

Chapter Eleven

Jon sat on the large couch in Sidwell's home, the ghostly image of Palmira beside him. More than once, he started to reach over and stroke the cat absently, fortunately catching himself before either the expert or Darnell appeared to notice. The old man was sitting in a large chair across from him, content to be reading from some old book that Jon couldn't identify, the cover was so badly aged and faded.

Seth materialized, standing, at the other end of the couch. "Message in, Jon. Magurshak."

Jon nodded. "Give it to me."

Darnell looked up from his book, said nothing. Jon glanced at the prospector, then turned his attention to the message.

Theodore Magurshak had never looked quite so haggard in all the time Jon had known him. The tall, robust man seemed smaller somehow, and the appearance of age that he usually cultivated now hung about him like a baggy old coat: worn, stained and threadbare at the cuffs. "At least it's calm here. No panic in the streets yet. Everyone just seems sort of stunned. Jen Grant and her experts at the NSA say there's a high probability of at least limited outbreaks of violence in the near term, with potential for significant unrest over the next week or so."

Magurshak sighed. "I'd hoped that we would have had some time to figure out what the artifact was, and then slowly break the news. But . . .

"I've put all outside communications with Titan Prime and your team under the control of Susan Jacobs. There will be strict limitations imposed on even private communications for all personnel for the foreseeable future, and absolutely no discussion allowed between anyone there on site and any of the news outlets. We're going to manage the news releases on this end, after careful consideration of the consequences of any further information getting out. I'm not sure what good this will really do, given that the big news has already been dumped on the nets, but we want to try to keep things under control as much as possible.

"I wish we knew just what the hell happened to our security. NSA experts have gone over every transmission since we've learned of the thing," said Magurshak. "They've combed through every possible message looking for some sort of code or encryption. There's nothing. Obviously, we figure that it's the Edenists who released the information, but we can't figure out how they got it in the first place. The only conclusion that anyone can come to is that there is a mole somewhere on the station." Magurshak's eyes hardened. "I don't think I need to stress just what the ramifications of that are. If there's someone there who was willing to leak the information to the Edenists to begin with, there may be someone there who would be willing to take a more active role on their behalf. Navarr has responsibility for security there, and will coordinate with Jacob's staff. But watch your butt, Jon, and try not to take anyone or anything for granted. Magurshak out."

Jon looked around Sidwell's dome. The scene was calm, almost serene. The

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incongruity of it made him want to laugh. Sidwell looked up from his reading. “How bad is it?”

“Well, it isn’t good. But it isn’t awful, either. No violence. Not yet anyway.”

“Least there’s that t’ be thankful for,” said Sidwell in a low voice, almost as though he was talking to himself. Then louder he asked, “They figger out wha’ happened?”

“No. But they’re fairly sure it was the Edenists. Though why did they wait this long? More importantly, how did they find out in the first place?”

“Yep. That’s th’ question.” Darnell seemed to be very intent on it, thinking hard. Finally he just shook his head and said, “I ‘magine there’s a lot o’ turmoil back Earthside.”

“Yeah, sounds like it.”

“People don’ like bein’ woke up,” said the old man. “Never have.”

“Sorry?” Jon wondered if Sidwell was talking to himself, or what.

There was a long pause while the prospector chewed an unlit pipe in thought, looking away from Jon. Slowly he started nodding to himself, as though he had reached a decision. He looked over at Jon, and once again there was a glint to his eyes. This time, however, it didn’t just flash and disappear, but lingered. “Ever been t’ Wales?”

“Whales?” Jon was confused by the sudden change in the conversation.

“Wales. Western part of England. I spen’ some time there when I was younger.”

“Um, no. Never been there.”

“I knew a man, a Welshman. Lived ‘n a small inn at th’ base o’ a great waterfall, one of th’ most beautiful natural wonders ‘n that part o’ th’ world. He used t’ say that people ‘out there’ ‘n th’ real world was asleep. That they was cut off from th’ natural energy o’ th’ world ‘round them, wit’ all their jobs ‘n gadgets ‘n entertainment. He said that livin’ alone at th’ foot of th’ falls, way up a valley ‘n th’ middle of nowhere, was a good ‘prenticeship ‘n being awake.” Darnell shook his head, remembering. “People have gotten lulled inta sleep again. It’s been a long time since th’ flu. They ain’t gonna like bein’ woke up.”

“I’m not quite sure I follow you.”

Sidwell’s glint caught him in its fire, and held him there for a moment. “Anythin’ what comes along ‘n kicks people out o’ their complacency gets ‘em riled up, like smackin’ a hornet’s nest wit’ a stick.”

“Yeah,” nodded Jon. “That’s what the NSA expects. So, now everything will be clamped down for a while. Communications in and out of Titan Prime will be tightly controlled, other restrictions in place. Sorry if it disrupts your life any more than we already have.”

“No problem. Since I foun’ that artifact, even I remember how ‘t feels t’ be awake. An’ that’s a big change, since I spent so many years tryin’ t’ get t’ sleep.”

Jon paused. He sensed that this was a crucial moment. “Why?”

“Why’d I spend so long tryin’ t’ get t’ sleep?”

“Not exactly. I mean, from what I know, you’ve lead a very . . . ah . . . interesting life. First with the Israelis, then out to Mars, then here. You’ve been at the cutting edge of our movement out to the stars. Why do you consider that trying to get to sleep? Anyone

else would have considered it the grandest adventure one could ask for.”

Sidwell smiled, and the glint in his eyes did not waiver. “Well, when ya want t’ forget somethin’, ya try ‘n distract yerself wit’ th’ best things ya can come up wit’. I’ve never been much o’ one for usin’ really hard drugs, so I figgered that adrenaline was my best bet. Keepin’ alive all these years has helped take my mind off’n other things.”

“Like what?”

“I ain’t quite ready t’ say. But soon. I think I’ll be able t’ tell ya soon.” Sidwell set his book to the side, and slapped his legs. Palmira looked over from where she sat, head cocked slightly, studying him. He slapped his thighs again, and the ghost cat turned her head away, disinterested. He laughed, looked to Jon and asked, “Well, now wha’?”

“I guess we get back to work, try and learn all we can about the artifact. They’ll have to deal with the news back home best they can. But that’s not our problem.” Jon stood up, stretched. His muscles ached, and he was tired. “I’m going back over to the dome to see how they’re coming along with the unpacking, then probably back up to Titan Prime. I’ll need to go over some things with Susan Jacobs, now that all this has come up.”

Jon got up from the couch, went over and started to put on his environment suit.

“I’ll come wit’ ya.”

They entered the artifact dome through the small airlock, coming into a scene that was a lot more organized and quiet than Jon expected. Most of his team were gone, presumably back on the station. Bradsen’s team was busy with their equipment, so focused on what they were doing that there was no talk, nothing more than the sound of the air exchanger and noises given off by some of the equipment as it was being calibrated. In the relative silence Jon could hear the whisper of the artifact. He tried to ignore it, letting it slip past him without listening to it.

They got out of their suits, went over to the edge of the pit. Down in there, close beside the artifact, Bradsen was working with Feldman and Faris, as they set up what looked like an oversize mattress covered in dull gold foil. Across from it, with the artifact between, was another such mattress. Bradsen looked up, nodded briefly, and went back to the task at hand. Feldman noticed Bradsen’s movement, glanced over his shoulder to see what had caused it. “Oh, hi.”

“Hey,” said Jon. Sidwell just nodded down to the man.

“Resonance field detectors,” said the physicist. “If there’s anything like a projected energy matrix going on inside that thing, we should be able to pick it up.”

Without looking up, Bradsen added, “Don’t worry, it’s completely passive. We won’t start any sort of active scanning until we eliminate all the passive options.”

Somewhat annoyed, Jon tried to keep his voice from showing it. “Good. Everything else going well?”

Bradsen stopped what he was doing for a moment, examined his work, and seemed to be satisfied with it. He looked up at Jon. “Seems to, in spite of that scare we had earlier with the news from home.”

“Well, you know how I feel about that,” said Jon. “I just wanted to come over and let you know, I’ve heard from Magurshak, updating me on the situation. Communications back home will be very limited for the next few days, until they sort everything out. Official business only, though they hope to allow personal messages again soon.”

This seemed to make Bradsen happy. “Good. That’ll provide fewer distractions for us.”

Sidwell scoffed. “Huh. I was jus’ tellin’ Jon here that people need more reasons t’ think for themselves, not fewer.”

“We’re professionals,” said Bradsen, frowning. “Some of the best researchers available. We’re perfectly able to think for ourselves, thank you Mr. Sidwell.”

“Think? You call bein’ mesmerized by too much data thinkin’? That ain’t thinkin’, it’s jus’ lettin’ the accumulation o’ information pass for knowledge.” Sidwell turned in disgust and walked away, going back over toward the airlock.

“Keep him outta here,” growled Bradsen, annoyed.

“Nope.” Jon shook his head. “Can’t do it. We’re on his claim, and have agreed to let him have free passage.”

“Change the agreement. He’s going to be in the way.”

Jon looked down into the pit, studying the man. “I wouldn’t, even if I thought you were right.”

“He has no respect for authority. I’ve seen his file.”

“I’ll agree with that,” said Jon. “But maybe this time he’s more the authority on the matter than you are.”

“Him? He doesn’t know a thing about this level of scientific research. He’s just an old prospector who stumbled onto something. Now’s he’s using it to get what he can.”

“Perhaps. But it seems to me that maybe knows a hell of a lot more about living than just about anyone else I’ve ever met.”

“I’m not concerned with that. I just want to make sure we get all the information about this artifact that we can, in the shortest possible time,” said Bradsen as he turned to the next task before him.

Jon waited, and watched. Finally he said to Bradsen’s back, “Come up later and let’s have a drink. I can brief you on developments from Earth.”

Bradsen didn’t turn around, or say anything, just nodded. Jon followed Sidwell, and left the dome.

“Notice anything other than normal fatigue?”

Jon shifted a shoulder, felt his muscles ache. “No.”

Tops looked over a bank of equipment at him. “Nothing?”

Jon thought. Other than the slight whisper he heard occasionally when around the artifact, he’d had no unusual fainting spells, or visions, or whatever the hell they were since she had run him through an extensive series of tests. “Sorry. Nothing. Why? Should I?”

She squinted down at her equipment, frowned. “No. Not as far as I can tell, anyway.”

“You sound almost disappointed.” He smiled. “Looking for something that’ll secure your place in medical history? Want me to go ask the artifact to turn me into a zombie?”

For a moment he wasn’t sure whether she caught his attempt at humor, she seemed so engrossed in her work. Then she looked up, her eyes seemed to focus on him, and the realization of what he said crept across her face. A smile and a slight laugh. “No, that’s . . . that’s OK. But I have to admit, I am puzzled. It’s like there’s nothing out of the ordinary at all. It doesn’t seem to matter in the slightest whether you’re in contact with the artifact or not, whether you hear that whisper you describe, or whether you faint and have one of these visions. The only thing that I can pick up in your data has been just a small increase in adrenal activity, which can easily be accounted for by being in such an extraordinary situation.”

“But that’s good, isn’t it?”

“Maybe. I suppose.” She paused. She pulled a stool around from behind the equipment, and sat facing him. “But I’ve done a more comprehensive analysis of others who have had close contact with the artifact, and who have reported hearing the whisper or feeling a little woozy. And there’s nothing unusual with any of them, either. It’s weird. I would not have been surprised to find something anomalous.”

“Like what?”

“Like a serotonin imbalance, depleted energy stores at the cellular level due to over-excitation, some subtle change in an obscure neurotransmitter, something. The most anyone has shown has been a slight increase in adrenalin, like yours.”

“What’s it mean?”

“It’s like there’s nothing there.”

“In the data?”

“Anywhere. It’s like none of you have come into contact with anything in the least bit unusual, certainly not something that is able to manifest auditory hallucinations, feelings of vertigo, and outright loss of consciousness.”

Jon nodded. “So, is it doing something below the threshold of your equipment to detect?”

Tops seemed to be at a loss. She shrugged. “Presumably. I don’t know what else to make of it.”

He waited, watching her.

She stood up, looked at her equipment in frustration. “If there’s something there, I should be able to detect it. But as far as my equipment is concerned, there’s nothing.”

“Just like the artifact itself,” thought Jon out loud.

She turned from her equipment and looked at him. “What was that?”

“Sorry, I was just echoing your frustration.”

“Yeah, but maybe you’ve hit on something. You guys came out here because all the available sensing equipment on the station wasn’t able to detect the artifact, right? No images on video, nothing?”

“Yeah. But how can . . .”

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“I don’t know,” she interrupted. “But it might be connected. It’s worth exploring.”

“How?”

“Give me some time to think about that.”

“Sure.” Again he flexed his sore shoulder, and stood. She was watching him, eyes somewhat narrowed. He smiled again, said “It’s OK, just a little muscular ache from unloading the shuttles down on Titan. I’ll work it out.”

She nodded. There was a pause. “So, what’s your take on things back home? All we’ve heard here on the station has been that there was news of the artifact on the nets, and for security reasons communications would be somewhat more restricted. Salim was very nice in how he presented it, saying that it was just a temporary step, but I can read between the lines.”

Jon thought about it, decided that there was no reason not to tell her what little he knew. “Magurshak’s worried. The NSA experts are expecting violence from some of the less stable groups, and depending on how that plays out, it could cascade. News like this is certain to shock people.”

“No surprise.”

“Yeah, really. More importantly for us, there might be a threat here.”

She looked taken aback. “Why?”

“Well, because someone here probably leaked the information to the Edenists back home, who then decided to put it on the nets.”

She nodded, slowly. “So that means that there’s someone here who sympathizes with them.”

“At least on some level. Supposedly everyone here has been vetted, but . . .”

Again, she nodded. “Like I said before, what appears in an official file on someone out here tends to be less complete than the bureaucrats and spooks would like. There’s lots of room for someone to have slipped by.”

“Yeah. I think that maybe the NSA’s over reacting, but it doesn’t hurt to play it safe.”

“Right.”

“Look, I need to go meet with Susan and Salim, go over all this and find out what they think of the situation here on the station. But think about that mystery with the artifact, and let me know if you come up with something. I can probably help smooth communications back Earthside, if you need some research done or anything.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

That evening, as he soaked some of the soreness out of his muscles in one of the hot tubs in the station’s spa, Seth appeared.

“Jon, Don Bradsen is back on the station, and says that he’ll be ready to meet with you to discuss matters after he gets a shower and change of clothes.”

“Interesting that he just left a message rather than tell me himself, isn’t it?”

Seth’s expression didn’t change. “The evidence would suggest that he finds your

supervision of his management of the researchers irksome.”

“No kidding.” Jon sighed. “Don and I usually get along reasonably well, but that’s because we usually don’t have much overlap of responsibilities. He’s a smart and driven man who doesn’t like anyone looking over his shoulder.”

Seth nodded, said nothing.

Jon thought about it for a moment. “Ask him to meet me for a drink at that large bar near the docking area. Tell him that I’ll be there in about a half hour, and he can join me when it’s convenient. Maybe a less-formal chance to talk would be better, give us a chance to clear the air a little.”

“It does seem to be a prudent course,” agreed Seth.

“OK. Do that. And give him the full feed of Magurshak’s message to me earlier. Say that we won’t be able to talk in the bar except in general terms, and I want him to have that information, so that he knows what’s going on.”

“Will do. Anything else?”

“Not at the moment.” The expert disappeared, and Jon started to get out of the tub, then something else did occur to him, and he paused. “Seth?”

Instantly, Seth was back. “Yes?”

“While I was talking with Sidwell, waiting to hear from Magurshak, he told me about some trip he had made to Wales and a man he knew there. Said this fellow was an innkeeper or something at the foot of a great falls. Evidently this made a significant impression on him, and I think it might be insightful to know more.”

“How so?”

“I’m not sure. But see if there are any extant records about Sidwell’s trips into that part of the world. It’d have to have been a long time ago, maybe even pre-flu.”

“Records that far back are likely to be spotty.”

“Yeah, I know. But find what you can. And see if you can get me some general information on the area, maybe even something on this waterfall. He didn’t give me a name, but said it was one of the best known scenic areas of the country.”

“I’ll see what I can come up with.”

“Thanks.” Seth vanished again, and Jon climbed out the tub.

The bar had a good crowd, but Jon was able to find a somewhat private booth off in a corner. As he waited, watching the door for Bradsen, he listened to the singing of some of the spacers. He recognized some of the members of the crew of the ship he had come in on, and figured that others were from the Planck. Between rounds of song, he overheard parts of the general conversation of the bar, mostly people sharing rumors about the news of the artifact, and what it meant.

Bradsen came into the bar and looked around, seeing Jon and nodding before making his way over.

Jon stood up and offered his hand to the older man. Over the sound of the vocal music, he said, “Thanks for making the time, Don.”

Bradsen took the proffered hand, shook it solidly but without enthusiasm or warmth. He looked at Jon coolly, but was neutral in tone as he said, "Yeah."

They sat, Don uplinked his drink order. "I got the message from Magurshak. Thanks."

Jon shrugged. "Thought you should hear it directly."

Bradsen's drink arrived. Taking a sip, he looked levelly at Jon. "So, what's up?"

Jon picked up his own glass, swirled the liquor and ice while looking down into it. Then he looked up, met Bradsen's gaze. "Well, we've gotten off to a bad start here. I wanted to see if we could correct that."

Eyes narrowing, Bradsen said nothing, just watched Jon warily.

Jon held up a hand. "Relax, I don't blame you for this. It's just an extraordinary situation, and we're both a little out of our element."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Just a truce. Give us both a little time to get settled into it. We get along well enough back home, I figure we can do the same here if we give ourselves a chance."

Don looked at him, sat back and sipped his drink in thought. Slowly, he nodded. "I'm OK with that."

"Good. I'll stay out of your way, let you and your people get on with your jobs."

Bradsen said nothing, looked down into his drink for a long moment. Looking up, his face was somewhat less hard set. "All right. And I'll try not to flinch whenever Sidwell comes into the dome."

Jon grinned just a little. "Well, he is a bit of an old coot, I'll give you that. But we are stuck with him. And I have this suspicion that he has some insight we'll need before this is all over."

The music died down, and there was a break as the singers ordered more drinks, got up to stretch their legs, shuffle seating arrangements, and go to the bathroom. As one of the ship's crew members went by, he glanced over at Jon and Don sitting in their corner booth. The man paused in his errand, and came over.

Don looked up and saw the man. There was a vague recognition in his eyes.

The spacer stopped beside their table, said "Hey, doc. Ryan Marsh from the Planck. I helped get all your equipment secure in the hold."

Bradsen stood, shook the man's hand, nodding. "Right. Thanks for your help."

"Hey, is what they say true? About some alien thing down on Titan? Is that why you guys brought all that scientific equipment?"

Bradsen smiled a thin smile. "Well, I can't really say, you understand. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk with people about it."

Marsh shook his head. "Not me. I keep my mouth shut. When I heard about the news, I put two and two together, figured I should just keep quiet."

"Good man."

"Thanks. Oh, and hey, there was still something in the ship that came up with your stuff. Fair-sized crate. You guys missing anything?"

Don Bradsen knitted his brows together. "No, I'm sure we got everything. You

certain it was for us?”

Marsh looked confused. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure. It was loaded with your stuff, and all the rest of the cargo was just routine supplies like we run up here regularly. This was different, crated like your equipment. You might want to check.”

Don glanced at Jon, back at Marsh. “Uh, yeah, we’ll see about that. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Well, hey, I’ve gotta hit the head. Good talkin’ with ya, doc.”

The man disappeared. Don asked Jon, “Can you have Seth look over the manifest, see if there was anything we missed?”

“Sure. Seth?”

The expert appeared, standing beside the table, and nodded to both Jon and Don.

“Seth, check our inventory and see if there was anything left on the Planck that was supposed to be shuttled down to Titan with the rest of our supplies.”

His answer was instant. “No, all equipment and supplies were accounted for.”

Bradsen spoke. “Was there anything in the manifest that wasn’t accounted for? Something that was forgotten, or left on board accidentally from the previous cargo that was displaced when we required the ship for our use?”

Again, the answer was immediate. “No. I have checked all the records, and consulted with the ship’s experts. Nothing was left behind. As you know, mass is a critical element in navigational calculations. Anything substantial that was on there would have had to be included in those calculations. There’s always some room for uncertainty, but anything significant would have been noticed immediately.”

Jon looked at Don. “Was there anything else that was sent up, besides routine supplies for the station? Maybe it was just stowed with our stuff?”

There was a slight pause this time. “There isn’t anything listed on the manifest. But Jon . . .”

“Yes?”

“There is a gap in the data record.”

“What do you mean? Someone has altered the manifest?”

“I didn’t detect any alteration. But after consulting with the ship’s experts, there is a discrepancy between the mass of the items listed and the mass used for navigational calculations. A significant discrepancy.”

“What do the ship’s experts have to say about that?”

“Well, that’s the thing. All of them are unable to account for the discrepancy.”

Jon sighed. Bradsen looked at him, again through narrowed eyes. “Meaning that someone has changed the record. Someone with enough savvy to do it in such a way that even the ship’s experts didn’t know it.”

Seth slowly nodded his head. “Apparently so.”

Bradsen shook his head. “This isn’t good.”

“Not at all,” said Jon, finishing his drink. “Not at all.”

“Shall I inform Commander Navarr?” asked the expert.

“By all means. Tell him I’d like to meet with him later, tonight if possible,

otherwise in the morning.”

“Done.”

“Well, it’s been a while.”

Jon chuckled slightly. “Oh, just a couple of days. It just seems like it’s been longer, with all that’s been going on.”

Gish held the door open to their family suite, and Jon entered, nodding to the trooper who stood guard outside the apartment. Looking around, he saw evidence of the girl everywhere. It wasn’t messy in the main room, but it was clear that there was a young child in residence.

“Have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, thanks.” Jon parked himself on the couch. “Chu Ling asleep already?”

Gish nodded. “Yes. She has been for some time.”

“Too bad, I’d hoped to see her. Everything going OK?”

“She’s fine. She’s spent a lot of time with ‘Doctor Tops’, as she calls her, these last few days.”

“Yeah, I know. Tops is trying to unravel the secret of her genetic manipulation.”

“As she’s explained to me.” Gish looked at Jon with something of a quizzical eye. “Is there something that I should know?”

Jon smiled. “No. I didn’t come by with any real information. I just wanted to say hello, see how she was doing here on the station.”

“Well, with everything that’s happened, she’s been curious where everyone has been. But we’ve mostly been concentrating on her education. And she’s been all over the station, going on long explorations with me, or Johan, or Duc.”

“Duc?”

“Yeah, she’s taken quite a liking to him. Having someone around who looks a little more like her has been comforting, I think. And he enjoys the freshness in how she sees the world.”

“Good.” Jon nodded, paused. “So, you’ve heard?”

“I got your post about it.” Gish touched the back of his hand, Jon felt the security screen intensify. “Any further news?”

“No. But Magurshak’s concerned. And it raises a lot of questions, potential problems.”

“Like Chu Ling.” The rumpled little scientist looked down at the floor.

“Well, nobody has said so to me yet, but I’m sure they’re thinking it back on Earth.”

Gish said nothing for a long moment, looked up and met Jon’s eyes briefly before looking away again. “And what have you been thinking?”

“I’ve been thinking that I’d like to know a little more about how you came across Chu Ling.”

Gish frowned, but didn’t look up. “I’ve told you already.”

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“Yeah, and I let it pass because of who you are. And that was before we knew what she was. But the coincidence of her finding you just before we discovered the artifact is a little much, in light of the fact that someone told the Edenists very early on. So, tell me again, but this time let’s get a little closer to the truth, OK?”

Gish stared at the floor, his face pained. But he said nothing.

“C’mon, Robert, better out with it. Tell me before the NSA people start breathing down your neck.”

“They already have.”

“Eh?”

Gish sighed deeply. Without looking up, he said, “They already have. Navarr’s been by to see me already this evening.”

Jon nodded. “OK, so what did you tell him?”

Gish looked up, the pain evident in his eyes. “That I knew she was a clone from the start.”

Jon was stunned. He almost stammered “Oh? How’s that?”

“Friends got in contact with me a few days before we knew anything about the artifact, said they had a small girl they needed to hide.”

Jon was puzzled. “Why would they do that?”

Gish’s eyes filled with tears. “They know my . . . my history. Asked me to help, to hide the girl.” He wiped at his eyes. “She was smuggled out of China, away from an organ farm. At least that’s what they told me.”

“Whoa.”

Gish nodded. “These friends have managed to rescue a number of children this way, and on occasion, I’ve helped. But it was clear from the start that this girl was special. What I told you about her playing games with me was true . . . and it tipped me off that there was something different about her. No one goes to the trouble to clone someone of such superior intelligence, just to use them as replacement parts.”

“So you were stuck with her when we got in contact with you about this mission.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t very well abandon her. But I also couldn’t tell you about how I had her, or what I knew about her.”

It was Jon’s turn to nod. Had the ‘underground railroad’ that Gish was a part of come to light, with all that it implied about cloning facilities in China, he would have never been allowed to participate in the investigation of the artifact. The NSA would have insisted on keeping him Earthside for debriefing, until they traced back all the links and had proof of the clandestine cloning. “So it was just coincidence that you had her when we found out about the artifact.”

Gish started to speak, but paused, took a deep breath. “I’m not so sure.”

Jon just looked at him, waited.

“She is so . . . special . . . so different from the others my friends have helped, that I have to wonder about the timing.”

“I’m sure Navarr agrees.”

“Yeah.”

“OK,” Jon nodded as he stood. “Let’s keep this quiet for now. Finding out that she was a clone was enough of a shock for the others, and with everything else, I don’t want to feed anyone’s paranoid fantasies. Not until we get some solid information. I’ll talk with Navarr.”

Gish also stood up, looked him straight in the eye. “Thanks.”

As Jon reached out to open the door, he turned to look at Gish. “I wish you’d told me.”

Gish nodded, said nothing as Jon left.

“Jon? It’s Commander Navarr.”

“Thanks Seth,” replied Jon as he got up and went to the door. Opening it he said, “Come on in.”

Navarr entered as Jon turned up the security screen. “Drink?”

“No, thanks. I still have too much to do tonight.” Navarr took a seat.

“Right. So, what’s your thought on that cargo mystery?”

Navarr shrugged. “Expertly done. There’s no trace of it in any of the records. Whatever it was, there’s no track to follow.”

“You know, that scares me.”

“Doesn’t make me too happy, either,” said the commander. “According to the crewman, it was a crate at least a meter square and more than two long. That’s big enough to hold just about anything.”

“Record of it being loaded back on Earth?”

“Dunno yet. I should hear back within the hour. But I’d be surprised if whoever wiped the records on this end forgot about taking care of things back there.”

“Yeesh,” said Jon.

“No kidding.” There was a pause. “Look, it could’ve been something we don’t need to be worried about at all. Maybe a little free lance smuggling by a member of the crew, something like that.”

Jon looked at him. “You don’t believe that.”

“No, not really.”

Jon shook his head. “So, now what?”

“Well, I’ve got Salim going over station monitors, see if there’s anything that got picked up on video that might tell us something. But don’t hold your breath.”

“You know, I’m getting sick of this cloak and dagger stuff.”

Navarr nodded. “So, I understand you went to talk with Gish.”

Jon looked at him, curious.

Navarr held his hands up. “No, I’m not tracking you. I asked Gish to let me know if anyone else came around asking questions.”

Jon nodded slightly. “OK.”

“I planned on telling you about our security concerns, and what I found out from him. Evidently, you figured it out for yourself.”

“Well, Gish is an odd little man, but even he wouldn’t just pick up a stray like he told me initially. I let it slide because I wanted him on this expedition, and figured that it really wouldn’t hurt matters. He wanted the girl along, that was his business. When news of her being a clone came in, I almost confronted him about it, but figured that it could wait.”

“Yeah, that was pretty much my decision, too. My superiors weren’t entirely happy about it, but let me have my way. That changed when we found out the Edenists, or someone, knew early on about the artifact, and intensified when the news hit the nets. I was told to ‘discuss’ the matter with him.”

“Makes sense. So, what did you find out?”

“Same thing he told you, according to Gish: that he has been part of a rescue effort to get these clones out of China, but that he realized there was something unique about Chu Ling.”

“If ‘unique’ can be applied to a clone.”

“Right. Anyway, he didn’t want to tell you the truth, because he knew that security demands would necessitate his staying on Earth during this mission. And, for someone who has suffered decades of professional ridicule for his assertion that we weren’t alone in the universe, that was too much to ask. So, he made up his story, hoped you’d buy it.”

“Yeah, that jibes with what he told me.” Jon looked at Navarr. “So, what have they found back home about all this?”

“Sorry, again I’m waiting to hear. But I doubt I’ll get much of an explanation, since I don’t really ‘need to know’.” Navarr shrugged. “You get used to it.”

Jon frowned, but wasn’t surprised. “If they can make a connection to the Edenists, will they at least tell us that?”

“Probably. Or anything else that may have some bearing on our situation here. Not knowing the full story is frustrating, but they really are pretty good about telling you whatever you need to know. If there’s something that comes up that’s relevant, they’ll let me know.”

“And you’ll tell me?”

“Unless I get specific orders not to.” Navarr looked apologetic. “Sorry, that’s the way it is.”

Jon nodded. “Anything else?”

“One thing: they’re sending another ship up. A large contingent of additional troops.”

“Well, I suppose that’s reasonable, given everything that’s going on. What, about eight days?”

“Maybe less. But we’re on our own until then.”

It was late, and Navarr had been gone for a while. Jon had taken care of some routine office work which he had been neglecting, and was tired, but couldn’t fall asleep. Propping himself in bed, he called up the cards, and started the ritual of playing them, letting

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his mind relax and wander. Slowly, the concerns of the past days melted away like glaciers, revealing the underlying beauty of the landscape, hard and still cold, but alive. His awareness started to flow, reaching past the immediate pool of now into something broader, deeper. This was the state he wished for, the point where he could start to anticipate the next card to appear, until they stretched out before him in a random but foreseen pattern, numbers dancing in a long chain.

Then something unusual happened.

He heard the whisper, the song of the artifact. The numbers slowly fell into step with it, moving in the rhythm of its voice. And as they danced, they started to take on depth, dimensionality, becoming solid and tangible. Slowly they moved, still dancing, but forming a structure, something that he could recognize vaguely, but couldn't identify. Then it came into focus, and he realized why he couldn't identify it at first: it was the swirl of the burl of tholin which floated beneath the artifact, somehow moving as though fluid. And there, reflecting in the sheen of the burl, was a face. Not his face, though it should have been. But the face of Darnell Sidwell, as a young man, smiling at him.

And he heard the voice he had heard so often. "Welcome back, Jon."

"Back where?"

"Look around."

Jon realized that the burl of tholin was indeed floating there under the artifact, in the middle of the large cave. It cast a light, just as before. But this time, as he turned to see the second shadow on the wall, he could only see his own. "Where are you?"

"Where I always am. But you've just started to be able to realize it."

He looked back into the pale blue mirror of the tholin burl. Again, he saw Darnell's face. "What is this place? Why do I keep coming back here?"

The face reflected back at him was thoughtful. After a moment, it said, "It is the center."

"Center? Of what?"

Again, there was that pause. "It is the center. The place of both light and dark. Your center."

"My center?"

"For now, at least." The face frowned slightly. "It's what you wanted, isn't it? The freedom in the flow? The awareness of a larger now? You're not asleep this time. You're here. In the center."

Jon thought about it, felt a strange tingling climb up his spine, with a wave of goosebumps spreading down his arms and legs. And with that distraction he could feel the awareness, the flow, start to crack and break up. "No, wait, I'm not done . . ."

"I'll be here when you return," said the voice, now growing distant as the moment faded. In the slightest whisper, the whisper of the artifact's song, he heard it say as he lost consciousness and fell asleep, "I always am."