going to go back up to the station. I probably won’t be back until tomorrow, with the rest of the team.”

Darnell nodded, looked back to his papers. He said nothing as they left.

Jon watched as the Planck made her final approach and docked with the station. As with the da Vinci, who was berthed beside her, she was on the ‘trailing’ side of Titan Prime, where there was the least chance of being struck by random debris from Saturn’s rings. Still, in the time Jon was there, he saw half a dozen flashes of light, the point defense lasers of the station at work.

As he waited, watching the transfer umbilical snake out to the ship, Susan Jacobs came into the viewing area. She was engaged in a conversation with an unseen entity, who appeared to Jon when Susan looked up, saw him, then nodded to the empty space beside her. Salim gave a slight bow of the head to Jon as they approached.

“So,” said Jacobs, “another interesting experience moonside, I understand. What’s Tops make of it?”

Jon shrugged. “She said there really wasn’t anything there, that I’m as healthy as can be, and there didn’t seem to be anything particularly unusual about my stats.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“She didn’t stop there, did she?”

He chuckled. “No. She said that it just showed how little we know about some aspects of brain structure and activity. She’s going to go over the data some more, and compare it to my normal waking and sleep states. She’s got Seth downloading my vitals constantly. Says she’ll know if I so much as have a daydream.”

“What do you make of it?” asked Susan.

“Still sorting some of that out. I’ll have whatever conclusions I come to in my report tomorrow morning, before the meeting.” Jon looked over to the entryway of the reception area. “Here they come.”

A mop of blond hair was visible, bobbing above the heads of others coming into the reception area. Jon recognized most of the faces from the files, but found himself focused on the tall, thin man to whom that mop of hair belonged. Don Bradsen, the USSA Research Coordinator.

Bradsen stopped just inside the room, looked around, and in a commanding voice said, “OK people, listen up. Meeting tomorrow morning at nine. The station expert, Salim, will show you to your quarters. It’s late, get some sleep and let your bodies adjust to the full gravity. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Only after giving these instructions did he turn to meet Jon, Susan, and Salim. “Hello.”

“Welcome back, Don,” said Susan. “Your usual quarters are ready.”

“Thanks.” He held out a hand to Jon. “Good to see you again. Sounds like you’ve had some adventures already.”

Jon shook the man’s hand firmly. “Yeah. I’ll have an update for you and your team in the morning.”

“Good, good. Well, I think my people are anxious to get into it. We’ve been following your reports, and find the speculations of your team interesting. But nothing like hard data, eh?”

A young, clean-cut man was hanging around behind Bradsen. Jon glanced at the youth, and Bradsen turned to see who was there. “Oh, Mallory, it’s you. What do you want?”

“Um, just seeing if you need help with anything . . .”

“No, no, that’ll be fine. I’ll manage. You can go, get some rest.” Bradsen turned back to Jon and the others as Mallory left. “Good man. Dana Mallory, our lab tech. Very helpful, can fix just about anything. Spent the whole time on the way here getting familiar with the maintenance protocols and whatnot for all the equipment we’ve brought, since a lot of it was new to him.”

“Enthusiastic,” said Susan.

“Very. Natural mechanic, it seems. Highly recommended. Good addition to my team, and everyone seems to like him. You know how it is with researchers, they can be neurotic about who handles their equipment.” Bradsen looked around, saw that the rest of his team had cleared the area. “Well, I suppose I should get tucked in, myself. No, that’s OK, Salim, I think I can find the way on my own.”

And with that, he nodded and left.

After he was gone, Jon looked to Susan Jacobs and Salim. Susan just shrugged. “That’s just the way he is when he gets here. Drives everyone nuts for the first day or two, until he settles back into a routine. We’re used to it.”

“Salim, you didn’t say much.”

“I’ve learned his preferences when he first arrives.” The expert smiled. “And discovered the wisdom of silence.”

“Smart. Well, OK, they’re here. I guess I should go see about getting some rest.”

“Sweet dreams,” said Susan with a bit of a smile.

“Thanks. I’ll let you know.”

He woke in the morning. There had been dreams, even dreams of the cavern, the artifact, and Sidwell. But they were just dreams, such as he would have had a year ago, his mind sorting through the various experiences and problems of the day, trying to make some sense of it all. It wasn’t anything like the waking, lucid dreams he had been having recently, particularly during his fainting spells.

But there was one bit that his subconscious had fastened upon, one piece of information that he was still wondering about as he sipped coffee and worked on his report for the meeting.

“Seth?”

The expert appeared. “Good morning, Jon. What can I help you with?”

“A phrase I want you to check on for me: ‘That which emerges from darkness gives definition to the light.’”

There was a pause. “Nothing in my reference banks, nor in what Salim has here. Shall I send a query back to Earth, see if we can find something there? It sounds as though it might not fall within my general-knowledge parameters.”

“Yeah, go ahead. It’s ringing a familiar bell for me, but I can’t seem to pull it out.”

“Very well. Finding the information shouldn’t take long, we should have an answer for you in little over the transit time for the message. Should be about three and a half hours.”

“That’ll be fine. We’ll be done with our meeting, probably getting ready to go back down to the surface.”

“Anything else?”

“No, that’s it.”

The meeting room was larger than the one they had used the day before, to accommodate the second team. Over coffee and rolls the two teams started to mingle, the few people who knew one another catching up on academic gossip and shared backgrounds. Jon looked to Bradsen, who nodded.

“OK folks, have a seat. Don and I want to keep this informal, just a get-acquainted session. But there is also some information that we want to go over.” He looked around the room, waited a moment while people settled into chairs. “Let’s start with introductions, cover what brings us together.

“I’m Jon Thompson, USSA Outer System Administrator, responsible for the overall smooth operation of US interests around Jupiter and Saturn. Obviously, I haven’t been doing my job, since this surprise was sprung on us.” There was scattered chuckling. “This is Susan Jacobs, who actually runs Titan Prime. I believe you know Salim already. This other expert is my assistant, Seth. If you need something from me, Seth can probably help you with it. And feel free to call on him for anything else he can help you with, since we’re rather short on experts up here.

“The members of my team include Jackie Gates,” he gestured toward her. She raised her cup of coffee and attempted a smile. “Who knows more about the semifluid CPU and tholin gel than just about anyone.

“This is Arthur Bailey, an anthropologist specializing in industrial archeology who also has degrees in mechanical and industrial engineering.” Bailey waved, slightly embarrassed.

“I’m sure all of you know, or know of, Robert Gish, who has been saying for decades what we now know was at least once true: that there are technologically advanced extraterrestrial civilizations.” Gish looked up from the floor briefly, nodded curtly. “His ward, Chu Ling, you’ll meet later.

“The man in black back there is our artist in residence, Duc Ng. If you haven’t yet had an opportunity to do so, I’d suggest that you take a look at his latest holo work. It’ll help you get prepared for meeting the artifact.”

“We’ve all had a chance to see Mr. Ng’s sequence on the artifact, on board the Planck,” said Bradsen.

“Well, in that case, be sure to check out one of his own sculptural creations, just for the pleasure of it,” smiled Jon. He continued. “This is Johan Klee, linguist and communications theorist.

“Lastly, I’d like to introduce Commander Anton Navarr, who is attached to this mission as our security officer. He and his troops operate independently, though that shouldn’t stop you from thanking them for the job they do.”

Jon looked around. Everyone still seemed relaxed, in spite of the implied danger that came with the presence of the military. Sitting, he looked to Bradsen, who rose and stood somewhat stiffly, began to speak. “I’m Don Bradsen, USSA Research Coordinator. This is unlike anything we’ve ever encountered before, but I’m sure that the talent we have in this room will be able to solve the mystery of the artifact.

“One person who didn’t come out with us is Gregor Soukup, the engineer behind the Apparent Gravity drive now being tested on the Hawking. How’s the ship doing, Gregor?”

Soukup grimaced slightly, but Jon was fairly certain that only he would notice it. And that just because he knew how little Soukup liked Bradsen, who had argued passionately against developing the AG drive. “She is well. Almost to Pluto already, and just after three days. We could take her to the stars, go find these aliens who left us this puzzle.”

“Well, perhaps after we figure out what we’re looking for,” said Bradsen. “OK, going around the room, let me introduce my team.

“This is Alexandra Byrne, chemical engineer. To her right is Lindsey Merritt, our biological sciences person with specialities in microbiology and genetics. Kelly Garcia there handles metallurgy and mass spectrometry. Harold Kanagawa is expert in scanning technologies.

“Levi Feldman researches particles and plasmas. Some overlap there with George Faris, who helped to refine the projected energy matrix that Jackie Gates uses in her computers. Theo Crane is our communications hardware engineer. And this young man to my left is Dana Mallory. He’ll keep all our equipment working.”

Without standing, Jon addressed the group again. “I hope that you’ll take some time this morning to get to know one another a bit. The dome housing the artifact isn’t quite up to normal atmosphere and temp yet, though it should be ready by mid-afternoon. At that point we can begin shuttling down equipment, start getting things set up.

“But before we break up, I want to go over some recent developments, and answer any questions.” Jon paused a moment, thinking. How much to tell them? He decided to stick with his usual approach, give it to them straight. “You’re aware of the security issue with the artifact. We attempted a military suppression device yesterday, and it seemed to have no effect. If the artifact is able to manipulate data storage, and possibly human

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memory, then we have no way of blocking it. Not yet, anyway. We have a couple of other tests we want to try, and it's possible that some of you will be able to detect how this manipulation is taking place. That may give us an insight into how to protect ourselves from the effect."

"Do you really think that this is a danger?" asked George Faris, a solidly built, short man who moved like a wrestler.

"Honestly, we don't know. We've seen no evidence that it means us ill, though it does seem to have this active camouflage capability."

"Which could imply other defensive systems that could be harmful," added Navarr. "And there is the matter of your fainting in proximity to the artifact."

Jon sighed. "Yeah. And not just fainting. I've been having related, lucid dreams. If the thing is able to manipulate or communicate with us, perhaps it is doing so through our subconscious. In any event, as I indicated in an earlier report, we'll proceed with caution."

Bradsen, who was still standing, nodded with some vigor. "Yes, I've directed that the first phase of research should only use passive instrumentation when studying the artifact. No direct scanning or contact with it, though we will evaluate surrounding materials. We can become more aggressive with our research as needed."

"Sounds good. We want to figure out what this thing is, and the sooner the better, given that there has already been at least one leak of the information. But I don't want us to endanger ourselves or the artifact by being hasty. Stick to your protocols, keep the information flowing, and we should be fine."

"What's this about a leak? You mean news of the artifact?" Alexandra Byrne, the chemist, asked, her long black hair dancing as she looked first from Jon to Bradsen.

Before Jon could respond, Bradsen spoke. "I edited that out of the update yesterday as we were approaching Titan Prime. I knew that it would be a distraction. Please do not let it bother you, as Commander Navarr and his people will be able to provide adequate security."

Jon gave a quick hard look to Bradsen, and was about to speak, but was interrupted by Jackie. "What, are you nuts? You didn't tell them about the Edenists?"

At this, there was a collective gasp from members of the second team. And following a brief moment of silence, questions erupted.

"Edenists? Here?"

"How did they find out?"

"Who else knows?"

"How long have you known about this? I wouldn't have come on this mission . . ."

Jon stood, hands out in a calming gesture. "Please, people, take it easy. We just found out about this Monday evening, and I told my team yesterday morning. What we know is sketchy, but I will make the full text of the communication available to you. What we think is that one cell of Edenists found out early on, but they have not acted on the information yet. There's no reason to think that there is any kind of immediate threat."

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“You should’ve told them.” Jon was annoyed, and didn’t mind letting it show.

“Look, Jon, what good would it have done? None, that’s what. There’s nothing they can do about it, except worry needlessly.”

“They still should know what threats they’re possibly facing.”

“Why? Is there anything that they could do about it? No. And it won’t affect us here. It’s something for people back home to be worrying about.”

“It doesn’t matter. They should know. They’re adults, they’re damned intelligent, and they don’t need to be coddled.”

“Uh-uh. You’re wrong. Knowing is only a distraction, something that could cause them to lose their focus, to miss an important clue in their research because they’re concerned about whether some crackpots are going to stage a raid on Titan Prime.”

Jon, who had been sitting forward in his chair, now settled back. “This isn’t a discussion. They know now, and I intend to make sure that henceforth they know about any significant developments.”

Bradsen stared at him. “Well, you’ve just made all our jobs tougher. Thanks.”

“To the contrary, the more our people know, the more they will be able to evaluate any unexpected piece of information correctly. No one, not you, not me, not Navarr, can be a substitute for the collective intelligence and intuition of our team. To try and control solid information is an almost certain way to undercut our investigation.” He looked up. Bradsen was still staring at him. The two men held one another’s eyes, then Bradsen turned and walked to the door without saying anything.

“Jon, I’ve received a response to our data search about your phrase.”

Jon was in his quarters, preparing to go down to Titan with most of the rest of the team. “Oh? What did they find?”

“Quite a lot, no surprise. But most of it is obviously not pertinent to the matter at hand. However, there is an extensive discussion of ancient Greek philosophy by an early 20th century author which may be relevant, and also passages in Zen Buddhism that seem to fit.”

“Can you summarize the first block of material for me?”

There was a pause. A long pause.

Jon looked up from what he was doing to see the expert standing, hands clasped behind him, staring off into the distance. He had never seen Seth look that way before.

“Seth?”

The image shook its head, blinked. “I’m sorry, I’ve been trying to review and digest the philosophy text. It seems fairly straight forward on first reading, but there are subtleties that I’m not sure I understand.”

“How much material are you talking about?”

“Just a few pages of text, and references back to the original Greek.”

“This in English?”

“The author was German, one Martin Heidegger. But there is a standard English translation.”

“Heidegger. I recognize the name, but philosophy wasn’t ever much of an area of interest for me. What’s the topic he’s writing about?”

“Early Greek thinking. The tract is concerned with something called ‘Fragment B 16’ by a philosopher named Heraclitus.”

“Never heard of him. Why is Heidegger concerned with this Greek?”

“He places Heraclitus before Plato and Aristotle, at the very dawn of Western thought. Most of his writings only exist in references by later authors, hence the ‘fragment’ designation. Heidegger considers Heraclitus to be seminal for all that follows, and this fragment the most important of all surviving fragments.”

“Hmm.” Jon thought back to the dream sequences. The figure of Darnell said that it was a very old question. “Well, download the file material to my pc and I’ll look at it later.”

“Done. I will also spend some time pondering what it says.”

“See if Johan Klee knows anything about this German philosopher, or what he was writing about.”

“I will mention it to him. He is also planning on going down to Titan with you this afternoon.”

“Good, maybe we can talk about it,” said Jon. “You also said there were some Zen Buddhist references that seemed to fit?”

“Yes, though those seem to be somewhat more clear in their meaning.”

“What I’ve read of Zen has never been particularly clear. But go on.”

“The phrase ‘that which emerges from darkness gives definition to the light’ can be understood as classic Yin and Yang, the twin elements of the universe that define each other by being opposite and complimentary.”

“That makes sense.”

“Indeed. A Zen interpretation would be that light and dark are necessary for any sort of reference, one for the other. Without both, neither exists, and therefore both contain the seeds of the other.”

“Simple enough. But I don’t see how it fits in with my dreams.”

“Perhaps it doesn’t. Just because we found a possible match doesn’t mean that it is an appropriate one.”

“Agreed.”

“Should I summarize this material and share it with the others?”

“No, there’s nothing really of value there yet. I haven’t drawn any conclusions about the meaning of the dreams, and no one else has experienced them, so they are relying on me for context. Let me talk with Johan, and read through this Heidegger tonight. Maybe I can grasp something that makes sense. Though I’d be surprised if I found anything in it you didn’t.”

“Not necessarily. This is where we run into the limitations of any expert system yet constructed. I may be able to manipulate and even synthesize data relationships that a human would never understand, but I completely lack any sort of human intuition. And

based on what I read of this tract, and the comments by others that I have referring to it, I gather that there is something about his perception of the fragment which is inherently intuitive.”

“Well, we’ll see. I’ll look at it later. Now, I need to get going, get ready to drop down to Titan.”

The shuttle that they took down to the surface was a freight runner, with an additional personnel pod inserted in part of the cargo bay. It was cramped, crowded, and generally uncomfortable. But it got them, and a lot of their equipment, down to the surface. During the trip, Jon wasn’t able to talk with Johan Klee about philosophers, since Klee was very busy being sick from the turbulence of the ride.

They landed at the pad, not far from the dome housing the artifact. Jon cycled through the airlock with three other people, and emerged into the thick Titan haze. Outside the ship, the first group through the airlock had already started to unload cargo. Sealed containers holding equipment and supplies were being piled on a wheeled sled, secured for moving.

“Christ, this stuff’s heavy,” came the voice that Jon thought he recognized as Theo Crane, the communications specialist. The man was struggling to drag a large crate onto the sled.

“Let me give you a hand with that,” said Jon.

“That Thompson?” said the man, pausing to try and look at Jon’s face in his standard environment suit. Unlike the military suits, these didn’t have mirrored faceplates. “I’d appreciate it. Bradsen had all of us working out on the ship on the way here, but still being back in full gravity is tough.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Happy to help.”

“Say, why don’t we just get the old guy who lives here to turn off his gravity generator? Make unloading this stuff and moving it a lot easier.”

Jon smiled to himself, as he helped shift the crate. “Too dangerous. The mass would be the same, just a difference in weight. Meaning that if you’re not careful, you can get yourself squished by the momentum of a moving, yet deceptively light, piece of equipment. If you’re not used to it, you can die real fast.”

“Oh. Yeah. I see your point.”

“So, we’re lucky that Sidwell has a generator.”

“I suppose.”

They finished the task, and helped some of the others pull the laden sled to the dome. Taking it in through the large equipment airlock, Jon and half a dozen others cycled through and into the dome, suits and sled dripping from the warm neutralizing bath.

Sidwell had been true to his word. Inside it was warm with clean, breathable air. Several people were already in the dome, having gone through the smaller & faster personnel airlock. Don Bradsen was one of these.

“OK, OK, people, come in, get a good look at the artifact, then let’s get to work. There’s more equipment to unload, and everything to set up and calibrate.”

Bradsen was already out of his suit, so clearly he wasn’t intending on going back out to the shuttle to help schlep in the rest of the cargo.

Jon went over to the lip of the pit, looked down. He could hear the slight whisper of the artifact, but felt no desire to go down and get close to it. Others came up to the edge beside him, looking down. There were gasps, as they saw it for the first time with their own eyes.

“If you want to go down and get a good look at it, feel free. Don’t touch it, and don’t get too close. I don’t want to have anyone faint and fall into the thing accidentally, the way I almost did.” Jon looked around at the faces staring down into the pit. “And if anyone sees anything dramatically different from Ng’s holo sculptures, let us all know.”

“It’s . . . it’s beautiful,” said Harold Kanagawa.

“Scares the hell out of me,” replied the stocky Faris. “Man, the hair on the back of my neck is standing straight up.”

“Yeah,” said Arthur Bailey, the only other person from Jon’s team to already be in the building. “Yeah, mine too. But not because I’m scared.”

“Just think what it has to tell us, to teach us,” said Kelly Garcia, a latina with prematurely grey hair.

“Incredible. Just unbelievable. My god.”

Jon looked over to see who said that, saw that it was Theo Crane, the man he had helped with the crate. And noticed that beside him, silent, eyes closed and hands grasped tightly before him, was the young tech, Dana Mallory. “You OK, Mallory?”

The youth shuddered slightly, looked to Jon with a slight panic in his eye. “I can hear it. I can hear it talking to me.”

“It’s OK. You’re all right. It just does that to some people.” Jon stepped back, over to him, put a hand reassuringly on his shoulder. “You’ll be fine, don’t worry.”

Mallory shuddered slightly again, turned away from the lip of the pit. “I’ll go help bring in the rest of the cargo.”

“Good idea.”

After everything was unloaded from the shuttle, and the ship sent back to Titan Prime for another load, Jon found Johan Klee, sitting on the edge of the pit, watching the researchers start to set up their equipment. Klee looked up as Jon approached. “This is most remarkable, Jon, most remarkable.”

“Yeah, it’s something.” Jon shook his head in agreement, sat down next to the older man. “I asked Seth to discuss a German Philosopher with you . . .”

“Yes, yes. Martin Heidegger. Seth explained that you needed someone who is familiar with his work. Sorry, I know but little of Heidegger.”

“But you know something?”

“Of course. He was a famous Existentialist, alive about a century ago. Any educated German knows of him. But I know little more.”

Jon nodded. “Seth has some writing of his that I would like your opinion on. Could

you look it over this evening, perhaps we can discuss it in the morning?”

“Certainly, I would be happy to do this for you. But can I ask why it is that you are interested in this philosopher all of a sudden?”

“I’m not really sure. But somehow I think that it ties in with my dreams or visions or whatever they are.” Jon sighed. “It may mean nothing, but I want to explore it.”

“We can have coffee in the morning, and talk philosophy.” Klee patted Jon on the shoulder. He gestured down into the pit, at the enigmatic artifact. “What does it say to you, Jon?”

“Sorry?”

“What is it saying to you, with the whisper you hear?”

“It’s just sound. Just a low, soft rumble.”

“I hear it too. But for me it is like distant waves.”

“And what is it saying to you?”

Klee chuckled, got up. “That I should take more vacations by the sea. I like the sound of the waves. But now, I think the shuttle is calling me. I will help in the unloading, then go back to the station, have dinner with Gish and Chu Ling.”

Jon chuckled along with him. “See you in the morning.”

By late afternoon, the shuttle had made two more trips back and forth, bringing down supplies and people. Most of the team had arrived, and been in to see the artifact. The majority went down in the pit to get a close look, but heeded Jon’s caution about getting too close. No one else fainted, though two people, Lindsey Merritt and Duc Ng, both reported that they felt something like an itch at the edge of their consciousness. Duc instantly wanted to try his psychotropic drugs, to see if he could enhance the effect, understand it better, but Jon told him to save it until they had some other data, and to get his camera and film ready, instead.

As he waited for Duc, Bradsen came over to Jon, sat beside him. Jon looked at him, asked “How’s it going?”

Bradsen nodded, satisfaction evident on his face. “Good. We’ve made real progress. All the primary equipment seems to have come through transit fine, and it seems that all we need is a little time to get everything adjusted and running properly. We should start collecting solid data from some of the equipment by later this evening.”

“How are your people holding up?”

Bradsen looked around, squinted. “Pretty well. It’s a good crew. Some of them have already informed me that they will be staying tonight.”

“Well, tell them to pace themselves. Realistically, we don’t know how long this could take.”

Bradsen shrugged. “They’re researchers, used to being in the lab or with their equipment in the field for days at a stretch.”

Jon frowned. “But still . . .”

“No, trust me on this. They’ll take breaks when they need it, not before.” Bradsen

looked at Jon. “And even with the equipment and supplies we have here, we’ve got a fairly small window of opportunity. At some point, we’ll have to either bring in another crew and significantly more equipment, or transport that thing to a research facility. Nobody here is going to want to lose the chance to be the one to crack it, figure out what it is.”

“Yeah.” Jon chewed his lip. “But I still don’t want people taking unnecessary risks. We don’t know what might damage the artifact, or cause it to act in self-defense.”

Bradsen looked annoyed, but said after a moment, “You’re right.”

“So, let’s find out what we can, while we can. Figure out what it is, and what it does, and whether we can take it back to Earth. But do so safely.”

Slowly, Bradsen began to nod in agreement. “Tall order, Jon. But we’ll see what we can do.”

“Thanks, Don.”

“Yeah.” Bradsen left Jon sitting beside the edge of the pit. Jon watched him move off, checking in with the researchers, seeing how things were going.

The smaller airlock on the far side of the dome from where he was sitting opened, and the figure of Darnell emerged alone. He took his time coming over to Jon, stopping to see what everyone was doing, but saying nothing to anyone. When he got to where Jon was, he just sat down.

“Damned crowded ‘n here,” said the old prospector.

“Yup,” said Jon, though it was far from actually being crowded.

Just then Duc came up, lugging his altered camera. It was an odd contraption, with the face of a standard camera poking out the front of a plastic casing the size of a loaf of bread, held in place with silver tape. In his other hand he had a shallow sealed box.

“Ready?” asked Jon.

“All set. I tried it out up on the station, and it more or less worked.”

“Well, then go ahead, give it a try.”

Duc nodded, a slight grin on his face. Setting up the camera on a handy crate to stabilize it, he took an exposure from the lip of the pit. Throwing a blanket over himself and the camera, he fussed around for a few moments. When he reappeared, he said “It’s pretty crude, I have to change the sheets of film by feel, so they aren’t ruined by light.”

“How long until the film is ready?”

Duc picked up the camera and made for the stairs down into the pit. “I’ll have to take it up to Titan Prime to develop it. I set up a makeshift darkroom in the bath of my quarters. With luck, we’ll have images later tonight, or maybe tomorrow.”

Jon watched the artist lug his equipment down into the pit, get it set up without getting in the way of the researchers. He took several more exposures, and was packing up everything when Jon saw Commander Navarr come in through the airlock. Navarr came in, glanced around, and walked straight over to Jon, taking time only to pop off the helmet of his suit.

He arrived, still dripping, in front of Jon and Darnell. “Can I have a word with you?”

Jon stood, glanced over at Sidwell, who was watching him with interest. “Sure. Uh,

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let's go over there next to the wall.”

Navarr shook his head. “Not necessary. He’ll hear of it soon enough.”

“What? What’s happened?”

“It’s on the nets back home. About the artifact. Someone posted it to the news services. Everyone knows about it.”