

Chapter Twelve

“Morning, Jon.”

Jon opened his eyes, checked the time by reflex. It was 7:00. “What do you have for me, Seth?”

“A couple of things, once you’re awake enough.”

Jon nodded. He felt a little bleary, but in a good way, the way he felt after a very deep and healing sleep. “Give me a few minutes to get a shower and get going, but tell me at least that it’s good news.”

“It’s good news.”

Jon chuckled lightly. “Seriously?”

“Yes.”

Jon went through his morning rituals in just a few minutes. As he was getting dressed, he said, “OK, give it to me.”

“I found the reference that you asked me about regarding Mr. Sidwell and Wales.”

“Oh, really? That’s faster than I expected.”

“Well, as it turns out, there are quite a few scenic waterfalls in Wales, but only one that had an inn where someone lived during that time period. I’ve uploaded some images. Would you like to see them?”

“Sure.”

The first image that filled his sight was of a great waterfall, cascading over the top of a cliff in the middle of a shallow ‘V’ between two higher hills. The stream was narrow, white with spray around the edges. Oaks and pines grew on the sides of the hills near the falls, and there was some kind of archway of rock about two-thirds of the way down. Near the foot was an old iron pedestrian bridge crossing the stream.

Seth’s voice narrated. “It’s called Pistyll Rheadr, one of the ‘seven natural wonders of Wales’. The drop you see there is about 75 meters.”

The next image was closer to the falls, taken, Jon guessed, from the bridge. Now he could clearly see the wonderful stone archway, and realized that the initial drop of the falls ended in a pool just behind that, then the water spilled out under the arch for another significant drop into the main pool below. From this vantage, the spray and splash of the water glimmered in the sunlight, coating nearby rocks, feeding the ancient moss that grew there. A path was clearly visible to the right-hand side of the falls, leading up the side of the mountain.

“This next image is taken from the top of the falls. The red structure you see below the falls on the left-hand side is the inn. I have more images, if you wish to see them.”

As Seth spoke, Jon saw the wide, ‘U’ shaped valley open out before him, the falls tumbling down and away in the right foreground. The hills on either side of the valley were lightly wooded here and there, but mostly given over to pasture. On the left-hand side of the image, a narrow blacktop road wound down the valley, echoing the stream’s flow. And there, as Seth said, was the inn.

“No, thanks, Seth, I think that’s enough. Pretty place.”

“So I understand.”

“I don’t see anything particularly noteworthy about it. But it sure seemed to make an impression on Darnell.”

“I find no record of his having been there.”

“No surprise. Well, I’ll just ask him about it. I need to talk with him about some other things, anyway.” The image faded. “So, what else?”

“A report on our progress in analyzing all transmissions since the artifact was discovered.”

“Oh? Found something?”

“No. Salim and I both have conducted independent investigations of all communications, both the standard dish array and the monitored relay satellites, just in case someone decided to use a secondary system. I’m convinced that there’s nothing there.”

Jon raised an eyebrow. “That’s pretty definite.”

“I have been over the data. Salim has been over it. It has been thoroughly studied by the snoop-experts at the NSA. There simply are no coded messages that weren’t already logged in the entire time-frame.”

“Did you check any communications that weren’t to Earth, maybe to the other colonies or even ships?”

“We’ve been over it all. There’s nothing there.”

Jon shook his head. There had to be some explanation. “Damn. I had hoped you’d find something that the others missed.”

“You put too much faith in me sometimes, Jon.”

“Maybe.” Jon frowned. “Tell you what, I want you to approach this in a completely different way. If you have determined there wasn’t a coded transmission sent, then there wasn’t. But the news of the artifact got to Earth somehow. Turn the problem around: using available resources on the station, how would you send a message? Come up with all the possible answers, then eliminate any that wouldn’t have been feasible in the time allotted, or which would have been readily noticed.”

“Understood. This will take some time.”

“Yeah. Let me know when you have your possibilities ready, and then we’ll go through them.”

“I should have them ready for you sometime this afternoon, depending on how much help Salim can give me. He knows the station’s capabilities better than I do.”

“OK. Let me know.” Jon thought for a moment. “What else?”

“Nothing. Though it is time for you to meet with Dr. Klee to discuss Martin Heidegger.”

“Thanks. Tell him I’m on my way.”

Johan Klee was a fastidious man, Jon could tell that from the way everything was arranged just so in his quarters. Bed made, clothes neat and professional, personal effects

all put away or carefully lined up on the night stand. Nothing was out of place.

“Thank you for meeting with me.” Jon said as he sipped the coffee that Klee had waiting for him.

“It is a pleasure. I have not felt as though I have had much to do with our mission so far. If you have questions that I can help you answer, then I am happy to do so.”

“You’ve been a big help, both with your contributions to our general conversations, and all you’ve done to help Chu Ling.”

“You are too kind.” Klee smiled, sipped his own coffee. “Now, about this business with Martin Heidegger. I have read the text that your expert Seth has provided. In both the original German and in the English. But I will confess that my Greek is rusty, and I cannot say that I followed all the subtleties of his argument.”

“Doctor Klee, all the Greek was beyond my understanding. But I’m not sure that is too important. I had a hard enough time with just the English version.”

Klee nodded, his white head bobbing up and down. “Yes. The German philosophers of that time tended to write that way. It is not easy to understand.”

“He’s talking about God, isn’t he? About that eternal light? Even though he tries to work around the normal Christian interpretations, isn’t that what he is getting at? All this business about Heraclitus saying ‘How can one hide himself before that which never sets?’”

“I think you are correct, to an extent. Heidegger was trying to establish that the standard interpretations of Fragment B 16 had been colored by that theological perspective. But I think that he goes past that in looking at what Heraclitus actually wrote. Remember, this essay was part of a book about how the Greeks invented philosophy, and they weren’t monotheists, let alone Christians.”

“OK, but isn’t Heidegger coming out of that tradition?”

“Yes, but he was aware of this. Hence the convoluted language, and the desire to outline each previous interpretation of Fragment B 16 and move beyond it, before seeking to provide his own interpretation.”

Jon sighed. “OK, granted. But what is his final interpretation? I admit, I read the essay three times, and my head was spinning so much by the end each time that I couldn’t keep anything straight.”

Johan paused, studied his almost empty cup in thought. Finally he looked to Jon and asked, “Why did you decide to look at this essay in the first place?”

“Because Seth said that the text fit with a search I had him do on a phrase I remembered from one of my ‘visions’.”

“And this phrase was?”

“That which emerges from darkness gives definition to the light.”

“Interesting.” Klee stroked his goatee. “Interesting, indeed. I can certainly understand why this text came up in a search, even though I don’t believe that particular phrase appears in the essay.”

“Yeah, I wondered about that, as I read it and reread it. The phrase sounds more like Zen than anything. You know, the light must have darkness to give it definition, the whole duality of the universe thing.”

“Remember again what it is that Heidegger is writing about: the development of awareness on the part of the Greeks.”

“I don’t follow.”

“He explores what is said and what is meant by the fragment, with all his talk about self-concealment and the never-setting light. But he comes around to talking about presence, how a thing becomes present in the world. More specifically, how men and gods are themselves presencing through the light that is within them, how they are alight just by their very nature.”

Jon shook his head. “You lost me.”

Klee squinted at him. “The gods, and man, are luminous, in Heraclitus’ view. Hence they can never be concealed from themselves. For Heidegger, this is the perfect summation of awareness: because they are aware, they cannot help but become aware of their awareness.”

“OK, so how is that significant? How does it apply to my phrase, or to the artifact?”

“I think it is like your Zen, but goes further. Rather than just the duality of light and darkness, there is the ability to perceive and define light and darkness. There is awareness. There is what Heidegger calls ‘presencing’. Because without the presence of that awareness, the definitions of light and darkness are meaningless.”

“Yeah, I think I see it.” Jon nodded. “The ‘center’ of both light and darkness.”

“That’s as good an analogy as any, I suppose.”

Jon set his cup down, stood and shook Klee’s hand. “Thanks. I need to give it some more thought, but you’ve got me on the right path.”

“Jon?”

“Yes, Seth?” said Jon, glancing up from his notepad to see the expert standing there.

“Duc Ng is on his way over. I told him you could meet with him.”

“That’s fine. Thanks.” Jon didn’t have long to wait, for just a moment later there was a knock on his door.

“Come in,” yelled Jon.

“Bad news,” said Duc Ng, once he had come into Jon’s room.

“Didn’t work?” asked Jon, but he could tell from the artist’s face that it hadn’t.

“No, didn’t work. I developed the film last night.”

“Nothing?”

“Well, not exactly. I did get some images, but the artifact isn’t in any of them.”

“Let’s see.”

Duc handed over a stack of photographs he had made, thin sheets of stiff plastic with a photo emulsion. The black and white images were roughly circular, and there were significant irregularities in a number of them. In the photos Jon could make out occasional pieces of equipment, sometimes a blurry image of someone moving. There were a couple of good shots of the burl of tholin. But in none of them could he see anything which might be the artifact.

He looked up at Duc. "What do you think?"

"I guess I go try again."

Jon nodded in agreement. "Yeah, we want to be sure."

"Well, I have already tested the camera. Made up some more film and tried it again last night, after I saw these. It's not great, but it works."

"No doubt. I didn't mean we had to be sure about the camera."

"What then?"

"I've been reading something . . ." Jon thought for a moment, checked his notepad.

"Yeah, here it is: 'Concealment here defines the way in which a man should be present among others.'"

"What's that from?"

"Martin Heidegger's Aletheia essay."

Duc looked a little puzzled. "Heidegger? Wasn't he some sort of philosopher or something?"

"Exactly."

"Why you reading him?"

"Long story, but it seemed to be connected with my dreams, or visions, or whatever." Jon looked at Duc. "And speaking of visions, you feel up to opening the doors of perception?"

Duc smiled. "Always, man."

"OK. Maybe later today or tomorrow we can turn you loose with the artifact, see if your senses can pick up something that the camera can't."

"But how can that be?"

"I dunno. But all of us can see it, some of us can hear it. Whether or not the machines can detect it, it's there."

Duc nodded, pulled his hat down a little on his forehead. "Right. I'll take the necessary items down with me when I go down to attempt the camera again."

"Just wait until I say so. I want to make sure this is a controlled experiment. Got it?"

"Got it."

It was late morning by the time the shuttle touched down. The pilot, a man about his own age, grumbled as he brought the shuttle to a bumpy landing. "Sorry about that. Damned winter weather. And this gravity field just makes things worse. Watch yourself out there."

"Thanks," said Jon, helping Ng with the bulky container that held the makeshift camera.

It was worse, he could see that the moment the airlock cycled and the door opened. The usual dull orange fog of hydrocarbons was thicker, and as he stepped out, a fine mist started to form on the surface of his visor. Freezing ethane, mixed with the usual precipitate of tholin.

Titan had a ‘year’ of sixteen days, as it circled around Saturn. Variations in the amount of solar radiation it received while in orbit caused climatic shifts on the moon, creating a simple sort of weather. The ‘summer’ period was warmer, and relatively drier, with little or no precipitation. The eight days of winter were wetter, with frequent showers of ethane, or even a freezing mist of the stuff. And the pilot was right: Sidwell’s AG field was making the usually light mist more substantive, almost like a freezing drizzle of sludge. It was a real mess.

“Let’s get over to the dome. I don’t want to be outside in this junk any longer than necessary,” said Jon.

“I’m with ya,” agreed Ng, looking around. “Wow, I knew that this happened here, but I didn’t know it was so thick.”

“Yeah, the AG field makes it worse. Spend much time out here, and you can get covered over by the stuff, your suit’s ability to clean itself off overwhelmed. Spend enough time in it, you can get buried.”

“Ugh.”

They entered the dome at the small airlock, taking extra time to wash off the accumulated ethane-tholin ice. Stepping inside the dome, Jon could hear the whisper of the artifact, stronger now than it had been previously when he was this far from it. With an effort, he pushed it back from his awareness, promising it and himself that he would pay attention to it once he had taken care of some other matters.

There were a fair number of people in the dome, all intent on one chore or another. Don Bradsen glanced up from where he was helping with some piece of equipment on the far edge of the pit, and nodded in a more or less friendly manner. Jon helped Ng get his camera out of the small crate it was in, then let the artist go about his business of getting it set up.

Jackie Gates came up out of the pit to meet him. “Morning.”

“Morning. How’s it going?”

Jackie nodded her head with some satisfaction. “OK. Feldman and Faris know their shit. That goofy-looking sensor bank they have on either side of the artifact should pick up any projected energy coming from the artifact. If something in there is manipulating space in any way similar to how we do it, we should find out.”

“Good. How long until it’s ready?”

“They finished calibrations earlier this morning. We’ve just run the first series of sweeps, fairly broadband. Nothing there, but that’s what I would expect. Manipulation of gel is a very delicate matter, even for us, and I would figure this technology to be more subtle than what we can accomplish. So, now we’ll start running through narrower and narrower slices of the energy spectrum, and sooner or later we’ll find it.”

“So you’re convinced that it’s technological in origin?”

She shrugged. “It’s what I know how to look for. So that’s what I’m looking for.”

Jon nodded slightly. “Heard the news from home?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Been too busy here this morning.”

“Yeah, I figured. Thought I’d come down and let everyone know.”

“Know what?” asked Bradsen, who had come around the pit to where Jon and Jackie were standing.

Jon looked at him. “Nothing too big, just the latest on coverage back home.”

Bradsen nodded slightly. Then he turned to face where most of the staff was working. “Hey, people, can I have your attention for a moment?”

Everyone looked up from what they were doing. Even the two troopers on guard inside the dome, still in their protective environment suits, took a couple steps forward from their position against the far wall, where they had a clear view of both airlocks.

Don nodded to Jon, who spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear him over the quiet hum of equipment. “Just wanted to pass along the latest news from home. There’s been some sporadic protests at USSA facilities, but nothing violent. Some of the fundamentalist religious leaders have issued condemnations of everyone associated with the project, but the more mainstream churches are calling for a dialog among the faiths and with scientists about the implications of this discovery. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for releasing the information to the nets, though it is widely believed that the Edenists are responsible.

“So, things are still safe and sound back Earthside. The full and uncensored news broadcasts are available through my expert, if you’d like to see them. Titan Prime is only getting filtered news, for reasons that escape my understanding, but I’ve managed to keep my lines of communication open. If you have questions, contact Seth, or ask me directly.”

He looked around at their faces, saw some slight relief in their eyes. Letting them know that things were still calm would help them concentrate on their work. After a moment, all of them went back to what they were doing before. He looked at Bradsen, who nodded but said nothing.

“Jackie, excuse us a minute, would you?”

Gates looked back and forth between the two men, started to ask a question, but decided to let it pass. She just turned and went back down into the pit.

“Good enough?” Jon asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s fine,” said Bradsen. “Any word on our extra cargo?”

“No. Navarr’s looking into it, but there’s no trace he’s been able to find. I didn’t figure it was solid enough information to tell anyone else about it.”

Don looked a little relieved at that. “Thanks.”

“Hey, I do believe in giving people solid information. I don’t believe in scaring them with unsubstantiated reports. When we come up with something tangible, I’ll tell everyone concerned. Fair enough?”

“Fair enough.” Bradsen looked around. “We’re making progress. All the equipment is working perfectly, and we’ve already been able to get some preliminary results. All negative, but that’s something.”

“Good. Anything you need, anything I can do for you down here?”

“No, thanks. If I think of something, I’ll let you know.”

“Right. Well, I’ll get out of your hair, let you get back to work.”

Don smiled, turned and walked away. Jon looked around again, saw Duc Ng down

in the pit, trying to get close to the artifact without getting in the way of Jackie Gates and the two researchers she was working with. He wasn't succeeding, and almost bumped into one of the sensor arrays, not seeing it with the heavy blanket thrown over his head. Just as Jon was about to say something, Jackie noticed, and gave Ng a sharp jab in the side with her elbow. "Watch it."

"Ow." Duc peeked out from under the blanket, realized the situation. "Oh, sorry."

"Yeah, well, be more careful," growled Jackie. "It took all night to get this thing set up right."

"Got it," said Duc as he ducked back under the blanket, took his exposure, and then got out of the way. He looked up at Jon, then came over to the edge of the pit. "Well, I think that should be it. I took another three shots up close, and three from a couple of paces away. If it's gonna show, one of those should have got it."

"Well, we'll see. I think it has its own reasons for hiding." Jon looked at the artifact. "So, ready to try the drugs?"

Ng nodded, but didn't smile. "Let me get the camera secured."

Jon left him to it, sat on the edge of the pit, legs hanging over the edge. From this point the call of the artifact was louder, harder to push out of his awareness. He closed his eyes, relaxed, and slowly let the song grow inside him. Staying perfectly awake, he felt himself start to slip into that flow state again, just as he was able to do while playing cards the night before. But he held himself at the doorway of that state, and had the odd sensation that he was a bridge between two worlds. A bridge. Archway of stone, emerging from the mist, just as in the dream he had a week or more ago. There was something else, he thought, and then it came to him: the pale blue light. He slowly opened his eyes, letting the doorway recede a bit, and looked across at the artifact. Now he could almost see the shimmer of blue from the tholin, just as in his visions.

From behind him a voice said, "I'm ready."

Jon took a deep breath and turned to look up at Duc Ng. The artist looked down at him quizzically. "You OK?"

"Yeah." Jon got up. "Just taking a moment to relax."

"Looked for a moment there like you were the one on drugs."

Jon chuckled. "No, nothing like that. So, anything I can do?"

"Not really. I tend to get hyper at first, then settle into the synesthesia comfortably. With the dosage I'm taking, it should only last a half hour or so."

Jon remembered from the few occasions he had used the drugs how intense that feeling was, knew that the subjective time would be both much longer in each moment, yet fly by in a blur of sensory overload, taste taking on hues of color, touch echoing sounds, aromas being tangibly hot or cold. For everyone the mix of senses was different, but added layers of meaning and insight that appealed particularly to some artistic personalities.

"I'm going to ask Seth to spend the entire time with you, and to record everything you have to say. Try and remember to keep a descriptive commentary going. OK?"

"Shouldn't be a problem. I'm used to this, remember?"

Jon nodded. "Still, these are unusual circumstances."

Duc looked around, then smiled broadly. “Boy, howdy.”

Jon followed him over to the wall, and the two of them sat in chairs. Taking out a small inhaler he had prepared, Duc put one end in his mouth and hit the charge. Breathing deeply, he closed his eyes and sat back against the wall, holding his breath for what seemed to be a prolonged time. Finally, he exhaled slowly. Keeping his eyes closed, he relaxed there for a moment, then said. “OK, it won’t be long now. I can already feel the tingle in my fingers.”

“Seth?” asked Jon. The expert appeared in front of the two of them. “Duc is going to try and describe what he’s experiencing for us. Please keep a record of everything for later review, OK?”

“Certainly.” Seth looked at Ng. “Shall I ask you questions if you get distracted?”

Duc opened his eyes, looked at Seth. “That is so wild. I’m not used to dealing with an S-series while on this stuff. Did you know that your transmission rate is blueberry?”

Jon chuckled. Seth didn’t laugh. “I wasn’t aware of that. How so, blueberry?”

“With a texture like blueberry filling. Thick. Sweet. Most experts are less . . . dense. More like apple juice. Flavorful, but thin.”

“Fascinating,” said Seth.

“Good term for it,” replied Duc, studying the apparent image of the expert. “Nice, full-bodied, complex. Ah . . .” he paused and looked around from where he was sitting. “This is an interesting place. There’s more color here than meets the eye. As people move, they leave behind trails . . .”

“You mean, like blurred afterimages?” asked Jon.

“No, more like they’re moving through some sort of liquid. The trails are the sort of wake you see behind a boat, a churning of color, shimmering, glimmering, glistening. Never seen that before.” He stood up, reaching out to steady himself on Jon’s shoulder.

“Well, let’s move on over to the pit, shall we, and see what all the fuss is about?”

Jon just nodded, said nothing, almost holding his breath.

Carefully, like a man walking barefoot on rough stones, Duc moved to the edge of the pit. He was so focused, so intent on watching every step, that Jon noticed he didn’t look up and into the pit until they came to the very edge.

Then he just stood there, gazing intently, jaw slowly dropping in astonishment.

“What, what is it? What do you see?”

Ng shook his head in disbelief, slowly turning to face Jon and Seth. “It’s . . . it’s not there . . .”

Jon looked at him, stunned. “It’s not there?”

“No . . . the tholin is there, glowing brightly, fragrance of a field full of wildflowers in bloom. But the artifact . . . it just isn’t there. Nothing is.”

“Nothing? What do you mean? I can see it.”

“No. You’re not. There’s nothing there. Just a blankness, a dull spot that has no color, no flavor, no heat. It’s just . . . nothing.” Duc seemed a little frightened, but balling up his hands into tight fists at his side, he said, “I want to go down there, get closer.”

“Right. No problem. I’ll help you down the stairs.” Jon started to reach out to take

Duc's hand, but the artist pulled away.

"I'm fine now. Just a little unsteady there at the start." Ng looked at Jon, peered into his eyes more intensely than anyone normally would. "Really. But ask the others to please move away from the artifact for a few moments. It'll make it easier for me to concentrate on it."

"You got it." Jon looked around, then clapped his hands to get their attention. "Folks, can I ask you to clear out of the pit for a few minutes? We've got a bit of an experiment to conduct here. It'll just take a couple of moments; get something to drink, go to the bathroom, whatever, and we'll be out of the way in a bit. Thanks."

As people started to move, Jackie Gates came over to the side where they were standing, and looked up, a curious glint in her eye. First she spoke to Jon, then directly to Duc, "He's doing it, isn't he? What d'ya see?"

"Just come on out for a few minutes, ok?" asked Jon. Several of the others had started to gather around them, up on the main floor.

"Hey, I'll stay out of the way. But I want to see this," said Gates.

"See what?" asked Alexandra Byrne, the chemical engineer from the second team.

"Duc's using auggies," answered Jackie, before anyone else could reply.

"Oh yeah, the artist," said Byrne, interested. "Though I doubt that you'll see anything more than the equipment can."

Duc turned to look at the woman, his eyes too wide open, pupils so dilated that the color of the iris was almost invisible. "I see a lot, more than most people can even imagine. But now, you might be right. There's nothing there."

"What do you mean there's nothing there?" asked Harold Kanagawa. He was the expert in scanning technologies. "Even without my equipment, I can see there's something there."

"Perhaps," said Duc, who started to make his way over to the stairs which lead down into the pit.

"Drugs, eh?" asked Don Bradsen of Jon. "Isn't that . . . risky?"

"No, he knows what he's doing. They're safe enough."

Duc carefully made it down into the pit, walked over past Jackie and the large sensors on either side of the artifact. He looked like some sort of bird of prey, eyes unblinking, head moving slowly back and forth to make sure that he had the object of his hunt in perfect view. He looked to the side for a moment, where Seth stood, silent and waiting, then back. "The tholin is moving, I can see it, Jon. Clean, playful water, wet to the eyes, brisk and energizing, the blue of glacial lakes.

"And I can hear the artifact, that pulse, that heartbeat, hot and vital red. A salty taste, rich and powerful. But why does it hide? Why can't I see it?"

"Still nothing?" called down Jon.

Duc shook his head, his ponytail dancing back and forth. He looked down and manipulated the back of one hand, closed his eyes for a moment and shuddered slightly. Then slowly he brought up his hands, rubbed them together, like a sculptor does before handling clay. His arms reached out, fingers reaching toward the artifact, as though he was

going to take it in his hands. Another slight shiver crossed through his frame. "I've upped the sensitivity of my enhancements as far as I can . . ."

He took another pace forward, stepping between Jackie and the artifact. Even from the distance of the lip of the pit, Jon could see a sheen of sweat on the man's brow, and his arms seemed to quiver ever so slightly. "I can't see anything. Just the blankness, the dullness. But there is a slipperiness there, something slick and subtle."

"Like a serpent," muttered someone behind Jon. He turned quickly to see Dana Mallory, the young lab tech. The youth noticed the attention, and gave Jon a funny look, and just then Jackie Gates screamed.

Jon swung back around to see her moving forward towards Duc's prostrate body, where he lay on the ground almost underneath the artifact.

"Jackie, no!" hollered Jon, but it was too late. She knelt down at Duc's side, her back to Jon. It seemed that the moment she made contact with him, she jerked as though hit with a jolt of electricity, and collapsed.

Everyone froze for a moment, too shocked to know what to do. Everyone except the two guards. Both moved forward, one with his carbine leveled at the artifact, the other scrambling down the stairs faster than Jon thought possible in an environment suit. Jon heard the one with the weapon bark over his loudspeaker, "Stay where you are. Let him pull them out."

It took just a moment for the trooper to reach Jackie and pick her up, but in that time Jon heard the nearby airlock cycle in emergency mode, and two more suited figures burst into the dome, weapons at ready. The trooper set Jackie's small form at the top of the stairs, and returned to retrieve Duc. Without pause, he grabbed the artist's feet and dragged him away from the artifact, then scooped him up and carried him up the stairs.

By this time one of the suited figures had gotten to Jackie. He had popped his visor open, and Jon saw that it was Navarr. The other three troopers stepped back from the crowd, weapons still very much ready, keeping a close eye on the artifact, the airlocks, and even the people who gathered around the two prone figures.

"They're both alive," said Navarr, loud enough even without the aid of his suit's speaker so that everyone in the dome could hear him. "In some kind of shock. We should get them up to Titan Prime as quickly as possible."

Jon heard Seth's voice, calm and reassuring. "I've sent word that a shuttle is needed immediately. It should arrive in about twelve minutes. I can find no telemetry from either Ms. Gates or Mr. Ng, evidently both of their personal systems are off-line. Do you wish to have Dr. Taupiczak here via telepresence?"

"Hell of an idea. Hook her into your system, soon as you can."

Navarr glanced over his shoulder at Jon. "Thanks."

Jon shook his head, started to speak, then saw the apparent form of Tops materialize off to the side. She seemed disoriented for a moment, looking around, then focused on the two people on the ground. "Looks like shock. But it's hard to tell from here. Any sign of injury?"

"No," answered Navarr. "Pulse shallow, respiration weak but steady."

“All right. Their color looks good. I think you can transport them safely. But how will you get them into suits to get out to the shuttle?”

“Leave that to us,” said the Commander, who then looked to one of the troopers and nodded toward the airlock. “Bring two.”

The woman nodded, and entered the airlock. Jon heard it cycle normally. He glanced at the apparent image of Tops. “Ng’s got a system full of auggies.”

Tops nodded. “Thanks, though I don’t think that should cause me any problems. When I did his baseline and history, we went over the cocktail of stuff he uses. Powerful, but mostly acts just on the sensory centers. Shouldn’t matter.”

The airlock started to cycle. Jon turned to see it open a few moments later, the trooper who went out returning, carrying two rolled-up bundles, each flat black and about the size of a large water bottle. She tossed one lightly to Navarr, who undid a belt on the thing and started to unroll it. He glanced up at Jon. “Here, help me with this.”

They rolled out and then unfolded a pouch a little over two meters long, as the trooper and Alexandra did the same with the other bundle. Jon realized what they were. “Bodybags?”

“Yeah,” said Navarr, opening up the length of the bag along a seal. Once he had this peeled back, they picked up Ng and placed him carefully in the bag. Jon watched as Navarr secured Ng with interior straps, ran the seal closed, then punched a control. Instantly, the quilted fabric of the bag started to inflate, and a few moments later the entire bag had taken on a hexagonal cross-section, and had become rigid. “Designed to be easier to handle and transport this way. But I figured that the air inside should last them long enough for us to get them out to the shuttle.”

“Brilliant,” said Tops.

“And your shuttle will be setting down at about the time you make it to the landing pad, if you leave now,” said Seth.

“Let me help,” said Jon, scrambling into his environment suit. Shortly thereafter he, Navarr, the female trooper and one of the other troopers in the dome had the two bodybags containing Ng and Gates into the larger airlock, and started to cycle it.

When he returned, and entered the dome through the airlock with the one trooper, Jon was relieved to see that things seemed to be returning to normal. Bradsen had everyone back at work, but was himself waiting for Jon. He looked to Jon and asked, “Navarr stay with them?”

Jon nodded, as he sat on a bench and started to peel off his suit. “Yeah. There wasn’t enough room in the shuttle for me, too. Made more sense for Navarr and his trooper to be there, since they have a lot more training with first aid. Just in case.”

At that moment Seth appeared. “Dr. Taupiczak is preparing for their arrival at Titan Prime, but sends word that she thinks they will be fine.”

“Thanks, Seth.” Jon looked to Bradsen. “Everyone here all right?”

Don looked around the dome. “Mostly. It’s got people rattled, but I think everyone

will be fine, able to focus on their work and get on with it.”

“Let’s just have everyone be more cautious about being around the artifact, not get too near it.”

“Well, I don’t think that is going to be a problem.”

Jon stopped for a moment, looked over at the pit. He realized he could no longer hear the distant whisper of the artifact.

“What’s wrong?” asked Bradsen.

“Just a little . . . overwhelmed, I think.” Jon shook his head, as though trying to clear it. “Any chance we got any coverage of that whole sequence on any of the equipment?”

“Damn. I didn’t think of that. I guess you’re not the only one feeling a little overwhelmed.” Bradsen looked around the room, but this time taking inventory of the equipment set up rather than the people operating it. “Well, there’s the sentry cameras, which are always on the artifact, or where it should be anyway. They should have it. But nothing else we have set up is designed for that sort of monitoring. It’s all watching for energy fields, et cetera.”

“Well, it sure looked to me like something shocked Jackie. I didn’t see what happened to Ng.”

Don nodded. “I’ll have everyone go over their data for the relevant time period. There might be something there.”

“Seth?”

“Yes, Jon?”

“Get me the images from the sentry cams from the moment Duc went down into the pit through when the trooper hauled him and Jackie back out.”

“Got it. Want it now?”

“No, look it over with a close eye on detail, but hold it for me a little bit. I have something else I have to check into.”

“As you wish.”

Jon looked up at Don. “I need to talk with Dana Mallory.”

“I’ll get him, then have everyone get started on that data analysis.”

“Thanks,” said Jon as Bradsen left.

A moment later the young lab tech came over to the bench where Jon was still sitting. Jon looked at him: slight build, short red hair and freckles, eyes brilliant green. He looked a little scared, with tension evident in the line of the jaw and around his eyes. “You OK?”

Mallory bit his lip, nodded ever so slowly.

Jon felt sorry for the kid. “Don’t let it bug you. Dr. Tops thinks that they’ll be all right.”

Mallory sat down on the bench next to Jon. “It’s just a little frightening.”

“Yeah, it is,” said Jon, nodding in agreement. “The whole thing is. But the artifact doesn’t seem to be actively hostile. The fact that all that happened was that the two people who touched it directly seem to have been stunned tells us a lot. It didn’t blow up, we all weren’t killed by death rays, nothing like that.”

“Yeah.”

Jon waited, watching the youth. He seemed to be doing better, the tension fading from his face. “You said something, just before Duc touched the artifact. Something about a serpent?”

Mallory’s face flushed, his white skin flashing red for just a brief moment. Almost sheepishly he smiled. “Yeah. I don’t like snakes. And the way he was describing it seemed to fit just the way I felt about it. It makes me . . . uneasy. The way a snake makes me feel, even when it’s in a cage and I’m completely safe from it.”

Jon smiled. “Yeah, I know what you mean. I’m the same way about spiders. OK, I was just curious about that.”

Mallory looked relieved. “Anything else I can help you with?”

“No, I don’t think so. Thanks.”

Mallory smiled weakly, got up and went back to work. Before Jon was able to get up, Seth materialized. “Message from Dr. Taupiczak, Jon.”

“Give it to me, personal.”

Immediately, Tops appeared. “Just wanted to let you know, I think they’ll be fine. Jackie is already semiconscious again, and I expect Duc to come around any moment.”

“What happened to them?”

“I’m not sure, though it seems to have been some kind of shock, but not a systemic one. No damage, at least nothing I’ve found yet.”

“So they’ll be OK?”

Tops nodded. “Yeah, it looks like. They may not have much memory of the moments preceding the incident, and there may be some other things we’ll need to keep an eye on, but I think that a full recovery is certain.” She paused. “But interestingly, we’ll probably have to replace all their cyberware, even their personal computers.”

“Why do you say that’s interesting?”

“Those systems are designed to be very well insulated. You know, so that they can’t be used as a weapon against the owner. Hitting them with something from outside is difficult, even for the military.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“But I almost get the feeling that the shock which went through their bodies was directed at those systems, that it came at them from the opposite way: not using them as a conduit for an attack, but for the focus of the attack.”

“Interesting, indeed,” said Jon. “OK, I’ll let everyone here know. Keep me posted, and tell them I’ll stop in to see them when I get back up to the station later this afternoon.”

“Right. Tops out.”

Jon sat there for another moment, thinking. There was something that his subconscious was kicking around, but he couldn’t quite bring it to the fore. Deciding that it’d emerge when it was ready, he asked Seth for the recordings of the incident from the perspective of the different security cameras.

The recording showed what Jon remembered, Ng walking toward the location of the artifact, hands held out like he was about to caress something precious. When he got to

where the artifact should be, he jerked, then fell to the floor. Jackie, who had been beside one of the nearby sensor banks, leapt to his side. It looked, from the perspective of the several of the cams, like she put out a hand to steady herself against something that wasn't there as she knelt down, and then she too jerked and collapsed in a heap. So, they both touched the artifact directly.

Jon remembered now what it was that had been eluding him. It was Darnell saying, 'Go ahead, touch it.'

He started to get back into his environment suit. Don Bradsen noticed this, and came over to him. "What's up?"

"I'm just going to go have a chat with Sidwell."

"Hear ya had a little 'citement over there."

Jon sat on the bench, started to get out of his suit. "Yeah. Two of my team members are now up in the infirmary, recovering. Which I find to be curious, since you said it was safe to touch the artifact."

Sidwell's brow furrowed in thought. "That was wit' a suit on. I ain't touched it wit' my bare hands, ain't told no one else to, neither."

Jon thought back. Yeah, Sidwell had told him to touch it when he first arrived on Titan, before the dome was pressurized or at a safe temperature for flesh. "Well, it was a thought."

Darnell looked at him with a piercing gaze. "Wha' you thinkin'?"

Jon popped his remaining foot free from the suit, turned and hung it on a convenient hook. He turned back around and looked at the old man. "You know, I'm not really sure."

"Then why ya come 'n here 'n blame me?"

Jon sighed. "Sorry. But I've been having these dreams, or visions, or whatever they are. And you're in them."

"So?"

"So, I keep wondering why."

Darnell stared at him for a long moment. Then, abruptly, the old man turned and headed for his easy chair. Over his shoulder he said, "Well, c'mon over 'n sit a spell, let's talk 'bout it."

Jon parked on the couch, opposite the old man. And as he watched, Sidwell picked up a pipe, fiddled with it, and then lit it. A sweet aroma filled the air, though there was surprisingly little smoke. "Now, wha's this 'bout me bein' in yer dreams?"

Jon considered, decided to be honest about what he could remember. "I'm not sure, but you've been in the ones for the last week or so. Like you're the one to pass on something important to me. And they haven't just been dreams, but also those occasions when I've passed out while in close proximity to the artifact."

Sidwell said nothing, just watched and waited, puffing on his pipe.

"You've been using a phrase: 'that which emerges from darkness gives definition to the light'."

“Dam’ fool thin’ t’ say.”

“Yeah, but it seems somehow to fit with the artifact.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, there’s an essay by Martin Heidegger on some early Greek text fragment that talks extensively about concealment and ‘presencing’. Klee explained to me that this is the way Heidegger talks about awareness. And yesterday you were telling me that the artifact had forced you to ‘wake up’. That seems to be pretty much the same thing.”

Darnell set his pipe down. He looked at Jon a very long time, pale blue eyes considering the younger man. “Yeah, sounds like. Now, I ain’ never read no Heidegger, leas’ that I can recall. But he’s right. That thing ‘n th’ other dome is all ‘bout awareness.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean mebbe ya should listen t’ yer dreams.”

Jon looked at him, a little suspicious. “But if you didn’t know what it was about, how can you say that?”

“Ya jus’ told me, didn’ ya? An’ didn’ I say that it was gonna force people t’ wake up?”

“Yeah.” Jon nodded. “You also told me about Wales, and the fellow there at the falls. Pistol something, right?”

Darnell squinted at Jon, said “Wha’ the hell you talkin’ about?”

“The name of the falls. Pistol something or another.”

The old man smiled. “Pistyll Rheadr. I lived jus’ a valley away. Never really learned Welsh, but leastways got used t’ th’ names o’ things.”

“Really? When was that?”

“‘Bout the time o’ th’ flu.”

Jon paused. “I thought you were in space then.”

“Had been,” he shrugged. “But was on earth when it hit, so stayed. Spent th’ time wit’ family ‘n friends.”

Jon nodded. It was a common enough story, though Sidwell was one of the rare people over 30 to live through that time. “How old were you?”

“Good try. Old enough t’ not fall for that, even then,” said the prospector, though he smiled at Jon. “So, ya found my falls, eh? Smart trick.”

Jon returned his smile. “Thanks. Though most of the credit belongs to my expert, Seth.”

“Yeah, he’s a sharp one. But ya thought t’ have’ m look, didn’ ya?”

“I guess so.”

“Why ya so curious ‘bout me? I’m jus’ an ol’ man, tryin’ t’ scratch a livin’ out of th’ ground.”

Jon had been looking away when Darnell said this, but he turned his full attention to the man for a long moment before answering, “You know something, don’t you? About the artifact. Something you haven’t told us yet.”

“Now, why ya say that?”

“You’ve hinted about it several times. I feel like you’re still hinting, but whether to

help or tease, I'm not sure." Jon felt something boil up in him. "You keep testing me, to see if I'm worthy of knowing. Don't you?"

Darnell was about to answer this, when the airlock started to cycle. Both he and Jon paused and waited to see who was coming in.

A moment later the familiar form of Commander Navarr stepped out of the lock. But he didn't sit and start to remove his suit, just popped open the faceplate and said "Get your suits. We have to go up to Titan Prime."

There was a coldness in his voice that Jon didn't like. "What's happened?"

Navarr looked to Jon just briefly, then nodded at Sidwell. "It's him. He's the one who broke the news on the nets about the artifact."

Jon turned to look at Darnell. The old man calmly puffed one last time at his pipe and said, "Yup. I did it. Don' deny it."